

In 1935, when I was 12, my sisters died in a house fire.

All three of them, but not me.

My brothers also didn't die. Our parents didn't. Our dog survived. And the cat only my sisters and I knew about, the one we had snuck into our room and who came and went through the window, climbing down the cherry tree just like Loretta had at least once. That cat survived; I held her in my arms.

But my sisters died. Them, not me.

I had woken in the night, though I don't know why. I don't remember smoke until I was in the dark hall and moving down the stairs without even realizing what I was doing, never to return to the bedroom we shared, two to a bed. Loretta and Annie. Margaret and me.

Hard to believe now when I have my own bed, my own room, a window, the same moon and stars Loretta and I wove into the stories we told the younger girls when they couldn't sleep.

*And do you have sisters?* someone will ask, always someone asks, politely, and I look into that expectant face, and because it's easier but not easy, I say *No, I don't*.

Try as I might, I can't quite see their faces. Instead, my mind goes to the wallpaper in our bedroom. Forget-me-nots climbing a trellis. The wallpaper was already there when we moved in. A little shabby, but so were we, I know now. And we girls loved those forget-me-nots, part of the magic spell we cast over everything in those days, the four of us like paper dolls, linked, hand in hand.

Loretta had just turned 15. Margaret was 9. Annie, 7, but very grownup, she'd want me to say.