

GRIS OF LITTLE HOPE

Three girls went into the woods. Only two came back, covered in blood and with no memory of what happened. Or did they?

Being fifteen is tough, tougher when you live in a boring-ass small town like Little Hope, California (population 8,302) in 1996. Donna, Rae and Kat keep each other sane with the fervour of teen girl friendships, zine-making and some amateur sleuthing into the town's most enduring mysteries: a lost gold mine, and why little Ronnie Gaskins burned his parents alive a decade ago.

Their hunt will lead them to a hidden cave from which only two of them return alive. Donna the troublemaker can't remember anything. Rae seems to be trying to escape her memories of what happened, while her close-minded religious family presses her for answers. And Kat? Sweet, wannabe writer Kat who rebelled against her mom's beauty pageant dreams by getting fat? She's missing. Dead. Or terribly traumatised, out there in the woods, alone.

As the police circle and Kat's frantic mother Marybeth starts doing some investigating of her own, Rae and Donna will have to return to the cave where they discover a secret so shattering that no-one who encounters it will ever be the same.

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GIRLS
OF
LITTLE
HOPE

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For Melanie and Amantha

*Every thing is an attempt
To be human.*
William Blake

*To the dull angry world let's prove
There's a Religion in our Love.*
Katherine Philips



ONE FOR SORROW

1. STAR FISH

DONNA RAMIREZ

SATURDAY 21 SEPTEMBER, 1998



I'm in the medical examination room at the Little Hope Police Department. Donna keeps saying it in her mind, over and over. Her brain can't grasp it, it keeps wriggling from her like an eel. Maybe if she says the words enough times, it might start to feel real. *I'm in the medical examination room at the Little Hope Police Department.* Over on the adjacent table, Rae seems to be having the same problem. She has a grin on her face the size of the moon, teeth bared, eyes crinkled in glee. This is not the appropriate response for where they are, *in the medical examination room at the Little Hope Police Department*, and Donna fights the urge to grab her and shake the grin off. It's too much, to be here, to have lived through what they have just lived through.

Although, if she's honest, she's not even sure exactly what it is they've lived through.

It is two days now since she came stumbling into consciousness. Literally, stumbling. Rae half-carrying, half-dragging her along a deer path, deeper into the darkness of

the woods. No idea where she was, what was happening. Rae was hysterical, babbling that they had to run, her hair wet, her face streaked with mud.

The last thing she remembers before that is climbing over some boulders towards Ronnie Gaskins's cave, Rae's dark bob bouncing up ahead. In between those two moments is blank, a film strip badly spliced. It's not amnesia, everything else is still there. She knows who she is. And she knows where she is: *I'm in the medical examination room at the Little Hope Police Department.* That's a start. Hold on to that.

Rae turns to her, brown eyes sparkling from the fluorescent lights, squinting and squeezed from that too-big smile. It must be that she's just struggling to press down the panic. Find the right emotions. Or, maybe it's what Rae remembers, and she doesn't. Maybe Rae understands how lucky they are to be alive.

The doctor asked them several times if they wouldn't prefer to let her examine them separately, but they refused to be separated. They'd had to drag a second examination table in from another room.

Rae's grin seems to be spooking the doctor. She won't make eye contact with either of them, but she keeps repeating their names, tacking them onto the end of every sentence as she narrates her actions.

"I'm going to take samples from under your fingernails now, Donna."

"I'm going to check your wrists for bruises, Tammy-Rae."

"I'm taking some photographs now, Donna."

"I just need a bit of blood for the lab, Donna."

Probably something she learned in a textbook about how to calm the traumatised. Remind them they are more than a victim, they are a full human being. But Donna does not feel like a full human being right now, no siree; she feels like she's had a chunk lopped off her. Worse, she feels like the chunk that's been lopped off. Isn't it starfish, where if you chop off a

leg, it can grow into a whole new starfish? That's what she feels like: a wriggling leg trying to remember how to be a person.

The hospital gown feels scratchy against her skin. Their clothes are already sealed up in a plastic evidence bag, balanced carefully on the counter to be checked for hair and semen. Some scrap that can speak for them, in place of their stubborn muteness.

The doctor leans over her to photograph a mud-smear on her waist that she has no memory of getting. She smells of fruity perfume and antiseptic. Donna can make out the shape of an oversized engagement ring through her blue surgical gloves.

Not a doctor, Donna notices. FORENSIC NURSE: CARLA MENDEZ, according to the small plastic badge pinned to her white coat. Donna's never seen her before, and she's pretty sure she knows everyone in this town. They must have driven her up from Sacramento. Is Sacramento big enough to employ someone to do this full time, comb over the bodies of girls who've been missing and are now found, to try to catalogue exactly the ways they've been violated? Seems like a weird profession. There's probably more to the job, but on this, the strangest night of her life, Donna can't bring herself to imagine what.

