

*ZEBRA*

*Gayle Curtis*

*Have                    you                    got                    itchy                    bones*

*And                    in                    all                    your                    time                    alone*

*Can                    you                    hack                    your                    mind                    being                    riddled*

*With the wrong memories*

*And the clean coming will hurt*

*And you can never get it spotless*

*When there's dirt between the dirt.*

*“Dance Little Liar” – The Arctic Monkeys*

# *PART ONE*

## *THE BOOK*

*This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used*

*in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidence. If you recognise yourself in this body of work, the delusion is all yours.*

*Prue read the declaration again, her brow creased. Something was unfolding within her, a realisation of sorts that she couldn't put into words. She had been expecting this unwanted visitor. How predictable of her daughter to do this. She shifted in her seat and read on.*

*DANCE LITTLE LIAR*

*A NOVEL*

*BY*

*birdy*

*For The Three Big Bears.*

*With a special dedication to Dr Petra Romanova and Dr Alice Porter.*

*A NARCISSIST'S PRAYER*

*That didn't happen.*

*And if it did, it wasn't that bad.*

*And if it was, that's not a big deal.*

*And if it is, that's not my fault.*

*And if it was, I didn't mean it.*

*And if I did, you deserved it.*

*Danya Craig*

*PRELUDE*

*One night in 1977*

*The tobacco crackled in the silence, glowing in the darkness, revealing Harry's face as he drew on the cigar. Laughter from inside the pub caused him to glance over his shoulder and look through the window at the Saturday night revellers laughing hard at someone's joke. He looked*

*up at the sky, diamonds scattered across velvet, turning his collar to the cold northern wind. The few houses that swept along the road were in darkness. It felt like the whole world was crammed into that remote boozier. He checked the time – it was almost midnight.*

*Harry stepped into the road and made his way around the chapel, stones marking eternal sleepers of friends he'd drunk with and folks he'd worked with. And the absence of who? The dog in his chest stirred, the drowning he'd attempted earlier beginning to wear off, and it began to whine, and howl as it had done every day since the raggedy end of 1974. He liked the silence. He needed the silence.*

*A sudden cry halted his stroll. He removed the cigar from his lips, wondering if the dog had found a gap in his ribcage. Then he heard it again. A fox or a deer, he couldn't decide which. He looked up at the streetlamp, and then down at the ground, although he didn't know why. A hand on his shoulder, a brief whisper in his ear, and there it was, a small gold disc glistening on the pavement. He blinked but it was still there, and he bent down to pick it up. Harry felt for the spectacles in his breast pocket and moved closer to the orange glow.*

*How about that, he said to himself, quietly. He rubbed the precious find against the material of his waistcoat, giving the soft gold a deeper shine – an embossed pendant.*

*He closed his calloused hand around it and thought about his daughter who had disappeared from the earth when no one was looking, to a place where the dead kept their secrets. She'd flipped a coin to the Ferryman and been taken to a destination none of them could reach. Not yet anyway. All part of God's plan, the vicar had said to Harry's clenched jaw, and his wife's swollen eyes.*

*Wrapping the pendant in his handkerchief, Harry slipped it into his jacket pocket, knowing exactly who it was meant for. The most vulnerable member of the family, only just born. A death*

*and a birth, that was how the saying went, didn't it, and he knew what was coming. Deep down, on reflection.*

*A few days later, Harry gave the St Christopher to Wolf for safe keeping, telling her who it was intended for when she was old enough to have it. Wolf agreed, hung the pendant on a gold chain around her neck, where it stayed. The old man's wish broken, forever.*

#### *ALL FUR COAT AND NO KNICKERS*

*'Let's play checkers,' Wolf said. 'Yes, let's,' said Birdy, setting out the chess pieces.*

*It was Drunk Auntie who had told me my mother was a psychopath. She whispered it to me at a family wedding where there were big black buckets of whelks and jellied eels. I was only four – I*

