On May 23, exactly one month before Gustavia and Leomaris Brennan's eleventh birthday, their mother became terribly, mysteriously ill.

At first, it was quite a wonderful day. For one thing, it was a Saturday, which meant sleeping in, at least for Leo. Gus could never sleep in, so she hopped out of bed at her usual time and ran down to the kitchen, where she found her father mixing batter for pancakes.

"Morning," Gus said. Her dad murmured back as he peered into his mixing bowl. Ila said nothing, but she smiled up at Gus from her bowl of oatmeal, the only breakfast she would eat.

"Where's Mom?" Gus asked.

"Not feeling well," her father said lightly. "I figured I'd let her sleep. I don't have to go into the lab today anyway. Let's go wake up that brother of yours."

Ila jumped up and grabbed her bowl of oatmeal off the table to follow them.

"Food at the table, Ila," their father said. Ila gave him her

Please? smile, and he shook his head in defeat. "OK, but two

hands and no juice."

Ila gave a happy little hop, which made Gus and her father laugh, and they progressed as a group to Leo's room. Gus shoved the door open. Leo was asleep. Leo loved to

sleep almost as much as he loved to read books. Except for their looks, Gus and Leo were as different as twins could be. Gus didn't hate reading; she just didn't have time for it. She was happiest when she was moving. She liked to run, and was the only fifth grader on the Girls A soccer team. But what she really loved was swimming. Gus swam on the school's club team in the winter, and on the town team in the summer. She loved the smell of the water, the salt of the ocean, even the chlorine smell of the school pool. As soon as she got in the water, everything else faded. In the pool she was not the smart Brennan's sister, or the sister of the Brennan who never spoke. She was simply the fastest swimmer.

Leo swam too, but while Gus was winning her races, he was usually ruining a library book by the edge of the pool. Their mother always said that if he could only figure out how to read in his sleep, Leo would be perfectly happy for the rest of his life. As it was, he usually settled for reading himself to sleep, which he had clearly done the night before. He was lying on his side with his face mashed into the book that lay open on his pillow. His glasses were half on and half off, tilted at the crazy angle they had slipped to in the night.

"Leo!" Gus said.

"Humph." Leo did not move.

"Dad's making pancakes, Leo!"

At this, Leo opened one eye, dark brown, almost black, like Gus's. Leo and Gus took after their mother, who was small and slender with glossy dark hair and coffee-coloured eyes. Ila's curly red hair and oddly coloured eyes were her own

They appeared to be brown, the same dark shade as Leo's and Gus's, but a closer look revealed a starburst of incandescent green at the centre of each one. Looking into Ila's eyes was dizzying.

"Where's Mom?” Leo asked, sitting up and sliding his glasses back onto his nose. His hair stood up so that he looked like a hedgehog in danger. His book thumped to the floor.

"Under the weather," their father said. "You're stuck with me."

Leo grinned and pushed his hair away from his face, which resulted in it sticking even farther up in the air. "Pancakes," he said approvingly.

Their mother stayed in bed all day.

"She must be really sick," Gus said to Leo. They were playing chess on an old wooden board on the living room floor. Ila was alternating between looking at her favourite book, one about a frog and a toad that were best friends, and playing with her stuffed bear, dressing and undressing it and leading it on soundless adventures across the rug.

Gus and Leo's sister was a little bit weird. Well, really, a lot weird. For one thing, she didn't talk. It wasn't that she was quiet or slow to respond, but that she didn't talk at all. Ila was five years old, but she had never spoken a word. She was also what their mother called sensitive. Although Ila couldn't —or wouldn't-speak, she definitely could scream. When she was a baby, it seemed like anything would make her scream: being wrapped too tightly in her blankets, or being woken suddenly, or the one-and only-time Gus had been allowed to feed her from her bottle.

"It's not you," her mother had said as she plucked the writhing, shrieking baby from Gus's arms. “The milk was too cold-that's all, Gussy. Not you."

