SOLDIER

by Emily Mani

Since before Mary could remember, Vin woke her up every night so they could go sleep in their parents' bedroom. She came at midnight, so they had to drag their pillows and comforters down the hallway and situate them in the dark. Mary had a hard time getting back to sleep after that. She fidgeted, punching at her pillows, glancing at her older sister. Vin always seemed perfectly comfortable on the floor, as though she was finally at ease, as though she had found no peace in her own bed. Mary wondered if Vin automatically woke up at midnight, or if she had just been awake the whole time, waiting. Sometimes it seemed like Vin never slept at all. There was no evidence that she had physical needs, no complaints about the weather being too hot or cold, no pestering their mother for dinner or a snack. And she was never tired. She was simply there when she was needed. She was there to keep things on schedule. She was there to keep an eye on Mary, to take her hand and pull her along from place to place; downstairs in the morning and upstairs to bed at

night, and home safely always from everywhere. It was Vin that got Mary to school on time, avoiding all distractions and possible dangers, variable from day to day except for the Soldier, who was always on the corner outside Frank's Butcher Shop.

"Don't speak to him," Vin would say, taking Mary's hand and marching them away.

"But Daddy speaks to him. He says good morning."

"I'm not Daddy."

Vin always seemed annoyed with the Soldier. It was as though they'd been previously acquainted but were now estranged due to an unresolved conflict, which had happened so long ago that Vin couldn't remember exactly how she had been wronged. She just remembered that they didn't like each other.

The main reason Mary wanted to speak to the Soldier was for the satisfaction of startling him out of his deep thoughts, like when the teacher snapped her fingers in front of a student who wasn't paying attention. When Mary called, "Hello!" he'd look up and smile for a moment. Otherwise, he stood with his arms crossed, slowly pacing like he was waiting for someone. When a customer approached the shop, he would watch their face carefully as though trying to determine if they were there to see him. When it was clear that they weren't, he would open Frank's door for them and touch his hat in a salute. Mary thought it was funny the way everybody started giving him pennies, as though he were a doorman expecting a tip. Mary knew he was just doing it to be nice.

Sometimes she held the door open for people, but nobody ever offered her a penny.

"They want to make sure he has enough to eat," her father said.

"Doesn't Frank feed him?" she asked.

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know," said Mary. Then she remembered that when she was very little, she thought the Soldier was Frank's son. That notion had faded so gradually that she hadn't noticed. Now it was clear to her that he wasn't, because Frank's son worked *inside* the butcher shop. He was clean and he wore regular clothes. The Soldier wore his uniform every day.

"He thinks he's still at war," her father explained.

Mary looked around their neighbourhood, at the babies in their prams and the old ladies, resting on benches. "How do you know he thinks that?"

"He calls everyone Captain."

"He does that to be friendly, like how you call everyone 'pal'."

Her father shook his head. "He's shell-shocked."

"The kids at school said he's always been like that, even since before the war. Lily McGonigle told me that her mother said he's just simple."

"Lily McGonigle is wrong and so is her mother."

"Did you know him before the war?"

Her father paused, thinking back. "He was younger than me. But I saw him around. He always looked normal."

"He looks normal to me now," Mary said. She didn't like the idea that someone could go away normal and come back so confused. "I think he's just friendly."

"He is friendly, but I've watched him when the train goes by. It shakes the ground and he gets agitated. He thinks it's artillery."

"He gets scared?"

"That's right."

"Can't someone explain to him that it's just the train?"

"I'm sure people have tried."

"Can't someone help him?"

"I'm sure people have tried to do that, too."

Mary nodded. Her father tried to help. He gave the Soldier enough money to buy alcohol, which made the headaches go away. And even though the Soldier was a terrible conversationalist, her father always stopped to talk to him about the economy and the weather and the holidays.

"It's a shame," her father would say afterwards, on the way home. "He fought for Great Britain during the war, but still has to beg for spare change."

"But he doesn't beg," said Mary. "You just give it to him."

"That's true."

When her father wasn't there, Mary urged her mother to give the Soldier change instead.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," her mother would say, pausing to think, as though she had once been told how to deal with beggars, but was disturbed to find the knowledge had disappeared. Inevitably, she would decline to give him anything, but seemed unsure of the decision.

When something confused or disturbed Mary's mother, she got a crease down the centre of her forehead. That crease turned up in the aftermath of every interaction she had with the Soldier, sometimes for a couple of hours. Then she would go home and make double the scones for breakfast, or double the sausages for supper, as though with the intention of returning to the butcher shop to give the Soldier the extras. Instead, Mary's family would have leftovers.

"Are you thinking about the Soldier?" Mary asked, during one of these double-portion suppers.

Her mother, who had been staring off at nothing, forehead creased, looked up at Mary and paused to consider. "No," she said. She was surprised by the question, but not enough to ask where it had come from. She had given up on understanding the extent of Mary's oppressive curiosity.

"Tell me why you asked that," said Vin.

Mary looked at all the food on the table. They had barely finished a quarter of it. "I don't know," she said.

Vin stuck her fork in a piece of roasted carrot. She pointed it at Mary as if to say, *oh yes you do.* The carrot nodded in agreement.

"Take that vegetable out of my face," Mary said, trying not to smile as she stared it down.

Vin nodded and put the carrot back on her plate, sticking a brussels sprout instead. "How about this one?"

Their mother cleared her throat. "I don't think you should play with your food," she said, like she had heard that rule somewhere before but wasn't completely convinced of it.

Vin put the brussels sprout in her mouth, but slowly and without looking at their mother, as if to suggest the rebuke had nothing to do with it; eating it had always been the plan.

Interaction between Vin and their mother was quick and to the point and only in the amount that was necessary. They moved through life facing forward, about a foot apart, every once in awhile, reaching out their hands to make sure the other was there. Mary, however, was running circles around them yelling for attention. If she made enough of a fuss, they would turn and look at her. Sometimes it was a blank look. Sometimes it was a look that went right inside of her. Mary longed for the latter, even though it made her nervous because it sometimes preceded what her father called, the "Irish Switch."

"Unpredictable bouts of rage," he said. "Your mother has it. Your sister has it. With men, it turns to fisticuffs. With women, well, even that's unpredictable. Sometimes it's words that can't be taken back."

