

# **Billie Prime**

## **By Jacq**

*Change the past. Rescue me.*

### **Introduction**

I have always been interested with time: time travel, time manipulation, and the very concept of how time is experienced by different people. I had a love of science fiction and fantasy too, but when it came to Time, it wasn't fictional to me. To be honest, I wanted to control time – to go back to the past and change the abuse and violence I lived through as a child and young adult. I did not realise until only recently that this was stopping me from accepting what had happened, and in turn, this was stopping me from healing. I was destined to blame myself for not being smart enough to change things; not being strong enough to ignore it either. So, Billie Prime was born, my way of sorting through my feelings about being a survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

### **Trigger Warnings**

This story does not contain any details of sexual abuse; however, it may stir up some upsetting feelings for readers. If you are affected by anything in the story, please make use of the resources on the back page.

### **About the Author**

Jacq is a black, disabled, nonbinary, fat, bisexual and writer. Jacq has studied and had personal experience of several mental health issues; working with the British Psychological Society and the East London Mental Health Trust. Jacq is on Twitter as @applewriter. Their favourite foods are peanut butter and tofu. But not eaten together.

## Billie Prime

### A.

Some things don't change; the shadows on the wall, the way they move and grow with the passing light is predictable. Used to think they were ghosts when I was a kid. Never learned about shadows and light until I took art in the third year at school. Class was full of sissies, but Mister MacAskill was nice. I see shadows all around me now - images of what I used to be, all the things I've done. They're all there, decorating my cell wall. Even the old git casts a shadow as they snore the evening away. I see the darkness in them projected on to the white cold tiles. There's blood there - speckles of red that nobody can scrub away. I can hear the muffled sounds coming from the old git as they turn and face the wall. The shadows grow long and broad in typical patterns. The sun sets early this time of year. The nights are longer. I miss London just a little.

A new shadow passes over me. I feel my eyes dilate as the room grows dim. I've always been sensitive to this. It's one of the nurses come nosing around like the pervs they all are. I don't hide from their inquisitive eyes. I stare straight back. I see blood in the way they move, all quick and furtive. I know what they've done - what's in the job description, and what's just for kicks. I can tell a lot from just someone's profile. The nurse is a walking bag of shit.

"You got a visitor, Billie." the nurse calls out.

Bullshit. Nobody gets visitors on a Thursday. And I don't get visitors at all. I don't move. Why should I? Unless this is some kind of weak prison break, nobody's coming to see my ugly mug.

The old git snorts, coughs and throws one of the pillows at the door. They shout something, but I can't understand their thick West-Country accent. Then the old git farts loudly, instantly stinking up the place. We didn't even have cauliflower tonight.

"Right." I stand, face the door as the nurse unlocks it. I catch sight of my reflection in the tempered glass. I look away in disgust.

The nurse walks me to the visitor room, locking and unlocking doors as we go, with cards, keys and a few number pads. When I see who is waiting for me, I step back, bumping into the surprised nurse who makes a squeak.

"Take me back."

Stupid fool looks in the room and then back at me.

"Take me back to my cell."

"Listen, I go off duty in five minutes. I don't have time for this. And they're not cells."

"Fine. Take me back to the bloody honeymoon suite. I don't wanna be here."

"Too bad." The nurse gives me a hard shove. I never knew they had it in them. The door shuts behind me with a snap. "I'll send Perkins down when they come on shift. Until then, you stay right there."

I hear movement behind me - the rustle of fabric, the echoes of new scents - perfume and tobacco. Every muscle in my body tenses.

"Sweetie?"

"Don't call me that." I look down. There are shadows at my feet moving - a hand outstretched. I cannot operate in this level of illumination. I need to get a clear view of things. Shadows are only useful when I'm alone. I turn around and face my Aunty Sarah. Her face is all lines and wrinkles as she smiles at me. She reaches out once more and I flinch back. I'm not scared of much, but I'm not stupid.

"How's this place treating you? Looks very pretty inside with all the flowers."

"They're plastic."

"Nicer than I thought," she continues as if I hadn't spoken.

"Why are you here?"

"Your mother's worried about you."

I step away, clenching both fists, ready to fight.

Auntie's mouth forms into a little o. "I'm sorry, but she's fretting herself sick. You went off in such a rush. And after what you did to..."

"Ring the alarm."

"What?"

I point to the white button on the wall. "The alarm. Tell them I threatened you." I take another step away from her. "Ring it." I move to the corner, face the wall with my hands crossed atop my head. I wait for the sound, for the nurses and the needles. I see my own shadow directly in front of me. For a moment, my vision goes out of focus. But then my black outline is joined by another. A hand touches my back.

"I'm so sorry. For everything. I never knew, not all of it. I never thought..."

I slip from under her hand as if I were made of nothing but light particles - a hologram projected on to glass. I move to the opposite wall. I smash the alarm with all my strength. Bits of plastic and metal radiate up and out into my skin. Blessed relief flows over me in a rush of endorphins. I punch and punch to the rhythm of the wailing alarm, but it still takes long moments for multiple hands to surround me in a mockery of an embrace. I am sucked out of an air lock and into the beauty of space as a needle punctures my skin.

## **B.**

Everything changes. When I was little we didn't have a colour television, only got central heating after Billie's accident. It wasn't just a different time, it was a different world. It was a world that I could keep pace with. I wish I could go back sometimes. Not to our old house in North London, but to a time when romance wasn't such a dirty word. And the skirts and dresses were prettier back then too.

Aunt Sarah got a portable telephone last month. I've no time for that; who would I call anyway? I don't like talking.

I go to the windows and watch the sun as it sets in stripes of purple and yellow. I wish I had someone special here to share it with. The next door neighbour chooses that moment to light a bonfire, mucking all of that up. The sky gets black that much sooner as disgusting smoke pours in through the gap in the window. I pull the curtains shut and flop on to my bed. I think about turning on the radio, but as I reach out, my hand freezes in midair. A new scent enters my awareness, powdery and strong, wiping the soot smell from outside. I twist on the bed, crane my neck to look at the bedroom door. Time slows down as I will myself to move. I can be up, to the door and engage the lock in only a few seconds, but fear makes my limbs wooden and dull. I'm not supposed to keep anyone waiting anyway.

The smell is stronger now, even though time has stuck fast around my body. There is a presence outside my door that grows as I will my leaden limbs to move. And then time collapses in strands of light and sound. The door to my room opens; a hand touches my leg, and the room grows dark and silent all at once. I take myself off to a meadow full of flowers and neon green grass - I hear the clank of cow bells, smell the fresh untainted air. A pale man with freckles and a friendly smile waves at me, but gives me space. It is my choice to approach or ignore him. But as I hesitate, the meadow warps and changes. The land beneath my feet moves in slow waves, turning black. The flowers become specks of light that pulse around me. Even in this new dark place, I dream that somebody cares about me, that they have travelled through the cosmos to find me. My usual friendly farmer is now an astronaut. I am an alien lost in the stars. The astronaut floats closer as I reach out to him. The hard blackness of space lights up when I wish for it to do so. I spy his brown eyes widen as I pull him into an embrace. He cannot hear me through the protection of his space suit. He can barely feel me, but this only results in me feeling more in control. I press a kiss to the plastic of his helmet, give him a gentle push, and watch as he flies away from me.

I feel the draw of something enormous calling me, and soon I find that I circle the event horizon of a black hole, stretching out as an eternity of spaghetti limbs and crushing gravity waves. Nothing changes there. Time cannot pass. I will not grow old. The past will never be repeated.

When I awaken from my dream, time has returned to normal. I am back on Earth, in my room, and the only thing that hurts is the rawness between my legs.

### C.

They put me in a room on my own. When I awaken, the door is open, but a nurse is seated on a chair in the doorway. My head throbs. I keep count of the pulses as I lever myself up and out of bed. The nurse doesn't seem to have noticed: they are asleep, a clipboard threatening to slide out of their hands with every slow nod they make. I can handle sleepers if they're quiet, but I'd rather not have my privacy blown out of the open door for all to see. I lumber to the bathroom adjoining my cell, and take a piss. The water swirls anti-clockwise and then clockwise. I understand now - I'm still asleep and this must be the most boring dream I've ever had.

The second time I awaken, it is night with the moon shining through the windows set high into a wall. I feel cold. My throat hurts, but I am relieved to find I am alone. I stumble over to the window, look up at the silver circle. I wonder if humans will ever make it up there to set up homes and lives. I think of fantasies written after the last world war, and of how folks must have wanted to escape everything they saw on Earth - all the horror and pain. The stories I've written about life out among the stars are just a fraction of all that's available to read, I know. How many of us writers want to escape this world? How many readers can I convince to follow? I had a short fantasy story published in a magazine once, years ago, but that's as far as my success goes. Rejection letters are the usual way things pan out for me. I guess my dreams of science fiction are too weird for others to be bothered with. It could also be the fact that all my protagonists are black or Asian - I never got the memo that we aren't supposed to exist in the future. Only whites make it into space it seems. But despite all of that, I still want a better life, and I know there's little chance of having that here in bloody Bristol. Space is black, even blacker than me. I belong up there and one day I'll find out how to go for good.

I think of the ship my parents steamed over the Atlantic on, how they thought they were going to a fresh start, a new world. I stop thinking about that after approximately five seconds. Violent, neglectful trash floating across the ocean from the Caribbean to the English Isles isn't my idea of a fun scenario.

If it's dark, it must mean that Aunt Sarah has long gone. There are no time pieces in this room. They took my watch and my mobile when I was brought in here. I could try to tell the time from the position of the moon, but my head hurts too much to do that kind of math.

I go back to my narrow bed, watch the sky as it transcends colour. Black turns to Lapis blue, turns to rose gold and finally moonstone grey. Semi-precious jewels glitter around me. My own eyes start to droop shut as I hear noise in the corridor outside. The smell of burning toast turns my stomach a little. The clatter of trolleys rattle past my room and then doubles back. I move to the far wall, prepared for a fight, for a confrontation.

A new nurse comes in my room. Her skin is dark brown, and her eyes have a yellowish tint to them.

"So, what was all of that commotion last night?"

"Last night?"

"All that yelling! Must be some doozy of a nightmare you had yourself there."

I feel a shudder pass through my belly. What did I say? What did I do? How can I look after myself if I pull that kind of shit when I'm sleeping?

The nurse sits on the edge of the table that's fixed to a wall. "You were calling out for your father."

I gulp, press myself further back into the wall. I read a study in a journal once that said if we can match the frequency of inanimate objects, we can pass through them as if they weren't there. But the details of the article were behind a paywall, so I couldn't read it all. I know in comics that Speedsters can sometimes do it too, and isn't fiction just a reflection of fact? No matter how hard I'm shaking, it obviously isn't fast enough to break through the barrier and merge into the wall behind me. I open my mouth, and then close it, because if I want to disappear, I need to keep my

trap shut. Walls don't speak; they don't call out and they don't feel afraid. I am made of cement and plaster. If I concentrate, I can make it so. A wall doesn't have parents. A wall doesn't need to eat or pee. I take a deep breath, place my palms flat against the surface of the wall. I don't breathe out. My skin is oil-based paint, magnolia white even though I'm black. But then there are no ethnicities when it comes to inanimate objects.