*needed a deeper explanation. Afterwards, I worried we might all be snipped into little pieces, wound through the mincer and stored in the freezer ready for the Christmas vol-au-vents. I had visions of Wolf in her chunky 1970s' sheepskin, offering a tray of nibbles to unsuspecting neighbours who asked her where my father was as they washed him down with glasses of Mateus Rosé and Twiglets. At night I hid myself behind a wall of soft toys that I placed in a ritualistic order that I had created every night before bed. I had a sequence that worked. I climbed in from the bottom and pushed myself against the comfort of the cold wall, a gap between them all so that I could keep one eye on the door, hoping she wouldn't spot me. It turned out, Wolf was high functioning. We were safe, or so I believed.*

*The trouble had really started in 1977 when I had scrambled through the deep dark wood and made my way out of Wolf's cavern. And I'd done it all without a penis. Triumphant, I had screamed my presence and announced my arrival. I was here. Later, I realised I was, in fact, a spare ham sammich at a buffet, an extra clam in the gumbo, if you will. The spare mussel in the moules marinieres. One big willy-less disappointment.*

*Wolf had a traffic light system. If her eyes changed from green to amber you were in potential trouble, if they glowed red, it was wise to make a run for it. She also operated a class system at the compound, and we were relegated to the lower realms. Me and Georgie hovered between fifth and sixth place in the pecking order, depending on who had given Wolf the most migraines during the week. Either way, we were both at the bottom. We sailed in the same boat. When Georgie was a puppy, she had been called George until Wolf realised the mutt had arrived missing some important components of a roast dinner, and she was given to me as a companion. Small and scared, neither of us were house-trained. We wet ourselves daily. My stretch went on for longer than Georgie's. She was smarter than me.*

*Like the chicken and the egg, I don't know which had come first, lack of understanding or fear. Sometimes I simply forgot because I was concentrating on something so hard. I wet myself when I was scared, I wet myself during the night, I wet myself when I was too worried to ask if I could go to the toilet. I just couldn't get it right. Wolf removed my soiled knickers, grabbed the back of my head and rubbed them vigorously into my face, leaving me with the smell of urine in my nostrils. It was worse during the winter when it was cold, and on a really bad day, it was my woollen tights, followed by a slap on chilled bare legs. Georgie received the same punishment, but being a dog and not wearing any pants, her nose was rubbed into the wet patch on the carpet. That was when I had my light bulb moment and partially solved the suffocation by piss, when I realised what Drunk Auntie meant by all fur coat and no knickers, and I started hiding my wet shreddies in the Ali Baba laundry basket amongst all the other washing.*

*'Wolf doesn't like girls, and she doesn't like us,' I said to Georgie one day when I was laying on the floor, having one of my deep thinks. I held her paw and told her we had to move out. 'You take one bite of Wolf or Monkey, and you are toast, my friend.'*

*Georgie laid her head on my knee, and I ruffled her teddy bear fur. She looked towards Monkey's bedroom. It had become her daily mission to terrorise my older sister. We had to find someone who would take both of us and I knew just the place. I had discovered that the woman behind the counter where Wolf collected her special headache tablets lived at the end of our road, and she was praying for a baby. I had listened intently to her conversation with Wolf, who was smiling as she buttoned up her sheepskin coat. I wanted to know the criteria. It turned out, Glenda and David were hoping for a girl.*

*'Wouldn't you prefer a little boy?' Wolf had asked her. 'Boys are so sweet and much easier.'*

*'We don't really mind as long as they're healthy,' Glenda said.*

*Wolf shrugged.*

*Before we left the shop, Glenda handed me a lollipop. I. Was. In.*

*‘Do you like dogs, I asked her when she leant forward and squeezed my chin.’ Glenda smelt of cigarettes, perfume and mints. I loved her immediately.*

*‘I do, and we have a dog at home,’ she replied.*

*‘A friend for Georgie,’ I said. In my head I had already chosen some wallpaper for my new bedroom.*

