

Skirt

Elly Strigner 2012

Mid-week, during April half term, I'm sitting in the park with a small but raucous bunch of girls from school. I'm pulling and twisting at clumps of grass with restless fingers, awkwardly silent, as they shout and talk over each other about nothing.

I try to hide, keeping to the edge of the hubbub. But I still have to dodge some sharp little words flicked at me now and again. My smile is a wobbly shape, and my laugh is more of a whimper. I cling to the ground like it's a security blanket.

Some of the more hostile girls question my presence with a glare. I'm beginning to wonder what I'm doing here, too, but I promised Anna I would come.

The patch of turf at my left hip gets balder and balder, but in a few moments the voices scatter and fade into the air. If this were a cartoon, our jaws would be on the floor, our eyes out on stalks. There seems to be a mermaid shuffling towards us, on dry land.

Except it's not really a mermaid – it's Anna. She's wearing a skirt that hugs tightly around her hips, and flares out dramatically at her ankles. The toes of her calico pumps peep out just slightly beneath the hem with every step she takes. One hand occasionally flutters up to check her floppy hat is in place, but that's the only hint of self-consciousness she allows. As she emerges over the brow of the hill, her bright hair and piercing white smile create ripples through the dull, grey air of the day.

Up close, the skirt is indigo denim (the only type of denim to be seen in at the moment). It's completely flawless - not a seam in sight. She might have been sewn into it. Or perhaps she was born wearing it. And although she's as slight as a bird, in it she looks like a column, or a Greek urn. Beneath the artfully arranged hat, blooms of curls emerge as if on a stem from her pale green polo neck.

The girls greet her with little fits of adoration. She acknowledges them casually, and sits down next to me, as easily as she would do in tracksuit bottoms. Now I feel sloppy in my flared jeans (also indigo) and potted in my hooded jumper, a much coveted cast-off from my older brother. And

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despite playing with make-up a lot recently (I've put little diamante gems around my eyes, frosted pink gloss on my lips) I'm scruffy in comparison. But I'm relieved to see her.

Anna and I are best friends, and basically our friendship revolves around fashion. Of course we talk about other things too, but mostly we like to talk about clothes. At break times we trawl through magazines and on weekends we're on the phone for hours, a copy of this month's Sugar or Mizz resting on our knees. I often go over to her house to do her hair and make-up. She brings me back tiny bottles of posh nail varnish from her French summer holidays.

Despite our shared passion, it is very, very important that we never copy each other. She wants to be a bit like Gwyneth Paltrow; I'm more interested in dressing like Gwen Stefani, though I'm constantly changing my mind. One day, in the lunch queue, she sulks (a rare slip of decorum) when I describe a pair of trousers I want. She has her eye on them too. Of course she buys them first, but I probably wouldn't have the guts to wear them anyway.

But that skirt is too beautiful. Of course I want one just like it. We all do. I want my feet to be invisible, and the hemline to swish from side to side like a tail. I want to be a vase, not a pot.

The day drifts on like a cloud and nothing happens, much to my relief. My fingers stop twisting, and I begin to smooth the grass rhythmically instead; Anna's nonchalance soaks up the other girls' acidity like litmus paper.

When she's not around, I'm mute and easily humiliated. Rhian Roberts collared me alone behind the science block once, and demanded to know why I never spoke.

'Oh my GOD!' she shrieked. '*CAN'T* you just tell us what you had for *BREAKFAST* or *SOMETHING??*'

Her cronies giggled on the playing fields behind us. I felt my face burn, words sticking in my throat. Stupidly, I tried to smile but my mouth got caught like a fish on a line, the corners pulled down by an invisible hook.

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Rhian let out a few exasperated squeals and I flinched, as she waved her arms at me in mock frustration, and stomped off to join the others. Eyes down, I tried to merge into the walls as I sloped off to class. That sort of thing would never have happened with Anna there.

This afternoon in the park is the last time we'll meet up before our obligatory family holidays. We say goodbye and arrange to phone in a couple of weeks. On Friday, my younger brother and I are going to visit my Grandparents in Cornwall, without Mum and Dad. Anna is going to Nice with her family. She always comes back three shades darker, with at least four new outfits, a holiday romance and enough new bikinis to supply every girl in our tutor group; I'll come back with bruised knees and possibly a new swimming costume.