I can stop breathing for a short amount of time, but my breath whooshes out of me when the nurse touches my shoulder. She looks at me with cautious eyes.

"You don't have to talk, Billie." I see a difference in this woman. I feel the distance she has travelled to be here with me. How many strands of DNA do we share? There are other black members of staff in this place, but it feels as if this is the first time one has ever spoken to me in this way. I decide to postpone my decision on whether she's trash or not. I suck at being a wall. I suck at being a man. And I'm just so very tired right now.

"Let's get you out for some breakfast." She doesn't touch me again, but I follow her out of the room all the same. I find I'm suddenly ravenous.

#### **D.**

I don't leave my room too much. I barely leave the house at all nowadays. Last time I went out, it was for a walk by the river, I took in the sights from the Clifton Suspension Bridge. I loved the way the river snaked from the left to right, grey and wide, even though I know something of the terrible history of this place; about the painting that shows slaves being thrown overboard from ships that took people like me from one corner of the world to the next.

I guess I must have stayed staring at the water for bit too long, as three people asked me if I was thinking of jumping. The last old lady said she would call the cops if I didn't move along. I've thought about offing myself plenty of times - it's a background noise in my head, but I would never do it that way. I love the water, even if I hardly get to see it. I often imagine there are creatures down there, looking up at me, avoiding trawler nets and wreckage left behind from ships. I'm not talking about your ordinary mermaid types either - these creatures would be strong and war-like, with muscles from fighting the current. The water creatures would be descendants of those abandoned slaves - they somehow survived and learned to live below the waves. I know these water creatures would welcome me as one of their own, but I would have to be careful with my introductions. What good would I be to them as a bloated, dead body? I feel that I could have a home - a real home under the water. I think of what that would be like every time I sink into a hot bath. I feel their song, like an echo reaching out to me. There are no shadows in the bathroom. Well, I'm lying - there are shadows, but not the kind that make me afraid to move or speak. I go in alone and I come out alone. It is one of the few places where I can breathe. I find no trouble changing from a human to a waterborne creature. I can go wherever I like. I can be whoever I choose.

Over breakfast, Uncle Paul says, "Car needs a service. Lorna, you'll come with me, won't you?"

The question never needed to be asked. Nobody turns down Uncle Paul. Nobody talks back. Everyone in this family is very good at keeping the peace. I nod, though I don't look up from my plate.

"It will do you good to get out for once - you stay locked up in your room far too much." Aunt Sarah reaches over and pats my hand. "Will you pick up some rice on the way back? Not the cheap one. Get the Uncle Ben's."

I know for a fact there are sixteen boxes of rice already in the cupboard. The rice sits alongside ten cans of Libby's corned beef, two bottles of Encona hot sauce, and a big bag of Maggi cubes.

Uncle Paul drives out of the city. We end up on the edge of a forest. A dingy car park contrasts to the dark jade green of the tree tops I spy from the back seat. On the ground, it is sludge-brown, grey and white, speckled with cigarette butts. The cooling car ticks as a faint timer to my senses. I look above the tops of trees and up into the grey sky. I know that beyond that, the

sky becomes dark blue and finally black. But then Uncle Paul's face appears blocking it all out as he looks down at me. The world is destroyed when he smiles. He says nothing, just walks away - the crunch of his boots on the gravel fading as he moves further to where more cars are parked.

When Uncle Paul returns a long time later, there is another man with him, white and squat with little birdy eyes. Money passes between them. I know how much I am worth. I feel the chill of the autumn air as the man leads me to a van parked some distance away. His grip on my shoulder is hard. The belt around his waist has a big shiny buckle on it. He smells of alcohol, and I only hope that I can have some later to help take this all away.

Afterwards, I come to beneath the shade of a fir tree. The trunk feels solid and nice against my back. I try not to move for a while because I hurt all over. I don't want to keep Uncle Paul waiting though. I clamber up, hissing as pain erupts in my belly. But then I spot something that makes me still. The shadows that gather around the base of the trees seem strange. It is gloomy here in the undergrowth, yet shapes grow and loom in something like a human form. I look overhead - the sun isn't casting these shadows, and there is no other source of light here. The shadows move in concert, and then they flow backwards, puzzling me. Three of the shadows break away and move closer. I trip on my heels as I back away from the sight, pressing myself against the tree. The shadows circle me, but one moves even closer. It doesn't touch me, but I feel somehow it is inspecting me. The breath is stuck in my throat as I take in the slightly changing colour of this apparition. I hear my uncle's voice calling out for me, and I look away for a moment. I already know I'm in trouble; I can expect the belt for making him wait. The shadows start to move away as my uncle's voice gets louder, closer, but the last one stops and moves back to me slightly, extending what passes for a hand. Uncle Paul calls out again, his voice rough and jagged. I take a step away and then I move to the shadows. I follow them deeper into the forest.

## E.

I'm in the mental health hospital for a week before I have my interview. I hear that Auntie Sarah called a few times, asking when I'll be released. The other inmates pretty much ignore me. I despise them all - whiny voices and random acts of public self-harm. The African nurse, Abena is the only part of this that does not suck. On Sunday morning, she and few other staff accompany us to the chapel on the hospital's grounds. I go, even though I stopped believing many years ago. Any opportunity to get off the ward is to be taken. Plus, the walk to the chapel goes through the courtyard in the centre of the grounds. True, the chapel is small and I must sit pressed up next to a couple dozen wretches during the short service, but I like singing the hymns, so there's that. It's strange to hear my own voice, strong and in harmony with the others. But the singing is more than that. I feel a release of something heavy when I let my voice be free. I feel as if my feet will leave the ground, wings will sprout, and I'll be able to fly. I once heard that common depictions of angels were impossible - they wouldn't be able to fly as their wings aren't in balance with their chest cavities. If they tried to fly, they'd tear their backs into several pieces of bloody, angelic chunks.

At my interview, they ask if I have any family willing to look after me when I am released.

"You mean the same fuckers that put me in here?" I ask, my face an innocent mask.

"Now Billie, surely not all of them are bad?" The consultant flicks through his paperwork. I am about to tell him a few choice words, when the fire alarm goes off. The consultant sighs, waits for the wailing to stop, but after almost a minute, it's clear it's not going to.

"I suppose we should see what's amiss."

We make our way out to the corridor where the other inmates are marching to the exit, presumably to the assembly point in the courtyard. I'm glad I get another chance to be outside for a bit.

I stand in a corner, near a strange-looking bush I cannot identify. Some of the other inmates have lit up cigarettes. One plays an imaginary game of football, leaping into the air when they score a goal. I lean against the wall, and that's when I feel it. Something cold passes over me, making me shiver. I look down to see my hands shake, and then I look beyond that to a curious dark shape on the paved area beside me. I think someone must have spilled a drink, or that maybe

it's all that's left of a rain puddle, but then my eyes widen as the shape starts to move. It remains on the ground, but it stretches out wide and long until it looks just like a shadow - like my shadow. I glance around, wonder if anyone else has noticed, but nobody seems to. I stretch out a hand. The shadow mirrors me. I lift a leg, rotate my foot. Same thing happens. And then I crouch down to look at it closer. Am I hallucinating? Is this down to the meds? At that moment, one of the inmates walks toward me, peering. I straighten up, step back, and give them my best intimidating glare. They lower their eyes and shuffle away.

## **F.**

The forest is our home. There is a special way things move here. Time means little to us; the falling of leaves, the patter of snow flurries mark the passing of one moment to the next. However, time does not move for us in the way it does for others. We have no birthdays, no saint's days and no need for calendars here. The sun and the moon watch over us. Sometimes we spy Venus or Mercury if the light is clear and not mottled by pollution. We love the sky very much. Light and water are important to us, as it is to all life. Interaction with others is also a necessity. For most of our existence we thought we were alone, but there is life all around. There are others of our kind, but they rarely know of it. We make contact when we are able. We found Lorna as they slept; reached out in dreams, but they would not hear us. There was a barrier of alcohol and denial wrapped around this one. We could only do so much when we were separated by these things. People who exist only in the outside world do not often wish to know about the multiverse on the inside. But we know of worlds within worlds; lives within bodies fractured by pain. We have many identities to share.

The forest is our home, but our home is also the place where outside dwellers come. We see them in the early morning, fingers dancing in streams to trap fish. We hear the rustle of their clothing, their footsteps that march ever forward. They are alien to us, a species to be observed without ever getting too close, but sometimes the aliens bring a native with them. Natives are always welcome with us.

## **G.**

I follow the shadows to an old crumbling building, after walking for what feels like hours. Part of me is afraid, not of the shadows come to life, but of my uncle's anger when he finally finds me. What will Aunt Sarah do? What excuse will they create? They are so very good at storytelling, even when it's no fun for me anymore.

Everything is quiet, save for the odd rustle of a frightened woodland creature. I sag against the shabby structure, tired and sore. I am in desperate need of something to drink. As if they heard my very thoughts, the door to the building swings open. I see dusty bottles on the floor inside. I pick one of them up, sniff cautiously, and then take a swig. The water is relief for my aching body. The shadows wait until I'm done, and then they move further into the building. The whole place is covered in moss and ivy, like it stopped being a house and gave itself up to the green that surrounds it. I find a smooth flat surface to sit on and rest for a while. Only one shadow remains with me, so I don't feel totally alone. I wonder how this is all real; if I passed out after the birdy-eyed man finished with me, and I'm lying in a coma somewhere in the forest, slowly dying. I don't feel afraid when I think about that: it seems a rather peaceful way to go. My only regret is that I don't get to die by the water. I'd like to see the ocean before I go.

A sudden squeal of hinges makes me sit up straight and look around me. I turn to the shadow, as if they could answer my question of who else is here, but of course it is silent.

"Shadows don't talk, but I do."

I jump at the sound of a voice, loud in all of this. A little girl steps out from a dark doorway. The girl approaches me, looking very real and not at all like something conjured in a dream. I feel suddenly embarrassed. Have I broken into her home? I take in the overgrown room. No. Nobody could live here.

"Emma." The girl touches her chest. "My name is Emma. What's your name?"

I gulp, feeling awkward. Suddenly being asked my name is the most difficult question to answer.

"You don't talk much, do you?" The girl asks me, coming closer. She hops up to sit on what may have once been a table opposite me. "It's all right if you don't want to talk."

I stare at the girl, who is now playing with the hem of her lacy dress. She has pale skin, with straw-coloured hair that is neatly styled around her shoulders. I don't like to talk, but I've got plenty of words in my head - not my fault they don't come out when I want them to.

"Not all of us can talk." The girl doesn't look at me as she speaks. "Some of us are too young to make words. Some of us never learned."

I feel stiff and cold. I wonder how many other children are here. Are there any adults? Am I in trouble?

