



My Perfect Silence

PENELOPE EVANS

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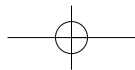
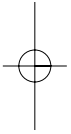
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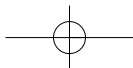
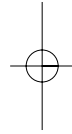
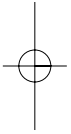
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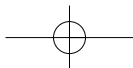
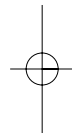
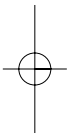
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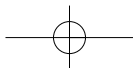
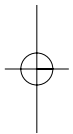
For the Amersham Adult Orchestra





Part One





Chapter One

I WAS FOUR WHEN I KILLED MY BABY BROTHER.

I don't remember it but I feel as if I was there. The baby; small, balled fists just visible above the sides of the cot. The banana I happened to be eating at the time. A sweet sponginess to fill his cheeks. Why not? I liked sharing. I liked having a baby brother, not being the youngest anymore.

I gave him my banana. Kindly, patiently, pushed it down into his throat like a mother bird with a big stiff worm. All of it. The fists fell back into the cot with contentment. Or something.

I'm told by the time Max ran in it was too late. He shouted for my mother, then stood mutely pointing. The banana peel was spread out over the baby's cheeks like a big star shaped flower. Under the skin the baby was blue, not there anymore, not really.

I *seem* to remember looking at her – and wondering what all the fuss was about. She still had us, Max and me. I could be the baby again.

Or do I imagine that too?

Sometimes I imagine it completely different. No generous impulse on my part, just a baby bawling; and me, an infant crosspatch, still wanting to be the baby myself. Cramming the fruit into the noisy pink gap, stopping the din like a cork in a

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bottle. A child with an answer for everything. That's what they used to say about me, even when I was four. Old enough to know what I was doing.

Except I didn't know. And all I have left is imagination. Because I don't remember anything – except for how everything changed.

Only Max stayed the same. Beautiful Max, my big brother. He never changed. And this I do remember, better than anything in my life. I remember how my brother wrapped his hand around mine, and held it tight. He's been holding it ever since, in a manner of speaking.

Everything else has vanished – even the taste of bananas. All that's left is a vague impression of sweetness. Twenty-five years ago now.

Max was going to be married next week, in his own church with his own congregation all around him. And cameras. Caroline – his bride, his chosen one – had chosen her dress, all sleek lines, long and lean and sophisticated as Caroline herself. I was there when she tried it on. She would have made a beautiful bride. She was beautiful anyway, and clever. And famous. That's why he loved her. Not because she was famous of course – Max is already famous – and not for the reason Caroline was, for talking to famous people on the TV, for finding out their secrets. I mean he loved her because she was beautiful and clever. And I suppose she loved him for the same reasons. Because Max too is beautiful and clever. And famous.

Now he's more famous than ever. A few days ago, Caroline had her head caved in, right on her own doorstep. They found her bleeding, blood dripping down the black painted railings with their shiny brass knobs that everyone has around there,

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and above them the steps that raised you up to the front door. Five of them.

I was there when it happened. So now they think I did it. The police, I mean. When they found me, Max was washing my hands, sluicing and rinsing. Then he showed them to the police and they were clean. But they had already seen it, the swirl of pink disappearing with the water.

And what can I say? Kill once, kill twice. I don't remember anything about the first time. So what can I say about the second time? Forget once. Forget twice.

'Poor Rosie.'

That's what my father said when the baby died. Struggling to see past the tragedy, to what else had been lost. A big man, big as a bear. A bear who reached out to my mother and said, 'Let's love what we have left.'

Poor Rosie? At the mention of my name, I saw her shudder. At the mention of *love* she turned away. All babies belong to the mothers. She couldn't see past anything. Only the cot, empty now. *Poor Rosie*...nothing. She shook off his hand and stumbled away into another room, with that new heaviness in her step.

We watched it happen, Max and me, peeping through the gap in the banister. At *poor Rosie*, Max's hand went to touch mine. And as she turned away, the touch became a squeeze. Only six himself, but so much older than me even then. We watched my father sigh, square his shoulders and prepare to follow my mother wherever it was she went. As if it was his duty.

Let's love what we have left. That's what he said.

