



# OUR LULLABY

ESMÉ JAMES

I know when I see the call.

I feel an absence and I know.

*No phones in the rehearsal room.*

I mutter an apology. Something cold takes possession of me.  
I leave the room without looking up.

An ethereal song softens behind me. I breathe in what is left of it, warming myself on its words. It talks about happiness, promises of safety. It cools and melts on my lips.

I feel the vibrations. This time I must answer. My voice is a song, warning away a time already passed.

*It's your brother.*

I hear it and I know.

The church doors crumble as I throw them open. The celestial music flees from the room. Eleven silent faces look on in confusion.

*Es, what is it?*

I can't answer – shards of ice pierce my lungs, frost is creeping up my throat. *Es?*

Alanah's voice floats somewhere behind me, in another world. She follows me across the room, out into the church carpark. *Talk to me ...*

I want to speak but she is in another world. It is winter here and all sound is frozen.

I open the car, fumble the keys into the ignition and reach for the handle. I hesitate. Words find me.

*It's Ewan.*

The door closes. Alanah knows.

I am disappearing. I am driving. I am looking at the road without seeing. The frost is creeping, devouring the window – my breath fending it away with what warmth remains.

*It's going to be okay. He's going to be okay.*

The engine is humming. It falls silent.

The door of my house is wide open; I enter, and it is not my house. Something else has taken possession, has drained it. It is not my house.

*Before you go in—*

I don't listen, I push passed Colin, heading for the nucleus of this nothingness. I am coming to find you.

*Esmé, he won't wake up. Esmé, he won't wake up.*

A mantra – Mum at your bedside, singing. But her words are stifled, suffocated by the room's staleness. Only their ghosts form on her lips. The insipid snowflakes drift across the room, escaping through the open window. They can't survive here.

## ROOTS

Mum has faded into washed-out pigments. Only her gaze remains – it's a plea, a call for something. I can't return it, I am unseeing. I only see you. The lifeless body pretending to be you, curled up to one side. You could have been in a peaceful slumber. You could have been dreaming with your eyes wide open – but I can feel the absence and it is suffocating.

I am coming to find you. Sitting by your body, I stroke you, talk to you, pretending I can feel you there. It comforts Mum – she knew I would find you, I always do. At stations, at playgrounds – every time you run away and get lost – down train tracks in the middle of the night I have found you, drenched in the rain. You were standing there, waiting. You weren't scared, you knew I'd always find you.

I am hugging absence.

Blanketing you in my arms, I sing, coming to find you, protecting you. Paramedics arrive but I keep singing.

*A seizure, Colin is saying. I found him shaking ... moaning ... went cold ... nothing like this before ... CPR ... just stopped moving.*

Your hand in mine, I keep singing – it is our song. You used to skip when I would sing it; your eyes locked on mine as you giggled, flapping your arms in the air. People would stare but you took no notice – you perfectly understood this world that didn't understand you. You would giggle and I would keep singing, flapping my arms with yours in the air.

You are lying motionless and I am singing. The paramedics tell me it's helping – I know they are lying. They have moved you to a stretcher and place a mask over your mouth.

*It is not uncommon ... keep going ... move back to give us room ...*

A frozen screen hangs above you; cartoon firefighters mercilessly suspended in their moment of struggle are engulfed in a motionless blaze. Who paused it? You had been watching this episode in the morning and I hadn't let you finish it. You were going to be late for school. You flopped back into bed and hid under your covers. You had been giggling while I had been yelling. That memory creeps around my neck and chokes me.

A hand slips into mine, squeezes it – I think it is you. Jim is at my side, stroking me, telling me to keep singing.

The paramedics move around us, speaking in tongues I don't want to understand.

*... breathing slowing ... not responding ...*

And then I am torn away from you, held back, watching them changing machines, inserting tubes, flicking switches. They won't let me go to you.

