

# Sophie Howram – Clarke - Y8

My mother was a strange woman, caught in a perpetual state of wandering within her mind. My father tried to justify her coldness, telling me stories of her prophetic nature. He'd weave tales of fortune-telling, crystal balls, dreams come true, glimpses into fate.

I'd listen, eyes wide, scarcely believing what I heard.

"Can she tell my fate?"

"She has."

"What was it?"

He never answered that. Frown lines grew along his forehead, from the years of furrowing his brow and glancing away from me. I'd lean forwards, hungering to know. Would I be good? Could I be more?

He would hurry the conversation on.

I never realised he was deflecting until it caught me between the ribs. I would rush on, awestruck.

"How can she tell the future?" I'd whisper desperately.

And he'd shake his head, like I was being foolish, and reply with something along the lines of, "It's not our place to know."

This was never a good answer. I would feel that ache, familiar and stinging, then crane my neck to look at my mother's pale face. Occasionally, she'd look back, and more rarely, she'd offer me a tender look, like there was an open wound on my face I had not yet noticed. I wondered what she saw in my plain form. I preferred it when she would look sourly, eyes dark as coffee beans.

Fortunately, that soft look lessened when my brother was born.

He was born looking like a loaf of bread. I stood by Mother's bedside, in a cold hospital that smelt of chlorine.

I'd never seen my mother so alive. Typically, she was deep burgundy, hawk-ish eyes, half-formed secrets. Now, she was feverish, whispering loose, warm words, brushing her nimble fingers against her newborn's button nose. Her eyes had an absent light, puzzling over her brand-new child, as if she were cataloguing his life.

I grasped my father's hand. A shiver crept down my spine.

"Is she telling his future?" I asked softly, leaning on my tiptoes - a bird almost in flight.

He flinched, ever-so-slightly. "Yes, she might be," he said, terrible as that imaginary wound I bore. "Maybe she'll tell you about it."

At the end, it was raining. Typical, but true. The sky sat low on the earth, clouds like whales, drifting lethargically across the surroundings. I had a wool coat on, which was getting terribly soggy.

That morning, I'd been woken by my mother, with sharp almond nails. In one arm, she cradled her precious little boy. I stared at both distastefully.

"Get up," she said.

I did not have to answer. She dressed me roughly. My shoes were untied - I was scared they were going to fall off.

She called a taxi. It brought us, quite quickly, to her shop. A tall, shabby building with a sign hanging above the door: tarot readings and fortune telling. That was the gist of it, at least.

It was dark; the only light was the smeared lamps, blurry gold.

She dragged me through corridors, suffocating walls. My brother wept, but his cries were ignored. I felt guilty pleasure at that; maybe his downfall had come unusually early. Maybe he wasn't so great as my mother once thought. Maybe - I dared to hope - she had brought us here to get rid of him.

Looking back now, those hopes were childish and vindictive. They made me feel a bit ill.

After the red velvet labyrinth, we stopped in a room with plum-red curtains. It was still raining. Incense burnt, but all I could smell was wet wool and dread. The filthy hopes I had harboured slipped away from me; my mother locked the door.

Hairs prickled on the back of my neck.

"You didn't tell your father, did you?" she rasped.

There was something in her pocket.

"About what?"

"This trip."

She was moving around me, like a hunter.

"How could I?" I whispered. "I don't know what this is."

There was a hand on my shoulder, guiding me to sit. My lungs struggled for breath.

I sat.

My mother sat in the seat opposite me, and my brother was in a wicker baby basket beside me. She looked at me like I was bleeding, and I had not noticed. It had been a long time since I had seen such a tender expression gracing her features. Even now, I cradle it sometimes.

Her mouth opened, but no words came out. She tapped her spidery fingers on the table.

"I saw your future," she said. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

She glanced at my brother.

"The fates told me one of my children would be great."

And the other?

"And the other would be nothing."

Oh.

"What will you do," I asked tremulously, "with the other?"

Her smile stretched thin.

"I'm sorry," my mother told me, "But it has to be done."

There was a knife in her hand.

I barely remember it. All I know is this:

It was by my throat.

My hands wrapped around her wrist.

And in one, fluid motion, I dragged the future away from my neck. My noose, my ending, pulled towards the baby brother that would've been great.

He stopped crying.

I wish it never happened, of course. It was a monstrous thing, to be so attached to my own life, to cling so pathetically to being someone, that I would rob my own blood of the chance to do the same.

But sometimes, I think, secretly—

I would do it again.

