

Jam Street

Femke Vindevogel

An extract pp 7-28

Original title Confituurwijk
Publisher Uitgeverij Van Oorschot, 2019

Translation Dutch into English
Translator David Doherty

© Femke Vindevogel/David Doherty/Uitgeverij Van Oorschot/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

p 7-28

I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another, Virginia Woolf wrote. I know the feeling. This self of mine is way too tight, it digs into my flesh. It's time to claim my lifelong right of exchange and send it back to the factory. I'll curl into a ball where it all begins and wring my way through a mother's birth canal. Faster this time. Thrashing wildly against every rib, every organ I pass. This time I won't be to blame for anything. This time I'm going to do it right.

1

I wrote my name on the fogged-up window with my finger. Peered at the garden through the letters. A low sun cast shadows on the winter leeks. Everything was white with frost. A duck was waddling across the frozen pond, the stable and the chicken coop lay deserted. Even the orchard where the sheep had grazed was bare and empty. Under the trees was the bench where I had idled for twenty-three years, watching lambs grow and midges dance. Season followed season, bringing the scent of ripe cherries, new-mown grass, bark and fallen leaves. The bench clung to its last flakes of paint. The long-stemmed roses drooped, their crowns like little hats blown over their eyes. They couldn't bear to see what was coming.

A layer of down lived in every corner of the room. A soft white blanket of mould to warm the peeling wallpaper. At least twice a week, my mother would empty a spray can of mould killer on it, to no avail. The down gained ground as quickly as the garden weeds. First she blamed the pond, then the groundwater and finally the clay soil of East Flanders for everything that was out of sorts. In Duinbergen, where she had grown up, rising damp was unheard of, so she said. Even if it was by the sea.

After her death, I continued where she had left off. I got someone in to treat the outside walls. Not a hope. Even the thirty-five layers of Alabastine I smeared over the down was a waste of money. On the day of the public auction, air freshener in hand, I made a last-ditch attempt to chase away the past but the fragrance of forest pine gave up the ghost within fifteen minutes. So did I. Soon the down would be someone else's problem. I was moving out. A matter of having to, not wanting to. My parental home was up for sale.

Emma slinked around my calves, meowing and yawning at the same time. With relish, she sunk her claws into the door frame. I let her. We all have our own way of saying goodbye. At least that's what my father always said. And he kept his word: his exit would be talked about for a long time to come.

I had found him in his consulting room, a place as mysterious as it was hallowed.

'Suicide runs in the family,' I told the police officer who came to record the cause of death. Shaking her head, she looked at the head-high piles of medical journals that had turned the room into a labyrinth. I wondered if, like me, she felt like she had wandered into an episode of ***Extreme Hoarding***. She crossed her arms, staving off unease with only herself to hold on to. An unnatural death was always subject to investigation, she said. Had I found a letter? I showed her the armband he had left me. An oval medallion threaded on a simple leather cord and engraved with the words ***Someone has to die in order that the rest of us should value life more.***

On reading the engraving, three thoughts had occurred to me: 1. He was urging me to end my life too; 2. He was trying to account for his death; 3. He wanted to give me one last reminder that Virginia Woolf has more to offer than Google.

I took a chance on number three. He had adored that woman. His shelves held every book she had ever written. He had even tried to find her in my mother. In photos from her teenage years, my mother bears a vague resemblance to Virginia. The same elegant neck and arch of the eyebrow, the same resigned and dented expression – as if life was an allergy no pill could relieve.

The policewoman squeezed her eyes shut for a second or two and pressed her palm to my shoulder.

In the week following his death, I gathered half a truckful of rubbish from my father's consulting room. Seven days it took me to stuff that petrified labyrinth into bin bags. By then, all that remained of him was the indelible stain on the tiled floor. The contours of his body had bled into the stone like a prehistoric rock drawing. He would definitely have approved.

I pressed my nose to the glass. On the other side a web trembled and the clouds refused to snow. I opened the window. The silence held. As if the house had died before I had even left, steeped in the past, stripped of every sign it had been lived in. Not a sound from the attic mice which, day and night, scurried down through the gaps between the walls to the rooms below. I sighed. The parquet creaked under my feet and I blanked out the memory of the inheritance concealed beneath the planks. Hidden there years before in the hope it would be forgotten as quickly as possible, and look – it almost had been.