At least it's not Dr Abrams, the town's skeezy family doctor, who looks for any excuse to get you to lift your shirt and breathes too deeply when he holds the stethoscope against your ribs. That's something to be grateful for, that it's no one who knows her, no one who could look into her eyes and see how much is missing. What should she be feeling right now? Grief? Terror? That's what everyone around her seems to want. They seem to want her to be sobbing or screaming. But each breath feels wonderful, cold and tickling her nose, the soft rise of her chest under the thin hospital gown. It's all just too absurd, to be lying here, reminding herself over and over again that she's *in the medical examination room of the Little Hope Police Department* like that's supposed to mean something.

Sacramento's more than an hour away. They must have

called Nurse Mendez just after they were found. There are no windows in this room so it's hard to tell exactly, but it can't be long since they stumbled into Louanne Martin's diner, Rae screaming for help. It was dawn. Louanne was the only person there, lining condiments on the melamine counter before the breakfast rush. She clasped her chest at the sight of them, sending bottles of watered-down ketchup careening across the floor, splashing bright red across the tiles like some kind of high-fructose crime scene.

That can't have been more than a couple of hours ago. Maybe more. Time seems to be loping past her in chunks. Like there's an absence inside of her, a hole that things keep slipping through.

She has no sense of how long they were missing. It must have been a few days at least, judging from how Louanne gasped when she saw them, and the posters plastered up all around town. She saw them earlier, her nose pressed up against the window of the police car that drove them here. Her own face on every wall, every street light. **HAVE YOU SEEN THESE GIRLS?**

"I'm just checking for injuries, Donna," trills Nurse Mendez, running gloved hands gently down her arm. She frowns at a spot of bright red on her elbow and reaches for a swab. Donna starts to tell her not to worry, it's just ketchup, but she's afraid she'll laugh. She lets the nurse swab it and slip it into a baggie, which joins the growing pile on the steel trolley.

Actually, as far as she can tell, Donna doesn't have a scratch on her anywhere. Like this might be some elaborate prank they're playing on everyone.

She needs to get her face under control before she ends up grinning like Rae, leering like a loon, scaring everyone. She focuses on trying to freeze her face, keeps repeating, *I am in the medical examination room at the Little Hope Police Department* in her mind. The paint has chipped off and been painted over the metal bars lining the examination table, coarse beneath the pads of her thumbs. The air is heavy in her

lungs, anchoring her back to her body. Cold in her throat. *Breathe. Just breathe. Remember where you are.*

Rae's mom gave them something for the shock, two little pills, oblong and powdery. She said it might make them feel a little sleepy. Sleepy's the last thing Donna feels. It's like somebody stuck jumper cables inside her brain, like her whole body is buzzing and dangerous to touch.

Her dad asked if he could take her home, let her wash, let her sleep a while. But no, there's too much to do. They need to catalogue and sample her. Her whole body is a clue, a crime scene. This is the grim admin of trauma. A trauma she can't even remember.

There are, fragments, maybe. Vague outlines of memories through the white mist of her brain. Crunching sounds in the darkness. The iron smell of blood. Something cold and wet on her face. And something else, nagging at her consciousness, like a memory she's not ready to look at yet.

Nurse Mendez guides Rae's feet into stirrups and begins to lubricate a speculum. "This might feel a little cold, Tammy-Rae." She pauses to look at the white scars laddering their way up Rae's thighs, but those are old.

Donna glances back at her. Rae, her best friend, her blood sister. A stranger to her now, that skeletal grin twisting her features, knees sprawled apart under a thin sheet, her normally glossy dark bob matted against her head with grime and sweat and leaves. She looks like a feral thing. Something that doesn't belong here, here in the shiny white and chrome *medical examination room at the Little Hope Police Department*.

"You look like a Troll doll," Donna tries to say. But the words come out slurred. "Ulook like a traw-daw." Rae barely glances at her. Donna supposes she probably doesn't look much better herself.

Nurse Mendez ducks under the sheet draped across Rae's knees. Rae flinches, hisses through her bared teeth. She's

crying, tears sliding over her smile.

“We’re OK,” Donna says, the words clearer now.

But are they? She can’t be sure. If she could just remember what happened, maybe then she’d know.

Rae turns her head away from her. Donna’s not sure if she’s hiding the tears or the maniac grin.

There’s a shriek from outside. A woman screaming. A muffled thump, raised voices, heavy footsteps pounding up the passageway. She recognises Chief Pittman’s voice, yelling that she can’t be down here. More shouting. A crash, and Marybeth Larkin falls through the doors to the examining room.

