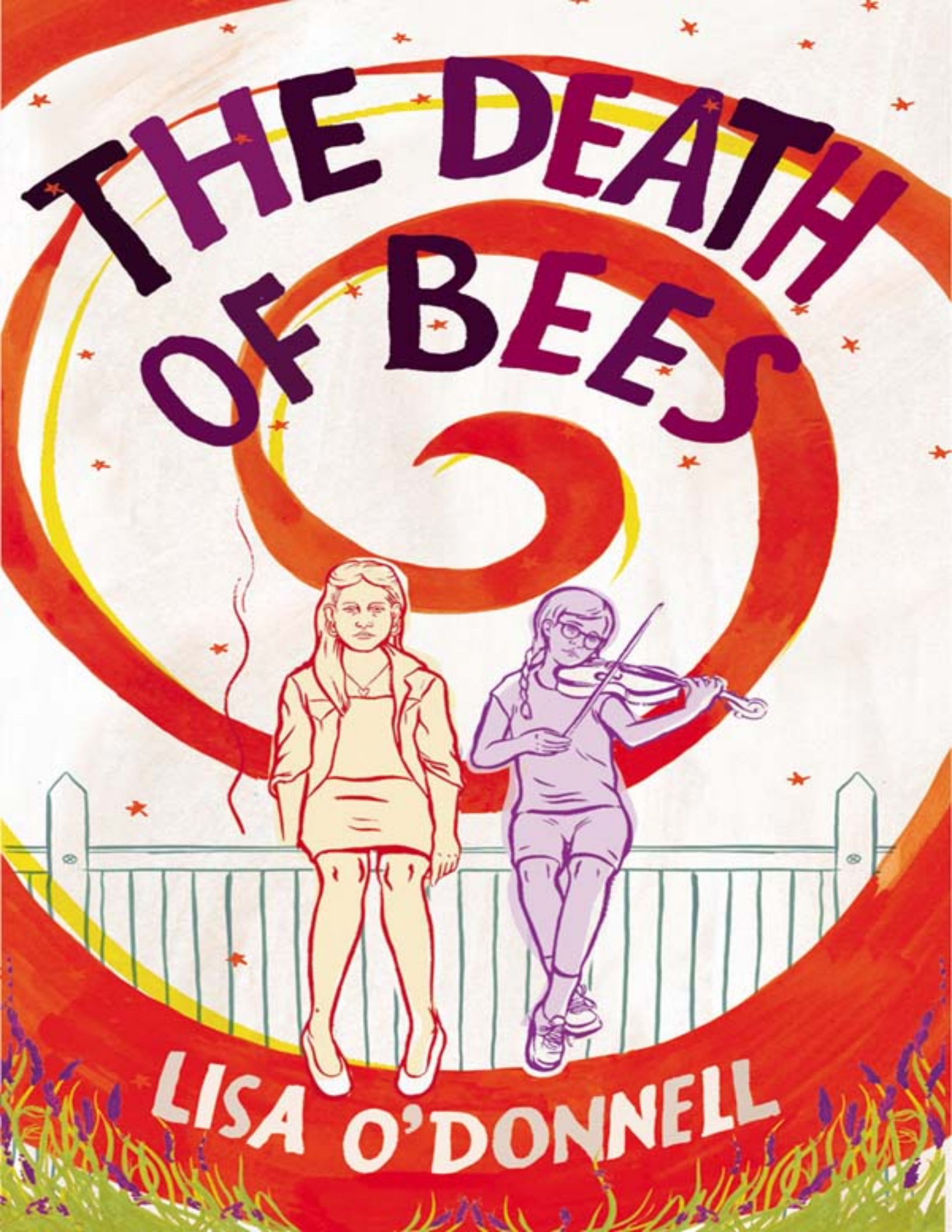


THE DEATH OF BEES



LISA O'DONNELL

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Acknowledgements

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About the Book

'I'm Marnie. Too young to smoke, too young to drink, too young to fuck, but who would have stopped me?'

