

Windward

By Bea Aalbers-Davey

The air is thick, muggy with fog, the sort of mist that crawls on skin like oil and smells like dirt.

Cate takes an obnoxiously deep breath.

"Nice view," Simone says, dully.

Valentine kicks a pebble off the side of the cliff. It *plunks* quietly on the sand.

"Wonder if anyone's died here," Valentine says, rustling in the pockets of her tan peacoat.

"Oh, don't say that," Cate mutters, sinking to the ground and folding her legs to her chest while she peers over the edge. Her shiny loafers slide in the wet grass.

"Probably," Simone says, kicking a nearby bush. It's scraggly, and gets caught in her sock, pricking her ankle. She picks out the spines with her fingernail.

"Christ," Cate groans, rubbing her face and smudging her mascara, "could you two talk about something else?"

"What is there to talk about?" Valentine clicks her lighter, then shakes it, clicks it again.

"I don't know. The lake?" Cate offers.

"The lake is full of dead things," Valentine says, still struggling with the lighter.

"Ocean floor is detritus," Simone interjects, leaning against a nearby cedar to pull the last few brambles out of her sock.

"Bugs drown all the time. That bush is dead. That tree is dead, or mostly dead. Your homework is made of dead trees. There's a bag down there, that's made of dead dinosaurs. Your hair is dead."

Cate touches her hair, which is bleached and dry like straw. It's rough beneath her fingers. She bites her bottom lip, rubbing her tongue along the back of her front teeth. "I just thought maybe you'd want to have a nicer conversation."

"About what? Last week's sermon?" Valentine lights her cigarette, finally, and inhales through her teeth in a hiss. She slips her lighter back into her pocket. "Ah. Your math homework?"

Cate sneezes, putting her head between her knees, looking sideways somewhere past Valentine. Valentine laughs, stiffly, pinching her cigarette between her fingers while she exhales, head up, eyes closed.

Simone plucks it from her hand and flicks it off the cliff.

"Hey!"

"Whoops," Simone says, flatly.

"That's littering," Cate says.

"She's right," Valentine says, leaning over the edge of the cliff and peering down. *Cliff* might not be the right word: it's more of an erosion, packed dirt and sandstone washing away with the waves at high tide, slow and steady. It isn't particularly tall, but it's certainly tall enough for them to know better. "Don't you care about the ecosystem?"

"Go get it, then."

"I didn't put it there." Valentine's toes tingle. Perhaps she should step back from the ledge. She doesn't, of course.

"Dad could see it." Cate lays flat on her stomach, sticking her head over the edge, hands crossed over her back.

"He never walks here anymore," Valentine says, with unearned confidence.

"Sure he does," Cate says. She picks a blade of grass and drops it, watching it float down to the beach.

"No he doesn't," Valentine says, just to be contrary.

"He brought me a rock the other day," Cate says. "A fossil."

"He did," Simone confirms, ripping English ivy off a mossy, degrading fencepost. The glossy leaves are limp with rain.

"He'll see it, and then we'll all get in trouble, and you'll never say it was you so he'll just check all our backpacks again. And then he won't let me go to the museum next week." Cate sneezes again. "I want to see the new frogs."

"Christ, do you actually want me to go get it?" Valentine kicks away a clump of dirt, watching it tumble down and scatter on impact.

"Yeah," Cate says.

Simone nods.

"No way," Valentine says.

"Come on. It's only a seven-minute walk around," Cate replies.

"You do it, if you care so much."

"It's your garbage."

"Once again, *I didn't put it there!*"

"Dad doesn't want us up here," Simone says, holding one of the ivy leaves to the overcast sky. She peers at it with one eye. It glows faintly green. "You should get it."

"When have you ever cared about him?" Valentine scoffs.

"I care about Dad," Cate says, plucking a disappointingly three-leaved clover.

"Cause you're the baby and he likes you," Valentine bites. The wind flicks a strand of hair out of her bun. She stuffs it behind her ear.

"I'm not a baby," Cate says.

"You're thirteen, Catie."

"You're only sixteen!"

