

A Kind of Spark

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For Mum, Dad and Josh.
And all children with happy, flapping hands.

Chapter One

“This handwriting is utterly disgraceful.”

I hear the words but they seem far away. As if they are being shouted through a wall. I continue to stare at the piece of paper in front of me. I can read it. I can make out every word, even through the blurriness of tears. I can feel everyone in the classroom watching me. My best friend. Her new friend. The new girl. Some of the boys are laughing.

I just keep staring at my writing. Then, suddenly, it's gone.

Miss Murphy has snatched it from my desk and is now ripping it up. The sound of the paper being torn is overly loud. Right in my ears. The characters in the story I was writing beg her to stop, but she doesn't. She crumples it all together and throws it towards the classroom bin. She misses. My story lies in a heap on the scratchy carpet.

“Do not EVER write so lazily again,” she shouts. Maybe she isn't even shouting, but it feels that way. “Do you hear me, Adeline?” I prefer being called Addie. “Not ever. A girl your age knows better than to write like that; your handwriting is like a baby's.”

I wish my sister was here. Keedie always explains the things that I cannot control or explain for myself. She makes sense of them. She understands.

“Tell me that you understand?”

Her shouts are so loud and the moments after are so quiet. I nod, shakily. Even though I don’t understand. I just know it’s what I’m supposed to do.

She says nothing more. She moves to the front of the class and I am dismissed. I can feel the new girl glancing at me, and my friend Jenna is whispering to her new friend, Emily.

We were supposed to have Mrs Bright this year; we met her briefly before the summer holidays. She would draw a little sun with a smiling face beside her name and would hold your hand if you looked nervous. But she got sick and Miss Murphy came to teach our class instead.

I thought this new school year would be better. That I would be better.

I take out my pocket thesaurus. It was a Christmas present from Keedie. She knows how much I love using different words and we laughed because the word ‘thesaurus’ sounds like a dinosaur. I read different word combinations to calm down, to process the shouting and the ripping.

I find one that I like. Diminished.

On days like this, I spend lunchtime in the library. I feel the other children in the class watching me as we tuck in our chairs and leave the room, the school bell screeching so loudly. Loud noises make my head spin, they feel like a drill against a sensitive nerve. I walk through the corridors, practicing my breathing and keeping my eyes straight ahead. People talk so loudly to their friends, who are right next to them. They get too close, they push and clamour, and it makes my neck hot and my heart too quick.

But, when I finally get to the library, it's all quiet. There is so much space. There is one window open to let in a little fresh air. There is no loud talking allowed. The books are all categorised and labelled in their proper places.

And Mr Allison is at his desk.

“Addie!”

He has curly dark hair and big glasses, and he is tall and skinny for a man. He wears old jumpers. If I were to use my thesaurus to describe Mr Allison, I would say he was kindly.

But I like to just say that he is nice. Because he is. My brain is very visual. I see everything in specific pictures, and when people use the word “nice”, I think of Mr Allison, the librarian.

“I have just the thing for you!”

I like that he never asks boring questions. He doesn't ask how my holidays were or how my sisters are doing. He just gets straight to talking about books.

“Here we go.” He walks over to one of the reading tables and puts a large hardback book down in front of me. I feel all the horrid feelings from earlier disappear.

“Sharks!”

I flip it open immediately and stroke the first glossy page. I told Mr Allison last year that I love sharks. That they are the most interesting thing to me, even more than the ancient Egyptians and the dinosaurs.

He remembered.

“It's a sort of encyclopedia,” he tells me, as I sit down with the book. “An encyclopedia is a book that tells you a lot about one subject, or one area of study. This one is all about sharks.”

I nod, somewhat dazed from excitement.

“I suspect you know everything that's in there already though,” he says, and he laughs after he says it so I know that he's joking.

“Sharks don't have bones,” I tell him, caressing the photograph of what I know is a blue shark. “And they have six senses. Not five. They can sort of sense electricity in the atmosphere. The electricity of life!”

They can also smell blood from miles away.”

Their senses are sometimes overpowering. Too loud, too strong, too much of everything.

I turn the page to a large photograph of a solitary Greenland shark, swimming alone in the ice-cold water.

“People don’t understand them.” I touch the shark’s fin. “They hate them, actually. A lot of people. They’re afraid of them and don’t understand them. So, they try to hurt them.”

Mr Allison doesn’t say anything for a while, as I read the first page.

“You take that home with you for as long as you would like, Addie.”

I look up at him. He is smiling, but his eyes don’t match his mouth.

“Thank you!” I make sure to put all the glad that I am feeling into my voice so that he knows I really mean it. He moves back to his desk and I become engrossed in the book. Reading is the most calming thing after an overly loud and unkind classroom. I can take my time. There is no one rushing me or barking at me. The words all follow rules. The pictures are bright and alive. But they do not overpower me.

When I am trying to sleep at night, I like to imagine diving beneath the cold waves of the ocean and swimming with a shark. We explore abandoned shipwrecks, underwater caves and coral reefs. All of the colour, but in a wide-open space. No crowds, no pushing and no taking. I would not grab their dorsal fin. We would swim alongside one another.