“Where is she?” Her face is red. A pink coat pulled on over flannel Minnie Mouse pyjamas, bottle-blonde hair tumbling out of its bun. It’s the first time Donna’s ever seen her without make-up, and she looks much older than her thirty-three years.

Nurse Mendez pulls her head out from under the sheet, nearly falling off her stool in shock.

Donna feels her body cringing, trying to make itself smaller. She doesn’t want this, not now. Not here.

Chief Pittman runs in and grabs Marybeth, holding her tight. “Please, Marybeth. This is a medical room. Let’s talk in my office.”

“Where is she?” Marybeth yells again. “Where’s my Katie?” She snarls and tries to fight her way out of his grip, but the chief has her tight. She collapses against him, her face crumpling into helpless, angry tears. “You left her. You left her behind. Where is she? Please just tell me, where,” And then she can’t speak any more. She leans against Chief Pittman and sobs.

Oh yes, the absence. Part of what her brain has been working so hard not to remember. That she and Rae are here, found, grinning and sobbing and scaring people *in the medical examination room at the Little Hope Police Department*.

But Kat, Kat is still gone.

2. BITTERNESS BARBIE

MARYBETH LARKIN

SATURDAY 21 SEPTEMBER, 1998



Sixty-eight hours since her daughter disappeared, Marybeth stands at her own front door, daring herself to open it. A wild thought has entered her mind, that she can’t seem to shake: that if she doesn’t open the door, Katie might be behind it, curled in her favourite spot, legs up on the window seat, book on her lap. She might look up with a smile, ready to tell her about the latest fact she’s just learned. She might just be there, and everything might be fine, as long as the door stays shut.

There’s shuffling behind her. Marybeth glances over her shoulder. The two officers are squinting at her. The chief said he was sending them back with her to gather evidence from the home, but Marybeth knows what they really are: babysitters. Their job is to keep her far away from Donna Ramirez and Tammy-Rae Hooper so she cannot *grab them* and *shake them* until they tell her what the hell happened to her daughter.

“Key’s sticky,” Marybeth mumbles, turning back to the door. Her very hand resists her. The officer she thinks of as Sergeant Underbite clears her throat. She can’t put this off

forever. Marybeth fills her lungs and swings open the door.

The living room is empty. Empty as a ditch a girl might have fallen into. Empty as a shallow grave dug in a killer's backyard. Empty as a coffin sized for a fifteen-year-old girl.

The cops follow her in. The other one, Sergeant Pockmarks, pulls out a disposable Kodak and snaps a photograph of the living room. It doesn't exactly engender trust, that they can't even afford a digital camera.

"Any messages?" Sergeant Underbite prompts her.

Marybeth walks over to the answering machine and shakes her head.

"The boys will be over later to install a trap and trace," she says, adding a neat tick to the checklist that's clipped to a clipboard. "In case a kidnapper calls," she adds, to Marybeth's blank look.

Marybeth nods. There's too much spit in her mouth, like she's forgetting to swallow. She pulls her upper lip between her teeth and tongues the thin harelip scar that twists up to her nose, an ugly habit she thought she'd kicked long ago.

Pockmarks moves slowly through the room, photographing every corner. He runs out of film in the first camera, and pulls a fresh one from his backpack. Marybeth's eyes flick to the half-eaten chicken sandwich that Polly dropped off last night, abandoned on the coffee table next to the undrunk Slim-Fast shake, unwashed mugs and a mound of crumpled tissues. A better woman would have cleaned up, she thinks, be doing helpful things, keeping it together. A better woman wouldn't have lost her fucking daughter.

"Have you opened or shut these windows?"

"She wasn't taken from the house. The last anyone saw her was at school."

Underbite stares at her blankly, pen poised above her notepad.

Marybeth feels a vein pulse in her throat. "I haven't touched the windows."

"Does Katherine have her own key for the house?"

"Yes."

Another tick on the clipboard. Underbite picks up the notepad by the phone and holds it up to the light, examining the top blank page. "Did you find a note?"

"No."

Tick. "Have you been in contact with her father?"

"He's dead." Underbite can't be older than twenty-five. Too young to remember the scandal it caused when they found Bill's body lying in the living room of his girlfriend's house with three bullet holes in his chest. The cops were about as useful then as they're being now. And exactly as stupid.

Tick. "Are you the only other person who lives in this home?"

"Yes."

Tick. "Do you have a computer in the house?"

"Can't afford one."

Tick. "Have you looked through the home thoroughly?" Underbite reads flatly. "You've checked laundry rooms, the attic, any vehicles that might be parked on the property—"

"Jesus. She's a teenage girl, not a lost wallet." It comes out as a shout.

