

Who'd Want a See-Through Daughter?

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It was a rare time that I was looking forward to visiting my mother. As I walked up the terraced path, I could breathe, for the first time in days.

I rang on the bell – I couldn't just walk in this time.

She opened the door, her hair wrapped in a towel.

She looked at me, furrowed her brow for a second, and then her mouth fell open.

She stepped backwards.

"What on earth happened?"

"What?" I said.

"Tara, you're see-through."

Oh. That.

I stepped past her into the hallway, holding my bag in front of me so I didn't knock her with it. She pressed herself against the wall.

She shut the door and turned to me. "Where're your colours?"

I looked down at my transparent hand, clutching the handles of my bag. You couldn't even see any bones. "Venice," I said.

She tutted. "I knew that place was no good."

"You can still see me."

"Only just."

She muttered this with a huff, as if I'd done it to spite her, and shuffled off towards the kitchen.

She had a point, of course. Who'd want a see-through daughter?

"You might as well have lunch," she said.

The lounge looked the same as always. A vase of flowers – sweet peas this time – smiled, prim, from the windowsill. The sofas at each end of the long room were pristine, untouched, whereas the armchair beside the fire had various possessions littered around it: glasses, iPad, mug, phone. The seventies cushion covers were worn but intact. The chair basically was my mother.

I stepped quickly past the mirror beside the fireplace – I wasn't ready yet – and perched on the sofa at the far end.

Mum came in carrying a tray. It held the usual: a cheese sandwich, a plate of tomatoes and chopped cucumber, and a glass of lemonade. This hadn't changed since I was eleven. She stopped a good meter away from me and leaned out to hand it to me. I sat forward and stretched out to meet it, then sat back, the tray in my lap. Mum sat down in her usual place, facing me. From where I was sitting, the angle meant that I could see the sweat peas over her shoulder. The pale pink flowers matched her jumper.

She picked up her phone from the floor and idly fiddled with it. "How's Sadie?" she said, not looking up from the screen.

"She's okay," I said. I hadn't expected this so early on in the visit. "Actually, Mum," I said, "I'm not with Sadie anymore."

"Another one bites the dust," she said, her gaze still on the phone.

Oh well, at least that was done.

I sipped my drink.

Mum straightened the towel on her head. As she did, she glanced at me, then screwed her face up. "Oh Tara, that's just disgusting," she said, her hand to her mouth.

"What?"

"I can see the lemonade," she said.

I looked down. The liquid was pooling in my invisible stomach. It was translucent, just like me. It was also strangely tasteless. I put my glass down before it slipped out of my clammy hand.

"I'm going to rinse off this colour," said Mum, standing up and pulling the towel off her head, revealing deep red oiliness. "I don't think I can bear to see the sandwich too."

She was still chuckling about her joke as she left the room.

I sat and ate the bland food with my eyes closed. With no vision, I could imagine Sadie was sitting next to me, like she was the last time I was there. She'd overdone it with my mum – she had a habit of doing that – by being over exuberant and making puns. When Mum had gone to bed that night, Sadie had turned to me and covered her face with her hands, mortified. We'd laughed for hours, and then weeks, about it. I tried to make her feel better and tell her that she could have another try in the morning, but really, I knew that my mother would never take to her. I think I'd always known that.

I left my tray on the floor and took my bag upstairs. As I trudged up the familiar staircase, I noticed the photos of me, in chronological order, ascending parallel to the banister. Winning a sack race, aged five. Being handed a trophy for horse riding, aged nine. Graduating from my sociology degree, aged twenty-one. All of the photos were as bright as rainbows. Growing up, friends had been jealous of my mother's celebration of my successes. They failed to notice that there was not one photo of me climbing a tree, or messing around with face paints, or laughing.

The water was still running in the bathroom. Mum always had long showers.

I pushed open the door to my bedroom. Over the last couple of years, Mum had started to use it as an office, so her laptop and various books were scattered on the desk.

Other than that, though, it was still very much my room. A cuddly giraffe and tiger sat side-by-side on the bedside table, and the walls contained photos and a painting of my horse, many years dead now.

I dropped my bag on the floor and stood in front of the mirrored wardrobe. There wasn't much to see, as Mum had alluded. I had an outline – strangely dark, like a child's drawing – but nothing much inside that. The light from the window shone through me and reflected off the mirror. The statue of a lion growled at me through my back and stomach. On my colourless body, my clothes also lost their solidity. My jeans and vest top had become thin veils over, seemingly, nothing.

