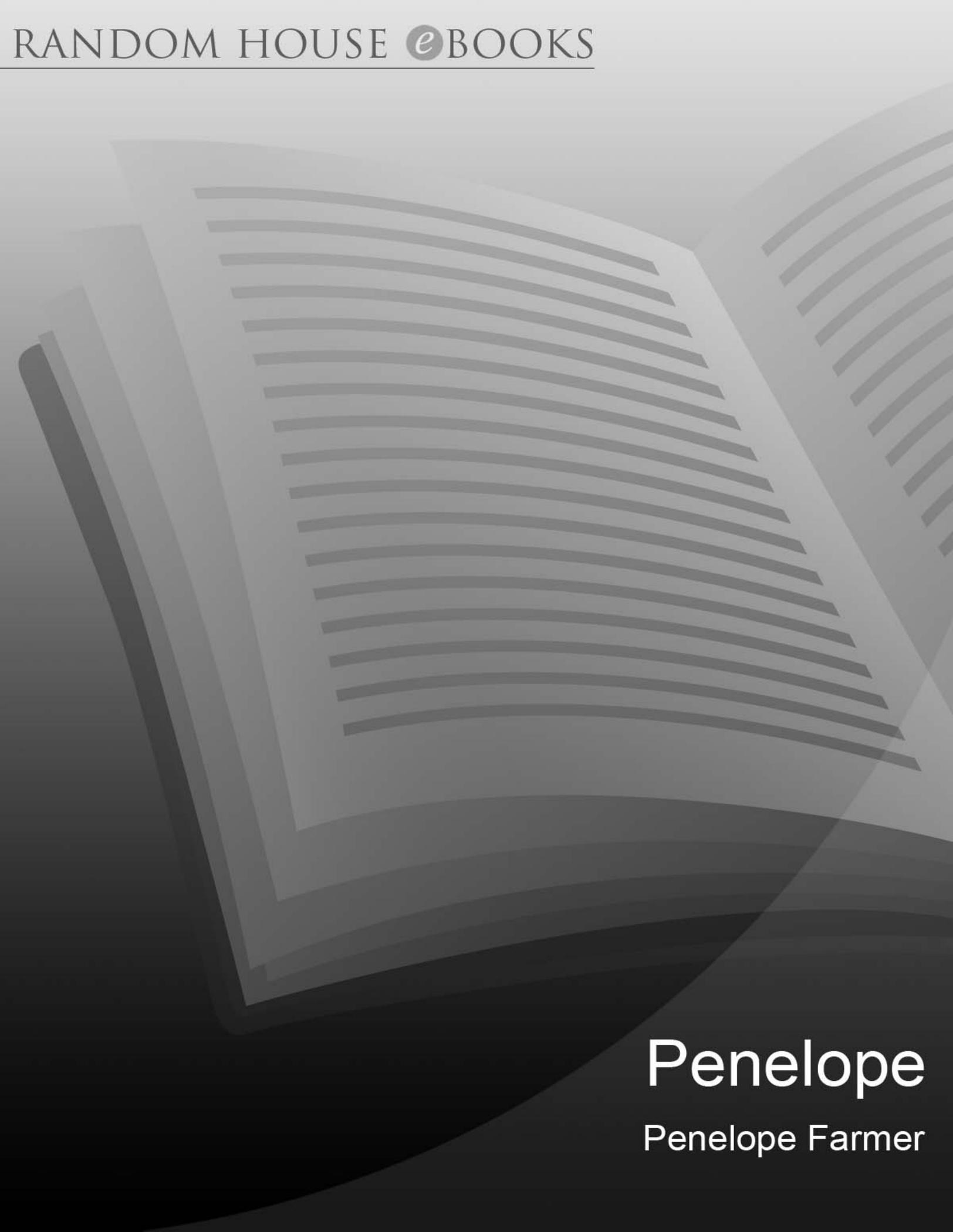


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Penelope

Penelope Farmer

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THE BODLEY HEAD
London

For Clare Penelope
with love

PART ONE

1

'Daddy, daddy,' screamed the little girl, pulling at her mother's arm. Then: 'Papa. Papa.'

