

## Big Bones

My name is Marie and my seven sisters are called Marie too. It's because of Maman: she's French, you see. She probably hoped we'd be good all our lives if she named us after our Virgin Mary, though I'm not sure it's working very well for me. You might think it's complicated for us – all being called Marie – but in fact it isn't because we use our middle names. Luckily, they're different.

I'm eight, I was born in 1969 and I'm the youngest. I think I was a mistake because Maman had run out of middle names by the time she pushed me from her stomach. I'm just Marie: Marie-nothing Smith. I don't know what name she'll choose for a new baby.

If you're thinking that Smith isn't a French surname, you're right. That's Dad's fault because he's English. He had a dream so we left France last year and came to live on a farm in Dorset. Everyone in France said it rained all the time in England but our Virgin Mary laid on the hottest ever English summer so we wouldn't be homesick.

It sounds as if Dad is to blame for something else, too, and that's my bones. I know, because he has just told Maman so.

The milking bail is a good place for me to spy on them. Dad bought it in a farm sale and towed it home behind the tractor. There's enough room to milk three cows, so it's a luxury for our Twinkle – and for Maman, because now Twinkle stands still. The only time Maman isn't rushing around or writing letters to our aunts is when she's milking. That's why Dad comes here to talk to her. It takes him a long time to say things, but that's OK because it takes Maman a long time to reply.

'She's got my bones,' Dad says.

I expect Maman to say, 'Don't be silly,' to Dad, like she does when I say stupid things. I wait for her to say, 'Don't be silly, she's got her own bones, not yours.' But she doesn't. She doesn't say anything at all, which is a bit scary. It either means she agrees with him, or she's thinking. All I can hear from my hiding place in the feed bin is milk squishing

from Twinkle's teats into the tin bucket. I can't see Maman's face from in here, but there seems to be an agreement-silence going on between them. It doesn't sound as if it's a good thing to have his bones.

'And she says she wants to be a dancer,' Dad adds.

The squirting stops. It's difficult to tell what kind of silence it is now, but it definitely feels louder. I squint through a rusty hole. The bin is just big enough for me to sit inside when it's empty. It's easy to climb into because the lid on the top is broken. I can slide it open, check there are no rats inside and then slide it closed above me. The only problem is that I can't see much. I can't see Maman's reaction.

I'm sure Dad is wrong about my bones. If anyone has given me bones, it must be Maman because I'm the same height as her. Here in England everyone's taller than Maman. I think that's why she's cross all the time. The ladies in the village shop, where I sneak to read *Jackie*, say she's 'petite'. The way they spit out the French word they've stolen from us and drop the last 't' makes it sound like an insult.

Maman starts milking again, but she still hasn't said anything. I wish she'd given me her hair as well as her bones. I love Maman's hair, even though it's going grey. It's silky like the edge of the blanket I rub with my fingertips to get to sleep. Dad fell in love with her hair. Well, with her plaits. She lost them on the ferry when we moved to England. I looked everywhere for them, even overboard, but I couldn't find them. Dad made her go to the hairdresser as soon as we arrived, to tidy the straggly ends, and she looked all English when she came out. So now she doesn't have plaits, only her hair. Dad doesn't seem to be sad about it, though. He's been happy since we left France, unless he's just pretending because it was his dream and not Maman's.

Each time Maman mentions her lost plaits, they are longer and fatter. One day, when she was yanking tangles out of my ginger mop, I told her it was nice to think they carried on growing in her memory. She rapped me on the head with the back of the brush and told me off for talking too much.

I'm always being told off, unlike Noelle and Thérèse. They're my closest sisters, not that they're close to me in anything but age. I watch them all the time when I'm not watching the animals or the insects or the plants or the sky or other people. Maman said they were too young to stay in France with our big sisters and our six aunt Maries, even though they're four and five years older than me. They're never told off. They cover for each other. It's because they are UTTs. In case you don't know, that means Unidentified Telepathic Twins. You didn't know, did you? Our Britannica is the only encyclopaedia in the whole world with the

definition in it. I'm certain of that because I added it myself.

No one else knows that Noe & Thé are UTTs. I worked it out as soon as I learnt the word 'telepathic'. I reckon Thé stayed inside Maman for a year after Noe was born. She waited until Noe told her that Maman had thought up another middle name before she came out too. And they're telepathic because they don't have to talk. They just stretch their eyes or jerk their heads. When I copy them they don't hear my silent words. They just look down their long noses at me and shut their bedroom door. I think Dad must have shared his nose bone with them.

At last, Maman replies. 'Her bones are big. Too big for a dancer.'

Too big? I imagine my bones sticking out of my skin. If they stuck out I wouldn't be able to dance. I wouldn't be able to do clouds, though my trees would be much better than they are today. There's definitely nothing sticking out. Not yet. The bones in my elbows aren't far from the surface and I've always had a doubt about the knobbles in my ankles. I hope they're wing bones and that feathers will break through one day so I'll be able to fly like the Greek boy in our Britannica. I can't look at my ankle bones properly right now or I'll disturb the empty sacks and Maman will hear the rustling and tell me off for eavesdropping, and I'll say I wouldn't need to eavesdrop if she bought us a television.