"Or a look that can't be taken back," said Mary.

"Or a dish that can't be put back together," he said, smiling.

"Or nothing at all; not a look and not a word or a broken dish. Just nothing. But it's a sudden nothing. And it's an angry nothing."

Her father nodded. "That's a good way to put it."

"I'm glad I don't have the Irish Switch," Mary added. "I'm happy that I'm happy. Like you."

"Me too. But not everyone can be happy."

"Why not?"

"Someone has to take care of things."

"Can't they take care of things and be happy while they do it?"

Her father thought for a second. "Yes, but not the type of happy that we are."

"What type of happy are we?"

"We're completely, irresponsibly happy."

"That's true," said Mary, because every time her mother told her she was irresponsible, it was because of something she had done out of complete happiness, like losing a new pair of shoes because she had wanted to walk barefoot after the rain, or coming home without a dozen eggs because she had accidentally bought ice cream for her and Lily McGonigle, instead. Mary had assumed she was irresponsible because she was a kid, but now that she thought about it, nobody ever called Vin irresponsible. Perhaps this is why Mary felt safe with Vin. She wanted to be with her all the time, despite the Irish Switch.

"I like responsible people," she said. "Vin is very responsible. She doesn't let me do anything."

"She loves you. She wants to keep you close."

"I know."

"Especially at night. She wants everyone to be together, close and cozy, like a whole little bunny family in their burrow."

Their father was charmed by the sleeping arrangement, while their mother was mildly put-off. She had drawn an imaginary line down the room. "If you're going to sleep in here, I think you should keep to that side. Both you and the blankets. And clean up after yourselves?"

Even their mother's declarations were phrased as questions. She was very sure of how unsure she felt, having been placed in a managerial role with almost no experience. It was like she had woken up with a husband and two children and didn't know how she had gotten there, but decided to go ahead and play the part anyway. Mary thought that's why their mother spent so much time alone in the morning. She was trying to get oriented. She would steal off to the kitchen and her tea by 5am, stepping over both daughters, and Mary's bedding which was flung all over the room by then. It had tossed and turned all night, like her. Mary's blankets often complained when she roused them after a fitful night.

We haven't had a good sleep in years, they would say.

"What do you want me to do about it?" Mary asked, bleary eyed but still feeling positive. "That's life."

It never occurred to Mary to stay in her own bed. Since before she could walk, Vin had pulled her out of it.

One morning, Mary turned and asked, "But who pulled you?"

"Nobody," said Vin. "I didn't sleep in here until after you were born."

"Where did you sleep before that?"

"In my own room."

"But where did you move at midnight?"

"I didn't move anywhere."

Mary sat up. She furrowed her brow because a visual eluded her.

Vin sat up too. "Mother and father go to sleep in their own bed and wake up in their own bed. That's what I did when I was a little. I went to sleep in my own bed in my own room and I slept there all night and I woke up there in the morning."

It was like a butterfly had landed on Mary's finger, allowing her a look at something she had never seen up close: the concept of change in one's life. It was curious and lovely but it took off flying and Mary tried with one hand, then the other, unable to catch the slow but evasive creature. She suddenly understood that things hadn't always been the way they were now. Other things, besides where Vin slept every night, must have been different too. But Mary didn't know what she didn't know.

"Then why did you start sleeping in here?" Mary asked. "If it hasn't always been that way?"

Vin looked at her blankly, like she often did when Mary asked obvious questions. "To rest," she said.

The sparse anecdote of sleeping somewhere else accumulated mystery and appeal throughout the day, gateway information to something ungraspable and as big as the sky.

"What was different before I was born?" she asked her mother that night, after dinner, when it was her turn to dry the dishes.

"Everything," her mother said, her hands full in the sink, scrubbing.

"Oh," Mary put her hands to her head like it ached. The vastness of everything spread through her body like adrenaline. She remembered the butterfly, its wings pulsing. "Does everyone sleep in their bedroom?"

"Yes," said her mother.

"What about Auntie Lou?"

"Everybody sleeps in their bedroom. I'm not sure about places in Africa or India or anything, but in Canada, people sleep in their rooms."

"What about the Soldier?"

"Oh, I don't know where he sleeps."

"What about Grandpa?" He hadn't been upstairs in his own house since before Mary was born. A horse had stepped on his foot and permanently damaged it, so he had started sleeping in a living room chair with the radio on.

"That's true. Grandpa doesn't sleep in his bedroom." Her mother abruptly brought one hand out of the water and grasped her nearby cup of tea, taking a long sip. Soapy water ran down her arm and got her sleeve wet.

Mary's mother was always drinking tea, and it was usually cold. She held it with her index finger hooked around the handle and her elbow out, as though she were posing for an ad. She took a pause before each sip to stare off at nothing. The teacup whispered things to her during these pauses. Their relationship was strong as blood and non-demanding. Her mother did not ask the tea to stay hot, and the tea did not ask her mother anything at all, because it didn't hold knowledge in high esteem. Neither did it like Mary or Vin. Children disrupted the balance of things. They were too loud and unpredictable.

"But what about Vin?" Mary asked. "And what about me?"

"That's another exception."

"Why don't I sleep in my bedroom?"

"I don't know. Why don't you?"

"Hm," Mary said, cocking her head to the side somewhat dramatically. "I guess because Vin comes to get me."

Her mother didn't acknowledge the answer. She kept her back turned, busy with the stacking of clean, dry dishes. Her punctuated silence was intriguing, like a locked room. Naturally, Mary assumed that the room contained something more exciting than anything left out in the open.

"Why doesn't Vin sleep in her bedroom?" Mary said.

"I've always thought it's because she's afraid of the dark."

"She's afraid of the dark?" It was shocking, both because it hadn't occurred to Mary that Vin was afraid of anything, and because the dark

had never been something that made Mary nervous. Darkness was simply another state of being. If you didn't like it, you could turn on a light.

"Why is she afraid of the dark?"

Her mother shook her head, the crease forming down her forehead. "I don't know," she said.

"Are you afraid of the dark?"

"Definitely not."

"Is there something inside the dark that Vin's afraid of?"

"I don't know."

"Does something happen in the dark that she's afraid of?"

