

SALLY HEPWORTH

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE MOTHER-IN-LAW*

THE GOOD SISTER

EVERYONE
HAS A
DARK SIDE

A NOVEL



THE GOOD SISTER

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St Martin's Press
New York

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For Eloise and Clementine
For giving me a glimpse into the great wonders and (greater) horrors of
having a sister

JOURNAL OF ROSE INGRID CASTLE

It's been three months since Owen left. Left, or left *me*—like so many things in the adult world, it's all a bit gray. He took a job in London; a work opportunity, ostensibly. It's not that I wasn't invited, but it was clear to both of us that I couldn't go. That's another thing about the adult world: responsibilities. In my case, one particular responsibility. Fern.

But let me backtrack, because it sounds like I'm blaming her. I'm not. The problems between Owen and me are 100 percent, unequivocally, entirely, my fault. I committed the most cardinal of marital sins—I changed. Overnight, as soon as the clock chimed my twenty-seventh birthday in fact, I went from being a well-educated, empowered woman to one of those pathetic women who wanted a baby with such ferocity it drove my husband away. An ovulation-kit-wielding, sperm-testing, temperature-taking lunatic. In my previous life, I'd scorned this type of woman from up in my (what I presumed to be) fertile ivory tower. Then I'd become one. And I'd pushed and I'd pushed and I'd pushed—until my husband left. Left ... or left *me*.

My therapist is right, it is a relief, getting these thoughts out of my head and onto paper. In therapy, we hardly talk about Owen at all. Instead, we while away the fifty-minute hours talking about my traumatic childhood. According to him, a good way to process trauma and put it behind you is to write it down. That's why he gave me this journal. I'm not convinced it will help, but here I am. Apparently, the people-pleaser in me dies hard.

The obvious place to start is the night at the river. I was twelve. We were camping. Mum and Daniel had been dating for about six months, but it was the first time we'd been away anywhere together. Daniel brought Billy, much to my and Fern's delight—we'd forever longed for a brother, and all those wonderful traits a brother brought with him: roughhousing, logical arguments, and good-looking friends. And for the first few days, we had a good time. Better than good. It was the closest I'd ever come to being part of a normal family. Daniel taught us to fish, Billy taught us how to play poker, and Mum ... she was like a completely different person. She did things like remind us to apply sunscreen and tell us to be careful in the river "because the current could be strong." One day, she even rested her arm affectionately around my shoulders as we sat by the fire. She'd

never done that before. I'll never forget what it felt like, our bodies touching like that.

On the last night, Billy, Fern, and I went to the river mouth. The heat of the day hung in the air and we spent most of the time slapping mosquitoes from our arms. Billy was in the water, the only place to get any relief from the heat. Usually Fern and I would have joined him, but something was up with Fern that night. She was in one of her moods. I'd wanted to ask her about it all day, but Fern could be volatile when she was upset. I decided it was better to leave it alone.

We'd been by the river an hour or so when nature called. Billy was showing no signs of getting out of the water, so I headed deep into the trees. There was no way I was going to let him see me pee. It was slow going; it was pitch black and I was barefoot—I had to watch every step I took. My fear of snakes didn't help matters. Still, I was gone for five minutes max. Apparently, that is all it takes.

When I returned to the river, Fern was gone.

"Fern," I called. "Where are you?"

It was strange for her not to be in the spot I left her.

It took me a minute to locate her, illuminated by a patch of moonlight in the shallows of the river. She was standing eerily still. Billy was nowhere to be seen.

"What are you—" I took a step toward her and she lifted her hands. Before I could ask what was going on, something rose to the surface of the water beside her—a sliver of pale, unmoving flesh.

"Fern," I whispered. "What have you done?"