Gus was hurt anyway. She had been waiting with huge excitement for the new baby. She and Leo were five when Ila

arrived. Leo had taken a good look at her and wandered away, but Gus loved her from the start. When Ila had first peered up at her with her strange, beautiful eyes, Gus could barely breathe. Her own sister.

But the baby, it turned out, was not really that much fun. For one thing, she cried all the time. Anything abrupt—a light flicked on in a dark room, a siren going by, even the bang of a door closing-would make Ila panic. Her small face would turn bright red, her eyes would squinch shut, and then she would start screaming.

"She's just a little overwhelmed,” their father had said. But it was more than that. It was as if Ila had keener senses than the rest of them and was being bombarded by the world at its regular, human-made level. For instance, Gus was pretty sure Ila could see in the dark. She never bothered to turn the lights on in their room, not even at night. Gus liked to believe that her little sister, having lost so much by not speaking, had gained in other areas.

"She also has better hearing than any of us," she pointed out to her father. "Remember when the Browns' cat went missing and Ila was the one who found him in the closet in the spare room? Nobody else could hear him meowing."

"That's just because she's so quiet herself," her father said, but Gus thought he looked pleased at the thought of his youngest having gifts instead of merely the deficit of silence.

As Ila got older, her tantrums lessened. But Mrs. Destito, the nurse practitioner at the clinic, was concerned about the Brennans' youngest child. Since it was difficult to bring Ila to her office, where the strange noises and bright lights could set her off, she had sent a young woman to their house to examine her. A behaviour specialist, she called herself. She had a high-pitched voice that went up even higher when she spoke to Ila. It sounded like she was talking to a puppy.

"Such an interesting name," the woman said in her puppy voice. "What in the world does it mean, I wonder?"

"It means island," their mother said shortly. "Island,' " the woman said. "How very, mmm, odd."

Number: 1077, 422, 46, 782, 111, 1103, 2263, 2951, 2283, 1422, 1210, 2349, 1287, 787, 1016, 2093, 2298, 1713, 2245, 3185, 379, 670, 590, 1581, 2158, 1020, 380

No one said anything. What was there to say to such a rude comment?

"Now, Ila," the woman had crooned, "show me your nice

bear?" When she said bear, she stretched the word out so that

it sounded like two long words, the second one a question.

They were in the living room, having tea and cookies. Ila, who was three at the time, was playing on the rug with the first of her many bears. She ignored the woman. "Ila," their father said, "say hello to the nice lady." His voice gave away what he really thought of the nice lady. Ila ignored him as well.

"Hmmm," the woman said, making a note in the spiral notebook that she pulled out of a large canvas bag. The bag also held toys, which she offered, one by one, to Ila. Ila ignored them all in favour of her bear, who was now practising headstands on the living room rug.

After a while, Leo drifted out, no doubt to go to his room to read or to continue training his turtles, one of whom he claimed could pick between a blue string and a red string almost 100 percent of the time. Gus had stayed, sitting quietly on one end of the couch, hoping not to be asked to leave. Gus loved listening in on adults' conversations, even when they were boring. And she sensed that this conversation, while slightly boring at the moment, was very important.

The behaviour specialist had been talking at great length about something called early intervention.

"With the right training," she said, leaning forward as she spoke, "Ila can even learn to interact with regularly-abled children!" She sounded delighted at her own prediction. "We will need to do more testing, of course, to see where Ila falls

"No," their mother interrupted. The woman looked startled.

"I'm sorry," their mother said, "but I've been doing a fair amount of research, and Ila just doesn't fit the profile. She makes perfect eye contact, for example. And she plays with

Gus and Leo, doesn't she, Peter?"

Her voice rose just a bit as she said his name. Their father put an arm around her shoulders. Ila played quietly at their feet. Gus sat as still as possible.

"She makes eye contact!" their mother said again. She sounded like she might cry. "She's just-quiet. Quiet and a bit sensitive. We don't want her subjected to any more testing. We-"

The woman leaned forward again, and Gus's mother stopped speaking. “Ila,” the woman said, and her voice was suddenly quite normal. “Can you come over here, Ila?"

