

The
**Hope
Fault**

A NOVEL IN THREE PARTS

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RAIN

It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.

J.R.R.Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories'

Friday

There's a big black cloud over Cassetown

Iris flicks the car's headlights on, even though it's not long past midday. There's no rain yet, but you can feel it in the air, smell it coming. When they'd left the city that morning, they'd driven three hours south in midwinter sunshine, under skies of unbroken blue. Then just out of Cassetown they drove in under a thick dark cloud that filled the whole of the sky to the south, and turned the day dusk-dark.

Kurt's in the front passenger seat, next to her. In the rearview mirror, Iris sees Luce in profile, headphones framing her face, eyes closed. She's slumped against a pile of bags and bedding, her hand twitching at her phone as it has been all the way south from the city.

Iris looks back from the mirror to the road, sees the sign for the bridge ahead. She feels the lift in the road take them over the bridge, and she flicks the indicator stick with her hand – flicks it without thinking, starts to turn the wheel, the arc of the turn so familiar, though so long untaken – the flick flick flick to turn right, past the FOR SALE sign overlaid with a diagonal red SOLD sticker, into the driveway of their old house.

The big black cloud holds onto its rain while the three of them pile out of the car, and Iris unlocks the front door of the house. They all stand for a moment in the doorway, then they split apart to wander the house. They claim rooms and beds, open and close cupboards, draw curtains. They breathe in its smell.

The rain holds off as Iris watches Luce and Kurt surge out the side gate and down the path to the bay, like the little kids

they were the last time they were all here together. Iris unloads their gear from the car, brings in bags of food they've brought from the city for the weekend, stacks flattened cardboard boxes and packing tape in the hallway. Rain holds off, still. Luce and Kurt reappear, arms loaded with driftwood, pockets tinkling with shells. They bring in wood from the shed at the back, get the stove in the kitchen fired up. Iris makes tea. They all settle in. The kids – her grown-up son, her teenage niece – slink off to their rooms, leave Iris in the kitchen. She stands up, moves to the sink to wash the mugs. Out the window, out the back, above the tin roofs of the shed and the old washhouse, the sky's solid, dark, but still dry.

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It's not until two hours later, when Paul and Kristin's car pulls into the driveway, that the first fat drops of rain start to fall. Iris meets them at the door, kisses Kristin on the cheek, inhales the baby's smell, waves to Paul. She bustles Kristin and the baby inside, out of the rain, into the kitchen, to make more tea, to get the baby settled. By the time Paul has hauled their gear inside – the travel cot, the clip-on high chair, the stroller, all the bags and toys and things a baby needs, all of them stacked down the hallway, next to the empty packing boxes – it's a full-on, pelting deluge.

All inside the house, now

They're all inside the house, now, and have been since the rain. They're in rooms that lead off from the central hall that stretches from the front door, down past the pile of baby things and packing boxes, down and down and down past bedroom doors and cupboard doors, open doors, closed doors, past paintings and photographs and drawings and posters hung and pinned and sticky-taped and blu-tacked to its walls. The hallway ends at a dogleg to the bathroom, then it crooks past the bend and leads on to the kitchen. You can barely see, in the darkness. If you opened the front door, even if you opened all of the doors of all of the rooms that lead onto that hallway, and even if you opened the curtains and blinds and windows of every single one of those rooms, still the hallway would be dark. There's a single light – just a bare bulb on a cord – halfway down, high up, hanging just below the pressed-tin ceiling. It stays on all day and all night. The hall – the whole place – has the beautiful smell of old house, and the sea: of books and papers; faintly of mice, somewhere within a wall; of musty linen, of mothballs, of old face powder (though none is ever used); of wax crayons and pencil sharpenings; and the salt-metal tang of towels from the beach, flung over doorknobs and chair backs and left to dry.

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They're all inside their rooms, now, listening to rain on the roof. It's pissing down, guttering and gushing, sinking into the earth, wetting, muddening, all damp and glorious. Kurt's lying along the sofa in the little room, drawing, his arm curled around – out of habit – to hide the page, though there's no one there to look.

