

'Beautiful, sensitive, and full of warmth.' Zillah Bethell

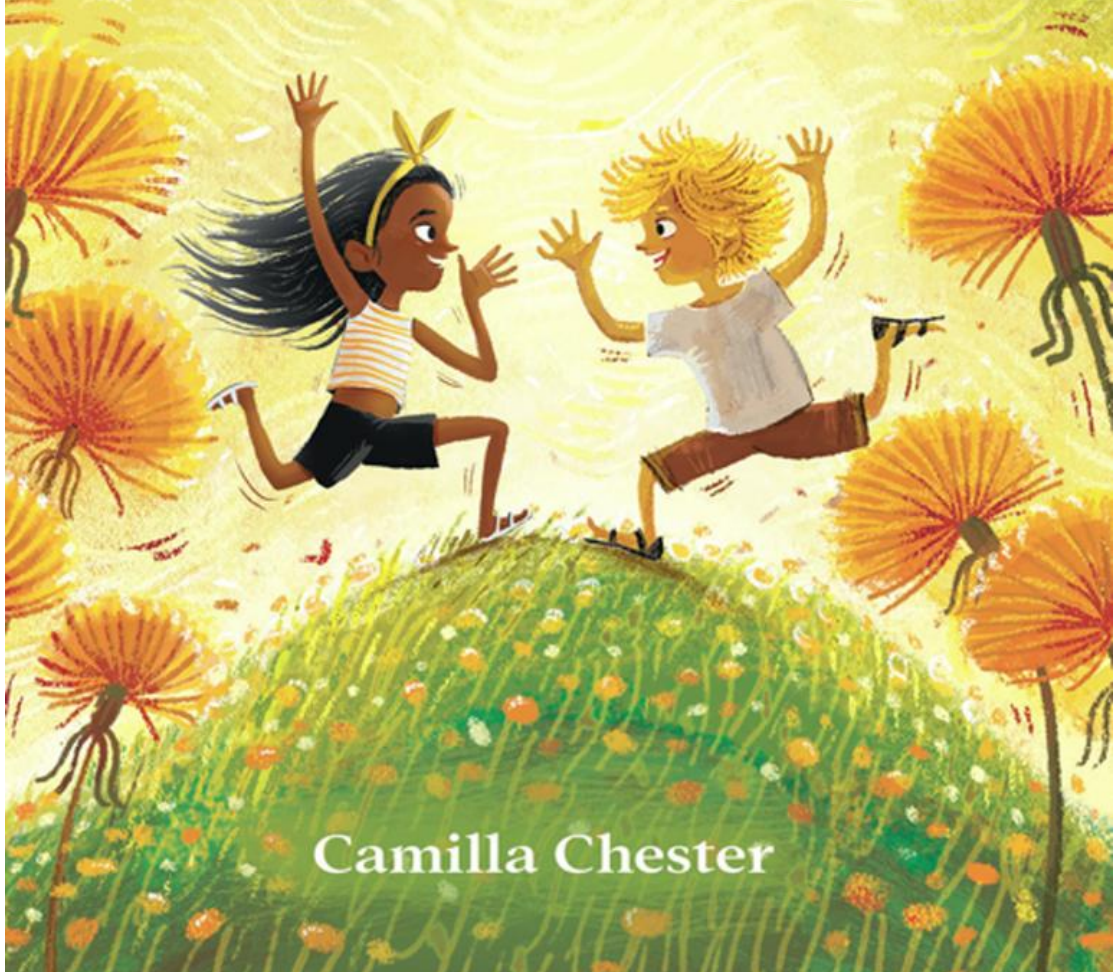
Call Me LION



Camilla Chester

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In memory of James John Redrup,
a lover of lions.
1989 - 2014

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1



Even though my trampoline is in the shade, the heatwave makes it too hot for bouncing. I bounce anyway because when you have no friends in the summer holidays there's nothing else to do.

'Hello!'

It's a girl's voice. It comes with a body and a grinning face that bobs up and down behind the third fence panel along. The new neighbours must have a trampoline exactly in line with ours. It feels like an invasion.

'I'm Richa,' says the girl and waves when she's at her highest. Her hair is black and long. It stays in the air after she falls, like an exclamation mark above her head.

The urge to run and hide is strong, but I force myself to keep bouncing.

My dog, Patch, gets up and sticks his nose under the fence. His tail wags really fast and he makes a 'hello' whine.

Richa notices him when she's up above the fence. She points and says, 'You've got a dog! I love dogs, but my stupid brother Aahan is allergic. He's a totally useless three year old who cries and moans and carries on and on about nothing.' Richa's voice is hot and puffy. It goes

quiet and loud depending on where she is in the air. She sounds like she's from somewhere different. Not Luton. 'I'm ten,' she goes on. 'How old are you? What's your dog called?'

She's good at bouncing. She's good at talking. She has long, thin arms that waggle about streaked with sun cream, and bare feet. Like everyone she wears shorts and a vest top. Because of the heatwave all clothes make you boiling hot. The only shoes people wear are flip-flops or sandals.