Around three or so, she was much too young to appreciate pictures, thought the only other person in the room. An elderly man in a corduroy cap, he had come to the gallery at this time on a Saturday morning, just after it opened, to avoid such irritations as small children and tourists. All the same he could not help looking around to see what the little girl was pointing at. She didn't mean *him* surely? But no, the little girl was not pointing at the elderly man. Her finger was outstretched towards one of the paintings; a large painting in a gold frame - all the paintings in this room were large paintings in gold frames - it showed a man in dun-coloured coat and breeches, a broad-brimmed black hat. Reclining in what looked like parkland, surrounded by trees, he was staring dreamily out of the picture towards the little girl. In his hand he held a leather-bound book.

The man in the corduroy cap knew the picture well. He knew the name of the painter and of his sitter without having to glance at the plaque on the wall next to the painting. But till today he had never known the gentleman portrayed to have that effect on anyone.

'Daddy, Daddy. Papa, Papa,' yelled the little girl again, tugging at her mother's hands, pulling her towards the picture.

The old man assumed the woman was the mother of the child, young as she looked. She wasn't wearing a wedding ring, he noted with disapproval; she was altogether absurdly dressed. On her feet were gold embroidered boots, her hair was a multitude of little plaits, threaded with beads. Now

she pulled the child back, abruptly, her feet clattering on the wooden floor boards. 'Shush, Flora,' he heard her say. 'Don't be so silly. Whatever can you mean. That's not your Daddy.'

'Daddy, daddy,' insisted the little girl, her voice louder than ever. In a moment, worse still, she began to cry, at the same time continuing to insist, 'Daddy, daddy. Papa, papa.'

The elderly man had heard more than enough. He glared at the young woman and the child, and marched out of the room ignoring the blue-uniformed attendant who had come to find the source of the screams that by now were echoing between the wooden walls, across the wooden floor of the gallery. Through the next room and the next, no matter how the man hurried, they continued to pursue him. In the end he went downstairs. There, staring into a glass case, at two books called the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, he was briefly reminded by one picture of the little girl upstairs. But otherwise he thought no more about it.

Flora, too, remembered nothing of that scene in the Tate Gallery. She had only been three at the time after all. But her Aunt Jo did not forget. Flora's mother had told Jo about it - Jo was Flora's mother's best friend, as well as sister to Flora's father. Flora's father was a bad lot, according to Aunt Jo. Flora's mother was alright, though, Jo had loved her, she said, almost as much as she now loved Flora. The only problem was, Flora's mother didn't have the sense she was born with, Jo said.

Jo herself had a lot of sense, luckily for Flora. If it hadn't been for her, who knows what would have become of either of them; Flora or her mother. Even before Flora's mother showed how little sense she had by getting herself run over by a bus, she and Flora had lodged with Jo and her family. It was very kind of Aunt Jo and Uncle Frank to let them stay. In the cramped little house in Hammersmith, in the cramped little street between the big hospital where Flora had been

born, and the cemetery where her mother was buried, there'd scarcely been room for one family, let alone two. Flora and her mother had had to sleep in the front room downstairs, on a put-U-up and a camp bed, their possessions ranged round them in supermarket bags, and boxes. The boxes held books mostly. There was a square package too, that held a picture. Flora remembered her mother showing her the picture once. Sometimes she wondered what had happened to it, after her mother died, after her Aunt Jo and Uncle Frank had adopted Flora, become her mum and dad.

For a while then Jo and Frank moved Flora's camp bed into their own bedroom with them. But when six months or so had passed, Frank said to Flora, 'Time you had a proper bed, Florakins.' (He was the only person who ever called Flora, 'Florakins'. From him she didn't mind a bit.) And for the next six months, he took more time off from his boys' club, and his political party committees than he'd done at any other time before or since. With his own hands he built on a bathroom behind the kitchen. And when he'd done that he'd turned the old bathroom upstairs into a bedroom for Flora's cousin Alan. From that time on Flora had shared the other bedroom with Alan's sister, Louise. Even after Alan went away to college she and Louise continued to share it.