I sighed and stepped away from the mirror to close the bedroom door. Then I collapsed on my bed and stared up at the ceiling. I thought of Sadie. This was unsurprising; after all, she was never far away. Even when I thought I was concentrating on something else, she would be there somewhere, looking over a fence, or peering through a door, or laying with me, the way she had been that day when everything changed.

We'd been on my bed, the Venetian sun streaming in through the open balcony doors. The suncatcher danced and sparkled, sending a shower of bright speckles across the bed and onto the walls.

Despite the canal breeze, our naked bodies were sweaty and pinked. Music was playing just how I liked it: loud and immersive. We were kissing. Kissing Sadie was always vaguely ethereal. I don't know if she designed it to be that way, or if perhaps I did. But on this day, she was beside me, propped up by one elbow, her other electric hand on my waist.

I ran my hands through her hair and kissed her, and as my eyes fell closed and the colours started to flow, she pulled back a few inches.

“Wait there,” she whispered.

Intrigued and smiling, I kept my eyes shut and stretched out, aware that she had got up and was rummaging under the bed. The music pounded through me, blurring with the images rushing in and out of my mind.

I felt her place something heavy on the bed. I half opened my eyes and saw a suitcase; I hadn’t remembered there being a suitcase under the bed. I rested my hands behind my head and watched as she unzipped and folded the lid back, so it rested on the footboard.

As she smiled at me, her green eyes were wide yet calm, and glistening. Her dark hair hung around her shoulders, ending just above her breasts. She’d never looked more beautiful.

She reached into the suitcase and took out a small knife. It looked old, like a vegetable knife from the sixties. It had a worn, wooden handle, and the metal of the blade was a dull grey.

My stomach tightened. Though I’d never seen this knife before, it was familiar. Sadie had described it to me shortly after we first met. It was the imaginary knife that she used on herself as a child. But, she’d told me she’d unimagined it when she was nineteen and had “worked on her stuff.” She held it up towards the balcony, and turned it around in her hand, the sunlight reflecting off the metal and creating a moving flash on the bedroom ceiling.

She looked back at me and moved the knife towards my stomach.

I flinched but didn’t move away until the tip of the blade touched my skin. Then I sat up.

She smiled, her eyes dancing. “I won’t hurt you,” she said.

“It’s not really my thing,” I said, straining my voice to speak over the music.

"You can trust me." The light from the suncatcher reflected off her teeth.

"I know," I said. Did I know? "It's just, I don't like blood."

She shook her head. "No blood. I promise."

On all fours, she kissed me. She rested her hand behind my hair and laid me back down.

"Relax," she whispered into my ear, "or it won't work."

"What won't?"

She brushed her cheek against mine. "You'll enjoy it."

She was probably right. Besides, I'd already agreed with myself to let her do whatever she wanted to do – blood or no blood.

She kissed me again, and as her tongue touched mine, she pressed the tip of the blade into the skin on my hip. She ran the knife downwards, to the top of my thigh. I waited for the pain, but it never came. Instead, it felt like small puffs of cool air on my skin. It moved in a square shape, about four inches across. My head swam with Sadie's smell.

She straightened up and took the detached square in her hands. It was glowing gold. She held it up to the light, in much the same way as she had done the knife. She smiled, a wide, closed-mouthed smile, and then carefully placed the strip into the suitcase.

"You're taking it?" I asked.

"It's only tiny," she said. "You won't miss it."

She looked at me, and I knew that I loved her. She could take whatever she wanted. I reached up and stroked her face.

When she laid back down next to me, she was like a spider. She was everywhere: on me and under me and inside me, all at once. She took me to somewhere I'd never been before. She stroked my face and pressed herself against me. As I closed my eyes and slipped

into her, she cut another piece: a triangle this time. Deep purple. The beat of the music became my pulse: our pulse. And the woody incense mingled with the scent of our sweaty skin. She cut two more squares, both yellow, a green heart-shape, and a turquoise diamond. She slid against me and inside me, and I swear we left Earth. Everything was warm and colourful, and all I could see or think or feel, was her.

Afterwards, she zipped up the suitcase, trapping the colours inside. I looked a little patchy, but basically ok.

It didn't really become noticeable for a few weeks. The transparency was something that happened very gradually, so gradually that I easily got used to it. By the time I left Sadie and came to England, I'd almost forgotten that I was ever a solid, full human being. I was blasé when my mother mentioned it, because really, I knew that I could have left so much more behind.

