

Invisible Threads

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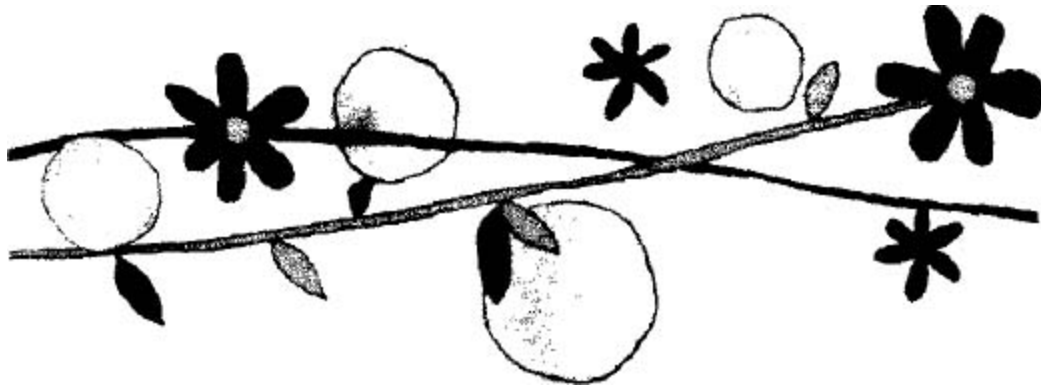
About the Book

'You're born and I can hold you any time I like. All I have to do is close my eyes.'

A unique and WONDERFUL book!! Two sixteen year olds, one an adopted daughter, the other a teenage mother, tell their subtly interwoven stories ... I loved every single word.

Vivian French

Invisible Threads



Annie Dalton & Maria Dalton

RHCP DIGITAL

*For Anna, Reuben and Maria, who lit up my life
the first moment I saw them; and still do! - AD*

*For Anna, Philipp and Reuben, with many thanks
and much love for all your support - MD*

Carrie-Anne

TODAY I AM sixteen years old. Today I have surpassed her.

Mum is all balloons and cream cakes.

'Come on, Carrie-Anne, love, smile!'

Click, flash, click, flash!

I am still not strong enough to claim my teenage right and roll my eyes, so I oblige, all eyes and teeth; I give her my best celebrity sparkle. With my mouth open and my teeth sharp I could devour her in one bite.

'Doesn't she look lovely?' My mum sighs, nudging my dad with a spiky elbow in his hard rib.

My dad grunts, a hog man hidden behind a broadsheet. He rustles his paper and gives me a pirate wink.

My dad understands me, because he knows my mum. We're comrades. I perform a perfect sashay towards the kitchen. I know my mum is watching my hips move softly side to side. She's envious of my ease and youth.

It's my birthday and I don't have to be nice.

Sarah's soaking corn flakes in a hand-painted Italian bowl. We've never been to Italy, but Mum thinks she can fool the neighbours into thinking our annual family nightmare in Devon is actually an art history tour of Tuscany. I curl my lip.

I'm sixteen today and I can think whatever I want.

Robert shuffles in, followed by a pristinely scrubbed Emma, my Jelly Bean. I am suddenly surrounded by three baby blonds. Sarah has soft curls framing a flower-fairy face. Her twin brother Robert's hair is short and spiky but fluffy like a duckling. Emma has Mum's hair. Fine strands of silk spilling down her back. A fairy-tale princess. She is sunshine.

I look at my golden brother and sisters and feel my darkness eclipse them. I am pitch-black, brow and hair. The happy golden siblings are joined by their happy golden parents. Karen and Derek Harris.

Click, flash, click, flash!

‘Come on, kids, put your arms around Carrie-Anne. Go on, Emma, give her a big birthday kiss.’

If they’re her kids, what am I? Her special baby? Her chosen child? I believed that until I was seven and friends began to pick and tease. I quickly realized that the translation and the truth behind my mother’s words was: abandoned child, the trash baby who was thrown out with the rest of the crap.