FERN

Every Tuesday morning at 10:15 A.M., I am stationed at the front desk of the Bayside Public Library. The front desk is usually my least favorite post, but on Tuesday mornings I make an exception so as to have a clear view to the circular meeting room where Toddler Rhyme Time takes place. I enjoy Toddler Rhyme Time, despite its obvious vexing qualities—the noise, the crowd, the unexpected direction a child’s emotions can take at a moment’s notice. Today, Linda, the children’s librarian, is regaling the toddlers with a vehement retelling of “The Three Little Pigs.” Imaginatively, she has chosen to forgo *reading* the book, and is instead acting the story out, alternately donning a fluffy wolf’s head and a softer, squidgy-looking pig’s head with pale blue eyes and a protruding snout. At intervals, Linda emits an impressively realistic-sounding pig’s squeal, so shrill and penetrating that it makes my toes curl in my sneakers.

The children, on the whole, appear enraptured with Linda’s recital, the only exceptions being a newborn screaming wildly on its mother’s shoulder and a little boy in an orange jumper who covers his ears and buries his face in his grandmother’s lap. I, too, am absorbed in the performance—so much so that it takes me several seconds to register the woman with pointy coral fingernails who has appeared at the desk, clutching a stack of books against her hip. I roll my ergonomic chair slightly to the right so I can still see the children (who are now helping Linda blow down an imaginary house of straw), but distractingly, the woman moves with me, huffing and fidgeting and, finally, clearing her throat. Finally, she clicks her fingernails against the desk. “*Excuse* me.”

“*Excuse* me,” I repeat, rolling the statement around in my head. It feels unlikely that she is *actually* asking to be excused. After all, patrons are free to

come and go as they please in the library, they don't have to ask for the privilege. It's possible, I suppose, that she's asking to be excused for impoliteness, but as I didn't hear her belch or fart, that also seems improbable. As such, I conclude she has employed the odd social custom of asking to be excused as a means of getting a person's attention. I open my mouth to tell her that she *has* my attention, but people are so impatient nowadays and she cuts me off before I can speak.

"Do you work here?" she asks rudely.

Sometimes the people in this library can be surprisingly dense. For heaven's sake, why would I be sitting behind the desk—wearing a *name badge!*—if I didn't work here? That said, I acknowledge that I don't fit the stereotypical mold of a librarian. For a start, at twenty-eight, I'm younger than the average librarian (forty-five, according to *Librarian's Digest*) and I dress more fashionably and colorfully than the majority of my peers—I'm partial to soft, bright T-shirts, sparkly sneakers, and long skirts or overalls emblazoned with rainbows or unicorns. I wear my hair in two braids, which I loop into a bun above each ear (not a reference to Princess Leia, though I do wonder if she found the style as practical as I do for keeping long hair out of your face when you are a woman with things to do). And, yet, I am most definitely a librarian.

"Are you going to serve me, young lady?" the woman demands.

"Would you *like* me to serve you?" I ask patiently. I don't point out that she could have saved herself a lot of time by simply *asking* to be served.

The woman's eyes boggle. "Why do you *think* I'm standing here?"

"There are an infinite number of reasons," I reply. "You are, as you may have noticed, directly adjacent to the water fountain, which is a high-traffic area for the library. You might be using the desk to shuffle documents on your way over to the photocopier. You may be admiring the Monet print on the wall behind me—something I do several times a day. You may have paused on your way to the door to tie your shoelace, or to double-check if that person over in the nonfiction section is your ex-boyfriend. You might, as I was before you came along, be enjoying Linda's wonderful rendition of 'The Three Little Pigs'—"

I have more examples, many *many* more, but I am cut off by Gayle, who approaches the desk hurriedly. "May I help you there?"

Gayle has a knack for turning up at opportune times. She has fluffy blond hair, exceedingly potent perfume, and a thing about bringing me lemons from

her lemon tree. I once made the mistake of saying I'd enjoyed a slice of lemon in hot water and since then I've barely gone a day without a lemon from Gayle. I'd tell her to stop, but Rose says people enjoy making themselves useful in these small ways and the best thing to do is to thank them and throw the lemon away. Bizarre as it sounds, Rose tends to be right about these things.