Her mother paused and took a sip. She swallowed, then paused again. "She started sleeping in our room when you were born."

"Me?" Mary asked, as though she'd been accused. "Why?"

"We thought it was jealousy, which I didn't think was a very good excuse but your father, well, you know your father."

Mary nodded. She did know her father.

"That's also when the tooth grinding started," her mother said, replacing the teacup and getting back to the dishes.

"When I was born?"

"That's right. We thought she was adjusting poorly. I don't remember being bothered at all when my brothers were born. Do you remember?"

"Being born?"

"No," said her mother. "Do you remember when Vin used to grind her teeth."

"You told her it was diabolical."

"No, I said she *looked* diabolical. Remember? She would sit there grinding her back molars. Her lips would curl up over her teeth in a smile and her jaw would go back and forth, back and forth, like a saw. What was she working so hard at?"

"I don't know."

"She was just a child, grinding her teeth like a lunatic saying, *I'm going to sleep in your room because of the terrible things.* I'm just glad your grandmother, my mother, wasn't alive to witness that. She was Catholic, you know. She would have blamed me."

"Terrible things," Mary caught her breathe. "What's a terrible thing?"

"What a strange question."

Mary, to her knowledge, had never seen a terrible thing. She had trouble even picturing what a terrible thing was, but she knew that it was exciting because sometimes people said, "Oh, that's terrible!" with a flash of excitement in their eyes and she could tell that they wanted more. Once, Auntie Lou was eating shortbread cookies at Christmas and said, "I should really stop," and Mary asked, "Why don't you?"

"Oh, I know. It's terrible!" Auntie Lou answered, and her eyes widened with the same excitement, plus a bit of shame so that Mary couldn't tell if Auntie Lou was happy about the shortbread or upset.

Mary didn't even think she had said the word out loud before, now that she thought about it. It gave her a peculiar feeling in her stomach that she kind of liked but kind of didn't. "Terrible," she said again, trying to decide.

"I'd forgotten about that tooth grinding thing," said her mother. "I'm glad it stopped."

"But she still does it," said Mary.

"She does? Well, I'm glad she doesn't do it that often."

"Yeah," said Mary, even though Vin did still do it quite a bit, but quietly so that their mother didn't notice.

"You know," said her mother, picking up the teacup again. "You don't have to sleep in our room."

"Huh?"

"Pardon."

"Pardon?"

"I said you don't have to sleep in our room just because Vin does. You can stay in your bed until morning."

"I can?"

"Of course you can. That's what it's for."

Mary could feel her mouth hanging open, like when she fell asleep sitting up. She closed it quickly, before her mother noticed. "But what do I say to Vin when she comes to get me?"

"You could just say no."

"Huh?"

Her mother took a sip of tea and paused, letting it course through her veins like the glass of sherry she allowed herself on Christmas day. "Just say no."

That night Mary was still awake when Vin came to get her, but she kept her eyes closed.

"Mary!" Vin hissed. When Mary didn't stir, Vin reached out and shook her arm a little bit. "Mary!"

Then there was silence. Mary kept her eyes shut tight. She could feel her sister looking at her.

"Mary?"

"No," said Mary without opening her eyes, nervous, as if she had sassed her teacher.

More silence, then Mary felt her sister's arms close around her. She felt herself being lifted from the bed. She was too heavy, and fell to the floor with a thud.

"Mary," Vin said. "Come on."

"No."

Vin grabbed Mary's hand and began to pull, moving her along a couple inches at a time.

"Okay, okay," said Mary, feeling thwarted. She got up, and gathered her things and padded behind Vin through the hallway. She was wide awake and not resigned, but followed the routine of situating pillows

and blankets. Then she turned and whispered, "What do you need a rest from?"

"Shh."

Mary inched closer. With her mouth nearly touching her sister's face, she asked, "What's a terrible thing?"

Vin looked at her, but Mary couldn't see her eyes in the dark. "If you don't already know," Vin said, "then I'm not going to tell you."

"Why not?"

Vin turned away and Mary understood that it was time to stop talking. She stared up at the ceiling, trying to keep still and waiting for the deep, slow breaths that meant her sister was asleep, then picked up her pillow and left the room.

Mary had never been so alone as when she stepped outside of her parents' bedroom. Her whole family was tucked in there, taking up all the space and making it small. But the hallway was big. She felt like she did during long drives into the country, when she would become restless and misbehave and her father would pull off the road beside a field and usher the girls out of the car. "Run around!" he'd yell, and Mary would take off like a horse until she was red-faced and out of breath and burning, free from the confines of the city and the car, free from that thing that made her impatient and wild and naughty.

Now she wanted to run, to understand the extent of this surprising freedom which had existed, all along, right inside her own

home. She wanted to go further and peered down the stairs, resisting the urge to race to the bottom, because that would be loud, and if her parents woke up, this new world would disappear into smoke like a magician's trick.

She stepped down one stair and then another, even and rhythmic like when she didn't want to break the layer of ice over snow, as though the stairs would give out, as though they did give out once her foot was on the next one so she could only go down, further without pausing. Then she was downstairs, and it was like a different house altogether, one she had never been in before. The furniture grinned like she had just arrived at her own party.

What? they said. *Did you think we all disappeared at night?*

"Maybe I did," said Mary. "I never really thought about it."

Well we don't. Quite the opposite. Night time is the best time.

Mary resisted the urge to jump. "I know!"

She skipped into the kitchen, giddy with options: the breakfast biscuits covered with a tea towel, the last of the day's milk on the counter, the usually closely-guarded cookie jar. She looked from one possible infraction to the next, deliberating.

Her mother's teacup was sitting on the windowsill, rinsed out and sleeping soundly, even though it had barely done anything all day. Mary covered it up with a tea towel. *You're so judgemental,* she thought.

She grabbed a cookie and sat down at the kitchen table in her usual seat. The other three, empty chairs stared back at her. They were not usually this quiet.

"Is there something that you want to say?" Mary asked. "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary."

The what?

"You look like you have something to say."

We do!

"Well, then, spit it out!"

Spit it out?

"Say it!"

She knew they wanted to. Their reticence was all for show. They were always dying for attention, which is why they screeched so loud whenever Mary stood up from the table so her mother would say, "Lift, don't push. Don't you know you'll scratch the floor?" Then the chairs would look apologetic, even though Mary knew they weren't, because if they were so sorry, they wouldn't keep doing it.