And we would not have to speak a word. We could just be.

Chapter Two

Waiting for my sister is the longest time of the day.

Dad is already cooking by the time I arrive home from school. Today is Monday, so dinner will be pasta. I like it quite plain. Too much sauce makes my tongue feel like it's drowning so Dad makes a white sauce for me, and a different one for the rest of the family: Dad, and my two older sisters, and Mum when she's not at work.

"Tea's almost ready, Addie."

Dad knows not to ask me questions straight away. I need time to settle. That's what Keedie says, she's the one who told me that and then she told Dad. Since then, it's been easier.

I help set the table and we throw pasta onto the ceiling to see if it will stick. One piece falls down and Dad catches it in his mouth. He laughs and eats it before yelling upstairs for Nina to finish talking to her camera and come down for dinner. He cannot hear the scrape of her chair, the whirring of her camera lens as it retracts, or the resigned click of her bedroom door closing.

But I can.

Nina is my other older sister, always here and always wanting. What she wants, I'm not really sure. A different house, a more perfect life. The kind of life she pretends to live in her videos. A rose gold life that's neat and tidy.

She has auburn hair that she dyes blonde and only sensible piercings. She wears tartan skirts and turtle necks. Her bedroom has a camera on a tall tripod and important looking lights. She talks to tens of thousands of people through her camera, about clothes and make-up.

She smiles on her videos in a way I have never seen her smile off camera.

"What's today's video about?"

Dad asks regular and repetitive questions. He calls it "making an effort". He says it's important for letting people know that you're interested in their lives. If I'm interested in someone, I have hundreds of questions for them, and they are never the same.

"Just a Q&A," Nina replies, spooning a small portion of pasta onto her plate. The smell of the sauce that she drizzles over the dish stings my nostrils. "My views have dipped since I stopped doing hauls."

Mum told her that buying large amounts of clothes each month was wasteful. It was a big argument. Doors were slammed and it made my hands tremble.

Nina gets up and goes to the fridge, wrenching it open to grab a bottle of juice. “Where is she?”

I’ve realised that Nina speaks with a certain tone of voice when she’s talking about Keedie. Her voice is visual, two different colours. One is dark and one is light. Both colours are for Keedie. But I’m not sure what they mean.

Nina is not the sister I’m waiting for. Keedie is.

Dad does not answer her, and I know she wasn’t talking to me, because she wasn’t looking at me. I wrap a piece of pasta around my fork. It takes a while.

“How was school?” I can feel Nina’s eyes staring right at my shoulders. So, I shrug them. She moves to sit with us at the table. “I asked you a question, Addie.”

“Nina.”

Dad rebukes her gently.

“Don’t remember.” It isn’t a lie, like Nina goes on to accuse. It all becomes difficult to piece together once I’m out of the school building. It will fall into place as a memory over the next couple of days.

“You have an excellent memory,” Nina tells me, scraping her cutlery against her plate in a way that makes me feel ill. “If she’s telling us she can’t remember, something must be wrong.”

She’s talking to Dad now.

“Do you like your teacher?”

Images of Miss Murphy flash behind my eyes. Her one really yellow tooth. Her long fingernails. “She’s just like Keedie said.”

Nina brings her cutlery down sharply. “You see... you’re just basing your opinion on what Keedie told you. She taught Keedie a long time ago, Addie. It’s been just over one week, you can’t know what she’s like.”

“Then why did you ask me?”

I don’t understand Nina. She wants things out of our conversations that I don’t know how to give. She talks to the people who watch her videos like she loves them. I watch her sometimes. When I was doing my Saturday therapy, the man would place photographs in front of me, photographs of different men wearing different faces. Expressions, he would correct me. But they were different faces. He would ask me to tell him what they were feeling but I never knew how. How to tell, how to know, what was really going on.

But I practiced and got better. I would watch Nina. She would look into her camera and smile so widely. She was happy; she loved the people she was speaking to. But they were, are, just strangers. Faces she cannot even see. I’m her sister. Yet she looks at me with a face I cannot read.

I never know what Nina wants.

Then I hear it. The gentle tap on the large kitchen window. I bolt out of my seat to fling it open before Dad or Nina even notice. I could hear her knuckles graze the glass before the knock even happened.

Keedie is here.

She clambers into the kitchen, ducking through the window. I hug her. She's the only person I ever hug. She never grips me too tightly, she never tenses. She doesn't wear strong perfume that stings my nose, just a mild soap that smells like home.

"Hello, my favourite person." Her voice is all one colour, a beautiful molten gold.

I smile against her ribs. She asks me no questions. She lets go when I do.

"Nina, I might drop out of university and start influencing like you," Keedie falls into the chair next to mine and starts eating what is left of the pasta. "I can't stand anyone in my lectures, and the rooms are awful."

"Very funny," Nina is being sarcastic but she smiles very slightly. "What's wrong with the rooms?"

Keedie looks at me and grins. I instinctively grin back. "Bad lights."

I nod in full understanding.

“Oh, I see,” Nina sips some more of her juice. “It’s a little secret between you two.”