I must have stirred, ready to run downstairs after him,

make him tell me it was all right, and it was enough just to have said I was sorry, like the times I shouted for more ice cream, or kicked my grandmother as she tried to brush my hair. It always had ended up the same way before, with hugs and kisses and chuckles of *Rosie Posie*.

But Max knew. He pulled me away from the stairs, halting the downward tilt.

Rosie, not now. Come with me. Come with me and I'll...I'll build you a den.

I would have caught my breath at that. Max built such incredible dens. He would pile the furniture and boxes together, cover them with curtains, with spaces for windows and a proper place for a door. He'd spend a whole morning building one, then finally crawl inside – alone. These dens had always been for him, somewhere for him to sit, away from the world. I never even used to be allowed inside. I would hover by the door, breathe down the chimneys like a baby wolf, peering in, looking for the glimmer of his head in the dark.

Go away, Rosie. That's all he would ever say. Until now. And now he was offering to build a den for me. All for me.

So I jumped up to go with Max. But at the bottom of the stairs I saw my father, not gone yet. He had paused, was looking up to where I was. He must have heard a sound.

Rosie?

Was it my imagination or did I, still invisible behind the banister, see my name form itself on his lips? I hesitated, feeling a tug towards him, drawn to him as if he was doing the pulling. And I almost went, following the draw, down to my father big-as-a-bear.

But Max pulled my arm, gently, insistently. *Not now Rosie. Come with me. Stay with me.*

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So I went with Max and he built me a den, better than any one I'd ever seen, with a throne made out of piled-up magazines. And Max read to me from one of his own books. In the confines of the den, he seemed so big, bigger even than my father. And I forgot that I had wanted to go downstairs. If you forget so much else, you come back to what you do remember. And I keep coming back to Max and me, sitting between the walls he had built just for me.

But sometimes I wonder. What if I had carried on downstairs after all? Would it have changed the way *she* looked at me, if I had caught her then? If I had said something different, if I had said anything at all? Could I have changed anything?

It was – how long? – a week after I had killed the baby. Somewhere in that time they must have had a funeral. A short sharp private affair, it would have been, jagged with grief, to which we were not invited. A week? Maybe it was the same day. Or maybe it was a year, two years later. You remember things in different ways when you are little – if you remember at all.

Whenever it happened, I remember this: the way my mother pulled away at the mention of my name. And I remember Max, holding my hand before he let go to build me a wall.

No one in the family ever mentioned the baby again. But he was always there, growing up beside us. Always in the shadows where I had cast him, those shadows where they all go, the people who vanish for all the different reasons. They might not be visible anymore, but they're there forever now, in the empty spaces between ourselves.

Like Caroline. Who would have been a bride next week. Who is also dead.

The police will be back to ask me more questions soon. This time they will want to make sure Max is somewhere else. He keeps too close to me, interrupts when they try to ask me questions. They want to know what I was doing at the house when she died, and he's stopped them finding out even that.

Max. He tries so hard to protect me. He can't stop trying, even now. Still building his walls, keeping me safe.

Right from the start, my mother must have turned, to discover that she was hardly a mother anymore. No baby and two children who might just as well have been one child, that's how close they were now.

Things change when a child dies. Obviously. A world splits down the middle and becomes two worlds – Before and After.

Things I remember from Before: my mother growing plumper as the pregnancy progressed. Slower as the baby grew inside her. Noisier, when finally she found it easier to shout than to run after us. My mother laughing because she couldn't see her toes; or eating strawberries in the sun. Kneeling as she tucked me in at night, whispering how she'd love to stay and fall asleep beside me there. Just she and me and the baby inside her. The three of us. Not even Max allowed in.

Other things I remember from Before: my father throwing me up in the air, allowing the world to turn a full three circles before he caught me. Tickling my tummy until I could hardly breathe for laughing. My father eating pastry I had shaped into ducks whose necks had drooped in the oven turning them into fat dying swans. Delicious, *schmecklich*, *delicieux*. He

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travelled abroad, and could thank waiters in any number of languages.

Things I *don't* remember from Before: Max. Strange – how I barely remember Max. It's only his dens I seem to recall, with his head gleaming inside, just visible in the gloom. Max not wanting to have anything to do with me. Max, trailing instead after my mother, trying to have her to himself, all himself. Small chance with me around – and no chance at all once the baby came along. I think he must have built his dens to get away from me.