"I know you have lots of questions, but we have to keep it simple for now. Is that all right?" The girl opens her arms, and one of the shadows moves into her embrace. Her face is obscured for a moment, covered in darkness until the shadow moves away. "An old man used to tend to this place. He had his radio on all the time. I learned to speak by listening to the World Service and BBC Radio Four. I miss him. I don't miss the news though - far too sad for me." The girl slips off the table, her feet a soft whisper on the ground as she glides to me. I inch back on my seat. "You have so many words in here," she says and then reaches forward to touch my chest. I inhale with a painful gasp.

"Don't." The word escapes me without thought.

The girl smiles. "My first word was, *Stop*."

I look at the strange creature. She smiles at me. "Single words come first. Please. Stop. No. Don't..."

I move away quickly. The girl's voice holds a chunk of pain in every word she says. I don't want to listen. I stand by the door, noticing that the forest has become very dark now.

The girl continues, her voice getting louder as she walks up behind me. "It hurts. Please don't. I'm scared. Please stop. Please, Daddy."

"Shut up!" I turn to her, my hand raised.

The girl just smiles at me. It is then I realise my hand wasn't about to strike - it was raised as a shield.

"Two words," the girl says. "Well done. Shall we try for three?"

"What is this?" I hear my own voice as if I were a stranger. "What are you doing?"

The girl steps close. She stands on tiptoes, but she can barely reach my shoulder. "I thought you'd never ask."

## **H.**

I swallow down my lunch as quickly as I can. They rescheduled my interview for the next day, but insisted I eat something before I can be given any medication. After the food comes a very long line of inmates waiting for little pills and big paper cups of water. I try not to run back to my cell, but once I am there I shut the door and move to the window. The sun is weak, but there is enough contrast to see the shadow as it pools around me on the floor.

"What are you?" I kneel, reach out a hand to finally touch the dark shape; it is cold and damp when I finally feel it. It also has some substance to it - not a flat thing at all. When my palms press against it, it curls away from me, moving to project itself on a wall where the light is strongest.

"Am I going mad? Like am I properly nuts now?" I say the words to myself, but the shadow shakes the dark blob that is its head. I stare in amazement. I somehow feel that the shadow is looking right back at me. "Do you understand?" The only response is the shadow moving slightly to keep its place in the centre of the illuminated wall. I hold up my hands, grab my head in frustration, and jump on the spot for a moment. I don't know what to think. How can any of this be real? Shadows don't just come to life. Aliens come from the stars, not the fag-strewn ground. But then I turn to the window, feel the faint heat from the sun as it moves from behind a cloud. The

shadow's outline becomes clearer. I squint up at the sun and feel like a fool. The sun is a star, a huge star. Maybe I wasn't so wrong about aliens.

"Did you come from out there?" I ask the shadow, pointing to the sun. The shadow shakes its head, lifts its hand and makes a strange motion. It lowers its hand, but then just does the same thing once more. I copy the movement, curl my hand around my ear and point my thumb outward. Something in me recognises this. I cannot name how I come to know it, but I do.

"Is this sign language?"

The shadow sticks up a thumb. Positive.

"I don't know sign language. I don't know what you're saying."

It reaches out a limb and touches my chest.

"I don't understand."

It inclines its head, touches me again.

"Me? You come from me?"

The shadow moves so close that I can no longer see anything but its dark form.

"I really am mad."

## I.

The girl holds my hand. Her grip is icy. She leads me out to the trees. The darkness moves and swirls ahead of us, but parts when we move close to the mass of black.

"You want to know about them," the girl says, pointing. "The shadows."

I nod, although at this stage, I feel like the less I know the better. Everything feels strange and cold. I look at Emma; her face is serious. A new feeling of dread makes my skin tingle.

"Every time you came here, you left something of you behind. It's as simple as that."

This time when I look at her I know my face shows my disbelief. How could these things have anything to do with me?

"The outside you is in trouble and needs your help." Emma looks at me as if this should mean something to me. It just sounds like more gibberish.

"There is no outside me."

"Five words - well done!"

"Stop it."

"You were one of the first of us to be made. Did you know that?"

"You're crazy."

Emma gazes at the shadows who collect around her. "You have a big brother."

"Billie." I can only whisper his name.

"Billie isn't really your brother. Billie is you." Emma jabs me in the stomach so hard, I stumble back. "And I am you, and so are all of them!"

I shake my head, feeling suddenly sad at the crazed look in Emma's eyes. I had thought this place could be safe for me, but I was stupid to dream.

"Some of us are different ages; different skin colours and different genders."

"Rubbish."

"Billie had an accident with a paraffin heater."

I nod my head.

"He was running. Who was he running from?"

I want to punch and kick the girl. I want her to stop. I turn around, face the house but she just scoots around me.

"If he had the accident, then why send you away?"

I open my mouth but there are no words to come out.

"You were made on the inside after that accident. And when you were made, another world formed to house you in it."

"None of this is real?"

"Oh, this is real. We are distinct. But we are all part of the same person. Multiple personalities living in multiples worlds - all housed in one body of a frightened child."

I make a dismissive noise.

"I understand," Emma says as a shadow wraps around her for a moment before moving away. "I didn't want to believe it either, but they made a convincing argument."

I turn away, but the shadows only rotate with me, so I am faced with a wall of black. I suddenly want nothing to do with them,

"Not true." I take a little step back. "Not me. They're not me."

"Every time you came here..."

"Never here before."

"You made it safer for the others," Emma continued like I hadn't even spoken. Some of us have even grown up to full adults. Why is that so hard to understand? You helped create these lives."

"I am a monster," I whisper. "Didn't make nothing."

Emma smiled but it was not a happy smile. "Paul is a monster. Sarah is a monster. Most of your family on the outside are monsters."

I feel something high and sharp in my throat. "How could I make you?"

"I am who you wished you could be - white, pretty and fragile."

I open my mouth to say something, but she interrupts me.

"Black is beautiful, we know that. But we also know how blacks are portrayed. Thug, whore, slave. Have I missed any out?"

I grit my teeth, say nothing.

"It will be an awfully long time before you see something positive to make you love your skin."

I've had enough of this little child harping on at me. I don't care if my uncle beats me when I got home. I don't care if he kills me. I am going to listen to this crazy racist girl any more.

"You don't want to listen because it hurts. You don't want to believe me because it breaks apart the fairytale you created." Emma clutches my hand once more. "Let us show you who you are - all of you. You are strong, creative and brave."

I squeeze my eyes shut. The girl is full of shit. I wish away the forest; wish for no trees, no house and no pain. I picture myself in space, weightless with nothing but the stars for company. I feel a hush come over me. I can breathe freely once more. I stretch out my arms, flex in the stellar light show. In the far distance the Earth sits as a blue-green ball in my sights. I turn slowly, happy for the loneliness of the void.

Emma appears beside me, smiling in a way that pisses me right off. "Quite the imagination you have. Did you ever wonder why you cannot wish yourself away permanently from your awful family in Bristol?"

I fume. Nobody has ever intruded in my escape before.

"Look at the satellites littering up the place," the girl continues. "I'm afraid it will only get more crowded up here when time moves on."

I attempt to float away, propel myself into flight, but Emma only follows; my shadow even in the darkness.

"Look, Lorna, we really do need to talk," she says and then hesitates. "Poor choice of words. We need to communicate, illusion to illusion as it were."

"I am real. You are not."

"Do you know how long you'd last in this place with no spacesuit? Do you know you can't actually hold a conversation in an airless environment?" Emma laughs to herself. "You shouldn't be able to breathe. And you can forget about lighting up a cigarette out here too."

A sudden image of cigarette butts flashes up behind my eyelids. I blink and find myself back in the car park on the edge of the forest. This time when the air leaves my lungs, it is as a gasp of relief. Things are back to as normal as they ever are for me. I glance around. Emma is nowhere to be seen. However, I do hear boots on gravel behind me. I dart away, taking cover behind an abandoned, broken down vehicle on the edge of the car park. I peek over the hood to see Uncle Paul walking, counting a small amount of paper money in his hands. He moves to a clutch of cars

parked further away. If I can sneak back to his car, get inside, then maybe I can convince him that I'd got lost and had made it back a while ago. It doesn't sound like the best excuse, but I can't concentrate with so much fear curling in my stomach. For some reason a snippet of what the stupid child had said rings in my ears. If I can wish myself into space, into a dream land, then why can't I wish myself out of here? Why couldn't I wish Paul into a volcano, or Sarah into a very deep dark pit?

I am shaken by these thoughts as I hear the footsteps once more. I gulp, crowd myself back against my seat. Uncle Paul opens the driver-side door. He starts as he sees me.

"Where the hell have you been?"

I try to say I'd got lost, but my mouth doesn't work right. My tongue is big and wooden. I just can't form words to get myself out of this mess.

Uncle Paul slams the door shut & starts the engine. He drives out of the car park in an eruption of speed. I look out of the back window as we tear away. I see Emma on the edge of the trees, holding up a hand in goodbye.

**J.**

"We can't give you any more painkillers - they'll affect your other meds."

"I don't need the other meds. I just need something to take away my migraine." I know I am holding up the queue, but I don't care. The other inmates can go to hell. The Irish nurse looks at me with sympathy. I don't want to be rude to her, but I am desperate for some relief. Every part of my body hurts. I grab on to the counter, because I feel I'm going to pass out. But the hateful cow won't budge. Fine.

I start to move away when another git-faced nurse calls out to me. "You'll be going home tomorrow."

I go very still, nod at the nurse. My shadow grows long and wide, like it can't even bear to stick around me.

"But the charges."

"They dropped them, it seems." The nurse pats me on the shoulder. "Your family want you to come home. This is a good first step."

I say nothing; just walk away feeling numb. I'm almost at my cell when Abena comes around the corner.

"Ah good. I heard you're going home tomorrow."

"Seems like it."

The nurse hands me a few slips of paper. One reads 'Support for survivors of abuse.' I hold up the paper, feeling angry. "I never said anything about abuse."

She shrugs. "You didn't have to."

I stuff the paper into the band of my hospital trousers.

"We can make a referral to a hostel too, but it might be a wait." The nurse hands me another flyer.

"This is for women."

The nurse looks at me for a moment with a confused stare.

"Trans people are welcome there," she finally says.

Whatever. I stomp back into my cell, close the door and face the blank wall.

"Where the fuck are you?" My shadow appears from out of nowhere. "You gonna tell me what's going on? Why ain't I going to prison? Cos I'd rather go there than back with those scummy pieces of shit."

The shadow is silent of course; it just makes more of those bloody stupid signs I barely understand.

"Slow down! I can't make head nor tail of you!"

The shadow grows strangely small, and then it slides off the wall. I am left alone in my room.

"Come back!" I pound the wall, my anger rising at the shit-show called my life. "Fuck you!" I punch harder, my knuckles blossoming into pain. I smash my head against the wall, over and over until my vision goes red and tears escape me. Nothing matters anymore. I don't want to live in this world. I don't want to keep breathing. I want to be gone.