Both officers flinch and look up at her with wide eyes. Underbite's mouth opens, then closes again.

"Please, Mrs Larkin," says Pockmarks. "We're trying to help."

Marybeth closes her eyes for a second, wishing she could press some kind of button to not be here right now, for this to not be happening. She takes a deep, shuddering breath. "I searched the house on Thursday after we reported her missing. Back when you people were telling me the girls were probably just taking a joyride to the city. She's not here."

Tick. Underbite tucks the list under her arm, sheepish, and goes through to the kitchen.

"Beautiful smile," Pockmarks says, gesturing to the framed photograph above the mantel. The day Katie won Little Miss Golden State.

Marybeth nods. Feeling a surge of pride, despite the circumstances. Not just that Katie was so beautiful, but at all the work they'd put in to make her so. The little tiara perched on perfect blonde curls took a whole can of hairspray and about one hundred bobby pins. The dazzling beauty-queen smile was Vaseline on the teeth, a trick she'd learned from the other pageant moms. The bright eyes were peppermint tea bags chilled in the refrigerator, left on for twenty minutes before the final make-up check. And the fact that she won, that was endless hours in the garage working out choreography, that was Marybeth's detailed notebook tracking the biases of every judge in the state, that was the thousands upon thousands of dollars she'd drained from her bank account because she *knew* Katie was special. A triumph of transformation, living proof that you can be anything you want to be, if you try.

Pockmarks smiles at her gently. "This looks like it was a couple of years ago?"

"Three years. She was thirteen." The last pageant Katie ever won, before she'd unilaterally declared she was retiring and refused to ever be on stage again. Just as she was on the cusp of making the transition from regionals to nationals and the big money. That was it, the end of all their weekends spent together, the end of her childhood.

"Got anything more recent?" He glances over at the collection of framed family photographs arranged underneath the TV, amongst the trophies.

"Maybe in her room," she says. Katie hates photographs, now. She hates a lot of things.

Underbite comes back from the kitchen. "Can you show us?"

Marybeth leads them back to the two bedroom doors at the back of the house, side by side. Hers is open, her bedspread a floral tangle on the floor, the pink sheets ruffled and sweat-stained. The other door is shut tight, like a girl's mouth clamped shut by a man's gloved hand. A small nameplate in the centre

declares it KATIE'S ROOM in patriotic red, white and blue, a peace offering from Katie's grandmother just before she died.

The spit in Marybeth's mouth feels thicker. She swallows it down.

"This is as she left it?"

"Yes. Zach told me not to disturb anything." She can't bear to call him Chief Pittman, he was only a patrol officer when she was married, darkened her front door more than a couple times back then.

Officer Underbite nods, adding another tick to her list. Standing this close, Marybeth notices a nest of blackheads in the crease of her nose. She revises down her age estimate: twenty, twenty-one at best. In a flash of empathy, Marybeth realises that this is probably her first missing child, too. Poor girl probably feels as lost as she does.

The door whines as it swings open. There's the faintest smell of White Musk body spray. Mid-morning light streams into the room, shimmering on the dust motes their entrance has disturbed. Bits of Katie. Bits of her skin and her hair, everywhere.

Pockmarks begins a slow circuit of the room, capturing every inch of it with his camera. Marybeth and Underbite hang back in the doorway.

"Nothing looks out of the ordinary, to you?" Underbite checks with her.

Marybeth shakes her head. The room is just as austere as always. The yellow sponged walls, the single bed, the dresser, the kidney-shaped curtained dressing table Katie uses as a desk. Two small photo frames next to her bed, one with herself and Katie eating ice creams in Bodega Bay, the other with Tammy-Rae and Donna pulling faces at the camera. Miserably bare, for a teenage girl's room. Marybeth had encouraged her to put up some posters, offered to make her a window dressing to match the bedspread. Anything to brighten things up a bit. She'd gotten nothing in response but a shrug and an eye roll.

The only real personality in the room is the bookshelf Bill built for her when she was little, which is crammed tight, books overflowing into teetering piles on either end. The whole top shelf is taken up with Katie's beloved collection of Nancy Drew books.

"What's she like?" Underbite asks.

"Smart. So smart. Top of all her classes. Never in trouble." The other pageant moms called Katie a "package kid".

"Any extramurals?"

"No. She was in a newspaper club for a while, but that stopped a few months ago."

"Friends?"