"Say it!" Mary said again, giving them the drama they wanted.

They paused, possibly for effect. *We know about the terrible things,* they said.

At the word, "terrible," Mary felt the feeling in her stomach again: the wanting and not wanting. It was like excitement before a birthday party, but also bracing herself, like when one of the boys threw a ball in her direction and she wasn't sure if it would hit her.

Mary put her cookie down. "What do you know?"

We don't know much.

Mary filled her cheeks with air then slowly let it out like a deflating balloon. This was something her teacher, Miss White, told her to do when she was exasperated. *Remember to breathe, Mary,* she would say.

"Okay, so you don't know much," Mary said. "But what do you know?"

They spoke so quietly that Mary had to lean in, and even then she didn't hear them. "They're where?"

They're out there.

She glanced at the kitchen window.

Go and look, the chairs said.

Mary got up and looked out the window, where everything looked the same as it always did. There were rows of houses. There were rows of street lamps.

"I don't see anything," she said. "Are you lying again?"

I guess you need to go further. You need to go outside.

"I don't think so," said Mary, because the world at night was like a painting. She could look at it, but to move into it would be impossible.

But don't you want to know about the terrible things?

"I do," she said. "Maybe I'll just take a look."

Good idea!

Up until this moment, Mary had never done a bad thing on purpose. All her misbehaving was by accident, a result of carelessness or

just not paying attention. Sometimes there were consequences to these actions, or her mother would scold her, or Vin would sigh and take Mary's hand, saving her from subsequent mistakes. But Mary never felt remorse. She was like a cat who annoyed its owner by shedding fur onto the carpet, so was shooed out the door on a beautiful, sunny day. Mary was built to behave a certain way, so though it bothered her mother and sister, she couldn't be blamed and hardly noticed.

But Mary thought, for a moment, about the front porch. Then she decided that it was definitely not alright for a little girl to go outside alone at midnight. Then she decided that she would do it anyway. It was a deliberate transgression. She moved into it slowly, glancing over both shoulders before she opened the front door, forgetting there was nobody there to scold her.

Even then, just standing in the doorframe looking, she could tell that rebellion was something she was interested in. Her neighbourhood, familiar as breakfast, looked and smelled different, both beautiful and intimidating, like an exotic country where the risk of unknown dangers are the price to pay for unknown delights. The night air curled over her toes and up her bare legs and arms. She breathed it in, feeling it go into her nostrils and down her throat. It was crisp and fresh. It was brand new. Her whole body felt compelled to have more, to go further. It was like when Lily McGonigle would let her have just one lick of her sweet pop, then eat the rest in front of her and Mary would have to bite her lips shut to keep from licking them.

This is the desperation with which Mary surveyed the street. She looked down at her feet, which were not so sure about things. They would like to go inside. They would like to go to sleep.

"Just across the street, okay?" Mary assured them. "We'll stand under that street lamp."

Her feet were in mid-protest when she took off sprinting, quick, like she'd heard a start gun, running on tiptoe, weightless, her feet barely touching the cold, wet-feeling grass and then the hard, pebbly street. It took her all of three seconds to arrive under the light on the other side of the street, but she was breathless, like she had run a long distance. And when she turned to look at her house, she realized she had. The sight was so foreign. She had never seen her house in the dark without a single window lit up. It looked as if nobody lived there at all. It looked as if a hundred years had passed and everyone, including Mary, was long gone.

But I'm not long gone, the house said.

"No," said Mary. "Will you be here forever?"

Not forever, but longer than you.

"Have you already been here a long time?"

Not a long time, but longer than you.

"Then do you know about the terrible things?"

The house didn't say anything, as though it had suddenly fallen asleep, which was not surprising considering how old it was.

Mary looked around. Off in one direction was the forest that some of the neighbourhood kids walked through on the way to school. In

the other direction, way off in the distance, Mary could make out the dull lights of the city. It looked like people were still awake down there. It looked like things were noisy and alive. Mary imagined walking all the way downtown right now, in the dark, and how inappropriate that would be. Her parents would be shocked. Vin would be completely horrified. This idea made the birthday party feeling and the bracing herself swell again. They became so big that they squished together and were suddenly indistinguishable. They were one Big Feeling.

"I'm outside after midnight and I'm all alone," Mary said, because she wanted to remember how it felt. She didn't want the Big Feeling to fade the way summer does in fall, the way Christmas does in January. "I'm outside after midnight and I'm all alone." She chanted it like they did at school. *Repetition make it stick*, Miss White always said.

That's when Mary saw him coming out of the forest, the only movement on a still street. She had never seen him away from Frank's Butcher Shop. He was making quite good time, as though heading towards an important task, so it was certainly surprising when Mary could no longer deny he was headed straight towards her.

"Oh," Mary said, feeling in her pajamas for pennies, because she couldn't think of another reason why he would be coming towards her. "I don't have any," she shouted, but he was undeterred.

She looked to the house for some input. "What do I do? Do I speak to the Soldier?" But the house barely opened an eye, no help at all. And the Soldier was close now, just down the street, and then just a few

seconds away. He lifted his hand and touched his hat. Then he stopped, right in front of her, close enough that Mary could smell him. It was liquor and tobacco. It could be worse.

He looked at her expectantly, almost smiling. "Well, Captain, you have what I need?"

"Me?"

He nodded, wide eyed.

"Pennies?" said Mary.

"No," he said, surprised, like he had never been given a penny in his life.

"Food?"

"No!"

She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Liquor?"

He didn't answer, but the look on his face implied that he was not looking for liquor and was disappointed that she would suggest that.

Mary exhaled slowly, trying to think, but she could feel her brain moving too quickly to be effective. It was trying to come up with one more thing that the Soldier would be interested in, but at the same time, wanted a good look at the current situation. She had never been so close to the Soldier and had certainly never been alone with him. She looked for clues that would show whether he was confused or simple or just plain nice. It didn't seem like the kind of question you could outright ask somebody.

"How old are you?" she asked instead, because this was her go-to question when getting to know someone.

"Twenty-nine," he said.

"Do you have kids?"