Colin tries to hold Mum but she is fighting, screaming – she needs to find you.

I am held and you are taken. Snowflakes are falling, melting in the empty room; nothing survives here.

Jim is holding me, humming in my ear.

*... It's okay ... He's going to be okay ...*

—

A sterile maze – the smell of disinfectant stifling but unable to mask the rot beneath it. A dull humming fills the air, a nurse starts laughing. The sound is discordant, striking a strained chord with a cry nearby. An elderly lady holds her husband's hand as he stares back, blankly.

## ROOTS

I slide down the hospital hallway, sneaking behind curtains, stumbling into moments that were not mine to share. Will they see me in their memories – painted into the corner, a girl who stood there, staring at them blankly?

Sneaking behind curtains, I finally find you, plugged into a machine that is breathing for you. Your pyjamas lie in pieces on the floor – they were red, your favourite. I think that I will sew them back together; I know they will be trashed and burnt.

Mum is reciting the words she has spoken a thousand times.

*... autism ... can't speak ... needs help ... all basic needs ... epilepsy ... not like this ... absences ... never shaking ... Will you wake him?*

*Is this his sister?*

Mum looks at me, painted into the corner of the moment.

*Yes, his older sister. He loves her more than anything.*

I want to feel that everything is okay. We stand frozen, sharing a smile. Something is exchanged, something is invited.

We are with you, hoping – the machine is breathing for you.

There are voices far behind the curtains, approaching, growing louder. My grandparents blunder into our little curtained room.

Nan heads straight over and hugs me. *There, there. Come on, now. No need to think silly thoughts yet.*

Pulling away, she smiles. Her eyes red from crying.

Grandad embraces me and starts laughing. *Do you think he's just trying to get out of school tomorrow?*

*That sounds about right.* I am laughing. *Did you hear that, Ewan?*

A moment later, Colin and Jim have found us.

A moment after that, my dad.

A voice tells us in the distance, *only one family member in emergency*. But we cannot hear them, we are laughing. Warm light pools around you.

We make a home in this hospital room.

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A call wakes me – I think it's my alarm. We have slept and I'm coming to find you. They said they would wake you.

Reaching out, I answer. *Es ...*

They are just calling to wake us.

*It's your brother ...* Everything is still okay. *Es ...*

I am still sleeping; half asleep, not hearing clearly.

*... get here as soon as you can ...*

I will wake up. I will wake up and we will try again.

*They've said we need to say goodbye.*

I sit up.

I am awake.

I put the phone down beside me. There is silence.

It is deafening.

I scream.

*Not now.* Jim lulls me.

He holds me but I am not there, part of me is missing – all of me is missing. I am screaming and you are not there.

*Not now.* Jim lulls me but I am not there. *Get dressed, get in the car.*

He hands me clothes, he can't find my jacket.

We leave it, it clothes no-one.

Jim is driving and calling my nan; she picks up straightaway.

*What is happening?* I am pleading.

## ROOTS

Nan is silent when she has always been powerful.

*I'm sorry, darling.*

No-one is laughing.

*Drive as safely as you can.*

Silence.

A red light, a green light; fading, dying away. The phone rings – Alanah's voice sounds from another world.

*Any update? How is he doing?*

*They said I need to say goodbye.*

Silence.

*I'm sorry.*

At the hospital, I am unseeing – a machine, I am breathing, following signs, running, finding ICU. I am no-one.

*My brother. I beg to a nurse. I need to find my brother.*

She takes me to you.

A knife is sliced through reality – I see through worlds – it is done with words; it has pulverised them, torn the poetry from their meaning. Nothing lives here.

Mum is looking at me, looking up from your body to me. I can see it. Something has been written and I can't change it, I can't make a home in this unreality. We live here now – in a space in between – and we will keep living and you will be absence.

She can't hold me, she isn't there.

