



# I

## Halloween



LAN

Me and Amy are both seven now.

Down here at the stream the water is icy cold and makes our feet ache. I can't stand in it but Amy doesn't mind, so I stay on the bank or up in a tree and she walks through the water, chatting about things she hates or what isn't too bad.

The main thing is we want to light the bonfire ourselves and we're hungry.

Amy comes out the water and tries to get her wet feet back in her boots but they won't go. *Damn-bloody wellies*, she says, and we walk home with them half on, and the empty welly-feet sticking out so it looks like her legs are broken. She forgets about socks almost every time.

It's a long way up the hill. I go backwards so I'll be slow enough to stay with her. I can see the woods bobbing up and down behind her as we go. Birds fly up from them making empty sounds. We get to the top of the field, then

onto the lane and over the bar gate, and cross the Yard with Amy still chatting and clumping along on her welly sides to the house.

It's a lot warmer inside and the smells are all pumpkin soup and sausages. She kicks off her stupid boots and we drop our stuff by the door. The kitchen table is covered in heaps of Walkers Ready Salted crisps and white buns, because of the party, and big pots of cold water with carrots in them. Jim is kneeling by the Rayburn, trying to get it going, and our mums are standing with their arms crossed staring at him. We ask if we can light the bonfire, and Jim says, *we'll see how we go*, but he's not paying attention, because when the Rayburn goes out the whole Farmhouse is more and more freezing cold every second. *Put some socks on, Amy*, says Harriet. Amy just says, *Mu-um*, because she hasn't got any socks and she's not going upstairs to get some. Harriet notices things like bare feet. *My mum hasn't seen us I don't think*. Jim says, *there you are, Lan, would you pass me the WD-40?* His voice is round, not boomy and shouty, like Amy's dad. He's definitely got the nicest grown-up voice, and he always likes me helping him. I pass him the WD-40 and the spanner, and he says *thanks*, like I'm a grown-up man too.

Harriet is swearing at the Rayburn, and my mum is on at Jim. He explains it was only the wick last time, not a repair *as such*, but Mum keeps on at him, because they're married. *This is boring*, says Amy, and I say, *let's go*. I grab some crisps off the table, and Amy takes a handful of carrots, and we go back out, the carrots all wet and dripping on the stone floor. Amy gets another pair of boots from the pile, too big, with embroidered flowers on and fleece

inside. Someone must have left them after coming to play or something.

The whole Yard is just watery mud. We can see the sky in it like it's a lake. When it's a big giant puddle like this us kids can slide really fast on our bums, and make long waves all across it, but me and Amy are in a hurry because we want to build up the bonfire – it's massive and tall at the bottom of the Yard. It's got crates and brush, and some old black planks poking out, and the tarp over the top makes it the same shape as a volcano. *It definitely needs more wood*, says Amy, *come on*. We go off to the wood store where the logs are.

Logs aren't bonfire wood but we can sneak some if we want.

At one end of the store are the split logs and at the other end are the logs that aren't done yet, and in the middle there's the wheelbarrow, with axes and saws hanging from hooks. Climbing up the woodpile makes the logs move, and when they slide we shout *timber-rr* – scrabbling on dirt and beetles all the way down, and some of the logs are really sharp. Me and Amy have always got splinters, nearly every day. We can both sterilise a needle with a match. Then we hold it flat, like Jim showed us, and brush the splinter up. We don't dig the needle straight in and make a hole, because that *hurts like shit*, Amy says. We do the little kids' splinters too. They always cry.

We finish the crisps and carrots, and lick our salty fingers, then I climb on a bucket and get the axe down. It's just the small one the Mums use, but the handle is hard to grip because it's shiny, and the blade is heavy, so I need two hands or it lops down.

I hold tight and swing it about, all round my head, while Amy stands staring out at the bonfire across the Yard.

It's ages till tonight. We are *so bored*.

I swing the axe a few more times, trying to do a proper figure 8, not a kid's 8, which is just one zero on top of another. I swing it up, round my head, down to the ground, and up again. I want it to make a whooshing sound, like a rope can, but it won't go fast enough. My shoulder hurts, and the swinging only works one way, the other way it's fast but jerky, and I lose my balance, because of it being so heavy. The axe pulls me with it. I spin, and turn, and almost let it go, but I don't.

I'm so dizzy.

Then there's Amy, right in front of me. She's right there where I'm swinging and my body doesn't know what to do, so the axe blade flies down at the ground, really fast, straight onto her foot, right into her boot, and through it, with a cutting-slicing sound.

Amy kind of yelps, like our dog Christabel when she got hit by the Lada. She's staring down at the axe. I am too. The handle is in the air and the blade is stuck through her foot into the ground.

My legs disappear, and I'm sitting on my bum. Amy makes a sound like she's been winded, and vomits crisps and carrot all over the place and on her feet.

But she isn't screaming. And I can't see blood. I haven't chopped her. The blade hasn't even touched her toes, just cut the whole toe end off the boot – except for a stringy thready bit, where it's still attached.

