

PLUM IS SOON TO TURN FOURTEEN, and one evening she stands in front of a mirror with her school dress around her ankles, her body reflected naked and distressing in the glass. If her reflection is true then she has gone about in public like this—this thick black hair hugging her face like a sheenless scarf; these greasy cheeks with their evolving crop of scarlet lumps; this scurfy, hotly sunburned skin; these twin fleshy nubbins on her chest that are the worst things of all, worse than the downy hair that's feathered between her legs, worse than the specks of blackness blocking her pores, worse even than the womanly hurdle that still awaits her, the prospect of which occurrence makes her seize into silence—and nobody has informed her of the fact that she is hideous. Her reflection is so troubling that

her gaze veers, seeking comfort in the posters tacked to the walls. One shows glossy kittens, another is David Bowie. She breathes deeply and lets a moment pass before sliding her sights back to the mirror. This is she, Ariella Coyle, aged thirteen. Carefully she scans her face, her shoulders, her waist, grimaces at the sight of a meaty bottom and thighs. Her hands gather her hair in a dense ponytail, and her face, unshielded, looks round and inflamed, her eyes the tarred tips of poison darts. Her arms are strong, her neck utilitarian, not vulnerable at all: indeed, Plum's entire body is somehow *too much*—too tall, too thriving, too *there*. Her stomach is the color of uncooked dough, and feels, when poked, like dough. *Ariella Coyle*, aged nearly fourteen, waylaid monstrously on the path to being grown. "There is no God," she tells her reflection: as quickly as that, she knows it is true. "And even if there *was* a God," she adds vindictively, "He wouldn't love you. Look at you. *Nobody* could love you."

The words should be like pools of blood, but the idea of such forsakenness actually makes Plum smile. Of late she's been attracted to all things ruthless and peculiar. She sometimes feels edgy and dangerous, like an animal with unblinking eyes. She's starting to think there might be something supernatural about her. She can guess what people are about to say, and when the telephone will ring; once, she heard her name spoken loudly behind her, though nobody was standing there. And yet, despite her superiority, Plum can never quite make herself immune to

human needs. She can't quite make herself not care.

Her mother calls "Dinner" from downstairs, and Plum hears the word like a dog hears *walk*. She catches herself—her greed is infuriating—and points a finger at the mirror. "You eat too much. Don't eat so much. *Try*." Her thoughts, these days, waltz obsessively around the subject of food—how much she might get, how long until she'll get more—and it's an obsession that is exhausting. So much about being almost fourteen is, in fact, so wearying that for an instant Plum feels light-headed with all she must endure. She has older brothers whose duty it is to tease her—if the situation requires, they'll find her taste in clothes and music and heartthrobs a source of crushing mirth. But lately Justin and Cydar have been keeping their opinions to themselves, and their silence rolls up Plum's spine like a hearse.

Mums calls, "Dinner!"

Plum kicks her uniform aside and takes from beneath her pillow a pair of baby-blue, lace-trimmed pajamas. Dressed, she checks the mirror, ensuring the worst is disguised. She hunches her shoulders, shakes out her hair, stoops her overgrown height. Her cheeks, in the summery dusk, in the anguished infancy of teenagerhood, are the pasty yellow of cereal left to float all day in milk.

The Coyle house is big, and humiliating. The staircase down which Plum runs is gloomy with pastoral paintings, hazardous with piled books. Nothing in the house is new: indeed, the more elderly an object, the more Mums and

Fa must possess it. On weekends they trawl antique shops, returning with chairs and statues and complicated wooden boxes. Before she'd known better, Plum had trawled with them; now she stays at home on weekends, curled on the couch watching science-fiction movies, and wishes she lived somewhere less mortifying. It's unfair that she must endure timber and stone, when all her friends know the joy of plastic and smoked glass. The dinner table to which she's been called is a lengthy slab of wood over which drunken friars might have drooled inside murky taverns. The seats are two ungiving pews salvaged from a church. It is embarrassing to ask a friend to dinner when they won't have their own separate chair, rude to expect anyone to use ivory-handled cutlery to eat from crazed china plates at a table that should have been torched. Plum's wildest dream is to have her bedroom carpeted in white shag—walls, ceiling, door, floor, all pristinely white and furry. The possession she craves more than anything is a miniature television—not one cased in wood, like the one in the den, but set inside a sphere of chrome, with three stumpy legs and a rapier-like aerial. She has seen such a thing in a shop, and it made her feel strangely like weeping.