He thought for a moment. "I hope not."

"Why?"

He smiled and took a cigarette out of his pocket, patting his chest like he was looking for matches. "What's that right there?" he asked, pointing to her hands.

She looked down and realized she was still holding her pillow. "Oh!" she said. "How funny!"

"What is it?"

She blinked. "It's a pillow! I didn't even realize I was holding it!"

"That's exactly what I'm looking for."

"You want me to give you my pillow?"

"That's what I came for." He put the cigarette in his mouth and shrugged, like he didn't even really want the pillow but orders are orders.

"Well, I don't think I'm going to give it to you," Mary said.

"Why's that?" He looked up and over her shoulder like he saw something disconcerting. Mary turned to look as well, but there was only the forest that led to her school. All she could make out was the dark outline of trees against an even darker sky. She turned back to the Soldier.

"Do you think we're still at war?" she asked.

He cocked his head to the side, his mouth loose so that the cigarette threatened to fall out. "Don't you?"

She mirrored him, cocking her own head to the side. "Huh?"

"If you don't call it war then what do you call it?"

It was like a trick question, like a riddle where the right answer got a gum drop. But Mary wasn't good at riddles. Her brain didn't work that way. There were a couple of kids at school who always got the right answer and they barely had to think about it. It was easy for them. It was only easy for Mary once she heard the answer. *Of course. Why didn't I think of that?* She could never see what those kids saw until they pointed it out to her.

She wanted to see what they saw. She wanted to see what the Soldier saw.

"Do you always come here at night?" she asked.

But he was still distracted by the forest and whatever he saw going on in there.

"Hey," Mary said, resisting the impulse to turn again. "Have you come here before?"

He looked at her, blinked. "I need that pillow because I'm going to have a rest."

"No," she said, clutching it tightly to her chest so the pillow's words came out muffled. *I don't mind if you don't*, it managed.

"Of course I mind!"

The Soldier grabbed the pillow but Mary tightened her grip and everyone locked into a stand-off, their bodies tense. His dirty fingers were digging into her clean pillow and Mary stared at the contrast. Her own hands were clean and so were her pajamas. Her feet were mostly clean, though she knew they'd be a bit dirty on the bottom by now.

"Where would you even take it?" she asked. "Where do you go to rest?"

He smiled. "We rest in the trenches, Captain."

The pillow, physically a bit strained but otherwise unconcerned, blinked up at her.

Don't you know what's happening? Don't you know what he is?

The realization flooded Mary's body and for a moment, made her weak so that she loosened her grip on the pillow and the Soldier fell back a bit, pleased. He clutched it to his own chest.

"Are you a terrible thing?" Mary asked. She spoke a bit louder than she should have and wondered if anyone would peek out of their window. Perhaps she wanted them to, since she was out here all alone. She could feel that aloneness now that her hands were empty. They were used to being grasped and pulled.

The Soldier turned and began to walk away with Mary's pillow, just as determined as when he approached. He must have other important tasks. Perhaps there were more pillows to snatch.

"Wait!" she said, "I want to come with you!"

The Soldier kept walking but turned his head and yelled the conditions over his shoulder. "If you come with me, then you'll have to fight!"

"I want to fight!" she yelled, but her feet wouldn't go. She stomped one and then the other as though pins and needles were the culprit.

"Better hurry!" the Soldier yelled.

"I'm trying!"

"Time's running out!"

"My feet don't want to move!" She stomped them frantically, angry that they had chosen this moment to assert their independence. "You don't know what's good for you," she told them.

And neither do you.

Mary looked up one more time. The Soldier and her pillow were in the distance now. She could feel some delicious thing disappearing. It was like pleading to pull over for ice cream, then watching the parlour grow smaller on the road behind. She took a breath and with all the authority she could muster, screamed, "But where are the trenches?" It was loud enough that the old house woke up. It was loud enough that from inside that house, a window opened and Vin stuck her head out.

"Don't speak to the Soldier!"

Mary's feet snapped to attention. They ran back across the street, as swift as a racehorse.

Mary slammed the front door, no longer concerned about waking her family, and took the stairs up two at a time. At the top, she paused by her parents' bedroom door, surprised that it was still closed. She put her ear up to it and listened. It was so quiet that she could imagine there wasn't anybody in there at all.

She went back down the hallway to her room and curled up on the bed. She could still smell the night on her skin and it made her want to go back, like after Victoria Day weekend, when the lake and the campfire were still on her body and the idea of school in the morning was dull and depressing. The thought of her pillow, heading off to God knows where, filled her with an intense jealousy. She wondered if Vin had ever felt the Big Feeling and if she had, how she could still be afraid of the dark instead of drawn to it. Perhaps Mary would have to tell her about the Big Feeling and it would be a revelation. It would change everything. They would go after it together.

Whatever was left of it from tonight was slowly draining out of her and there was nothing Mary could do to stop it up, to save it. She had the sense that it was like food, which you had to eat every day, even if you had eaten twice as much as usual the day before. And now there was no Big Feeling left across the street. Next time she'd have to go all the way down to the end of the street, and later, around the corner. Then maybe into the forest. The forest would probably have lots of it because it had actually been explicitly prohibited: *don't go into the forest after dark*. The Big

Feeling was going to be a lot of work, but that didn't matter because Mary had a taste for it now. There was nothing she could do about that.

"The problem is you," she said, looking down at her feet and wiggling her toes, trying to remind them of who was supposed to be in charge. "You're to follow orders, even if you don't like it. Even if it means going off into the night."

We do follow orders, they said. *Just not from you.*

She exhaled sharply and looked away. She would ask Vin how to deal with his problem. She would ask her; *what does it mean when your feet don't want to move?*

By the time Mary got downstairs in the morning, Vin was already in the kitchen, sitting in her usual chair and eating a biscuit. She looked up when Mary entered and watched her sit down across the table, even moving her head to get a better look at her entire body, as though she wanted to make sure that no parts were missing.

Their mother was leaning against the kitchen sink, her cup of tea in one hand. The other hand was inside a pocket of her apron, even though it was not meant for a hand because it was very small. The apron hung loosely from her neck. It wasn't tied neatly around her waist the way it was supposed to be, because once during an Irish Switch she had torn it off and hadn't bothered mending it.