His feet are up on the sofa's arm. A sketchbook rests on his thigh, and one knee is bent to prop the surface to a good angle for drawing. He's pencilled the six-panel page he thought of in the car on the way here. He thinks about getting up, knocking on Luce's door, showing her how he's translated what he imagined into a series of images, a composed page, a piece of story: a scene. But he doesn't get up. He chews his pencil. He listens to the rain. He flicks back through the pages of the sketchbook, past rough ideas, sketches for story lines, glued-in pieces of paper. Some pages are bright and beautiful, inked and fully coloured. Some pages have just a line or two, a shape, a phrase. Some have a wash of watery grey. He flicks forward to a blank page, puts pencil to paper, and starts to draw the rain.

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Three doors down and across the hall, his cousin Luce is on the floor, wedged in the gap between her bed and the window, pillows and sheets and quilt all pulled off the bed and tucked around and under her. Her elbows are pulled in tight against her sides. Her knees are up in a V, and the laptop rests on them. She doesn't think about her fingers on the keyboard, the trackpad, doesn't think about how they move, what they do. She's scrolling through stuff she cached before they left home in case the wireless was shit here. And it's shit here. Of course it is. Her phone beeps, and she grabs it from where it lies on the centre of the bed, thumbs the screen alive, reads the text – *Hey Lulu, busy here so not driving down til tmrw, txt me if u forgot anything, and I can bring. Mum x* – and replies – *K* – then blanks the screen and throws the phone back onto the bed. As the phone hits the mattress – a soft thud, a muffled beep – Luce hears a sharp strange sound from a few rooms away. It's like a parrot trapped in a cupboard, but it's probably the baby, so not her problem. She listens for a moment, her head on its side, but all she can hear is the rain.

One door along, and back across the hall, Kristin grabs the pillow and pushes it to her own face to muffle her shriek, her squawk. Paul pushes into her, kisses her, shushes her, ‘Shhh, shhh, love,’ both of them laughing with keeping quiet, with the unfamiliar bed, with the proximity of the others. Kristin shifts her hips, tensions her body against his. His hand brushes her breast, and her body and mind fill – in a biochemical wave – with their baby, asleep in the room next door, just a thin wall away. She reaches her arm out over her head and places her hand flat against the wall, feels the old wallpaper corrugate against her palm. Then Paul moves faster against her, in her, and her hand raises up until only the fingertips touch the wall, then one finger, then she lifts away completely, and her cry gives up to the high ceiling, to the shush of the rain.

The last time Paul’d been in this bed was with Iris. They were still married, then, but already falling apart. Then, he’d driven down from the city, leaving late – leaving Kristin, and the delicious cheating tangle of her sweaty sheets – arriving in Cassetown long after Iris and Kurt had eaten. He remembers Iris reading a bedtime story to Kurt, remembers trying to walk in quietly, but treading on Kurt’s Lego, strewn everywhere up and down the hallway. He’d stumbled, sworn, kicked Lego into the darkness. Was it really ten years ago? More? Kristin shifts under him. He moves his leg, and knocks the book from the end of the bed to the floor. Kristin had been sitting on the end of the bed, reading the book – a map on the front cover, reaching around its spine to the book’s back – when Paul came to her, after he put the baby down to sleep in the room next door. Their beautiful baby, their nameless girl, lulled to sleep in the rain.

In the middle of the room next door, a thin wall away from her parents, the baby sleeps in her cot, arms L'd either side of her head in surrender. She is fat, fed, loved; she wants for nothing but a name (poor lamb). A few steps away from the baby, Iris has just stepped in, *in loco parentis*, to check her: sleeping on her back, window closed, heater on low, not too many bedclothes. Iris has her arms up, too, in the same position of surrender. She leans in against the thin wall, her palms and forearms pressed into it, her forehead pressed against it. She hears the thud of a book hitting the floor, hears murmurs of love through the wall; she hears the old-man snore of the baby behind her, and she hears the heavy fall of the rain.

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Yes, they're all inside the house, now, while outside the rain still falls. Gutters run with it, downpipes rush.

Iris pushes away from the wall and moves back to the cot, puts her hand lightly on the baby's full belly, feels its rise and fall. The baby snuffles, its breath curdy, sweet, animal.

Iris leaves the room, closes the door gently behind her. Her phone vibrates in her pocket. She fishes it out, unhooks her glasses from the neck of her shirt, swipes, peers: Marti.

Hey Rice, I can't get away til tmrw, txt me if prob. Hope Lulu behaving. Mart x

Iris taps back.