Bad lights are the kind of lights that are so bright, they give people like me headaches. They hurt our eyes – they are visually loud.

Keedie is Nina’s twin. But she is not like Nina. She is like me. Autistic, like me.

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Keedie and I go walking by the Water of Leith after dinner. We enjoy the sound of our shoes crunching on the gravel path leading down to the muddy bank of the river. I reach out to touch the leaf of a tree which will soon turn a different colour and then die. I bawled when Mum first told me about the leaf on the tree but she explained that it’s good and normal. That it doesn’t hurt them to die.

“Miss Murphy shouted at me today.” I kick a stone so it soars through the air and lands in the running water. “Because my handwriting was messy.”

Keedie stops walking to glance at me. I know my face will be difficult for her to read. We step onto the bridge over the river. I have a handful of sticks that I’m ready to drop.

“She shouldn’t have done that, Addie.”

“She didn’t read it. She said she couldn’t.”

“It’s because of your motor skills,” Keedie stops and gently takes my hands.

“Motor skills?”

“Our brain sends messages to our hands. It tells them what to do.” She touches her finger to my palm and then my temple. “When you’re... different, your processing is a little unique. The hands have a bit of trouble doing exactly what the brain wants. They’re so busy getting the words exactly right, and in the right order, that they don’t have time to get the writing perfect or pretty.”

“Ok.” I stop walking and absorb what Keedie has said.

“My handwriting is the same way.” She nudges me and laughs. “That’s why Nina won’t let me sign Christmas cards from the two of us.”

I laugh as a memory of Nina sitting by the fireplace last December with all of the holiday cards spread out in front of her appears in my head. She was very serious about the whole process, the wrapping as well.

“I use a laptop at university,” Keedie adds. “It’s much easier for me.”

I nibble on my bottom lip. “I don’t think Miss Murphy would like that.”

“No,” Keedie sighs. “If memory serves, she hates anything that might actually help someone.”

“There’s a new girl in our class this year,” I change the conversation, something Mum says is important to do if you have nothing further to say. “She’s from London.”

“How exciting.”

“I don’t think she has any friends yet.”

“Well,” Keedie gestures for me to start dropping my sticks over the edge of the bridge. “Maybe you should be her friend.”

“If she likes the library,” I drop my first stick, and watch the splash as it hits the water, “then that would be fine.”

“What about Jenna?”

“She sits with Emily now. I don’t think Emily likes me.”

I can tell Keedie these things. If I told Mum or Nina, they would say that I was being silly and that I should just sit with them at lunch and be friends with both of them.

Just be nice and friendly. Of course she wants to be your friend, too.

Keedie knows that it is not that simple. That first impressions are horrible. That making new friends is not easy. I can see the whispers, the stares and the giggles. And I know that they are not good things.

“Well then, you should definitely be friends with this new girl then,” Keedie says.

I nod. Something has changed in the last few years. It used to be easy to go up to someone in the playground and ask to play. Now, people sit in tight little groups and they like to talk instead of play.

I miss the playing.

“You know,” Keedie pushes her golden hair out of her face. “I haven’t told anyone at uni that I’m autistic.”

I stare up at her. She’s so tall, with legs that seem longer than my whole body. I’m always looking up at her. “Why not?”

Keedie is never afraid to talk about being autistic. She is, as Dad says, “loud and proud”. She was diagnosed around the same age that I was, between nine and ten. Mum said Nina would do everything as expected; she walked and talked quickly, she liked most foods, she did fine in school. Keedie didn’t speak until she was five. She jokingly says that it was because she had nothing to say. She struggled with other children, she fought with teachers, she had difficulty controlling her emotions. She would only take part in school if she was engaged or interested. Mum says she would sometimes get a phone call from the school telling her that Keedie had just walked out of a maths lesson.

I have Keedie to explain everything to me. To tell me why my handwriting is bad, why loud noises and bright colours make my mind catch fire.

She had no one to tell her.

“Most people still don’t understand, Addie.”

“But,” I get the sudden urge to stim, the conversation feels too loaded. “Won’t it be harder masking full-time?”

Stimming is something I do when I’m overwhelmed. My hands fizz and flap, my limbs become restless. I sometimes feel the urge to pat the back of my head. There can be good stimming, there can be bad stimming, but a lot of the time I have to hide it. Masking is when we have to pass as a neurotypical person, as someone who is not like us. We have to ignore the need to stim, self-soothe and we have to make firm eye contact. Keedie told me it’s like when superheroes have to pretend that they’re regular people.

“Ah, I’m getting pretty good at it now,” Keedie winks at me, her big green eyes bright and difficult for me to read.

People aren’t like books. A familiar book is always the same, always comforting and full of the same words and pictures. A familiar person can be new and challenging, no matter how many times you try to read them.

As we make our way back home, Keedie stops. “Want to run down the hill?”

“Yes!” I shout.

So we run. My hands flap freely and joyfully, able to stim without anyone telling my not to. Keedie whoops and sings. We reach the bottom, breathless and exhilarated. Keedie gives me the quickest hug from behind and we head home in the dim September light.