I finally stop when my energy escapes me. I see red smears on the wall - crimson images of my hurt. God, when did I become such a poetic cunt?

Nobody comes. Nobody checks up on me. I am left shivering and crying in my room until the dinner bell rings a long time later.

## **K.**

I lie in bed afraid to move. My guess of Uncle Paul's temper was well wrong. My whole body feels swollen and hot. I can barely see out of my right eye. If my bladder fills up, I will wet the bed, because there is no way I can get up and walk to the bathroom. I really shouldn't worry though, as the sheets are already ruined.

I want to transport myself to a calm place, but I am worried about who else will be there. I cough a little, wincing as pain moves haphazard over my chest. My eyes close of their own will. I feel like all my fight has finally gone.

I find myself in space a few heartbeats later. I smile in the peace and cold. I glide close to a nebula, watch the clouds of matter as they form lovely little patterns. I reach out and circle the rings of Saturn, dipping in and out of ice boulders and pockets of gas. I feel as free out here as I am imprisoned on Earth. But as I start to fully relax, Emma appears.

"Billie needs you."

I reel back at her hard, quick voice. I don't want to talk to this girl, but it seems I have little hope of escaping her.

"He's in a secure hospital - in quite a bit of pain right now. He really could do with your help."

"Who will help me?" I whisper. Who will come to my rescue and make my life the slightest bit better?

"I will." With that, Emma holds my hands. We disappear.

## **L.**

We travel to a place we have never been. The streams of time unravel before us, taking us into the world where Billie lives - the heart of us all. The journey is not long, but the tiredness we feel comes from emotions long-buried and then unearthed. Each trip to the forest is a trip to the past for us. Every strand of light is an after-image of a life spent in despair, desperately trying to knit itself back into the whole - trying and failing and, if they are lucky, moving on. We see Petal, one of the early ones, who has a passion for watercolours, light and shade. We feel their love of art as a means to escape. The strands here are pale blue with crests of white. We travel further on. Things stop being linear for a moment as we encounter a cluster of life, untidy and frayed. We already know this is Jay Jay, a small and cowering soul, stuttering in their attempt to simply live, but full of affection all the while. We feel sadness as they refuse to connect when we reach out to them. And now we come to the realm of Lorna - these strands of time are sewn together here, one on top of the other. We are amazed at the patchwork of protection in a variety of colours and shapes. Some are complex and some are simple dark squares, but each of them is beautiful. Emma is at the centre of this - a sunny yellow shape that stops the patchwork from falling into disarray. And following this, we see open space and the modern age. We see alien machines, battles among the stars, excitement and adventure in books and ideas about science fiction and fantasy. We see the strands of time thrash and bend, but ultimately come together as we finally enter the consciousness of Billie Prime.

## **M.**

I feel sick as I come to myself in a strange room. My body still hurts from the beating, but the weird trip through a kaleidoscope makes my head reel with sensation overload. I look around the room - it's a waiting area of sorts, and notice Emma is sat beside me. She looks straight ahead, her hands clasped in her lap. Things don't feel right. There is a massive, fancy television in the corner of the room, blasting out music set to short films. At the end of each snippet, writing appears at the bottom of the screen. I don't understand any of it, even though it's in English. I jump slightly as advertisements appear; young people in tight colourful clothing move about on strange contraptions. I feel even more confused than before.

Emma turns to me at last, sneering at the telly. "You can thank that lot for cluttering up space with their wretched satellites."

"Where is Billie?" I ask, giving up any hope of understanding the girl, or the people onscreen, who are now scooting around on something that looks like flat roller skates.

"Billie must come to us." Emma closes her eyes. "Think of him."

I do as she says, conjuring up an image of my brother. I picture his smile, and how that smile grows wide when he picks me up and swings me around. I see him sewing patches on to a pair of jeans, showing me the colourful swatches of fabric as he turns this way and that. I see him wave to me as I start my first day at school, with him in the class three years above mine. I find I am crying. I look away, suddenly overcome.

"I asked you a question in the forest," Emma says, not opening her eyes. "About why you could never fully wish yourself away from your aunt and uncle."

I nod, although I really don't want to think about them.

"It's because Billie needed you there."

"No!" I stand and move away. "Billie loves me."

"I know that," Emma says, eyes still closed. "That's why he did it."

At that moment, the door to the room swings open. A man with a mass of keys and cards hanging around his neck, pokes his head into the room.

"Good. Every bugger's gone home." The man goes to close the door, but as he does, Emma yanks me forward. We both slip through the gap before it closes.

I look at Emma, confused, but the girl just raises an eyebrow at me. I follow her further into the building.

**N.**

I clean myself off as best as I can. My face is a right mess, with bloodshot eyes and a bruised forehead from my earlier freak out. Dinner made me feel a little better though, and there was prunes and custard for dessert so at least I'll be regular.

"We've got board games later," a nurse calls out as I make my way back to my cell. I stop mid-stride, a full body shudder washing over me.

"Don't be like that. You'll have fun, just wait and see. You have a little nap, and then come and join us all. Make some friends!" The nurse is aggressively cheerful. She loops her arm through mine and swings me in the direction of my room. I feel myself dragged forward, my pathetic attempt to disentangle myself failing. I practically stumble inside where I see two girls, one black teenager and one white little kid, waiting for me. I stare at them, wondering what kind of joke this is, when one of them speaks.

"Billie." The white girl approaches me. "You wanted to see us."

I gaze at one and then the other; the black girl looks like shit. "There's been some kind of a mistake. You must have the wrong room."

The black kid stands and clutches her belly. "Who's this lady?" she asks the white girl.

"Lorna, this is who you call your brother, Billie."

I hold up my hands. "Whoa there. I ain't your brother. I don't have any sisters and I'm not a lady either."

The black kid limps up to me. She takes me in with a gaze that makes me squirm, despite my best efforts.

"You sent me to Bristol." Lorna's voice is pure condemnation

My eyes widen a bit, but I keep my cool. This still feels like it's all a crock of shit.

The white girl puts a hand on Lorna's arm. "Billie needed you to stay with Paul and Sarah."

"Hey!" I start, suddenly angry. "Did my aunt and uncle send you?" Annoyance rises hot and jagged inside me. "I don't know why they got a couple of kids to do their dirty work, but I'm not going back to them."

The white girl puffs out a breath. "Can we put a stop to this?" She reaches out, takes Lorna's hand and then grabs on to mine. The whole room vanishes.

"Oh shit, shit, shit!" I swing my head around, gasping as the ground beneath my feet is replaced by nothingness. I flail about as I realise I'm floating in a sea of stars. "How is this possible?" I don't know whether to whoop for joy or piss my pants. "This just can't be real. I must be having some killer delusions."

"You made this," the white girl states.

"Me? I'm not God, mate. I could never do this." I wave my hand around, stunned at the details in every object I can see. "Bloody hell, Jupiter is fucking huge!" I propel forward to the planet. "Shit, but I can't remember all the names of the moons. And look!" I point, "The red spot! I can see the red spot!" I squeal like a legit crazy person. "This is awesome! No way did this come from me." I catch sight of the girl's faces; their serious expressions dampen my mood instantly.

"Why bring her?" Lorna asks. She looks pissed off, and along with her injuries, quite scary. And I don't get scared of much at all.

"Billie, you called for us. We came because you need us." The white girl has the most condescending voice ever.

"I never called for a couple of kids."

"You made us for a reason. I'll help you remember why."

"I didn't make anything. Wait - are you saying you think I'm your dad? Cos that shit's not really possible."

The girls both sigh. Lorna floats closer to me. "You sent me away."

"Stop it! Why would I do that? Why would I send you to those sick fucks? Those two aren't safe for anyone to be around. What kind of a man do you think I am?"

"Not a man."

"Shut up. I get enough of that crap at home. I'm more man than plenty of blokes out there."

I look over at the white girl. Something, apart from her ability to zap me into space, is really unnerving.

"Shadows don't talk, but we do," she says.

I swallow, suddenly thinking of the shadow who came to life a few days ago. "Was that your doing? Did you make that thing?"

"You did that on your own, just like you made us. We have always been with you - an inside part of you to protect and help," she continues.

"The only thing I ever created were stories..."

"About space," Lorna finishes my sentence.

I go very cold, stop breathing through fear and dread. Finally, I am forced to inhale. "That isn't possible." I wave my arms around pointing to the speckles of light around us. "Aliens come from the stars, not from me."

"Not an alien," Lorna says, looking even more angry. "You made me. Sent me away. They hurt me. Hurt me bad."

Something in me cracks. My heart goes brittle with pain as I look at the child. "Imaginary things don't come to life."

"Real thing," Lorna whispers. "Feel real pain."

"We come from your trauma, Billie. Don't you remember being hurt? Paul is a very dangerous man."

"Not any more he isn't. Sorted that one out."

"What did you do?"

I look down at my feet. The universe sprawls out around them. I am struck by the absurdity of it all. "Found some pics. Pics of me as a kid. Fucker kept them. I wouldn't even had remembered that shit, if not for that."

The white girl makes a sound of realisation. "You buried it to survive."

"Buried what?"

"The memories. The sexual abuse."

"Stop talking."

"You buried the experiences, and then you created us to deal with it."

"I said stop talking." I grab the girl by the scruff of her neck. "Only happened once. I'm not like that."

The girl looks at me calm as you please. "What aren't you like?"

"A victim. I'm stronger than that. I'd never let that happen more than once."

"Just a kid." Lorna is right beside me now. "Like me."

My grip around the white girl goes slack. She floats away from me in a graceful movement.

"There are so many of us."

I let out a noise that could well be a sob. Images assault me, all bleary, but I know what they are. I smell aftershave and tobacco, hear zips rasping open, the sound of my own childish weeping, calling out for my dad.

"I don't want to be here." I turn around, look out to the universe I made; it all seems so pathetic now. Look, if I made all of this, then maybe I can make somewhere for you two to live. Nobody will bother you, and you won't bother me. Will that be okay?"

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"Where you go, there we are."

"Well that sucks." I hold my head. "When we're here floating about in space, where is my body?" The girls both look confused. "Am I still in Woodmayes Memorial or did I vanish? Can the nurses see me?"

"They think you're sleeping."

"This is such bullshit."

"Why did you call us?"

"I never called you," I snapped

"You are Billie Prime. You made us."

"Are you sure?"

The white girl looks ready to throttle me. "May have happened in a dream or at a time when you were afraid."

"Bloody Uncle Paul." I bite out the words and notice how Lorna goes stiff at the mention of his name. "When I found the photo, I had it out with him. He's an old man, but he's still a nasty piece of work. Got a bit carried away, and that scumbag Sarah called the police."

"Uncle's not old," Lorna says in a quiet voice.

"Bastard's ancient - must be knocking on ninety now. Only found the pic when I was cleaning out his place so he could move into a care home, and Sarah could move into a smaller place."

"Not true," Lorna insists, turning to the other girl. "Not that old."

I sigh. "If we go to his home in Bristol, I'll show you." I look at the white girl. "Can you take us there?"

"You have to do it."

