

Too close To Home



Sometimes you just need some SPACE

AOIFE WALSH

Contents

Cover

Also by Aoife Walsh

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Who's at home?

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Also by Aoife Walsh

Look After Me

Too
close
To
Home

AOIFE WALSH

ANDERSEN PRESS • LONDON

This ebook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorized distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781448188055

www.randomhouse.co.uk

First published in 2015 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Aoife Walsh to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

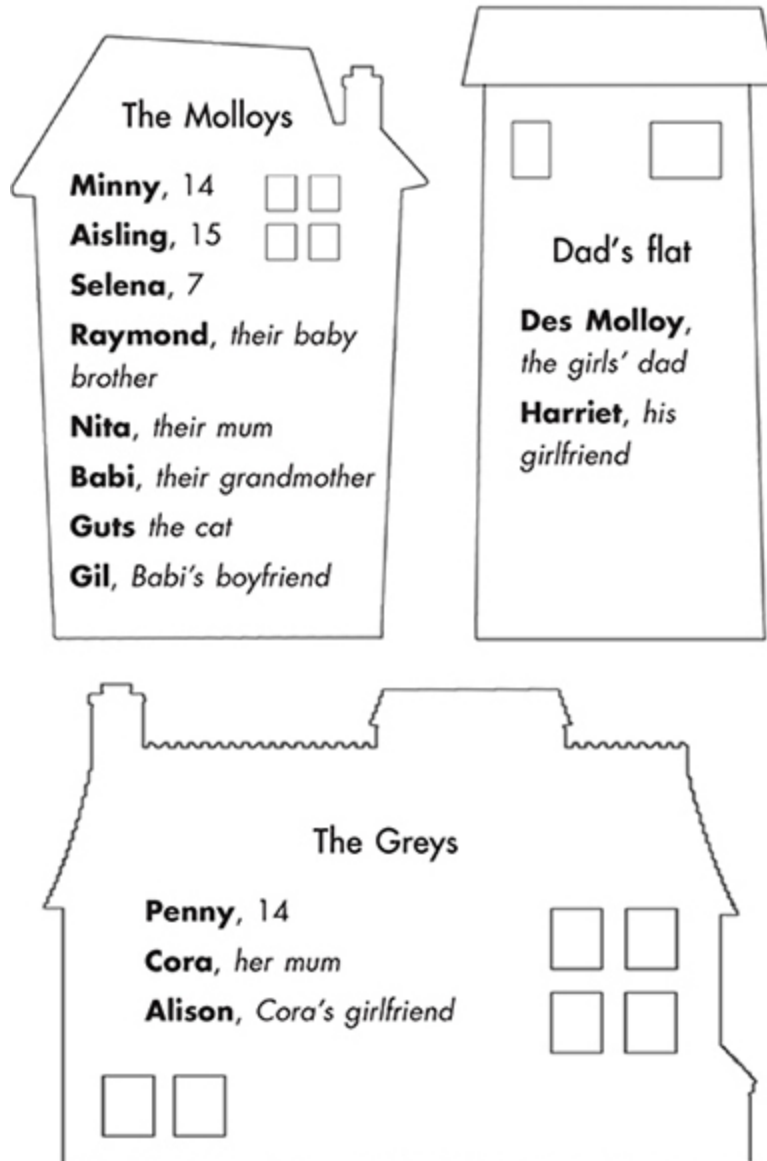
Text copyright © Aoife Walsh, 2015
Illustrations copyright © Kate Grove, 2015

