

CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNER

SARAH CROSSAN



MOONRISE

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BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

THE FIRST CALL

The green phone
on the wall in the hall
hardly ever rang.
Anyone who wanted to speak to Mom called her cell.
Same with Angela.

I listened to the jangle for a few seconds
before picking it up.
'Hello?'

'Joe?' It was Ed.
He hadn't been in touch for weeks.
I'd started to worry,
wondered if he was ever coming home.
'Is Angela there?' he asked.
He was breathing fast
as though someone were chasing him.
In the background
 hard voices,
 a door slamming.

'Angela's at soccer practice,' I said.

'And Mom?'

'No idea.
Hey, Ed,
I found a baseball glove at the park.
Will you be back soon to play?'

Ed sighed heavily. 'I dunno, Joe.'

'Oh.' I picked at some peeling paint on the wall.

Another sigh from my big brother.
'I got arrested, Joe.
They think I done something real bad.'

I pressed the receiver tight
 against my ear.
'What do they think you done?'

'They think I hurt someone.
But I didn't. You hear?'

'Yeah.'

'I mean it. You hear me?
Cos people are gonna be telling you
all kinds of lies.
I need you to know the truth.'

The front door opened and Mom stormed in
carrying a bag of groceries
for my sister to conjure into dinner.

‘The police got Ed!’ I shouted.

I held out the phone.
She snatched it from me,
dropping the bag.

A tangerine rolled across the rug.
I picked it up,
the skin cold and rough.

‘Ed? What’s going on? ...
But how can they make that sort of mistake? ...
Don’t shout at me, I’m just ...
No, I know, but ...
I don’t have the money for ...
Ed, stay calm ...
I’ll call Karen. I said I’ll call Karen ...
Stop shouting at me ...
Ed, for Christ’s sake ...
I’m just not able to ... Ed? Ed?’

She held the phone away
from her ear and scowled
like it had bitten her.
'The cops are charging him with murder,' she said.

I was seven.
I didn't know what that meant.
Did he owe someone money?
We hadn't any cash to pay the electricity bill.
My sneakers were so small
they made the tips of my toes white.
'Can I call him back?' I asked.
The tangerine was still in my hand.
I wanted to throw it in Mom's face and hurt her.

'No,' she said.
'And don't expect to speak to him for a long time.'

I didn't believe her.
I thought Ed would call.
I thought he'd come home.

But he never did.

SLUM LANDLORD

Aunt Karen told me not to come here.
She said Ed didn't deserve an entourage
after the pain he'd caused our family.

Even after ten long years
she blames him for everything.
 She points to Ed and says,
 'See what he did to us.'

And maybe she's right.
Everything turned to shit
when Ed got put away;
nothing worked any more.

So maybe this *is* a stupid idea.

I'm already pining for home, Staten Island,
anything that isn't Wakeling, Texas,
in the broiling heat.

It's not as if I *want* to be here,
checking out some slummy apartment.
But I can't afford to keep staying at
the Wakeling Motorstop Motel,
not for the whole time I'm in Texas anyway.

‘Six hundred for the month,’ the landlord croaks,
coughing up something wet and
spitting it into a Kleenex.

Judging by the dishes in the sink,
the apartment hasn’t been lived in for months and
he’d be lucky to get a dime for this hole –
roaches in the closets,
rodents in the kitchen.

‘I need it until mid-August.
I’ll give you four hundred,’ I say.

He snorts. ‘Five hundred. Cash.’
And I can tell by the way he’s
backing out of the apartment
that it’s as low as he’ll go.

Well, I guess he’s the one with the keys;
he can afford to play hardball.
‘If I find out you been selling weed,
I’ll send my men round.
You don’t wanna meet my men.’

But his men don't bother me.

I got bigger worries

 than getting bashed in with a baseball bat
by his hired goons.

I got Ed to worry about.

 Ed.

So here I am.

 Stuck.

And it's going to be the worst time of my life.

The worst time of everyone's lives.

 For those who get to live.

TEXTS

In the parking lot of my motel
a gang of bikers are slugging booze from paper bags,
hellfire rock music filling up the lot.

As I pass them, my cell phone pings in my
back pocket.

I don't bother checking the message.

I know it's Angela pestering me:

Where r u?

Did u go 2 the prison?

U seen Ed??

Hows Ed???

Karens still srsly pissed off.

Eds new lawyer emailed. He seems smart.

Where R U???

I have to call my sister.

And I will.

Later.

Right now, I'm starving.

And I have to get away from this music.

BOB'S DINER

The diner is all beat up outside,
paint crumbling, half the neon sign unlit,
and inside it's the same:

broken floor tiles,
posters pale and torn.

A middle-aged waitress in a
pink bowling shirt smiles.

Her name – *Sue* – is embroidered into
her front pocket,

the black thread unravelling itself,
 snaking down the shirt like a
 little vine.

'You OK, hun?' she asks,
raising her hand to her mouth,
dragging on a cigarette right there
behind the counter

like it's totally normal –

 a waitress smoking in a restaurant.

And it might be. Around here.

I pull out my remaining cash and wave it at her.

'What would four bucks buy me?' I say.

'I guess you could get a bacon roll
and a coffee.

Would that work, hun?'

'Great,' I say, inhaling the
tail of her cigarette smoke.

She shouts my order through a swing door,
turns back to slosh coffee into a stained mug
and pushes it across the counter.