I don't bother trying to argue. I just picture the mouldy old house on top of a rise in Clifton. I see the front door with peeling yellow paint. I smell mildew; see the blotchy spots on the wallpaper near the bathroom. The girls hold my hand and we are suddenly there. I open my eyes, dumbfounded at my ability to do this.

Lorna looks around, confused. She touches the wall. "Different." She starts to pick at a corner of wallpaper. I peer closer to see a little felt-tip pen drawing of a sad face revealed beneath the paper.

"You did that?" I ask.

Lorna nods.

I turn to the other girl. "If she did that, does it mean I did that too?"

"Finally," the girl sighs. "You did it a long time ago. Lorna did it a few months back."

I take a step away, not wanting to connect the lines of thought in my head.

"Are you a ghost of me?"

"Still alive."

"Oh shit. This is real. I went mad and buried the past."

"Not mad. Afraid."

I slump against the wall. The information hits me like a crashing wave. "Why did I have to do this?"

"To remember," the white girl says, her voice soft.

"No. I mean, why did I have to take us here? Why not Lorna - she lives here too."

"Not safe." Lorna starts to inch away from us; the kid looks spooked.

"Can you just try?" I ask, trying to not sound as frustrated as I feel.

She looks at the other girl. "Emma?"

"We'll be with you, Lorna."

Lorna still looks like she's about ready to bolt, but she takes a breath, and holds our hands.

This time when we come into existence, the house looks very different; cleaner and brighter somehow. I feel taller, with my point of view strangely shifted. Lorna drags us into my old room. I lock the door and take in the sight of disarray.

"Looks like a bomb went off in here, kid." I reel at the awful smell in there, and then I get a closer look at the bed - I turn away, bile rising in my throat. "I'm so sorry," I whisper. I squeeze my eyes shut. "You're just a kid. You don't deserve this."

"She's you," Emma states. "Younger you. I am you as well. We all are part of the Prime."

I sweep my hand through my tufted hair. "Funny, but I can kinda understand why someone would be driven to make a whole new world because of this." I pull the sheets off the bed, trying not to look too closely at them. The mattress is stained, but it's reasonably clean near the edges.

"It didn't just happen once, did it." It's not really a question.

"No. There are many of us."

I feel tears prickle the back of my eyes. I don't want to cry though. I never want to cry again. I scrub at my face, and turn away, looking instead at the little details of the room. I see the yellow-brown curtains with a geometric style. I toe the beige carpet with my shoes, and see the worn spot near the window where I used to spend much of my time gazing out of, wishing my real parents would come and rescue me. Later I used to wish for aliens to transport me away from the house and up into space. I wanted anything to remove the pain; even as a kid, alcohol, when I could get it, didn't really do much of a job in making the hurt go away.

"Every time it happened... Did a new person come to life?" I ask.

Emma sits beside me. "Not every time. Some were only shadows. Some were more formed - more independent."

"All part of you," Lorna says.

I look down at Emma; I can't begin to imagine how she came to be. But she seems to be the one with the most answers. "Am I possessed?"

"No."

"Am I mad?"

"No."

"Are all the others gonna turn up?"

Emma shrugs. "We all feel your pain - from the past until now, but it's their decision to respond to your call."

"I still don't remember calling anyone."

"The picture. The photo." Emma points to my pocket.

I doubt it will be there - I'm wearing clothes the hospital gave me. But sure enough, when I reach to my pocket, the photo is there. The photo is a slimy pic from an old Polaroid camera.

Lorna looks over, catches sight of it and gasps. "It's me."

I feel the square burn in my hand. I look down at the image of a naked little girl holding a plastic dildo. The girl is crying. "It's me," I say. "Used to be me."

Lorna starts sobbing. I wish I'd never found the wretched photo now.

"I'm sorry for calling you here." I stand up. "But I can't stay trapped in the '80's."

Lorna stands too. "You can change it."

I look at her with a blank stare.

"Change the past. Rescue me. Rescue everyone."

I look to Emma. "Is that possible?"

"No."

"Change it," Lorna insists, looking wide-eyed crazy. "Take me home."

Emma places a hand in Lorna's. "Multiple personalities is not the same as time travel. It doesn't work that way."

I gawp at the kid who sounds like a legit professor.

"There is a multiverse within, but we cannot transverse time on the outside."

"Fix this," Lorna snarls.

"Maybe there's another way," I whisper to myself. "Shit, but I don't know diddly about this stuff." I have an idea. "But I've got a friend who might." I reach out and hold the girl's hands, and then I think about the hospital.

I blink my eyes open, back in the waiting room. "Can you stay out of sight for a bit?"

"Nobody else can see us," Emma says. "We'll go to your room."

I find Abena helping to set up the board games around the dinner tables. She smiles when she sees me. "I'm going home in a bit," she says, straightening up. "Suppose I won't see you again before you're discharged. I've got some time off."

I cut straight to the chase. "I need to know about multiple personalities."

The nurse gives me a double-take. "Have you tried Google?"

I take a breath, try not hit anything. "They took my phone when I got admitted here. So no, I haven't tried Google - I don't trust it, but I trust you." My admission seems to startle us both. We just look at each other for a bit.

"Let me finish up here, and we can have a quick chat."

I rush back to my room, thinking about all the horror films I've seen where someone had a split or multiple personae. God, am I some kind of Jekyll and Hyde character? I falter outside the door to my room. Inside are two representations of my personality - one a teenage black girl, and one a white, blonde kid. I sigh to myself: Jekyll and Hyde doesn't begin to cover it.

I stride into my room. "Are any of the other me's violent?"

Emma shakes her head. "No. Just you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're violent. None of the others are."

"Are you talking about what I did to Paul? Cos that dirty pervert would be hurting kids until they nailed the lid of his coffin shut." I pace the room, feeling scandalised. "If I didn't beat the crap out of him - if I didn't put him in hospital, what do you think he'd do to the next kid who came around?" I glare at Emma, wanting to punch her lights out too. "I can't believe you're having a go at me."

"You asked me a question. I answered it."

I am about to walk out and take out my frustrations on a couple of walls, when Abena comes in. She takes a seat on a chair bolted to the floor.

"So why do you think you have dissociative identity disorder?"

I look at Abena, confused at what she just said.

"It's what they call multiple personality disorder nowadays."

I glance over at the two girls. "I'm not sure."

"Well as a survivor of abuse, it may be a remote possibility, but without a thorough investigation, we wouldn't be able to make a proper diagnosis."

"Let me speak to her," Emma calls out.

I swing my head to the girl. "What?"

Abena looks at me. "What?"

"Nothing. Just thought I heard a voice."

"Well, hearing voices are also part of DID."

"It is?" I casually stretch out my hand. Emma coves over, holds it and then sits on my lap. I reel back in my chair as she wraps her arm around my neck.

"Billie?" Abena looks concerned.

I open my mouth to respond, but the voice that comes out is a different pitch to mine. "You were right about the abuse. Billie found a photo of herself as a child in a sexual situation. Her uncle took it."

"Shut up. She doesn't have to know the details." I try to push Emma off my lap, but she clings to me.

Abena looks shocked, but she covers her tell quickly. "Um..."

"Billie feels ashamed of what happened," Emma continues. I give the girl a huge shove. She falls to the floor, glares up at me. "You're such an awful coward!" Emma hisses, and then stomps away.

"Are there any others in there?" Abena asks, her voice gentle as she leans forward.

I look down, feeling humiliated to the very core. "I think there are lots."

"Do any of them want to talk to me?"

I reach out a hand. Lorna comes over and wraps herself around me. I am overcome with a wave of grief and sadness. My chest heaves with emotion.

"And what's your name?" Abena asks with a smile.

"Lorna," I whisper. Tears start to flow. "I want him to stop. He comes most every night." I'm sobbing so hard, I start to hiccup on the words.

"It's okay, Lorna. He's not here now."

I nod, wiping my face with the back of my hand. "Don't send me back," I wail. "Change the past!" I break down, crumple to the floor, with floods of tears streaming down my face. I feel like I'll cry forever, that I'll turn myself inside out with the pain. But then I feel Abena's arm around my back. Lorna steps away and goes back to Emma. I am a useless mess on the floor, shaking with the things I never wanted to feel, not ever.

"DID isn't my specialty," Abena says carefully. "But you can talk to me until we find someone who is trained in this." She strokes my back. "Anyone of you can talk to me."

I don't know what to say. I'm stunned that someone believes me. I'm still shaking with tears, but something gets through to me in a way nothing ever has before. I feel things start to bubble to the surface - conflicting emotions; a multitude of voices, some young and babbling, some more adult. It's like every part of me has just heard the message that it is safe to exist. I start to cry once more, my head full of expressions of sadness.

"I'm going to get something to relax you for a bit, and then I'll leave a message for the head psychiatrist." Abena squeezes my shoulder. "You're not alone with this."

I nod my head, stumble over to my bed and curl up. I watch as shadows appear on the wall, changing and moving all around me.

## O.

We see the dreams of the others. We watch images play out; fantasies where they are truly free, thoughts of what it would be like if the fabric of our existence were knitted in another way. We travel to the past inside and imagine things different to how they happened. But time does not move for us in the same way as it does for the outside worlds. The forest may only exist for a

certain period of the twentieth century, but we exist far outside of it. Before Billie Prime, we were already here as potential. When the trauma came for the very first time, we only stepped forward as a salve for their wounds. And now something rare has happened for us - we are told that it is safe to exist on the outside. We are unsure what to do with this new information. Some of us do not wish to come from the shadows; some of us do not know how. And then there is Billie, who does not know if they can bear this number of souls within. We have always been here. Billie Prime is already enough for us.

**P.**

I awaken in the morning. Lorna is still in my room, but I can't see Emma.

The teenager sits at the bottom of the bed, gazing at me. "Why pretend to be a man?"

I raise myself up on the pillows. "I'm not pretending. This is how I identify."

"You've got big tits."

"You've got a big mouth," I snap back.

Lorna crosses her arms, scowls at me. "Why send me away?"

I sigh. "I'm sorry. It just kinda happened. I couldn't handle it, so in my head I made someone who could."

"Can't handle it either." Lorna pouts at me. "Asked for Emma, cos I couldn't do it alone."

"I'm sorry," I repeat. "I never knew I was doing any of this. I didn't know about this personality stuff until yesterday."

Lorna tilts her head to one side. "Will you change the past?"

I ignore her question, but she's insistent.

"Will you?"

"I don't know if I can. Time travel's kind of a big deal. I don't have a time machine or access to a bloody wormhole, you know?"

"You're afraid."

Lorna's pronouncement stings. "Damn right I'm afraid. I've got god-knows how many people living in my head, I just beat up my uncle and now you're asking me to flip a switch and restart my own bloody life!" We both glare at each other for a moment. "Don't you think I'd change things if I could? Who asks for this kind of crap?" I tap my head. "I've got huge gaps missing inside me. I know stuff I've never learned and I don't know how that happened. So leave me alone for a bit, kid. Go and find Emma if you want something to do."

"Emma's gone."

"I can see that."