I backed stiffly out of the room. There was no getting away from it. Twelve years before my primary school teacher had predicted that my life would take a wrong turn. In the eyes of Miss Michaels I was the product of a teen marriage, the daughter of a man whose medical degree had been a fluke, the coddled child of an unstable mother, raised on piano music and nuggets of pointless wisdom. 'You'll never amount to anything,' she'd say when I forgot my book for the hundredth time, when my parents had failed to sign my report card, when I arrived at the pool without my swimming costume. During dictation she'd say it. In the middle of show and tell. Miss Michaels was fond of hurtful words. The feeling they gave her as they tripped from her tongue and sank invisible barbs into their target.

My name dripped down the window. The door slid smoothly shut. I went down the stairs, counting each one. Eighteen in all. I had counted them a thousand times. My phone was silent. No messages. No one knew my number, I had wanted it that way.

At the foot of the stairs, I gazed a while at the two man-sized cactuses that stood sentry outside my father's office. Like me they didn't so much as bristle; no one wants to be the first to say goodbye.

I picked Emma up and forced her into her carry case. She clung to the edges with her forepaws but eventually conceded defeat. This was the beginning of the end and she sensed it. Without a backward glance, I tugged the front door shut behind me. Out in the garden, I grabbed a handful of earth from the flowerbed where, since childhood, I had maintained my very own cemetery. Two guinea pigs, a day-old hamster, a goldfish and three cats trickled through my fingers and into my pocket. With one hand I clutched the carry case, the other was wrapped around the handle of a suitcase whose wheels were refusing to cooperate. I struggled down the garden path,

dragging the case packed with sheet music, a recorder, the last book my father had been reading, cat paraphernalia and a minimum of clothes. My destination was only a few blocks away and yet I had never been there. I only knew Jam Street from the gossip, from the dirty looks aimed at any resident who dared to stray into the baker's or the butcher's. The people of Jam Street were expected to shop at ALDI, everyone in the town agreed. After walking a hundred yards or so, I turned round. The fluorescent FOR SALE sign grinned back at me. There it stood, my house, the grandest in the street, upright and elegant, as if it knew it came from good stock and couldn't simply let itself go. Five generations of doctors under its belt. That kind of thing seeps into the walls.

*

From the hill at the edge of town I had a good view of my new domicile. To my left the traffic on the E40 thundered by, racing a train that was speeding on to Ghent. It was late Saturday afternoon, still plenty of people about. Apart from a clump of pensioners outside number fifty, they were the slipshod kind.

The north wind played with the toggles on my coat. I dodged an airborne plastic bag that bore the name Ludo & Sons, Master Butchers. The wind was sweeping up from below and litter fled the street. Plastic cups tumbled towards freedom. I wished I was a plastic cup myself, that a slop of coffee in my belly was all I needed to complete me.

Cramp seized my shoulders. I straightened my spine.

For appearances' sake my right eyelid put up a struggle as I took in my surroundings. A place of concrete, where grey filled the days. Identical flat-roofed bunkers bunged together. The strip of windows that ran along the upstairs floors squinted up at me suspiciously, a rusty tear in the corner of each eye left by years of driving rain. Above the windows, a ridge of doubtful-looking gutters clung on. For a second, I looked a little doubtful myself, then wrestled my face back into deadpan submission.

Jam Street lay spread out before me. A neighbourhood really, but the nickname had stuck. Not a bend or winding path in sight. Utter symmetry. Front gardens of reddish grass, little plots of botanical despair, with only weeds, dandelions, painted cartwheels and anchors to liven them up. In one garden, gnomes stood shoulder to shoulder, trampling any hint of green. A pointy-hatted terracotta army. Along the pavement, a scattering of feeble trees had been given leave to survive. Nothing flourished here but kids and weeds. I descended into this unknown underworld, clueless as to who or what I might find there. Slow phantoms shifted behind the windows; I was being ogled. My legs stuttered and I forced them to move on, walking in their own shadow until darkness overtook us.

My new neighbours' lawn at number thirty-eight was studded with graves. Clumsily hammered crosses bearing nothing but dogs' names: Max I, Max II, Max III, Rex I, Rex II, Rex III and Rex IV. The sky turned yellow-white, snow ready to fall at any minute. I forced a smile. It was exactly what I had expected. A place where people ate squidgy white bread slathered in jam or chocolate spread twice a day because they had no money for meat. Welcome to Jam Street. Come on in, you have nowhere else to go.

The key to my new dwelling thrust in front of me like a weapon, I walked up to the front door. My toe hit an upturned paving stone and I nearly stumbled. I took a deep breath and composed myself.