So. Memories of what came After: my mother, not plump anymore, trying to force the softness back into her lips as she kissed me goodnight. The cake stiff with roses and ballerinas she made for my fifth birthday, icing hard and shining as marble. My mother folding away baby clothes into a bag.

And my father. Still throwing me in the air. Still tickling me in front of the fire. But in his eyes a certain dreaminess as I try to catch his glance. He has tossed me so high above his head. What if he forgets to catch me? What if he tickles me so hard I die for lack of breath? *What if that's the plan?*

And Max. *Now* I remember Max, days filled with him. Six-, seven-, nine-year-old Max. Shining at twelve where other boys begin to fade. At fourteen, hair falling into his eyes as he watches out for me. Never so far ahead, never so busy that he can't turn to check I'm there. I remember Max better than I can remember myself – the scraps of me I saw in the mirror. Small and skinny with coarse yellow hair. Like Max but scrawnier, not quite properly put together.

Meanwhile my parents recede – still there, but coming alive only from a distance. People I'd have liked to know better. And already beginning to forget the taste of bananas. Only

the memory of sweetness, fading to the memory of a memory.

At nine I went away to school – far away, so that boarding meant a stretch from one holiday’s end to the next, and it made no sense to come home even for the occasional weekend. Max’s school was closer, and for a long time no one told me he was coming back at weekends, every weekend.

Does that sound sad? It’s absolutely and completely not meant to. I *liked* school. Loved it. Even though Max wasn’t there. I liked the way the nuns treated every one of us the same – cool, almost sad in the way they called us quietly to attention. As if each little girl reminded them faintly of sins left behind.

Something strange happened the first day I arrived. I looked around at the other children – small, miserable creatures who’d left their mummies and daddies in Africa or Singapore or wherever – and I must have realised there was nothing here I needed to compare myself with. We were in the same boat, every one of us – *all* of our parents were absent. That night, little girls sobbed into their pillows and whispered it was because their mummies weren’t there to kiss them goodnight. But they might have been making it all up for all I knew. They might not even have had parents at all. If someone isn’t there, you can’t question if they exist or not. You can say anything, imagine anything. And they didn’t know about me, what I had done. It was nobody’s business except mine.

I pulled the covers up to my chin, listened to the muffled sobs around me – and imagined my parents. Within minutes I was sobbing, loudly as the rest. Warmth flooded the surface of my pillow. A lovely, nostalgic warmth. At home, in the World-that-came-After, my mother could rarely bring herself

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to kiss me. But here I could imagine it happened every night. And, finally, when little by little the sobbing around me stopped, I snuggled down happily, like a child used to kisses.

Next day a letter arrived from her. Long and loving, warmth pouring off the page, love like I remembered. The same thing happened the next week, and the week after and all the months and years that came after. Easier for her now I wasn't there. Somehow school had given me back my mother.

So I loved school. Loved it. Right up until the day I discovered that I was wrong; they knew all about me, even here.

I'd always thought my parents had kept it secret. No one's business but our own. I didn't understand the truth: when you're a child who kills another child, it's everybody's business.

There was another truth as well, and this was a larger one, making every other truth insignificant. It had been there all the time, staring at me out of my mother's eyes, and still somehow they had kept it from me, my mother and father. Struggled and toiled every day to keep it from me.

Fourteen years old and I was alone in the gym, on my hands and knees, searching. In a hurry because the next class were already changing into gym knickers and were about to troop in. Too late, though, for here were two girls already picking their way over the rubber mats in their gym shoes. In a small school, these two – Mary and Margi – already had a reputation. They picked on other girls – on any girl – so long as she was alone.

'What are you doing?' This was Mary. She was younger than me, although her breasts were already plumping out her

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Aertex blouse. Her face was dotted with matt patches, not quite skin colour, where she had daubed herself with spot concealer.

‘Looking for something.’ I kept my head down, sensing the boredom in them, the desire to make something happen.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

They nudged each other, and watched me as I went on searching beneath the ropes. I was wishing the rest of their class would arrive, but they must have been held up. Perhaps Sister Imelda was having a foot inspection.

There was a giggle behind me.

