



Mum and Dad have gone away before, so when I come home from school and see them packing – Mum throwing things in an old blue sports bag, Dad folding shirts and sliding them into a small black suitcase – I sit on the edge of the bed and wait quietly so they know I'm one less thing to worry about. Unlike Lilith, who stalks in behind me and demands to know: 'Where are you going?'

She's only nine, but she is supposed to be a genius, so I do wonder when she'll stop asking.

‘You know they can’t tell us, Lil.’ I share my most responsible look with everyone.

Dad tugs the zips of his case closed and picks it up as if it’s weightless. He’s clean shaven and smells like the anti-dandruff shampoo that we all use, even though none of us has ever had dandruff. ‘That’s right, Lilith. Best if you don’t know, eh? A secret you don’t have to try to keep.’

His shoes squeak a little on the lino as we follow him out of the bedroom. Mum is in the kitchen. When she sees me she beckons me over and opens the fridge door.

This is when I realise something is different. There is nothing in the fridge but eggs. A fridge devoid of variety is a familiar sight – even if you queue early, there’s often only one or two grocery items for sale at the Co-op. It’s the *number* of eggs that’s weird. There are boxes and boxes of them.

‘Ninety-two eggs,’ says my mother, nodding, as if there is something self-explanatory about this. ‘It’s all I could get, but it should be enough to last the month – if you don’t go crazy with them.’ She looks at me and gives me a certain kind of smile, one I see only at moments like these, when she won’t be seeing me for a while.

‘A month?’ I say. I try not to let the words leap off my tongue, as though I am alarmed or anything. Mum and

Dad need to know I am brave and in control, that I can look after Lilith. I tell myself they don't have a choice about going away.

'Yes, it's a month this time.' Mum closes the fridge door but stays stooped so she can look me right in the eye. 'It's a relief to know I can rely on you, Cara.'

'We'll be fine.'

'Good,' she says, straightening up and smoothing down the crinkled fabric of her blouse. I prise Lilith's hand away from the fridge door handle: I have an urge to show my mother immediately that she is right to have confidence in me. But she isn't looking any more.

'Did she say *ninety-two eggs?*' hisses Lilith, as if Mum isn't still in the room.

'Yes,' I say, and it's then I hear the car pull up outside. Government cars don't sound like everyone else's. They're big and boxy and their engines are deep and thrumming. Dad says that's because they get serviced once in a while. Nobody else can afford that.

Mum hears it too. 'Time to go. You know what to do if anything happens?' She's not really asking. She knows that I know. I look at the phone number under the magnet on the fridge.

She hauls the faded canvas bag on to her slim shoulder, leaning slightly under the weight of it. 'Bye, girls,' she says, and squeezes my shoulder. Lilith's too.

Dad does the hair ruffling. The apartment door closes behind them. Lilith and I kneel on the sofa, pull back the corner of the scratchy lace curtains to see out of the window and wait for them to appear on the bitumen outside.

‘Don’t open it so much,’ I tell Lilith. ‘They’ll see us.’ I can’t help thinking that we’d look too much like little girls with our forlorn faces peeking out at them. I don’t want that to be the last thing they see.

But when they do appear, they don’t look back. The black government car gleams like a wet stone. Our parents climb in and slam the doors with their tinted windows and it rolls away.

We fall back from the window, letting the curtain drop back into place. I try to decipher the look on Lilith’s face. She’s frowning slightly. Is she sad, I wonder? Frightened? I think about putting my arm around her.

‘I’m hungry,’ she says.

‘Oh.’ I let out a little breath. That’s something I can help her with at least. I stand up, ready to go into the kitchen, and swallow down the hard and heavy thing that’s lodged in my throat, restricting my air supply. A wet stone.

I smile at her.

‘Omelette?’



Some people think that the point of living in a tall building is the view, but that's not how my parents saw it when they chose to live on the ground floor. All we can see from our apartment is the Wall.

There was a time when I didn't know that there was any other kind of view, and I felt good, even smug, about the extra space they said we had, and about not having to climb up flights and flights of stairs.

And it's true that our apartment is much bigger than average – Lilith and I even have our own rooms.

Mum has left the blind open in the kitchen, and the glass square is blank and grey. It's as if we have framed pictures of the Wall in all our rooms instead of windows.

I whisk three eggs, thinking I'll beat the dinner rush for the gas, but when I light the stove the flame is low, even with the controls turned right up. That's the other thing about living on the ground floor. There's one pipe that carries the gas all the way up to the sixth floor. Gas rises, so when other people are using it, their stoves and heaters pull on the supply so our flame gets smaller and smaller. When everyone in the building is cooking at once, the gas is barely there.

By the time I call Lilith from her room, the Wall is in full shadow and the window is dark grey.

The days are getting shorter. 'We won't make it out to the park tonight,' I tell her. Mum and Dad's leaving

at a moment's notice has disrupted our routine, but I want to warn Lilith that it will be back in order by tomorrow.

She shrugs. She wouldn't care if we never went to the park again. She could vanish into her room forever then.

