

Lina

Mum left this morning when I was still asleep. I asked her to wake me, to say goodbye, but she didn't. She texted later from the airport to apologise but when I rang her back before she boarded, she didn't answer. Her phone went straight to message.

Now she's probably closer to Hong Kong than she is to me.

Dad will be here soon, and I was going to spend the morning cleaning my room and wrapping the presents I bought for my second family, but I've done none of that. Instead I had an hour-long shower, shaved my legs with Mum's razor, and finished the tub of salted caramel ice-cream.

I posted a photo of the empty tub on Instagram, and immediately both Elle and Tessa called. I ignored them both so then a long stream of emojis and heartfelt messages flooded my phone. Elle even said I could come and stay with her family until Mum's back, but that would be worse than spending the next 174 hours with Dad and the steps. That's what I call his wife and kid. They aren't my real family. They're the stand-ins, like that emergency tin of baked beans at the back of the cupboard that will do if you've run out of everything else.

At least I can be ignored at Dad's place. I'm well practised in exactly how surly I have to be so that they prefer me disappearing into my room than hanging out in the lounge. Elle would want to chat endlessly, and I'd have to watch her cheery family exchange presents on Friday. Knowing her Mum, there would probably even be a present for me. This way, I can sleep through Christmas morning, and wake up when it's almost over.

I hear Dad's knock on the door. I know it's him because he always does this little rhythm if Mum's not here. It's like he's worried I'll open the door to a murderer or something. Thing is, I've been staying home alone for years. Not like Mum cares. She thinks the double security door will keep me safe.

'Hi, honey,' says Dad, leaning down for a kiss on the cheek.

'You look tired.' I tell him.

He laughs and the sound irritates me.

'Your brother thinks the morning starts at four.'

'Not my brother,' I say quietly as I turn around and head back in to grab my bags.

'You ready to go?' He never walks into the house. We conduct entire conversations this way, with him out and me in.

'Do I have a choice?'

Dad reaches for my backpack and slides it over his shoulder. I always forget how big he is until I see him. It's like he fades in size and memory in between visits.

'Benny's been saying your name for days,' says Dad unlocking the boot and tossing my bag in. 'He's really excited that you're coming.'

'He's two, dad. The only thing Benny gets excited about is eating yoghurt with his hands.'

Dad laughs and I climb into the passenger seat, relieved that he didn't bring the steps with him to collect me. I dread awkward car-rides.

This is Dad's work car, so I've only been in it a handful of times. It's fancier than his family station wagon, and there's no car seat in the back for Benny. It also smells clean, and there are no handprint food stains on the leather.

I Bluetooth my phone and turn up a song I've been listening to a lot. It was one Riley's sister introduced me to. Not that I'd admit that to anyone. I like pretending my music is *my* music, not hand-me-downs from some cool teenager that I don't even know.

'Bit loud, honey,' says Dad.

I pretend to turn the volume down, wondering why parents always seem to have such delicate hearing.

'Sam has a few things planned for the next few days. She'd really love it if you'd visit Santa for a photo with Benny.'

This I have to laugh at.

'I'm serious, Lina,' says Dad. 'It would be nice for Benny.'

Everything's nice for Benny. Nobody ever thinks about the fact that Benny took my childhood. I stopped believing in Santa when I was about five because after Dad left Mum couldn't be bothered pretending.

'No thanks,' I tell him, singing the harmony.

'This week is a big deal for us. I think we should make it as nice as we can,' he says, shooting a quick look my way as if his sweet dad glance will seal the deal.

'Dad, I'm here because I have to be. Let's not pretend to be happy families. Okay?'

Mostly I avoid staying over at Dad's in the large suburban dreamhouse with Barbie and her kid unless I absolutely have to. Dad sighs twice and stops talking, which is so unlike him. Usually he fills all gaps with chatter. As we pull up outside his three-storey house, I match the sigh.

'Goodie, we're home,' I say in my best mock cheery accent.

Dad married Sam about five years ago and she's perfectly fine for a step. She opens the front door before he can, and plants a kiss on my cheek.

'Benny's asleep,' she whispers. 'So, can we just keep it down? He cries if he gets woken,' she says.

I shrug and step inside to Christmas winter wonderland. The loungeroom is bursting with decorations. A tree is sparkling in the corner and presents circle the base. I wonder if any of them are for me or if they are all Benny's.

'Is the WIFI code the same?' I have my phone out and am trying to get on to Dad's server.

'Sssshh,' he says behind me.

'Isn't Benny upstairs?' I say.

'He's a very light sleeper,' says Dad. 'Like his Mum.'

I roll my eyes at the framed photographs of my steps that line the mantelpiece. I'm there too if you search. I know because I have. There's one of me as a baby wrapped in a family heirloom rug. And one of me starting school grinning at the camera like I was living my best life.

Dad places my backpack carefully onto the chair in the corner that I always like to think of as mine. It means I don't risk touching anyone on the couch.

'Do you need some breakfast?' Sam asks.

Her long hair is tied back in a ponytail and she's in jeans and a t-shirt that would fit me. She's a runner and before they had Benny, they used to train for marathons together. Now Dad leaves the hardcore fitness to her and plays golf. He's a right middle-aged cliché.

