

HANNAH FAGAN

A is for Above, B is for Below

We find an apple. We know what it is because of ‘A is for apple’ in the book which Ma-Three used to teach us to read. Though that apple was red, and this one is small and sort of brown, so we take it to Grand-Pa to make sure. When we put the apple in his hands he feels it all over and brings it to his mouth and tries to take a bite of it, though he doesn’t have proper teeth and can usually only eat food that’s been mushed for him by one of the Mas. William and Lizzie and I pretend to be Grand-Pa trying to chew on the apple and crying because he can’t, and the twins fall over laughing. Then Big-Pa comes up from Below to carry Grand-Pa down, and asks us what the hell we’re doing, so we stop. When Big-Pa sees the apple Grand-Pa is slobbering over he grabs it and throws it on the ground and smashes it with the heel of his boot. He shouts at Grand-Pa and says doesn’t he know that the enemy puts chemicals in the ground that grow up through the roots of plants and into the food to poison us? He says maybe Grand-Pa is getting too old to go Above anymore. Grand-Pa cries harder at that, but we don’t laugh at him as we go Below because we know how much he’d miss sitting in the sunshine and feeling the air. We all would.

Below is Main Room, where we live. The bathroom is on one side and on the other side is Big-Pa’s room, where the supplies are, and which only the Mas can go into. I go straight to Anna, lying wrapped up in her crate, and pull faces at her to make her smile. I pick up her hand and wave it at her. She has such long fingers. Ma-Three says it means she’ll be tall. I hope she’s not too tall, because then she’ll have

to walk all hunched over down here. Sean was tall. Sometimes he'd put me on his shoulders and the top of my head would just brush the top of Below. He'd say he was cleaning the ceiling. Then Ma-Four comes over and tells me to leave Anna alone, says I'll frighten her. I hate Ma-Four with her stupid pinched-up freckled face. She makes me angrier than William, who sometimes thinks he's better than me because he's a year older. Back when Ma-Four was still Cissie she was one of my favourites. But since becoming a Ma all she does is shout and boss and think she's special. She doesn't even like Anna. She always holds her slightly away. Not like Ma-Two used to hold me. Sometimes she'd curl me up tight to her and whisper in my ear, "You're mine." It wasn't like when William says the last bit of food at the bottom of the tin is his. It made me feel like she was also mine. "You're mine," she'd say. "I carried you in my belly." When I see Ma-Four carry Anna like she's got a bad smell I miss Ma-Two so much that I have to go lie on my mat and stare at the wall, even if it makes William and Lizzie mad cause they want to play.

It's not like there's that much to play Below anyway. There's battleships and snakes & ladders, and Sean made little men out of bits of tin and we used to play a game called 'soccer' that he made up with them. But we don't play that any more, it's not the same. There's much more you can do Above.

Ma-Two is the reason we get to go Above. Ma-Four told me, back when she was Cissie and nice. She and Sean were born Above, before the war made them come Below. But the new babies born Below kept getting sick and dying. Ma-Two had lost the most babies, so when I was born she went to Big-Pa and said that the reason the babies were dying was that they weren't getting any sun on their skin. Big-Pa said we couldn't go Above because the enemy put poison gas in the air and if we breathed it we'd die. Ma-Two said we were dying already so what was the difference? Big-Pa knocked out her two front teeth, but soon after he opened the top-door and now we're allowed to go Above for an hour a day. The Mas are still not allowed to go out, but when the top-door is open they stand in the patch of sun let through from Above. Maybe that's why Cissie has been so horrible since becoming a Ma. She misses Above. Even her freckles have become faded.

Pa never does stop Grand-Pa from going Above, but it seems like the threat was enough. After the day with the apple Grand-Pa gets sick. Eventually it gets so bad that Big-Pa has to go Above for a few days to get medicine. Ma-Three always tells us how brave Big-Pa is to go Above to get extra supplies, she says we don't know the horrible things he may see in the war. When I was little I'd worry that he'd never come back and that we'd be stuck Below forever. But now I know that he's never gone for long.

Not being able to go Above puts me in a bad mood, and the twins keep making it worse. They've started playing this stupid game. The one goes, "O is for owl!" and the other goes, "Hooooooo! Hooooooo!" and then they both fall over laughing. Ma-Three gets upset if we get irritated at the twins, so I wait until she's changing Anna before I hiss, "What the hell are you doing?" Melissa says, "You're not allowed to say 'hell'!" but Holly says, "We're being owls!" "Why are you making that noise, then?" "That's the noise owls make." "How do you know the noise owls make? You've only seen them in a picture." "*We* saw one," says Melissa triumphantly. "It was grey like in the picture, but bigger, and it sat on a branch Above going 'Hooooooo! Hooooo!' and then it flew away before anyone else saw it." "There are no animals Above," I snap. "Big-Pa says the enemy poisoned them all." But Melissa just says, "We saw one" and Holly goes "Hooooo hooooo," and they turn towards each other, giggling, so I know it's no use.