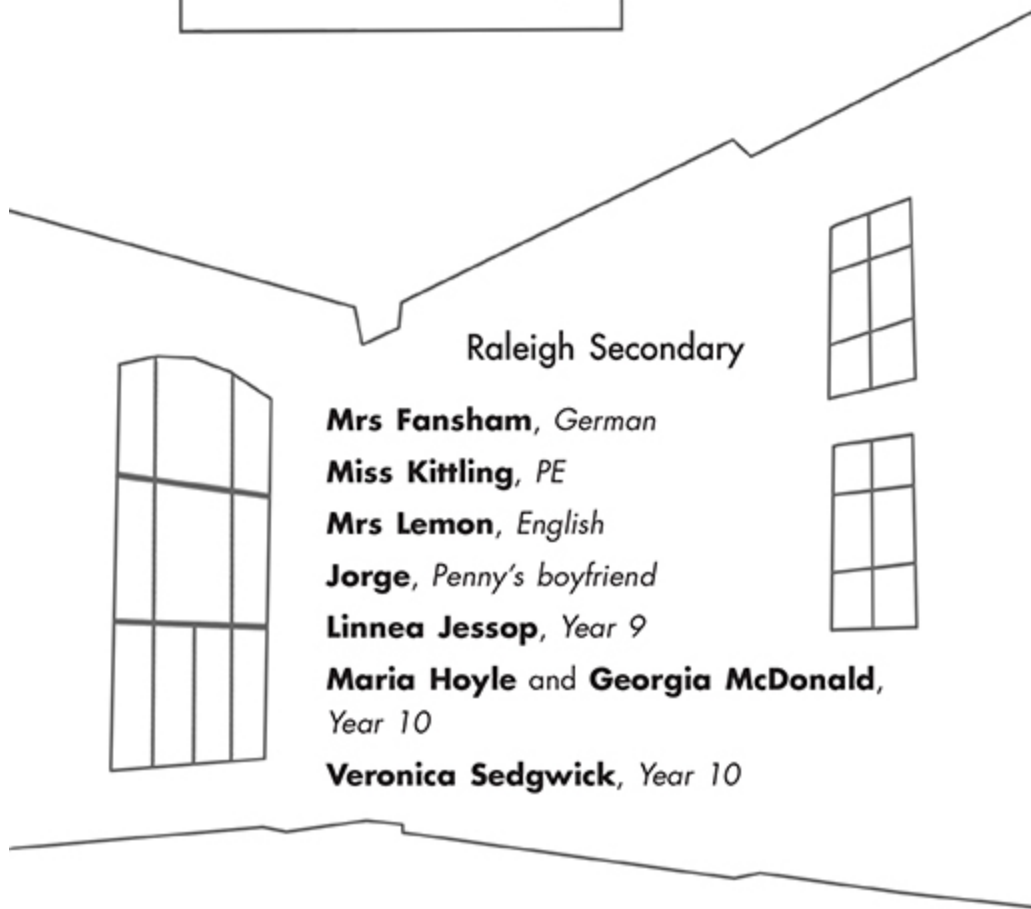
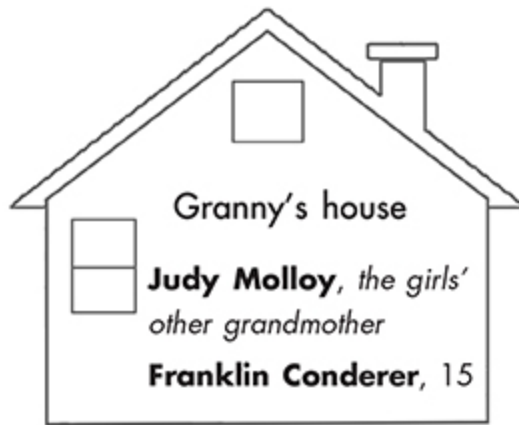
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 300 0

For Oscar and for Aobh

Who's at home?





ONE

All year Minny had endured having PE last thing on a Friday. It was hateful in winter but at least everyone else thought so too. It hit new lows in the summer term when most people apparently loved running round in an astroturfed cage, swinging tennis rackets. But it reached the absolute depths on this particular Friday when, after a horrible English lesson, she was informed that they were all playing rounders together, girls and boys. Rounders. Minny had loathed it since primary school.

Of course, it was funny to see how playing a team game with boys affected the girls. 'Look at that,' she said to her best friend Penny, as they lurked as far away from the action as they could get. 'Juliet's gone all weak and feminine. Oh, look - straight at Andrew, that one.'

'She wasn't weak or feminine when she stamped all over me in football last term,' Penny remarked. 'I've still got that lump on my shin.'

'No.' Minny watched Emma Daly drop a hit from Michael, who was batting after Juliet. 'And Emma didn't fumble that hockey stick she ground into my ear either, that time I fell over in front of her.' It was strange to be talking to Penny during PE - since spring she'd been all into tennis, running away from Minny at the start of lessons so as to get put in a group with the good people.

Then of course they had to go up to bat. Minny's heart pounded as she stood in line; she didn't know what was scary about it really; it wasn't as if she wasn't used to looking stupid in PE. She missed with the first swing. 'Keep your eye on the ball,' Miss Kittling barked. Minny had no

idea how to keep her eye on the ball. Her eye didn't want to stay on the ball, at least not while she was also swinging a bat. She was happy not to hit it; all she wanted was to be able to run to first base without getting anyone else out. After her third air shot, Miss Kittling blew her whistle.

'Look, Minny,' she said, polishing a ball of her own on her thigh, 'there's no point in coming to these lessons if you're not even going to try.'

'I couldn't agree more, miss.'

'That's enough of that. Honestly. Just watch the ball.' She tossed it at Minny, who swung and missed. 'Right, we'll try one more time. This enthusiasm for sport must run in your family.'

Minny missed again.

'Apparently I can't make your sister Aisling come out here and join in a team game any more, but I'm not having you wriggling out of it as well. Is that clear?' Minny swung in desperation and connected; Michael Dearbourne caught her out straight away but at least she could drop the bat and get away from the situation. She only overheard a few sighs from her own team, and Penny saying supportively to Nathan, 'It's not her fault she's crap at sport.'