The room went very still. Gus found herself holding her breath as she waited for her little sister to respond. Go on, Ila! she wanted to say, but she forced herself to keep quiet.

Ila looked up at the behaviour specialist, her eyes shining in the light from the lamp behind the couch. She smiled and waved one chubby hand.

Their mother said-and now she really was crying-"You

see! Well done, Ila! Go on over, honey."

Ila obediently toddled over to the woman, who scooped her up. Gus braced herself, but Ila seemed content to sit on the woman's lap. She examined the string of pearls that the woman wore around her neck. Everyone in the room relaxed. Gus's mother wiped her eyes. But then the woman made the mistake of pulling a tiny penlight from her shirt pocket and shining it in Ila's eyes, making the starbursts at the centre of them glow a dangerous, vivid green.

"What unusual eyes! I'm just going to track her pupils," the woman said brightly, shining the light back and forth. Ila's face grew pink, and then red. "Oh dear," their father said. The corners of his mouth

twitched.

Gus clamped her hands over her ears just as Ila shrieked and pulled away from the woman, who made the second mistake of taking hold of her wrists.

When it was all over-the spilled tea mopped up, the crushed cookies swept, the lamp put right, and the behaviour

specialist shown politely but firmly to her car-their father had called a family meeting.

"Your sister is just fine," he'd said sternly, looking from Gus to Leo and back to Gus. Ila was in bed, having exhausted herself with screaming. "There will be no more talk of this ism or that ism," their father continued.

"Ila is who she is," their mother added, "and that's final."

Gus and Leo looked at one another, bewildered. They had decided a long time ago that their weird little sister was just that their weird little sister. Why talk about it more? "Duh, Dad," Leo said finally.

"Personally," Gus said, "I think Leo's weirder than Ila. I mean, he trains turtles."

"They're very underrated," Leo said complacently. "It's clear from Ditmars's Reptiles of the World that they have much more complicated family structures than most people think."

Gus looked pointedly at their father.

"Well, OK, then," he said, throwing up his hands. "Let's have some lunch."

As it turned out, Ila did have to have more testing, but none of the tests ever turned up anything actually wrong with her, other than her silence. In the end it was decided that she had something called selective mutism, which meant that she could understand language perfectly well and could, and probably would, speak someday. Her sensitivity to lights and noise decreased as she got older. She went to kindergarten, and her teacher admitted that she seemed to be learning everything along with the other children. She'll talk when she is ready, their parents said, and so, for the time being anyway, that was that.

If they had lived in a bigger town, Ila might have been teased, or worse. But in their tiny town, where everybody knew everyone else, she was simply known as the Brennans' quiet child, in much the same way that Gus was known as the fastest swimmer on the team and Leo as a bookworm.

Leo was also frustratingly good at chess. Luckily, he rarely paid attention long enough to beat Gus.

"Mmm," said Leo now, moving a horse. He was not looking at the board. Behind him, Ila laid her bear on the rug and tucked a blanket around it for bedtime.

"Leo!" Gus scolded him. "That leaves your king open!"

"Sorry," Leo said, moving the horse back. "I was reading this cool book about wolves last night. I was just thinking about pack families. Did you know, Gus—"

"Whatever," Gus said. "Just go."

Leo slid a pawn forward, saying, as if Gus had not interrupted him, "So then the alpha female-the mother wolf-pukes up her food for the cubs-"

Gus sighed. "Check," she said, and took his queen.

Their mother came down for dinner. Her face was pale and she had dark circles under her eyes, as if she had been sick for weeks rather than just one day.

"Feeling better, Rosie?" their father asked gently, and she

murmured, "Oh yes, thanks, darling," as she took her seat,

folding into the chair.

All through dinner she was remote and tense. When the wind banged a shutter at the back of the house, she actually jumped from her chair with a slight scream. Their father was up and at her side immediately.

"Rosemaris," he said, and then when she did not answer him but continued to look wildly about her, as if expecting intruders to burst into the kitchen, he said, "Rosie! It's just the wind. It's fine."

