

READING PASSAGE

It was Eleanor's idea, she told Mum afterwards. Not that Mum believed her. Nothing bad was ever Eleanor's idea. Nothing good was ever Charlotte's idea.

5 They'd been sent out to walk their argument off, at the end of a day jammed into the tiny cluttered house where they all snapped and bit at each other while the wind and the rain lay siege to the three of them. All day long Dad's boots, fishing rod and golf clubs had sat lonely and unused in the hallway, seeming to taunt them, reminding them of the phone call from his
10 London office that had – yet again – taken him away on the first day of the holiday. Whenever Dad was away, none of them seemed to know who they were any more; it was like the splintering of a great mirror in their lives. Nobody dared mention him. It was as if he didn't exist. Instead, they cut each other with the sharp edges of his absence.

15 While they were out, Charlotte knew Mum would pull out her phone and jab at Dad's number. Then she would talk at him non-stop, complaining about the Scottish weather, the Scottish people, the Scottish food, and, most of all, Eleanor and Charlotte, her voice rising ever higher in rage and frustration, until Dad hung up on her, and she fractured into helpless tears. Charlotte had seen her do it, looking down on her from the top of the stairs
20 when Mum thought both daughters were asleep. When she heard Charlotte she hung up, hid the phone under a cushion, and snatched up her magazine. These phone calls were like an addiction she would admit to no-one.

25 "Why do we have to come to Scotland every year?" Charlotte had asked, during a plate-slamming dinner punctuated by Eleanor's sighs and the muttered complaints Mum left inaudible like unexploded bombs.

"Because we love it here," said Mum. "It's always a part of our summer. A very special part."

30 "It's special when Dad's here," said Charlotte. Eleanor threw her a look that momentarily silenced her. "Anyway, I've never liked Scotland. There's nothing here but sheep and horizontal rain and one shop that sells stale bread and baked beans and the *Daily Mirror*. The woman that runs it hates us for being English. She'd push us off the cliff if she could."

"But your father is Scottish," said Mum, "and he loves it here."

35 "Well, why isn't he here, then?" said Charlotte, and then wished she hadn't, because Mum's lip was shaking and her eyes were like fragile glass.

40 "Personally, I find Scotland charming," said Eleanor. "It's such a relief to get out of London, don't you think, Mum? I always unwind when I'm here." This was an obvious lie. All week Eleanor had been like a clockwork toy that sputtered round the floor spitting out resentment and unkindness. Charlotte laughed disbelievingly at her sister. Eleanor retaliated with screeching, slashing tears, turning her head away and tossing her long whip of hair. That was when Mum had sent them out for a lovely walk by the sea to calm down. In the freezing rain and the biting wind.

The waves came and went on the beach, ignoring the girls as they

45 ignored each other. Eleanor strode ahead, seeming to sneer at the wind in
contempt. Charlotte zigzagged behind her, doing everything she could not to
follow her sister's path. They got to the end of the beach. There was nothing
to do but to turn back; back to the little house clinging to the cliff, where, on
50 happier holidays, their father would walk through the door, holding high the
salmon he'd caught for their tea.

Eleanor stopped under the soaking, jagged cliff at the end of the beach.
Charlotte caught her up reluctantly.

"Charlotte," she said. "Look up there. What do you see?"

55 "A nest. It'll have eggs in, at this time of year. Do you remember last
year, when we watched the birds from the top of the cliff with Dad through
his binoculars? He wouldn't let us within two hundred yards of them,
because they were nesting."

"I'm going to climb up there. Climb up there, get the eggs, and throw
them onto the rocks and smash them. Are you coming?"