"Finally!" the woman says, and then launches into a story about how her son left his library books at the beach house and then it got fumigated so they weren't able to collect the books until yesterday and now they've incurred a fine and, also, she'd like to extend her loan, but the book has twenty-seven reserves on it! Twenty-seven! As far as stories to get out of fines go, this one is rather benign, I have to say. I spoke with a gentleman recently who explained that his daughter had taken his library copy of *Ulysses* on a trekking vacation to the Andes, where she'd left it in a mountain village with a mother of newborn twins whose husband had recently passed away. I marveled that an Andean village woman could read English so well as to read *Ulysses*, not to mention have a desire to read such a book while single-handedly raising her twins on a mountaintop, but before I could ask him much about either, he shuffled away. (Gayle, of course, waived the fine.)

I work in the library four days a week, plus two Sundays a month. If it's not raining, like today, I walk the thirty-five minutes to work while listening to my audiobook and I arrive at the library a minimum of fifteen minutes before my shift. If it is raining, I catch the bus and arrive at a similar time. I then spend the day recommending books, processing returns, and avoiding questions about the photocopiers. Depending on the particular day, I might also order new books, set up the conference room for author talks or community meetings, or put together book packages for the home library service. I try to avoid conversations about things other than books, although I'll occasionally indulge Gayle in a conversation about her garden or her grandchildren, because Rose says it's polite to do this with people who we like.

I'm listening to Gayle waive the fine for the woman with the coral-colored fingernails when my eye is drawn to a young man in thick glasses and a red-and-white-striped beanie entering through the automatic doors. A homeless person, most likely, judging by his too-loose jeans and the towel draped over his shoulder. He makes a beeline for the shower room. The Bayside library boasts two showers (thanks to its former life as a hospital), so it's not uncommon for the homeless to come in to shower. The first time I saw a

homeless person come in, I was affronted, but that was before I worked with Janet. Janet, my old supervisor, taught me that the library belongs to everyone. The library, Janet used to say, is one of only a few places in the world that one doesn't need to believe anything or buy anything to come inside ... and it is the librarian's job to look after all those who do. I take this responsibility very seriously, except if they require assistance with the photocopiers and then I give them a very wide berth.

I reach for my handbag and follow the man toward the bathroom. He's tall—very tall—and lanky looking. From behind, with his pom-pom bouncing on his stripy hat, he reminds me a little of Wally of *Where's Wally?* fame.

"Wally!" I call as he steps into the small vestibule—an airless, windowless tiled room leading to both the men's and women's bathrooms. I usually avoid this space at all costs, but seeing the man enter, I feel an unexpected compulsion to face my fears.

"Were you planning to use the shower?"

He turns around, eyebrows raised, but doesn't respond. I wonder if he might be hearing impaired. We have a large community of hearing-impaired patrons at our library. I repeat myself loudly and slowly, allowing him to lip-read.

"Yes?" he says finally, his intonation rising as if he is asking a question rather than answering one.

I start to question my impulse to follow him. I have become more wary of vagrants since a man exposed himself to me a few months back during an evening shift. I had been replacing a copy of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* when suddenly, at eye level, there was a penis, in the "Mc" section of General Fiction. I alerted Gayle, who called the police, but by the time they arrived, the man had zipped up and shuffled out of the place. "You should have snapped it in between the covers of that hardback," Gayle had said, which sounded messy, not to mention unwise for the hygiene of the book. When I pointed this out, she suggested I "karate-chop" him, which is neither an actual karate move (I have a black belt) nor something I would be tempted to do, since karate has a pacifist philosophy.

I have been doing karate since I did a trial class in grade two and the sensei said I was a "natural" (an odd comment as there was nothing natural about kata—on the contrary, the movements felt very specific and unnatural). Still, I found I enjoyed it immensely—the consistency, the routine, the structure, even

the physical contact, which was always firm if not hard. Even the “Kiai” shouts, while loud, are to a count and expected. So twenty years later, I’m still doing it.

“Well, here you go then.”

