

Ana and Nan

9PM

The twins always saw themselves in the seagulls, even as children. Their feathered doppelgängers would come and sit on the bathroom ledge every evening and stare in at them as they had their bath, watching them with their curious pink-rimmed eyes. There would be a flash of recognition between both parties. Something vermin-like, something poisonous, would pass between them. Rats with wings, their mother would shout, before shooing them away. But the birds always came back; unlike their mother, who – six months ago – wasn't able to navigate her own drop from the ledge with quite the same ease.

There was a strange comfort in it now for Ana and Nan; to have the seagulls there during their bathing ritual, those webbed feet padding confidently across the cramped space where their mother had once stood. The twins watched these rolling resurrections with fascination, gazing at their feathered aggressors jostling each other, pushing each other off, with each ousted bird returning seconds later as though the fall meant nothing.

Ana and Nan could see the gulls trying to decipher – with every twist of their ugly, slanting heads – why two identical women would sit opposite each other in the bath every evening, conjuring stiff white peaks from their fingers until the suds obscured each one's view of the other. The shape afloat on the water was a replica of that building on the hill where the twins worked. They saw themselves as architects of foam, carving out from the amorphous mass the contours of a library in miniature – weaving windows from the fine white webs, moulding

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scented stacks and stairwells, their fists firming up each angle, their fingernails scraping away space for reading rooms and archives, all the while ensuring the egg-white roof was sturdy enough not to collapse on top of it all, and wash away their efforts.

What the gulls could not see was that this was more than mere bath play. Tonight, Ana and Nan were preparing themselves for the day that was nearly upon them, a day when they would take charge of the library, and expose its delusions of grandeur, of safety, for the soap-mirage it always was.

‘When do you think we’ll next have a bath?’ Nan asked, as she straightened her right palm in order to forge a lower level into the structure, a squeaking subterranean corridor, the concrete version of which they would soon enter.

Ana knew what Nan was really saying was: *There will be no baths in prison. None of this intimacy, none of this togetherness. No more of each other.*

‘Could be years, I suppose,’ said Ana, wiping sweat from her cheek. ‘A small sacrifice,’ she added, taking her fingers for a leisurely stroll around the back of the building, imagining herself entering there as they had planned, Nan around the front. She used her left thumb to smooth out another step, then her right pinkie to make an outline of the doorframe.

‘I know you’re thinking about Mum,’ Ana said, moving a little too suddenly so that her left breast bulldozed away half the North Reading Room. ‘Wondering what she’d make of all this, aren’t you?’

Nan sunk lower into the foam, kicking the library basement away with her toes, her hair morphing into a dark overgrowth on the library’s roof. The structure was crumbling now; the suds having become limp and shapeless, even the gulls no longer interested. Nan hated the way Ana insisted she could read her mind, as if Nan’s brain were a vacant room through which Ana was

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free to roam as she liked, opening and shutting doors, ransacking through cupboards, running her fingers over everything. Nan could never read Ana's mind; the doors were always shut, the windows dark.

'Yes, I suppose I am,' Nan lied, relieved that if nothing else, she owned her own mind.

'I think she'd approve, you know. Of all this. It's what she would have wanted. I don't think we need to be scared.'

Nan was not scared. If anything she was excited. Whatever happened, however things eventually played out, it would be the end of something. The start of another.

'If we just stick to the plan,' Ana continued, 'we'll be fine. Nothing's going to go wrong.'

Everything would go wrong, Nan thought. And this is how she knew her sister couldn't really read her mind. Because her sister still believed that Nan would carry things out in exactly the way they'd planned, when Nan had no intention of doing so – she was going to do things her way, even if it meant a longer sentence; and forgoing her right to a bath forever more. She had long imagined herself with that gun in her hand, taking control of it all; desperate to know how it would feel when she finally got to pull the trigger.

'Whatever we do, we do together,' Ana continued. 'After all we're the same person, you and I, aren't we?'

Ana's foot swam towards her. Nan lifted her own foot and pressed against it. She knew Ana saw this as a moment of unity, but for Nan it was the opposite: a real, physical sign of the boundary between them. Where one thing broke away and became another.

'Ana and Nan. One person. One soul. Palindromes.'

Nan hid her smile in the froth. Ana was obsessed with the fact that their names could be read forward, and backward, that they could formulate no other possible sounds. Ana was convinced that their mother had chosen them so that no one could interfere with

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their names; that their identities remained strong, unshakeable. Nan didn't see it like that. She saw their names as dull and uninspiring in their plainness; neutral as anything. As a young child she'd always dreamed of having a longer, greater title, something complex, multisyllabic. Something that spoke of revolt. Something like Arianne – a silvery wheel of a name; or Gwenivere – a girl glowing in the dark. Something that enticed yet terrified you.

'Palindrome,' Nan echoed quietly, as she opened her mouth to ingest the rest of the soap ruins.