I'm not particularly enthusiastic about Cornwall this year. It's not because of my statuesque Nana, whom I was wary of as a child, with her wild hair, feline eyes and opal rings. I'm fourteen now, and that fear is slipping away, although Nana is still remarkable. It's the length of each day stretching out ahead of me that I can't stand. My cousin Libby will be with her horses, my big brother is old enough not to come, and my little brother will be over with the boys next door every day. Grandpa always keeps himself to himself. So most of the time it will be just me, Nana, room after room full of paperback novels, and cats hiding in the bathroom, waiting to leap out at me when I'm on the toilet. It's not exactly Club Med.

For most of each day, Nana will steadily orbit the ground floor. Unhurried, she'll move from her morning coffee and crossword in the kitchen, to the laundry room, the garden and the stables, and finally back to the kitchen to prepare supper. Without my parents as a lifeline, I will flicker between the empty rooms and the garden; learning Nana's routine by heart, and trying to invent one of my own.

It's a long journey. I sulk for most of it, but have to suck it up when I see that Nana is waiting at the front door as we pull into the drive. Her brushed silk blouse flutters gently, and an unlit cigarette is poised lazily in her right hand. She folds me up in her long, branch-like arms and squeezes me through my self-made cloud. Within fifteen minutes our parents have dumped us and sped away. I'm not even sure where to, but it's probably

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the Lake District. No doubt they'll tramp around in expensive hiking boots for a week, and squabble over who is the better map-reader.

The twin room I usually share with my cousin is being redecorated, so Nana has decided I should stay in the sewing room. My cloud dissipates a little when she tells me this (although I don't show it). I was meant to sleep in there two summers ago, when the house was packed full of visitors, but as usual we all got swapped around, and I was put in the fussy green room, where a slightly manic-looking stuffed lion watched me from the top of the wardrobe all week.

But the sewing room is a hoard of shifting treasures, and when I go in I feel like I've interrupted a secret life. The sewing machine, dressmaker's dummy and linen press are in permanent residency, but piles of fabric, biscuit tins overflowing with buttons, ribbons, thread and pins are never the same. Scraps of satin and silk scramble through their wicker basket beds. Shiny buttons burst out of jam jars, rainbow threads curl across the floor, and jigsaw pieces of calico are draped, expectantly, over the dummy. By the window there's a pile of fine corduroy, indigo and soft. Running my fingers over it, I let out a big sigh, and an idea goes 'pop' in my head like a button from a shirt.

It takes me days to pluck up the courage to ask for what I want, but in the end, I don't have to. I'm nattering with Libby in her room when Nana appears.

'Darling', she says, standing to her full height in the doorway. In her hands is the corduroy. *'I've got all this material I simply can't use. Shall I make something for you?'*

Libby sniggers quietly, but I ignore her. Nana's a very clever seamstress and used to make all her own clothes. She once made a skirt for my Auntie that had exotic birds appliquéd all over it. She made a skirt for my cousin last week, too, but Libby's not really interested in clothes unless she can ride a horse in them.

I've made a meticulous drawing, and start describing all the curves to Nana in earnest detail. She smirks knowingly, and I get tongue-tied and stop

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prattling. As she winds a tape measure around my waist, I cautiously slip my drawing onto the cutting table, hoping she will see it and understand.

The next day, I'm in my cousin's room again, while Nana is working on the skirt in my bedroom. Libby's not here, so I'm listening to the radio and reading some of the magazines that are lying around, but the only kind she seems to read are about ponies. I'm bored and besides, I'm too excited about my skirt to concentrate properly.

'Draw me a horse', Libby ordered yesterday. 'One that looks like Black Beauty.' I can't draw horses, I've never been able to, but I try cobbling one together for her now, to pass the time, and it's awful. It looks like a haggis with legs. Still, it has a saddle so it's basically a horse.

I'm just reaching over to leave it on her bedside table, when Nana appears in the doorway.

'It's finished, darling.'

I jump up from the floor, bashing my knee on the bedpost as I do so, and limp after her to the sewing room. My cheeks are flushed with excitement as I step through the door. Amongst all the clutter, the only thing I am looking for is the skirt hanging before me on the dummy.

Nana and Grandpa have got some friends from church coming over to dinner, and Nana said earlier that she wanted us to dress smartly. Libby takes very little notice and just wears her school trousers. My brother Liam has been scrubbed in the bath, so he's gleaming, and is allowed to eat in his pajamas. But Nana has insisted that I wear my new skirt. All through dinner Libby keeps glancing at me and smirking, half mockingly and half in sympathy. I can barely manage to smile back at her, I feel so awkward. I'm just glad that the table hides my legs.