'What are you doing this weekend?' Penny asked as they changed back into real clothes in the sweat-drenched cloakroom.

Minny brightened up a little as she threw her T-shirt into the bottom of the locker; at least school was over for the week. 'I don't know yet, no plans. What about you?'

'I can't meet up tomorrow, anyway. Jorge is in that tennis competition.' She finished dabbing a fresh layer on the caked concealer between her eyebrows. 'See you later, have a good one, byeee.'

Minny slammed her locker shut and trudged through the school. The main door was a rectangle of golden light, promising a couple of days' freedom, even if it was

friendless freedom filled only with her family. She was almost there when Mrs Fansham stampeded out of her classroom and grabbed her, literally and damply. Mrs Fansham was a German teacher. Minny had never even taken German, but they had spoken several times before because Aisling, Minny's sister, was in her form. 'Oh, Minny -' she towed her into the classroom - 'I wanted a word about Aisling.'

"Kay," Minny said, non-committally.

'She hasn't had a very good day, to be honest with you.' She put her hand on her fat chest. 'I don't know what was wrong, do you?'

Minny shrugged.

'She wouldn't say. Anyway, I saw her leaving a few minutes ago and she looked upset.'

The fact was Mrs Fansham was just stupid. Minny had to work hard to stop her face saying so. Ash had chemistry on a Friday afternoon, and Minny knew for a fact that their mother had explained, in short words, why Aisling found science stressful. Bustle, open flames, being expected not to spill things; plus long benches all joined together and distracted teachers - open season for bullies and hell on a stick for an autistic person. Besides, all Mrs Fansham was achieving by rabbiting on in her steaming-hot classroom was that Ash was getting further and further away from school and it would take longer for Minny to catch her up.

Now she had to hurry most of the way home, getting hotter and crosser all the way, until the last stretch of shops when Aisling was in sight. Also just about within earshot; Minny caught the odd squeak. Her sister got louder and shriller the more stressed out she was.

'Minnyminnyminnyminnyminnyminnyminnyminnyminnybatman. Aisling Molloy! You know very well ...'

Ash was crossing the road now, skipping irregularly the way she did. There was a group of boys up ahead, on the corner of Whitsun Road where the big puddle always was;

there was a leaky pipe there or something. Minny speeded up. Aisling, crossing, stretched carefully over the water. One of the boys hustled her so that she stepped right back into it. There was a roar of appreciation.

Minny half ran, half power-walked up towards them with her hardest face on. Ash was just standing there, squeaking in a voice that only bats could have heard. The boys were still sniggering but had stepped away. 'Idiots,' Minny muttered, taking Aisling's arm. 'Come on, let's go home.'

'But I can't NOW,' Aisling said shrilly.

'Yes, you can, we're nearly there.'

'My feet.'

'Try not to think about it.'

There was a boy pelting towards them from further up the road that she'd been half aware of. She stood back to let him go past, only he stopped instead.

'Are you all right?' he asked. Aisling looked at him as if she wasn't sure he was speaking to her. 'I saw - are you soaking?' They all looked down at her feet. She sidestepped, and squelched. 'Morons. Yeah, well done,' he shouted at the boys.

'Yeah,' Minny said, to make herself known. 'You're OK though, aren't you, Ash?'

'Good.' He fidgeted. 'Hi.'

'Hello,' Ash said.

'Hi,' Minny said. 'Oh. Hi.'

The profundity of the exchange was because she had recognised him. His name was Franklin Conderer and she hadn't seen him since she was eight years old when he had moved to the other side of London.

'What are you doing here, Franklin?' Ash asked him in her small-talk voice, which was the most normal one she had. Minny wasn't sure how they had both recognised him; he looked really different. He hadn't been at their primary school very long, only while he was living with his aunt, but she remembered him as the kind of little boy who did

things like running into other kids at full speed and hurling them down on their faces. He never touched the Molloy's, but Penny got a kneeful of black gravel once. He was supposed to be in Ash's class but he got sent down one to Minny's; their mother said it was because Minny's teacher that year was a man, and was therefore supposed to be able to handle him. Back then, Franklin had had one of those sad super-short haircuts some little boys got with a separate fringe, as if they didn't deserve to have hair, and always looked miserable and out of place. He had good hair now. He was thin and pale.

He looked surprised. 'Well, I'm ... I'm living with Judy for a bit.'

'What?'

'Judy Molloy?' Aisling enquired. 'Our granny?'

Their granny, Judy Molloy, lived less than two miles from them. Since their dad had left, the time they spent with her had been gradually whittled down - first they had all moved in with their other grandmother, Babi, whom Granny couldn't stand, and then they started getting so much more homework, and the baby came, and they just didn't go round to her house as often. Still, Minny would have expected to know that she had adopted a teenage boy.