Doors swung open in unison. The residents took up position by their gateposts, lining the length of the street. No one took a step further, as if uncharted territory lay beyond. Their faces turned my way at exactly the same moment. Men in sweat-stained vests. Women resplendent in their bedtime togs, complete with flip-flops and ruffled hair. Around them ran a hoard of nippers, snot bubbling from their nostrils.

My bladder winced in shock. I did my best to look unflappable and study each face in turn but, far from reassuring me, it only made things worse. I had seldom seen eyes so hollow.

'Welcome to the neighbourhood,' one man yelled. The feathers in his long black hair drooped towards the tarmac. A sunbed overdose had tanned his skin orange. How was I supposed to react? What words would win the heart of a poor man's Tonto?

I walked up to him and stuck my hand out. Pulverising my every knuckle, he muttered something I could barely catch and spat on the ground.

'I'm Ronny. But you can call me Apache.'

'Marie,' I answered.

'Not much of a name that, luv. I'll call you Mariah.'

I played with the fastener on my coat, zipped it all the way up to my chin and shrugged. 'Marie... Mariah...' I said. 'All the same to me.'

Something tugged at my sleeve. A girl of around eleven peered up at me. Black hair. No socks. Worn out sandals. Skirt barely covering her chubby backside. A twitch at the corner of her mouth sent a spasm across her face. Not exactly grisly but it reminded me of the horrors of *World War Z* all the same, where a twitch spelled the onset of zombiedom.

A man with the swagger of a silverback gorilla came up and squatted in front of Emma. I suppressed the urge to throw myself between him and the cat carrier.

'Bonny little thing,' he said.

His words were friendly enough but still I was wary. Politeness never lasts long with guys like him. Civilisation is the thinnest of veneers, as easy to pick off as the shiny wrapper on an Easter egg. My eyes drilled a hole in his bald patch and saw that the years had not been kind to his straggling pony tail. Greasy black hair, bunched together with a rubber band. Battered face. Beard. Tache. Thick Ghent accent. A sleeveless leather biker's jacket, not a gang I knew. This must be Pa Slicklock: the menace who loomed large in every scrap of town gossip, regular at the Last Chance Saloon, my new next-door neighbour. He had the same nervous tic as the chubby-bottomed girl who was now leaning against his shoulder.

Samantha appeared beside him. I took a step back and felt my old school wall me in with invisible bricks. Samantha shrank into her eleven-year-old self, hopped from one leg to the other and said, 'Only dweebs want to be a pianist. I'm going to live abroad and become a photographer. A war photographer maybe. Something heroic like that.' Then came the look that said she saw nothing heroic in me. I was a dozy cow, a useless frump who would never be *her* best friend. The indignation had ripped through my insides as violently then as it did now.

By the look of things, she was bogged down in the place she had sworn for years she would leave. It made my day.

She hadn't changed much. Still had that slightly mocking expression and the birthmark on her neck had lost none of its intensity. The purple stain, shaped like a flamingo, had grown with her and fanned out all the way up to her chin. Samantha was a stunner, always had been.

She looked at me like I was the eighth wonder of the world. My stomach seized up.

'Marie De Geest, who'd have thought!' she cawed.

I tried to swallow the grit in my throat. But before I could dredge up a fitting response, Pa Slicklock rose to his feet. 'De Geest,' he said. 'Your name's De Geest? Doctor De Geest's girl?' He looked me up and down, then turned and announced to the whole street, 'It's Marcel De Geest's daughter!'

Approving nods all round, a free pass into everyone's good books. No cause for celebration, I thought. This would only make the imminent disappointment all the greater. The wind plucked a few opinions about my father from the brief buzz of voices and blew them into my ear. Toe-curling stuff. To them he was half-man half-god, with a ready laugh and no qualms about propping up the bar at their local boozier. But they only knew the outer shell, had no idea of the softness inside. Only

I saw the thinness of his skin, how he had absorbed the world until he became a mouldy, sodden sponge. How life had consumed him.

Silence fell as they remembered why my father had given up his practice all those years ago. Everyone in this neighbourhood knew what had triggered his early retirement. Marleen de Pooter had worked on the checkout at the local ALDI for ten years. I had run into her at the baker's just the other day. As soon as she spotted me she barked like a seal, a wholehearted demonstration of the coughing and wheezing my father's fiasco had bestowed on her. Pneumonia disguised as a heavy cold, it could fool the best. But the course of antibiotics he had prescribed to smooth over his mistake had resulted in a deaf baby. An oversight, my father explained. He hadn't seen that Marleen was pregnant. No word of a lie. To his alcohol-addled brain she had genuinely looked like one more overweight woman, a diabetic waiting to happen. It was the final blow to his career. One he had never been able to stomach. Nor had my mother. She hadn't married a doctor to wind up at the sharp end of a scandal.

