

Kirsty Robinson's letter arrived during the week of mourning. We were all together at home, waiting for the post-mortem results – the doctors didn't understand what had killed him and needed to look into his brain. The envelope was small and bulging, and my name and address covered the whole space, in loopy felt-tip pen. Inside was a bead necklace rattling in the bottom, and sheets of very thin writing paper folded over several times. I fingered the necklace, made of melon seeds dyed red and strung on cotton. She'd written on one side of the paper only, a few big words per side: "*Dear Martin, I'm sorry to hear about your father. I hope you're not too sad. Now I've started, I can't think of anything else to say. Oh dear, that sounds rude. I have just watched the Lone Ranger on TV eating a marmite sandwich – me, silly, not him!*" Her cheerful voice went on over several pages, the ink clearly visible through the back of each sheet. "*Write back only if you want to. Goodbye, much love, Kirsty XXX. PS send my love to your sister.*"

She knew Naomi because she'd gone out with a boy in Naomi's year. She was famous for going out with older boys, even when she was quite young, and for being disdainful towards the boys in her year. It caused us to despair, knowing she was beyond our reach – unbelievably beautiful, with her long golden-red hair and daringly short mini-skirts, mocking the boys who gawped at her as she stood in the playground within her circle of girls. I kept re-reading the letter, then folding it up and putting it away and taking it out again for another look, and every time the same thrill went through me, followed by the same dousing realism. She'd written to me and that made her suddenly approachable. And she'd made me a necklace. It was probably just an act of kindness, no matter how romantic it appeared. She'd ended with: *Write back only if you want to*. Was that a joke? But surely she couldn't be making fun of me in a condolence letter? Which meant that her famous rudeness, her standoffishness at school was an act. Or that she'd made an exception for me. Hadn't she pecked me on the cheek at the station last week, her cheeks aflame? And bothered to get