"She's angry."

I sit up fully and clutch at my head as a throbbing pain suddenly tears through me. "What's going on?" I want to vomit. I feel awful, with both my stomach, my head and my back going into spasms.

"It will pass," Lorna says. "Time moves for you. Not for me."

"Is this you doing that? Are you and the others giving me a headache?"

"Stop blaming us!"

I gawp at the kid and then start to laugh as I realise I'm having an argument with myself. I'm still chuckling when a woman I've never seen before comes into the room. I can tell at a glance that she isn't a nurse; the clothes are more starched, the pose more reserved. This is someone who spends a lot of time behind a desk, not dealing with losers like me. She doesn't introduce herself as she sits down: typical high-level medic behaviour.

"I see you're scheduled to go home today."

I feel a tingle of nerves wash over me; the realisation that I'm going to have to manage all of this on my own from now on.

"I understand Abena spoke to you yesterday?"

I only nod, unable to form any words.

"I think it best we delay your discharge for a few days, until we can ensure you'll be safe."

I'm so grateful, I gasp out a little sob, and then feel like an idiot for doing so.

"There's a hostel we can refer you to, and of course you know about the specialist clinic, but both have long waiting lists." The woman flicks through her papers. "We'll move you to another ward. Oh wait, it says you identify as male." She peers at me, makes a silent decision and averts her eyes. "Let's just keep you here for the duration. Since you know your way around."

There's an uncomfortable silence for a while, but where my words had once hidden, they now bubble up in an uncontrolled way.

"I feel like I've just adopted sixteen children and I don't know what to do!" I didn't really mean to say that, but it just comes out. My train of thought stops abruptly. I can't think of what else I can say. It's like a road I'm walking on suddenly splits in two and I can see myself walking on the left, whilst I stand like a fool on the right watching myself stride away. I feel a gentle hand on my shoulder, look to the side and see brown skin covered with smudges of paint. My mouth is still moving; my voice is still coming out, but the words aren't mine. I realise this is a first-contact situation. I listen to my voice stammer as I try to get words out, but my nerves scupper all of that. This alien life must be less than impressed by my attempt at starting a conversation. I look down, see a piece of paper the woman has put down. I pick it up, run my fingers over it and feel the weave and weft of fibres so processed it's barely there. But I can feel it; I can feel the potential.

The woman asks me a question, her face looking mildly concerned. I make motions with my hands. At the very same time I feel a different weight on the back of my neck. Now my words are gone altogether. My hands move in patterns part of me understands. My signing becomes faster as my hands arms and fingers loosen up. It seems perfectly clear to a section of me, but the outside me is as confused as the woman whose gaze takes in all my motions and hand signs. I feel tired, headachy and nauseous all at once. I want everyone to stop and go away.

"I'm scared," I finally say when the pressure of the other inside people eases up on my body. "There are so many."

The woman puts down her pen, sighs but she smiles at me. "Give it some time. These are all part of you. You can learn how to control it, but be patient."

I nod, scrubbing at my face. When I look up I can see her name badge: Doctor Wodjewodski.

"Maybe you could ask one of the others if they can help you with that."

"Emma." I put my head in my hands. "She could help, but I pissed her off."

The doctor nods. "There will be some alters who are scared and angry. You will need to learn how to deal with that too." The bell for breakfast sounds. "After some food and your meds, why don't you ask to spend a little time in the courtyard, have a think in the fresh air?"

The shadows at my side retreat as I stand and make my way to the smell of toast and coffee. I feel different out here among the others; I've stopped thinking of us as inmates - we are patients now. I eat a little bread, drink coffee strong enough to strip paint off walls, but when the other patients leave, I remain in the dining room. I look out of a window to the sun as it attempts to break through the clouds. I notice some art supplies on a table below the window. I make my way over, pick them up. I don't feel a sense of artistry or anything when I hold them. I don't feel like I could paint the Mona Lisa or anything like that, but there is a comfort in the items which makes me smile. There is a hum of welcome acceptance as I clutch them to my chest. Not even the feel of my boobs freak me out - they are simply part of me.

I turn around to find Lorna watching me. "You draw?"

I put most of the supplies down, but carry a sheet of paper and a tube of poster paint back to my seat. "I think one of me loves it."

"I did art at school."

"Mister MacAskill, I remember," I say without really thinking. "Well of course I remember what you did - you are me after all."

"I'm separate."

"You're one of my inside me's."

Lorna shakes her head. "You forget many things."

I think for a moment and shrug. "I remember that smelly kid who kept poking me."

"Mickey."

"I remember I wanted an artist's box for Christmas."

"Dad said no."

I go very still. "He slapped me when he found the catalogue from the art shop." I rub my cheek.

Lorna snorts a laugh. "Slapped?"

I look at her, confused. "What's so funny?"

She comes closer, opens her mouth and angles her head so I can see. "Lost a tooth."

"No, that was when I fell on the way home from school - I hit my head, blacked out and when I woke up..."

Lorna shakes her head. "Forgotten many things."

I gulp, look down at the paper. I scrunch it into a ball and throw it to the floor. My breath comes in short pants. She's right - I have so many gaps in my memory; some are just dark holes, but some have been plastered over with my stupid overactive imagination.

"Will I ever get everything back?"

"No," Lorna says. "Unless you change the past."

"Are you still on that kick?"

"Know you can do it."

"Didn't you hear Emma? It can't be done."

"Go back, kill Paul. Go back further, kill Hitler."

I laugh out loud. "Why not go all the way back and stop the Trans-Atlantic slave trade? Would that make you happy?"

"Yes."

"How can you be part of me?" I look at Lorna sideways. "How can someone so weapons-grade stupid be part of me?"

Lorna leaps forward, surprising me with her agility. She grabs me around the neck, we both topple backwards. We wrestle each other through what looks like a tunnel of light and colour. I manage to land a few decent punches, but Lorna is thin and wiry. She gets me in a headlock and twists so hard I think she's going to yank my head off. When I finally struggle free, I see that I'm in Lorna's bedroom back in the 1980's.

"Every night!" Lorna's voice is a screech.

"I'm sorry!"

"And every month, this." Lorna pulls a little box from under the bed - a pregnancy test kit.

I stagger to the bed like I've been punched in the face.

Lorna crouches by my side. "Have to steal it." She looks at me. "Do we get pregnant?" She bites her lip. "Do we have a monster?"

I will my tears to not fall, but I sniff and look away for a moment. "I want to change things, but I can't."

Lorna reaches under the bed once more. She hands me a little stack of paper; photocopies that are crumpled and thin. Each sheet has a print out of an article about time travel. "So many ways to try."

"Lorna..."

"Go back."

"You didn't exist until I was ten years old. I can't go back further, cos nothing traumatic happened before."

"Jay Jay happened before," Lorna whispers.

"Jay Jay?"

"He's little. Emma knows." She looks at the floor, won't make eye contact with me.

I feel a chill travel down my back. "How little?"

Lorna shrugs her shoulders. I just blink at her, not knowing what to do or think.

"I got sent away after my accident when I was nine. Maybe Jay Jay formed because of that?" I go to pat Lorna on the arm but she shrinks away from me. "I need to speak to Emma."

"Emma's angry."

"Tell me something new, why don't you?"

"I can take you," Lorna says, but she clearly doesn't want the whole ridiculous time travel conversation to end. She holds out her hand in a half-hearted gesture. "Think of trees," she whispers.

I close my eyes, picture a generic forest scene. I imagine the breeze on my face, the smell of grass and pine needles. I conjure the feel of soft moss and earth beneath my feet, but then the smell of tobacco and rum intrudes. Dry bark catches against my face. I open my eyes, find I'm gasping for breath. I see a forest, but I also see a patch of tarmac and gravel littered with cigarette butts. A flourish of bile rises in my throat.

"We can't stay here," Lorna hisses.

"This place." I look around swinging my head from left to right. "I remember this place."

"Need to run." Lorna motions to the trees. As I follow her, I turn my head when I hear a strange sound - a child is crying nearby. Lorna doubles back once she realises I'm not following.

"Quickly." Her voice is urgent, her eyes wide. Lorna grabs my hand and when she does, the world around us warps into a strange spiral of colour and lines. The car park is turned upside down in a swirl of grey and brown. The trees stretch out into the distance. After a few moments, the scene changes and everything goes green. I find myself in the heart of the dark forest, outside a house that looks like it was abandoned centuries ago.

"Stupid mistake," Lorna says, her voice sharp and quick. "When I run, you run." She stomps into the house without turning back. I follow her, amazed at the sight of all the green around me. The house feels more like a living creature than a structure.

Emma and Lorna stand in the middle of the space. Emma takes a step away when she sees me, but says nothing.

"Look, I'm sorry." The words tumble out, and I don't really know if they're making any impact on the girl. "I never meant to upset you. It's just very new for me and I get annoyed really easily."

"I know," Emma says with a smirk. "What do you want?"

"Can I change stuff? Like go back and change things?"

Emma shoots Lorna an angry look and shakes her head.

"I need you to be honest with me. Cos if I changed stuff, it might mean that none of this - none of you will exist."

"Rather die," Lorna calls out.

"What I mean is, are you saying this is impossible, because you're scared of not being brought to life, or is it impossible because it really is?"

"Changing the past is something nobody can do. We can only change our future."

"Stop it!" Lorna picks up a small rock and flings it at me. I have to dodge getting hit in the head.

Emma seems very unbothered by it all as she continues. "If you could go back, how would you stop the abuse?"

I turn to Lorna, an eyebrow raised.

"Kill Paul." Lorna's voice is understandably hard. "You beat him up. Now you finish him."

I gulp, but feel a surge of hate to my uncle. "I can do that." Right now, I'm itching for delivering some long overdue justice. My hands ball into fists. I want to smash my uncle's face into a bloody mess.

"And the others who hurt you?"

"Others?"

Lorna looks away suddenly. I take a step to her, but she moves out of reach.

"You mean the other men in the car park? Is that what you're talking about, because I don't think I can track them down." I turn back to Emma.

"There is no escaping the past." The little girl places her hands on her hips, looking very grown up; forced to grow up too soon.

"What are you going on about? Why is everyone acting all weird?"

"Your father." Emma's voice is soft, but I hear it.

"My dad never did that stuff to me." A sudden rage washes over me. "Don't you talk about him like that." I throw up my hands in frustration. "You two can both go to hell." I turn to leave. Shadows swirl in my path as a solid wall of shapes. "Get out of my way."

"Everywhere you go, there we are." I turn to see Emma still in the middle of the room.

"Do you control them?" I point to the dark shapes in front of me. "Is that what you're trying to do with me?"

"Never."

"And what about Jay Jay? Where does he fit into your little theory on my life?"

Emma narrows her eyes. She raises herself up to her full height. "Leave him alone."

I sag, feeling some of my own anger fade away. "I'm not going to hurt him. I just want to talk, try to make some sense out of all this shit."

"Jay Jay is special. They don't have the ability to deal with much."

"Why?"

"He is the youngest of us."

"I know. They got made after my accident."