*‘She’s talking about our dog,’ Wolf said to a puzzled Glenda. ‘Another thing I have to look after,’ she added.*

*Glenda had kind blue eyes touched by her smile. No sign of traffic lights. She brushed my cheek with her soft hand. ‘You’re very lucky. She’s a sweet little thing.’*

*I looked up at Wolf, who shrugged, and rolled her eyes. ‘She can be, when it suits her,’ Wolf said. We left and as I tried to keep up with Wolf’s quick strides, I turned to mouth something to Glenda, but she was serving another customer.*

*I stumbled, yanking Wolf’s hand. ‘Look where you’re going,’ she snarled. ‘Come on, I need to get back.’*

*I never knew why we had to return to the compound so quickly, but Wolf said it every time she stepped outside the place.*

*Georgie and I made it to Glenda’s twice before the door of the compound was reinforced with a chain. ‘She tells such stories,’ Wolf had tinkled to Glenda’s frowning face, as she hauled me and Georgie down the garden path. ‘What on earth will people think!?’ She roared at me when we were out of earshot.*

*I looked around, but I couldn’t see any people.*

*‘What are we going to do now?’ I asked Georgie that weekend, banished to my bedroom forever. She tipped her head back and began to howl. I clamped my hand around her muzzle, and me and the muffled hostage began to think hard about our next escape route.*

*As if by magic, Big Bear peered his head around my bedroom door. ‘Birdy, get your shoes on, we’re going out. Bring the mutt.’*

NANNA

*It was Monkey who snitched on me. 'She stinks,' she blurted.*

*I hid behind Rabbit, closed my eyes tight shut and braced myself. A soft hand gently tugged me free, and I was led into a bathroom with a big green broad bean of a toilet.*

*I took my wet trousers and knickers off, held them out to Nanna, took a big deep breath and waited, murky clouds hovering above me, threatening to flood my mind.*

*Being spontaneous, Big Bear had decided on that Saturday night to take Wolf to the pictures. We didn't visit Nanna that often and I'd certainly never stayed there before, so I was unsure how to navigate the toilet. Georgie had been a goodie two shoes and peed outside the moment we stepped out of the car.*

*I exhaled and took another deep breath, waiting for the knicker gag, but nothing happened. I could hear running water and spied through one eye Nanna swishing bubbles in it. I flinched when I felt her hand on my arm. 'Let's get the rest of your clothes off, there's a good girl.'*

*Nanna washed me in the bath, gave me a foam beard which made us both laugh before she dried me with a towel that smelt of flowers, and dressed me in the pyjamas I'd been sent with. Then she sat me on her lap by the fire where I stared at the flames, mesmerised and calm in her presence of blues and oranges.*

*'Where's The Old Man?' I said, staring at the empty sunken chair opposite. I'd heard Big Bear say it after our last visit.*

*'Your granddad? He's in the pub, just down the road. You'll be snuggled up in bed before he gets home.'*

*'Where am I going to sleep?'*

*'Do you want me to show you?'*

*I nodded and followed Nanna into the hallway, cold in contrast to the heat from the blaze in the sitting room. She led me up the stairs, and Georgie ran up ahead. I tried to stay on the bobbly green carpet running up the middle as I stared at the large roses that overlapped the wallpaper and I imagined you could collapse in. I reached my hand out to check but thought better of it. Wolf didn't like us touching the walls in the compound, and we dodged it like cracks on a pavement.*

*Georgie sat on the landing, waiting for us, head cocked to one side.*

*Nanna showed me the two bedrooms neatly made up for the three of us. In one, there were twin beds separated by a small table with a lamp on the top, and a single in the other. They were neat and covered in woollen blankets.*

*'Can I sleep with Rabbit?' I asked her, suddenly panicked that I might be forced in with Monkey who was fond of putting a pillow over my face.*