"Did you scrub?" she asked.

Mary nodded and smiled at her sister. "Hello," she said, trying to sound cheerful, but sounding accusatory instead.

Vin paused mid-bite. "Good morning," she said. "Did you sleep well?"

"What do you mean?"

Vin swallowed and said blankly, "what do *you* mean?"

Their mother pushed off the sink and came to stand in front of them, her hand still tucked into her apron. "I've made a decision about the sleeping arrangements."

"What is it?" said Mary, reaching for a biscuit.

"I've decided that it's all gotten out of hand. It's reminding me of the war."

"How?" said Mary.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No."

"Okay," said their mother. She took a breath and started again. "What I want to know from you two is; are you planning on sleeping in our bedroom forever?"

Mary looked at Vin, who was trying to appear bored. When it was clear that her sister was not going to participate, Mary answered for herself. "I'm not," she said.

"Good," said their mother. "I didn't think so. And Vin," she said, slowly like she'd just learned the name and wasn't sure she was getting it right. "You're twelve."

"That's right."

"Don't you think it's time for you to be more independent?"

Vin thought briefly for a moment. "No," she said. "I'm too young to get a job. I'm too young to live alone."

Their mother creased her forehead, trying to decide if Vin was trying to be funny. "I just want you to sleep in your own room."

"I don't think so."

"Well, actually, I've decided that you will. What if you turn thirteen and you still can't sleep alone? What if you turn fourteen?" She paused, imagining it. "Sixteen? I can't think of anything worse."

"You can't?" said Mary.

Their mother looked at Mary like she'd forgotten she was there, then turned back to Vin. "It stops tonight." She took her hand out of the little pocket and tapped one finger on the table like a gavel.

"How will you make me?" said Vin. "Will you put locks on the doors?"

"Maybe I will," said their mother, considering, as though Vin had offered the suggestion to be helpful. "Maybe just on my door."

They stared at each other, both as though they were about to make an additional argument, as though the winning words were on the tip of their tongues.

Slowly, so as not to disturb them, Mary dipped her biscuit into the jam and took a bite. She watched them watching each other, and

wondered if one was about to switch. The plates were breakable, of course, and so was her mother's teacup. It quivered a bit in her hand.

Down the hallway by the front closet, gathering his things to leave for work, their father began to whistle. He called down the hall. "Where's my other coat?"

"Listen," their mother said to Vin, "if Mary can do it, then so can you. I've decided the nonsense is over. You're going to sleep in your own room."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are, Lavinia. Starting tonight."

Their father poked his head into the kitchen. "Where's my other coat? It looks like rain."

Their mother ignored him. "Lavinia? Do you hear me?"

"Katherine," their father said. "My coat?"

Their mother looked at him, stunned for a moment by the rare use of her first name. "It's in the closet with the other coats."

"No, it's not."

Mary looked at her father's disembodied head, wondering why he wouldn't just come into the kitchen completely. She also wondered why he couldn't find his own coat when, as their mother just said, it was likely in the closet with the others.

"What are you three up to in here?" he said, smiling.

Nobody answered him, and for a moment it was as though Vin and Mary and their mother were all in agreement and on the same team.

Her father's place in the household suddenly didn't make that much sense. She saw it on her mother's face too. There was the crease down her forehead.

Mary's father just kept smiling at them. "What did I do?"

Their mother put her teacup down on the table and went off to find their father's other coat. Their father followed.

"What did she mean?" said Mary, turning to Vin. "When she said the sleeping arrangements reminded her of the war?"

"Because it's gone on for years. Because she thought it'd be over a long time ago."

"Oh. How did you know that?"

"It's easy," said Vin. She took a deep breath and put her chin on her fist in the archetypal pose for thinking up a solution. And then she looked at Mary like she was the problem, and solving her was going to be a lot of work.

Glad for the attention, Mary leaned forward. "Guess what," she said. "You don't need to sleep in mother and father's room anymore." She heard the certainty with which she had made the pronouncement and it pleased her. Vin had always been the authority, but there was something about going outside alone after midnight that lessened the divide between big and little sister. It was a refreshing reorganization of roles. "I've been in the dark," Mary continued. "And there's nothing bad there. In fact, there's something very interesting." She raised her eyebrows, trying to

entice Vin to ask questions, then dunked her biscuit in the jam again, a little too deep so that her fingers went in as well.

Vin picked up a little silver spoon and held it out to Mary with two fingers. "Would you like this?"

"For what?"

"For the jam."

"Oh," said Mary. She looked at the chairs to see if they were smirking. *Do you have a problem?* She wanted to say. They were reminding her of someone pretending to be asleep because they were not moving or making a sound, but lacked the indignity of being truly unconscious. Most people, while they slept, had a twitching eye or a mouth that was slightly open.

"I already have a spoon," Mary said.

"Then you should use it."

Mary smiled. "Okay," she said. She wanted to say that if Vin had a problem with fingers and crumbs in the jam, if wasn't because there was anything wrong with fingers and crumbs in the jam. It was only because Vin was too particular. "Vin," she said, pressing on. "Do you know where the terrible things go?"

"Why do you want to know about those?"

"I want to know where the Soldier goes when he's not outside the butcher shop."

"Why?"

Mary glanced at the chairs. "Because he's not always outside the butcher shop."

"Of course he's not always there. He's just there to beg for money. He doesn't stay there all night."

"Yeah, at night. Where does he go at night?"

"I don't know, Mary. Let me look at my chart."

"What chart?"

"My chart of everybody in town and where they sleep."

Mary stared at her sister, trying to process the joke but distracted by the appeal of such a chart. "Even if you had a chart like that," she said, "and by the way I know that you don't, but even if you did, I doubt you would show it to me."

"I probably wouldn't."

"Because nobody wants me to know anything," Mary said, putting the last of the biscuit in her mouth. She didn't put any jam on it because she didn't want to provoke Vin by dunking, but she also didn't want to defer to Vin's authority by using her spoon.

"Make the chart yourself then," said Vin. "You can refer to it when your interest piques."

"But I don't have the information to make the chart," said Mary. "If I had the information, I wouldn't need the chart. Somebody that already has the information has to make the chart so that other people, who want the information, can look at it."

"Who would have that kind of information?"