‘Look what I’ve got.’ Mary was holding up an object that dangled silkily from her hand. A bracelet.

‘That’s mine. That’s what I was looking for.’ I spoke before I could stop myself. Too eager.

‘Can’t be. You weren’t looking for anything, remember.’

‘I was looking for that.’ I tried to keep my voice cool, the way Max’s voice would have been cool. Max was always cool in a crisis.

Margi was triumphant. ‘Then you’re a liar. We asked you and you said *nothing*.’

Mary began to slip the bracelet over her wrist, admiring it while Margi leered at me.

That bracelet. My mother had given in to me for my last birthday. Passed it across the breakfast table with a quick, tight smile. Always a different mother from the letters, and yet still the same mother. Something understood.

My mother. My bracelet. I made a grab for it, and when Mary dodged, I sprang after her. As she laughed at me, Margi grabbed me from behind, held on to me, sharp nails digging

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into the skin on my arms. Never mind that she was younger than me, she was much taller – almost everybody was – and strong. It would have taken an adult to haul her off.

Safe now, Mary stepped nearer. Smirking, she shook her wrist inches from my face. The bracelet slid down her arm as if trying to find its way back to me. And before I could think what I was doing, I snapped my head forward, catching the arm and the bracelet with my teeth. Mary squealed.

There was a taste of silver, of metal threaded across my tongue – then something else altogether. Warm flesh, slightly salty, like you'd imagine the skin on a young live pig. Margi's hands pinning my arms injected their nails deeper into me, and goaded, I let my teeth sink, through the salty pink-pig skin.

Mary squealed even louder. Squealed and squealed as if I was killing her.

'Rosie Bryant!'

Sister Imelda's voice bounced off the gym walls. And even then I couldn't seem to let go. My jaws had locked around Mary's arm and I was hypnotised by the taste of flesh and silver.

A hand cuffed me across the head, finally breaking the grip of my teeth.

'Rose Bryant, you will come with me.'

I had a last glimpse of Mary staring in what looked like disbelief at her arm before Sister Imelda thrust me into a side room, so hard I knocked over a chair. I picked it up and faced her.

'She's got my bracelet.' Once again my voice was cool. Here was Max coming out in me yet again. Calm, concentrating on the facts. A child with an answer for everything. They still called me that.

Sister Imelda, her face a sallow wedge beneath her wimple,

ignored this. 'Have you been inoculated against tetanus?'

'What?' I must have sounded insolent in my surprise.

'I said – have you been inoculated against tetanus? It's another name for lockjaw. We'll have to inject the poor child against that, on top of what you've done to her.'

Lockjaw. So that's what had happened. My jaws had locked around Mary's arm. That's why I couldn't stop. I was amazed there was a term for it.

And as I gaped, she leant forward and wiped something off my chin with a paper handkerchief she had taken from up her sleeve. 'Mother of God,' she muttered with a look of disgust. It was blood.

Mutely she showed me the hanky, and something went cold inside me, making me forget about lockjaw. I had another person's blood smeared on my face. Worse than snot, worse than spit, worse than anything.

I said, 'She deserved it.'

Sister Imelda's face hardened. Everyone knew she liked Mary, named for the mother of God, a girl who could produce real tears every time she took the sacrament. Never mind that she had tasted of pig. Sister Imelda began to talk, in a low voice, as if to herself. 'To think I never believed it. Not a five-year-old – that's what I said to the Reverend Mother when she told me. A five-year-old wouldn't hurt a fly. Or surely not a baby. Not something so small.'

I felt for the chair I had just righted. I needed support, like one of the old nuns we'd see shuffling on Zimmer frames in the walled garden behind the tennis courts, the ones who were in retreat. 'Gaga', some people said.

'I was four, not five.' My voice sounded faint. Almost a whisper.

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Again Sister Imelda ignored me. 'What sort of girl are you? Killing one child. Savaging another, biting like an animal.'

I opened my mouth to explain about the baby, the banana and everything. But it was something I had never had to do before: explain. And I couldn't start now.

'Well?' said Sister Imelda. 'Well?'

'They shouldn't have told you,' I said at last. My voice was cold, matter-of-fact. 'Not about the baby.'

I saw Sister Imelda give a start. 'And what can you mean by that?'