Emma just looks at me.

"That is when they got made, isn't it?"

"No." She glances at Lorna. "Are you going to get angry again?"

I blow out a puff of air, shake my head.

"Your father..."

"What?" I feel my blood pressure start to shoot up. "How many times have I got to say this? He never did anything!"

"You said you wouldn't get angry."

"You talk shit about my dad and I'll be as angry as I want."

"You want to make sense but you refuse to listen to your own selves."

"Please stop." The voice is small, but it doesn't come from anyone I can see. I turn around to see the shadows move aside. A toddler comes from in their midst. The kid goes to Emma and clutches on to her leg. "Stop it."

I blink with astonishment at the child. "It can't be." I take a step back, tilting my head to see Jay Jay clearly. "You're not me. You're just..."

"A baby?" Emma asks. "A child? A tease, whore, slut? Asking for it. Belongs to me. Feels so good, baby."

"My god," I gasp. "What's wrong with you, Emma?"

"These are all words he said to Jay Jay. All words from your dad."

"Shut up!"

Jay Jay detaches himself from the girl. They stumble toward me on unsteady legs. "Daddy? Daddy?"

I back away more. The kid keeps chanting for their dad. I bump into a wall, slide along it and then turn and run into the dark.

## Q

Shadows do not talk. We, being made of light and shade, find other ways to communicate. Our form moves when the sun filters through the trees. We communicate when we dance on the forest floor, skipping over twisted branches, swirling around the base of a tree, or signing on the surface of a dark pool. Our hands are many, our movements are intricate, but we are open to be misunderstood as we have witnessed with Billie Prime. We will stay with him, for if the forest is

our home, and space is our dreams, then Billie is our heartbeat that rings out across all these places. Shadows do not talk, but we can surely feel. We sense a pain as deep as the fracture that brought us out of the dark and into the explosion of life that we now are. Billie is stronger than they know, more resourceful than they believe. And we being shadows are forever in their company; it is what we were made for.

## R.

I hide under my blanket for hours. I can't stop shaking. I know that someone will come if I miss two meals in a row, but I don't care. Eventually I must fall asleep, because when I struggle out of the blanket, almost falling to the floor in the process, Lorna's sitting cross legged on the floor by the bed. We look at each other for long moments.

"I'm sorry." Lorna chances a quick smile at me as she speaks.

I get up, don't respond but go to the bathroom instead. The annoying cunt follows me. I don't yell at her to go away; I just ignore her as I take a shit and a shower. She doesn't exist for me anymore - none of them do.

"I'm sorry."

I walk with a stiff back to the dining room. There are a few inmates still loitering around the last plate of food. They all look disappointed when I take it. I don't care. I eat without tasting, because I know I can't have my meds on an empty stomach.

"Billie, I'm sorry."

I stand in line for medication. Lorna stands beside me. I notice a surplus of shadows in the queue, but it doesn't affect me. Shadows don't mean shit any more. I take my meds, swallow the lukewarm water and walk away. One of the nurses talks to me, but I can't make sense of what she's saying. I feel numb inside and out like never before. It feels good.

I go to the TV room, turn it on, and then ramp up the volume as loud as it will go. I sit alone in the room, stare at adverts for hover boards and fancy shit I've no money for. One of the staff comes along and turns the volume down. They move their mouth at me but I can't hear them. When they leave, I notice that Lorna has gone too.

I ask to go to the courtyard, and after a long wait, I stand in the middle of it, just soaking up all the sun when it makes its appearance. I don't look at the ground beneath me. I don't wish myself off somewhere else. I don't even think of the latest Star Wars film and how much I enjoyed it despite the reviews. I stay in the present. I count the seconds. I wish I were dead. The sun becomes suddenly bright even though I see dark clouds approaching. I stand beneath its glow, feel the energy that has travelled from space down to earth, down to me standing like a fool in the middle of Woodmayes Memorial hospital. I feel a burst of energy, like the sun's radiation has activated something hidden within me. I stretch my arms up, feel my fingertips tingle as I photosynthesise all the light and heat and power. My true identity reveals itself in the sunlight. I am stronger than any human. I am an alien from another world who is trapped on this stupid, worthless planet. I look up at the sky and realise there is only one way to return to the stars. The clouds scud over the sky and soon the light has all but gone. But I realise what I must do. I know how to get back to where I truly belong. I know how to go home.

I'm called back into the secure ward when it starts raining. I don't want to go; find the icy breeze and rain really refreshing. Plus, there are no trees in the courtyard, so no reminders of the bloody forest. I stop my train of thought, shuffle back inside.

"Can I have my mobile back?" I ask one of the nurses I've never seen before, as I drip in the reception area. "Abena said I should look up some stuff about Dissociative Disorder." I flash a smile and hope for the best. The nurse hesitates, runs off to ask someone, but they are busy. "I'll be quick," I say. "I just feel so alone with all of this."

"Okay, just bring it back as soon as you're done."

I go to my room. I know it will be a few hours before anyone comes to check up on me, so I have some privacy for now. My room is dark; I flick the light switch, but nothing happens. It doesn't matter - I start up my mobile, which is on emergency power, to give a little light but then

once I check the time, I switch it off again. I pry open the back, a hard task to do in the gloom, but it comes apart in my hands. I feel around inside for the memory card, a little wafer of plastic and metal that holds all my photos and games. I place the card to my wrist, take a breath but find I cannot press down to cut myself. I need to die for my true self to be free. And I want to go quickly, to put an end to the thought of my Earth-father being a monster. This is the only way out I can see, so why can't I do it? I realise my hands are shaking. I take another breath, close my eyes, and dig the card against my wrist. It stings a little, but not enough for me to know I've done a good job. I decide to move over to the window - what little light is available has got to make it a bit easier. As I walk, I trip on something. I remember I left my pair of hospital slippers laying in the centre of the room. When I right myself, I notice something strange. I angle my head up to look at the lightbulb: it is indeed switched on - a faint grey light is being emitted, just bright enough to make a tiny dent in all the darkness.

"Okay, show yourselves," I call out. "I don't have time for this bullshit."

At first nothing happens, and then after a few seconds, the dark begins to move - about a dozen or so shadows separate themselves out into individual forms. Emma, Lorna and the bloody toddler stand there looking at me. I pocket the memory card, and place my hands behind my back.

I can't take my eyes off Jay Jay, although I never wanted to see him again. I sit on the bed, swipe my hands over my damp face. Everyone is silent. We play a messed-up staring game. I cave first.

"Why are you all here?"

Jay Jay steps forward and approaches me. With every step the child takes, my heart starts to crack. They are absolutely tiny. I could never have been that small. This isn't me; I have zero memory of ever being that young. I feel like someone is playing a very cruel joke on me.

Jay Jay lifts his hand and flicks it. All the others take a step back and disappear. I am left alone with the kid. I don't often get scared, but right now I'm bloody terrified. I scoot back on the bed until my back hits the wall. I lose sight of Jay Jay for a moment until I peek over the far edge of the bed - there he is, staring up at me.

"What do you want?"

The kid tilts his head and then lifts both of his hands. I don't want to touch him, don't want to pick him up and I don't want to be any closer than I am. But some small, stupid part of me ignores all that. I reach over and lift him up to put him on the bed, however once my skin touches his, I catch sight of myself reflected in his eyes; they are dark brown and full of life. A thousand, thousand stars illuminate the dark and in the middle of it, there I am. I look down to see Jay Jay is somehow in my arms, sleeping. Jay Jay's head is pressed on the scarred flesh of my arm. I can feel the ridges and puckers pull toward him. I know that this child trusts me to rest peacefully, that I won't do anything bad or abandon him when he wakes. I don't know how I come by this information, but it's plain to me. I've never held someone so small in all my life. He has tiny fingers and chubby cheeks; his dark brown skin is flawless and warm. This child is beautiful. I feel a surge of protectiveness make me never want to let go. Jay Jay starts to snore softly. I chuckle and then the laughter turns to sobs. I cry and cry and heave with tears. I'm scared I'll wake up the kid, but he sleeps through it all, only wakes when I am out of breath, gasping in the void of space. Jay Jay reaches up and touches my face. He looks at the wetness on his fingers.

"Water." It's the only thing he says, but it is enough. I remember burning pain, of being held down and hurt by big angry hands. I remember crying for my dad, even though he was the one above me. Long before my accident with the paraffin heater, my life had fire and flames thanks to my father. I couldn't understand why he would do this, so I in my little mind, he became good dad and bad dad. I became Billie and Jay Jay, Lorna, Emma and a dozen other names that came to life over the next few years. I created a new world because the old one was ablaze for so long.

I don't want to hurt this kid. It's so simple; I want to be here for the person inside me who is still suffering. I don't want to die, even though everything hurts so much.

I look down and see that my arms are empty. I am floating in space, circling the Earth at a million miles an hour.

## S.

When I finally come down to Earth, I place myself in the back garden of my uncle and aunt's home. I look up, see the window of what used to be my old room. To my left, a neighbour puts trash on a pile, and then goes to light it.

"Can you hold off for a bit?" I ask, smiling my widest, fake-iest smile. He nods and ambles off to his shed.

I look up at the window once more. The curtains move aside, and Lorna looks out. I know what she's waiting for: for her real parents or some aliens to come and rescue her. I wave up at her, watch as her eyes go wide. Much to my surprise, she yanks open the window and half-climbs, half-falls to meet me.

"Come home," I say. "You don't have to stay here anymore. The danger is past. Time can move on now."

"Where will I go?"

I point to my chest, and then I embrace my teenage self.

"I don't want to be a man," she whispers.

"Men have female chromosomes. We learned that in General Science, Mister Powell's class, remember?"

"I liked him. He taught us how to make fireworks."

I smile at one of the few happy memories of my younger years.

We are silent for a time until Lorna speaks; I'm glad she doesn't sound like this is a consolation prize or anything like that. "I'll be part of you, a real part of you?"

I nod. Lorna smiles at me, presses herself closer without further resistance or hesitation. I gasp as new memories blossom within me; the dread of waiting until Uncle Paul finished with me before I could fall sleep, the fear of pregnancy, or of someone finding out and blaming me because uncle always blamed me. These memories are all the past, and I am here in the present. It still hurts like hell; owning up to what happened to me, how my own family used me for sex is still devastating, but I survived. I am not a victim - I am a survivor. The garden fades into nothingness around me. I take a step and find myself in a different area of green. I walk into the forest.

## T.

The house in the forest is empty when I enter it. I inhale the smell of wet leaves, touch the damp walls where little squiggles of water make their way down to the stone floor. I wait patiently for all the parts of me who want to show themselves. It doesn't take long before my shadow on the ground multiplies into many.

"Anyone who wants to can come stay with me, in me. I don't know how to deal with everything, but I guess we can learn together. If you don't want to do that, you can stay here or go someplace else. Everyone gets a choice. And you can change your mind too, cos god knows this is some weird shit happening here. I won't be angry at you, I promise."

I don't know how I've grown up in such a short space of time, but I'm kinda glad I have. Everyone has suffered enough; I don't want to add to it.