"I don't know," said Mary. "I don't think anybody would have it."

"Exactly."

"Would the Prime Minister?"

"No. There might be one other person in the whole world who cares about where the Soldier goes at night, plus you. And that makes me feel…" She shook her head and looked up, searching for the word. "...I don't know, nervous."

"Because you're afraid of him," said Mary. "But I'm not afraid

Vin fiddled with the little spoon, turning it around like a baton. "You should be," she said.

"Why?"

Vin took a breath, studying Mary's face as though she were deciding, even though they both knew that she wouldn't offer any more information.

Mary scoffed, dismissing the possibility. "Nobody will tell me anything."

"Because you're little."

"Well, I went outside all by myself last night. Does a little kid do that? I went outside while it was dark. I saw the Soldier. He took my pillow, actually. And I felt something that was very, very interesting."

Vin pointed the little spoon at Mary. "If you're telling me the truth, then what you did was terribly stupid."

"Of course I'm telling you the truth," said Mary. She reached out and with one finger, moved her mother's teacup away from the edge of the table. "You saw me."

"If I'd seen you, I'd have made you come inside right away."

"You did. You yelled out the window at me. *Don't speak to the Soldier!*"

"Mary, are you sure that voice didn't come from inside your head? You are allowed some common sense, you know. It doesn't always have to be me."

"It didn't come from inside my head."

"It's also possible that you dreamt the whole thing."

Mary thought for a moment. It could not have been a dream, because she remembered how it smelled. The smell was still on her arms. The dirt was still on her feet. "If it was just a dream," she said. "Then where is my pillow?"

"One missing pillow is not proof of your story."

Mary pushed her chair back from the table with her feet, as though she needed some distance, to see the whole scene at once. "Why are you lying? I know that you saw me"

"You're the one lying. You're so interested in where the Soldier goes at night, but you say that you saw him and let him go off with your pillow. Why didn't you follow him?"

"I don't know," Mary said, turning her face away like she didn't want to talk about it. But then she looked at Vin out of the corner of her eye. "What does it mean when your feet don't want to move?"

Vin smiled. "It means you were scared."

"But I wasn't scared. I *wanted* to go."

Vin leaned forward. "It's okay if you were scared."

Mary paused. "I know," she said slowly. She had the impulse to lean back, away from her sister, to protect herself. She felt that she had something brand new in her possession, and it had always belonged to her but she had not been allowed to hold it. And now Vin wanted it back before Mary understood what it was good for. She looked at Vin's face and the certainty on it. "How can you understand," she said, "if you've never been outside in the dark like me? You've never talked to the Soldier."

"How do you know that?"

It was like Vin had grabbed her hand. *I'm pulling you along but you don't know where.* "You spoke to the Soldier?" Mary asked. She turned to the chairs, who were still pretending to be asleep. "When did she speak to the Soldier?"

"Don't talk to the chairs, Mary."

"Why not?"

"Because they can't talk back."

"Yes they can. They're just pretending." Mary kicked the chair closest to her in the leg.

"Stop it," said Vin, greatly uncomfortable, as though she was watching some thoughtless debacle, like a large animal being forced through a very small hoop.

The chair opened one eye and looked right at Mary, then closed it again.

Mary pointed and sat up straight. "See!"

But Vin wouldn't look. She was studying Mary's face. Her mother had looked at Mary like that when the cat died last year. She had beat around the bush about it numerous times before throwing up her hands and stating that Buster was gone forever. He was never coming back.

The chair was biting its lip, like a child in church who is trying not to laugh. Mary knew it was laughing at her. She felt herself slipping back again, firmly into the role of little sister. This space had already gotten cold, and it was too small and uncomfortable and boring. And she couldn't see anything from in there.

Vin began twirling the spoon again.

Mary squinted her eyes, trying to see. "Do you talk to the Soldier when I'm asleep?"

"I'm more reasonable than that, Mary. I don't leave the house at night."

"What else do you do when I'm asleep?" Mary was speaking so quietly, almost to herself. It was like sounding out a long and tricky word in a book. She took it slowly, one letter at a time. "Who else do you talk to?"

"I don't talk to anything."

"My feet?" Mary said. "You talk to them at night. You tell them to stay close."

Vin turned her face away, like she was trying to avoid an unpleasant smell. "Your feet aren't alive, Mary. You are."

"Can you tell them that it's okay to go where I tell them to go? It's okay for them to, you know, walk away?"

"To walk away from me."

Mary stomped one foot, asserting herself. "Yes!" she said, her voice rising like it did last night, demanding that the Soldier and her pillow stop.

"You want me to give you permission to go off at night, chasing after things you don't understand. That's foolish. I won't do it."

"Then just tell them to do what I say."

"Tell them yourself."

"They don't listen to me!"

"That's not my fault."

"Yes it is. You've been telling us what to do since before I can remember. They think you're in charge."

"Maybe they think I'm sensible. Maybe *you* think I'm sensible. Maybe you're even sensible, deep down, but you don't want to be, so you have to blame me and your feet, as though we're in cahoots and you know nothing about it."

"Responsible," said Mary, "not sensible. I think you're responsible and there's nothing wrong with that. I would be responsible too, except that I'm just not."

"But you *do* think there's something wrong with being afraid. Sometimes being responsible means being afraid."

"Well, I don't mind being afraid either, except that I wasn't," said Mary. "And if you were the kind of person that would talk to the chairs, then you could ask them yourself."

"I'm not going to talk to the chairs and I'm not going to talk to your feet," said Vin. There was no deliberation on her face.

"Then they'll never listen to me," said Mary. She was squinting her eyes again, like she was trying to recall a faded memory. She'd spent her whole life going where Vin told her to go, being pulled along. She hadn't known there was more outside, more at night, more far away, and that Vin would not want to go to these places. If Mary had known, she'd have kept control of her own feet. They were like a baby animal that cracked out of its shell and looked up at the wrong mother. They only wanted Vin, so Mary was relegated to the space around her sister, which was a very small space that kept away from any kind of darkness at all. It kept away from the Soldier and the Big Feeling, the last of which was draining out of Mary this very second. She felt the finality of it. And Vin looked down at her like she knew it was happening, her hand outstretched on the kitchen table.