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As she tapped on the bath plug to drain the water, Ana saw that the doppelgänger gulls had flown away, leaving in their place a strange, black-headed seagull. She'd seen him several times before, parading the promenade near the flat, squawking at day-trippers, boasting his tar-tipped head. He'd never dared to come and stare at them like this before, either. Ana thought he must know what they were up to, wanted to be a part of it.

'Just ignore him,' Nan said. 'He's desperate for your attention; don't give it to him.'

Ana couldn't resist, somehow. She found herself sneaking a look at him every now and then as Nan finished rinsing the soap out of her hair. It felt like he was mocking them; the way he'd scared off the gentler gulls, just to assert his individualism, his singularity. It was as if he was saying that the sisters' doubleness wasn't right in some way – for there to be no birthmark, no scar, no blemish that set them apart, it was as if he was making out they were the freaks, rather than him. She stood up suddenly, hoping her nakedness would scare him off, but he wouldn't budge.

'Shoo!' she shouted, like her mother had once done. 'Shoo!'

'You've still got a bit of conditioner in there,' Nan said. 'Sit back down.'

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‘Shoo!’ she said again, now determined to get rid of him, her breasts squished up against the window.

Still the black-headed gull refused to budge. He cocked his head; again Ana felt that he was waiting for something, waiting to be consulted about their plans, perhaps.

‘OK, well you can sort your own hair out, then,’ Nan said, standing up suddenly, hoisting one leg out of the water.

‘Help me get rid of him,’ Ana pleaded with her, grabbing on to her sister’s slick, wet arm.

Nan reached over to open the window wide, knocking the seagull off his perch. It should have been the end of it. But the gull saw the open window as an invitation and glided smoothly past them and into the bathroom. They both went into a blind panic then, the bird flapping and squawking in the air above them as they grappled with him, entangled in one another’s nakedness, their fingers sticky with feather and soap, both shrieking, the gull breaking away, fleeing this way and that before suddenly coming to a halt at the bathroom mirror.

It was perhaps the first time the black-headed seagull had seen his own reflection. Perhaps he thought this was the way of things; that in entering the twins’ world, this is what happened – everything, everyone doubled. Became a perfect, clear, luminous reflection of each other. He perched there on the side of the sink a while, staring, trying to work things out.

‘Grab him,’ Nan said quietly, as though the bird might hear their intent. ‘Do it now.’

Ana was frozen to the spot. She couldn’t take her eyes off him, as he began to peck away at the reflection, disturbed by how easy it was to replicate himself. Nan eventually pushed her out of the way and grabbed him herself, but instead of hurling him back out of the window, she pulled him towards her and forced him down into the diminishing bath water. Ana backed away, watching as he thrashed relentlessly against Nan’s hand, knowing somehow that

if he held fast the water would soon be gone. But Nan had other plans, swiftly wringing his neck as the last of their soap structure died in the plughole.

‘I didn’t know you knew how to do that,’ Ana said. Her sister was, for this one moment, no longer a twin; suddenly merely herself, just like the black-headed seagull.

‘Neither did I,’ Nan replied, with a curious calm.

There was a strange smell in the room now, the stench of pavement and death mingled with the perfumed steam coming off their bodies. Nan handed the bird to Ana.

‘You can get rid of it,’ she said, wrapping herself in a towel and marching out of the room, leaving Ana alone with the executed bird hanging limply from her hand.

Ana almost couldn’t bear to touch it, and so she hurled it back out through the open window as fast as she could. She shut the window firmly and leaned her head against it. She tried not to think of the dead bird’s ungraceful descent through the air, the final, dirty slap. How it had come in alive, and gone back out dead, all because of them.

A few minutes later, after checking the doors and the lights, Ana returned to their bedroom to find Nan already fast asleep, her back turned away from her. She was disappointed that the evening had ended so abruptly, but she supposed that the incident had exhausted them both, and they would need to conserve their energy to carry out all they had planned, for they had not slept well these last few months. She clambered in next to Nan, shuffling around to see if she could rouse her; but no, she was a dead weight across the mattress. Ana lay down next to her and tried to clear her mind and assume the inertia of a normal person, a person for whom tomorrow was just another working day. But those people were all fools, she thought; because their lives would never be the same. And there would be one fool in particular walking among them along that red carpet. The fool who had brought all

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this upon them in the first place; the fool who was finally going to get what he deserved.

Before long, she found herself entering the deadening dark that was both her friend and co-conspirator, the only place she could really be alone. Where only one vision awaited her, a vision that recurred all night, just beyond the thin veil of her eyelids; that of the library of soap and feathers evolving, sud by sud, feather by feather, brick by brick, into the National Library up on that hill; a building shining brightly into the darkness, bold and fearless in the face of night, without the faintest idea of what the morning would bring.