*'Yes, you two are in the twin. Monkey is in the other room.'*

*At the mention of her name, Monkey appeared, breathless from rushing up the stairs. 'I want the best bedroom, Nanna,' she said.*

*'You're in your usual room.'*

*'Good,' Monkey replied, and descended the stairs. Always checking I wasn't stealing anything she had before I had dared to prick the world with my presence.*

*'Where do you sleep?' I asked her.*

*'In here.' Nanna pushed the final door open, and we stepped into a room with a carved wooden bed with a lumpy mattress. There was a pretty wardrobe with two ornate knobs that I immediately ran over to touch, quickly turning to make sure Nanna wasn't cross with me, but she was smiling. Next to the cupboard was a chest of drawers with a shiny swirly wood surface.*

*'Who is that?' I pointed to a photo of a woman in a silver frame. A soft, wide smile and a kind face filled the picture.*

*'That's your auntie. Daddy's sister. There's more of her in the photo album if you'd like to see it?'*

*My eyes were the size of plates. 'Can I?'*

*'Come on,' Nanna smiled, 'let's go downstairs.'*

*'Will you read me a story?' I asked her.*

*'Yes, when you get into bed.'*

*Back in the sitting room, I leant against Nanna on the sofa. She opened a large heavy leather-bound book. Faces jumped forth. People, some of them strangers to me, had a familiarity that I didn't feel with Wolf's family.*

*'That's Auntie from upstairs,' I mumbled around my thumb.*

*'Yes, love. And do you know something? Your Daddy named you after her. Isn't that something special,' she said, tickling me under the chin.*

*'Why?' I asked.*

*'Because she's dead, you dummy!' Monkey shouted from the table where she was doing a jigsaw with Rabbit. I felt Nanna flinch.*

*'You wouldn't talk like that if your Granddad was here,' Nanna said to her in a low voice.*

*'Don't be rude,' Rabbit scolded Monkey, who stuck her tongue out in response.*

*'Is she really dead?' I asked Nanna, quietly.*

*'Yes, love.'*

*I offered her Pink Elephant and linked my arm through hers, thinking about my name belonging to someone else. Did she look like me? Did I look like her? If I had her name now, what would she be called? I wasn't quite sure of the finality of death. When Wolf's granny had died, Big Bear had*

*said the old bag had finally expired. When I had asked him what it meant, he said her heart had stopped. Several “whys” later and I had worked out she had lost the tick in her tock and stopped breathing.*

*‘Can we go and see her?’*

*‘That can be arranged,’ Monkey sniggered.*

*‘No, sweetheart.’*

*‘Why?’*

*‘When people die, they go somewhere else, and we’re parted from them for a while. It’s just the way of things.’*

*‘Do you know where?’*

*‘No, love. It’s one of life’s mysteries.’*

*‘Is it a bit like Grandad being in the pub? I’ve never been there, have I, and I don’t know where it is?’*

*Nanna laughed. ‘Yes, it’s a bit like that.’*

*‘You’re so stupid,’ Monkey said.*

*I stuck two fingers up at her, and Nanna gently lowered my hand. I had seen Big Bear do it to Wolf, and I knew it was bad because it only happened when her back was turned, and he would signal for me to keep quiet if he saw me looking.*

*We were quiet for a while and I traced my finger around the faces of people I had never met, but somehow knew.*

*‘Nanna?’ I whispered, releasing my grip and sitting up to look at her.*

*‘Yes?’*

*'I think Georgie needs a wee wee,' I said, the usual dark purple panic beginning to rise within me.*

*'Does she? Let's take Georgie to the toilet, then,' Nanna said, getting up from the sofa and guiding me to the bathroom. I waited for the tuts and huffs, but none came.*

*'You're a good girl for letting me know.'*

*'Not when Mum sees her piss wet clothes. She says she's sick to death of you,' Monkey blurted, sighing gleefully before putting a puzzle piece into the jigsaw and hammering it down with her fist. 'You are in so much trouble.'*