One of the back windows of Richa's house opens wider. A woman, who is probably Richa's mum, leans out and speaks a whole load of words in another language.

There are lots of kids from all over the world at my school. My guess is that Richa's mum is speaking in Gujarati, because she speaks just like Rama in Chestnut Class and his family are from Gujarat in India.

If I could talk, it might be a question I would ask Richa, but I will never ask a question to a stranger. It's hard enough just to keep bouncing and not run away, and I can only look at Richa when she isn't looking at me.

Richa shouts back in one big rush. She says three words in English: 'roasting', 'bouncing' and 'dog'. Their conversation carries on, sounding crosser all the time until Richa stops it by saying, 'na, na' and bouncing around so that her back is turned to the window.

'She wants to slam the window shut to show she's angry with me,' Richa explains, 'but it's way too boiling hot for closed windows. She'll shut the curtains all huffy instead.'

Boiling and roasting are words that everyone uses. We know the heatwave is cooking us all, like sausages.

'Mum says it's hotter than India,' Richa says, still bouncing. 'She's grumpy because we've had to move house and she's really, really, *really* pregnant. I hope it's a girl.' She looks me up and down between bounces and

adds, 'No offence. Not all boys are bad, but I do-not-want-another-brother!' Richa says the last bit up into the sky with her hands in prayer.

She bounces a bit more, watching me, then says, 'Do you have any brothers or sisters? You don't say much. Don't you talk? Why don't you talk?'

It's amazing to me that Richa can say all these words. If I was a boy that could speak, these would be my answers to her questions:

1. My name is Leo, but the people I can talk to call me Lion. I can count all of their names on one hand.
2. I'm ten too. Just had my birthday party with my family. It was OK, and nothing like Theo's party at *RollerCentral* where I froze like a statue and everybody stared at me. That was the worst time of my entire life.
3. My dog is called Patch because he is brown and white but has a big black patch over his right eye and ear. It makes him look like a dog-pirate. I can talk to Patch. He is my only one true friend. What I would like more than anything in the whole world is a real friend, but you can't be friends with someone who can't talk - fact.
4. I have a big brother called Ryan who is seventeen and sprays stuff all over his body that makes the back of my throat go dry. Brianne is my sister; she is sixteen and wears floaty skirts and scarves and wants to be a physicist. Brianne and Ryan argue all the time.
5. No, I don't say much. I want to talk but I can't.

2



Richa doesn't seem bothered that I can't answer any of her questions. She keeps chatting and bouncing and asking me things.

The worry that Richa is there eases and I stop wanting to run away and hide. It starts to get fun, despite the heat. I like the whoosh of air lifting my hair, the roar in my ears and the light feeling in my body.

Bouncing is good, but not as free as dancing. I go to dance class once a week and Just Jive, my summer dance school, starts on Monday. Three brilliant weeks of dancing. Last year there was a Just Jive show. I really wanted to perform but my Selective Mutism stopped me. The thought of the class and my fun teacher, Felicity Delaware, makes me do dance-jumps.

I jump in a big star and a pogo stick. I do a scissor kick, and a lightning bolt.

As I dance-jump Richa stops talking. I'd got almost used to her chattering away. I twist jump to face her. She twists too, matching my move. We jump, facing each other, perfectly in sync. I try a star and she copies me, stretching her arms and legs out wide. Next, I jump a superman; Richa mimics me, her right arm straight up,

fist tightly clenched. She matches a couple of straight jumps, then a quick-tuck. Both our knees are hugged tight into our chests. There's a good feeling inside me.

She laughs. 'I'm as quick as you. My turn!'

I copy a few of Richa's straight 'jump into the swimming pool' style bounces, arms clamped tight to our sides. Then I copy her back-leg flick and a knee-bounce.

It's fun.

She pokes out her tongue, I copy. I wave my arms in the air above my head, she copies. She makes floppy bunny ears, I copy. She goes crazy, freestyle, wobbly mad and does lots and lots of bounces. She keeps laughing and laughing and saying, 'That's not the same. You got it wrong.'

I grin and almost laugh. This is the most fun I've had with anyone who can't call me Lion in a long time, maybe ever.

After a lot of different bounces and dance moves, Richa flops onto her belly on her trampoline. I have to bounce up high to see her.

'I'm too hot,' she complains. 'There's only boring water in our house. And it's all warm from the tap. No ice. We've not got the freezer bit of the fridge working properly yet.' She rolls onto her back, squints her eyes against the glaring sun above and announces, 'I'm coming over to your house.'

Panic stops my bouncing. Out of rhythm, the trampoline bullies me, bumping me to my knees and flat onto my belly. I hear Richa call up to the open window, probably telling her mum in Gujarati where she's going. Her mum leans out again and looks over our fence.

She says, 'Alright with you?' to me, her Indian accent heavy. I see the top of her belly all stretched with baby.

'He doesn't talk, Ma,' Richa shouts up.

'What?'

Richa answers her in Gujarati. Her mum answers back.