Plum slides into place on a pew, skidding sideways to let Justin sit beside her. He pinches her arm as he sits down, and she pinches him back harder, her heart fattening with love. Rangy as a tall ship, handsome as a prince's portrait, a power of aliveness radiates from Justin the way light beams away from the stars. To Plum he is without flaw, a kind of

sun-king. He works behind the counter of a bottle shop, and has earned enough to buy a Holden as big as a barge. Occasionally he drives Plum to school in it, dropping her off by the side gate where the tough girls smoke before assembly. It is often the only moment of her day when Plum feels all is not lost. "*Planet of the Apes* tonight," she reminds him, but he shakes his head, says, "Can't." She whines and screws her face up, but he just reaches for the water jug. "You've seen it before. You've seen it a hundred times. If you watch it again you'll *turn into* an ape." Fa comes in from the den then, half-asleep and rubbing the ear that's been compressed by the transistor, and Justin turns to him gladly. "What's the score?"

"Australia six for ninety at stumps. Border not out on forty."

"We're going to lose."

"We'll be cooked like a curry!"

"What about Imran?"

Justin's eyes flash toward Plum. Fa says, "Imran went out for nine."

"Plummy loves Imran."

"I don't!" Plum denies. "He's just good."

"Where's Cydar?" asks Mums, passing out slabs of plate; and suddenly Cydar is there in the room, a hawk whistled down from the sky. He drops into his place opposite Plum like a sheet snapping on the wind. Cydar is the middle child, shy-eyed and secretive, a breeder of night-life-colored fish which he sells to men who don't talk. He

keeps himself and his aquariums in a weathered bungalow at the end of the garden, where he is visited by acquaintances as languid as the fish. He is studying at university something to do with microscopes, something that makes Plum proud but bored. She thinks he should be a rock star—he has that wastrel look. He should play Judas in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Cydar has a girlfriend, Justin once claimed, about whom they must never speak. “Why not?” Plum had asked; and Justin explained, “Because she has no reflection. Because her eyes are white. Because she can only eat what she’s killed with her bare hands. Don’t say her name! You’ll summon her.”

Cydar’s gaze had merely glided away, as if there was so much he could say in retaliation that it was most satisfying to say nothing. Now he says, “I thought you loved that other one. Pascoe.”

“I don’t love any of them! Pascoe’s all right.”

“Big bad Lenny,” contemplates Fa.

“A girl at school has his name all over her folder. *Lenny Pascoe, Lenny Pascoe*, about ten thousand times. I like his hair,” Plum admits.

Mums sits down beside Cydar, polite distance between their elbows. “Hot pot,” says Justin approvingly, lifting the lid from the casserole dish; he is not home for dinner often enough to notice the frequency with which his mother serves this meal, as if she’s discovered, running beneath the kitchen’s tiles, a seam of sausage and segmented pineapple. Plum, however, decides stoutly, “Mums, I don’t want that.

I'm not eating hot pot ever again. It's fattening. I'm fat."

"Poo," says her mother, which means many things, none of them being that Plum may not eat. She shifts the lid from a sarcophagus of rice, releasing a curse of steam. "Imran caught off Chappell for nine," Fa reflects dreamily; he comes alive to ask "How's the car?" of Justin, who's been tinkering in the driveway all afternoon.

"The starter motor is soon to be kaput."

Fa frowns with sympathy or possibly confusion; Justin, reminded, waves beneath Plum's nose a knuckle he has skinned with a spanner. "Get away!" she squeals, swatting with her knife. "That's revolting! Mums, Justin is being revolting! You're revolting, Justin!"

"Revolting!" He's pleased. Cydar, who this morning sold a glimmering finned creature for the fantastic sum of fifty dollars, who can feel the note and all its potential in the hip pocket of his jeans, who will never spend a single minute of his life laboring over a car, says, "You're driving it tonight though, aren't you? I don't want to catch a taxi."