*'That doesn't go there!' Rabbit shouted, reaching across to remove it.*

*'Am I?' I asked Nanna, the fuzziness of fear spreading around my stomach.*

*'That's enough,' Nanna said, firmly. 'She is not in any trouble at all. And there'll be no more of that kind of talk.'*

*'I'm going to tell on you!' Monkey sang, waving another puzzle piece around theatrically.*

*'Hey!' Rabbit grabbed it from her. 'That belongs to the part I'm doing.'*

*'No one is going to say anything about anyone, is that clear? We all have accidents, there's no shame in it. Her clothes will be clean and dry by the morning, and your mother will be none the wiser.'*

*I stuck my tongue out at Monkey who was scowling now.*

*At bedtime, while Nanna was reading a story from a book of fairy tales that reminded me of Wolf. I searched her sparkling blue eyes, the soft down on her face framed by silver curls. She smelt of clean and cooking and orange.*

*'Nanna?'*

‘Yes, love?’

‘Who are you?’ I whispered.

She laughed. ‘I’m your dad’s mum. Your grandmother.’

‘I know, but who are you when you’re up and dressed?’

Nanna laughed again, but louder this time. ‘Faith,’ she said, eventually.

I whispered the word back to myself, my head filling with flowers made of tiny fried eggs.

‘Do you like dogs?’ I asked Nanna as I drifted off to sleep.

*Prue slammed the cover and turned the book over to read the blurb on the back. Habit made her reach for the pendant that was still hanging around her neck, running it backwards and forwards along the gold chain. Lies. All lies. As she read on, Prue’s chin creased, then her mouth, followed by her nose, pushing her brows together and finally her forehead. The disapproving wrinkle quite possibly continued over the top of her head and down to her neck, but it was hidden beneath her bleached blonde helmet of hair. She turned towards Arthur to tell him about it, but of course, he wasn’t there. She didn’t understand what The Narcissist’s Prayer was all about or who it referred to. Maybe it was Arthur? He was an important man, had a successful career, but she’d never had him down as a narcissist, although, she knew it was common amongst businessmen. And the dog. Why had Birdy brought that up? The past should stay in the past, was Prue’s belief. What good could come of digging up family business.*

*The synopsis had said it was about a child with neurodiversity, whatever that meant. What did that have to do with the necklace? The dedication also baffled Prue. She had never referred to Arthur as Big Bear. Birdy, as far as Prue was concerned, had cut herself off from the family and they hadn’t heard anything from her for a couple of years now. Even when Prue had indirectly made it known that Arthur was ill, there had been no word from her. It was wicked*

*what Birdy had done to this family. Wicked, Prue thought to herself now, as she had done hundreds of times over the last few years, refusing to peek behind the word to see why her daughter might have made such a choice. Face forward, she told herself. Don't keep raking over all that has been said and done.*

*She turned the book over now, removing the coat from the hardback, as though it might reveal some kind of secret, but it was plain with the title and author name embossed on the spine in gold. How pretentious, she thought. Dance Little Liar. How true that was. Inside, she found photographs she didn't even know Birdy had copies of. Pictures of her through the ages of her childhood, and ones of Arthur and his parents, but strikingly, Prue couldn't find any of herself. She flicked the pages like a deck of cards until she reached the acknowledgements. That would tell her everything she needed to know, she thought, smugly. She was confused to find gratitude to a counsellor, several psychologists, two psychiatrists, a surgeon and a GP, a publisher and literary agent. No one else. No list of friends, and of course, a complete lack of family. Birdy no longer had any, that was why. A warm satisfaction crept over Prue at the sudden thought. A deep, comforting pleasure that she kept to herself. It was just as she had suspected. Birdy was alone and serve her right. It was exactly what she deserved. Prue had often warned her about laying in the bed she'd made.*