Small as the room was, till they were ten or so neither of them minded sharing. They were more like sisters than cousins. Almost exactly the same age, not unlike to look at, they even dressed alike sometimes - they'd been mistaken for twins a time or two. Sometimes they pretended they were twins. Secretly Flora wished they really were. She was hurt when Louise said she was glad they weren't. Not that she ever admitted she felt hurt. But then, right from the beginning, Flora always did prefer to keep her feelings to herself. And that, maybe, was one of the problems.

Though Flora's calling the man in the Tate Gallery 'Papa' was the first time she behaved in such a surprising way, it wasn't the last. As a little girl she kept saying peculiar things - things other people found peculiar, that is. For what she said did not seem the least bit peculiar to her. She only talked about things she remembered from long ago. And didn't everyone have things they remembered from long ago? There was a little white dog, for instance, with a curly tail, that she remembered loving more than anything in the world. It was true they didn't have a dog at Cardew Road, just a not very friendly tabby cat. But that didn't mean to say, she thought, that she hadn't had a little white dog when she was little, before she and her mother had come to live with Aunt Jo and Uncle Frank.

During one Sunday lunch, when she was six or so, she started thinking about the little dog for some reason. And then suddenly she remembered it had died somehow. She could not quite remember how it had died, only that it had been horrible. Feeling very sad all at once, she put down her knife and fork and staring at her plate of roast lamb and green peas heard herself saying, 'I cried when my dog died. I cried and cried and cried.'

Louise laughed at her. 'Flora's making up stories,' she said. 'Flora's always making up stories. We haven't got a dog in our house. We've only ever had a cat.'

'But I did have a dog,' Flora insisted. 'I did have one. It died I tell you.'

Alan was kinder than Louise on such occasions. 'But Flora,' he said, leaning forward, 'You don't even like dogs.'

You're frightened of them. Whenever you see a dog you want to run away.'

'I'm only frightened of big dogs,' Flora protested. 'My dog was little. I'm not frightened of little dogs at all.'

And it was true she was not afraid of little dogs. On the other hand, the sight of any dog bigger than a Labrador had always made her cry. Yet she couldn't remember any big dog in particular, only the little white dog that she had loved - its name was Tray, she remembered, as she picked up her fork ready to start eating her dinner again. It died, she thought again. And, as she did so, a phrase came into her head suddenly from nowhere, spoke so loudly and insistently, she found herself repeating the words out loud - 'Eat or be eaten,' she proclaimed, stabbing at a roast potato. 'Eat or be eaten.' But then, looking round the table, she could not imagine why all of them, Aunt Jo, Uncle Frank, her cousins, Louise and Alan, were staring at her in such amazement. 'Eat or be eaten,' she repeated for the third time, putting the potato into her mouth, and chomping it up.

'Does Flora think a potato could eat *her*?' Louise said.

And then there was this, a year or so later, when Flora and Louise were out shopping with Aunt Jo, in the big Safeways supermarket in King's Mall. It was a very hot day in the middle of the summer holidays. Seeing a fat man pushing a trolley down the aisle just ahead of them, Flora had stopped dead, burst out laughing, and said 'He's almost as fat as Doctor Darwin. Only he doesn't have a wig like Doctor Darwin. Do you suppose he believes in God?'

'Who's Doctor Darwin? What's a wig?' Louise asked. 'What do you mean "believes in God"?' But by then the fleeting memory of such things had left Flora also. She stood blinking, staring at the fat man, reminded of nothing at all except the man himself. He had rolls of fat, she saw, about his midriff. His face was round and red, his bald head shining in the sun, his nose beaded with sweat where his

metal-rimmed spectacles touched them. His trolley was full of loaves of bread.

Aunt Jo, very sharply for her, said 'Stop staring, Flora, it's rude, has the cat got your manners?' At which Louise sniggered, and Flora, furious, kicked Louise, and Aunt Jo took them by an arm each and dragged them crossly away into the next aisle, the one with the refrigerated displays of different kinds of yogurt and cheese, where Flora and Louise started an argument as to whether strawberry yogurt was nicer than raspberry. And once again, for the moment, as far as Flora and Louise were concerned, that was that.

