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## SALAMANDER

NERINE'S BROTHER STEPHEN, walking out into the garden, seeing everything sleek silver with rain, coming out of the tiny doorway of that house they shared, seeing Nerine sitting on a stone by the pool, seeing a salamander run across her legs. He called her *Salamander* then forever after, because of the way her quick head would dart, her quick words would come. This incident opened his eyes to her. There was no other name that really said enough about her speed and her lightness and the bright flare of her smile. *Salamander*. It was the best time for Nerine, the time of the genesis of her new name.

When Stephen fell in love with his twin sister Babe, the bright one, Nerine the salamander was left in the cold. She was thrown out, or walked out, one early winter morning to fend for herself, yes, things had come to that. And Nerine had fended. She had a practical disposition and an inkling she could be a nurse.

This is a story about how there *was* a brother even though Juanita, and Don, who knew her later, hadn't thought so; they imagined she had imagined there was one. They did not believe he really existed, and then there he was on the doorstep with a shopping bag. It is also about how Nerine was burdened. Her life was oppressed by troublesome small things that bit into her, reducing her to something much less than she might have been. Her life it seems, was a battle that she couldn't win. Nerine went about in a distracted and agitated manner as if she wanted to be, or ought to be, somewhere else entirely, longing for a past which perhaps had never happened, a future which couldn't be. The past and the future encroached heavily on the now, robbing Nerine of the best part of it. There was just a little sliver of now left, it leapt and bounded across her lap surprising people, it was there in her smile.

Juanita and Don are the neighbours who witness Nerine's anxious comings and goings. She's not one to linger in the hallway though she'll talk soon enough and tell them things when they are there with

her face-to-face, but Juanita has seen Nerine in the swimming pool in the early evenings, when she's on her morning shift. She's always doing the breaststroke, putting in a lot of energy but not getting very far. Somehow, although this is a pool and not the sea, Nerine is going against the tide. Nerine, all at sea in the swimming pool, floundering in the ripples made by stronger swimmers. She's in up to the neck but her head's held high. It seems she is a swimmer who doesn't want to get her hair wet, her short boy's-look hair, which is slick with spray anyway so she really needn't have bothered – her fringe is plastered to her eyebrows. But maybe it's her face she wants to keep dry. There's a look of constant battle about Nerine wherever she is, she has the appearance of someone who has to fight every inch of the way forward. It's wearing her out but she won't give in. When passing swimmers flip water droplets across her she has an unforgiving look that she carries with her until she leaves. But by the time Juanita has noticed this she and Nerine are no longer speaking. Juanita dates this from the time Nerine came round one night to borrow a candle and saw Don in Juanita's bed.

*Nerine is ridiculously juvenile, she must be forty,* Juanita says. Don is the one who has to hear the details of their silence.

He sees Nerine quite a bit, on the off chance, her distracted face always breaking into an unexpectedly charming smile. At these moments she certainly doesn't seem like someone who would bear malice towards anybody; that smile convinces him entirely it's Juanita who's the one to blame. On Saturdays he often sees her coming back from the Farmers' Market and they stop and have a little chat. She'll tell him about the Electric Board and the overcharging, and the muddle the Housing Association has made with her rent for the third month running, and her water rates, how she's paying off what they say she still owes at her former flat, and she shouldn't be. She has to go and get legal help again. Nerine, her short legs awkward in their green wellie-boots, looking up towards the sky as if she's expecting rain. Her wool skirt shifts in the wind, pleats puce and heather, recalling a country life far from here. There's a wavy blue plastic slide in her hair suggesting water, making her look childish. Don imagines the buckets and spades of a child's seaside holidays. A simple life without worry that she can't yet find again though she's waiting to. The brother has moved to Canada, he has bought a house; Nerine is waiting to join him. *It is miles from anywhere,* Nerine says complacently. Don nods and smiles at her. At this time he doesn't believe there really is a brother. He, like Juanita, thinks Nerine has made him up.