Hazlehurst housing estate, Glasgow, Christmas Eve 2010. 15-year-old Marnie and her little sister Nelly have just finished burying their parents in the back garden. Only Marnie and Nelly know how they got there. Lennie, the old guy next door, has taken a sudden interest in his two young neighbours and is keeping a close eye on them. He soon realises that the girls are all alone, and need his help - or does he need theirs?

As the year ends and another begins, the sisters' friends, their neighbours, and the authorities - not to mention the local drug dealer, who's been sniffing around for their father - gradually start to ask questions. And as one lie leads to another, darker secrets about Marnie's family come to light, making things even more complicated.

Written with fierce sympathy and beautiful precision, *The Death of Bees* is an enchanting and grimly comic tale of three lost souls who, unable to answer for themselves, can answer only for each other.

About the Author

Lisa O'Donnell won the Orange Screenwriting Prize in 2000 for her screenplay *The Wedding Gift*. Recently she took a break from screenwriting when she moved to LA with her two children. *The Death of Bees* is her first novel.

Lisa O'Donnell

THE DEATH OF BEES



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

To my children Max and Christie

PROLOGUE

EUGENE DOYLE. BORN 19 June 1972. Died 17 December 2010, aged thirty-eight.

Isabel Ann Macdonald. Born 24 May 1974. Died 18 December 2010, aged thirty-six.

Today is Christmas Eve. Today is my birthday. Today I am fifteen. Today I buried my parents in the backyard.

Neither of them were beloved.

WINTER

MARNIE

IZZY CALLED ME Marnie after her mother. She's dead now, actually they're both dead. I'm just saying that's how I got it, my name. My mum had a boring name, didn't suit her at all. She was an Isabel called Izzy. She should have been a Charlie, I think of her as a Charlie. My dad had a gay name, Eugene. He never said he hated it, but I bet he did. Everyone called him Gene, but he was a bit of a Frankie, a Tommy, maybe a Mickey. My pal Kimberly gets called Kimbo, she's always getting into fights and would smack her own shadow if she thought she could catch it. Kimbo's name evolved from a slagging she got for being a total psycho and it stuck, like a warning. 'Here comes Kimbo, run for your life.'

My other pal is Susie. Her real name's Suzanne and for a long time that's what we called her, we never felt inclined to shorten it the way people do with long names, but then when we were about eleven years old she told us she didn't want to be called Suzanne any more, she wanted to be called Susie. She thought it sounded older and sexier, I suppose it does. Of course her granny still calls her Snoozy, mortifying baby name.

Then there's my sister Helen, we call her Nelly, to be honest I don't think she knows her name is Helen, she's been Nelly since she was a baby. Nell would have been cooler, but she was like Dumbo when she was born, so Nelly was a perfect fit.

Izzy said choosing my name was a nightmare; she wanted something different for me, something sophisticated that made people look twice at me, as if they'd missed something about me the first time they

looked, and so she chose her mother's name. I understand Emma was also a hot favourite, so was Martha, but Gene didn't like Emma, he said it was a weak name. He didn't like Sam either because he got dumped by a Sam. He also knew a Siobhan who got smacked by a bus when she bent down to pick up a fag end on the kerb side. Gene's favourite was Elise because of a song by The Cure but Izzy hated it, she was more of a New Order fan and I understand Elegia was discussed.

Izzy said I was tiny when I was born, a preemie rushed to the intensive care unit where I was kept in a plastic bubble for nine weeks with Gene and Izzy peering at me through Perspex glass. The safest place I've ever been. Anyway that's why I'm Marnie and not Eve or Prudence or Lucretia. I'm Marnie. Too young to smoke, too young to drink, too young to fuck, but who would have stopped me?