Amy drops onto her knees and starts crying, with bits and crumbs all falling out of her mouth. The toe of the

boot that I chopped off just lies there, looking at me. We're both still staring at the axe like it's going to jump at us. Then, with our fingers all watery, we take the handle, together, and pull it out. I feel like it's going to burn my hand off, and Amy makes that sound again, like she really has lost all her toes. I'm imagining blood. She is too, so we look again.

There is definitely no blood. Just Amy's white toes, like a foot coming out of a sandal.

We put the axe far enough away so even if it moves by itself, which it might do, we're safe, then we lie on our sides, out of breath like we've been running. Her eyes have gone big, and I can see window-shaped reflections in the blue. I feel like I want to go to sleep. My chest is wobbling inside, and Amy puts her thumb in her mouth, which she doesn't even do that often.

When we get up, we take the stolen boots, and the chopped-off bit, and run out of the wood store when no one is looking, and shove them into the bonfire, till they're hidden, and Amy washes the sick out of her mouth at the trough. Water-mud squelches through her blue-and-white toes as we walk back over the Yard.

The sky isn't reflecting any more, the puddle is just dark.

'Grown-ups always say things are dangerous,' she says, 'but they aren't.' It's true.

'Yeah,' I say.

'We're careful,' says Amy.

Grown-ups always say:

*Mind your eyes*

*Careful, that's sharp*

*Don't break your neck!*

*You'll burn yourself*

But we've stepped on rusty nails that stuck deep into our feet, and we didn't even get lockjaw. We've both touched the hotplate on the stove. We won't do it again, we're not stupid. Dangerous things are always fine if you're clever like we are, and cool like us.

AMY

There's nobody in my house because they're all in Lan's kitchen still, so we've got the whole place to ourselves, *and* there's hot water because my house is heated by the Aga, which has never even broken *once*. Me and Lan run the bath until it's as deep as it will go. It's hot, but sometimes cold water drips on us from the ceiling, because of condensation. Our skin goes bright pink. There's dirt in the soap ridges, and scum floats on top of the water like ice-islands, and we can tap them with our fingers. They don't break if we do it gently. We imagine tiny miniature polar bears on them.

There are loud grown-up voices downstairs, and doors opening and closing, and Martin Hodge comes back from work. We jump out and wrap ourselves in big crispy towels, and go out onto the Rope Bridge over the Big Room, not even feeling cold because of the hot bath. It's nearly the party time now. The grown-ups have put Fran Ferdinan on the CD player with the nail-varnish decorations on it that me and Lan did, and it's *really* loud. We drop our towels and jump up and down on the Bridge, yelling along –

*Well do ya? Do ya do ya wanna? Well do ya, do ya do ya wanna? Wanna go . . . where I've never let you before . . .*

The Rope Bridge swings and dust falls, and I remember the axe going into my boot and it feels like my toes aren't there again, but when I look down they are, and we start shouting as loud as we can –

*We're not dead! We're not dead!*

It's so funny.

*Amy and Lan! We're not dead! Amy and Lan!*

The little kids come running in from Lan's kitchen – Josh and Eden and Bryn, and Bill Hodge and Lulu Hodge – screaming up and down the Big Room like racing cars. I say, *quick!* – and we run to get dressed up for Halloween before they can follow us.

Lan puts on a black velvet shirt of his mum's and a hat, and I've got a big black cloak, and the cowboy hat. We go to my mum's room for make-up, because Gail doesn't have any make-up, because she says she's a *natural woman*. My mum is just as *natural* as Lan's mum. She keeps her make-up for special, which is almost never anyway. We draw black rings around our eyes, and make our lips black. And draw on different eyebrows, and I stuff Finbar's hat with some of Mum's knickers, to stop it falling down, and we both put beads on. We look amazing.

The Farmhouse kitchen is full. It's got my family, Lan's family and Hodges, plus Boring Colin, and Ruby Wright, because they've come early, like always. Lan's baby sister Niah is lying in the cot Jim made, by the Rayburn, which he's got working again, so now Gail's stopped being mean to him and she's all, *oh, Jim's such a handyman*, and squeezing his arms and swinging her hair about.



All the little kids go crazy when they see how good me and Lan look. They want to get dressed up too, but we haven't even finished getting ready, so we say – *NO!*

'Love each other,' says Mum. She's always saying that.

*Help each other*

*Include the little ones*

*Be kind*

*Love*

When she's forgotten about us we go in the larder and put cooking oil on our faces and dig our hands in the flour barrel and slap it on to look like ghosts. Then Bryn and Eden and Bill and Lulu and Josh come barging in and we do their faces too, and we *all* look like ghosts, and Dad shuts the door on us, and bangs on it, yelling like a Frankenstein to make us scream. Except then Josh and Bryn get real-scared, not pretend, and cry, so Dad lets us out, and says *sorry*. They aren't old enough to be scared for fun like me and Lan are.

We run round and get in the dog beds, and the flour falls off in lumps, and the dogs lap our faces and it's really funny until Mum screams –

'Just get out! Oh my God!' She's terrifying.