'I had ice-cream,' I tell her, enjoying the frown it causes.

'Tea? Coffee?' Sam is already heading into the kitchen to turn on the machine.

I don't drink coffee. Not because I'm not allowed to, but because I don't like it. It tastes like everything I imagine is hard about being an adult. It's bitter, it makes your breath

smell and I don't believe anyone actually likes it, they have just learned to pretend. I decide that right now is all about pretending.

'Coffee, white no sugar,' I say.

Dad is heading towards me with his arms out. I need to duck away before this becomes a hug. I've only been here five minutes.

I join Sam in the kitchen and sit at the long wooden table covered in paper and crayons. There's a couple of sheets with coloured scribbles on them and I hold one up.

'Benny's?' I ask, as though maybe Dad's drawing style hasn't developed.

Sam turns from frothing the milk and smiles. Love spreads across her face as she talks. I want to screw the sheet up and toss it at her.

'He loves drawing,' she says. At least she isn't telling me he's the next Picasso.

The sound of the coffee machine drowns out the rest of her sentence and I watch Dad through the doorway as he fixes the fallen tinsel on the tree. I haven't been in a house with a Christmas tree for years. Mum doesn't like the real ones. Says they drop needles all over the floor and are a pain to dispose of after the big day. And we've just never bothered with the fake ones. Instead we sit by our window in matching dressing gowns to exchange presents. And then go to our favourite restaurant for lunch. By the time we come home in the afternoon, Christmas is over. Not even the wrapping paper hangs around.

As Sam slides over my coffee, there's a scream from upstairs. She runs, as does Dad from the other room. And I sit in the empty first floor, while Benny the King commands all the attention.

I leave the coffee and drag my backpack up the stairs to the room at the back where I always sleep. I'm not sure what this room does when I'm not here. It must have some small function because I only fill it for about twelve nights a year. Usually if Mum's away I head to Tessa's house or my aunty comes and stays.

I creep past Benny's room and hear Sam singing a song about a train. It makes me hurry. I don't want to be dragged into family hour.

My room is like living in a hotel. White sheets, clean folded towel, and a small television set. It has a door that shuts and a bed that is large enough for two. I'm tossing up between putting away my clothes neatly or living out of my bag, when the door pushes open and Benny waddles in wearing only a singlet and nappy.

He says something that sounds like my name and then holds up his arms like he expects me to pick him up. Dad always tells me Benny and I look like siblings, but I can't see it. He has blonde hair and I don't. Our eyes are different colours and he's always dribbling.

'Sorry can't play, just about to check Instagram,' I tell him.

He responds with a squawking sound that's possibly a complaint. 'Lina, play,' he says.

I haven't seen Benny in a while, and the fact that he can actually make words sort of shocks me. Maybe he is gifted.

'I can't,' I tell him again holding up my phone.

'Benny, phone,' he says.

'No, Lina's phone.'

He smiles at me like he understands my need for technology. I see the dimples that make his cheeks look soft and cute. He walks up to my leg and slides his arms around it, holding on at knee level.

I've always treated Benny like he's Dad's new pet. If I pat him occasionally and comment on how big he's getting, I seem to be allowed to ignore the fact that he exists. But Dad's not in the room. He's not hovering and Benny's holding my leg because he wants to hold my leg. It seems he's changing the rules.

I pat the top of his head. His hair soft and flyaway. Hope he outgrows that. Flyaway hair is not good on a boy. 'Lina, come,' he says, moving backwards and trying to pull me along.

No two-year old tells me what to do. I stay fixed where I am.

'Lina, come,' he says again.

'No.'

'Yes.'

I shake my head knowing he can't see me because he's still looking at my kneecap. And then I wonder if he'll bite me, like a cat would.

'Okay.' I shake him free and follow him out the door, down the hall to his room where Dad and Sam are cuddling. I can't remember my parents ever standing so close. And I'm pleased when they leap apart as we walk into the room.

'Benny wanted me to come,' I tell them, not looking at either of them very closely.

'He knows what he wants,' says Dad laughing.

‘He probably wants to show you his new train set,’ says Sam. ‘My parents sent it over for Christmas, but it arrived early.’

She busies herself, pulling something out from under the bed. It’s a large wooden board covered in track. ‘Sorry, Lina. He might bore you with this.’

‘I’m sort of busy,’ I tell her.

Sam has never parented me in any way. She’s always respected the step rules. But the look she gives me as she stands up, is pure parent disapproval. If I knew her better, I might argue that playing trains with Benny is not my job.

Instead I sit on the ground, almost at the feet of my father, as Benny hands me sticky carriage after sticky carriage and I have to make them move. At some point in the chugging trains episode, Dad and Sam sneak out of the room. I’m aware of them leaving but figure they’ll be back soon.

But they aren’t. I’m not sure how much time passes before I realise that even Benny is no longer playing trains, and it’s all me. I’m the only one loading up the carriages with coal and packages and joining them up magnetically so they can glide through tunnels and up over hills and down into the station.