People think Nelly's nicer than me, but only 'cause she's off her head. She's twelve. She likes cornflakes with Coke and period dramas. She likes old movies with Bette Davis and Vivien Leigh. She likes documentaries about animals and anything to do with Harry Potter, she's obsessed with him. She also plays the violin courtesy of Sarah May Pollock, a music teacher who weeded out talent every year by forcing us to listen to recorded notes. I was never selected to play an instrument although I like to sing and can hold a tune pretty well, but it was Nelly who identified the treble clef necessary to play the piano, an instrument she boked at, drawn instead to a lone violin with a broken string lying flat on a grey Formica table. Obviously she plays brilliantly and within a short period of time Miss Pollock ended up giving her the violin for keeps, a gift last Christmas, that's how good Nelly is or how good Miss Pollock was who loved to play with her. Unfortunately Miss Pollock left the school, was replaced by Mr Charker, a trumpet man. Nelly still plays and like a master someone said and of course our school gives her a platform every

Christmas mostly to wow the Board of Governors even though the school is not advancing her in any way by hiring someone else to teach her. Not that it would make any difference when she can actually play without music. Kimbo and Susie love to hear her play, so do the neighbours and I like it too except when she pulls it out in the middle of nowhere and starts in with the Bach because she does that, on the subway sometimes, in a bookstore on Sauchiehall Street and on a bus to Wemyss Bay once. No one ever minds, 'cause she's so good but it sort of embarrasses me, her zipping away and me next to her smoking a fag like a total stranger, as if we don't belong together.

Another little foible of Nelly's is how she talks. She sounds like the Queen of England most of the time. She doesn't say mum, she says mother and she doesn't say dad, she says father. She has sentences in her head like 'What the devil's going on?' and 'What on earth's all this hullabaloo?' I've also heard her say 'confounded' and 'good golly'. Drives me nuts. Constantly having to protect her from headcases who think she's taking the piss. She also wears spectacles, round ones like Harry Potter; she's recently developed an obsession with him and wears them like they're real glasses, except they're not. Last Christmas Izzy got her a magic cloak, but she only wears it around the house and one time to take out the rubbish.

Truth is Nelly's a wee bit touched, not retarded or anything, just different. She doesn't have many friends, she doesn't laugh much and when you talk to her about something serious she gets really quiet, like she's taking it in and then rearranging it in her head. I don't know how she arranges it, I just know it's different from how I might arrange it. She also takes things very literally, so you have to be careful what you say. For instance if I said 'You're fucking mental' she'd say something like 'I can assure you, Marnie, one is perfectly sane!' I don't know why she's not dead to be honest. You can't talk like that, not in Maryhill.

Gets to you after a while, even the teachers, they can't deal with her at all. When she started Secondary School they put her in a class for total fannies, but halfway through the school year they had to take her out 'cause she's totally brainy at science. Pure Einstein stuff and then of course there's the violin. I feel sorry for her. I mean she can't help it, being how she is, it's not like she wants to say everything in her head. She can't help it, like telling the toughest girl in her year, Sharon Henry, she should wash her 'down theres' 'cause Nelly could smell her 'foulness'. Seriously. No censor. Lucky for her Shaz thought it was funny, which meant everyone else was permitted to say it was funny, even luckier, it wasn't said in front of any guys. Apparently Shaz grabbed a bar of soap and told everyone she was off to wash her 'down theres' and then simulated cleaning aforementioned unmentionables. Hysterical laughter ensued interrupted by an irate Miss Moray who wants everyone to fuck off so she can have her lunch. Now whenever any of the girls from Nelly's class walk past her they simulate washing their vaginas or ask her if she can smell fanny. Nelly doesn't get it. Tells them not to worry - 'They're perfectly sanitary.'

There's other stuff of course, like the rabid chitchat and usually about something totally random. I remember when Steve Irwin died, the reptile guy, for about a month it was the only thing she'd talk about. Steve Irwin's widow, his daughter and of course stingrays. Where stingrays live. What Stingrays look like. How to get poisoned by a stingray. You want to thump her when she gets like that.