"Only Tammy-Rae and Donna." Who are sitting at the station right now, while she's here, being asked pointless questions. "It's not that she's shy. Just, always in her head, you know?" This wasn't always true. There was a time they'd been confidants. Katie would come home from elementary school and they'd sit at the kitchen counter drinking juice together, and she'd tell her everything, who her favourite teachers were, who she sat with at recess, every bit of gossip that made it round the schoolyard. A born storyteller, just like her dad. She'd add touches of drama in the retelling, little exaggerations. Scold Marybeth if she looked away, "Ma Bear, listen!". Once, when she was small, Katie had heard someone calling her Marybeth and she'd heard it as "Ma Bear", which sounded right to her, because bears were big and strong and they could protect you from forest fires. Fires had been little Katie's greatest fear since she heard about how her aunt and uncle's house burned down in a grease fire back in '89.

Where did she go, that little girl who shared everything with her? When did she begin to tuck herself away? Logically, she knows this is probably a normal part of teenagehood. But it still *hurts*. It didn't matter how hard she tried to be different to her own mother, to never be cold and scolding, Katie pulled

away anyway, a thousand thousand small retreats. And now she's gone, completely.

Pockmarks completes his catalogue of the room and waves them in. Underbite pulls an evidence bag from her jacket and starts rummaging through the clutter on the nightstand. She bags a hairbrush and the retainer that stops Katie from grinding her teeth.

"She needs those," Marybeth says, reflexively.

"I understand, ma'am," says Underbite, in the kind of singsong you'd use to calm a horse. "But we need to take samples of DNA, fingerprints, teeth impressions. That will help us to find her."

But that doesn't make sense, does it? An image flashes in Marybeth's mind. A body, lying on a cold metal table in a morgue. They don't need these things to find Katie; they need them in case they have to identify her body.

She retreats to the corner of the room, feeling conscious of the stupid cartoon pyjamas she's still wearing, tonguing the scar on her lip, watching as Underbite bags up and seals and violates Katie's things. A cold fury rises in her. They could have done all of this on Thursday morning, when she and Estelle Hooper marched into the police department saying their daughters were missing. They could have sent out helicopters. They could have called the FBI. They could have *responded*, goddamn it, instead of making her feel like she was being hysterical and overreacting to three teenage girls who'd probably taken a trip up to the city, or were sleeping off a hangover in one of the empty warehouses in Eastside. And no matter how many times she told them her daughter was a good kid, and she would *never* worry her mother like this, they placated and nodded and soothed her and did *fuck-all*. Did a cursory search around town. Spoke to some teachers. Told her to put up posters if she needed something to do.

Until this morning, when the other two came back covered in bruises and naked as the day they were born, staggering out

of the woods, and they couldn't dismiss her any more.

And all she can think of is how many hours they've lost. She's counted every single one, each wasted moment. If only that English teacher had realised they weren't in class *one hour* after they skipped out of lunch on Wednesday. If only Estelle Horseface Hooper had thought to check that the girls were actually in her basement after she got home late from that church meeting, they might have realised *nine hours* later. If only Zachary Toilet-Brush-Moustache Pittman had just taken them seriously when she and Estelle told him the girls hadn't shown up for breakfast, *seventeen hours* later. If only *any one* of these supposed adults had actually looked after the children who were in their care she wouldn't be standing here, *sixty-eight hours* after her daughter went missing, watching a police officer pull the sheet off Katie's bed and stuff it into an evidence bag.

"The K9 unit can get her smell off of it," Pockmarks says quietly, sidling up to her. "They're sending a team up from the city to start searching the woods."

Marybeth nods, afraid that if she opens her mouth she'll scream.

Underbite adds the sheet to the growing pile of evidence bags in the corner of the room. She asks Marybeth to check the closet, to see if anything is missing.

"The girls have a movie night every Wednesday at the Hoopers'. She'd have taken a set of pyjamas. A change of clothing. Her toothbrush. They'd be in her school bag." They go through the closet together, Pockmarks prompting her to be sure that nothing else is gone. Everything's there, every single one of the awful flannel men's shirts she's taken to wearing recently. Marybeth can't help but feel a rush of shame, on her daughter's behalf, at how huge each one is.

Underbite finally seems to be coming to the end of her list. "Was your daughter taking any medications?"

"Nothing important."

Underbite waits, pen poised above the notepad.

"Diet pills," Marybeth confesses. She doesn't mention that Katie doesn't know she's taking diet pills. Marybeth crushes them up and adds them to her orange juice in the morning. She has no other choice. They've already tried the Ornish diet, the Zone, Jazzercise, but Katie keeps finding ways to sabotage herself. Katie calls her shallow, says things like "I'd rather be pretty on the inside", like politics will protect her. She's got no idea how cruel people can be. But this is what mothers do: they hide the ugliness of the world from their children, so they can believe in goodness for just a little while longer.

Underbite frowns and makes a note. "Did she keep a planner? A diary? Anything like that?"

"She has a journal. Thick. Black leather cover. She's always scribbling in it." Marybeth crosses her arms. "It must be here somewhere."

