

## Dear Santa

Ma mammy disnae love me. Ah kin see it in her eyes, no the way she looks at me,-but the way she looks through me, the way you look at sumpn that's been in the hoose fur years; you know it's there but you don't see it. It's hard no tae be seen, it makes you wee and crumpled up inside. When ah kiss her on the cheek, her skin creases, soft and squashy lik a marshmallow, and close up ah see the lines rennin doon the sidey her mooth and smell the powder on her face. She doesnae kiss me back.

*You kin read fur ten minutes but then that light's tae be aff Gonnae come and tuck me in, Mammy?*

*You're too big tae be tucked in.*

*She keeps watchin the television.*

*You tuck Katie in.*

*Katie's only five. You're a big girl.*

*Ah'm eight year auld. Ah'm a big girl.*

Ah don't know if ma mammy loved me afore Katie wis born, ah cannae mind that far back but ah must of been jealous when she was wee. Ah remember wan day she wis lyin sleepin in her pram ootside and ah got plastercine and made it intae wee balls and stuck them all ower her face; she looked as if she had some horrible disease. Ah mind staunin there lookin doon at that soft skin covered in sticky horrible purple lumps and felt good inside, warm and full.

Katie's asleep in the other bed, fair curly hair spread oot across the pillow, smilin in her sleep the way she does when she's awake. Ma sister is perfect, ah kin see that, she's wee and pretty and aye happy, bubblin ower wi life. When the sun shines, she's runnin aboot the gairden efter sunbeams and when it rains she pits on her wellies and splashes in the puddles. She never cries. Ma daddy says she's a princess, her teacher says she's an angel, ma mammy says,

*Why can't you be more like your sister?*

In the school nativity play Katie gets picked as the angel that tells Mary she's gonnae huv the baby Jesus so ma mammy sits up all night sewin her a white robe and a perra golden wings. Ah'm a shepherd, wi a stripy tea towel roon ma held. In the photy she's at the front, in between Mary and Joseph, glitterin as if she really wis an angel, and ah'm this big lurkin thing at the endy the back row, daurk and blurred. The photy gets framed and put on the unit in the livin room.

*Thon's a lovely photy.*

*Katie's pure beautiful in that frock. She looks just lik an angel.*

*And Alison's gettin awful big fur her age.*

*Ah know, ah kin haurdly get anythin tae fit her. Ah hud we pit panels intae her communion frock so she could wear it fur her confirmation and it's less than a year auld.*

It's Christmas Eve, the shops sparkle and we're in Debenham's queuein up tae see Santa. Ah don't think ah believe in Santa any mair but don't want tae admit it. Katie goes first and sits on his knee and tells him she wants a baby doll and a cot. Then she gies him a big kiss, slides doon fae his knee and runs towards ma daddy.

*Santa says if ah'm a good girl ah'li get it, Daddy.*

She pits her airms coon his neck and he birls her, wee legs stickin oot fae canner her frock.

*You're aye a good girl, princess.*

He smiles at me.

*On ye go, hen.*

Close up ah kin see Santa's beard is fake. The glue has dried on his skin and there's wee rolled-up rubbery bits on his cheek. But his knee feels solid tae sit on, and when he smiles the lines crinkle roon his blue eyes.

*And what's your name, pet?*

*Alison.*

*Whit age are you, Alison?*

*Eight.*

*You're a big girl for eight, aren't you? And whit dae you want for Christmas, Alison?*

Ah knew he wisnae Santa, no the real Santa that lives in Greenland wi the reindeer, if there is a real Santa anyway, but his eyes were kind and he called me by ma name and ah wanted to tell him, ah tried tae tell him.

*Ah want ma mammy tae . . .*

But then a big lump cam up, no in ma throat, but in ma hert, heavy and grey lik a stane, that stopped me fae sayin it.

*You want your mammy? Is she no here?*

He looked roon fur help as though he wis feart ah wis gonnae cry and he didnae want a greetin wean on his knee. Ah shook ma held. He looked straight intae ma face.

*Whit dae you want fae Santa, Alison?*

*Ah don't know: ah know but ah cannae say.*

*Is it a secret?*

*Aye.*

*Ah tell you whit. Why don't you write it doon and . . . do you have a chimney at home?*

*No a real wan, it's a gas fire.*

*Well you put the letter in a secret place, and I'll find it. And if you're a good girl, you'll get what you want.*

Ah'm a good girl.

Christmas Eve ah'm sittin on the bed in ma pyjamas wi a pad of blue lined paper and a Biro. The room is daurk but the wee bedside lamp makes a white circle that lights up the page ah'm starin at. It's hard tae find the words.

*Dear Santa,*

*Please could you*

*I would like*

*If its no too much bother*

But what is it ah'm tryin tae say? Could you make ma mammy love me? That's no Santa's job, he's there tae gie oot sweeties and toys tae weans wanst a year, so there's nae point in askin him. If there is a Santa. Ah look oot the windae; the sky's dirty grey and ah don't think we'll huv a white Christmas somehow.

The door opens and ma mammy comes in. The hall light's on and her fair hair sticks oot all coon her heid, fuzzy and soft. A cannae see her face.

*Are you no asleep yet? It's nine o'clock.*

*Ah'm writin ma letter tae Santa.*

*Santa doesnae come if yer no sleepin. Look, there's Katie, sound.*

She bends ower Katie's bed, where she's lyin wi wan airm stickin oot fae under the covers. Ma mammy lifts the bedclothes ower her, then turns tae me.

*Hurry up and finish that letter, Alison. Ah'll pit it in fronty the fire and Santa'll get it when he comes.*

Ma mammy sits on the bed beside me while ah take a clean bit of paper and write dead slow so it's ma best writin.

*Dear Santa,*

*Please could i have a Barbie doll and a toy dog. I am a good girl.*

*Love*

*Alison*

Ah fold the paper twice, print SANTA on the front, then gie it tae ma mammy. She pits it in her pocket and lifts the covers fur me tae get inside. Ah coorie doon, watchin her hair glowin like a halo against the blackness of the room. Ah love strokin her hair, it's that soft and fuzzy but she cannae be bothered wi that and jerks her heid away, sayin *don't, you'll*

*mess it up, just lik she does when ma daddy tries tae touch it. But it's that quiet and still and she's in a good mood so ah lift ma haun and touch her hair, just a wee bit.*

*Mammy, how come you've got fair hair and Katie's got fair hair and mines is broon?*

*You take efter yer daddy and Katie takes efter me.*

*Ah wisht ah had fair hair.*

*How? There's nothin wrang wi broon hair.*

*Ah wisht ah had hair lik yours.*

Ma mammy smiles and the lines roon her eyes get deeper but she looks at me mair soft like.

*Go tae sleep, hen, or Santa'll no come.*

She bends ower and kisses me, a dry kiss, barely grazin ma cheek, and before ah have time tae kiss her back she's switched off the bedside light, stood up and moved tae the door.

*Night, Alison.*

*Night, Mammy.*

She goes out, nearly closin the door, but leavin a wee crack of light fallin across the bedclothes.