

The Ally Ally O

THE BIG SHIP SAILS ON THE ALLY ALLY O, your youngest sister is singing, the Ally ally o, the Ally ally o, the big ship sails on the Ally ally o on the last day of September. Al-ly ally o, she belts out each time she gets to the chorus, Al-ly ally o, al-ly ally ally o-o-o.

You want to shout at her to shut up. You put your thumb over your right ear and lean your forehead against the window so you can concentrate. You think you're on the road that leads to the Ice Bowl. But you can't be sure. It's raining outside, and the smear of raindrops on the window makes it impossible to read street names when they flash past. Besides, everywhere looks different now you're playing the game. Familiar places appear at unexpected times, as if distances have somehow gone wrong, or they fail to appear at all, because you've turned off the wrong road too early, or onto the right road too late. You used to love the Getting Lost game. When your mum suggested playing it, you and your middle sister, then your only sister, would be beside yourselves with excitement. Once you ended up at the Pickie Fun Park and pedalled all around the lake on

a giant plastic swan. Another time there was a carnival at Lady Dixon Park with helium balloons and face-painting. You a tiger; your sister a butterfly. The warm, waxy feeling of the colour on your cheeks.

Your mum must have planned it, you realise now, somehow steered your choices. You don't think she has a plan today. How can she: she was right in the middle of the ironing, huge drifts of still-damp bedsheets, a cassoulet half-done on the stove and the radio droning when she said, I need to get out of here. The three of you, chasing each other round the dining-room table and out through the conservatory and back, stopped and looked.

The Captain says it'll neverever do, neverever do, neverever do, sings your youngest sister, more hyper with every passing minute.

Shut up, you scream inside your head. Shut up.

Your whole body feels hot and damp. Your leggings are made out of wool, and they're itching your legs. You press your forehead into the window.

The road to the Ice Bowl: it has to be. Maybe you're going to Indiana Land, the rope bridges and the ball pit and the Freefall. For a moment you feel the sensation of sitting on the edge of it, legs dangling, arms crossed over your chest, before the attendant yells at you to go, go, go.

But your mum said she'd never take you there again after the rumours there was a rat in the ball pit. It was meant to be living off spilled Slush Puppies and leftover chips. It was a monster rat, a mutant. It was a whole family of rats. It bit a baby in the soft-play area. Dragged it under the plastic

balls and gnawed its eyes out. Even the mums were talking about it at the school gates.

The Captain says it'll neverever do on the last day of September. Al-ly ally o, al-ly ally o, al-ly ally ally o-o-o—

Your youngest sister breaks off. Mum, she says. What does Ally ally o mean?

Well, says your mum. I'd say it's the Atlantic Ocean. 'Ally' for Atlantic and 'O' for ocean. And the big ship's the *Titanic*. Left at these lights or straight on?

Straight on, your middle sister says.

Okey-doke, says your mum, and accelerates.

Pedal to the metal, flat to the mat, your middle sister says, imitating your dad, and your mum laughs. For the flash of a second, you hate your sister.

It's not the *Titanic*, you hear yourself saying. The *Titanic* sailed from Belfast on the second of April and from Southampton on the tenth of April at noon. You can't help adding, It might be the SS *Arctic*, though. The SS *Arctic* sank at the end of September. It was the fastest, most famous ship of its day, but it collided with the French steamer *Vesta* off the coast of Newfoundland and almost all on board perished.

Your mum glances at you in the rear-view mirror. Is that from that book? she says.

No, you say, too quickly. From school.

Your face is hot with the lie, and you're sure she can see it. It's true, you say. After the SS *Arctic* the shipping lines promised to reform their safety provision but the *Titanic's* tragedy was that she was considered by all to be unsinkable.

Mum! your middle sister says.

Oh sorry, your mum says. Never mind, look, there's another set of lights coming up ahead.

I want to choose, your youngest sister says. How come I never get to choose?

You do get to choose.

No, I never.

Girls, your mum says. Then she says to your youngest sister, Okay, straight on or right?

Your youngest sister wriggles in her booster seat and claps with glee. Right, she says. I mean straight on. No, right.

Are you sure? your mum says.

Yes. No . . . yes. Stop laughing at me. Mum, tell her to stop laughing at me.

I'm not laughing at you.

Yes, you are. You're laughing inside your face.

Laughing inside my face?

You are.

Girls, I'm warning you.

I didn't do anything.

Yes she did!

Right, your mum says. I'm turning right. She flicks on the indicator and pulls into the lane for turning right. Your mum's voice is suddenly too bright again. I need to get out of here. Get your shoes on, all of you. I've had enough of this.

Your whole body is itching now.

The Captain of the SS *Arctic* was Captain James Luce, you say. He went down with his ship standing atop a wooden box, but in a quirk of fate it bobbed to the surface, and he

clung on until he was rescued two days later. His sickly son, Willie, however, perished. All the children on board were drowned, and all the women too, because the panicking crew had scrambled into the lifeboats themselves.

You're banned from reading that book, your middle sister says. Isn't she, Mum?

A, I'm banned from reading it before bed. You can feel your voice trembling. And B, I wasn't reading, I was reciting.

Mum? your middle sister says.

You make your eyes meet your mum's in the mirror. You can't work out her expression. You used to think she really did have eyes in the back of her head: that was how she knew what you and your sister were up to. It was almost a disappointment to realise how it worked.

You know all that by heart, your mum says.

You can't tell if it's a question or a warning. Yes, you say.

You wait for your mum to say something, but she doesn't, and your middle sister, who's twisted round to look at you through the gap in the seats, turns back with a huff of disappointment.