I prefer the Harry obsession, it's quieter. When Nelly's reading, nothing exists, not even me, I love it when she's reading, I like not existing, even for an hour. I think the Harry Potter thing reminds her of Nana Lou. She read a couple of the books to her when she took care of us that time but those days are well over. We're on our own now. Izzy and Gene are dead and no one can know what we've

done with them. We'd get separated for sure, they'd put me in a home and God knows what they'd do to Nelly. Anyway I'll be sixteen in a year. They can't touch me then. I could have a baby at sixteen and get married, I'm considered an adult and legally able to take care of both of us.

I suppose I've always taken care of us really. I was changing nappies at five years old and shopping at seven, cleaning and doing laundry as soon as I knew my way to the launderette and pushing Nelly about in her wee buggy when I was six. They used to call me wee Maw around the towers, that's how useless Gene and Izzy were. They just never showed up for anything and it was always left to me and left to Nelly when she got old enough. They were never there for us, they were absent, at least now we know where they are.

NELLY

‘GOOD GOD, MOTHER, you scared the dickens out of me.’

She kissed my forehead and went to the garden. ‘Where the devil do you think you’re going? It’s freezing out.’

‘I’m fine, hen. Just need some air.’

‘Well, at least take a cardigan. You’ll catch your death out there.’

MARNIE

IZZY'S REACTION TO Gene's death was totally unexpected. She wouldn't let us call an ambulance and lay there cuddling his dead body, stroking his hair and kissing at his cheeks like she really loved him. It made me sick watching her like that.

The next day when I woke to silence I thought she might have left in the night and done a runner like she always does. Instead I found Nelly in the kitchen sucking on cornflakes and Coke. When I asked where Izzy was she nodded towards the garden. I only had a T-shirt on and it was freezing outside so I grabbed a cardigan. We have a pervert living next door and the less he sees the better, but Izzy wasn't in the garden and the shed door was open so I make a barefoot run and that's where I found her, or where Nelly must have found her before returning to her fizzy cereal. Izzy had hung herself.

When I went back to the house Nelly was still eating. I told her Izzy was dead.

'Well, that's torn it,' she said.

I explained what would happen to us if Welfare found out. She nodded. I told her we had to bury them in the garden.

'You think that's wise?' she said.

'Course it's wise, ya fucking balloon.'

Before we buried them I checked their belongings for money. Gene had half a tab and some receipts. I don't know why he kept receipts. He also had a banker's card with his PIN number 4321 written on a label stuck to the inside of his wallet. Seriously.

Izzy had a handful of change and some fags, a telephone number, some sleeping pills and some jellies. I kept the fags and tossed the pills, but then I thought I might make money from the pills so I fished them back out of the trash and sold them on. I also kept her purse. I was there when she bought it. Calvin Clone. She also had forty quid. Thank God. We would have starved otherwise 'cause there was fuck all in Gene's account.

NELLY

MARNIE MAKES ME do things I don't care for. Says all kinds of ghastly things. Dead, buried, over, but must she go on? Beastly girl.

MARNIE

GETTING GENE OFF the bed and into the garden was a living nightmare. His face was swollen as if someone had beaten the crap out of him and he was sticky, like he was leaking venom. It was coming out his eyes, his nose and his mouth. And the smell, I was gagging.

We decided to wrap him in the sheet he was lying on, we couldn't stomach the idea of touching him again, but it was soaked right through with this syrupy fluid and so we had to get another sheet and that did mean touching him again. Rubber gloves would have been useful, but we didn't have any. All we had were woollen ones so we used them instead.

Gene's flesh was literally falling off him and ripping like paper in some places. Every time we moved him he made a noise, like a fart, except wet and by the time we'd reached the top of the stairs we'd had enough and couldn't bear to hold him any longer. At one point his arm escaped, limp as a rope, Nelly tried to cover it, but she accidentally caught his hand and his fingernail came away and got stuck in the knit of her glove. She boked then and couldn't take it any more. Neither could I, so we mutually agreed to push him off the top landing and let him roll to the bottom. It was the worst thing we could have done. He burst at the seams, body fluid everywhere, on the carpet, on the walls, a swamp of poison.

