

# LITTLE SISTER

BARBARA GOWDY



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For Antje Kunstmann

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From her office above the Regal Repertory Theater, Rose Bowan watched a Coke can roll down the sidewalk across the street. It missed the fire hydrant, hit a tree, spun under the café's wrought-iron gate, and set off in an arc around the tables, whose languorously twirling umbrellas somebody had better start lowering.

She called her mother on the landline.

"Hello, darling," Fiona answered over the blare of the television.

"Hi, Mom. I can hardly hear you."

"What?"

"Could you please turn that down?"

"Where did I . . ." The volume dropped. "A special weather statement's coming on."

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“It’s going to pour any minute. Let me come pick you up.”

“Wind gusts to sixty kilometers per hour,” Fiona said. She was reading. “The greater Toronto area should expect—”

Lightning crackled the line.

“Did you hear that?” Rose asked.

“The day I can’t walk five blocks in a bit of weather is the day you can shoot me in the head.”

“Have you shut the windows?”

Silence.

“Mom?”

“Do you want to hear a dirty joke?” Fiona said in a changed voice, mischievous and with an Irish accent.

“No,” Rose said heavily.

“What happened to the man who fell down the toilet?”

“I might have left my bedroom window open.”

“First it got dark.”

“Mom, I’ll see you later.”

“Then it rained.”

“Bye for now.”

“All right, darling,” Fiona said in her normal voice. “See you soon.”

There was a long lightning flash, during which the office flickered like an old film. The sound of stately,

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processional thunder that followed was called brontide, Rose happened to know. She put the phone in its cradle and looked at the Wall of Stars, so named because it was covered in photographs of her father posing next to movie legends. The photograph directly across from her was of him and Groucho Marx smoking cigars, her father seeming to smile straight at her, and it was her habit to look up from time to time and tell him about the theater, its finances and programming, her plans to fix whatever was falling apart beyond the point that it could no longer be ignored. These past few months she also filled him in on her mother's condition.

"She's getting coarse," she said today. "Like a little boy."

He already knew. Today in his eyes she saw the knowledge of everything that had been and was to be, and she turned in her chair and watched the rain.

When she turned back, she found herself reading the plate under the photograph. She blinked, puzzled, and read it again: *Groucho Marx, January 12, 1962*. Her eyes moved along the rows of plates: *Jerry Lewis, July 14, 1966*; *Gloria Swanson, September 15, 1966*; *Mickey Rooney, October 23, 1968*. Normally, even from a few feet away and in good light, she wasn't able to make out those words. But here at her desk, in the gloom, they were perfectly legible.

How could this be?

She looked around the office, and everything—sofa, film canisters, movie posters, bookshelves, the spines of magazines—had the same hyperclarity, and not only that, it was pulsing.

She lifted her glasses. Now black flecks were obstructing her vision, hundreds of them, geometrical flecks like bits of broken lettering. She rubbed her eyes, and the flecks, as if besieged, began organizing themselves into medieval fortresses. Her glasses made no difference. Off or on, the frenzied structures grew.

At their peak, when there was no room left, they collapsed. Rose had a rush of nausea, and then a quick, exquisite sensation of her skin tightening and cooling and her flesh clinging to a vibrant bony web. The sharp vision returned, without the pulsing. She saw a tiny white spider rappelling from the ceiling, its thread and translucent legs. She touched her pen to the thread, and the spider swung behind her desk out of sight.

But it wasn't her desk, her old mahogany davenport. It was a sleek, blond table. All it had on it was a bound document, a laptop, and a pad of paper. Printed across the top of the pad was the word *Goldfinch*. She heard a photocopier going, and people talking in another room.

Her hand, her cold little hand, wrote, *Monday, 9:00, Dr. A.* on the pad and underlined it twice. The other

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hand swiped crumbs from her skirt, which was several inches above her knees, pale yellow, and had a pattern of navy-rimmed polka dots. Her nails were brutally chewed. Her thighs were bare.

The phone rang. She snatched it up. "Harriet here," she said in a croaky, tentative voice that was not Rose's but somehow exactly hers. And the name, Harriet, wasn't hers, of course, but it suited the small, kinetic person she seemed to be inside of.

"Hi," said a man.

"Where are you?" she said.

"My office."

"I'll come down."

"No, don't," he whispered. "Everybody's still here."

She swiveled to face the windows. Beyond a wall of rain were other office towers and the dim stacks of their lit windows. "I thought we had a deal," she said unhappily. "When I call, you pick up."

"I couldn't. I'm really sorry." He sounded sincere.

"It's just, I'm . . ."

"What's going on?"

She shook her head. If she spoke, she would cry.

"Harriet?"

And that was it, it was over. Rose was back at her own desk, in her oak-paneled office. She was wearing

her own clothes: blue jeans, a white T-shirt. These were her breasts. These were her thighs, like logs compared to those others.

Her nose bled.

She overreached the Kleenex and had to steer her hand back. An aftermath of misery clung to her, and she let herself cry a bit. She must have fallen asleep, except the precise, mundane details, not just the spider and the skirt but also her cold fingers, her childish grip on the pen, the background noises—that whole ordinary, filled-in world and its myriad sensations—had felt as real as this, only (she looked around) in much clearer focus.

Harriet? Who was Harriet? Rose had never before dreamed that she was someone else. Or inside someone else. Yes, *inside* more accurately described the feeling of visiting, as opposed to having, the woman's body. She sniffed her empty coffee cup and thought of their new employee, Lloyd, the former drug dealer.

He was changing garbage bags in the lobby's two bins. He heard her coming down the stairs and said, "This is the last of the large."

His cigarette-racked gangster voice, she still wasn't used to it. "Check under the sink," she said.

"Okay, will do. Did you enjoy the fireworks?"

She paused. "Fireworks?"

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“There was one thunderclap there, I thought we’d been hit.”

“We have lightning rods.” She resumed her descent. She was aware of holding herself too erectly, like a woman with a jug of water on her head. “My coffee tasted off,” she told him, although it hadn’t.

“Off how?”

How would amphetamines taste? “Bitter.”

“Really? Mine tasted all right. But I take a lot of milk and sugar.”

“Metallic,” she said.

He spun the bag, tied the ends. “I’ll pour myself a cup of black, see what’s going on. It might be the coffeemaker.”

His nonchalance was so convincing that she felt ludicrous. Why would he have spiked her coffee? What did he have to gain by sending her into a two-minute hallucination? “Has my mother been in?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

She went by him to the snack bar and set down the cup. Too close to the edge. Before she could catch it, it fell and smashed. “Oh, God!” she cried.

He trotted, gray ponytail swinging, to the utility closet.

“It just exploded,” Rose said to explain her outburst.

“Old china,” he said. “It gets brittle.”

She watched him shunt around and sweep up the million pieces. Between his belt and T-shirt, his spine knuckled out. He was a wiry, muscled man, still as hard as wood in his midfifties, faded tattoos of snakes and skulls plastering his arm. He always wore the same old rutted cowboy boots, and Rose and her mother wondered if they were the only footwear he owned.

Her mother was the one who'd hired him. Up the street, Terry's video store was going out of business, and when Fiona went in to give Terry her condolences, she found Lloyd stacking DVDs. They started talking. He said he'd been the Strand's projectionist and was looking for work, and she offered him a job on the spot. Four jobs, actually: projectionist, ticket taker, cleaner, handyman. "Everything you've been bellyaching about," she gloated to Rose afterward, as if only hours before she hadn't passionately fought Rose's suggestion that they take on extra help. Under the circumstances Rose shelved her qualms about Lloyd's prison record: eight months for trafficking in amphetamines and marijuana. Anyway, he volunteered the information himself, and it had happened a long time ago, in the late eighties.

"I'll run the vacuum over it," he said now. They stood side by side and inspected the miles of worn brick-red carpet.

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“That was my mother’s favorite cup,” she said.

“They have sort of similar ones for sale at Starbucks,” he said. “Probably thicker. And they probably say ‘Starbucks’ on the bottom.”

“She might not notice. But I don’t want to start trying to fool her. She’s having a hard enough time sorting things out.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

Rose looked at him. “She didn’t tell you, did she.”

“Tell me what?”

“She has dementia.”

“No way.”

“She told me she’d told you.”

“Alzheimer’s?”

“Vascular dementia.” Rose rubbed her face to gather concentration. “You get a series of ministrokes. It amounts to the same thing, in the end.”

“Man, I never would have guessed.”

“You didn’t wonder about her accent coming and going?”

“She isn’t Irish?”

“No, she is, but she’s been here over fifty years. The thing is, a part of your job, a big part actually, is to keep an eye on her during the shows, and if she starts acting weird to intervene.”

He smiled. "That might be why she didn't tell me."

"It's more than you bargained for."

"I'm good with weird." He brushed the shattered cup to the back of the pan. His eyes were also shattered in their way, and yet not despairing. Far from it, when he smiled, he seemed to access a private bliss.

"Well," Rose said, "her lapses are short so far, sometimes only a few seconds. And I'm always right upstairs."

"I'll stop by Starbucks tomorrow," he said. "See what they have."

She no longer suspected him of anything, but when she was back in her office she Googled *methamphetamine*. It was a stimulant, seldom a hallucinogen. She Googled *LSD*, *peyote*, *mescaline*, *magic mushrooms* and learned that they all distorted and smeared your perceptions, they didn't fine-tune them. She scrolled through the sites she'd bookmarked during those hellish days following her mother's diagnosis. Slurred speech? No. A change in vision? Absolutely. Dizziness? Slightly. Headache? No. Confusion? Very slightly. Fear? Not during.

Because of the flecks, she tried *migraine* and read about a phenomenon called silent migraine, where you get visual turbulence and feelings of bodily disorientation and, in severe cases, a nosebleed, but no headache. She kept reading and deep into a clinical study was

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rewarded with “Some silent-migraine auras escalate and systematize to the extent that they become tantamount to unrestrained states of credible illusion or dreaming.”

There it was: the stress she was under had created visual turbulence and body disorientation that had led to a credible dream where she was inside this petite, sad, croaky-voiced businesswoman with really sharp eyesight.

It was twenty past four. A whole hour lost. She was tired, she wanted to take a nap, but she stayed at her desk and returned phone calls. Only when the MGM rep said, “Whoa,” about a thunderclap at his end did she become conscious of the storm.

Lightning flared. Her vision sharpened. “I’ll call you back,” she said.

The stages from the first event came and went: geometric flecks, fortresses, nausea, a sense of her skin shrinking and cooling, of wired flesh clinging to lightweight bones, a wholesale spatial and physical transition as swift and mildly jarring as waking from sleep.

“I’m not cut out for this job,” she was saying in a husky voice.

She sat with her feet on the dashboard of a parked car, her skirt up around her hips. Polka-dot skirt, little feet, narrow hips. She was back in the body and mind of the woman, Harriet.

“You can’t publish two books on the same subject,” said the person beside her. He sounded like the man from the phone call.

Rain drummed the roof. They were the only ones on the top level of a parking garage, in a far corner. She wiped her inner thigh with a Kleenex. “Climate change isn’t exactly songbird extinction,” she said.

“One leads to the other.” He stretched. He was a rangy, athletic-looking man with a large, handsome head. “Same problem.”

A half-smoked cigarette and a lighter were in the cup holder, and she took them out and got the cigarette going. He lowered their windows a few inches.

“Yeah, well.” She sighed. “That’s more or less what I told her.”

“You’re a soft touch.”

She smiled, but she was suddenly desolate, and she climbed onto his lap. He had gray, slightly epicanthic eyes. His hair was a rich, animal brown, thinning at the temples. She brushed the stubble that failed to completely cover his acne scars. She held the cigarette to his lips, and he inhaled. They took turns smoking, watching each other, not speaking, and then she tossed the butt and kissed him. It was a luscious kiss, incredibly sexy.

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“Now look what you’ve done,” he said about his erection.

Another car drove in from the ramp. “Shit,” she said, ducking.

“They’re parking near the entrance,” he said.

She waited before twisting around. Three women were hurrying toward the stairwell.

“Are they from the office?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.” She was frightened now, her stomach churned. “We should have gone to the other lot.”

“Are you kidding? Lesley parks there.”

She looked at him. “When you say her name, I see her, and I can’t do this.”

“What are you talking about?” His erection softened. “*You* say her name.”

“It’s different when you say it.”

“What time is it?” He checked his watch.

“I wonder what she’d do if she found out.”

“Five thirty.”

“I wonder what *you’d* do.”

“Why are we talking about this?”

She climbed off his lap and flipped down her visor. She fluffed her hair. And right then, without warning, without even a crimp across her vision, Rose was back in her own body. She was at her desk, bleeding onto her computer.