Emma taps me on the back, making me jump about ten feet in the air.

"Are you trying to give me a heart attack, kid?"

Emma has the good grace to at least look sorry. "You understand now? About why you can't go back? Even if there was a way, you couldn't do it."

"Yeah, I suppose I'm starting to." It is still very early in my comprehension of things, but I get the basics. The abuse had to have happened for me to want to go back in time in the first place - if my childhood had been fine, it would never occur to me to change the past. It's one of those paradoxes that every sci-fi show has an episode on, and those TV specials never end the way anyone expects. I don't know how Jay Jay helped me to understand things, but he enabled me to accept what happened, and that's a good start.

"I was sexually & physically abused." It doesn't hurt so much to say it out loud, but it does sound a little strange to my ears still. I spent so much energy burying the truth to survive, that it feels liberating to face it instead.

"This will always be a safe space for you and the others," Emma says, walking to a dark corner of the room. "I will always be a part of you." The corner gets darker as she is joined by some more of my shadows. It makes me sad for a moment, but I know the sadness won't last forever. Time can restart now. I'm ready for it.

## U.

Sometimes the last thing you expect to change can transform right in front of your eyes. I changed the gender I identify with a long time ago. I thought I had to look like a man; have no tits or curves, to pass. I felt I had to pass to feel my real self. But now I know I have the personalities of different genders inside me, it's like I have more masculine traits than I can imagine. There's a silent man who only communicates in sign language he made up himself. I call him Eugene. Eugene started off as a shadow on the ground, but I picture him as an evolved human now. Eugene has a slight swagger in his walk, and a flamboyant manner when his arms and hands swish into motion. I never thought I'd be taking lessons on what it means to more masculine from him.

Little Jay Jay has been strangely absent from sight lately, but I still feel his sense of contentment that helps me get back to sleep when nightmares thrash about my head. I also feel his joy and childish honesty when I encounter someone new. Jay Jay is an alien race all tied up in one beautiful little boy. For someone so young, he's the most paternal of all the inside me's - my alters, as Abena calls them.

I don't want to run from being a woman. I don't want to reject it because of the abuse either, but I've always known it wasn't really for me, just like I know Bristol and London aren't for me as well. Cornwall may be the whitest place in the country, but it has the clearest night skies I've ever seen. There's a place just south of Penzance where the land meets the Atlantic Ocean. The sky is free from light pollution, and it's so full of stars it makes my head reel. I feel at home there, like I have access to space whenever I like, but I don't have to escape in my head to enjoy it. I just have to look up and let the light shine down. Cornwall is the place I want to make my home one day.

## V.

We watch as the multiverse warps and changes; the house in Bristol is gone, as is the car park by the forest. As each environment fades away we see others grow and become reinforced. Life begins to blossom in corners that were once sterile and cold, lines of existence become layered and more complex than before. Pain still runs through the core of Billie Prime, but it is no longer the dominant emotion in their life. We remain as potential for whatever their life brings next. We are forever their shadow, for where Billie is, there we are.

## W.

I am discharged a few days later. A place at a women's refuge has opened up, and I intend on taking it, even though I don't identify as a woman anymore. I'm not totally stupid; I have nowhere else to go until I can get into the hostel for survivors.

I feel a new lightness in my step as I heft my bag over my shoulder. It feels strange, but with every step, I see my shadow on the ground beside me, and know that I'm not alone; that it's more than the action of light on my body. I am not alone because I have others inside me. I still don't know how many there are in total, but just knowing they're in there makes me feel better, and that is the strangest thing of all. I'm not terrified of them, or scared that being like this will mean a straitjacket for me. I'm thankful in a weird way.

I walk out of the hospital and on to the quiet road that leads to it. I close my eyes, inhale a big breath of air, take a step and almost crash into Auntie Sarah who appears in front of me. Everything screeches to a halt. The smile freezes on my face. I can't move a single muscle, and I

am left practically suspended mid-stride. Time stops moving as the whole world crashes around me.

Aunty Sarah launches herself at me, throwing her arms around my neck in a firm hug. It takes several seconds before I'm able to snap out of it. I jerk away from her embrace, feeling suddenly dirty.

"I've come to take you home," she says, looking like I've slapped her. "Your uncle has been asking for you."

"What?"

"He's sorry for everything. And he's so sick now, after what you did to him. Give him another chance, love." Aunty makes another attempt to touch me, but I manage to shuffle out of her reach.

"Are you kidding me?" I gasp.

"It was a different time, Belinda."

"My name is Billie."

Aunty Sarah rolls her eyes. "In my day, nobody changed their name or dressed up like the opposite sex or whatnot. But your uncle and I accept you despite all that. You're family."

I lower my voice, desperately trying to keep my temper under control. "You know what he did, and you want me to come back?"

Sarah ignores my question and just says, "Your parents are frantic. They want to see you. They call me every day. If you don't want to see Paul, that's fine. But see your parents at least. I'll give you train fare to London and everything. We've all been praying for you. We want our prodigal daughter to come home."

"When did everyone find religion?"

Aunty rummages around in her handbag, ignoring me yet again. She pulls out some photos. I step away, not wanting to see what they might be.

"Look." She thrusts a photo in my face. "You and your mum at Christmas back when you moved in to your new house."

I don't want to look, but I can't bat the photo away.

"You were all so happy. And look at this," she says as she jams another photo at me. "Your parents have always been kind and loving. Their wedding was one of the most romantic things I've ever seen." She points to my dad. I feel my stomach drop when I see the younger version of him; the man who never grew old in my mind. The man I called 'Good Dad.'

"And here's one of your uncle. Now tell me, is that the face of a child molester?" Auntie's face is stretched tight with anger. "You were always such a headstrong child. We took the best care of you, and now look at how you repay us!"

I feel myself disappear as Sarah keeps talking. My soul just turns to liquid and leaks out through my shoes to pool on the ground. How can this be happening when I'm ready to move forward? I watch as if I'm on the roof of the hospital, looking down at the two of us in the little road. But then I feel a pair of small hands circle me, pulling me back to my body. I realise it is Emma in a heartbeat. I'm still in shock at what Aunty Sarah is saying, but I know Emma is up to the task.

"Do you know what child sexual abuse and incest does to someone?" I ask. My voice is that of a small child who grew up listening to the World Service and BBC Radio Four. "There are changes in brain chemistry, alterations in muscle strength and other physiological changes that you may not be aware of."

Aunty Sarah stares at me with incomprehension making her eyes wide.

"You see, I'm quite dangerous to be around. What I did to Uncle Paul is just a taste of what I'm capable of - what I plan on doing to you if you don't leave me alone." I roll up the sleeve of my shirt, angle my arm so the scarred flesh of the old burn shows. "This is what my family did to me. The paraffin heater accident didn't just happen by chance."

"You can't blame us for that."

"Yes, I can, and yes I will. I remember it happened on the day you and that piece of shit you call a husband came to visit. Uncle Paul and my dad spent a jolly old time upstairs with me, while you and mum went out shopping. It was just two brothers reconnecting over some sexual exploitation."

"Don't talk like that. Forgive and forget, Belinda."

"As I was saying," I continue, my voice rising in volume. "I couldn't handle one man abusing me, so how do you think I handled two? I'll answer that for you, as you seem a little distracted right now. Well I ran. I ran for my life. And I was so afraid, I didn't really look where I was going. I fell on top of the paraffin heater and this happened." I thrust my arm out again. Aunt Sarah jerks back in fear. "There is no way in God's green Earth that I am going near anyone in my old family again."

Aunt Sarah looks about herself, realising that we're being overheard. Some hospital visitors stand at a distance watching us. I know the staff inside can probably hear us too.

But my old family are a cunning breed. Aunt Sarah's face goes hard as she changes her tactics.

"You're willing to be alone for the rest of your life, because you can't let go of the past? You must have really gone mad if you're thinking like that."

This time, when I speak it is with my own voice. "I am never alone. I have a new family now."

Aunt Sarah has nothing to say to that it seems. She sneers at me once last time, and then she turns on her heels and walks away. I wait until she is out of sight, and then I sag against the wall of the hospital entrance. My shadow is solid beneath me. My alters hold me up so I do not fall.

X.

This is the past we used to wish for ourselves: We look out of our bedroom window at night as a little child, not yet five years old. Our body feels like it's on fire, and we want to cry, but dad told us not to. We want someone to take me away to a place we will be safe. We gaze up at the twinkling stars, making a wish, just like in the song. All at once, one of the stars begins to move. We think it's an airplane, or maybe a big comet, but then the little speck of light grows larger in my sight. We go up on tiptoes, mouth open in wonder as it approaches. This is no star - it's a spacecraft! The alien vessel is silent as it lands in the back garden. The neighbour's dog starts to bark, but nobody else notices it. Nobody else sees it but us. The hatch opens and three people come out. The people are very, very tall and their skin is dark brown. They float up to my window like angels, and then they help us to unlock it and get it open. They tell us they've come to Earth to take their child back. We are so happy, we cannot speak. They pull us out of the bad house, and we float back down to their spaceship. We ask which two are my parents, and they laugh - they all are! They tell us how sorry they are that they left us with such horrible people, and that they were tricked by bad dad who pretended to be nice. We turn around and take a final look at our old home. We are not sorry to leave it, although we know mum and good dad will be upset for a while. But we belong with our three real parents in space, and we know they are going to take good care of us. They all give us a cuddle, tell us what our real alien name is, and then they strap us in a seat. The spaceship takes off without a sound. We can see the whole of London from our little chair. We wave the world goodbye as we head off to explore the universe and find a new home for us all.

**Ends.**

## **UK - Resources**

Survivors UK, for Male survivors of Child Abuse and Rape

<https://www.survivorsuk.org/>

Women's Aid for women experiencing domestic violence

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/>

Survivors Network, for Trans and Nonbinary survivors of abuse

<http://www.survivorsnetwork.org.uk/>

Haven – Survivors of Sexual Abuse Network

<http://www.havennetwork.org.uk/>

Disabled Survivors for survivors who are mentally or physically disabled

<http://disabledsurvivorsunite.org.uk/>

NAPAC for Adult survivors of Child Abuse

<http://napac.org.uk/>

ISPEAK for those with Selective Mutism/ Mutism in general

<http://ispeak.org.uk/>

Positive Outcomes for Dissociative Survivors

<http://www.pods-online.org.uk/>

Clinic for Dissociative Studies – an NHS service for those with DID

<http://www.clinicds.co.uk/>

Gendered Intelligence – for Transgender people under 21

<http://genderedintelligence.co.uk/>

LGBT Switchboard – (they used to be biphobic, but have improved of late)

<https://switchboard.lgbt/>

Hearing Voices network

<https://www.hearing-voices.org/>

Mermaids – for Trans children and parents

<http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/>

Psych Central – Mainly US based, but have good forums used by people worldwide

<https://psychcentral.com/>

Irish Women Survivors Network (based in London) for those who were in care institutions

<http://iwssn.org.uk/>