'Yeah.' He put one hand behind his neck. 'I got in a bit of trouble, a while ago now, and anyway no one seemed to think I should stay at home, so Judy said she'd have me for now. See how it goes.' He shrugged at them. He was really thin. 'I only came yesterday. I suppose that's why you didn't know or anything.'

'Yeah.'

He was looking all around them. 'I was at the school to talk about starting there, you know. I was just waiting for the bus.' He pointed at the bus stop.

'You're starting at Raleigh?'

'Yeah. On Monday.'

'That's where we go,' Minny said.

'I know.' He hesitated. 'Is it all right?'

'Er. You know.'

'We're coming to Granny's on Sunday,' Aisling said brightly.

'Are we?' Minny said.

'Yes. I said to Mum the day before yesterday that we hadn't seen Granny since the twenty-second of April.'

'What happened on the twenty-second of April?' Franklin asked.

'That's when we last saw Granny,' Aisling explained. 'And we agreed that was a long time so Mum said she'd phone Granny up and ask if we could go round this Sunday.'

'Right.' Minny looked at Franklin. 'So I guess we'll see you then.'

'Cool.'

'Or not.'

'Or not,' he agreed.

'Why not?' Ash asked. 'We're going round on Sunday.'

'Come on, Ash,' Minny said, rolling her eyes. 'See you, Franklin.'

'Yeah, see you.'

When they'd left the bus stop safely behind, Minny glanced at Aisling. There were tear marks, but only at the sides of her eyes as if meeting Franklin had distracted her in time. 'Don't pay any attention to those idiots.'

'No. My shoes are wet.'

'We'll dry them.'

Ash snuffled a bit. 'Will Mum be at home?'

'She's got a staff meeting. She said she'd be back for dinner.' They trudged on. 'That's a bit weird, about Franklin.'

Aisling was looking at her shoes.

'I mean, you'd have thought we'd know. It's not that long since we've seen Granny.'

'It was the twenty-second of April.'

'You said.'

'That's six weeks ...'

'Mmmm.'

'And five days. Which is closer to seven weeks really.'

'Oh, shut up, Ash. I almost didn't recognise him.' She paused. 'He's taller than I thought he'd be.'

'He's not very tall.'

'He's got better hair. He used to have terrible hair. I liked his T-shirt.' It was always like this. They wandered along side by side and one of them talked. Usually it was Ash, spouting complete gibberish, while Minny let her get on with it; sometimes, like now, Minny would just think out loud. She assumed that to Ash it meant about as little as the details of the 1972 Congressional US election, or as endless sung renditions of 'There's a Hole in My Bucket' meant to her. They didn't actually converse. That was fine; they never had, except when they were younger, if they were ever doing the same thing at the same time, like playing a computer game or constructing a fantasy football cup draw, they might have talked more co-operatively then. The only thing now was you had to be slightly careful to say: 'Ash.'

'Mmmm.'

'Don't repeat any of that, OK.'

'Don't repeat it to who?'

'To anyone.'

She was normally pretty safe, but because their stupid parents had always played stupid parental games about 'don't you dare do this or I'll tickle you', you had to look solemn and serious and right in her eyes when you were telling her. The December before last she'd announced to the front room, where Babi was having a cocktail party, that Minny was expecting her second period any day now, she'd had her first at Halloween! with a mischievous glimmer that showed she was expecting some roughhousing.

'Look,' Ash said, pointing. 'There's Selena.'

They crossed the road. Their other sister was leaning on the sign at the corner of their street. 'I've been waiting for you.'

'Why?' Selena always got home first; normally Babi picked her up after her afternoon Weight Watchers meeting. Today though, Greengrocer Gil had rung her just as they were getting home, and she'd strolled off down the street, refusing to open the front door first for Sel. Selena was seven. Their grandmother was a liability - Sel should never be left hanging about on a corner by a main road on her own; even Minny could see that. Sel looked like Aisling, except less dreamy, and like their mother too: lots of cloudy blonde curls and a wistful luminous face. Minny was inclined to put it down to nomenclature. Aisling meant a kind of poetry, or dream or vision, or a woman you see in a dream or a vision. Selena meant the moon. But she, she was Minny. All that made you think of was words that were insults or at least very basic, like skinny or tranny or dunny. They weren't even real words.

Babi had returned to the house without bothering to fetch Selena; she opened the front door as Minny stuck her key into the lock, said nothing, then glided back up the hall as if there were wheels under her very long black trousers. They had been living in Babi's house for nearly two years. Minny was so used to it that she got resentful about Babi being there, even though it was her house, and blamed her for it being so crowded. She supposed in fact their old flat must have been smaller, but at least it was *theirs*, and there was room for their stuff. This house was too full. Minny knew her sisters, brother, mother and grandmother weren't actually evil, not even her grandmother; they just didn't all fit together properly. Like the games and jigsaws which had been stuffed together over the years and come spilling out of their boxes. And like those boxes, it sometimes felt as if the top of the house was going to come off, or the side might split, or a giant foot would come down out of the sky

and casually squash it so that even masking tape couldn't fix it.