*Prue heaved herself from her own bed, creeping downstairs to fetch her iPad and make herself a cup of coffee. The house would be quiet for a couple of hours. Plenty of time to research the so-called medical people listed. After that, she would start reading, making notes as she went along, just in case she had to compile a letter to anyone.*

*The first task took half an hour, and Prue decided anyone could get a certificate and call themselves a doctor these days. It was of no consequence. Eager to read and find out what libelous lies Birdy had written, Prue began her latest campaign in earnest.*

## STRANGWAYS

*'I'm five,' I said to Drunk Auntie.*

*'Even so, you should be able to spell by now. I was writing books at your age,' she said, leaning forward so much I was surprised she was still attached to the chair. She finished her cigarette and stubbed it into the heavy glass ashtray on the table. She smelt of deep, spicy perfume, smoke and talcum powder. An air of swirly purples and heavy pinks.*

*'What sort of books?'*

*'Filthy ones.'*

*I frowned and Wolf laughed.*

*'Look, watch me,' she said, taking the pencil from my hand. 'You've got the s the wrong way round. And fairies, has one r not two.'*

*I placed one foot on top of the other and swung from side to side, the usual tumbling sensation stirring my insides as I watched her rewrite my letter back to front. It really wasn't worth twenty pence. They could have the stinking tooth. It had a hole in it anyway.*

*'Where are the others?' I asked, wondering where my loud-as-bright-glass cousins were.*

*Drunk Auntie sighed. 'You have the attention span of a gnat, Birdy. I told you, they're all at birthday parties.'*

*'She's like that with everything,' Wolf said from her kitchen lair. 'I wouldn't bother wasting your breath or your time.'*

*I smiled at Drunk Auntie, expecting her to get up and walk away, but she lit another cigarette. 'Fetch me a top up, there's a good girl.'*

*I picked up her glass and took it to Wolf. 'You can see I'm busy.' She snapped.*

*I stared at the pineapple and cheese on toothpicks. There were small sausages too, and I wondered what was in them, reminded of what Drunk Auntie had told me about Wolf.*

*I placed the glass on the side, and carefully filled it to the brim and carried it back to Drunk Auntie, my hand cupped beneath it to catch the spillage.*

*'There, that's better.' Drunk Auntie handed me my letter. She had written her own version on the back in spidery words that I couldn't read.*

*I stared at it and picked at the skin on my bottom lip. 'What are filthy books?'*

*'Never you mind,' Wolf shouted from her lair.*

*'They're rude,' Drunk Auntie whispered. 'Tits, bums and willies, that kind of thing.'*

*I nodded, distracted by an idea of my own. 'Can you show me how to spell Joanna Lumley?'*

*'Why do you want to know that?'*

*'She's been obsessed with Joanna Lumley since Arthur mentioned he had a crush on her,' Wolf said. 'He probably wishes he'd married her instead of me.'*

*I gave myself whiplash looking at Wolf. 'Does he?'*

*'Probably.' Wolf was snippy. 'He has a photograph of her in his office at work.'*

*'And I thought my brother-in-law had bad taste,' Drunk Auntie said quietly, winking at me. She squeezed me closer. 'Do you want me to help you write a fan letter?'*

*'Yes please!'*

*'I tell you what. I'll write it, and then you can copy it out.'*

*'Do you know where she lives?'*

*'No, but we can find out where to send it. She'll have an agent or something. I know all about that kind of thing,' she said, waving her hand around. 'What do you want to say to her?'*

*'Is she married and does she like dogs,' I said, immediately, lifting like a balloon.*

*'Okay. What else? You need to ask her something original. Something no one else has asked her. You want your letter to stand out above the rest. It's the best way to get a reply.'*

*I picked my lip and thought hard. Questions tumbled out onto my fingers. 'How many bedrooms does she have? Does she like Fuzzy Felt? Does she prefer Barbie or Cindy? And, do I have to go to school?'*