"I'm sorry," their mother said. "I'm just a little tired, I think."

"How're the tides, Dad?" Leo asked, pushing up his glasses

on his nose.

Their father was a physical oceanographer. He studied something called Alexandrium cells, which are organisms that cause the algal blooms known as red tides in the Gulf of Maine. Red tides, he had explained, are dangerous because the algae can build up in the tissues of shellfish, poisoning them.

But in the last month, their father had been pulled off the red tide project to study a new problem-the tide markers in the Gulf of Maine were showing unusually high tides. The phenomenon was erratic, happening only every few days or so, but it was troubling.

"Still happening," their father answered Leo. "It's really strange. There doesn't seem to be a pattern to them."

"But it could be underwater earthquakes, right?" Gus

asked.

"Well, it could be, but it's not very likely."

"What about a tsunami?" Leo said eagerly. "Starting small, you know, way deep, and just building, building, building." He crept his hand along the table to demonstrate. "Then, whoosh!" He reached over to Ila, who was watching his approaching wave hand with fascination, and tickled her, making her giggle.

"It's not funny, Leo," their mother said, her voice unusually sharp.

Their father gave her a look and said in a softer voice, “It's probably related to global warming. We're looking into the melting ice at the polar caps as a possible cause. But even if that is the case, there's only about a one-"

"I know," Leo said gloomily. “A one-in-a-thousand chance

of a tsunami ever hitting Maine."

"Cheer up," their father said, grinning at Leo. “Maybe we'll have a bad hurricane season."

"What about those missing fishing boats?" Gus asked.

Their father stopped smiling. Three fishing boats had been lost in the Gulf of Maine since April. All three had gone down during freak storms that had risen out of the sea with no warning and then vanished as quickly as they had come. No traces of the boats, or of the fishermen who had been aboard

them, had been found. "Nothing," he said very quietly.

"But fishing accidents have always happened, right, Dad?"

Gus said.

Their father nodded, but his expression was grim. "Yes, but not like this. Maybe two, three incidents a year, but not three boats in one spring. That's nine men missing now."

Their mother stood up abruptly, her chair squeaking as she shoved it away from the table. "I'm going back to bed," she said. "Peter?"

Their father got up quickly and took her arm, helping her to the stairs as if she were an old woman. As they went upstairs, the children could just hear their mother's voice.

"You'll only frighten them," she was saying.

"I'm not scared," Leo said. "Are you, Ila?" Ila shook her head firmly, her red curls bouncing against her cheeks.

"But Mom is," Gus said. "It probably reminds her ..." Her voice trailed off. They all knew the story of their mother's family, although it was never spoken about. Her parents had drowned in a boating accident when she was just seventeen. Rosemaris had been on the boat as well, but was saved when a boy, out fishing early in the morning during his vacation from college, found her clinging to a lobster buoy. She was half dead from hypothermia, but she survived. She had no other family, so the boy's parents took her in. She waited tables at LuLu's Diner until the boy finished college, and then they were married. A year later, they had twin babies. They named the girl Gustavia, after the boat that Peter had been driving when he found the half-drowned girl. Leo's full name was Leomaris, which means lion of the sea, something that Leo pretended to be embarrassed by but secretly thought was pretty cool.

"Maybe," Leo said, suddenly thoughtful. "I mean, it is kind of weird, you know, that they haven't found any wreckage or anything, right? It's a little freaky."

"Charlotte says her dad hasn't been taking his lobster boat out," Gus said. "Her mom won't let him. She says they've been fighting like crazy about it, 'cause you know they have to pay for that special school for her little brother, and they're going to run out of money if he doesn't go out."

"Well, freak storms are, by definition, anomalies," Leo said. He reached for the bread plate. Since there were no grown- ups at the table to stop him, he jammed two pieces into his mouth and then followed them with a spoonful of butter.

"I'm thure it will all be thine," he said.

"Gross," Gus said. "Gross, gross, gross."

"Yum," Leo said as Ila grinned delightedly.

But it wasn't fine. In fact, it got worse quickly after that.