'You beastly, beastly man,' says Nelly.

We had to get a wheelbarrow in the end, stole it from the next-door neighbour, then we spooned Gene off the floor and took him out back.

Izzy was already in the shed, her eyes sinking into her head and her tongue hanging out, but still, she didn't look half as bad as Gene, more bloated and less green, a sort of damp blue colour. When Nelly saw Izzy she burst into tears, then she threw up, I mean really threw up. I was on autopilot. I wanted them buried and gone. I didn't have time for tears, I knew we had a job to do and mostly I was wishing we'd got rid of them sooner and, to be honest, I don't know why we didn't.

We spent all night digging, the ground was practically frozen. It was tough to get the earth to move. We also realised there wouldn't be enough room for both of them in the grave, we'd forgotten about the earth we had to put back in the hole to actually bury them and since Gene was the smelliest of the two we decided he was to be buried first and Izzy we squashed into the coal bunker knowing she'd decompose but be accessible for the pouring of disinfectant when necessary. But a week later we had to scoop her into a bin bag and shove her under the shed because she was leaking across the cement.

Last thing we did was pour bleach over them; a lame attempt to disguise the stink they'd left behind though Nelly insisted the cold would be enough to keep the stench at bay. Then we went inside to purge what remained of Gene from the stairs, but no matter how we scrubbed we couldn't remove his stain, though we scoured until the colour left the carpet and the skin on our knuckles burned blood. That's when we decided to pull the carpet up and got a knife and ripped every inch of it from the stairs. But even with the carpet in the bin the scent of their death remained in the house.

When all was done we covered Izzy with two sacks of coal and planted lavender on top of Gene, not out of sentiment you understand, but to better hide what was buried in the earth. The saleswoman at the Garden Centre said lavender grows fastest and has a strong smell but

worried about the weather being so cold, suggested we wait till spring. She said we only needed a few bushes but they were so small we bought more. We needed to cover the grave. She also said that lavender attracts bees and not to plant it next to a door. Then she went on about how the honeybees were becoming extinct and how sad it was for the environment. Nelly was freaked by that and talked of nothing else for about a week. Eventually I had to tell her to shut the fuck up about the bees, which I felt bad about afterwards, but she was really getting on my nerves and was constantly asking questions I didn't know the answers to. I mean I was making up all kinds of shit at first, the bees have migrated, the bees are evolving into another species, but then it got too hard and my answers were scaring her, I might have said something about global warming coupled with a nonsensical end-of-the-world theory, I don't know. She just makes you feel like you have to know the answer to every fucking question she has. In the end she gets me in a corner, goes right up to my face, not even asking any more but demanding an answer, so I gave her one.

'I don't know a fucking thing about the honeybees, so stop asking,' I say.

She stopped then, hasn't mentioned the bees since, not one word, but I know she still thinks about them.

NELLY

MY FATHER, A loathsome, malignant type of a fellow, sat me on his lap in the night-time. Said he loved me.

Later I find him spent, stagnant, unclean, crumpled on an unmade bed. I find my pillow by his head and good golly Marnie had pushed it over his face.

And a good ruddy riddance to you, Eugene Doyle.

MARNIE

I LOVE MY friends. What is real to them is real to me. We don't care what people think either and we've been holding hands since our Primary School teacher told us it was the safest way to cross the road. We've been hanging together 'that' long and there's nothing we don't know about each other, maybe there's a few things, but mostly we tell each other everything.

Susie lives with her granny. Her mum's in a loony bin. Susie's going to be an actress one day, she's brilliant at acting. Goes to the drama club with all the squares, not deliberately of course, she got caught smoking in the cloakroom before Christmas and instead of getting detention she was sent to Drama Club once a week for a month, now Susie's in the school play, *Oliver Twist*. She's Nancy, has tons of songs to sing. Kimbo and I said we'd help with costumes and stuff, but only so we can hear Susie sing. It's a pretty cool musical.