A washed-outhand. A mechanical beeping. A window – looking through it, I see my dad. He is running, weeping, holding the falling parts of himself together. He is running across parkland, running through that void, coming to find you.

I clutch at absence.

## OUR LULLABY

He is in the room, he is weeping. *My boy, my boy.*

He collapses; his arms try to find you. *My boy, my boy.*

He is melting, cries lacerating the silence. *My boy.*

I pick up his body and try to contain it – it slips through my fingers and pools on the hospital floor.

I can't find you.

Crawling onto the bed, I lie beside emptiness; singing through absence, trying to find you.

—

We are moved, avoided – they don't need us here.

They are talking. When will they kill you? They are checking, consulting. I am singing.

They place a cap over your head – you look like a swimmer. You loved to swim. You would dive right to the bottom and let your body float to the top. You wouldn't lift your head, you'd lie on the surface looking under the water – looking like a body, drowning.

After a while, I would panic, thinking that this time it wasn't a game. And I'd swim towards you, but before I could reach you, your body would flop over and spit water from your mouth, laughing. And I would be laughing, wondering about that strange peace you found there, in the somewhere in between.

They place a cap over your head and no-one is laughing. I am singing, trying to find peace here in absence. Dad is a pool around you. Mum is not there.

They are checking, consulting; they are multiplying, speaking in tongues. I am singing. They are telling me that it's helping – I think they are lying.



## ROOTS

I am singing but I've lost sight of the words – I have forgotten.  
There is no poetry here.

A sound.

There is something – discordant – and it pierces through this in-between. Mum is singing, catching my words before they slip away. She looks at me and I can feel them. We are singing through absence, coming to find you.

*Keep singing.* A nurse calls to us, summoning a sea of blue bodies around us. *He can hear you!*

The nurses laughing. The activity in your brain is multiplying. You are responding. You can hear us. You can sense the concert around you.

*He's still there!*

We are singing, coming to find you.

They tell us to keep singing. So we clutch at notes through laughter. We assemble words and give them meaning; we drift on melodies, flooding the room, drowning in tones and duration. We are finding you. You are here with us. We sing through hours of poetry and meaning, forgetting time and staying beside you. A new day has broken. We can just feel you, the tip of your finger touching me, reaching through this in-between.

There you are.

They will try to pull you over. They are staying, they are deliberating. We must stand back and keep singing. They will pull the tube from you; we will see if you are just machine. You must breathe and keep breathing – we have one chance to pull you from the in-between.

The cord is ripped from you.

## OUR LULLABY

There is a silence; we are suspended, drifting somewhere that time cannot hurt us, swimming through a moment that has no surface. We are emptiness, we are laughter. I hear music.

I hear your laughter.

With a sharp inhale, you rise to the surface. Your eyes flash open, flutter, fade. They are closing. My heart is frozen.

And then, you are smiling. They place oxygen over your mouth. You breathe it. The mask condensates from your warm laughter. Your eyes are blinking, you are searching. They catch mine and there is no fear in your gaze – you were never scared. You knew you would always find me. You hold me there, we are grounded.

The world begins to re-form around us, piecing us back together, making us whole. The doctors are moving around us – they are hugging each other, cheering. A nurse is crying. You are surrounded and there is music. It is your laughter, singing through spaces, building a bridge through that in-between. I join in your song, laughing. Reaching out, I find you; my hand around yours, soothing you, singing our song of happiness, of promises of safety. Softly, you squeeze back. You are there, I feel you beside me. You are music and you have made it home.

Crawling onto the bed, I hold you in my arms, your body nestling against me. I feel your gentle breathing – you could have been sleeping – your body is flooded by warmth and colour. It spills from you, spreading around our hospital room.

Doctors are parting, performing final checks and procedures. They are speaking to my parents of the future, of possible causes,

## **ROOTS**

of preventions. But, for now, I do not hear them. I close my eyes  
and lie there beside you. I have found you.

And there is a beautiful silence. And it is our song.