All good, don't worry. Lulu no trouble, as always. See you when we see you. Party starts at 6!! x

She pockets the phone, and stands, quiet, in the middle of the dark hallway. It's been eight years – nine years? – since she's been here, since they let this house, *as is, where is*, furniture, photos and all, for what they thought would be a year at most before they sold it. Their things are still here; have been, all this time. On the wall opposite her is the old glamour portrait of Rosa, signed *Frank Golden, Photographer*; next to it, the framed

dustcover of Rosa's book (the cover from Iris's childhood copy of her mother's book, with *IRIS GOLDEN* written six-year-old-carefully in black crayon, copying the shapes and serifs of her mother's name, *ROSA FORTUNE*, in authorial gold print on the front cover): both so faded, both so familiar.

She reaches her hand out, touches a finger to her mother's face, preserved under glass in the photograph. All the people are inside the house, now, all together, the people she loves.

Iris steps down the hallway, arms out either side of her, feeling her way as if by Braille. Her fingertips trace doors (bedroom doors, cupboard doors, open doors and closed doors), doors into rooms (the baby's room, that used to be Kurt's; Paul and Kristin's room, that used to be hers and Paul's; Luce's room, that's always been Luce's; the little living room that Kurt's in now; the middling room, where she will sleep, that she will share with Marti). Her fingers skip over their paintings and photos, their posters and drawings, past the dogleg at the bathroom, and on into the kitchen. Sitting at the table in the rainy-day-afternoon-dark, she feels their old house hum, with the people all inside it, and outside, only rain.

When Dorothy goes to Oz

Kurt slams down onto the sofa next to Luce, his black notebook clutched to his chest.

‘This is what I’ve been working on,’ he says. ‘It’s not finished, not even close. Just ideas, really, so far.’

He places the book – carefully, with ceremony – onto the table in front of them, opens the cover, reveals the first page. He leans in over it, his back hunched, and Luce leans in with him, mirrors his pose, the shape of him.

She’s used to seeing film storyboards, from her mum; she’s grown up with them, they’re as normal to her as newspapers, or novels. This is loose, though, somewhere in between a comic, a graphic novel, a storyboard. Each frame is drawn in pencil, then inked over, right on the page, with black – no colour, just the black ink over carbon-slate-grey of the underlying pencil. He hasn’t erased the pencil anywhere, so the bones of each frame – its starts and stops, its dead ends and doodles – are there to see, shadows under the black ink.

‘It’s one of the stories Mum used to read me when I was a kid,’ he says, ‘from Rosa’s book. The book of faery-with-an-e tales.’

He lets her leaf through at her own pace. She’s eager to get the story – the sense of it – but stops to linger on this page, and that, taking it all in: not just the words and the pictures, but the shape and flow of it all together.

‘I was trying to sort of reinvent it, you know, for –’ he nods in the general direction of the bedrooms, the rest of the house.

‘The baby?’

‘Yeah. They’re great stories, you know? And they’re in the book. Rosa’s book. But I wanted to retell them, to pass them on.’

Like a tradition. Pass them down through the family.'

'But the baby's not related to Rosa.'

'Yeah, I know. I keep forgetting, but I know. Rosa's *my* grandmother, not the baby's. But the baby's my half-sister, so the connection's there, right? As if Rosa's her half-grandmother, or something.'

'Yeah, not really, but whatever.'

He shoulder-butts her, gently. She leans into him.

'No, no, I get it. Kind of like Rosa is to me, kind of a step-grandmother or something. It's a good idea. This is really good. Like, amazingly good.'

He nods, as if he knows this already.

'So – it's going to be a comic?'

He shakes his head, pushes his finger against the bridge of his glasses.

'Yeah, that's the trouble. Probably comic – graphic faery tale, I suppose – but I dunno. I actually thought film, when I started, like an animated short, playing around with how colour is used. Like, for this one, I want to start in black and white, like this,' he flicks through pages, points at frames, 'then introduce colour here,' he flicks pages again, stops, points at the page, jabbing it with his finger, 'when the colour comes into the narrative: boom!'

On this page, after pages of black ink on white paper, there's a small patch of blue at the edge of one frame, then the colour builds in each of the six frames that follow. Then, on the facing page, the single frame – the final frame of the story – is flooded with blue, a range of shades, filling the frame, filling the page, picking out elements of the intricate image, focusing the eye, calming and exciting at once.

'Oh, wow,' Luce says. 'It's like letting light in after being in the dark.'

'Yeah, that's what I want, that difference, that transformation. A different world, with colour.'

