

Mame Ekblom Cudd

Calling Out to Lizzie

It's the day before my surgery, and Da, before tending the cows, says goodbye. He places his hand on my head, then his cheek, too, his breath slow and calming.

Last night I heard them, my parents, in the front room, their speech all low and whispery, worried about my sixth surgery to repair my cleft palate—for clear speech, finally, maybe. My cousin Anne, down the road in Killybegs, she got the harelip, too. A little scar, a fine, white line is all she has, but her speech is clear.

Mrs. Mulrany's great-aunt, visiting for the first time, popped in yesterday and asked my mum, "Your Fiona, is she a bit deaf, as well?" I do sound like that. The words floating, my tongue loose in my mouth, not touching the roof, not well enough for clear speech. I stay silent at school and silent with the boy I like, Thomas.

So many hospital visits and just this past July the doctor saying, with a probe in my mouth, pointing, showing, "You see this extreme deformity here," and my parents never using "extreme deformity" with me or anyone. We all sat straight in our chairs as those words flew around the room, hitting us.

And afterwards silence in the car, my mum reaching her hand back between the seats to hold my hand for a while. We left the windows rolled down, so Da could smoke and those horrible words could be peeled away and tossed out into the sea air.

Today we drive back to the children's hospital in Limerick for a better palate, advancements Da says we should not ignore. Only Mum and I are going. Da will stay back with Connie and Michael and Lizzie.

Lizzie, my little sister, jumps behind me on the bed as I pack. My talker, my kitten, she's small and quick, affectionate, so physical. She'll curl up in my lap, or Da's or Mum's. Quietly she will talk and then, dancing almost, she'll spin over to the visitors in our kitchen, speaking for me, answering, laughing with Thomas, as well. Reading, now that she can, the notes on the little chalkboard Mum gave me. Always there's a giggle as I write more and more complicated words, and she says them perfectly, explaining. She takes me in good humor or not. She runs with me, keeping up almost as fast to tend to the

cows, to bring them down to the second pasture. And she knows the whistles, directing them through the little gate near the stream.

"You're a big help to your sister, Lizzie Keneally," Mr. Mulrany said yesterday, catching us on the road with the cows, asking again of the surgery and Lizzie answering, cuddling against me, but her speech clear and sounding much older than any child of eight.

We walked home through the tall, wet grass, waving to Mr. Mulrany, with me thinking of Lizzie's childish movements and laughter. Yet she speaks clearly to them, to our neighbors and friends, and then she hides behind me as if I'm the one who spoke. So well done that when they answer, they look at my eyes. Sixteen in a month, I will be. I should speak, I hope, better, and I shall have to leave Lizzie alone. She must speak for herself.

We sit in the kitchen, still in the dark, and Mum makes the tea before we leave. Connie and Michael have gone out to help Da. Lizzie, she picks up the chalkboard and climbs onto my lap. When I get home, I will call out her name, nice and clear, and hear it she will, all the way from the second pasture.