But why would she? Either he or Juanita has said at least a hundred times. This is the preamble to their discussion of the why's and wherefores.

*The brother is her carapace*, Juanita once remarked and Don, having thought it through found this apt. The brother gave hope to Nerine's life and supplied her with a need to buy little treasures. These she stored up in boxes that she stood around her bedroom. Over time she had to move out of the bedroom as the boxes filled up all of the space. From floor to ceiling there wasn't anything else. Nerine moved into the living room. Here too, after a while, boxes lined the walls. There was enough space in the middle for a couch, which Nerine also used as a bed, a fridge, a small table and a microwave. Her TV was fixed on a ledge high up near the ceiling and didn't take up any ground space. Nerine went to markets and bargain basements and antique shops and she bought her treasures. She looked at them and then put them in a box. Evenings she spent getting out a box or two at random and sorting through her things. She displayed them on the small table taking care to keep them away from the sauce bottles and the butter, she held them up to the bit of light that managed to get in there through the drab mottled curtain. They were more entertaining than anything the TV had to offer.

*It must give her comfort to be surrounded by all these treasures*, Juanita said with a shrug. *If there were no brother whose house she was expecting to move to, she'd have no reason to buy the stuff.*

Don had the flat next to Nerine. There was never a sound coming from her place. He seldom knew if she was in or on duty at the hospital. Until that moment when he'd see her in the hallway or out on the street, rushing along with a new treasure — to get it safely boxed, he guessed, as soon as possible — it was as if she didn't really exist. If he hadn't actually stopped and talked to her she'd have been gone in a flash, in and out of shadow, somewhere and then nowhere so fast he'd have been left wondering if he'd really seen her. It was this flitting quality she had. Her face, of course, would be twisted up with anxiety over something or another. Nerine was hounded by her troubles even in flight.

*She wants to pretend I'm not here. She tries to unthink me, I can see that. And so I play along*, is what Nerine says to Don when he meets her by chance coming into the building. *But you and Juanita used to be such friends*, Don tells her, to which she gives a snort, or makes a sound very like a snort. This is her only reply.

*Didn't you*, Don says, to draw out something more specific.

Nerine is staring out across the narrow communal garden. And when she speaks she says, *So I play along with her. That's what you have to do in such cases.*

*And now you're not on speaking terms.* Don looks at Nerine closely, sees her eyes have become focussed.

*I can't speak to Juanita, Nerine says, her voice confidential. You see, she's mad. She's mad and she wants me out of here. It's as simple as that. There are cases like that at the hospital. But I'm strong from dealing with the mad people. I know how to deal with her. What I do, whenever I bump into her is to pretend I don't really exist. You know, with mad people, it can be dangerous to make any kind of eye contact. Juanita would like to break me but she won't. I'm playing her game you see, I'm letting her think I'm not here after all. I'm ignoring her because it makes me safe, not because I want to.*

Don can't pretend he's not shocked at hearing this stuff. Juanita and he are close after all, now and again they're even lovers, though with no commitment as they're both recovering from long term relationships and can't take anything more substantial. But it's not that they don't like one another. Don knows he's frowning. He'd walk right on but there's this bit of him that wants to find out more.

*You don't believe me, Nerine says quietly. And I'm not surprised because Juanita is a good actress. She keeps her true self well hidden.*

Don thinks the best thing to do is to act very calmly or he'll never be able to get to what's really behind all this. *But, why would Juanita want you out of here, Nerine?*

Nerine considers Don's question. He thinks he sees a crafty look creep into her eyes. *I can't go into that, she tells him. But I'll just say that sometimes these things aren't even personal. It may be nothing to do with me as such. I'm the one who just happens to be here. I'm the occasion. In the Psychiatric Wing there are a number of similar cases.* She picks up her bag that she's left resting by her feet and passes quickly on into the hall, closes the door.