They squeezed through the porch, between the pushchair and the big tippy pile of shoes. Ash normally just stepped out of her trainers and chucked them in the direction of all the others, but now she stood there awkwardly holding them. 'Stick them out the back in the sun,' Minny suggested. 'And put your socks in the washing machine.'

'I want to wear my socks.'

'They're soaking wet.'

'No, they're not.'

'Ash, you're leaving footprints on the carpet.'

'But I like these socks.' She took them off in the end, looking resentful as if the whole thing was Minny's fault. Minny sat down to unlace her high-tops properly because they were coming to pieces, and then got her books out of her bag, balancing her real book on top.

'What are you reading?' Selena dusted her sandals off and placed them on top of the shoe pile.

'*Peter Pan*. What? It's a great classic of English literature,' Minny said, dropping her pencil case so that all her biros fell out and rolled under the radiator. 'Mum reckons you can't appreciate any post-war novels if you haven't read this. Or something.'

Babi was passing through the hall again with an empty glass in each hand. She snorted. She refused to believe that anything good at all could have come out of Britain, since Shakespeare anyway, even though she'd been living here for about fifty years. English literature annoyed her because you couldn't really argue with it being good, compared to everything else English in the arts. She took the arts very seriously. A lot of her family had been arty, intellectual types who died in Czechoslovakia when the Nazis came. Then after that it was the Communists, and she and her parents had fled, more or less, and ended up in London. Later on she'd met their grandfather, who was a

writer from South Africa who didn't get on with the government and so he'd left there and come to England as well. It all seemed to mean that Babi couldn't take any kind of creativity seriously unless it could get you thrown in jail.

Minnie started to get up, but just then there was a thumpety thump from the back room and the baby came bustling round the corner, crawled up to her and grabbed her hair so he could get up on his feet to kiss her. She picked him up, wiping snot off her jaw, and carried him into the front room. At least it was Friday and her mother would be home soon.

The front room was misleadingly subtle and sophisticated, at least when you looked in from the street outside and if you ignored the green plastic highchair. There was no TV because that was in the back room: instead it had the real-wood bookshelves and the walnut table and chairs; the carved mantelpiece with ceramic tiles and the big old-fashioned wooden globe their mother had bought on her honeymoon in Italy. You couldn't see the baby toys from outside, stacked underneath the window, alongside the piles of books that had never fitted on to Babi's shelves. Also it wasn't mouldy, like most of the other rooms were in the corners, except when their mother had just been on one of her cleaning binges. Minnie was up for playing cars with the baby for a while, but he'd already heard the *Countdown* music and was crawling next door, to Aisling.

'You can go and do your homework,' Babi announced, suddenly appearing in the doorway with a giant metal spoon and stepping over the baby. She had her house shoes on now, which were incredibly shiny, just like her outside shoes, but without the four-inch heel that could kill a horse. 'I will look after him till five thirty.' Five thirty was when their mother was meant to be home.

'It's Friday.' She never did homework on Fridays.

Babi shrugged. 'Suit yourself. But I don't have to cook till then. So ...'

Minny trailed upstairs. She didn't get so much time free of sisterly duty that she could turn it down. Summer holidays soon though; her mother would be off work, more or less, so there wouldn't be nearly so much for Minny to do in the house. Of course that all meant more time listening to her sisters babble. Sel just banged on and on about all this crazy Bible stuff she insisted on reading at the moment; Minny felt like she was sharing a room with all of them as well: Moses and Hagar and Jephthah and their nasty habits. And Ash lived in a world of her own, people were always saying it - with varying degrees of indulgence. Took up plenty of space in the real world as well though.

It still seemed unnecessary to do homework on a Friday evening, so she went into her mother's room and flipped open her laptop. It wasn't supposed to be up here. Computing was meant to be done downstairs to ensure that no one happened on anything unsuitable. Still, whenever anyone said they had serious homework to do they were allowed to take the laptop to wherever it was quiet, and then no one ever remembered to bring it back. Sometimes all Minny wanted was a couple of minutes to talk to someone, an adult who wasn't talking to someone else at the same time. And then email was the best thing on offer.