That's a stalemate. Cate glares at Valentine. Valentine sticks out her tongue. Cate sticks her tongue out in return.

From below there is a loud shuffling sound, then a noise like a rainstick, then a gentle *thump*.

"I got it," Simone shouts. She holds the damp cigarette aloft. It's slimy, and beginning to disintegrate between her fingers. Valentine's lipstick has left a burgundy ring around the shaft.

"Oh my God," Cate gasps.

"Good for you," Valentine says, flatly.

"Are you okay?" Cate yells.

"I'm fine," Simone yells back. She dusts sand off her trousers, tucks the rotting cigarette into her pocket, and sets about climbing the cliff again. From this close, the lake smells strongly of algae and mud.

"Be careful," Cate shouts.

Simone hoists herself onto a short sandstone ledge, sand granules digging into the meat of her palms. Valentine glances down at her, trying very hard to look like she doesn't care. Cate chews on a strand of crackly hair, scratching at her jaw with stubby, ragged nails. Her eyes are locked on Simone, who grabs a sturdy root and makes a sideways hop to another foothold.

Cate crouches down and extends a hand. Valentine mirrors her without thinking.

Simone bites her lip, scrabbling up a fairly flat section, her foot precariously jammed in a small crack. Something jabs under her left thumbnail and there's a jolt down her arms – she's slipping, she realizes, her sneakers squeaking down the sandstone.

"Simone!" Cate yelps, extending her arm, the inside of her elbow pulling taut.

Simone's foot pinches in the crevice, and her fingers have left scrapes in the soft stone, and in the half-second before she falls, she jumps to grab Cate and

Valentine's forearms, pushing off with the balls of her toes, reaching, reaching, reaching out.

Simone's palms slap against solid skin, and she grabs on tightly. Valentine's nails dig into her arm. Her legs flail for a moment, before she braces them against the cliff face again, her pulse so strong she can feel it in her ears.

Cate counts down, and on three they pull back and Simone launches forward and up, up, up.

They land, sprawled out on the wet grass, with a heavy, bruising *thump*.

For a moment, it's quiet except for their haggard breathing, with Cate and Valentine on their backs and Simone on her front, collecting dew like tarps. Cate's head is pulsing, and her shoulder burns. There are little half-moon imprints on Simone's arm.

Valentine giggles.

Simone groans as she fumbles for her pocket. She retrieves a handful of greyish slimy mush, which she promptly deposits in Valentine's open hand.

"Ew," Valentine says, shoving it into her pocket. It feels like a smashed snail. Simone wipes her hand on Valentine's wool coat.

"You inhale that," she says, rolling onto her back with a grunt. Her shoulder blade pokes into the dirt.

Valentine doesn't say anything.

"You hear about Jess Fenton?" Cate asks, trying to divert the conversation. She coughs, her throat raw like a paper cut. She takes a gulp of the humid, heavy air.

"Not recently," Valentine says, staring up at a layer of murky cloud that looks like a rabbit head. "What'd she do?"

"Bit someone," Simone fills in.

Valentine lets out a snort.

"Mr. O called her Jessica and she chomped down on his forearm, apparently," Cate says. "She got suspended."

"I didn't think she'd resort to biting." Valentine laughs, scrunching her nose. "She's nasty, though."

"She's nice to me," Cate protests.

"Really?" Valentine props herself up on one arm and looks over at Cate.

"She dissected my frog for me in biology! I couldn't do it."

"Baby," Valentine says, gently knocking her knuckles against Cate's cheek. Cate grumbles.

"You're in bio with a junior?" Simone asks.

"Got bumped to accelerated eleventh," Cate explains. "And she did the lab write-up for me when I was sick."

"She slapped me in freshman year," Valentine says. "Gym class. Gymnastics unit. Got me right across the cheek. Made eye contact. *Absolutely* not an accident."

"Huh," Cate says. "I guess she contains multitudes, or whatever."

"I guess," Valentine says, dropping down to her back again and inhaling.

A high-pitched bird trills. The cedars creak.

"We should get home," Simone says.

"We should," Cate echoes.

None of them move.