It's thick and bitter, nothing like you get in
New York,

but I don't complain.

I tear open a Splenda,
tip it in to disguise the taste.

'Any jobs going?' I ask.

'Wait there, hun.'

Sue vanishes
through the
swing doors.

I grab a muffin in plastic wrap from a basket
on the counter, stuff it into my bag before
a man appears,

a thick moustache hiding his mouth,
a belly that bulges over his waistband.

He reaches across the counter, shakes my hand.
'I'm Bob. I believe you're lookin' for work.'
His accent is drawn out and totally Texan.

'Joe Moon,' I say.

He nods.
'I need a delivery guy.
Someone with a car, cos the junker
out back won't run.
Or someone real fast on a bike.
The fast person would also need a bike.'

'I fix cars,' I say quickly.
'If I get it to go, could I have the job?'

Sue has reappeared, a fresh cigarette limp
 between her twiggy fingers.
She spits bits of tobacco on to the floor.
'Just so's you know, hun, my boyfriend Lenny's
good with motors. Even he couldn't get that
crap heap to turn over.'

She uses a sour rag
to wipe coffee stains from the countertop.

'I could try,' I say,
not wanting to sound too desperate.

'OK. You can *try*,' Bob says.
He reaches into the basket and
hands me a blueberry muffin.
'Dessert's on me, son,' he says.

NO SHORE

All last week
Reed tried to cheer me up.
Sitting in his car drinking warm beer,
he tried to make me believe Ed would get off,
that I'd be back in Arlington before
the track and field holiday programme
began.
'I'll win bronze for steeple chase,
you'll get a gold for five thousand metres.
Then we'll go to the shore
and show off our medals.
We can stay at my cousin's beach house
as long as we want.
We'll get tans,
 smoke dope,
 hit on hot girls.
So many hot girls at the shore.'

'Sounds good,' I said,
knowing it was never gonna happen,
knowing I'd miss out on my entire
summer,
including the New York City
track and field programme.

It was the one thing that had kept me going
in school –

knowing that at the end of the year,
no matter how low my grades were,
I'd have the programme to prove
I wasn't some layabout loser.

But instead of running,
I was coming to Texas
to count down the days until
my brother's execution;
trying to make me feel better about that
was pointless.

THE SECOND CALL

I liked cheese sandwiches with a truckload of ketchup
and had a plate of them in my lap.

I was watching *Spiderman* on TV,
cross-legged on the carpet
wearing scuffed-up sneakers –
laces undone, feet sticky inside them.

I was eight by then,
a year after that first call which had turned
everything
inside out.

Mom shouted at me, as she always did.
‘Turn the goddamn TV down!’

She had her cell to her ear,
was squinting like she was trying to see
whatever it was she was being told.

And then,
like a rock into a river,
she fell
and began to howl.

It wasn't like you see in movies,
someone collapsing but so beautiful
and
tragic.

She was a person possessed,
smashing into pieces,
and I was afraid to get too close.
'No!' she screamed.

I knew right away the words she was hearing.
Anyone could have guessed.

We were kind of expecting it.

And not expecting it at all.

Aunt Karen had been at some of the short trial,
came home and
told us things weren't going Ed's way –
for starters, there was his confession
the day after he got arrested.
She said that if she'd been on the jury,
she'd have locked him up and
thrown away the key herself.

'He didn't do it,' Angela told her.

'I don't know any more,' Aunt Karen said.
'He looked pretty guilty to me.'

And the day that second call came,
I was the only other person at home,
alone again with Mom in the house
and
I didn't know what to do.
I mean,
Mom was always freaking out, but not like that:
 an animal caught in wire.

I went to her,
 tried to get her to stand,
 but
 she wouldn't.
 She couldn't.

 Mom stayed
 down for a
 really
 long
 time.

AUNT KAREN

Three hours after the bad news
our Aunt Karen came to stay.
'I'm all you've got,' she told us.

She stared at the ketchup stains on my white T-shirt,
like that was proof our family
couldn't take care of itself.
I wiped my nose with the back of my hand
and she flinched.

'We don't have space,' Angela explained.

Aunt Karen scratched her nose with her
thumbnail.
'I'll take your room. You can share with Joe
for a while.
Ed's old bed is still in there.'

Angela stood up as tall as she could.
'I need my privacy,' she said.

'Yeah, well,' Mom mumbled, cradling a gin.

‘But I have exams,’ Angela tried again.

‘I know you do,’ Aunt Karen said.

‘And you’ll pass them. I won’t have you go down
the same road as Ed.’

It didn’t matter how hard we stamped our feet,
Aunt Karen had made up her mind
and Mom was in no state to argue:
Aunt Karen was staying and
we would start going to church,
not just on Sundays but after school too.
TV was

out

and Bible study was

in.

Karen knew how to save our souls
from falling into the darkness
that had carried off our brother,
and the first part of her plan was
to never mention Ed again.

HOW MOM HANDLED IT

Mom stopped going out.

She littered the house with empty pill bottles.

She watched infomercials,

shopped through the TV,

said she was waiting until people forgot,

that she'd get her act together and

go back to work

once the worst blew over.

But

she never returned to work and

when she finally ventured out,

she didn't come back.

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in September 2017 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 4088 6780 8

Export ISBN 978 1 4088 7843 9

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk