

Winner of the Second Prize in the Schools Section

A Proper Goodbye

Fiona Church, Bruton School for Girls

'This is just the beginning of what promises to be a very long day,' I muttered to myself as I closed the door. The postman looked up and smiled as he headed back towards the gate. I had woken up with that feeling that everything would go wrong. I was right. I spilt toothpaste all down my fresh school shirt, had a ladder the whole length of my tights and fell down the stairs in the rush to answer the door when the bell rang.

'Cathy, are you ready yet?' Mum called for what seemed like the millionth time that morning. She got no reply except the sound of Cathy blundering down the stairs and into the hallway. I knew not to expect any more than that from her; Mum gave her the glare that automatically caused Cathy to mumble the word 'sorry' under her breath.

Cathy was the typical moody teenager. If she didn't get her own way she would moan and whine about it for weeks, her music was always so loud you had to shout to just get heard, and not to mention it wasn't what was quite classifiable as music, it was just noise. She was tall and slender with sapphire-blue eyes and a head of perfect brown, almost black, curls. That morning to be precise, she was wearing a pair of skin-tight black jeans and a band T-shirt, for some group that I had never heard of, and her hair pulled back into a neat pony-tail. I could never understand that something so simple could take so long to prepare but look so good.

From the table, where I had sat to eat my breakfast, I watched her pull on her old red converse and grab a cardigan from the pegs, before heading off down the path for the bus to college. I took another bite of my toast before getting up to collect my files for school.

Cathy and I were complete opposites; me, short and round with brown eyes and brown mousy hair. I had the wonderful joy of wearing black tights and grey skirt with a white shirt and my school tie, jumper and blazer every day, always willing the day where I could leave school and wear my choice of clothing to college, just like Cathy.

It wasn't until I arrived home to a silent house later that day that I knew something had happened. Silence always meant she wasn't home; no music, friends or phone calls. Cathy was never not at home; our house was like the meeting place for her and her friends, I always thought it was something to do with our well-stocked cupboards and fridge. So when I opened the door to silence I was slightly concerned. I went up to her room and knocked on the door. No answer. I twisted the handle, which seemed bitter cold beneath my fingertips. I pushed but the door didn't want to budge; Cathy had locked it and taken the key.

Ever since we were little Cathy had worn the small silver key on a chain around her neck. She always demanded that she was left alone; but rarely locked the door, only on

occasions such as birthdays and Christmas when she hadn't yet wrapped presents. Looking back I can't actually recall any other time when Cathy's door was locked.

I waited for a while; started my homework, made a sandwich, watched some television, basically occupied myself until I heard the front door open. 'Cathy?' I asked, while jumping with anticipation.

'No dear, is Cathy not in?' Mum replied while taking her coat off and hanging her bag up. I shook my head. 'Have you called her?' She asked again. I gave Mum the typical eye roll and a lecture about how we don't live in the Stone Age any more and it was one of the first things I tried. I was trying not to worry Mum, but I was worried myself. Cathy never missed Wednesday dinners. It was her favourite. Wednesday was pasta day.

I started the dinner while Mum called all Cathy's friends. I hadn't yet said I couldn't get into her room. I thought it was something small and unimportant ... never knew how wrong I was until now. 'Is she there, Mum?' I questioned when we sat down at the table for dinner, but Mum was too distant to notice that I was talking to her. Her distance answered my question. No, Cathy was not at her friends'. We ate our dinner in silence, packed away in silence, sat and waited, hoping Cathy would return and that it would be some ridiculous reason for why she is so late.

Seven o'clock came and went. Eight o'clock came and went, and so on until ten o'clock went by.

'Get your coat, we are going out.'

I didn't hesitate. In the car we drove around all the local youth hang-outs. Past all the places where Cathy would occasionally go when the weather was better, but never in mid-February. It wasn't like her at all. We drove and drove, for hours, round and round in circles. Still no Cathy though. I saw a tear fall down Mum's face; it left a faint greyish-black line where her mascara was taken with it. Slowly we headed home, passing all the places we had previously been.

At home I knocked on Cathy's door again, somehow hoping she would have been there all along.

'Mum, do you have a key for Cathy's room?' I asked. My voice seemed as quiet as the wind outside. Mum emerged from her room holding a small key, the exact replica of Cathy's.

'Why? Did she lock that door of hers?' she replied.

I nodded half-heartedly. I saw the glimmer in my Mum's eye at that moment; she knew there might be hope. Cathy might have left something in her room. Maybe. Just maybe.

The door opened with a creak. The only door in the house that squeaked. Mum used to say it was a Godsend. She could hear if Cathy was trying to sneak out of the house after curfew. This time it was different however. We weren't prepared for what we saw. It seemed normal at first. The room smelt like her; musty but with a hint of apricot. Then we saw her. She was just hanging there, her eyes open with a look of pain still in them. Her body stiff and rigid; the only life in her was the dim light of the room reflecting off the silver key hanging on the chain around her neck. Her clothes were strewn all over the ground. The rail in which they used to hang was empty except for in the middle,

where she hung like an item of clothing which had been forgotten. Between her clothes her chair, lying with its legs in the air. I screamed. What had driven Cathy to do such a thing?

I stood with my eyes transfixed on the body. On her body. I felt for my Mum. She wasn't there. I turned to look for her. She was curled on the floor like a small vulnerable child. There were no tears, she made no sound, was just there curled up looking at her baby, hanging.

At that point I knew I had to think. I called the police and an ambulance, not really knowing who to call; it wasn't something they taught us in school. I sat with Mum until they arrived, holding her in my arms as she shook. Then they took her away. Put us in separate cars and drove us here.

I want to see my sister. I want to say a proper goodbye. I know that's what the funeral is for but I want to do it now. Please, just let me see Cathy.