Pockmarks and Underbite glance at each other. She knows what they're thinking: that's exactly the kind of thing a girl running away from home would think to pack. She has to bite her lip again to keep from snapping at them.

"She might have taken it to school," Marybeth adds.

But they've already turned from her and are searching for it. Pockmarks opens the top drawer in the desk and pulls out a bright orange square of plastic cut into puzzle pieces. The pieces seem half-glued together, shrivelled. He holds it up to her in a silent question.

"No idea," Marybeth responds.

Underbite crouches by the bookshelf and starts going through the books one by one, tipping each one forwards to peer behind it. It's terrible, seeing them here, in this room she knows as intimately as she knows her own daughter's face. And it's all pointless, isn't it? There are no answers here. The answers are sitting in the police station right now, both of them, telling the chief what happened to Katie. And she has to

stand here and wait until they decide what to tell her.

She walks over to the window, staring out at the peach tree in their front yard. It's heavy with fruit. She pictures them rotting on the branches, worms crawling through soft flesh.

"Your daughter was a smoker?" says Pockmarks from the floor.

It's the last straw. She turns to him to tell him to fuck off and get out of her house instead of insulting her daughter, only to see him holding a half-empty package of Marlboro Reds. The words die in her mouth.

He shows her where he found it. It's the hardcover copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* that Katie read for freshman English. The pages have been hollowed out, the remaining edges glued together. A secret storage box.

More than the cigarettes, the thing Marybeth is most surprised about is that Katie would ever mutilate a book like this. She's seen her pick up old books at the Salvation Army and sniff them.

"Teenagers keep secrets, Mrs Larkin," Pockmarks says gently. "Trust me, I've got three of my own." He pulls out a white plastic rod the length of his hand. A pregnancy test. Unused. "Do you know if she had a boyfriend?"

Marybeth shakes her head, feeling her scar tingling from how much she's chewed on it.

Underbite takes the book from him and scratches a finger into the hollow. She pulls out a piece of paper, folded up so that the corner tucks into one of the folds, a neat little envelope. Her eyebrows shoot up as she unfolds it. "And this?" She holds it up to Marybeth.

It's a five-pointed star, drawn in thick marker, crudely occult-looking, a rust-coloured splodge in the corner. At the centre of the star is a bird, like a crow, holding up its middle finger.

"Can you tell me what this is?"

Marybeth can't. In fact, for the first time, she's confronting the idea that maybe she doesn't know who her daughter is, at all.

3. YES IT'S FUCKING POLITICAL

KATHERINE LARKIN

SUNDAY 8 OCTOBER, 1995



Dear Diary,

Wait, sorry, that's too familiar of me. We've never formally met. Hello, Diary. I'm Kat Larkin. Or Kate Larkin, or Katherine Larkin, or Ma Bear's Little Katie Cub, depending on who you ask. Never Kathy, thank goat. Pleased to make your acquaintance.

I always thought that directly addressing a diary was one of those made-up things people do on TV, but Donna and Rae have both been out of town all weekend and I'm so bored I'm TALKING TO A BOOK, apparently. That's just the level of excitement you can expect from Little Hope. Like, you can't even turn the town's name into a joke, it's already LITTLE HOPE, c'mon.

It's 1995, and a new millennium is coming, and all the magazines talk about how we're living in the future, and girls have the power now and we can be anything, and capitalism won the Cold War and the whole world's just going to get *better and better* until we all get spaceships and we're all connected by the World Wide Web into one big master brain

that spans the whole world (unless, you know, the planet gets fried from the hole in the ozone layer but HEY let's not talk about THAT). It's 90s energy baby!

Except all of that feels like it's happening elsewhere, to other people. Here in Little Hope we might as well be stuck in the 1890s. This whole stupid town is like a gold rush theme park even though everyone knows there was never actually any gold here. But still, we put on a mock gunfight in the town square every Saturday to keep the tourists stopping by for a couple of hours before they head on to Tahoe. It's basically the only industry left since all the factories closed in the recession. Come for the gold rush museum, stay for the alcoholism and ennui!

Only three people I know actually have a computer in their house (one of them's Rae, but her brother barely ever lets her touch it). No, here in Little Hope, girls still have to take home ec and boys get to take shop. Donna tried getting into shop, saying her dad taught her to wield a hammer better than any of the pipsqueak boys in our school, but HA HA HA, like that was ever going to happen. We get movies two years after they come out everywhere else (if ever). We have one CD shop and they have a single rack of what the owner Mr Walker calls "that grungy music" and everything else is golden oldies and pop. Donna has to get her grrrl punk tapes on mail order from Olympia, and it costs her a damn fortune. Here in Little Hope, the most thrilling change the 90s has brought us is a new portrait centre at the JCPenney's.