Don, left to ponder this, left wondering. Not that he's really wondering. Nerine is upset about something. He leaves it at that. It's only now and again, later, when he looks at Juanita, he has the thought, malignant and unwelcome. Could she, would she? *Is she?* Then reaction sets in, guilt. A Friday night. He's spending it round at Juanita's. They're in bed by now — it's ten o'clock. He watches her across the gap of bed. A few seconds spent watching, in his heart, suspicion. Then he looks at her again. No, impossible. Meeting Nerine on the Saturday, coming in from the Farmers' Market her bag laden with leeks and celery — his eyes catch onto their waving tops and the truth hits him. He sees Nerine for what she is, a crazy woman. She starts off at once going on about the non-existent brother. How she was just about to go to join him in the house in Canada, but then *Nine Eleven* happened and she was afraid to fly. She's still afraid to. It'll be some time yet before she'll build up the courage. Or does Don think she's wrong here? Should she go anyway? She tightens the plastic slide on its strand of hair.

He shrugs helplessly.

And then it's, maybe she should, maybe she should put the horrors out of her mind and just go for it.

He shrugs again. What to say?

But no, perhaps she'll wait.

Waiting is Nerine's style; it's her game plan. If it is a game, if she does have a plan. To wait.

Up on the diving board Juanita sees Nerine with arms stretched up. As if she's about to dive, as if she will. Sometime.

*But what about her hair, what about her precious face?* Juanita is thinking as she leaves the swimming pool. If Nerine dives into the water her hair and her face will get all wet. Juanita walks away from the building, goes down the street, not caring enough about what will happen to induce her to stay. What will be will be. What is, is. In her heart she carries a picture of Nerine static. Stretching her arms up to the rafters forever. Who knows what the conclusion will be?

Nerine is with Don on the street. They are walking; she won't let him get away today until he's heard what's on her mind. She has him for a sympathetic listener. He is, but with limitations. Hearing about the hospital, how the other nurses have got it in for her is one thing, but Juanita, being told that Juanita is persecuting Nerine is a thing he really doesn't want to hear. He shifts uncomfortably in his shoes. Can't bear to hear it but keeps quiet, wants to hear more. He's pulled in the two directions.

*Every night Juanita taps five times on the water pipe. She knows it will reverberate, keep me from sleeping. Somehow she waits till I'm just at the point of sleep. When she takes out her rubbish bags to the bins she drops just a little bit of shredded cabbage or rotten fish-head – a foody thing you can be sure. Drops it just near my front door, next to the mat.*

Don is quick here, he's seen a flaw in Nerine's story. *I'm sure it must be an accident. You can't be saying Juanita would do such a thing on purpose. You said what Juanita wanted was for you to not exist. You said she wouldn't want to be reminded you are here. If Juanita is doing this to you it means she's aware of you. She's reminding herself. Why don't you just speak to her? Tell her to be more careful.*

*I can't do that, can I,* Nerine says.

*I don't see why not,* Don tells her curtly, as though to say Nerine has kept quiet only because she wants to prolong the bad blood of the situation.

*Because, she goes. Because. I'd be playing into her hands, wouldn't I.*

Nerine gives a wild sudden laugh, returning Don to his belief she's a little unbalanced. More than a little. He ponders this thought quietly.

Nerine continues – *The logic isn't as clear-cut as you imagine. She wants to know I don't exist but she has this compulsion to keep on testing to see*

*if it's true. She's trying to draw me out but if I'm drawn out I'm in danger. If I don't take the bait I'm safe. But she'll keep on trying. There are many such cases in the hospital. In the psychiatric wing it's an everyday occurrence. Signs. The mad are always looking for signs.*

Don and Juanita lean together and whisper, conspiratorial with this new thought they've had lately. *Is Nerine a nurse at the hospital, or a patient? Is she, or has she at some time been a patient in the psychiatric ward.* She knows so much about the place; she knows so much about mental states. Just one subtle tweak of the facts would be all it would take. *And so?*

One Tuesday night. Don meets Nerine on the stairs. She's looking agitated, wants him to come into her place and help her shift a bucket of water. Would he mind? No, of course he wouldn't mind but where did the water come from? The pipe next to her sink is split, it's spilling water. She's called the emergency services, she's waiting for the plumber. The plumber was supposed to come last week, he was supposed to come yesterday.