The colour on the page feels disruptive after the clear, clean monotone of black on white. She turns the page and the colour disappears, then pages later it reappears, but green this time, deep green, grass green, sea green all in the final frame. It's an accent, an emphasis, used for effect, with thought.

Kurt leans in and turns the pages.

'I'm not sure about this one though.'

The book is open at a page of full knock-your-socks-off colour. Luce closes her eyes, slowly opens them. Her eyelashes blur the image, then it comes into focus as she opens her eyes wider, until she's staring, eyes focused on the image on the page. It looks unfinished, still in draft. But that's almost its strength. The colour Kurt's used is brighter than watercolour, but with the underlying pencil, the ink outlines, somehow rendering it subtle.

'Oh, it's the swan story! I love that one! It's creepy.'

'Yeah, the colour might be a bit much, though. I think I prefer the single-hue washes, just the blue or green or whatever accents.'

'It's like when Dorothy goes to Oz. Like going to sleep in black and white, and waking up to full colour. Nice; you've done the bit with the swans swimming off. That's beautiful. Oh, and look at the little guy! The mannikin. Nice. I always loved that bit.'

Kurt's bag is on the floor by their feet. He reaches into it and pulls out a book, opens it at a page marked with a flag of coloured paper.

'Yeah, it's not quite the last bit of the story, but I like it. Here: "The black swan and his shining mate swam to the centre of the river, their necks entwined together. The good wise woman leaned in likewise to her little mannikin" – blah blah blah – "four of them, two by two, paired now for life". I always liked that bit too. It kind of works.'

Luce takes the book from him, closes it, looks at the cover. She lifts it, smells it, smiles. She traces the indentations of the embossed words, all but traces of the gold worn from them.

'I haven't seen this for years. We haven't got it. At home. Iris always read me yours. This one.'

'You can borrow it. If you want. I'm trying not to look back at it while I work. I want to leave myself room to move away from the stories, to really retell them my own way. They're really vivid in my head.' He rubs his hand over his hair, musses it behind his head on the right, behind his ear, jabs his finger at his glasses.

Luce doesn't answer him. She's settled into the corner of the sofa, her legs pulled up by her side. She has turned to the first page of the first story in the book.

All my girls, in the kitchen!

Iris, passing the doorway to the big room, sees Kurt and Luce there together. She stops, leans against the door frame, pretends to sort through the collected tat on the sideboard in the hallway – old keys, bits of paper and notepads, feathers and stones, unmatched hose connector pieces – but really, she’s listening, watching. She watches the two of them sitting there, their heads together over an open book, the shapes of their heads – the shape they form together – so familiar. Their hunches match each other, their rounded shoulders containing self; cousins, but they could be siblings. She sees only the crowns of their heads, sees only similarity. The book – landscape, black cover – is open on the low table in front of them. Kurt’s finger points to the page, jabs it three times, then flicks up in the air, fingers pinched in to thumb, then pause – beat – then his hand sweeps to the side, palm down, fingers spread in a gesture of *no way!*, then he jabs his finger twice at the next page. He opens both hands outwards, palms up, arms moving outwards, shoulders lifting in a gesture of showmanship. Luce peers in at the page, then looks up at him, smiling, nodding. She says something. Iris can’t quite hear her, just sees the shape her mouth makes.

Kurt sits back on the sofa, pulls his legs up, crosses them. He’s still talking, but quietly, so Iris can’t even hear the murmur she heard before. Luce picks up the book, is leafing through it. She looks up at him, asks a question, makes a comment, nods at what he says. Kurt gets another book from his bag, opens it, points to something, and they lean in even closer, heads together over the page. Luce takes the book from him, runs

her fingers over the cover. She lifts the book to her face. Iris watches Kurt watch Luce. Luce smiles, says something. Kurt smiles at her. Luce settles in to read the book. When she lifts it, to read it, Iris sees that it is her mother's book, *Miss Fortune's Faery Tales*.

Iris smiles, but she knows to keep her pleasure to herself, at least as far as Luce is concerned. They used to be so close, the two of them. Luce used to call Iris *my fairy godmother*. Luce, the daughter of her best friend; Luce's mum, Marti, her twin-sister-in-law. Her ex-twin-sister-in-law. But for a year, maybe more, Iris hasn't been able to get close to Luce, and she's pretty sure Marti can't, either. *I was like this*, she reminds herself. She knows she was a difficult teenager, closed off. Poor Rosa.

