

I can't let go of them—the *good, right things*, especially—because if I do ... I'll turn into a cloud and I'll float away, and a storm will come and blow me to nothing.

The *good, right things* are the most important. One day, people will notice I'm doing them. One day, people will see what I do, and they will see me. And then they will like me, or at least ...

They will stop leaving me.

chapter one

Monday's good, right thing: Today, I didn't remind Esme in the ice cream shop that I asked for vanilla yoghurt, even when she gave me hokey pokey. I don't really like hokey pokey, but I didn't want to make her feel bad. I didn't mention that I asked for a cup, too, instead of a cone. I think maybe she was having a bad day.

Esme Rogers has blue hair like the secret feathers some ducks have—the ones that look like glistening eyes. I used to think they were for scaring predators. Dad says they're to attract fish. Esme uses her blue hair to attract boys, I think. Every week there's a new one, on a stool by the ice cream shop counter, looking at her like she's the treat.

They're gone a few days later and she always looks as blue as her hair, afterwards. I think she loves each one of them, and she's super sad when they go.

I don't know why they would go. I think Esme is magical.

I'd like her to be my friend, even though she's fifteen and I'm only eleven-and-a-bit. The first time I met Esme, it felt like our souls connected.

I don't think she wants it, though. Maybe, if she wanted to be my friend, she'd remember I never order hokey pokey. I won't remind her, though. I don't want to make her even more blue and, besides, if I keep her a little bit happier, or at least not so miserable, that can be Monday's *good, right thing*, and it can add to the others. Even if she won't be my friend, hopefully she'll still smile in that sparkling way and let me smile back.

I write it down, in my small brown notebook. Monday's *thing* is done. Now I can breathe. And I can walk, with my not-quite-right ice cream, all the way home and feel safe.

I'll give my cone to Dad, if it's not too melted, and that will grant me extra points. Dad likes ice cream cones. It's a thing. He'll be happy with me, if I give him the cone. He mostly always is, anyway, but this will make things even better.

Maybe he'll cook us mashed potato for tea. I won't ask, though. For one thing, I'm probably way too old to love mashed potato this much, way too old for hokey pokey, too. Way too old for all the things that make me feel a little less tight inside.

For another thing, I don't want to ask Dad about the mashed potato because he's busy.

Dad's busy because he is important. He's a teacher and he has just been made the principal of a ridiculously fancy school in the city. I don't go there. I go to a school where they're

meant to be nice to people like me. A school where we don't use plastic and where we eat lentils for lunch out of wooden bowls and we say a prayer for bugs if we step on them. A school that's meant to be "gentle" and "nurturing," where we don't wear uniforms, where we talk about our feelings a lot and everyone is *kind* and *accepting* and *welcoming*. I tell Dad they are all those things but, really, it's not true. They're not mean, in particular. There are no bullies or cliques. Nobody hassles me, except for Indigo. They just don't know I am there.

I'm very small. But that's not it.

It's not my pale brown hair, either, like peeling tree bark. It's not my sticking-out limbs and the fact I still look nine or ten at a push. It's not my reading glasses or my rabbit teeth. The reason nobody sees me, at the Albatross School, is that I'm not special.

I'm not like Annaliese, who sings like an angel and looks like something from a dream, or Flynn, who is cool and charismatic and destined to run the country. I'm not even Indigo, whose wildness marks her out.

My school is a school for special people, and I am not one of those.

I am not destined to run the country or win a Nobel Prize or make art installations that they show at the Louvre.

I'm not destined for anything. I never was.

I don't sing or dance or make sculptures of trees and I can't paint or even whistle, and my acting is terrible. I can sort of write things, I think, but nobody knows that.

I write things in my brown notebook. Things that happen and things I wish would happen and things that never will, because they involve unicorns and shapeshifters and portals to other worlds.

And I write down my *good, right things*. Another thing I should have grown out of, like the mashed potato and the hokey pokey. So many things I should have left behind, now I'm this age, this nearly teenager, nearly grown-up, nearly, nearly age.

But I can't. I can't let go of them—the *good, right things*, especially—because if I do ... I'll turn into a cloud and I'll float away, and a storm will come and blow me to nothing.

The *good, right things* are the most important. One day, people will notice I'm doing them. One day, people will see what I do, and they will see me. And then they will like me, or at least ...

They will stop leaving me.

Dad is in his study when I get home and my ice cream isn't too melted and he smiles when I give it to him, and then he says, "Did Esme mess up your order again, Petal?"