Ma-Four and I are caring for Grand-Pa when he dies. We've all been taking it in turns. He talks a lot, near the end, but the others have learnt to sleep through. Ma-Four wipes him with a damp cloth and shushes him, though it makes no difference. She says his mind is shooting back and forth through his life, so sometimes he cries like a baby and calls her Ma and sometimes he thinks he's still a young man and screams with frustration at his weak body. And sometimes he looks at me and I know he knows what he is, an old man near death, and those are the most terrible times. Tonight he is talking about the war. He cowers and whimpers from the bombs that fall and the sirens that sound. Ma-Four tells him that there are no bombs and sirens Below, that here we are safe. Seeing the way she is with him, she reminds me of how she was back when she was Cissie,

and I decide to go back to calling her that. Though only in my mind, because Big-Pa wouldn't like it.

Grand-Pa is the worst we've ever seen him, making high, airless screams in the back of his throat and trying to raise himself. "Help me!" says Cissie, and I lean over Grand-Pa's chest, my face level with his. Suddenly he stops struggling and looks at me. "Why did you bring us here, Charlie?" he asks me, and his voice is steady. "Why did you bring us underground where everything is dark and cold? I want to go up, to where there's sun and rain and peace." Cissie's been easing me back and when Grand-Pa says this last word I feel her hand tighten on me. "What's peace?" I ask. "It's when there's no war," she replies, and she's staring at Grand-Pa so hard there's a crease between her eyebrows, "Isn't that right, old man?" "Peace," says Grand-Pa, looking upwards, and for a moment in his face, the baby and the young man come together with the old. Then he is gone.

It's several days until Big-Pa gets back. We have to leave Grand-Pa lying under a blanket on the side of Main Room. When Big-Pa finds out Cissie and I were with him when he died he calls us to him. "Did he say anything? Did he ask for me?" I'd never heard Big-Pa sound like that before, small and unsure. "No," said Cissie, "he just died." Big-Pa nods and stands up. Then he grabs Cissie's throat and slams the back of her head against the wall. He holds her there for a moment, then lets go and leaves to his room.

After Big-Pa hurts Cissie I have to go lie on my mat, because it makes me think about things that have been stirring up since Grand-Pa started dying. It was last winter, and it was very cold. Big-Pa found out that Ma-Two was asking us to bring her wood from Above to burn. He was holding a big piece of log that William and I had been proud of carrying Below together. And he was shouting at Ma-Two, saying didn't she know there was war on and the enemy could put poison in the wood which could be released when you burnt it, and smacking her with his free hand. Sean got up and said, "Leave her alone!" None of us had realized that Sean had got taller than Big-Pa, and from the way Big-Pa looked at him I don't think he'd realized either. Ma-Two said, "Don't, Sean, don't," and put her hand on his arm. Everything was very quiet and my face felt hot and prickly and we all just sat curled up in our blankets and looked

at Big-Pa looking at Ma-Two's hand on Sean's arm. Then Big-Pa hit Sean on the side of the head with the log so hard that Sean flew into Ma-Two and they both fell over. He hit Sean again when he was lying down. He took Ma-Two by her hair and dragged her into his room. The twins were screaming and Cissie and Ma-Two and Lizzie were crying and I think I was too, and I looked at William and saw a big wet patch on his pants, and though he saw me looking I never said anything or teased him about it afterwards. Ma-One took us all to the bathroom and shut the door so we wouldn't have to look at Sean lying there bleeding, though even with the door shut we could still hear Big-Pa shooting his gun, the one he keeps in his room to protect us from enemies. We stayed in the bathroom for a long time, till William and Lizzie and the twins and I fell asleep in the bath lined with towels. And when we woke up and came back to Main-Room there was no Sean and no Ma-Two, just a small red stain on the end of my mat that I have to lie with my feet curled up to not touch. Two weeks later Big-Pa took Cissie into his room and she became a Ma.

Big-Pa digs a hole for Grand-Pa Above. When we are next allowed out William and I go look at it. It has a pile of dirt over it that is a different colour to the rest of the dirt, and two crossed sticks nailed together at one end, with three letters on them—'R for Rose', 'I for Igloo' and 'P for Parrot'. We look at it for a long time without speaking, and I don't know about William but I think a lot of things about Grand-Pa. I think about how he didn't speak or do much until he got sick, but how William once asked Ma-Three if his being named Grand-Pa meant that he was more important than Big-Pa, and how she said she'd wash his mouth out if he said anything like that again. But I think about the sound of Big-Pa's voice when he asked if Grand-Pa had said anything before he died and wonder whether maybe it was true. I think about the way Grand-Pa had looked before he died, shrivelled and brown like the apple we'd found, and the things he'd said. I think about them a lot. I hope he is happy to be Above in the sun.

When we go Below William asks Ma-Three what 'R.I.P.' stands for, and she says she thinks maybe it was Grand-Pa's name. I don't

think it was, cause when Grand-Pa was struggling to remember and thinking everyone was someone else he clutched at Cissie and said, "It's me! It's your Johnny!" over and over again until she shook him off. But I don't get a chance to say anything because Cissie drops a bowl and breaks it out of nowhere. This is not like her, and Big-Pa punches her in the face.