I reach into my handbag and retrieve the small toiletry bag that I keep in there. I hand it to Wally, who holds it away from himself as if it might contain a ticking bomb. “What ... *is* ... this?”

“It contains toothpaste and a toothbrush, a face washer and some soap. Also a razor and some shaving cream.”

I’m not sure how I could be any clearer, and yet Wally still seems confused. I study him closely. He doesn’t smell like alcohol and both his eyes are pointing the same direction. His clothes, while ill fitting, are all on the correct parts of his body. Still, the jury is out on his sanity.

“Did you just call me ... Wally?”

There’s something pleasing about the man’s voice; his words are round somehow, and completely enunciated. It is an unexpected delight in a world where people are forever mumbling.

“Yes,” I say. “You look like Wally from *Where’s Wally?* Hasn’t anyone told you that before?”

He neither confirms nor denies it, so I decide to provide more information.

“You know *Where’s Wally?*, don’t you? It’s a book .” I smile, because Rose says that people should smile while engaging in banter (playful exchanges of friendly remarks), and this, to me, feels very much like banter.

Wally doesn’t smile. “You mean *Where’s Waldo?*?”

Wally is American, I realize suddenly, which explains both his accent and his confusion.

“Actually, no, I mean *Where’s Wally?* The original book was *Where’s Wally?*, published in the United Kingdom in 1987. Since then, the books have been published around the world and Wally’s name is often changed in these different editions. For instance, he’s ‘Waldo’ in the United States and Canada, ‘Charlie’ in France, ‘Walter’ in Germany, ‘Ali’ in Turkey, ‘Efi’ in Israel, and ‘Willy’ in Norway.”

Wally studies me for a few seconds. He seems perplexed. His gaze, I notice, is just to the left of me, as if he is looking over my shoulder.

“Anyway, in Australia, it’s Wally,” I say.

“Oh. Kay.” He looks back at the toiletry bag. “So ... the library provides these?”

“No,” I say, smiling wider. “I do.”

Under his glasses, Wally’s mossy green pupils travel right to left slowly. “*You* do?”

“Yes. My sister gives these to me whenever she returns from international travel. Do you know they give them out for free on airplanes?”

“I did know that,” he says, which makes me wonder about the accuracy of my assessment that he is homeless. I have, in my lifetime, been known to get things alarmingly wrong. I examine him more closely. His jeans are both too loose and too short and appear to have been cut off by hand, judging by the frayed ends. His buffalo flannelette shirt is in better nick, nicely buttoned right up to the neck. And while he has an overall look of grubbiness, I haven’t detected an odor, even in this small vestibule. I look at his fingernails, which are clean. Spectacularly clean, in fact. Buffed and pink and round, each cuticle a perfect crescent moon. The man could be a hand model.

“I apologize, I thought you were homeless.” I don’t smile now, to indicate this isn’t banter, but a serious comment. “I’m afraid it was your jeans that gave me that impression. And the hat, obviously.”

He stares at me. Not being one to duck away from a challenge, I stare back. A few years ago, I read a book of tips for people who find eye contact difficult. It suggested staring competitions as a form of exposure therapy. To my great surprise, I excelled at it. As it turned out, staring competitions were nothing like the discomfort of regular eye contact. There is no need to wonder how long you must look at someone, when you should look away or how often to blink. With staring competitions, all you have to do is fix your gaze on the person and let your mind wander. I can do that for hours if I feel so inclined. In fact, I once beat Mr. Robertson, a library patron and good contender, at thirty-seven minutes. I expect Wally, younger and wilier by the look of him, to be a better contender, so I’m disappointed when after less than ten seconds, he looks away.

“Amateur.”

Wally opens his mouth at the same time as the door swings open, forcing me farther into the vestibule. The boy in the orange jumper from Toddler Rhyme Time pushes his way inside. On his heels are his grandmother and

another woman pushing a double stroller. Clearly, Rhyme Time has finished. Outside, the swell of toddler racket intensifies.