"Where are you going?"

"Away from you."

"To the pub, I bet! When you could be watching *Planet of the Apes* . . ."

Fa has turned to Cydar now. "How are the fish doing?"

"Swimmingly," says Cydar.

"You know what I'd like to see?" Justin elbows his sister. "A battle between the gorillas from *Planet of the Apes* and the skeleton warriors from *Jason and the Argonauts*."

“The gorillas would win. They’re stronger.”

“But those skeletons are dodgy. *And* they’ve got spears.”

Fa asks, “How was school today, old Plummy?”

Plum answers offhandedly, “All right.” School is an endurance test for her, a situation she faces like a brick wall every day, but she seldom answers anything but *good*. She knows precise things about her father—that he works with numbers, prefers his eggs cooked through, has a plate in an ankle from a boyhood broken bone—but there is an obscuring fog of softness around him that Plum is wary of disturbing with truths that aren’t *good*. Her father catches a tram at ten past eight each weekday morning, taking a seat where he can see the tram’s wide door slipped open and closed by the grade of the road. “Why do you watch the door?” she’d asked once, expecting an answer about mathematics or time; instead Fa had replied, “It rests me.” And the words had terrified Plum, because what they implied was terrifying; and she’d vowed never to expose, or expose herself to, such wistfulness again. For this same reason, Plum will never ask her mother what she thinks about when she’s alone in the house and it’s raining, those cold afternoons when Plum arrives home to find Elvis gazing up from record sleeves shuffled over the floor. It is one thing for Plum to exist on the edge of desolation: but the thought of anyone in her family being anything less than happy fills her head with the noise of an untuned radio. She longs to shout at Fa, *You’ve got what you’re supposed to have!* A job, a house, children, a wife. *What else do you want?*



Sometimes she almost hates him for being the way he is.

Anyway, it is Plum's growing conviction that a mother and a father have no right to feelings. A parent should be a person the way a door is a door, something like the robot in *Lost in Space*—loving and providing and cleaning, not distracted by wishes and needs. The only thing that really matters about a parent is the existence of the child. If Mums and Fa ever were fourteen, they're well beyond it now; beyond the time when their lives are vital things. Even when they were fourteen, it's unlikely that they had problems as grievous as Plum's.

And now everyone is talking about something that doesn't concern her, scooping out globes of fuzzy rice, shunting the water jug down the table. Justin and Cydar are deciding what time they should leave, and Justin thinks the car will need petrol; Fa is saying he'll build shelves in the kitchen to accommodate Mums's collection of jelly molds. Mums has picked up a dropped cluster of rice and the sticky grains are clinging like grubs to her fingers, won't be shaken onto her plate. "Trouble is," she's saying, "you're not a *builder*. Everything you build *falls down* . . ." And all of it is so unworthy of being spoken at all.

"Listen!" Plum barks. "Everyone be quiet. I have something important to say. I'm not going to church anymore."

It's a decision she's hardly known she has made, coming upon her like the urge to burp. Immediately, however, she's committed. Having released the words, she's relieved. "All right?"

Across the table Mums's mouth twists, as if her daughter is something bitter she'd expected to be sweet. "Plum."

"Justin doesn't go. Cydar doesn't. Fa never did. Why should I?"

"You *need* to." Justin stabs a stump of sausage with a hundred-year-old fork. "You're unholy. You've got horns on your head."

Plum pauses—she's seen people-beasts in movies with horns on their heads, and thinks the look charismatic. Horns would change her life. "Well," she says, "I'm not going. God's never done anything for *me*. And I don't believe in Him."

Mums clicks her tongue. "Don't say that at the table."

"Why not at the table?" But Cydar is ignored.

"You can't make me." Plum is captured by strange determination. This is what she is supposed to do, now that she's nearly fourteen and the docility of childhood is behind her. She is meant to start becoming what she wants to be. "If I don't believe in God, it's stupid to go to church. It's hypothetical."

"It's what?" says Cydar.

Fa says, "What's made you stop believing in God, Plummo?"