Even our library's filled with books about the past: pioneer days, the glories of the civil war, the transcontinental railroad, but I've been waiting for a YEAR for them to stock the new Anne Rice. It's for Rae, she makes me take them out on my library card and then she only reads them at my house. Vampires are on the long list of Forbidden Demonic Things banned in the Hooper household, a list that includes *The X-Files*, "homosexuals", spaghetti-strap tops, discussions about stem

cells, Judy Blume, *Aladdin*, *The Simpsons* and, for some reason that continues to baffle us all, Cabbage Patch dolls.

That dirtbag Fred Stein once tried to throw a "rave" at the old bottling factory. He said he'd managed to get some ecstasy from his brother who goes to college in Oakland, but they turned out to be caffeine pills (April Hollister recognised them, her dad's a long-haul driver). So everyone just got super buzzed on caffeine and danced around to a beatbox playing terrible club music until we were all too wired and were struck with the urge to go do something productive like homework. Some rave.

Here in Little Hope, it feels like the greatest decade in history is happening, and it's passing us by.

It's like one time I asked Ma Bear whether she was a hippie in the 70s, and she blinked and said, "No, all the hippies were in San Francisco." Jeez. Imagine being alive during Woodstock and the civil rights movement and thinking, *You know what, I think I'll just stay in my small town, thanks, and watch a lot of television.*

I really don't understand any adult who chooses to live here. But then, adults are a total mystery to me in general. It's like something happens to you when you turn twenty-five where your whole personality is sucked out of you and replaced with a sudden obsession with real-estate prices and decor from Crate & Barrel. Like you actually become a different person.

It sucks that one day when people ask me what it was like to live through a new millennium, I'll have to say, "I don't know. I wasn't really there."

Sometimes I think if Rae and Donna and I hadn't found each other, we'd be dead. Dead inside, anyway. The three of us should never have become friends. Like, in what universe would you have ever looked at us: a wannabe rebel, a preppy church girl and a wallflower nerd and thought, OH SURE, those three are going to be best friends and change each other's lives forever. But that's what happened.

It wouldn't have worked with any two of us alone. Without

Donna around, Rae and I just spend hours ranting about how awful and plastic and ruined the world is. When it's just me and Donna, I always feel kind of slow-witted and dull. And Donna and Rae, jeesh. Within five minutes they're bickering and in ten minutes they've basically dropped emotional napalm all over each other. One time they had a fight about *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* that somehow ended with Donna throwing a milkshake over her in the middle of the cafeteria.

But together, something magic happens. Any two of us are dangerous, volatile. But as three, we balance out each other, make up for our worst excesses. Maybe that's why three is always the magic number. Three witches. Three fates. The holy trinity. Body, mind, spirit. Donna, Rae and me.

We'd known each other for years without ever really KNOWING each other, y'know? I mean, there is exactly one high school in the vast metropolis of Little Hope, California, population 8,902, so obviously we'd met. But the first time I remember actually speaking to either of them was at the inaugural meeting of a school newspaper club Rae was trying to start. Donna and I were the only two people lame enough to show up. Donna because the guidance counsellor said she had to; me because I was sick of spending every lunch break hiding in the music room with Kylie Cochrane, who's obsessed with John Stamos and would spend endless hours talking me through magazine cut-outs she'd compiled in her Stamos Scrapbook.

We were all pretty apprehensive of each other, sitting there in Mrs Green's classroom last period. I thought Donna was a poser, with her Courtney Love-imitation smeared lipstick and hand-painted rip-off Babes in Toyland T-shirt (Donna would cut off and sell any part of her body for a real one, but it's not exactly the kind of thing they sell at the Sears in Sacramento). I'd pegged Rae as an annoying suck-up: star of the athletics team, Christian youth leader, Perfect American Girl. And I guess they both thought I was a dork probably (eh, who am I

kidding, they never thought about me at all).

But then Donna pitched a super-smart story about how we should investigate which local stores sell things made in sweatshops, and Rae confessed that her main interest in starting the newspaper club was to have an excuse to skip her Wednesday after-school Bible study group, so she didn't really give a shit what we wrote about, and then the three of us started making jokes about how awful *The Catcher in the Rye* was (which we were being forced to read for English) and how if a girl had been as whiny and entitled as Holden Caulfield, no one would ever have thought it was worth writing a book about, and by the end of that hour that was it, we were friends.

Sometimes I wonder if our friendship would have meant so much to us if we'd lived in anywhere more interesting than Little Hope. That's the real thing that binds us together: all of us are determined not to be anything like the drones that live in this town. We want bigger lives than anything that's on offer here. I'll be a writer, scientist, gentlewoman scholar, Donna will be an actual rock star, and Rae's going to run for governor and single-handedly fix the hole in the ozone layer. We're going to get the hell out of here, the moment we can, and then our lives can finally begin.