'Now *there* was a doctor,' an old woman in a headscarf sighed at last. 'The only one who could rid me of my shoulder pain. A tug here, a yank there and that was me, right as rain.'

She walked over and leaned in close. 'You wouldn't know, would you?' she whispered hopefully in my ear. 'How to yank it for me?'

'Sorry,' I shrugged.

In the silence that followed, she massaged the base of her shoulder.

Emma gave a yowl. All heads bowed in the direction of the carry case.

'Oooh... puss-a-wuss!' the chubby girl exclaimed.

Pa Slicklock pressed his face to the bars, prompting a long, low growl from within.

'What make is it?' he asked.

'Lucky dip' I was about to say, but Samantha beat me to it.

'British shorthair. Anyone can see that!' Her smile showcased a row of perfect teeth. I wanted to grab the case and smash her in the face with it.

'Wassa matta, wassa matta?' Pa Slicklock jabbered to Emma, as if she were a baby. 'Who's a widdle fluffball? I'm Stefan, your new neighbour. And what's your name?' He stuck a finger through the bars and clearly expected an answer.

I cleared my throat. 'Emma. Her name is Emma.'

'Emma! What a stupid name,' the chubby kid said. 'Animals can't have people names, my dad says.'

Pa Slicklock, apparently the man whose seed had done the deed, nodded proudly.

'Only hope my dogs don't mistake fluffball here for a rabbit,' he said. 'Those mutts will take a lump out of anything.'

'No chance. Emma's a flat cat.'

'A minute ago she was a shorthair...'

'A flat cat. The indoor type.'

He scratched his chin, perplexed for a moment, then puffed up his hulking frame for full effect. 'Let me tell you how things work around here,' he said with a gravity that did not become him. 'Keep the noise down and don't stick your nose in other people's business. To each his own. You stick to your patch, I'll stick to mine.' The tattoo on his arm was having a giggle at my expense. Two ample breasts framed by a heart and captioned with curlicues that read *I Love You*.

'Or else?' I asked.

He took a startled step back. The bystanders sucked in their breath.

My finger jabbed the air. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself!'

'Off her trolley,' he muttered under his breath.

I pointed at the gnome-infested garden. 'And while we're at it, is there a law against greenery around here? My contract clearly states...'

'Don't tell me you're one of them nit-pickers who bang on about the rules any chance they get...'

The lid I was keeping on my nerves slipped and a cackle of laughter burst from me.

He grunted and clearly thought I was a complete nutter. The look in his eyes softened.

Samantha turned and sauntered off. Not a hint of urgency in her step. Her height made everything she did seem languid. She walked just like she used to; feet turned out, arms stiff at her sides, right leg more limber than her left. My heart performed a little drumroll.

Pa Slicklock blocked my view. 'What do you do, by the way? For a living, like?'

'I don't have a job,' I answered truthfully.

A sigh of relief washed through Jam Street.

*

As soon as I opened the carry case, Emma shot under the sink. I went exploring, my footsteps echoing off walls that were plastered with horse wallpaper. The rooms were hungry for furniture. A familiar smell hung in the air: damp that was lying low and ready to surface at any moment.

The back door gave a pained yelp as I opened it and looked out at the narrow garden, hemmed in by tatty spruce hedges. Facing me at the far end was a concrete shed, as broad as the house itself. The sheds, like the houses, formed a long strip that ran the length of Jam Street. I pictured those two grey strips from the air as Nazsca Lines: modern concrete geoglyphs, intended to last for all eternity. The thought nearly crushed my windpipe.

Slicklock's pack of dogs cheered me all the way to the bottom of the garden. Eight barking muzzles poking eagerly between the spruces, dog breath fogging the air. Maws sucking in the first snowflakes before they could touch down. This lot were far too wild-eyed and hungry to be labelled pets. I took hurried refuge in the shed, which was packed to the roof with junk that hadn't been worth moving: a chewed-up doll, a rusted barbecue grill, a sunbed missing a leg, a stack of *Playboy* magazines, a fishing line, a can of dried-up worms, a child's table in the form of a mushroom, scarred with bitemarks and bleached by the sun. I dragged the table inside, grateful to have found something to eat off.

