

fire can be mistaken for light

The Lake District

IT WAS ONLY THREE YEARS AGO THAT I SAW VITA FOR THE FIRST time. The day began as my days always did then, greeting a daughter for whom adolescence meant allowing me increasingly smaller glimpses of herself. I woke her before showering and dressing, then, predictably, had to wake her for a second time before going downstairs. I was in a long-standing white-food routine that summer, and my meals typically comprised various breakfasts: toast, cereal or crumpets. On days when food does not have to be dry, scrambled eggs or omelettes can also count as white. I cannot tell if it is a day on which an egg is a white food until I hold one in my hand. It is a small but real joy to me that as an adult I can decide, without explanation, whether eggs qualify as white, and therefore edible, on any given day. Without being told I am making a show of myself. That I am hysterical, attention-seeking and to be ignored until I eat something that is violently coloured.

Occasionally, and only in front of Dolly, I would showily eat something that did not adhere to my assigned list of foods. You can eat normally then; you can do what the rest of us do without a fuss. My mother said this, often. I answered her silently when she was alive and I continue to do so now she is dead: There is a cost, Mother, always a cost to such transgressions, and I am the one who pays. I am the one whose throat and body burn when I politely swallow down food of the wrong colour; it is my arm that itches when a neighbour greets me by lightly placing a hand on my skin. I wear the marks of

these encounters, these painful sensory interruptions.

In truth, though, the cost always felt less when it was my daughter for whom I performed. Because she is all that I have loved more than adherence to my routines. I was already afraid, then, of what was between us. I thought of it as a well-fed creature who was expanding rapidly, separating us further from one another everyday. My response to Dolly's distance had always been to work harder on the illusion of normalcy. Whenever I was able, I concentrated on overriding my natural behaviours in front of her. In a white phase, I daringly added admittedly pale, yet non-white, pieces of food to my meals: chopped and peeled apples pale green grapes, some poached salmon or chicken. During a period when fruit and pink yoghurt were all I found edible, I would make us a plate of cheese and biscuits to share in front of the television, and privately shudder as the dry crumbs spread out like fingers in my throat.

The year before Vita arrived, a cat had taken a liking to our garden. A taut, grey creature that stared fixedly into the distance whenever approached, he was as a little statesman, affronted by contact, but straining to remain polite. Despite this apparent disinterest in our company, he visited us regularly for a time, bringing the small dead bodies of mice and voles. These he placed carefully at our feet, before sitting in apparent reluctance next to us, his body tense and his little face turned away. At first, we tried to pat him, but although he did not move from his chosen position, he visibly shuddered at our touch, and, in his own unhappy way, he taught us to ignore him completely.

When I ate non-white items for my daughter, I held myself as tightly as the cat and, like him, I hoped the sacrifice would be appreciated wordlessly and without fuss. Dolly scrupulously

refrained from direct comment on my attempts to challenge my style of specific eating. I chose, as I often did, to read her adolescent disinterest in me as discretion. In return, I resisted describing to her how alarming I found the vibrancy and textures in the broad range of foods that she favoured. I realise now that perhaps this gentleness between us was an imagining of my own; all the non-saying, the unspoken compromises, these felt like love to me. But I have come to see that my daughter does not find comfort in silence, that this is only what I find there. I know now that we are separate and unlike, in this way as in so many others. I should have remembered how quickly she came to hate that cat.

Shortly after I woke Dolly that morning for a second time, the door slammed, informing me that she had left for school and that I was now alone in the house. But voices from upstairs whispered insistently down to me in the hall. Her television had been left on, as it often was, to talk into the empty room like an elderly and confused guest. The set was a recent gift from her father, and the austere black boxiness of it was satisfyingly at odds with the otherwise girlish bedroom. These furnishings were her grandmother's choice many years ago, and the Laura Ashley frills had not been to Dolly's own, more sophisticated taste for some time. When she became a teenager, we planned to redecorate her room for her sixteenth birthday, and we had frequently discussed the various paint colours, or wallpapers and the curtains she might then choose. But our plans were made back when 1988 seemed implausibly far into the future, and the idea of my little daughter becoming a young woman was equally illusive. And that summer, when Vita entered our lives, Dolly was already sixteen and our redecorating conversation had been replaced by my silence as she wondered aloud about being off on a gap year or away at

university within a couple of years, *How often will I actually return here?* she would ask.

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