'It was none of your business. It was nobody's business. I don't know why they told you. *It's not fair.*' The last words said it all, the consequence of the anger building inside me. Not fair that my parents had told them. Not fair that others knew. Not fair I had to be different here, the one place I thought everyone was the same.

Yet what had I said? There was a look on Sister Imelda's face I had never seen before – almost comical, making her look like the child she might once have been, before God and Jesus smoothed over her features. A sharp-faced child who had turned over a stone to discover all kinds of evil things beneath.

Finding her voice she said: 'Get out. I'll deal with this later.'

Next day I went and stood before the Reverend Mother. Sister Imelda spoke in front of me and her account was faultless, dry and factual as if she was in court. She didn't try to make anything sound worse than it was, and yet each word seemed to settle on the word that went before, until something entirely new was created, different from the truth; layered and hardening to a picture set in stone. Mother Martha listened to my explanation about the bracelet, and

asked me if I was happy at the school, whether I liked the people who were around me.

‘Yes,’ I said fervently. ‘I like everything. I love school.’

I saw her weigh another question, then decide against it. Instead she picked something she had on the desk in front of her. ‘Rosie, I want you to take this. Keep it with you.’

I glanced down at what she was giving me. It was a picture of the Virgin Mary staring into the crib that held the baby Jesus, the sort of picture you’d see on a Christmas card. We had the same kind of pictures to keep the pages of our books.

The Reverend Mother sat back and folded her hands, studied the wedding ring on her finger. There was silence now. Apparently the interview was over, which confused me. I had been expecting a punishment. Detention, worse even. I darted a glance at Imelda and found she was watching the Reverend Mother, her mouth twitching as if she too was expecting something else. Moments passed, until she couldn’t stand it anymore. Loudly, she cleared her throat.

Mother Martha sighed. She looked at me, her face expressionless. ‘Rose, I want you to carry the picture with you always. And look at it. Meditate on it when you are alone. See the way the blessed mother observes her child. We call her the mother of God. Yet sometimes we would do well to remember that she is also the mother of a son.’

And that was all. They wanted me to look at a picture. Not even a very good one. Mawkish, is how Max would have described it. Mary was pictured as if she were on the edge of fainting with adoration, in thrall to her child – who for his part was barely visible except for the small, balled fists waving above the sides of the stall.

I nodded. And for days and weeks did what they told me; I

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kept the picture with me all the time. It was there when I emptied my pockets. It fell on to the floor whenever I reached for a handkerchief. It got covered with crumbs and smeared with butter. I must have looked at it ten times a day without even realising it.

It became crumpled. So much so that, two weeks before term ended I dared to take it out of my pocket to leave it by the side of my bed. Apart from the wrinkles and the grease it looked the same as ever. A tableau of swooning mother love.

About to turn away, I caught sight yet again of the small, balled fists, barely visible above the sides of the cot. And this time, without warning, something began to shake inside me. I had to hold on to my bedside table, ignorant of what was happening to me. I felt like a wall caught in an earthquake as the ground moved, deep and invisible, beneath me. I gripped the table hard. And there was the picture.

Then I understood. It was the picture, its mawkishness a lesson, a weapon. Small, balled fists, and Mary's face, full of hopeless love, knowing what she was going to lose.

And like a wall, I collapsed. It didn't matter that I didn't remember, that I had never meant to harm anything. I collapsed because at long last I understood what I was. I was the child who had killed a child. I had taken a life, as precious as my own life. Complete knowledge – this is what my parents had tried to keep from me, to keep me from understanding. And a child was what I had taken from my mother.

If Sister Imelda asked me now what I had to say for myself, I would have to be silent. There was nothing I could say. No defence. No explanation. And no question of fairness.

Nothing.

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That was the day, the hour and the moment I stopped speaking, the child who had had an answer for everything. Not another word. What else could I do?

Did they see it as a job well done, the nuns who had made it their business to make me understand?

They called a doctor, but he couldn't make me speak. *I* couldn't make me speak. He asked me questions and listened to the silence, and made of it what he could. He was worse off than those doctors from the olden days, who had no stethoscopes to help them, no X-rays or scanners to show what's going on inside.

He needed me to speak to give him a clue. And I had nothing to say. Not now I understood, finally knew what I was.