“What’s wrong with my hat?” Wally asks, as the door opens again and a small girl and her mother file into the small space. It’s getting quite cramped in here now. The boy in the orange jumper jumps up and down and announces “I’m busting” to no one in particular. Then he notices Wally. “It’s Wally!” he cries, marveling.

Wally looks at me and I shrug—a nonverbal gesture I’ve seen people use to indicate, *Told you*.

There are a lot of people in the little vestibule now and the acoustics are particularly irritating. I place my hands over my ears. “It’s a compliment,” I yell over the din. “Wally is universally beloved, even if he is an odd sort of fellow. Though maybe he isn’t odd, maybe he just looks that way? Like you!”

Wally pushes his glasses back up his nose and I lip-read him saying, “*Excuse me?*”

“You don’t need to ask to be excused,” I shout, moving toward the door. “The library is a public space; you can come and go as you please.”

The door opens yet again; this time an elderly man, pushing a walking frame, comes through it. I grab the door and maneuver around the double stroller. I’m almost out the door when a thought occurs to me and I swivel around.

“And if you belched or farted, I didn’t hear it, so no need to excuse yourself for that either!”

And with that, I give a little wave and take my exit.

When we were five, my mother took my sister, Rose, and me to the library every day for a year. *A better education than school will ever give you*, Mum used to say, and I quite agree. If it were up to me, every child would have a year in the library before they went to school. Not just to read, but to roam. To befriend a librarian. To bash their fingers against the computers and to turn the pages of a book while making up a story from their superior little imaginations. How lucky the world would be if every child could do that.

I was that lucky. These days, researchers seem to be saying that we don't form explicit memories until the age of seven, but I have a number of memories from the year I was five. Memories of Mum, Rose, and me waking up with the birds, scrambling into our clothes and racing out to the bus stop. Because of our eagerness, we nearly always arrived before the library opened, then passed the time by sitting on the bench out front, or, if it was raining, huddled under the awning finishing our books while we waited for the doors to open. When we got inside, Rose and I took turns sliding our books into the return slot and then racing to select our beanbags for the day (I preferred the cotton ones—the vinyl could get so sticky after a while). Mum never sat on a beanbag, she preferred the armchairs or seats on the other side of the library. Often, we didn't see Mum for the whole day. That was part of the fun. We went to the toilet by ourselves, we went to the water fountain by ourselves. At the library, we were in charge of what we did and when.

We'd been doing this for a few weeks when one of the librarians, Mrs. Delahunty, began taking an interest in us. First, she gave us book recommendations. Then, she gave Rose and me worksheets on which to write the names of all the books we'd read. If we got to a hundred, she said, we'd be gifted a book from the library to keep! It was through filling out that worksheet that Rose and I learned to write. Some days, when we deliberated on what to read next, Mrs. Delahunty would come over and make suggestions.

“Did you enjoy *The Giving Tree*, girls? If so, I think you would love *Where the Wild Things Are*. Sit down and we’ll read it together.”

Afterward she’d ask us questions. *Do you think Max really went away? What do you think actually happened?* Mrs. Delahunty said that answering questions helped our brains understand what we’d read. As the year went on, Mrs. Delahunty chose more and more difficult books for us, and by the year’s end, according to Mrs. Delahunty, we had the vocabulary of twelve-year-olds! Because of this, the following year we skipped prep and went straight into grade one. Mum was very proud of this. Lots of people said things to us like *What a wonderful mum you must have!* and *Your mum must have spent a lot of time reading to you.*

The first time someone said that, I started to point out that, no, it *wasn’t* Mum who spent time reading to us, but then Rose tapped her bracelet against mine. Mum had given us our bracelets when we were born—mine was engraved with a fern, and Rose’s with a rose. Somewhere along the way, they became our way of talking to each other without talking. Rose always taps her bracelet against mine as a warning. Stop. It’s a good system that almost always works. There’s only been one time that Rose couldn’t stop me from doing the wrong thing and that was a mistake that will haunt me for the rest of my life.