This day, my birthday, reminds me that there is a woman out there, and by bone and by blood I belong to her. I am that woman’s shame and regret.

Now I am sixteen and I have surpassed her. I’ve made it, I haven’t messed up. I am clean and safe. I made it. The family history of Carrie-Anne and her mystery mum has a new chapter.

Click, flash, click, flash!

Naomi

I CAN HOLD you any time I like.

'You can hold that little baby any time you like.' That's what the nurse tells me. She's not one of the hard-cop, soft-cop midwives I had before, just this Irish nurse with a tired face. She says it because she sees I'm upset.

Nine months, close as my own breath, now suddenly you're public property. I can't see you, just their backs in hospital gowns. They're sucking out your lungs with a tube as if you're a piece of plumbing.

'We'll take you onto the ward in a minute, then you can hold her any time you like. You'll be sick of her by the time you get her home,' says the nurse in a soothing voice.

They're still concentrating on you, like mechanics round an engine. The brutal sucking sounds make me want to snatch you back, but they have to do it. It's so you can breathe.

Oh God, oh God, suppose you couldn't breathe? And inside I'm praying, Be OK, baby. Please please be OK.

And you are, you are OK, because they lift me onto this trolley and cover me with a thin white blanket, and I get to hold you again. You're in a little nightie now and not so bloody, but your fuzzy hair is still black, deep jet-black like a blackbird's feathers.

It's the first time we've met yet suddenly we're rattling along corridors together, down ramps, in and out of lifts.

It feels dangerous, it feels out of control. Ceilings and light fittings fly over my head. Alarming sights jump out. Someone vomiting into a dish. Closed curtains with moaning

going on behind. Over one woman's bed, a plastic bag of blood drains down through a tube.

The nurse sees me looking. She says, 'You're lucky.'

She can't have read my notes. I don't tell her I'm not lucky. I look at you instead. You're yawning just like a real person, looking into my eyes with a wondering expression, as if I am exactly the way you thought I'd be.

I touch each tiny curled finger with its perfect transparent fingernail. I stroke your black black hair.

'That'll rub off,' laughs the nurse. 'She'll be bald as an egg in a couple of weeks.'

I'm not listening. I've had a startling thought. 'It's my birthday!' I say. 'I just remembered.' I can't believe I almost forgot my own birthday.

The nurse sighs. 'Being a mother will do that to you. Another few months and you'll forget your own name.'

I'm still holding your finger. I want us to go on travelling down corridors like this for ever, never arriving and always always together like this.

They've fastened a plastic bracelet around your wrist. A label inside says *BABY BIRD*.

My baby bird, I think. My present from me to me.

Your eyelids glisten as if they've been smeared with Vaseline. I kiss them. You're my baby bird. My birthday present. My unforgettable sixteenth birthday present.

I open my eyes. The mad clattering of the trolley, the careering sensation stops dead. It's one year later and I'm in a motorway café. It's completely bland and impersonal, which is why I chose it. No one to notice a girl sitting too long over her empty cup.

I keep my eyes on my watch. The gold hand flicks flicks around the dial. Around me, people come and go, wiping tables, setting down trays.

Flash!

I jump. Someone must be taking photographs. But it's just a knife catching the sun. Next time I look at my watch it's 4.30 p.m. You're born! You're out there in the world with your beautiful blackbird hair; somewhere with pink balloons and a cake with one candle and teddy bears. You're born and I can hold you any time I like.

All I have to do is close my eyes.

Carrie-Anne

I OFTEN THINK that if Mum didn't have her 'schedule' gluing her together, she'd shatter like a glass. Sometimes I see the cracks under her exterior of control. As though she is a beautiful piece of tapestry but I can spy the loose threads and knots.

Beads of sweat are sliding down my dad's flushed cheeks as he awkwardly attempts to shift the refrigerator to its new home. My mum has been rearranging the furniture again.

