

THE BOOK OF DARIA

by Rati Mehrotra

Avery skipped beside me as we left the school playground. The bell had rung, but behind us kids still ran and laughed and chased each other – kids without a care in the world.

“Quit following me everywhere in school,” I told my sister. “If I fail math it’s going to be your fault.”

Avery giggled. “Daria, who cares if you fail math? Not me! And not that man who cries all the time.”

“Well, *I* care,” I said, “and he doesn’t cry all the time.”

“No,” said Avery. “Just when he’s drunk or looking at pictures of the four of us. Which do you think it’s going to be today?”

I closed the school gate behind me without answering and walked down the street. Avery followed, of course. She hadn’t left me once since the accident, not even when I went to the bathroom. She just came in with me and perched on the sink or in another stall until I was done. I was used to it by now, more or less. What I really couldn’t stand was when she sat on my desk in class, blowing raspberries while Mr. Bruno handed out the test papers. It was a wonder we hadn’t been suspended. They were giving us a lot of leeway, I suppose, owing to the circumstances we found ourselves in.

My breath fogged the October air. Avery laughed and tried to catch the leaves blowing down the street, and I tried not to think of Mom. But it was hard; Avery has Mom’s way of laughing, crinkling up her eyes and throwing her head back, as if the whole world is a huge joke.

“Saw Mom today,” said Avery, as if she’d read my mind. “She was watching from the window when we left home this morning.”

When Avery first told me she could see Mom, I was always asking her stuff like: *What did she look like? Was she happy or sad? Did she smile to see me?* Now I knew better than to ask; Avery didn’t have the answers, any more than I did.

We arrived home, an old semi-detached facing the Trinity Bellwoods Park. I crossed the cluttered yard and paused at the door, heart sinking. The light was on in the living room. I could see a shadow moving behind the blinds. Dad hadn’t gone to work again. How much longer before they fired him from the plant?

“He’s here,” said Avery. “Want to just go play?”

“I have homework,” I said.

“You never learn,” said Avery. “Every single day it’s the same. You think it will get better, and it never does.”

I looked at her. Uncombed hair, grimy face, torn blue school uniform, scornful eyes. Mom would have had a fit. “He’s all we’ve got,” I said. “You don’t want to end up in a state home, do you? I’m going to talk to him, and you should too.”

Avery rolled her eyes. “Here we go again. Go inside and get ignored. *I don’t care.*” She skipped away to the swing in the yard. She hated being in the same room as him. I didn’t blame her. I had a hard time looking at him myself. He’d been driving drunk that August night, yelling and swearing at Mom, when he veered off the 401 Highway and smashed us all into an oncoming truck. Mom died instantly. He didn’t get a scratch himself.

I pushed open the door and let myself in. Sometimes Dad went crazy and threw stuff. Sometimes he drank and wept over photos. Most of the time, he acted like I didn’t exist.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, head in his hands. A half-empty bottle of whiskey sat beside him.

“Dad?” I said. He didn’t look up. “You’ve got to stop drinking in the daytime,” I continued, in my best imitation of Mom’s voice. “It’s not good for you.” *Or us*. When he didn’t answer, I asked, “Have you had anything to eat? Can I get you a sandwich?”

He didn’t respond, which was just as well because I was pretty sure there was nothing to eat in the house, unless you counted mouldy bread and year-old cans of tuna.

I went over to the table and prodded my father on the shoulder, but he just slumped over and began groaning.

I backed away. Avery was right. I always hoped things would get better, and they never did.

I climbed the stairs and went to my room. Avery was already there, lying on the bed.

“Told you,” she said.

“I don’t think he’s talked to me once since the accident,” I said. My eyes blurred.

Avery bounced up. “Hey! That’s not allowed. You’re two years older than me. *You* don’t get to cry.”

I perched on the bed and sniffed. “Wish I could see Mom, talk to her.”

Avery gave me a sideways glance. “She’s been looking for you.”

“Really?”

Avery got up and went to the door. “Come on,” she said. “I’ll show you.”

She went downstairs and I followed. Dad was still lying face down on the table, just like I’d left him. Avery picked up a fork and poked him on the shoulder.

“Ouch!” He shot up on his chair.

“It’s me,” said Avery. “Pull yourself together, Dad. What would Mom and Daria think?”

His face crumpled up and he began to weep again. Avery sighed and put her arm around him. He clutched her like a drowning man.

I turned away from them and went to the window. It was snowing. Snow in October. The weather was all mixed up, just like me.

Avery helped Dad to the sofa and came over and stood next to me. “The year ends soon. Time to move on, don’t you think?”

I started. “Is it December already?”

“It’s been December for a week,” said Avery. “You don’t have much of a sense of time any more, do you?”

No, I didn’t. Time was twisty. Time made me think I was still in school, still alive. I remembered the night of the accident, the tearing pain of being ripped out of my skin, and I shivered.

Avery pointed. “Look.”

I squinted through the glass. A figure stood by the gate. It could have been Mom, or it could have been something else entirely. I hugged myself. I didn’t really want to leave. Or maybe it was Avery who didn’t want me to leave, no matter what she said.

“Go on,” said Avery. “She’s waiting. She’s been waiting for you all this while.” Her voice was all trembly, like she was trying not to cry. Avery my sister, who never cried.

I swallowed and said, “Make sure you comb your hair and take a bath. Get something to eat...”

“Yeah, yeah.” Avery turned her face away. “Just go.”

I walked out of the house. Snow stung my face and eyes. The figure detached itself from the gate and turned toward the street. I quickened my pace to catch up. At the gate I paused for a last look behind.

The house was dark. No Avery. Had I imagined it all? Talked to her in my dreams?

But I could feel her still – the sheer force of her, the vitality that had held me here until now.

The moon slipped into the sky. The figure waited a little way ahead, patient and unmoving. Part of me wanted to follow her, and part of me was more scared than I had ever been.

The moment stretched. I felt my life turn like a picture book in my hand. The Book of Daria, just twelve pages long, one for each year that I'd lived. And the last, terrible sentence that ended my story.

But then I saw another book, waiting to be picked up. It had endless pages, endless possibilities, because they were yet to be written.

I blew a kiss toward my old house, my sister-that-was. *Goodbye Avery*. Then I turned and followed the figure down the street.