I wonder how many other kids in the city have computers in their bedrooms. Given that you need a licence to own one, and how hard it is to get hold of computers even if you do, I'd guess Lilith is an exceptional case. Mum and Dad wangled it somehow, although when Lilith asked for an internet connection they looked shocked for a minute before reminding her that those are illegal in private homes. They can wangle extra things sometimes through their contacts in the Department. The rest of the time we're just like everybody else, and that's how it's supposed to be. *Equality* is the first of all the First Principles, but Dad says I shouldn't worry about the extra things we get. If it comes via the Department, he says, then I can be sure it's not the kind of special treatment allowed in other countries, where everything is for sale and some people are rich and others poor.

Dad says the Department is there to look out for the best interests of our country and everyone in it, and that's all I need to know. Mum and Dad work for

National Security, which means they have shiny silver government-issued laptops so that they can take their work wherever they go, including home. Evenings in our apartment are whisper-quiet. I try to read in the corner of the sofa under one of our dim energy-saving bulbs. From there I can see the kitchen table where my parents set up their laptops, sometimes at right angles to one another, sometimes side by side, but always so that the screens are facing away from me. The sleek machines blink with tiny bright green and orange lights and illuminate my parents' faces and the bare walls with a cold kind of glow.



Lilith disappears after dinner, and I spend the evening in Mum and Dad's bedroom. I dig out two old cook-books they were using to prop up a broken table leg, sit up in the exact middle of their bed and make a list.

soft-boiled

hard-boiled

fried

poached

scrambled

omelette

frittata (tortilla? same thing?)

quiche
French toast
custard
soufflé
meringue
mayonnaise
zabaglione

Not all of these are meals exactly, but I want to be prepared. I put stars next to all the dishes that don't need any ingredients apart from eggs, stack the books on the bedside table, set the alarm and wriggle down under the blanket.

I always sleep in this room when our parents go away. It's a corner room, and in the morning, if the weather's right, and if I lie on Dad's side of the bed and look under the curtains at the right angle, I can see blue sky.



The next morning though, the alarm gets me up long before the sky turns blue. It's bread day at the Co-op, and no one else is going to fetch it. I don't want to leave Lilith on her own so I shake her awake in the dark.

'Noooooooooooo!' she moans. 'What time is it?'

'Bread time.'

It's four-thirty. The computer is still on, whirring

and blinking. Lilith has slept in the track pants and T-shirt she put on yesterday after school. I bet she stayed up late.

‘Come on. I’ll make you breakfast after.’

We bumble downstairs pulling on jackets and gloves. The mornings are already brisk enough to make steam out of our breath. The Co-op’s a couple of blocks away. Other figures are trooping towards it from all directions like an army of sleepwalkers, and at the end of our street the loudspeaker screeches to life. I grab Lilith’s elbow and tug her closer to me, making an effort not to glance at the camera mounted under the speaker, hoping the hood of my sister’s jacket hides the grimace she makes as the strident brass and drums of the national anthem invade the pre-dawn peace.

There’s already a queue under the awning outside. Two armed soldiers are on duty, one patrolling the line, one at the door of the Co-op. It doesn’t open till six, but by then the line will be around the block. If we came then we might miss out. We’d definitely be late for school. Mum and Dad are hoping Lilith will be selected for some special government program for gifted children when she’s old enough. It’s not a day school like the one we go to now – it’s in another city altogether. She would have to board there. Lilith is pretty keen on the idea, but for now she is stuck here

with me and I don't want to be the one who makes her late for classes.

I've brought a book. Lilith hasn't brought anything to help her pass the time, so I let her read over my shoulder until she gets restless waiting for me to finish each page. She isn't used to queuing. Dad usually does the bread run; Mum gets the milk on Tuesdays. I could stay in my warm bed until breakfast time like Lilith does, but when Dad gets up he makes a lot of noise. If it wakes me, I follow him down. *Comradeship* is one of the First Principles, after all.

The book is one I've read before; I've read all my books before. I've read nearly all the books in the local library. I go there once a week, even though it's as cold and stark as our apartment and seems too big for the number of books in it. They're grouped in orderly clusters between expanses of empty shelving. Mum says this is because a lot of the books had to be removed after the Wall was built so that they couldn't corrupt people's minds with dangerous ideas.

When I asked what happened to the books that were removed, Mum narrowed her eyes at me as though simply wondering about that might be considered a Suspicious Act. As though she thought I was hoping they were being stored somewhere I might find them. 'They were destroyed, of course.'

The soldier saunters past us with his rifle loaded, his face hard and blank. It's still dark, but the awning is lit so that the queue is like a little tunnel of orange light. I recognise a few faces from our building, but I don't say hello to anyone. And then I spot Leon's dad, Marco, only three places behind us.

I instinctively check for Leon, and am relieved that he's not here. Marco sees me looking though. He looks at the two of us, Lilith and me, and then if I'm not mistaken he shakes his head. I turn away quickly and put my arm around Lilith's shoulders, drawing her close, hiding both our faces in the book. I can feel him there though, the whole time we're waiting. I turn the pages but I don't take in a word.

When the Co-op doors open I forget about him. The line moves and soon we are trudging home along the grey pavement past the grey tower blocks with a loaf each under our arms. They feel soft and springy through the plastic, which means they're fresh. A voice from the loudspeaker lists the First Principles as we pass under it, as if there's anyone who can't recite them in their sleep. For breakfast I boil two eggs, and we poke chewy, tangy crusts into the bright yolks and lick our fingers afterwards.