

Superfoods

by C.J.F

My brother Sam spins and falls on our overgrown lawn, glancing up at Mum's bedroom window, he makes himself into a fountain, shooting water out his mouth, shrieks and collapses. I tell him to shut the hell up. The cats wind round my legs while I prepare dinner.

It's getting dark, I shout from the kitchen. You'd best come in.

It doesn't get dark for hours but Sam doesn't know that. Mum bought extra-thick blinds for his bedroom windows and he still can't tell the time.

Put him in early so it's quiet for your Dad, Mum used to say to me then we'd make pancakes, listening for Dad's car on the drive.

I hear the toilet flush then Mum's feet padding back upstairs. Sam bolts through the kitchen wanting to go to her but I block his way like he's one of the cats trying to jump onto the work surface. He whimpers and sticks his shiny lips out but I stay put.

I mash cheese into his potato the way he likes and cover it with beans while he sits at the table tapping his spoon quietly against the soft flesh of his cheek, happy-groaning. I put his food down and he does his wide-mouthed grin at me, part-smile part-gawp. A sliver of drool lands on his plate.

When he's eating I slip out with Mum's food. There's spinach and avocado next to the cheese and beans and potato. Three squares of dark dark chocolate and a cherry yoghurt.

I scratch my knuckles on the door to let her know I'm coming.

She's sitting up in bed, long ponytail falling over her shoulder like rope from where she twists it all day. Her lunch is untouched on the bedside table again. I carry it out and take a deep breath before going back in.

Superfoods like Dr Cruz said, look Mum: avocado, spinach, chocolate...

My voice turns thin and wet; it sinks into the wallpaper, trickles out the crack in the window.

Sam wants to come up and say hello...

Ha! she says and I shut my mouth, surprised to hear her voice.

Standing still my heart beats in my throat as I look at her, hoping this silence is just a pause, a thinking gap before the words she's going to say next.

Sam starts shouting and banging downstairs, noticing I've gone, but I stay where I am, prepared to wait for hours for these next sentences, for what I've been owed since Dad left and she came up here. There's the sound of a plate smashing and Sam starts to cry. The kitchen door swings open and his flat feet are on the stairs.

Stop him, she says, so quietly I almost miss it.

Eat then, I tell her like we're making a deal, but I run down the stairs to stop him before she says anything else.

The next day is as hot as it's ever been and Sam wants to water fight again. I help him turn the washing-up bottle into a water gun and force a laugh as he shoots it straight into my eyes.

No matter how much I chase him round to the other side of the house he always winds up squealing underneath Mum's window. She stares out over our heads, looking beyond the corn fields and the main road and the sprawl of the town.

Sam shrieks, glancing over his hunched shoulders to look up at her. I shriek with him, staring up at her too. She ducks inside.

I call Sam in for his tea early and pack him off to bed so I can spend more time on Mum's. There are more superfoods than I know what to do with: broccoli, beetroot, carrot, peppers, alfalfa sprouts. I divide them into colours.

I knock on her door harder, brave after hearing her speak yesterday.

The room smells bad like off fruit and eggs and the windows are locked.

Where's the key, Mum?

She doesn't answer, moves her head to watch me as I put fresh food on her bed, wafting my hand like that could freshen the air.

Mum?

Yesterday's cheese and beans have been picked at by the cats.
There's an orange paw print on the windowsill.

You need to eat something.

She turns her head away from me.

We need you downstairs.

Her knuckles are pale as she twists her ponytail and I can see the way her bones work under her skin. The sun shines in the window, bright, and I think about Sam downstairs in his bedroom, tricked into going to sleep early like a budgie with a coat thrown over its cage. I look at Mum surrounded by dirty cups and cat fur, lounging around like some deranged heroine from a novel and want to yank her out of bed.

We're your fucking children.

I slam the door. Sam is standing in his bedroom doorway tongue pressed against the doorframe, looking at me from the corner of his eye. I grab his hand and pull him outside.

He blinks at the sun which is not even thinking about setting as I scoop out cold, creamy potato from its skin and lob it up at Mum's window. Sam stares at the yellow-white splodge on the glass and squeals, jumping up and down in his pyjamas, dribble trickling down his front. I squeal too. There's no response so I stick my fingers into the other half and lob again.

We're your fucking children! I bellow up at her, ecstatic, not caring what the neighbours think. We're not *going* anywhere!

Sam stares at me, knees bent, happy-groaning.

I hand him an avocado quarter then throw one myself, grinning down at him. He copies me, throwing his arm up loosely and letting go so the avocado bounces off the side of the house, a few feet off target. I cheer like it's spot on and Sam wobbles out a victory dance.

Watch this, I say, picking up the yoghurt pot and we both watch as it hurtles towards the window, smashes through the glass. Sam throws himself on the floor, shrieking, he rubs his cheeks on the grass and I lie down next to him, looking up at her window, waiting.