The skirt is beautifully made, of course, in that lovely soft corduroy. But it's not what I had in mind. It's old-fashioned, hugely baggy around my hips and too high around my waist. Nor does it skim the floor, as I had hoped. It

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reaches just above my ankles, and I'm not hobbling in it – my legs are rattling inside it, like two bones in a bag.

Nana has even added a satin ribbon as a flimsy sash. I never asked for that. This is a skirt for a goody two-shoes. Is that really how she sees me? Not only do I hate the skirt, I hate myself for hating it. Every time I start to feel miffed at Nana, since she clearly didn't even glance at the picture I drew, I feel horribly guilty. All my food tastes slightly bitter. I can't stroke the dogs under the table because I feel like I don't deserve that luxury. I am ungrateful and sad, and it's my own fault.

Nana is clearly very proud of her handiwork, and she hasn't seemed to pick up on my true feelings.

'Adriana,' she says to one of her friends, 'did you see my Granddaughter's skirt when you came in?'

Adriana shakes her head and makes inquisitive noises. She is quite a few years younger than Nana, with coiffed blonde hair and glossy red fingernails. All her clothes are shiny and tight.

'Darling', Nana says to me, 'Stand up and show Adriana your new skirt.'

It is a command. I push my chair away slowly, and stand up.

'Turn around, darling, nobody can see.' I give a stiff little twirl.

'No, no, darling – we still can't see. Why don't you do a little walk for us.'

So I do a lap of the dining room table, which seems to happen in slow motion, and the grown-ups watch me with sappy but largely uninterested expressions on their faces.

When I sit back down, Libby is covering her face with a napkin, and my brother notices her and starts giggling as well. Thankfully the grown-ups don't seem to notice. For a moment I want to laugh, too, but then I remember Anna emerging over the brow of the hill, and the laugh collapses inside me with a pathetic little wheeze.

'I just don't see why I have to go. They can't force me.'

The summer holidays are approaching. It is Friday afternoon, and Anna and I are back on the hill, just the pair of us. I am lying on my belly making a daisy chain. Anna is sitting next to me, and I am aware of her tearing at bits of grass on the ground at her side. She rolls them up into little green blobs and flicks them ahead of her.

I lean over onto my side to face her. The soft, damp grass has made an impression on the skin of my right arm, a rhythmical cluster of ridges, like corduroy.

'There's just nothing to do there!' she says, frowning, 'And there are no shops!'

I say nothing, out of empathy, but I also feel slightly smug that this time it is me who is going on a proper holiday, to join my Aunt and cousins on a Greek island. Anna is going to see her Grandparents in South Wales. We have been talking about this all day, or rather, Anna has been talking about it, and I have been listening. I've never seen her this cross.

I slip the daisy chain over my wrist, and decide to change the subject. I ask her what she's going to wear this weekend. Some boys in the year above us are having an end of term party and everyone, including me, is going.

'I don't know', she sighs. 'I was going to wear that blue skirt but my Mum faded it in the wash.' She growls in exasperation, flinging another ball of grass into the distance. 'It's not fair!'

She doesn't return my question, but I don't mind. What I'm planning to wear won't be quite ready yet, and after what happened at Nana's I'm trying not to get my hopes up.

The skirt made my stomach turn over every time I saw or touched it, so I hid it in the back of my wardrobe. I hadn't shown it to anybody else since

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leaving Cornwall. Then, one day last week, Mum came into my room to put away some clean clothes. I was sitting on my bed, carefully applying tippex to a CD case, and watched apprehensively as her fingers searched for room in the back of the cupboard.

She stopped, and I knew she had found it. I saw her reaction to the soft blue mass, a mild state of reverie, the same as mine when I first ran my fingers over it. 'Is this what Nana made you...this?' she had quizzed, intrigued. When she tugged it out and let it hang, she pulled a face, but then inspected it thoughtfully, like a new puzzle. 'Let me see what I can do', she said, and quietly took it away with her.

I'm not sure what to expect, and just thinking about it creates more knots in my stomach. But I want to let myself enjoy a flicker of anticipation, and so I roll over onto my back to watch the clouds drift on and the sun change in the sky. The grass feels cool and soft under my head. My best friend and I stay there for a long while, side by side, each in our own separate worlds.