*How did the pipe split?* Don asks her.

*Old useless pipe,* Nerine spits back.

She can't shift the bucket because she's hurt her shoulder lifting a heavy patient at the hospital. Two nurses are supposed to do that job but the other nurses hate her, they all gang up on her; they made her lift the patient on her own. Now she's done something to her shoulder. She can't move it; her whole back is full of pain, as if there are a thousand splinters piercing her. Walking is difficult. She's off work now. Doesn't know if she'll ever be able to work again. She's got to try and get legal advice about compensation.

Don edges through the doorway of Nerine's flat. She's got a kitchen/living room that she uses as a bedsit. Two rows of light brown cardboard storage boxes line the walls. They are higher than when he was here last time; they have nearly reached the level of the television. In the centre of the piled boxes is an oasis of living space. A couch with a cluttered coffee table in front of it, a small fridge next to that with the microwave on the top. A rug. At the edge of the rug the boxes start, the room is not large. There's a gap and then the sink on the far wall. The bedroom door is open. That room is full of boxes, except there's a narrow corridor and this is how Nerine gets in. To inspect the contents of random boxes Don supposes.

*I've made up my mind to leave,* Don hears Nerine saying. *But there's a problem with my documents.* He nods, lifting up the bucket. *I have to see my solicitor.*

He hears her vaguely, isn't really listening. Nerine's constant lamentations can be a little hard to keep an enthusiasm for. He takes the bucket of water to Nerine's shower room, a sparse tiny rectangle with a single threadbare towel, a packet of bleach. How Nerine can live the way she does Don can't begin to imagine.

*She's waiting, Juanita says. She won't waste anything on the present. It's only the future and the past Nerine's got any time for. In her mind perhaps, she's already gone on to somewhere else or has never left where she used to be.*

Ten a.m., a Thursday, nothing exceptional, nothing new, nothing you'd call new. Except there's this smell. Juanita in her kitchen making toast notices it. Something between grease and fireworks, she's not sure what. Don's just about to go in to work with the report he's been working on. There's a faint, sickening odour, he can't tell where it's coming from. Then half way to his door with an arm in one sleeve of his jacket, the fire alarms go off. The ones in the flats, recurrent sirens, shrill and screaming, and the one in the hallways, like a thousand clanging bells. Together and out of harmony, these two alarms rip through the building. In a few minutes Don's out on the pavement, and here's Juanita, looking sheepish. *I was just making toast, she tells him. And now this.*

Next the fire engine arrives.

*I was just making toast, Juanita says, feeling bad about it, still thinking at this moment it's her fault the alarm's gone off. You have to make toast on the windowsill in this place. Who can do that?* The firemen check her flat. *No, it's flat No. 3, one of them calls, just when the investigation's nearly over. By the time they get to Nerine's, the smoke's billowing. She's not coming out, not answering. Don looks at Juanita, sees her face gone white with terror. It mirrors his feeling. They move tremblingly into the entrance porch. Don tries to get back in the building; he thinks of Nerine trapped inside her little space. But the firemen won't let him re-enter. By now they're kicking in Nerine's door, calling out. The door's down, they're going in. A smoky haze through which they see the rectangular doorway to the bedroom. It's orange with flame. No sight or sound from Nerine, no cry, not even a whisper. They fight the flame with water, spraying it down to nothing, reveal Nerine's body lying across some burned up lumpy boxes just into the room.*

A shudder passes between Don and Juanita in the entrance porch, as though they too have seen her lying there crumpled and partly blackened and dried out as a twig.

When the ambulance comes Nerine is rushed to hospital. She doesn't survive, but it isn't till some time later that Don and Juanita know this. They keep phoning the hospital and nobody can tell them anything about Nerine. The impersonal voices at the end of the line keep saying

they've never heard of anybody of that name, they say she has never been admitted. It's as if they are in collusion with the kind of troubled life Nerine had had and they're determined to reproduce it. Even now the same problematic things are going on. *But she was a nurse at the hospital*, Don shouts out, distraught. *No*, they say, and then the phone cuts off.