Aunt Jo remembered the name Doctor Darwin, though. She even went to the library once, hoping to find out who Doctor Darwin was. Maybe she would have gone on looking, had such incidents continued. But they did not. For as Flora grew older, she was not only less and less troubled by such untoward memories but being older and wiser, she decided that those that did come were better kept to herself. And maybe that would have been the end of it. Maybe if things had gone on well for her, if she and Louise hadn't started falling out, the memories would have ceased to trouble her altogether. But around the age of ten or so, she and Louise did start falling out. And then the memories began coming back. They brought with them voices, they started whispering names in her head - her name? - yes? - it seemed to be her name; only her name was Flora, and the voices didn't say, call, whisper that. They said, called, whispered something else. They started driving her altogether mad.

No one mistook Louise and Flora for twins by this time. Since Louise had started to grow and Flora had not, you might not even have thought they were sisters, or even cousins, let alone twins. Flora was a thin, pale, beaky, above all small girl, much younger looking than her age, and not the least interested in clothes, boys, pop music, the things other girls in her class at school were beginning to be interested in. She did not mind being small, or not liking the same things as everybody else. But Louise minded Flora being different, or rather it upset her that Flora did not seem to mind. Louise was a big girl now. Not only was she much taller than Flora, by the time she was eleven Aunt Jo had been forced to take her out and buy her a bra. Louise was proud of being the first girl in her class to wear a bra. She thought Flora should have been envious of her for that. But Flora did not seem envious in the least. Whereas Louise was deeply envious of something Flora had - and that Flora, so irritatingly, took for granted: her more than good, her *exceptionally* good brain.

Not that Louise was stupid; far from it. She was very good at sport, too, much better than Flora. Apart from being a leading light of her junior school netball team, she was almost the best gymnast in the gym class she went to on Saturday mornings. But she did not have the kind of brain that Flora had. Flora's kind made the headmistress of their junior school insist that Flora should try for a scholarship to the big local private girls' school. Louise would have got into that school alright, if Jo and Frank could have afforded to pay for her to go. But there was no way she could have won a scholarship to it - whereas Flora walked in. And what was

worse, as far as Louise was concerned, she seemed to think nothing of it; she just took it for granted she'd get the scholarship. As Aunt Jo had often told her, her mother had gone to a school just like that, so why shouldn't she, Flora? She took it as her right.

But Louise didn't see it the same way. Had it not been for Flora she wouldn't have minded in the least going to the comprehensive school in Chiswick along with several of her friends. (Unlike Flora, who'd never needed more than Louise as a companion, Louise had plenty of friends - making them was another of her talents.) Her brother, Alan, had done well enough at that school to get into college. But the sight of Flora being made such a fuss of after she'd won her scholarship was more than she could bear. Not least because Flora seemed to take this, like everything else, so very much for granted.

Aunt Jo had more sense than to make a fuss of Flora. She stopped Uncle Frank making too much of her also. What she could not do was avoid taking Flora out to buy the uniform for her new school. This was not merely a question of the skirt and top, blazer and gym shorts that was the entire uniform for Louise's school. Flora had to have a great many other things besides. It was an old-fashioned school in some ways, which Aunt Jo being a somewhat old-fashioned woman herself - so Louise was always telling her - approved of. Girls in its sixth form did not have to wear any uniform these days, it was true. But lower down the school was another matter. Flora needed a school hat - two school hats, one for winter, one for summer. She needed a school overcoat and a school raincoat. She even had to have a hockey stick and tennis racket. The school had its own sports grounds on the other side of the river; though it was a city school, it still made much of sport. Flora was going to have to play games of some kind - she could even take up rowing on the river if she wanted - almost every day of her school life.

At Louise's school, on the other hand, Louise would be lucky to get one games session a week. She wouldn't have thought anything of this, maybe, if things had been going to be just the same for Flora. As it was, the sight of Flora's hockey stick and tennis racket was the last straw.

Flora had grown used to Louise glaring at her, making sarcastic remarks. She'd grown used, too, to being called brainy, boring, a book-worm, to seeing Louise and her best friend, Tracy Ann, whispering together, then turning to look at her, giggling. This doesn't mean to say she did not mind. She did mind very much. And the more she minded, the more she was plagued by memories from that mysterious past in which she'd had a little white dog; the more the voices whispered to her that other name, the one that was her name, yet that wasn't Flora. But she did not reveal to anyone that this was happening. She did not even let herself think about it much. She just retired to sit by herself in her bedroom and read her books more avidly than ever.