'Howzaboy Kevin,' she typed. Sometimes they addressed each other as if they were drunken American characters from P.G. Wodehouse books. *'I had a triple-suck day today, having to listen to Penny gloat all morning and all through lunchtime about how much she snogs Jorge, and then horrible bitter Mrs Lemon said she couldn't give back everyone else's creative-writing homework from last weekend because she had to spend so long reading mine because it was twenty-two pages. And she said some of my sentences were nearly a page long too.'* She wouldn't

reread it now to check if that was true. She didn't particularly want ever to reread it. *'Like I was just a show-off and a suck-up. Like I'd ever try to show off to her, as if I didn't know better. Everyone looked at me like I was the worst geek in the world.'* If only they knew; she'd had lunchtime detention on Monday because of the maths homework she should have been doing instead of writing the last ten pages, and failed a French test the same day. *'Can't WAIT till next year when I get a new teacher, though she'll probably have put me down a set. Mum says she won't, but I bet she does.'*

She never felt she had to think about what she was writing with her Uncle Kevin. He was all piled-up sentences and missing commas himself, so there was no great stylistic pressure, and she never worried that she was boring him because he remembered the tiniest things. He said her emails were like a soap opera set in a school, and that he loved hearing about teachers and about evil girls like Juliet and Emma. Mostly she resisted the temptation to make things up to please him. And he only asked the most general questions about Aisling or Selena so she didn't feel like she had to keep him up to date on how school and Ash were getting on with each other. Which was good because it was depressing enough having to answer her mother's questions.

Also you could talk about books to him, stuff you'd read and stuff you might read, without feeling like an idiot. He had time and he was interested. The day Minny had learned to read and knew she had, they ran all the way home from school so that Ash had to ride the last quarter-mile on their mother's back, and as soon as they were in, bundling up the stairs to their flat, Nita had phoned Kevin at his bar in Ireland and got her, Minny, to read out two verses of a poem. Dylan Thomas, it was. And Uncle Kevin burst into tears. Minny missed him, not that they'd ever seen much of him, but he'd always been on the phone to

one or other of her parents, and sometimes he'd visited, laden down with bags of chocolate bars. Now her father was gone it was only emails.

Anyway he already hated Mrs Lemon and he'd be sympathetic. English was supposed to be her favourite subject, not the one she dreaded only slightly less than PE. It was her thing, reading books and writing stories, what she had always been best at, not just compared with how she did at other things but compared with the rest of the class. Only Mrs Lemon hadn't given her anything higher than a B all year, and mostly B minuses. *'Don't know what to read next. Mum says it's time for Jane Austen but I'm not sure.'* She might just spend the weekend on Malory Towers or *The Railway Children*, but that wasn't something she would tell Kevin.

She was thinking of a sign-off when she heard Selena's squeak and the scuff-thump of the baby climbing the stairs. The stair gate clanged against the wall and then the door flew open.

'Babi says she's got to cook now and you've got to have Raymond!' Selena announced, puffed from carrying the cat and circling the baby.

'Why me?' Minny pulled him onto her lap. He was a devil with the computer. It was just like her grandmother to offer so aggressively to look after him, so that you would start doing something, and then ditch him on you before you'd finished. 'Couldn't you watch him just till Mum gets home?'

'No. He was crying to get up the stairs.'

Minny wasn't really cross. She loved him. He was her favourite and she was his - after their mother, which didn't count. She fluffed up his hair and batted his hands away from the keyboard. 'Well, can you just play with him till I send this?'

There was no room for them to sit on the floor - their mother even had to keep her knickers in a plastic bag at the bottom of the wardrobe, so Selena got the jewellery box

from the dressing table and she and Raymond got stuck into it on the other end of the bed. It was even smaller than Minny's room, which had bunk beds for her and Sel; only Aisling's was more tiddly. Ash had to have her own room because she got up at five o'clock in the morning. Her stuff was so wedged in there that the door didn't open properly and you had to climb over the bed to get in.

Minny finished her email, knees drawn up to protect the laptop from Raymond. *'I've got to go now because the baby's going nuts and there's no one to look after him as usual except me. Babi's too busy making Czech fish stew, which smells completely ram and will probably make us all violently ill - but I thought I'd tell you so you can start thinking of books for me and ways to murder and dispose of Mrs Lemon and think of me when you're having a NICE dinner this evening with no fish heads ... Minny.'* She turned round to find that Sel was checking out her reflection in two necklaces against her school jumper, with another in her hair and four rings on her wiggling fingers, while the cat purred in her lap with a bracelet around his ear, and Raymond looked gravely disgusted and had two strands of a beaded earring dangling from his mouth.

'Selena! He could choke on this kind of crap! Have some sense, will you.' She put her little finger into the corner of his mouth and he opened it unwillingly. She pulled the earring out. It looked intact, although with her mother's jewellery it was hard to tell.

'Well, it wouldn't have been my fault.' Sel threw all the necklaces down. 'I'm only seven.'

'Oh, and I'm sure that would have been a great comfort to you as he breathed his last,' Minny snapped. 'Now tidy that stuff up.'

'You tidy it up.' She stropped out, banging the door behind her. Raymond reached for another earring.