*She must have been admitted*, Don repeats to Juanita, his head hollow with the sense of nightmare. *She can't just have disappeared*. He phones again, reaches this department, that department, this ward, that ward, everywhere. Then he goes to the hospital in person, to make enquiries. He stands at the entrance desk. The receptionists on the other side give him confident and empty smiles, they could be robots. They check their records, eyes aloof. *No, he must be mistaken. It must be the hospital the other side of Town, Nerine – was that the name? – she must be somewhere else*. Don slips away from their blankscreen faces, tired, brought down by the weight of their denial.

That night police come round and interview Don and Juanita. They say Nerine's a missing person, ask them for a description. *But there was a fire*, Don bursts out. *Nerine left here in an ambulance*. The police seem to know nothing about this; they say they'll contact the Fire Department. Three days later Don phones the police and is told Nerine has died. Don and Juanita are in a state of shock.

And yes, she had been a nurse, yes she had died in that same hospital where she'd worked, only there had been some kind of mix up with the records. It's a sad story. She'd been taken in with burns and acute asphyxiation. The hospital when Don calls them, says who is he, is he a relative? He says he's a neighbour and they say they can't give out any information, as he isn't kin. It is like a replay of Nerine's own experience of life. The affliction, the pain. The unbelievable difficulty. Uncanny that.

Don has a mental picture of Nerine a candle in her hand as she looks at some lacy treasure, a soft bit of cloth susceptible to the flame. The flame catches. Soon to be all over with her. He pictures how Nerine dies, pictures the boxes catching light around her, her hair on fire, the hairslide melting quickly. Boxes hold her in, collapsing in front of her till she's all cut off. Boxes tumbling. She, Nerine, bright and resisting as she leaps and twists. But it's too much for her. She falls.

She leaps and twists before his eyes at unexpected moments. In the hallway, in the street at places he most frequently used to see her. Light and shadow. She, slipping in and out of them as usual. Her worried look. Hard for Don to believe at first the swift and darting Nerine does not exist, except as ashes.

*Ashes in a casket in a shopping bag, let's be brutal*, Juanita says.



Juanita believes such things have to be said, that reality has to be looked at harshly or it won't be taken in. Nerine who always tried to make light of the present and be there in it as little as possible was far more a thing of substance than she could have imagined or wished. For even when the harsh things are said, Don and Juanita find it hard to accept she's dead, and that's the truth of it. They stare at the shopping bag in Stephen's hand, a scarred bag of everyday leather. The sight of it is what at last convinces them. Almost without knowing it, they've been toying with a sense of the sacred, something extra terrestrial. The shopping bag has undercut its presence.

I know it's wrong to fall in love with your sister. It's a false thing, a thing not to be tolerated. This is what the brother Stephen would have liked to say, had he been brave enough. And maybe Nerine hated me because of this. I even hope it was because of this. I expect condemnation — I almost need it. But it's also possible it's because of Babe she didn't ever come back to us. To me, I mean. I'm talking about Nerine feeling left out. The intensity of twinship that excluded her, the sense of isolation she must have had. I'm talking about jealousy.

*Nerine fell out with Babe and so she left us to fend for herself*, is all he actually does say. *But who is Babe?* Don asks self-consciously, the name *Babe* embarrassing him as he shuffles out the question.