That night, Cissie wakes me up. The one side of her face is swollen but I can still see her eyes shining with the odd fever-look they've had since Grand-Pa died. "I know what R.I.P stands for!" "What?" "I know what R.I.P stands for! I remember from when we lived Above! It's not Grand-Pa's name. It means Rest. In. Peace." "So?" Cissie's frightening me, with her fever-eyes and doing things to get herself hit. "So! Grand-Pa didn't write those letters! He did! He knows! He knows what Grand-Pa said is right! Otherwise why would he write that word! The same word!" Cissie's voice is growing with excitement, I'm worried she'll almost be shouting soon, but luckily Lizzie turns over and begins murmuring, and Cissie is forced to go back to her mat. "I have a plan" is the last thing she says to me.

Cissie doesn't say anything to me about the plan, I don't think she trusts me. But I know when she starts to do it. She waits till Big-Pa next goes Above for supplies. He's only been gone half a day or so when she says, "Anna's sick." No one does anything so she says, "Anna's really sick! I need to get medicine for her from Big-Pa's room!" Her voice rises like she's about to cry. Ma-Three goes over to her, "She does feel warm," she says uncertainly, "but I'm sure there's no need..." "She's got a fever! It's been growing all day and if it gets any worse she could die!" Cissie's sobbing now. Ma-Three rubs her shoulder, and they both look at Ma-One. Ma-One says nothing. Then she gets up and keys in the code to Big-Pa's room. "I'll look after Anna," says Ma-Three. Cissie seems reluctant to hand Anna over, but she does, and then she goes into Big-Pa's room and shuts the door.

Ma-Three is remarking on how long Ma-Four is taking when the top door opens and Big-Pa's feet appear on the ladder. He dumps a sack of potatoes at Ma-Three's feet and looks around. "Where's Ma-Four?" he asks. "She needed to get medicine for the baby," Ma-Three

twitters. She wasn't planning on Big-Pa being back so soon either. Big-Pa roars and strikes her with the back of his hand, then turns and heads towards his room. I don't know what Cissie's plan is, but I know that if Big-Pa gets to his room it's all over. I think about Ma-Two saying, "You're mine." I think about Sean, and about Anna. I think about the way Cissie lied to get herself into Big-Pa's room. I let these thoughts fill me with courage. And I shout out the only thing I can think that would make Big-Pa stop in his tracks. "Hey Big-Pa," I call. "Want to see my new game? It's called War!" I see Big-Pa turn towards me, even as I feel Lizzie and William step away. "I'm playing the enemy! I've put poison in the air and the ground and the water! I'm going to kill everyone!" Big-Pa seems unsure of what to do. He steps towards me, one hand half-raised. Then seems to think better of it and just says, "That's enough, boy." He turns again, and I throw myself at his feet, screaming and clutching my throat and his ankle. "They've got me!" I scream, "The enemy has got me! The poison is in my lungs and in my skin and it's burning me up! Go and get your gun and shoot them, Big-Pa! Why don't you shoot them?!" Big-Pa kicks at me. One of his kicks connects with my chin and I scream in earnest. He's dragged me across Main Room and now he kicks me into a wall and yanks open the door to his room. Then there's a bang so loud I can't see. When I can, what I see is Cissie, with a pack on her back, holding Big-Pa's gun. "He showed me how it worked," she says, bending down to pull me up, "to warn me of what he'd do if I disobeyed him. He shouldn't have done that."

Someone's making a wheezy, watery sound, and at first I think it's me, but then I see that it's coming from where Big-Pa's lying. Cissie raises the gun again—and Ma-One steps between them. Then Cissie's face is red and scrunched up worse than ever, and she screams in Ma-One's face, and I'm screaming too. "Sean and Cissie were yours!" I scream "You carried them in your belly! They were yours!" and Cissie screams, "I would never let him do to Anna what you let him do to me!" She raises the gun even higher and says, "Get out the way or I'll shoot you too!" Ma-One says nothing. Then she walks over to the top door, Cissie's gun on her all the time, and keys in a number. "Leave," says Ma-One, "now." Cissie stands for a moment, the gun shaking up and down with her breathing.

Then she says, "Get Anna," and swings around so sharply she almost hits me in the face. I run to Ma-Three and snatch Anna, and she shrinks back from me to shield the twins against a wall, and Lizzie is screaming in a corner and... "William!" I call, turning blindly until he steps out in front of me, "William come with us," I say. William shoots a look at his hysterical sister, at his Ma bent by his Pa, "But the war..." he says. "There is no war!" I say. "Or at least not in the way Big-Pa said there was." Cissie is tugging on my arm, pack on her back and Big-Pa's gun in her hand, but I pull away from her, sobbing, "He said that air was poisoned but we breathed it! He said the wood was poisoned but we burnt it! He said the food was poisoned but we ate it!" William has already turned away from me.

Up Above, we stop for a moment and look at Grand-Pa's grave. Then I walk forward and snap off the longways stick, the one with the letters on it. Grand-Pa already has his peace. It's Cissie and Anna and I who need to find ours.