‘Benny turn?’

I look up into the eyes of my step. He’s smiling at me like he understands why I fell under the spell of his toy.

‘Yeah, Benny turn ...’ I say, shuffling over so he can reach the carriage with the engine.

But instead of sitting down next to me and leaving a decent polite distance between us, Benny backs into place with his nappy-covered bum and lands hard on my lap. He sighs just like my Dad does.

Within seconds of him sitting on me, my legs start tingling and going slowly to sleep. I could straighten them and wriggle my way out from under his weight, or I could just suck it up and stay here. I lean forward and breathe him in. He smells sweet like apples and milk. And I let my legs go numb, and I keep as still as a fox, as he explains in single words and broken sentences the rules of the game.

It seems like days pass before Sam appears in the doorway. Her smile is like an audition tape for the weather channel. I wait for her to start telling us the humidity over Melbourne, but instead she scoops Benny up in her arms and leaves. No words. No

explanation to the twelve-year-old babysitter who has suffered through train-land while her legs have officially gone to sleep. Not even a thank-you.

I lie backwards, my head resting on an oversized brown teddy-bear with very dirty paws. Benny's room is like a toyshop, complete with ceiling-height display cupboards stuffed full of games and books.

Mum promised to buy me a new phone in Hong Kong for Christmas. And duty-free make-up. I wanted to give her the present I'd bought but she told me wait until she was back.

'Comfy, Lina?' Dad says from the doorway.

'Not really. I think Teddy's eyes are pushing into my skin.'

'We're taking Benny to the park. Do you want to come?'

I laugh thinking he should be able to translate.

'You sure? We usually get ice-cream after,' he says.

I've never heard my dad use the word 'we' so often. It throws me for a second.

'Lina, come,' says Benny pushing past Dad and walking over to where I'm lying. He leans down and rubs the side of my face.

Looking at him upside-down is odd. He looks like a different person. Not Benny the step. But some random kid who I'm not related to.

It makes it easier to say no.

But he doesn't seem to hear me, because he pushes his little strawberry stained hand into mine and pulls. Dad is laughing and egging him on. Mum better buy me a really great phone because she owes me for this. I let myself be pulled up, but as soon as I'm on my feet, I break free and wipe my fingers on my shorts.

'I'm staying here,' I tell Dad, as I head back to my room where this time, I shut the door until it clicks.

It seems to take them ages to leave, but finally after the front door shutting and opening and shutting again, I hear the car pull out. There are messages from Tessa and Elle and a boy from school but nothing from Mum. I snap a photo of my bare green toes from the pedicure I had last week, but don't bother posting it because my big toe looks ugly.

Now that I have the house to myself, I don't know what to do. I decide to unpack a few things into the top drawer of the shelves but leave the rest in my backpack for a quick escape. Then I head downstairs to the kitchen.

Sam is a health nut. The fridge has more vegetables than ours has seen in a year. And the pantry is full of labelled jars. Flour, oats, seeds, nuts and other things that need cooking. Mum and I don't do much of that. We mostly reheat.

I grab a block of chocolate but it's super dark and vegan. It doesn't even smell good. Then I spy a packet of dried fruit sticks that I guess are probably Benny's. Mashed up apricot and apple tastes pretty good, so I eat half the pack.

I'm digging around in the back of the pantry for crackers when I hear a car pull into the drive. I hurry over to the window just in time to see Benny being lifted out of the backseat and carrying an ice-cream cone with a pile of scoops balancing on top.

Fastest park trip ever.

'Lina, ice-cream,' shouts Benny through the window.

I open the front door as he hurries towards me. 'Is that for me?'

He grins and holds it up, managing somehow not to drop the lot.

'Thanks,' I say.

But before I can take it, he licks across the top and upends the chocolate scoop onto the ground with his tongue. His eyes grow wide and I know there are tears somewhere in there because it's exactly the expression I pull in the mirror when I'm practising.

Surprised, I realise I don't want him to start crying. And maybe I actually care enough not to be the reason that he does. After all, he is only two. And possibly gifted. And I can make him feel better really easily.

'All good, Benny. I hate chocolate ice-cream,' I tell him, taking the cone. I wonder if I have to pretend to hate chocolate ice-cream forever now. Hopefully little kids forget things like this.

His grey t-shirt is covered in smears of drying ice-cream.

'Strawberry,' he says making it sound like a different fruit altogether.

'That's my favourite,' I tell him.

'Benny favourite.' He grins and I smile back, licking the top of the melting pale pink scoop.

'Benny picked the flavours,' says Dad climbing out and walking over. As he does, he whispers, 'Thanks, Lina, that was really kind.'

I could say something smart, but for once I don't. Instead I shrug like thinking of someone else's feelings is no big deal for me.

'Now we're going to the park,' says Dad.

'Lina come,' says Benny.

My phone beeps and I pull it from my back pocket. It's just Tessa texting me a photo of her new lip-gloss. I could go inside and lie on my bed and message her back.

Or I could let myself be taken away for an hour on the swings with the steps.

'Lina, come,' says Benny again walking back towards the car like he knows I'll follow. And strangely enough, he's right.