But the kids are still close. They've virtually grown up together, even though Kurt is six years older than Luce. They were in and out of each other's houses all the time; then when their parents split up within three months of each other, that brought them even closer. And Luce will still let Kurt close. He can lean into her, without her flinching away.

Iris moves, now, down the hallway to the kitchen. She sits at the kitchen table, smooths the list in front of her, her attempt to bring some order to the task ahead this weekend. Now that the house has been sold – sooner than they expected – they're here to sort and pack up their belongings, their long-stored junk and treasures. There's nothing like making a list to postpone action, and Iris's list is random, loose, pointless, little nervous thoughts written down in shorthand, out of list-making habit:

Start in sleep-out – what to keep?

Furniture – need anything?? Kurt?

Rosa's stuff...

CHINA = kitchen = KEEP!!

Photos etc (scanning – Luce? Kurt? \$\$)

Plants – cuttings? Dig up => transplant? (Rain!!)

Blanket – unpick? Restart? Finish!!

She starts doodling at bottom right of the page, under the list. She draws an egg; or perhaps it's a stone. She draws a curve around the egg-stone's equator, another below to twin it, then lines that radiate out and down, then another curve, until the egg-stone wears a stiff, sticking-out skirt, a ballerina's tutu – a doodle from her childhood, one she hasn't drawn for years. Down from the egg-stone skirt she draws thin legs, one straight, one bent up to rest foot on knee, each leg ending in a ballet slipper, with ribbons crisscrossing up the spindle-thin legs. Thin arms attach at the top third of the egg-stone, and loop up to arch above it, framing it in the fifth position, *en haut*.

Luce walks into the kitchen. Iris puts her arm over the stone ballerina, puts her head up, smiles at Luce. Luce ignores her, opens the fridge, stands staring into it. She closes it again, walks to the pantry, opens it, closes it, opens it again, then goes back to the fridge.

'Hungry?'

'No.'

'There's plenty of fruit. Crackers? Cheese? We'll do dinner soon.'
'It's fine.'

Luce pours water into a glass, leans against the sink drinking it. In between mouthfuls, she bites the pad of her left thumb.

'What've you been looking at? With Kurt?'

'Nothing. You know. Stuff.' Luce puts the glass down on the sink. 'Mum's not coming. She texted.'

'She texted me, too, maybe an hour ago. Said she'd be here tomorrow.'

'Yeah. Same.'

'She's so busy, poor old Mart. Do you need anything? That Marti was going to bring down for you?'

'Nah. I'm okay.' She bites her thumb. 'Just –'

The baby cries. They hear it start with a whinge and a whimper, rising quickly to a full-on wail.

'Poor love, waking up in a strange room.' As Iris starts to get

up, they hear a door open, hear Kristin's voice *oh bubba, Mama's coming, it's alright bubba*. They hear the baby's cry gurgle to a stop, hear Kristin's *shhh, shhh, Mama's here*, hear her walking up the hallway towards them. She appears in the doorway holding the googy-faced baby on her hip, both of them with bed hair, neither of them caring. Kristin is wearing yoga pants and a t-shirt. Her feet are bare.

'She's had a good sleep,' Iris says.

'Not *too* good though, eh bubba? Hopefully she'll still sleep tonight.'

Kristin goes to put the kettle on, and Iris stops her, takes the kettle, fills it, flicks it on.

Paul appears behind Kristin, slips his arm around her waist, and kisses the top of the baby's head. The baby reaches her hand out and presses his nose, as if to push him away. Paul's days of bed hair are, like his hair, a thing of the past, but he's grinning a sated grin.

'Look at you, all my girls, in the kitchen! My har-eem. I'm a lucky man.'

'Euwgh!' Luce covers her ears with her hands.

Kristin belts Paul on the bum with her free hand. 'You're so lucky you can cook us dinner, then.'

'With pleasure. What is there?'

Paul starts poking around in the boxes of food they've brought, and the fridge, and Kristin starts bossing him around, telling him what he'll do, in that way she does, that Iris has become used to. It's been ten years since Iris and Paul's marriage fell apart, a year longer than that since Paul fell in love with Kristin. The messy years were over quickly, at the beginning, and – truth be told – they weren't even very messy. They all adjusted. They all got on with it. And they're all just family now. All together, all just family.

And here they are, to get this job done now, all of them in the house, all ready to clean it up, to pack it up, to split it up and sort it out, and to say goodbye to this place.