"We need to go upstairs and get ready for school," she said.

Mary looked at the hand and it was appealing in a way. Some kids always want to sit on their mother's lap instead of taking their turn on the slide, or merry-go-round, or telling Santa what they want for Christmas. They're afraid of the fun, so their turn comes and goes and then it's gone. And the outing ends, or the party ends and everybody goes home and the kid never got to do anything, but doesn't care because it was all very safe, and comforting. Vin wanted Mary to be this kind of kid. But Mary wanted her turn. "There was something I wanted to tell you." she said. "But you didn't ask."

"Okay," said Vin.

"Why didn't you ask?"

"You can talk, Mary. You can say whatever you want to."

"I know I can say whatever I want," Mary said. "But why didn't you ask?"

Vin's hand was still empty on the table and Mary could see that her sister was struggling, just a bit, to remain casual about it. A hand, when rejected, has a tendency to form a fist or at the very least, disappear back into the pocket of the person who offered it. But Vin's hand stayed put, not willing to surrender. "Okay," she said. "Tell me."

Mary wanted to get it right. She felt that if she didn't get it right, Vin wouldn't want to hear about it ever again. If she didn't get it right, if she couldn't articulate the Big Feeling, it would fade from her memory completely. Life would go back to dull, and Mary wouldn't even know that it was dull. This felt like a terrible fate. She felt her face squish up into

a pained expression. She wondered if she had a crease down her forehead, like her mother.

"It's big," she said, finally. That was the first thing about it and she knew it for sure. "It's bracing yourself for the terrible things but being excited for the terrible things at the same time." She looked up at Vin's face, hoping to see some recognition. "It's wanting to go with the Soldier but also being afraid of the Soldier."

"But the Soldier isn't a terrible thing," said Vin.

Mary shook her head, because she wasn't even finished. She had the urge to slap Vin's hand. It had lost that air of vulnerability, had suddenly become antagonistic. "How do you know?"

"The Soldier doesn't limp and frown and drink because he's terrible. He's like that because the terrible things got him." Vin paused, waiting for Mary to absorb the words, one at a time. "You don't go find the terrible things, Mary. The terrible things come and find you."

It knocked the breath out of Mary; not what Vin said, but that it was the truth. Mary wasn't used to the truth. She had wanted it, had been asking for it and looking for it, fighting for it and fed up that Vin never gave it to her. Now here it was, menacing enough to disorient her. The look on Vin's face, both frightened and frightening, was a new dimension to her sister that Mary felt immediately uncomfortable with but figured was the price of real information.

"Would they come right into the house?" Mary asked.

A seed of fear took root. It was a little bit fear of the dark and a little bit fear of the night. She wanted to think about what would become of these fears if they grew, but was too distracted by Vin, who, Mary now understood, contained those particular fears and many more. They had been there for a very long time. They were old and hardened and pruned to fit neatly so that they were hardly noticed on the outside. But the fear inside of Mary was sudden and tender and still unpredictable.

"But the Soldier told me he was a terrible thing," Mary said, grasping at what was going and gone, everything from last night, her pillow, the Soldier, that whole new country.

"No," said Vin.

"Huh?"

"I don't think he actually told you that he was a terrible thing."

Mary's thoughts were moving very quickly and she put a hand to her head, trying to slow them down. No, the Soldier didn't say he was terrible. It was Mary that asked. Then he'd turned and walked away.

Mary put her other hand on her head, trying to work it out. "How did you know that?"

"It's easy," Vin said. Her lips were parted, just a sliver, and her jaw was moving back and forth, back and forth. *What is she working so hard at?* their mother had asked, and Mary hadn't been interested in the answer. *She's working hard at everything.* Vin was bigger than all of them and looking down, responsible as God. Even Vin's hand, empty on the table and

rejected, had miraculously retained its dignity. Mary imagined it sitting up, speaking to her like a shadow puppet.

This has all gone according to plan.

Powerlessness settled on Mary's body, starting on the top of her head and sinking, sinking. And something else came up. It was as big and strange and satisfying as the Big Feeling. She let it come all the way up.

"Put that hand away," she said and tried to swipe it but Vin moved, looking surprised. Mary knew better. "And tell it to be quiet!"

"It doesn't speak, Mary. I speak! You speak!" Again, Vin put her hand out. It was habit. It had always worked. She stood up from the table and put her hand out.

The chairs were still smiling. This was a dream come true. It was all the drama they could ever hope for. Mary stood up as well and kicked the chair next to her, right in the leg, twice, hard.

"Mary!" Vin said. She took a step, reached for Mary's hand but Mary snatched it away, stumbling. "Mary they don't speak!"

And the teacup. Unable to turn itself away, it was forced to watch this display of the pointless emotions of children. It longed for the quiet of 5am. Mary saw the teacup's loathing, the disgust. And the teacup saw Mary.

"Mary!" said Vin, her voice finally cracking. "They're dead!"

It was like the end of a movie when the film strip runs amok and the world moves in double time, and the brain has trouble keeping up. That was how Mary raised her mother's teacup above her head and threw

it at her sister's feet. But then everything slowed down, just before the china hit and crumbled onto the floor, bouncing back up again in pieces, flung across the kitchen in an elegant crescendo.

Then it was clearly dead. The chairs dead too, a vague smile still frozen across one of the faces.

Mary looked up and saw their mother standing by the door of the kitchen, eyeing the disaster, trying to understand what had happened.

"I broke your teacup," said Mary. "I don't think it can be put back together again."

"Why?"

"Because it broke into too many pieces," said Mary. "And maybe some are lost."

"No," said their mother. "I mean why did you break it?"

Mary looked at her hands, held tight into fists, like they were responsible and were trying to hide from the consequences. But she could see that they were attached to her arms, which were attached to her body, which was attached to her. She relaxed her fingers and moved them around slowly, like learning to work a marionette. The realization made her weak. "Because I'm terrible," she said.

Vin still held her silver spoon. She twirled it around like a baton. Their mother fit one hand into the tiny pocket of her apron. Her other hand hung empty at her side.

Emily Mani's fiction has appeared in *Reunion: The Dallas Review*. She lives in Toronto, Canada with her husband and kids, and is currently working on a novel featuring Vin and Mary, the characters from *Soldier*.