*Drunk Auntie laughed. 'Some of the chairs in your attic have been kicked over, kid.' She prodded me in the stomach with the pencil. Wolf laughed.*

*'We don't have any chairs in the attic,' I said, holding my breath as I watched her write Dear Joanna Lumley at the top of the page. All I needed now was an envelope and a stamp, and I could get those from Wolf's forbidden desk.*

*'A Bonbon short of a selection box, you are,' Drunk Auntie said.*

*'What does that mean?'*

*'Stupid,' Wolf added, laughing harder now.*

*'No, I'm not,' I said, indignantly. 'Mrs Snake said I was top of the class with my reading.'*

*'Don't tell fibs, Birdy. She said no such thing,' Wolf quickly retorted. 'You're such a little liar.'*

*According to Wolf, every word I uttered was a lie. Recollections of school, days out, conversations, general happenings around the house were all made up by me. It either hadn't happened or she couldn't remember. When I was told anything, I had taken to pinching myself and replaying the memory in my head to prove to myself it was real and had most definitely happened. I made a note of my surroundings, sounds, smells, people, so that I could hang the memory on its own hook.*

*Drunk Auntie pulled me towards her, so I was leaning against her knees. 'You get it from her side of the family,' she whispered, nodding towards Wolf, 'they're not very clever, but at least you're pretty. You have your looks. You get that from your dad's side. Looks are everything. It's all that matters when you're a girl.'*

*I didn't like Wolf's family, and I didn't want to be compared to them. They were mean and did mean things.*

*Monkey wandered in. Her eyes fixed on her King Kong game. I was under threat of execution if I ever touched it or even dared look at it.*

*'You're pretty,' I said to Drunk Auntie, 'does that mean you're stupid?'*

*Drunk Auntie leant her head back and laughed a big steel drum.*

*'Uh oh, you're in trouble,' Monkey said.*

*'What have I told you about being rude?' Wolf appeared at the table, leaning over to top up Drunk Auntie's wine glass, overshadowing me like a black cloak. She had this knack of moving quietly around the compound.*

*'I walked right into that one,' Drunk Auntie said, still laughing.*

*'Apologise, right now,' Wolf said, glaring a red mist down on me.*

*Blushing and fearful, I looked at Drunk Auntie. 'Sorry,' I said, quietly, although, I was uncertain what I had said that was rude.*

*'It's fine, honey. A perfectly reasonable question to ask.'*

*'I've asked her not to speak to people that way. She knows it's naughty.'*

*'She's only little. Leave her be,' Drunk Auntie said, gently.*

*I stared at the pen she was holding, hovering over my potential one-way fare, willing her to finish it.*

*'Oh, honey, you should go and change.' Drunk Auntie gestured to my trousers where a wet patch was seeping across the front. Nervous and engrossed in what we were doing, I had forgotten to go to the toilet.*

*'Not again!' Wolf shouted, grabbing my hand. 'What is the matter with you!? Get upstairs.'*

*'Don't,' Drunk Auntie said, resting her hand on Wolf's arm.*

*Wolf ignored her and I was led away to face the inevitable.*

*Afterwards, I sat outside and hid in between the shrubs by the shed. From the roses I stared up at the unfamiliar house while I rubbed the soft, fluffy tips of Georgie's ears. I could see Wolf moving around her kitchen lair, her face stern, reloaded with a steel trap full of anger. Drunk Auntie leant against the worktop, arms folded, her mouth moving animatedly. Voices were raised, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. Upstairs, I could see the crown of Rabbit's head where she was seated at her desk, bent over her books, studying for exams. Monkey was on the back step playing with her King Kong again, her face set like Wolf's. Two peas from the fucked-up pod.*

*'Who are these people?' I whispered to Georgie. Her eyes turned to me and then back to the house, her front paws shifting and settling in the dirt. Caramel and pink filled the air around me,*