The World's Greatest Ever Disasters! You bought it with your birthday book tokens, and at first your parents laughed at your choice. The *Titanic* is in there, and the SS *Arctic*. The *Hindenburg*, 6 May 1937. The explosion of the ICMESA reactor in Meda, Italy, on the tenth of July 1976, which led to a cloud of dioxin, one of the most toxic chemicals known to man, being released into the atmosphere. The Coconut Grove nightclub fire on the twenty-eighth of November 1942, which started when a teenage busboy

tried to turn back on a lightbulb that had been unscrewed by a couple wanting to kiss in the dark.

On the blank pages at the end you've made a secret list of world disasters that have happened since the book was published. Only the very worst ones make it in there, the ones where hundreds of people die at a time, where whole cities are wiped out in one fell swoop, whole swathes of the world destroyed forever. Typhoons, monsoons, earthquakes, mud slides. Stunt planes colliding at air shows and smashing into the crowd. Drilling platforms in the North Sea exploding. Toxic gas leaks. On the twenty-sixth of April 1986, the meltdown of the fourth reactor at the Chernobyl plant. There was radiation detected over Scotland within hours. On a clear Sunday you can see the coast of Scotland from Crawfordsburn, as if it's no distance at all. Your most recent addition, 24 March 1989, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in the Prince William Sound. You keep the book hidden at the bottom of the piano stool and only take it out when you really have to. Sometimes it's a relief to know it's there. Sometimes you wish your parents would ban it entirely.

The road is narrowing as it climbs into the hills. The rain is coming down more heavily now, lashing against the right-hand side of the car. You can feel the car shake, as if it's trembling.

Are we lost yet? your youngest sister says.

I think we might be, says your mum.

It's only a game, you tell yourself. It's only a stupid game. You're in the countryside proper now. Hedges and mud and fields. The road twists and turns, climbing higher and higher.

We're going to have a great view of the city in a minute girls, your mum says.

How do you know? your middle sister says, accusingly. If you don't know where we are, then how do you know where we'll be?

Sorry, your mum says, but she catches your eye in the rear-view mirror and you know it's deliberate.

The car rounds a bend, and your mum slows right down. There you go, she says.

You crane to look out her side of the car.

What is it? your youngest sister says. Where?

I can see some cows, your middle sister says, still sulking, and some fields and some rain. Big wow.

On a good day, your mum says, the view from here is the best view in the world. On a good day, you can see all of the city, Samson and Goliath standing over the docks, and Queen's Island, and all the way across the lough to Cave Hill and Divis and the Black Mountain, all of it, as if you could just scoop it all up and hold it in the palm of your hand.

I thought you said you didn't know where we were, your middle sister mutters.

I didn't know until we got here that this was where we were going, says your mum.

The Black Mountain, your youngest sister says. Have I ever been there?

No, says your mum. No, you haven't.

Why not?

Well, says your mum, I don't know my way around that part of the city.

Can we go there one day, but?

One day, says your mum.

For a moment, the only noise is the click-click of the indicator and the windscreen wipers going back and forth. Your youngest sister doesn't know yet that 'one day' means not ever. She doesn't know that there are places that you never ever go, not on purpose and not even by accident. One wrong turn, one wrong consonant; that's all it takes.

When I first came over, your mum says suddenly, your dad drove me up here at dusk, to watch the lights come on all over the city. That's when I thought, Yes, I could live here after all.

You always tell us to grow up and get away, you say.

Do I? your mum says. No I don't.

You do.

You do, Mum; your middle sister chimes in.

Well. I suppose I do, sometimes. Maybe all parents do. We probably don't mean it literally. We probably just mean, make your world a better place.

She sits for a moment. Then she shakes her head and sighs, checks the mirrors and turns the indicator off, starts driving again.

Are we going home now? your youngest sister says.

Your mum looks at the dashboard clock. Seventeen minutes past four, it says.

I don't know, your mum says. Do you think we can find our way back?

Your youngest sister drums her heels against the seat in pleasure. Al-ly ally o! she screeches.

Oh not that song again, your middle sister says. She's like a broken record, isn't she, Mum?

I am not, your youngest sister says. Mum, tell her to say sorry.

She didn't mean it, your mum says. Did I ever tell you, we used to sing that song when I was a little girl?

Really? says your youngest sister, forgetting to be offended.

I always used to assume it was about the *Titanic*, says your mum. But I stand corrected.

Did you really used to sing it? your youngest sister says.

We had a game that went along with it. You all held hands and wove in and out of each other's arms, then tumbled down in a heap at the end. I haven't thought about that in years. We used to play it in our street, a dozen of us at a time.

In Manchester? says your middle sister.

In Manchester, your mum says.

When you were a little girl before you grew up and met Dad and moved here and had us, says your youngest sister.

Yes, your mum says. I suppose that's about the sum of it.

The road takes you past Four Winds, where your piano teacher used to live, and then joins the big dual carriageway. Who can get us home from here? your mum says, and your youngest sister says, Me! Me!, and your middle sister says, Boring, it's just straight all the way now.

Your youngest sister is no longer singing, but the song plays on a loop in your head.

We all dip our heads in the deep blue sea.

MULTITUDES

It wouldn't be blue, you think. There would be thick walls of grey-green fog and the waters black, choppy with rolling white-capped waves, the temperature reaching freezing. Huge jagged dirty-looking icebergs looming out of nowhere. Your dad says the joke about the *Titanic* is, She was fine when she left us.

With the heel of your hand you rub a patch of the window clear of condensation, but there's hardly anything to see, the bright moons of oncoming headlights, the red of tail lights, the rain.