'It's a breath of fresh air.' She sighs. 'Like a whole new house and not a penny spent.'

'No, just Dad's blood, sweat and tears,' I say accusingly, giving my dad's arm a comforting squeeze.

'Your father's just fine, Carrie-Anne. He enjoys doing little things for me. Don't you, sweetheart?'

My father's face has turned a deep shade of crimson. All he can do is nod, puffing hard as he musters all his strength to give the fridge one final push.

'Mum, is Dad going to have a heart attack?' Robert giggles nervously.

'Don't be silly.' She gives Robert a reassuring pat on the head. 'Your father's as fit as he was when he was a young man.'

My stomach begins to churn at the way in which my mum sentimentally glances in my father's direction. The lack of authenticity makes me cringe. Fraud, I think to myself.

'Right! Time to go.'

My father has only just switched the fridge back on. 'What, now? Shouldn't I change my shirt first?'

‘No time. I promised Tim we’d be there early to sort out refreshments.’

Every Thursday evening my parents go to an educational class. This year it is conversational Spanish; last year it was art appreciation. My mother clicks her fingers impatiently, commanding my dad’s attention and submission. ‘Come on. We don’t want to be late for Tim.’

I roll my eyes and slump onto the terracotta-coloured sofa. ‘Tim Shakespeare is such a wanker. You know he pervs over the girls at school all the time. Ugh! And he looks like a slug. A big oversized, gross slug.’

‘Carrie! Don’t be so rude. He’s a lovely man and he’s been very good to you, helping you out with your school work.’

‘You think he’d be so helpful if I wore my skirts a little longer?’

‘You have a mucky mind, young lady. Those gutter thoughts won’t make you any friends. Now make sure Robert, Emma and Sarah brush their teeth before bed. And no scary films.’

I grab the TV remote control and flick it on. When I am in this kind of mood, my defences are impenetrable.

Finally they are gone and I can breathe, finally let go of my resentful adolescent alter ego. I lope upstairs and pounce on my brother. ‘Fancy a game of Monopoly, nappy head?’

On Thursday nights I can relax my scowl. I soften as I play make-believe with my siblings. I become a princess, a lion, a pirate. I travel the landscapes of my brother and sisters’ imaginations, transported to a place, a time, where only we exist.

‘I don’t want to play.’ Jelly Bean’s lower lip begins to tremble. ‘I never win. Even when you try and let me.’

‘I know, we’ll play in teams,’ I suggest, wrapping my arms tightly around her. ‘And you can be on my side – that way we can either win or lose together.’

This is the person I'd like to be. This is the person I could be.

Naomi

FOR SIX DAYS I have the little four-bed ward to myself. The day before I have to leave they wheel in a young woman on a trolley. When the nurses have gone, she heaves herself, wincing, into a sitting position. She's just a girl, maybe my age, sixteen or seventeen. I see her glance at the cot beside her. A baffled expression flickers over her face as if she's wondering where the hell it came from.

I say tentatively, 'Hi, I'm Naomi.'

She blanks me, hunting in her locker for a comb, fussing with her hair. So far as she's concerned, she's alone. She ignores me until the night nurse dims the lights and the ward fills with its eerie green glow, the closest it ever gets to dark.

When I hear her voice I assume she's talking in her sleep. But apparently it's me she's talking to. About how her real dad died and her new dad knocked her about. 'Then I started seeing this boy and fell for a baby and Mum kicked me out. My boyfriend's coloured,' she adds nervously, as if I'll think badly of her for this.

Outside of old movies, I've never heard anyone say 'coloured' before.

'The social worker says he'll help me keep my little boy, but I've got to show I can keep it together. "Find a job and a little flat, see if you can keep it together, Louise," he says.'

Louise goes on, pouring out her grim life history until she's talked herself out, then she goes quiet. I don't think she's sleeping, she's just lying there, trying to make sense of it all. Suddenly she says in a dreamy voice, 'You know all