Don as if falling from a great height. Things flashing past his eyes as he goes. This bit of the past, that bit, all bringing him right down to the present. He can't remember the last time he'd seen Nerine. He thinks of the fire, again imagines the boxes alight, those same boxes he'd seen in their dull brown ordinary state. He'd almost felt the rough texture of the cardboard when Nerine had absently run her fingers across the boxes next to the sink. The day he'd gone to carry away the bucket of water seems far off and close, in equal measures. A small action, strange he'd noticed it at all. Nothing significant, except it spelled the feeling of life and now here's the opposite. Ashes. Do ashes feel? He laughs in spite of his misery. All the unresolved troubles. Don shakes his head as if to dispel them. Nerine never managed it, more's the pity. They'll have to be dispelled, now. He thinks of the faded look of her curtain, of the TV high on the wall with its own waiting look. The smile of Nerine, its surprising lively quality.

The police have been and gone. And now on the doorstep is Stephen, the brother. In his mind he says, *Wrongly I fell in love with Babe my twin sister, also known as Caroline.* All passed smoothly until the day Nerine saw Caroline and me lying together in the long grass. The wind whooshed the grass apart and there we were. My fault. No, not just the carelessness. Of course it was my fault. It shouldn't have been

happening. Me and Babe, we shouldn't have been as we were, but there was this terrible pull between us. Twinship. Nerine couldn't handle it, and why should she? You could call it incest. But it felt like a love I'd never get over. In the end Caroline left me. She married five years ago and went to live in Wales. I've never visited. No, it's never seemed the right thing. I live by myself now, very quietly. I had hoped Nerine would join me. I have a house. It would have been just the two of us. Not that I mean to say...no, it's not at all like that. Why didn't she come? She must have been lonely living by herself in that pokey flat. Why didn't she? Not because she saw what she saw, surely? His face is red, which probably means he suspects he's on the right track.

*Stephen says, Babe was what we used to call my twin sister. I don't know why, her name is Caroline. Nerine was the baby of the family, if anybody was. I hoped she'd come out and join me, but Nerine always loved to play a waiting game. Maybe she would have come one day, we can never know. She fell out with Babe and left one frosty morning. And now this. I'm never going to see Nerine again.*

He looks at the shopping bag, thinks of Nerine reduced to a little pot of ashes that have to be carried in a bag for the sake of public acceptability. The myth he's had of Nerine has given him a sense of security, something allegorical about her that has always soothed him. He'd been working on the assumption she was imperishable. He cries.

Don and Juanita on the step, both with an arm around Stephen. They invite him in for coffee, both eyeing the shopping bag uneasily at the same time. But no, he'll be going, he guesses, he's staying in a hotel the other side of town. He'll be back tomorrow to sort through Nerine's things — if there is anything left which hasn't been burnt.

*So what was she waiting for? Don's voice sounds hopeless. What? He'd like things to be different; he'd like Nerine to have found whatever it was. But then again maybe she wasn't waiting for anything and it was just an act. Or it seemed like waiting to everyone else. Maybe Nerine's pride wanted people to go along with thinking there were other options she could take if she wanted to. But it was possible there wasn't anything she could go on to after all. Nothing she felt right about.*

*Juanita says, Nerine saw us together once. The door swung open unexpectedly. Just a couple of seconds, but she saw you lying in my bed. It might have shocked her, Nerine was hardly adult, was she? I mean did you ever know her to have a relationship even? She pauses. It was one night when her electricity had broken down. It kept on breaking down didn't it, if you remember. She came to borrow a candle.*

*A candle? Don says unhappily. Don't.*

*It was round about that time I sensed hostility coming from her. Not long after, we even stopped speaking.*

Juanita thinking of Nerine up on the diving board, or slowly making her way through the swimming pool. Nerine in water but not succumbing, never giving in to it. Nerine with her arms outstretched as if reaching out for other possibilities. Stuck in the past and waiting for the future to happen.

And the brother goes on his way in the next day or two, goes back to Canada, thinking how myths, though deep and universal, can be deeply and universally fallible. You can't rely on them. Who could withstand such a fire? No mortal creature, no salamander even. Where did this idea come from that a salamander could not burn? He himself was guilty of believing Nerine was protected in some strange way by something bigger than all of them, by the charisma of some reified glory, by perfection, a story larger than words. But he knows now Nerine was just a woman. It's a lesson that is painfully difficult to learn.