The smallest Slicklock mutt, a light-brown chihuahua, jumped merrily up and down and kept jumping long after I had disappeared into the house. Five minutes later it turned and toddled off. As if it knew that simply giving up is sometimes the smart thing to do. It had the same resigned tread as my mother when she had stood outside my father's consulting room too long, staring at the 'do not disturb' button that was always lit. Not once did she fling open the door without waiting for an answer as I sometimes did; my mother had learned obedience too early.

Upstairs, I took a pile of sheet music from my case. Bach, Gluck and Handel made me a mattress half a centimetre thick. In the absence of a sleeping bag, I folded my only towel to make a pillow and placed my father's book beside it in hopes that the reasons for his death might sneak into my dreams, like facts from my old school textbooks the night before an exam. I shivered. The previous occupants had used up every last drop of heating oil. The lights weren't working either.

I clasped my hands on top of my head and tried to calm myself, but couldn't stop thinking about that awful camping trip I had once gone on, and the discovery that for me, even then, home comforts were bare necessities. The brochure had promised a fortnight of adventure and non-stop sunshine. My mother only agreed to sign me up after I had whined for days. Never had I been so shamefully mistaken.

At the first opportunity, I had tracked down a telephone box and called home. 'Homesickness is something you have to learn to get over,' my mother said. It was mainly relief I heard in her voice. Camping was hardly an appropriate activity for a respectable girl like me, and she was happy that I had come to that realisation, happy to have a daughter who missed her. What I missed most

was not feeling cold and the chance to be alone; I found peace in seclusion – my mother would have inflicted an overdose of social activities on me, if only she had known.

When I was not allowed to leave camp early, I found a piece of chalk and made marks on the stiff canvas canopy at the head of my bed, counting down the days between me and civilisation. I did not make any friends. The damp and the cold worked their way into my bones and settled there for weeks. Misery always seems to hang around me for a while.

I stared at the wallpaper, wiped the horses from my mind's eye and chalk marks on canvas swam into view, the crossed-off days of a former prisoner. 'I should really cry sometime,' I said softly and, though my breath came in clouds, I broke into a sweat. For a count of twenty-five I held the air hostage in my lungs. A dozen dramas played out in my head, each one grimmer than the last. I would rot here, fall apart, collapse into ruin. 'Oh, stop whining,' I snapped and challenged myself to think of something cheerful. That lasted all of thirty seconds. Feeling wretched, I absorbed the sounds bleeding through the walls on all sides. I had never liked terraced houses, next-door neighbours and the sense of confinement that came with them. I closed my eyes and the insides of my eyelids showed me the silhouette of my father on the floor of his consulting room – the reason the new owners would be able to afford the house. I thought of the carpet that had no doubt been put down to conceal it, of the sheep I had given away to a retired farmer with an oversized head and undersized gumboots. He had said he would take good care of them, said he had a children's farm, but did he? Perhaps Marita and Isolde had been ground up for kebab meat, their flesh already wedged between the teeth of a hungry teenager staggering from one party to the next.

I sat up with a jolt. A clock on my other neighbours' wall struck the hour. Seven tinny chimes and a husky cuckoo. Oh joy! Followed seconds later by the sound of my doorbell. A simple *drrring* that announced the arrival of Samantha.

She looked crumpled and blurry with sleep. Her flamingo birthmark was hidden beneath a scarf wound three times around her neck. The second I saw her something gurgled in my guts.

Holding up a grease-stained paper bag from Amy's Bakery in one hand and looking the picture of innocence. Two good reasons to slam the door in her face.

I reined myself in and crossed my arms. The snow began in earnest. A garden gnome across the way had seen it coming and was wearing a ski jacket. Samantha followed my look and said, 'That's André's place. He's got a whole collection of those things. Drags them in and out of the house, summer and winter. Used to be a farmer, the only one down Kerkwegel way. You know the place. Big gate and a lane lined with pollard willows.'

As if I cared. What was she doing here? Where did she get the nerve?

She stuck out her hand. 'Friends?'

I buried my hands deep in my pockets. Drop dead.

Samantha was good at forgetting. A skill she had mastered at a young age. She forgot to pay at the school sweet shop, forgot her packed lunch. One day she forgot her jeans and walked around all day in pink knickers with kittens on and no one so much as laughed or called her a slob like they did that time I turned up wearing slippers I had mistaken for shoes. Samantha forgot things on a daily basis: her books, her homework, her calculator and even her name once – in gym class when she landed on her head. No one got mad at her. The worst she ever got from Miss Michaels was a misty-eyed 'You'll forget your head one of these days.' Samantha was her favourite. The poor soul who had grown up on Jam Street, deserving of everyone's sympathy. Samantha Goodhart had it all: a big mouth, cool armbands and a Pink Panther backpack. But a good heart? Not even close.