'No no no. Give it to Minny. Listen, there's the front door. Mummy's home. You go and find Mummy. No, leave Guts

alone.' She tried to keep him away from the fleeing cat with her knee while she bundled all the jewellery back into the box. Her mother would probably never be able to unravel a single necklace from the clump.

When she came downstairs with Raymond under her arm, her mother, Nita, was still in the hall, taking everything out of her shoulder bag and spreading it all to the corners they lived in. 'Hello, sweet angel,' she said, rescuing Raymond as he tried to dive head first over the banisters to get to her. 'And hello, other sweet angel.' She aimed a kiss at Minny. 'Good day?'

'No, rubbish.'

'Oh no. I smell fish stew though.'

'I know.' They both squeezed their faces up. What Minny had said to Kevin had only been for effect, and because you couldn't say you loved fish stew; actually it was one of Babi's best, and though she said the stench would kill her, she often made it on Fridays. Friday was non-meat day. They ate so much dead animal that Minny's mother got fits of conscience about it and insisted on one day off; they'd picked Friday because they were usually out of meat by then anyway, and Selena still went to Catholic primary school and Friday was the day recommended there. Though that meant the weekly risk of some anticlerical feeling getting aired at the dinner table. Also, since they usually cheated and ate fish, Minny wasn't sure there was any point.

'Oof,' her mother said, bending down to pick up her mobile, which Raymond had dropped, then straightening up again. 'You are a big heavy tubby, aren't you? Where are the others?'

'Watching TV, I suppose. I had English today.'

'Oh yes? Was it good?'

'It's never good, I told you.' Minny came down a step. 'Mrs Lemon made me look like an arse for writing a long story. She said it showed bad judgement and she didn't

have time to mark any of the others just because of mine, and that I was self-indulgent.'

'Oh, Minny.'

'She's a cow.'

'Of course she is. A big Friesian heifer. Don't worry about it - she was probably just having a bad day.'

'Good, she deserved to. It was embarrassing.'

Her mother was looking up, but she wasn't listening now. Aisling was calling her, monotonously, from the back room. She headed off. 'What's wrong, Ash? All right, I'm coming. Mama, when's dinner? And where's Selena?'

Minny would have liked to go back upstairs on her own, but it was all hands on deck between Nita getting home and dinner being dished up. She had to look after Raymond while her mother first spoke to Selena about kiddy stuff at school and let Sel drivel on about some project she was doing on Ancient Greece, and then started going through Ash's homework. Mostly the teachers emailed it to Nita because Ash never wrote it down properly. On a Friday the two of them always had to plan minutely when it was going to get done. Meanwhile Raymond kept shoving *The Hungry Caterpillar* in front of her face. Normally he liked Minny reading to him, but not on Fridays when he'd been at nursery all day and their mother hadn't come home till five thirty.

At ten past six Nita finally came running into the back room with the baby chewing the corner of his book, ditched him on the floor and flung herself onto the sofa. 'My *God*, that was a hard day. I need to lie down. You can all do what you want. I'm just going to lie here.'

Aisling, who'd been drifting around muttering about *The West Wing*, immediately went to lie on top of her. Nita groaned. Selena started bouncing up and down and shouting, till Minny took her cue and went to lie on Ash so that Sel could lie on her. 'Chaos, Minny,' Ash said from underneath, 'you brought chaos.' All-pile-on was a

tradition. It put everyone in a good mood, unless you happened to get an elbow in your collarbone.

Dinner was usually when they were all together for the first time. They weren't a picky family - they ate anything put in front of them while exchanging news and opinions so fast that food had been known to fly across the table. But not that day, because just as they were all rolling around on the sofa trying not to fall on Raymond, who was engaged in climbing on top, the doorbell went. Selena sucked herself off the heap and flew towards it as usual. No one else in the house had had the chance to open the front door for about five years. Even political campaigners and Mormons had learned to miss out their house now because they had to struggle through five minutes' really intense conversation with her before they got to see anyone else. Minny wasn't sure why Sel found the ring at the door so exciting, but it was a disappointment this time because it was Gil.

'Hallo, Selena,' he said in his fake jolly way, taking off his stupid hat. 'Am I on time for dinner?'

'I don't know.' Sel put her finger in her mouth as if she was four, and ran away. Babi came out of the steamy kitchen and hung his hat up for him.

'Darrlink,' she said in her throaty voice, 'I am just serving up. Won't you go and sit down for two minutes till everything is ready?'

Their mother had to change Raymond's nappy before dinner, and Selena, being seven, could scamper wherever she wanted whether there was a guest or not. So that meant Gil watching *The Simpsons* with Ash, because Minny was reading. She didn't like him. He had a lot of virtually white hair which he swept in a puffy ring around his red bald patch, and he wore mossy jumpers. Babi was never polite to Minny's friends, in fact she went out of her way to blow smoke at Penny, so why should Minny be friendly to Gil?