Dad calls me "Petal" because my name is Aster and it's a

kind of flower and I pretend I'm too old for that, too—too old for my dad to have such a childish, silly name for me. But, really, I like it. I like having a nickname. Most of the kids at school have one, but nobody has bothered to try making one for me.

I like being Petal.

And I like it when Dad ruffles up my hair, when he says it, even though it makes my scalp tingle. I like it when he tells me that he doesn't have much work left to do and he'll come and make tea soon and I should tell him how school was before he goes back to it.

I don't tell him I really want mashed potato.

I do tell him that school was good. It's a lie, of a kind. But, at the same time, it isn't one.

It wasn't *not good*. It just wasn't *anything*.

I didn't speak in class, and the teachers didn't call on me, because they know I won't say anything. I think they don't want to embarrass me. It's nice of them, if you think of it that way.

I think, also, that they don't know what to do with me. The teachers at the Albatross School know what to do with exceptional kids. They don't know what to do with a cloud; a mouse; a pale, wilting flower.

But also, they don't call on me because all the other kids

are loud, and they drown me out. They swallow me up.

At recess and lunch time, I hid in the hole in the tree that nobody knows about but me.

I'm too old for holes in trees. I'm too old for closing my eyes and imagining that the hole is a magic doorway to another world.

Other girls in my year have ear piercings. I'm too scared of needles.

Other girls in my year go to concerts. I don't like crowds.

Other girls in my year are planning for university. I don't even know who I am now, let alone who I'll be in seven years.

Other girls in my year wear skirts and high heels and makeup and look even older than they are. I am small and I feel like I will always be small, inside and out.

Other girls in my year make up songs and they sound like the songs on the radio—songs with film clips, songs that make people stand and cheer.

I made up a small song, while I sat in the tree, but it was rubbish. It sounded like a discordant jumble and maybe that's the only thing my brain knows how to do.

The song was about a girl in a corner, curled tight into a shell, into a nautilus shell, curled in the only small square of light. And the light is retreating, slowly—coming to join the

girl—and it is chased by the shadows. Slowly the shadows eat the light and the shadows eat the girl and she is consumed. And nothing she did in her life before that moment—no *good, right thing*—can stop the shadows.

Nothing can stop the shadows.

They reach out their fingers,

Their tendrils and claws

And I am a nautilus, curled on the floor

But my shell is gone, now.

I'm nothing but skin

And the shadow claws scratch me

And pull me within ...

And there is no good, right thing to ...

I stopped the song, then, because it occurred to me that I had not done any *good, right things* yet and that made me stop breathing for a moment.

I ate sandwiches, in the tree hole, that I made in the morning, but they tasted of cotton wool because I hadn't done a *thing* yet.

I ate an apple, too, but I ignored the chocolate that Dad had sneaked into my lunch box, after I was done packing it. We're not meant to have junk food in our lunch boxes, because

we're a *Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds* school. Dad knows about the no-junk-food rule, but he thinks it's ridiculous. He says, in his day, kids brought nothing to school but Vegemite sandwiches, lamingtons and Smith's chicken chips. His grandmother was at school during the war and sometimes ate nothing more than white bread with margarine for lunch, and a chocolate crackle for a treat.

"She's still alive, at ninety-four, and she'd never heard of quinoa or kale," he tells me. "So, eat the chocolate, Petal."

Some days, I can't believe my dad is a principal. At home, he's almost never sensible. I think it's because of being the only adult in our house and being the youngest of all his brothers and sisters and being mostly around children at his school. Aunt Noni said, once, that maybe Dad acts silly to cheer me up, and to make me be bold. He wants me to be braver and wilder and louder and more daring. Instead, I'm quiet, like a flower, and I break as easily, and nobody sees me. I'm a child in all the worst ways you can be a child. What she said was right and it made me feel horrible. I want to be what Dad wants me to be. Instead I have to be a flower.

I am Petal. Dad says my nickname like it's a good thing but it's not at all. I am Petal and I am soft, and I break, and I hide among all the other flowers that are bigger and bolder and brighter and nobody sees me at all.

When Aunt Noni saw that she'd made me feel bad, she told me, "Oh, Aster. I didn't mean you should change, or

that I think you're not perfect just as you are, or that I think you're not a normal eleven-year-old ...”

“I'm not a normal kid,” I told her. “I'm four-years-old and I'm forty-years-old and I'm nothing in between and everybody wishes ...”

I didn't say the rest of it.

I didn't say that it wasn't only Dad who wished I could be normal. Mum wished it, too.

That's why she left us.