When she strolled into our class for the first time in primary five, everyone looked up. Even in threadbare clothes she had an irresistible attraction. There was something fearless about her, a touch of the wild that everyone in our class so badly needed. Samantha was the kind of girl who made your heart leap just because she wanted to talk to you. Was it those legs of hers – too long for her body – or the hair that shone blonder than Barbie's? And if that wasn't it, there were her golden

eyes speckled with green, the Smurf tattoo on her forearm, the armbands clinking on her wrists, the hair wrap coiled around her blonde locks... at our little local school in Hollegem we had never seen the like.

Twelve years on, she still had an expression it was hard to be mad at, but I wasn't going to fall for that again. She could smile sweetly till her face ached. From the first shove to the final sneer, every detail was scrawled on my memory in thick black marker.

Samantha shifted her weight from one leg to the other. Her hand hovered in the air for a moment but eventually withdrew. My insides began to gurgle again, softly, like distant thunder. And then, so quick it startled me, my hand flew through the air. I hit her full in the face, a slap that echoed off the houses across the street. The imprint of my palm flamed on her jaw. Her mouth slackened. My rage had found a way out of me at last.

Neither of us said a word or went to leave. We stared into each other's eyes and remembered what had caused this moment.

We were back in the school playground, tucked out of sight between the lean-to and the bins.

'Did you bring it?' Samantha asked.

I nodded and took the wedding ring from my pocket. Samantha came closer. 'From now on you can call me Sam. My friends call me Sam.'

I had waited a long time to hear those words. Too long. Now they had come at last, I suddenly felt like a loser. The realisation dawned: friends can't be bought.

Timidly, I told her I had changed my mind. At which Samantha snatched the ring from my hand and said 'Promise is a promise.'

Every hair on my body stood on end and I grew taller and broader. A low growl came rumbling up from deep inside me. I snorted and I roared, more animal than human. Chasing her into the open, my rage took hold of everything within reach: Emilia's skipping rope became a noose, Nathalie's thermos flask a hammer, my leather Snoopy schoolbag a buffer.

A loud circle of classmates closed around us, cheering Samantha on. It was a full two minutes before I regained control of myself. At my back, Miss Michaels ordered me to accompany her to the headmistress's office. My back took a long time to listen. I was too busy crushing Samantha's hair wrap in my fist.

The headmistress told me I was to spend the week contemplating what I had done, and for the first time ever at Hollegem Primary, a pupil was suspended. By the time I returned, all the white-headed notes on my sheet music had vengeful little faces. For me, comfort was always in the details.

The Slicklocks' front door swung open, and two girls and three boys spilled out onto the street. Samantha and I were still locked in our face-off, my fists clenched, her hand clamped to her face. The chubby daughter tossed her black hair and threw me a grin that stretched from ear to ear. The dog in the doll's pram she was pushing matched the colour of her sister's hair. The sister, who looked around twelve, was holding a baby. I had seen anaemia patients with more colour in their cheeks. The dirty-blond mop on her head turned out to be a puli-dog hairdo, with a slanting fringe that made her eyes stand out. Those eyes were something special, a cold stare that seemed to suck the grey out of Jam Street's concrete bunkers.

'Ooh yeah! Full-on lesbo drama!' yelled the eldest son, a lanky fourteen-year old with acne, limbs out of synch with his body.

'Bull dykes! Bull dykes!' the Slicklock kids chanted in chorus.

Samantha turned to face them. 'Hey, you lot. Mind your manners.' She was still nursing her jaw.

The black-haired girl pushed her way to the front. 'Yeah, but Sam. You *are* a dyke, aren't you?' 'Dykes stop people drowning. Like that Dutch kid who plugged the hole with his finger.'

'Well, you've got a hole, Sam!' the younger brother grinned.

Samantha rolled her eyes. 'Yeah, but not one that needs plugging.'

'Here's a plug for ya,' yelled the spotty teenager, yanking down his tracky bottoms and flashing a pale cocktail sausage.

Samantha came between me and the children. 'You know the rules. This is where it stops,' she said to them. She drew an invisible line in mid-air, like the line between garden and kitchen only dogs can see, the one their mucky paws are not allowed to cross.

Without a second glance, she stepped into the shadow of my garage and made a bee line for the living room.

Uninvited and far from welcome.