The week with my mother passed with some awkwardness. She never really got used to me. If I came around the corner unexpectedly, and she didn't have time to mask her expression, I would see her upper lip curl.

An unexpected benefit, however, was that I never got in her way. I could linger wherever I wanted in the lounge, and she could carry on watching TV, through me if necessary. When she was working at my desk – her desk – I could sit on the windowsill and watch her, and I didn't block the light, or cause a shadow. In this way, we moved around each other much more easily than usual.

The day before I returned to Venice, she came into the lounge looking pink and smiley, and slightly out of breath. She had a carrier bag in her hand.

"I've got a surprise," she said, sitting next to me on the sofa. She reached into the bag and pulled out a packet of thick felt tip pens. She held them up. "These will make you feel better."

"Oh, lovely," I said. "I haven't drawn in years."

She opened the box and tipped the pens into her lap. Unlike the brightly coloured pens on the packaging, these were all pastels.

"They're different to the ones on the front," I said.

"I asked the shop assistant to swap them." Mum picked up a pale blue and looked at it carefully, removing its lid.

She turned to face me. "Hold up your hand." She grasped my translucent wrist and turned my hand so that my thumb was on top.

She squinted and pressed the blue felt tip onto the knuckle of my thumb. She started off slowly, colouring in a circle, the size of a ten pence piece.

She stopped to inspect it and smiled. "Yes, these are definitely the right colours."

I stared at my thumb. It'd been so long since I'd seen any colours there – my hands had been among the first parts to go. It felt warm.

Mum picked up a green and started on my index finger. Her colouring was quicker this time. Within a minute, most of my finger looked like washed out grass.

She chose a pink next and continued. Bit by bit, my hand was becoming a hand again. Where she'd started on my thumb, was already starting to absorb the colour, and was looking like normal flesh. The rest of my hand was a mixture of cool, refined colours, petering out into the see-through of my arm. It looked rather like the vase of sweet peas.

I shifted in my seat. "I don't think this is working, Mum," I said.

"Of course it is. Look – it's solid." She tapped my normal looking thumb with the end of the pen.

"I want to stop now," I said.

"Don't be silly." She scraped the pink pen harder into my palm.

I tried to pull my hand away, but she tightened her grip.

I could feel sweat forming on my back. The warm of my hand was turning to hot.

Mum gripped harder, coloured harder. She moved the pen to my elbow, started scribbling up my arm, no longer caring if she filled in the gaps. Her face was frowning and flushed. She grabbed another pen. It matched the pastel yellow of her jumper.

I yanked my hand away and stood up. The force of the action pushed her back, so she was leaning against the arm of the sofa. I shook my hand, hoping that I could prevent the pastels from sinking in.

Mum stared up at me, a cluster of lidless pens in her lap. "What on earth?"

"I said no." I tried to keep my voice level, but I was struggling to catch my breath.

"But I went to all this trouble."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"And those pens were expensive."

"I'll give you the money," I said. "I don't care."

She stood up and returned the pens to their box. "You'll regret being so ungrateful."

"I can choose my own colours," I said.

She let out a laugh, more like a bark. "You can't seem to keep them. At least you have some now."

I stared at my pastel-coloured hand. My mother's hand. I strode into the kitchen, opened the drawer and took out a vegetable knife.

“What are you doing?” Mum had followed me and was standing in the doorway.

I had to do it now, or I’d lose my nerve. I laid my hand on worktop, the mottled fake-marble shining through. I held the knife to my thumb and pressed into my skin, just as Sadie had done.

“Oh my god, Tara, stop,” Mum hissed. She stepped towards me, trying to grab the knife. I turned my back on her and quickly ran the knife around the edge of the blue, feeling those same puffs of air, and then pulled it off. I slung it on the floor and started on the green. Mum pulled at my shoulders, but I shook her off. I worked quickly, cutting and pulling, until all the pieces were off, and I was see-through once again.

I turned to face my mother. She stared at the discarded colours on the kitchen lino. She shook her head. “You stupid girl.”

The next day, she saw me off at the door, but when I got to the end of the path and turned back, the door was already closed. Through the lounge window, I could see her standing beside the fireplace, staring into the mirror.

I ambled to the train station, reminded of Sadie, and how she’d looked on that last evening.

