

Family Tree

They look so much alike. They always have done.

The sisters are even ageing in the same way – a few silver strands in their dark hair; a network of fine, feathery lines at the top of the cheeks. Susie’s one step ahead though, being three years older. It used to annoy Annie that she would never catch up. These days she’s not so bothered.

5 “I thought Dad was going to break down. He sounded so upset,” Susie says.

“He told me to drop everything,” Annie says. “That she didn’t have long.”

“Oh God. Was that what he said? She didn’t have long. He told me that she’d want to see me. She wanted to have her family round her.”

“But would she have been able to speak?”

10 “‘Spose¹ not, but since when has that stopped him?” Susie asks. “He’s always spoken for her, hasn’t he? Started everything with ‘your mum thinks...’.”

“Your mum thinks that skirt is too short.”

“Your mum thinks you’re not working hard enough.”

Your mum thinks you should be nicer to your sister, Annie remembers. He must have said something like that to Susie too, but these are things you can’t mention.

15 “Tell me again what the consultant said,” she says instead. “About the tree.”

“He said her heart is closing off its supplies.” Susie has her eyes shut. “It’s like a tree with all its branches spreading outwards. The branches are drying off one by one because the oxygen can’t reach them.”

20 “Dying,” says Annie without thinking.

“What?” Susie opens her eyes sharply.

“Dying. You said drying. The branches of the tree are dying.”

“She won’t, will she?” asks Susie

25 “Not tonight,” Annie tries to sound reassuring. “Otherwise Dad would never have sent us home. He wouldn’t bring us all the way here and then not let us sit by her at the end.”

But as she speaks, Annie’s thinking that it was just what her father might do. She can imagine exactly what might have been going through his head. The first moments of panic, the phonecalls and then once they were there, his need to have their mother to himself once more.

“Perhaps we should ring the hospital, and find out how she is,” Annie says.

30 “Dad said he’d call if there was any news.”

“We can’t just sit here and wait.”

Annie is sitting drawn up in the arm chair, resting her cheek against her knees. She’s in the perfect position for keening², she thinks, and rocks just slightly so Susie won’t notice. It feels surprisingly restful. She can see it might be comforting.

35 Eventually, the sisters decide on cards. They’ve always played a lot of cards as a family. Sevens, cheat, rummy³, but they all need more than two people. They take a pack of cards each and set up patience⁴, facing each other across the kitchen table.

40 Annie looks across and sees Susie has a row of red cards facing upwards. That’s often the best way to start because once you turn over some black cards you move faster. She’s going well herself. A red queen on a black king and she’s got a red ten facing upwards. “If I get this out, Mum’ll be fine,” she tells herself and turns up a black jack immediately. She works on, eyes moving left to right,

¹ I suppose

² (her) jamre sorgfuldt

³ *Sevens, cheat, rummy*: kortspil

⁴ kabale

scanning the pattern until she's nearly out⁵.

She pauses for a moment and sees that Susie is turning over the cards one by one, sightlessly. "Hey," she says without thinking. "You're cheating." Susie looks up and for a split second, Annie
45 knows Susie doesn't recognise her.

"I'm going to bed," Susie says. "I can't bear this."

Annie's torn between wanting to finish her game of patience and going up with Susie. The problem is that there's only one spare bed and they haven't talked yet about who will sleep on it. If Susie goes up now, Annie will be left with the floor.

50 "I'll come too," she says, sweeping up her cards.

They're just going upstairs when the phone rings. Annie holds the receiver sideways so Susie can listen too. Their father tells them that their mother is sleeping now but they're to come in the morning first thing. Their mother will want to see them then, he says. Susie and Annie look at each other and Annie is horrified by her desire to laugh.

55 "We'll see you in the morning, Dad," Annie says.

"Take care, Dad." Susie calls.

"Well then," he says. "I suppose I'd better get back."

"Well then," says Annie after she's put down the receiver. "I suppose we'd better get to bed."

Susie smiles. They've always been able to laugh together at their father. Encouraged, Annie asks if
60 she fancies a nightcap. "We'll take it up with us," she says, "Like a midnight feast."

They huddle together in the single bed, drinking whisky. "I always said that my ideal man would be someone I could drink whisky with in bed," says Annie.

Susie gives a shriek. "You're rubbing your feet against mine," she says. "You know I hate that."

"I can't help it. There's not enough room."

65 "Go on the floor."

"You go on the floor."

Annie gives Susie a push as if she's trying to heave her out of bed but Susie twists round quickly, grabs a pillow and holds it over Annie's face.

"Beg for mercy," she says. "Say the magic words."

70 Annie can remember them as if it was yesterday. "You're a beautiful princess," she chants. "You are the most wonderful sister in the world."

"That's better." Susie lies back on the bed, clutching the pillow to her chest. "It's too small for us both, isn't it?"

"We could go into their bed," suggests Annie tentatively.

