



**Liz
Johnston**

**The
Fall-
Down
Effect**

a novel

THE FALL- DOWN EFFECT

Liz Johnston

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PART 1

1989

*And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you
anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
to have you listen at all, it's necessary
to talk about trees.*

—Adrienne Rich

1.

Fern pressed her body into the bark. Amid the sparse lower branches, she'd found a perfect outline for her seven-year-old frame, no limbs or knobs sticking out where her head and shoulders wanted to go. She heard Sylvia calling her name and tried to squeeze deeper, imagining her skin and flesh sinking into the ridged surface. The hemlock welcomed her. The bark smelled like dirt and toast and moss and cinnamon, and like none of these. It smelled only like itself, and it was her favourite smell. She pressed closer and sniffed deeply.

Sylvia's voice came closer, then drifted farther again, closer, then farther. But Fern remained camouflaged, like an owl or a thrush. Her invisibility made her insides thrum. She watched bugs moving jerkily up and down the trunk in front of her and listened to the secret language of the tree. But then, urgently, she needed to pee. The sensation drove through her whole body. She clutched a hand to her crotch and tried to be still.

She heard River now, his call a whine. "Hiding in the woods is cheating!"

"Fern!" Sylvia was circling close again. "Please come out. It's not fun anymore."

She couldn't make it even if she ran back to the house right now. She couldn't hold it long enough for River and Sylvia to

give up and go away so she could squat and relieve herself where she was. She moved her hand away, and the warm pee flowed forth, soaking her panties and shorts and running all the way down her leg, leaving a slightly stinging, slightly itchy trail. She widened her stance, hoping to stop the rush from reaching her socks and shoes. At her movement, the snap of a twig rang out among the trees like a shot.

She was crying when Sylvia and River beat their way over to her. The magic was broken, and she was found and wet and she wasn't anything like a tree.

"Why didn't you come when I called?" Sylvia asked as River squealed, "Ew!" Sylvia took Fern by the arm and dragged her back toward the house. As the tears ran fast and hot down Fern's face and neck, Sylvia told her not to cry. "We can fix everything before Mom or Dad comes home."

AFTER WIPING DOWN THE OUTSIDE TABLE AND LAYING OUT the placemats, straightening the spoons River had dropped sloppily, Sylvia walked around the side of the house and sat on the front step to wait for Mom. Inside, Dad was making dinner. Fern had already told him about Mom going into town to protest the McDonald's grand opening. Sylvia's first-ever time babysitting had gone from an exciting chance to prove her capability to a drawn-out countdown to another of her parents' fights.

When Mom's car turned the corner, Sylvia stood and dusted off her bum. Mom hurriedly rolled up her window as she parked and switched off the engine. "He beat me home," she said as Sylvia arrived at her door. "Is he angry?"

"I don't think so." Dad never got angry, even when Sylvia thought he should.

“I thought I’d be home hours ago, but...” Mom opened the back seat to pull out the large posterboard sign she’d made that morning. “Can you grab this, hon?” Sylvia took the sign and followed her back to the house.

On the way in, Mom called out, “I can explain, Tom!”

He popped around the corner and smiled at them. “After dinner,” he said. “Syl, can you put that in the back closet, near the ones you did for Earth Day?”

Sylvia did as she was told. She listened from down the hall, but Dad was just talking about what he’d made for dinner and letting River brag about how helpful he’d supposedly been. She read the sign Mom had hastily marked before dashing out the door that morning: *Cheap food, big cost. Don’t fell a forest for your burger.*

When she returned to the kitchen, she asked, “What does ‘fell a forest’ mean?”

“Chop down,” Mom answered. She turned to Dad. “We now have a McDonald’s”—she spat the name—“in town and people need to know—”

“Lynn.”

“What?” Mom’s voice was aimed at innocence.

“Can we just— After dinner, okay?”

Fern was doing laps around the butcher block, muttering, “Fell a forest, fell a forest.”

Sylvia put out an arm to halt her. “Go sit at the table,” she said.

Fern considered her for a moment, then resumed her circuit.

They ate on the deck, despite the gathering clouds, and Dad continued to avoid the subject of Mom leaving them alone. He talked about seeing a family of beavers on his patrol. Then Fern went on about birds and bark, and River tattled about how she’d cheated at hide-and-seek and peed her pants.

No one asked about Sylvia's day. Finally, she burst out: "I did a good job. I even got River to water the garden. And eleven's old enough. Mom and I saw a sign at the community centre for a babysitting course, and you only have to be eleven—"

"You're not in trouble, Syl," said Dad. As he dabbed a slice of the dry seven-grain loaf into the bottom of his bowl, Sylvia caught the quick pissed-off look he gave Mom.

"It's me who's in trouble," Mom said.

"No," he said, shaking his head, "don't put me in that position, Lynn. We're partners. You can't be 'in trouble.'"

"You would have had me sit around the house with a *McDonald's* opening in town, when Sylvia is more than capable—"

Sylvia wished she could blink her and her siblings away from here, even just to the basement, anywhere they wouldn't have to witness what was boiling up in front of them.

"What about their lessons?" Dad said.

"You think they're not learning? Did you listen to what they were telling you, not ten minutes ago? Fern's practically a naturalist. River's learning how things grow. He's learning saturation and evaporation and—"

"I get it, Lynn. I get it."

"It's going to rain," said Sylvia. "Can we go inside?" Dad looked at Mom and then nodded softly to Sylvia. She sprang up and gathered her and her siblings' bowls in her arms. River held the door for her, being helpful for the first time all day.

RIVER HATED IT WHEN MOM AND DAD FOUGHT. THEY'D stayed behind on the deck, and River could still hear the angry voices, even though Sylvia had gone past the kitchen and dining room to set their bowls on the coffee table in the living room.

“What’s evaporation and sad-duration?” he asked Sylvia so they wouldn’t just be sitting there listening.

“Evaporation is when liquid dries up,” she said, glad, it seemed, to have something to talk about. “You remember how we did that experiment? Mom put a tray of water out on the table. There was less and less each time we checked it until it was all gone?”

“The droplets got absorbed into the air!” Fern said.

River put down his spoon and pushed his bowl to the other end of the coffee table. Black bean soup was better when Mom made it. He looked up at Sylvia. He didn’t remember the experiment she was talking about.

“And saturation . . . It’s like when you were watering, how the ground got darker as it got wetter and had more water in it for the plants to drink. It was more *saturated*.”

River went to the front window. It was dark out now. He couldn’t see stars through the clouds. “When’s it going to rain?” he said.

As if on cue, the first few drops hit the window. A minute later, Mom and Dad were back inside, looking mostly dry but mad.

“All right,” said Dad, gathering bowls off the coffee table as he swept into the room. “Who’s ready for a bath?”