Plum's head pivots. There is no overhead lamp and the table is lit only by what light vaults the kitchen counter, so Fa sits in shadows. "I never did. I've always thought it was silly." She speaks with certainty, although what she says isn't strictly true. As a child, she'd believed: but believing is what

children do. “Look at it sensibly. The whole thing doesn’t make sense. If God is real, where did He come from? And what about the dinosaurs—how come they weren’t in the Garden of Eden? And why do bad things happen, if God is so kind? And how come, if God made everything, everything can be explained by something that *isn’t* God, something that’s *normal*—”

Cydar says, “It’s called science.”

“It’s common sense!” shrills Plum. “Angels and Hell and Satan and Heaven—only a *kid* would believe that stuff! Only somebody who wasn’t brave, or wasn’t—*educated*—or wasn’t—modern! And *I’m* not a kid!”

“You are,” says Justin. “You’re a little goat. Those horns.”

“I’ve grown up!” Plum squawks; then quickly rounds her shoulders lest the ludicrous nubbins show and it’s assumed she’s referring to them. “I’m nearly fourteen!”

“Are you going to have a party?” asks Fa. “For your birthday?”

Plum glares at him, distracted. “What? I don’t know. I haven’t decided. I’m not talking about that—”

“Parties are for kids,” Cydar suggests.

“No they’re not! That’s a stupid thing to say. Justin had a party when he was twenty-one.” The occasion is one of Plum’s most satisfying memories, Justin’s crowds of fabulous friends and the noisy fuss they’d made of young Plum; the highlight had come when a female guest fainted, and Fa had tapped her face until she revived. “Everyone’s

having slumber parties. Can I have one, Mums?"

Her mother looks tortured, which means her daughter may. The girl scrambles upright on the pew. "I want everything bought from the supermarket — nothing homemade. I want mini pizzas and chicken wings, and cashews and macaroons. An ice-cream cake from a cake shop, not some horrible sponge. No balloons or streamers or games either. And punch instead of soft drink —"

"And bags of lollies to take home?"

Plum's lip hoists. "We're *fourteen*, Justin. You don't get bags of lollies at our age."

"Do you giggle about boys instead?"

It's the kind of brotherly comment that makes Plum feel like a deer in a huntsmen's forest. She glances past the casserole dish to where Cydar sits in dimness, wrists bent above his plate. She does not need light to know his eyes are still and cool on her. "None of your business. We'll talk about whatever we want. You're not invited, so you'll never know."

Cydar says nothing, which is more disconcerting than words. Mums is standing to saw slices from the lumpy loaf. "And what do you want as a present?"

The miniature television in its globe of chrome flames like a star in Plum's mind, blinding Cydar from sight. The television is, without question, the most desirable item she's ever seen. None of her friends have a TV to themselves, let alone one so enviable. Nor, Plum suspects, will she, for its price tag had made her swing away, swallowing with

disappointment. Her family isn't poor, but some things are beyond the realm of reasonable expectation. Nevertheless she has cleared a space on top of her dresser, to prove that the object would fit. She has lain on her bed and imagined watching the pint-sized screen. "I don't know," she mumbles; to her horror, tears are close. She has seen herself unwrapping a television-sized box on the morning of her birthday; she's accompanied herself to school, casually announced the new possession, reveled in the envious mewls of her friends. She's constructed a new and entirely perfect life around something that is, in reality, as unattainable as Everest's peak. It's the kind of make-believe thing a child would do, as poignant as a broken heart. Indeed, Plum feels her heart *is* breaking over the loss of what never was. She dredges her voice past a clot of grief that has bulged inside her throat. "The only thing I want is something you won't let me have. I won't even bother telling you what it is, because I know I won't get it."

"Oh no," Justin sighs. "Not another bloody pony?"

Tears, humiliated and humiliating, spurt from Plum's eyes: she throws down her cutlery and struggles to her feet. "Shut up!" she wails. "You always laugh at me! I'm a *person*, I have *feelings*, I'm not a *joke*! Why can't you all just *leave me alone*?"

And having clambered over the back of the pew Plum departs the table, pounding through the house like a rock down a cliffside, storming up the stairs like a centurion.