Until then, the three of us keep each other sane by being our own 90s experience. We MAKE it happen for ourselves. We can't join raves and revolutions. But we can foment our own quiet revolution right here. A revolution of three.

Anyway, Diary, it's nice to make your acquaintance.

Your new friend,
Kat

FACT I LEARNED TODAY: Ecstasy was invented in 1912! Now I'm imagining what Theodore Roosevelt would be like at a rave.



THE LEGENDARY LOST MINE OF LITTLE HOPE

Welcome, treasure seekers! You are not the first to pursue your fortune amongst these hills. From the auspicious day in 1848 when James Wilson Marshall found those first shimmering flakes in Sutter's Mill, igniting the California Gold Rush, prospectors have swarmed these hills and valleys in search of riches. The desire for gold was so great that it motivated men and women to endure unbelievable hardships, including starvation, scurvy, dehydration and even death!

However, not all newcomers were interested in gathering their share of wealth by such back-breaking labour. One such man was our town's founder Edward Mullins. Possessed of a keen eye for opportunity and a silver tongue, he found success and notoriety as a frontier gambler in Sutter's Mill.

In 1851, he won the deed to a supposedly gold-rich plot of land in a game of chuck-a-luck (a game of chance played with three dice). Looking to leverage his new acquisition into a fortune, he began the arduous journey south-east towards the location of the plot in Hope Creek, El Dorado County. Before departing, Mullins loudly proclaimed, "By God's blessed hand, I shall become a rich man, or leave my bones in Hope Creek."

confessed that her main interest was to have an excuse to skip her Wednesday after-school Bible study group, so she didn't really give a shit what we wrote about, and then the three of us started making jokes about how awful The Catcher in the Rye was (which we were being forced to read for English) and how if a girl had

Part of the tale is recorded on scraps of a letter he wrote to his brother, Zebediah Mullins: "My heart beat violently at the sight of the yellow flecks gleaming in the black fractured rock. Gold! Laughing aloud I held up gleaming specimen after gleaming specimen."

He marked the entrance to the cave with three X's carved into the rock face. Filling his pockets with as many nuggets as he could carry, he set off to Hope Creek where an expert pronounced them pure gold. Thereafter, whenever his funds ran low it is said he'd disappear into the wilderness and return with a small fortune in nuggets. Always the opportunist, he traded tales of the mine for liquor and on more than one occasion promised to guide gullible gold seekers to his legendary mine (for a sizable fee, of course). Rumour has it that he'd usually abandon them about the same time the liquor or money ran out.

Edward Mullins mysteriously disappeared in 1854, taking the location of the Hope Creek mine with him. Theories include a deal gone sour, Apaches and even UFO abduction.

Over the years, news quickly spread of the motherlode at Hope Creek mine, helped in no small part by Edward Mullins's loose tongue. Many hoped the surrounding mountains, rivers and hills would surrender a similar fortune in gold. But they did not: prospectors tried in vain to locate Mullins's now-legendary mine. Regardless, by 1856, Hope Creek had become the fifth largest town in El Dorado County.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dale and Sam are best friends and horror dorks who collaborated on a short story called ‘This Book Will Find You’ (along with our third best friend, Lauren Beukes, who IS NOT missing in the woods, we promise) which is now being developed as a TV series.

Dale Halvorsen co-created the *Vertigo* Comics horror series *Survivors’ Club*, along with Lauren Beukes and Ryan Kelly. He collaborated with Lauren and Carlos Ezquerro on the one-shot *Durham Red and Strontium Dog* comic for *2000AD* and *CHUM* in *Strange Sports Stories* for *DC Comics*. He is also an international award-winning book cover designer, graphic designer, and illustrator. He cannot remember loved ones’ birthdays, but he can embarrassingly recall horror movie run times, facts like Count Orlock blinks only once in *Nosferatu* and the voice of *Scream’s* Ghost Face Roger L. Jackson is the voice of Mojo Jojo in *The Powerpuff Girls*. Proudly autistic. He lives in Cape Town, South Africa.

Sam Beckbessinger is the bestselling author of *Manage Your Money Like a Fucking Grownup*. Her interactive story about climate change, *Survive the Century*, was featured in *New Scientist* and *Gizmodo*, and she was one of the writers on *Realm* and Marvel's *Jessica Jones: Playing With Fire* serialised novel. She teaches creative writing at Bath Spa University, writes kids' TV, and is weirdly obsessed with spreadsheets. She grew up on a farm near Durban, South Africa (where she had a pet donkey named Mr Mago) but now lives in London.

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