Miss Fraser (failed actress in vintage clothing) wants Susie to go to drama school. She's already spoken to Susie's granny about it, but her granny wasn't having any of it.

'Actress, that'll be fucking right,' she says. 'You're cutting folk's hair. It's a job for life, hen.'

'S'not up to you!' Susie told her.

Her granny slapped her for that. 'Don't you contradict me. Fucking madam,' she says.

Susie was fuming for days, says her granny can go fuck herself, not to her face obviously, just to show us how serious she is about acting. She's even stopped smoking,

only does it when she's drunk, says it's bad for the voice; so is coffee, apparently.

Izzy told me one time Susie's mum was a nympho. Would fuck a stick in the ground. It's a shame for Susie; her mum left when Susie was really small. Truth is Susie hardly remembers her, but loves her like she's in the next room. Sometimes Susie gets scared she'll end up in a loony bin too, like it runs in the family or something, and gets really depressed about it, but with all the support she's getting from her mates and from the drama teacher you can see the confidence in her growing by the day and she's starting to seriously think about life beyond Maryhill and a life away from her mad granny, who shoplifts by the way.

Kimbo's totally different from Susie. Everyone's scared of her 'cause she's bipolar, she got diagnosed last year. Her parents, dope-smoking fiends, didn't want her taking medication if you can believe it and insisted on therapy to help her handle her emotions, but when she threw a chair through the window of the school common room it became necessary. She's put on a lot of weight recently, nasty side effect of the anti-psychotics she's taking, but apart from that they're working really well, although this one time she did go off them. She said she was feeling better and stopped taking them, but you can't do that, turns you into a psycho if you do that. She wasn't hospitalised or anything but she couldn't leave the house for a month. Susie and I prefer medicated Kimbo, everyone does, she's like Santa when she's doped, and always laughing and giving you stuff. I feel bad she's fat 'cause it's not like she's tall enough to carry it and of course she's totally deluded about it and wears clothes that are way too small for her. Before Xmas she got a bellybutton ring and it took the guy three stabs to make the hole, but she still doesn't get it and it's not like her parents are going to say anything, they worship her. Kimbo's maybe one of the few teenagers on the planet who actually likes her mum and dad. I don't blame her.

Greg and Kate are brilliant; always knock before entering and when Kimbo tells them to 'fuck off' then that's exactly what they do. If you go to Kimbo's around dinner time her mum always makes you eat with them. It's usually McDonald's. Greg and Kate love McDonald's, although there was this one time I went round and they were having macaroni and cheese with tomatoes on top. Kate made it for Greg's birthday, he's mad for it apparently. She put a flag in the middle of it. He likes flags. I'd visit them every day if I could, but they live in the penthouse and I'm scared of the elevator. Also they like to walk around butt naked and sit with their bare arses on sofas and kitchen chairs. It's like Kimbo doesn't even notice any more. Anyway that's how I know Kimbo and Susie. We lived in the same block. We were on the third floor, Susie on the first and Kimbo was on the top.

When Susie and I moved from the blocks Kimbo transferred to the same school as us, that's how close we are. Izzy hated it in the towers and was glad to be rehoused. They moved us to Maryhill on Hazelhurst Road, newest housing estate on the block. I can still remember the smell when we got here, paint and putty, but I don't go round Kimbo's any more. It's dangerous and not because of the refugees they've housed there but because of the wee radges who don't like the refugees there. Glaswegians are very territorial, even in a shit hole like Sighthill. It never occurs to them the accents around them belong to doctors and nurses, teachers and lawyers, educated people forced out of nice homes in beautiful lands only to be stored in tower blocks in the north-east of Glasgow. I mean seriously. Imagine losing everything you are and everyone you know, to have survived rape, starvation and homelessness, to have escaped death at the hands of genocidal maniacs only to end up in a mouldy housing estate. Now we have immigrants with university degrees and doctorates prostituting themselves, selling drugs and doing whatever