‘You watch this every day, Aisling?’ She just nodded and hummed. She didn’t like Gil being in the house either, because he was new, and a man. ‘I’ve only seen it once or twice. Is it good?’

‘Roger Ram is up and Roger Ram is down,’ Aisling shouted suddenly.

‘Christ!’ Minny shouted too because she hated to be startled.

‘Roger Ram is dancing all around the town.’

‘Shut up, Aisling.’

‘Why don’t you like it when I sing that?’

‘You don’t sing it, you scream it.’

‘And it makes your heart jump,’ Ash added joyfully. Minny had made the mistake of saying that to her about eight years ago and she never forgot stuff that tickled her. Minny didn’t like to say they had a pensioner with them and shocks probably weren’t good for him. ‘I sing about Roger Ram sometimes when I’m feeling stressed,’ Ash explained to Gil.

‘Oh dear, are you feeling stressed? And on a Friday night?’

Minny felt sorry for him in a way. They weren’t the easiest family.

At dinner they all had to be polite instead of just eating. Gil had never come for a normal dinner before, and his arrival had always been announced. Babi refused to look at anyone. Minny was wondering if this meant he’d be popping by all the time now, and could see her mother was wondering it too. Nita was the world’s most polite and friendly woman, it was sickening sometimes, but she struggled with Gil. Anyone would feel weird with someone dating their mother, particularly their sixty-five-year-old mother, and it was so hard to imagine what Babi could possibly see in this red-faced old man. Say what you would about their grandmother, she wasn’t Minny’s cup of tea,

but she was sort of magnificent. She had a very sharp pure black bob, sticking-out cheekbones and deep hooded eyes, and she kept herself pretty trim.

Then there was their grandfather, who to be fair had died eight years ago – but he was supposed to be this extraordinary man. Minny didn't remember that side of him because she'd been too young, but she remembered looking forward to seeing him – he wasn't so much the kind of grandfather who took you to the playground; he'd taken them to theatres instead, or to museums, and then, when they were flagging, to beautiful restaurants for tea. Once there had been a cake with silver icing. And the carousel on the South Bank. And he was this great political writer and everything, and knew everyone in the world that was famous and interesting, and Babi had apparently worshipped him. She was miserable when he died. And now here she was doing whatever she was doing with the old bloke from the greengrocer's on Grenville Road. Minny wasn't the snob in the family, Babi was. So it all seemed a bit mysterious.

Nita tried to be nice, like she always did. She didn't have much chance to pay attention to him because she had to feed the baby and talk to Selena and Aisling, neither of whom had ever grasped that you were supposed to wait for a gap in the conversation before you started telling an irrelevant story. It all went much as usual: Selena tutted and sighed because there was chaos going on after she was ready to say grace. Then, when everyone had said amen, she immediately opened her eyes and said, 'Victoria got told off today because Lily and Fran were fighting over who was going to be her partner in baseball. It was really unfair.'

'Mmm, this is tip-top tasty,' Aisling said, at pretty much the same time Gil said, 'Nita, can I pass you the pepper?' Their mother had to accept it brightly while blowing on the baby's bowl to cool his dinner down, fastening his bib and

listening to Selena. While she was telling her completely boring and structureless story about three girls in her class that no one else knew, Aisling was repeating 'tip-top tasty' at increasing volume because no one had acknowledged her. When their mother finally did get to say, 'That's great, Ash, good,' Aisling straightaway said, 'That's another thing that's wrong in *The West Wing*, you know, this man says that Franklin Pierce - you know, the president? - he says that he was his great-great-grandfather, only Franklin Pierce never had any grandchildren, so he can't have been.'

By the time there was a lull, because Selena and Ash were both chewing at the same time, Raymond had his fists twisted up in Nita's hair. 'It's good to see you here, Gil,' she said, turning her head from where it was resting sideways on the highchair tray. 'Is everything going well with the shop, and everything?'

'Oh, very well,' he said, sucking fish off his fork. 'I'm delighted to be here, Anita. Dining with not one, but five beautiful women - I'm the envy of every man in London.' It was so cheesy Minny felt her mouth go dry, and Nita practically shuddered. Minny could see Selena's eyes moving round the table, counting to make sure one of the five was her.

'Well, we're very pleased to have you. I'm sorry it's all a bit chaotic, but Fridays are always like this - I didn't get home till half past five, so Mama had to look after everything as well as cook.' She paused but he was busy eating. 'So - Minny,' she said, turning in desperation, 'tell me about this teacher. What's her name again?'

'Mrs Lemon.'

'Of course.'

Minny shrugged. She had no interest in talking about it in front of the whole world.

'No? Anyone got any plans this weekend?' She filled her mouth up with stew, looking as if she was in pain. 'This is really wonderful, Mama.'