Maman's milking squirts are faster now. My hands remember Twinkle's floppy, leathery teats. They feel dead, like when you hold your index finger against someone else's finger and stroke them both together.

I wonder if I can change my bones? Or find another body to live in, like a hermit crab? I like dancing the crab. I like the scuttle and rattle of them.

Twinkle stamps her foot. I picture her tail swing and swat Maman's cheek, and my bottom twitches. When Maman milks Twinkle, she presses her face into her flank and sometimes a Jersey hair sticks on her cheek and then falls into our soup. I think she's listening to hear when Twinkle's stomach has no milk left in it. Cows have got seven stomachs, you know. They make milk with one, calves with another, cowpats with the third and they chew cud from the fourth. I don't know what they do with the other three.

'Anyway, if she wants to be a dancer, she'll need lessons,' says Maman. 'And we can't afford them.'

I gather some loose dairy nuts into a pile with my fingertips. I don't want dance lessons. Katy Dean has dance lessons. I've seen her in her horrid pig-pink tutu and I wouldn't be seen dead dressed like that. The kind of dancing she did at the school show was boring little steps and jumps to cassette music. I couldn't see *what* she was dancing. It was just Katy

Dean showing off.

In any case, I don't need lessons because I'm already a dancer. Louis told me so. He said I was a real dancer and not the stupid copycat Noe & Thé say I am.

It's true that I do copy things. Not just some things: everything. I don't know if it's a gift, or a curse a witch gave me when I was born. I can't help myself. As soon as I start to watch something I feel myself slip into it, like cake mix when I tip it into the star mould and it runs into every corner and fills it. When I dance the beech tree I flow up the trunk and along the branches to the twigs. I stretch out my arms and watch my fingers turn into leaves. They unfurl like in the nature film Mr George showed us on the new colour television at school. And when my finger-leaves are open, the hollows in the centre of my palms begin to flower.

I don't know if you see what I mean. It's difficult to explain with words. Louis understands. When I dance, Louis can see exactly what I'm dancing. He even guessed right when I danced the octopus, which is hard because it has eight legs. I've always danced. I used to dance with Minou, our French cat, before I even knew I was a human. She and I would lie on the rug in front of the fire, twitching our ears when someone came in and swishing our tails when Noe & Thé bothered us. Maman used to tell us off for climbing onto the table and I had sores in the corners of my mouth from licking my whiskers.

Dad grunts. There's a clack-clack as he slits binder twine and I listen to him stuffing a slice of bale into Twinkle's haynet. He doesn't say any more about bones or dance lessons.

By the way, Louis is my best friend, the only person I share my orange Space Hopper with. He's my cousin and he belongs to my aunt Marie-Jeanne, even though he didn't come out of her stomach. He was an orphan, like our lambs. Tatie Jeanne got a bargain when she bought him.

I wish he could live here. On the last day of his last visit I hid him in my secret hideout in the gap under the hot mouldy hay bales in the barn. I told Tatie Jeanne he was dead and that she'd have to go back to France alone. But Noe & Thé dragged him out and brought him back. Tatie Jeanne hugged them. Maman smacked me. And Louis looked sad.

Maman slaps Twinkle's rump. She's finished milking.

'Poor Marie. She'll never be a dancer,' she says. 'She hasn't got the physique, thanks to your big bones.'

So it's true: I've got Dad's English bones. And I'll never be a dancer. I scrunch up the handful of nuts and crush them. One of my nails scratches the side of the metal bin but I don't care if Maman hears me.

Twinkle kicks the bucket, making a clang echo around the tin milking bail. It's so loud

that I miss Maman's next words. Dad leaves. I hear him squelch through the mud outside.

Louis must have been wrong when he said I could dance. Maybe he only knew what I was dancing because he's telepathic with me. He might be an OWT – that's a One Way Telepath. And before you ask, I don't know if OWT is in our Britannica because I've only just thought of it.

Louis never said I'd need lessons. He never said I hadn't got a physique or that my bones were too big. Perhaps he doesn't know anything about dancing.

Dad squerches back into the milking bail. He doesn't say anything to Maman. There's a waiting-silence. I can't see them through the tiny hole. What are they doing?

The feed bin lid slides open a sliver and I cower into the corner. A long handle thrusts through the gap. Metal prongs stab. I scream.

Maman shrieks and flings off the lid.

Dad shouts a word I've never heard before and yanks up the pitchfork.

I explode from the feed bin like a volcano. Red lava dribbles from holes in my calves.

'Oh, Marie,' sighs Maman. There's pity in her eyes, and I know it's not because of the blood.

My molten heart cools into stone. I have to dance, even if my bones are no good. I want to dance. No matter what happens, I'm going to dance.