75 "I think that would be best." It's as if the horseplay has reminded them that Susie is the oldest sister. The one who still gets to make the rules. Annie follows her obediently through to their parents' bedroom.

"I can smell her handcream," Annie says, holding the sheet up to her nose.

"She never let us into bed with her, did she?" asks Susie, smelling too. "Other children got to sleep
80 whole nights with their parents but she always told us to go back to our own beds."

"Think of something nice and settle back down," Annie mimics her mother's voice exactly. "What did you used to think of?"

"Men selling apples."

"What?" Annie lifts herself up on one elbow so she can look at her sister.

85 "I used to think of this candy striped stall – pink and white – and there was this man who had rosy cheeks just like the apples he was selling. He used to give me one because I never had any money. I loved the taste of that apple. What about you?"

Annie can't remember. "Sweets probably or cuddly puppies," she says. "I never knew about your apples." She's aware of sounding peeved but she doesn't like to think of her sister lying in the bed
90 next to hers all those years ago, keeping something like the apple man back from her.

"They still love each other don't they?" Susie's got her eyes shut, her arms crossed on her chest

⁵ *she's nearly out*: (her) hun næsten får kabalen til at gå op

over the sheet.

Annie grunts. "You know, when I was very young I never saw them as separate people," she says. "They were always Mum and Dad. I used to lie in bed sometimes and wish he'd die so she'd love me more."

"Annie no!" Susie keeps her eyes shut but tighter. Annie knows she's said too much but it's too late. She ploughs on, digging her furrow deeper.

"It was as if they wanted our family to be split into two pairs – Them and Us. But it was never Us, was it? It was always you and me separately. So it was Them and me and it was Them and you. I felt as if I never had anyone.

"And then when I got older, I tried to turn it into something positive," she continues. "I thought if I could find someone like Dad, who would love me just as much, then I could become Them." She's silent now because she doesn't want to say the obvious. That it hasn't happened for either of them.

"I know what you mean." Susie talks very quietly so Annie can only just hear her.

"You felt the same?" she asks and Susie nods, eyes still shut.

"Even now," Annie surges on now she feels she's carrying Susie with her. "Even now, it's as if Mum and Dad are at the hospital together and we're here. They don't really want us."

Susie reaches across and fumbles for Annie's hand. "No, they don't," she says.

"They should never have had children," Annie says.

"No, they shouldn't." Susie squeezes Annie's hand hard.

Annie turns to her sister but Susie has moved onto her side so her back is facing Annie. It's a sign from the old days of sharing a bedroom that the talking is over. Annie feels the same frustration with her sister that she felt then.

She tries to go back to sleep but the image of her father sitting alone by that hospital bed keeps coming back to her. She tries to replace it with Susie's apple man and for a moment it's alright but then just as he's about to hand her an apple, the man reaches across and pinches Annie's cheek so hard it hurts. She sits up shocked, rubbing her face and listening to Susie's breathing. As her eyes become accustomed to the blackness, she thinks she can make out a shadow standing in the doorway.

"Cuckoos in the nest⁶," she hears a low voice whisper. She tastes the words in her mouth. Cuckoos in the nest. Where did that come from?

She lies back, her heart thumping so hard she tries to still it by putting her hand, palm flat, on her chest. She thinks she'll be awake all night now but when she opens her eyes, it's morning. Susie is leaning over her.

"Wake up," Susie says. "Mum's better. The hospital sent Dad home last night to get some sleep. We're going to see her today." Susie is looking so happy, radiant almost, that Annie wonders whether their conversation last night was a dream.

"Mum..." Her mouth feels all furry and as her hand reaches across to get her glasses, she knocks over the empty whisky glass. "She's really going to be alright?"

"It looks like it." Susie laughs.

"But what about the tree? The branches falling off and stuff."

"Dad says the consultant says it can sometimes happen. The heart starts to recover on its own. They've got to keep her in for tests, of course."

"Where's Dad?"

"Downstairs. He slept in the spare room last night."

"He didn't mind about us here."

"He's so happy about Mum, I don't think he cares about anything this morning." Susie throws Annie a robe. "Hurry up," she says. "Dad says she'll want us to be there when she wakes up."

"Your mum thinks it's a time for families to be together." Annie tries to pass it off as a joke but really she's trying to recreate the closeness she felt with Susie last night. Either way, it doesn't work. Susie's left the room without saying anything, shutting the door firmly behind her.

⁶ *Cuckoos in the nest*: (her) Gøgeunger i reden

145 When Annie walks into the kitchen, she stops for a moment before reaching down to kiss her father. "It's good news about Mum," she says, taking the seat opposite him. But although she looks closely into his eyes, she can read nothing there except the impatience to get back to their mother. Them and Us, she thinks and looks across to where Susie is standing washing up last night's dishes, her back to both of them. Them and me.

(2006)