I’d opened the door to her flat and the sound of her singing was coming from her bedroom. A bottle of champagne behind my back, I followed her sultry voice and peeked around her bedroom door. The room was dim. The tall buildings and narrow alleyways of Venice meant that even in the summer, hardly any natural sunlight reached the ground floor windows.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I noticed Sadie standing in front of the mirror, with her back to me. She was swaying to her own song, wearing black underwear but

nothing else. From that distance, I could only just see her face in the mirror. She looked different, but I wasn't sure how. I stepped inside the room, no longer caring if she saw me. As I dropped my hand to my side, the champagne bottle clinked against the buckle on my jacket. She spun around.

Her face changed shape. Her forehead became longer, her eyes higher up. If she'd been a rabbit, her ears would have pressed tightly down against her head.

She looked so different that I squinted, trying to figure out if it was really her. There was a deep purple patch on one of her cheeks. I stepped towards her – it looked like it had been sewn on with big, hurried tacks. She turned to her bed and reached for her dressing down, but I grasped her thin arms and pulled her back to face me.

She struggled for a second but then stopped and hung her head. "Please don't look at me," she said. She was grotesque, but also strangely beautiful.

My hands were sweaty against her skin, and I trembled as I looked down and noticed a golden rectangle on her collar bone, a turquoise triangle on her thigh. I released her arms and stood back. She was covered in them. Every coloured piece that she'd cut from me was now crudely sewn onto her body.

I released Sadie's arms and left the apartment, closing the door on her crying.

I ran down the alleyway, still holding the champagne, my footsteps echoing off the stone buildings. I was surprised my weight even made a sound anymore – would that be the next thing she took?

I strode over the bridges and through the backstreets, into the center of Venice, to find that St Mark's square was flooded again. It didn't take much rain for that to happen. At least, not by British standards. People said that Venice was sinking. I didn't know what I felt about this. On the one hand, I hated it. How could my beautiful city sink? How could there

ever be a time that it would no longer exist? On the other hand, if it sunk, I would sink with it, and I would live under the waters that I had spent so many hours staring at and loving. Everyone else would leave town, but I would never leave. Everything that was mine was there. Would I even exist in England anymore?

The flooding platforms were already erected. I walked across them, towards the bright lights of the Basilica. I negotiated a route that meant I wouldn't have to pass any of the handful of people that were also there. It was dangerous for me to be beside water, especially at night. I needed one of those 'low visibility' road signs around my neck.

My phone beeped as a text came through. I reached into my pocket and pulled it out. *I'll never do it again. Please come back.*

I reached the Basilica and sat at the top of the steps, above the flood waters. I pulled the cork out of the champagne bottle and took a long swig. A young couple crossed the square: messing around, pretending to push each other off the platform, laughing. I remembered when Sadie and I used to laugh like that, pull one another around, kiss in public. That was back when I was tangible. She used to look up at me somehow, despite us being the same height. It was shortly after I'd noticed it, that the night with the knife happened.

I could have gone back to her, right that moment. Despite everything, I wanted nothing more than to be with her, as if this hadn't happened. I stared at her text. She said she wouldn't do it again. I could have pretended that I believed her, like I had so many times before. But I knew that the problem was bigger than that. Sadie couldn't really have stolen all my colours, unless I'd somehow wanted her to.

I stood up and peered down into the water. As I failed to see my reflection, I had to acknowledge that it was me who had placed that suitcase under the bed, just as it was me who had imagined that knife back into existence.

Swigging champagne as I walked, I returned to my apartment, packed a bag, and left for England.

The train pulled up and I climbed on, quickly finding a place beside the window. There were only three other people in the carriage: the benefit of travelling at midday. I didn't know what I would do if someone came to sit next to me. How could I ever explain?

I sat back in my seat and tried to breathe, as the English countryside fell away. Venice was only a matter of hours away; I just had to get through this last bit. Coming to England to protect myself hadn't worked out as planned. I needed to return to Venice and get my colours back, or at least find some new ones.

That morning when I'd gone downstairs in my mother's house, the kitchen floor had been mopped and the colours were gone. For a second, I'd wondered what Mum had done with them, but then decided that I'd rather not know.

I stretched out my legs and smoothed the material of my jeans, the maroon-orange pattern of the seat visible through my thighs. Something itchy brushed against my wrist; it felt like a spider walking across my skin. I turned my hand over to see that a few inches of my outline had come loose. From the base of my thumb, down to where my veins would have been, I had nothing separating me from the air. It would probably need sticking back on, somehow. As I picked at the black ribbon-like strip, I thought how perfect it would look, used as a tie for Sadie's hair.