*and I leant into her thick fur, calming. I tugged at some rose petals and put them in my plastic bowl. Me and Georgie were making perfume that we planned to bottle and sell around the neighbourhood.*

*Big Bear came into view, his long Daddy legs stretching out beneath the garden table. He was concentrating but absent, lost in a world far away from here. His brother, Uncle Bear, was sitting next to him, outstretched in the same way, dozing and chatting in the sun. I warmed at the sight of them both. Two of the three bears. The only ones I recognised – we were the zebras mixed in with the hyenas. I felt homesick, and I didn't know why. I was home, but it wasn't somewhere familiar. These people were not my people, and I began to wonder where my people had disappeared to. Were they the zebras or, was my family somewhere else wondering where I was.*

*'Maybe,' I said to Georgie, the idea jolting me upright, 'I'm Dorothy and you're Toto. Yes! That could be it. We've been blown into the wrong family.' I had recently watched The Wizard of Oz and pointed and stared at the screen in shock when I thought I saw Wolf cycling past the window, but Rabbit said it wasn't her, and it would probably be best if I didn't mention it. I rewound it and watched it twenty-three times, the score playing in my head for days.*

*Georgie let out a small whine. Monkey had moved from the step, and Georgie liked to keep the enemy in her sights, much like I did.*

*'There's a witch in that story, too. . .' I whispered. We both looked up at the kitchen window. 'Georgie, I think we've cracked it. We've landed in the wrong garden.'*

*Georgie looked at me, earnestly, and then quickly back at the house for any sign of Monkey.*

*I was warming to this idea. 'Big Bear has lost his memory, and he doesn't know he's in the wrong house. We must tell him, Georgie,' I said, determined that Big Bear would fix it all the*

*moment he knew. I tipped the watering can over the rose bowl and stirred it, knowing deep down it was a load of bollocks.*

*Bored with the idea of making perfume, I used the rosewater to wash the piss off my face, the scent refreshing and white clean.*

*‘Hello!?’*

*Me and Georgie looked around, momentarily confused. Then we heard it again, but we couldn’t see anyone, and Georgie began to growl. Big Bear and Uncle Bear were chatting and laughing with Drunk Auntie who had joined them, Wolf was still in the kitchen lair, and it didn’t sound like Monkey’s voice.*

*‘Hello! I can see you, but you can’t see me. I’m over here, behind the wall.’*

*I stood up and looked around. Georgie ran to the side of the garage and started barking. Two green eyes were visible through the patterned holes in the brick wall, then they disappeared. I heard scuffling and a girl appeared over the wall. She had the blackest hair I’d ever seen, freckles, bright green eyes, and a gap in her front teeth just like me.*

*‘You’re so lucky to have a dog! What’s his name?’*

*‘Georgie, and she’s a girl,’ I said. ‘Who are you?’*

*‘I’m Brooke. What’s your name?’*

*A bag of marbles rolled around my mouth as I whispered her name to myself. A kicking K that no one apart from me understood was back to front. ‘I’m Birdy,’ I said.*

*‘That’s a cute name.’*

*She sounded like someone off the telly. My mind still in the narrative I had been pondering over, I asked her, ‘Are you from Kansas? Have you come to collect me?’*

*‘You’re funny. Do you wanna come over?’*

*'I'm not allowed. I pissed my pants,' I said, trying on her American accent. 'Do you know what filthy books are?'*

*'No. Is it the same as dirty magazines?'*

*I shrugged. 'I guess so,' I said, looking up and shading my eyes from the sun.*

*'My dad has loads of them. I can show you, if you wanna hang out?'*

*Who the hell was Drunk Auntie? Big Bear? Since when had Birdy referred to Arthur as anything other than Dad. And since when had she served up anything so common as nibbles on sticks, thought Prue. She only did things like that if she was annoyingly asked to produce something for a community group.*

*So far, it was just a load of fantastical, whimsical nonsense. Exactly the kind of thing she expected from Birdy.*