It was easy to see which side of this room belonged to Louise and which to Flora. On Flora's side everything was very tidy. There was a shelf crammed with her books. Along the window sill were ranged her china and glass animals, all in pairs. Flora always had liked things to come in pairs, there were two teddy-bears, even, sitting side by side on her bed. On the other side of the room, on Louise's bed, sat only one, very big, very pink bear with a blue ribbon round its neck. On the shelves above stood Louise's cassette player, her tapes. On the wall were her posters of Michael Jackson and Kylie Mynogue. (Aunt Jo had made her take Madonna down.) There were clothes strewn all over the floor. Louise was what Jo called "a mucky pup", unlike Flora.

Flora was reading *Wuthering Heights* at this time (she and Aunt Jo were both reading it - liking books was something she and her aunt had in common). One afternoon she walked into the bedroom, the book under her arm, to find that Louise had made a line down the middle with old

shoeboxes and discarded Lego bricks from the box under Alan's bed. As Flora arrived, Louise finished laying down the last barricade of red, white and blue bricks. She got to her feet, stared Flora straight in the face and said, 'That's it then. If you leave anything my side of the room, I'll throw it away, I'll burn it. Especially a book,' she said, pointing at *Wuthering Heights*. 'One of your cruddy books.'

'If I find anything of yours on my side, I'll wrap it up and send it to Oxfam,' Flora said, coolly. But she did not feel cool. She felt suddenly more unhappy than she'd ever felt in her whole life. I can't help getting a scholarship, she thought. I can't help having a good brain. It's not my fault. For one moment she almost found herself wishing she was only as clever as Louise - that they were after all going to the same school, so that they could go back to being friends again, the way they used to be. But only for a moment. Thereafter she turned her back on her cousin, lay down on her bed and, opening her book, pretended to read.

Louise banged about for a while still, putting clothes away in her drawers, a most unusual event, Louise being so untidy. Then, having opened the cupboard doors and slammed them shut not once but twice, she put on a tape of Michael Jackson, turned the sound up, turned it down, turned it up again. Flourishing the hockey stick, that, without Flora noticing, she had reached from the back of the cupboard, she shouted above Michael Jackson's voice, 'Who wants to play hockey anyway, it's a snob's game.' But it was no good - still she aroused no response from Flora. Her adopted sister just went on reading or pretending to read. She didn't even lift her eyes from her book when Louise broke her own new rules, invaded Flora's side of the room and drew the curtains, so that Flora could not see what she was reading any more.

'I'm off,' she hissed leaning right over Flora, putting her face between Flora and her book. 'I'm off to Tracy Ann's.'

You're a boring fart, Flora, that's what you are. You can keep your bloody book.'

Turning Michael Jackson up louder than ever she shouted 'And you keep to your side. I mean it,' and slammed out.

Flora did not draw the curtains back. She did not even turn down Michael Jackson. She just rolled over on her back, clutched her two teddy bears to her, one on either side, and burst into tears.

Michael Jackson fell silent at last. The room fell silent. But by then Flora's head was so full of other voices, she did not notice. Having quite drowned the music, they now went on shouting away, sounding quite confused at this point, like people shouting at a football match - not that Flora had ever been to a football match, but she had seen them on television often enough. After a while, a lone voice replaced them, a woman's this time, but it echoed no less painfully in her head. It sounded like it was weeping, repeating over and over the name that was Flora's name and wasn't. Flora had opened her mouth to repeat the name herself, when this weeping voice in its turn was drowned by that gravelly, rich stammering voice - how Flora hated it - shouting, in triumph, almost; and it was the worst, most painful sound of the lot. 'Eat or be eaten,' it was shouting.

Flora clutched her head at this point. It hurt so. EAT OR BE EATEN. She could not bear it. The insistent voice was running the words together now, they came out sounding like one word, making her skull start throbbing and banging away. It felt like someone tying steely bands round it, pulling them ever tighter. It felt like someone else thumping inside her skull with a small but oh so heavy hammer. After a while she began to scream in pain. Almost immediately Aunt Jo came running.