She makes us go upstairs to help the little kids, but they only really want to wear what we're wearing, so it's not going to work. Still, we do our best. Jim always says:

*Do your best, it's all anyone can do.*

He's definitely the best grown-up for saying things.

My dad's the best for being silly and playing.

The Hodges aren't best for anything. But they're sensible. Which is good, I suppose.

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When it's finally time, and it's dark outside, all the grown-ups and all of us squelch down the Yard with the food and lanterns. Gail doesn't carry anything, or do any helping, because she always says having baby Niah is *so exhausting*. Me and Lan gallop ahead in the smells of woodsmoke and apples, with our black clothes flapping. Suddenly the big cold bonfire is above us – way more dark than the night-time sky. We see a torch flash, and Finbar comes out from behind it like a tall crazy scarecrow with his roll-up in the corner of his mouth.

'So, kids, give me a hand with this tarp,' he says.

Me and Lan help him, and pull at the pegs and knots, then the three Dads come and help, and us and Finbar throw the tarp up and off, and a rat runs out the bottom of the bonfire. It goes straight past Rani Hodge's foot, and she screams –

'*Martin!* A rat!'

Me and Lan copy her, going, *oh, Martin, a rat!* – and fall about laughing.

We're desperate to light the fire, but we have to check it for hedgehogs first. Bill Hodge says, *if we cook a hedgehog, can we eat it?* and Lulu Hodge says *eat it!* right after, because she's only *three* years old and she copies every single thing her brother says. Me and Lan think cooked hedgehog would be gooey, and we could break the shell open like we did with the sea urchins that time on the beach, but Jim says hedgehogs taste more like rabbit, and –

*We don't eat hedgehogs, because they're rare and precious.*

We've only seen a few hedgehogs, but we see millions of rabbits, all gentle, with their tiny little jaws making

circles when they chew. Lan and me think rabbits are precious too.

It starts being a real party when the Village Families show up, and Old Friends From Before we came to Frith. The grown-ups bring the outside sofa to sit on, and everybody is just lazing around talking and being boring. It's just like that time we went to see *Jack and the Beanstalk* in Swansea, and I got so bored waiting I rocked on my seat until I fell off and bashed my face on the back of the one in front and got a nosebleed. Mum wasn't even that nice about it because she was *so pissed off* with me by then. Waiting for the party to start is *even more* boring than that. I can't even stand it. So I chuck back my head and scream –

*Oh my God when can we light this fucking fire?!*

And my hat falls off and all Mum's knickers fall out on the ground. The grown-ups – especially the village ones – *gasp*, like I've done a poo or something. But the Village Kids laugh – and so does Lan. Obviously.

## LAN

Jim lets me and Amy light the bonfire with the blowtorch. We hold it between us, with our arms straight. The blue pointy flame shoots out, and it hardly takes any time at all till great big orange flames storm up into the sky. It's hot immediately, and the flour on our faces dries and cracks. Everyone has soup, and baked potatoes full of butter, and shop-bought cheese, and orange-drink in massive bottles. Us Frith Kids and all the Village Kids run round and play in the mud, and this kid from school says I look like a girl

in my beads and stuff and Amy says, *who cares?* I don't. And there are sausages, and there's ketchup, which we never have normally, because of sugar or money. Harriet's made her Pasta Thing, with mayonnaise and tuna and stuff. She and Rani Hodge hand it round, and Mum sits on the log, feeding Niah out of her boob, with her shiny hair hanging down in front. Niah sleeps nearly the whole time. She's like a small potato. Every single person who sees her is amazed, because she's new and so tiny. Mum sits on the log with her, and Jim keeps coming over and saying, *how are my girls? How's my baby?* and kissing her and things.

I don't mind he's so crazy about Niah. We all are. Even if she is just the same as a potato. Bryn and Eden are just my little sisters. I don't remember them being born, so I don't think about them being my half-sisters. Niah being new makes me remember I'm not Jim's real son. I mean, I don't *mind*, it's just Niah makes me think about it more. I go over and try to snuggle into Mum's shoulder but I don't think she notices me.

'Lan!' says Harriet, like it's really important. '*Lan!*' I sit up.

'Lan, can you and Amy be in charge of the ice cream?'

All the kids yell – *ice cream!*

'Can you get it before I count to twenty?' says Harriet. And I forget all about Niah and Mum and not being Jim's real son and me and Amy *run*.

When everyone's eaten and we've all played, and it's really late, most of the friends go home, and it's just us: Honeys, Connells and Hodges. And Finbar of course. And we sing

live music. It's the best bit. The night is cold and dark. The fire is massive and hot and scorching and sometimes it pops, or even whistles when it's got green wood in. Finbar can play any instrument in the world. Me and Amy sit with our backs to the giant bonfire and Finbar says –

‘So, kids, what’ll it be?’

I love looking at everybody’s faces in the firelight, all waiting. Finbar holds his guitar staring down at it. He always starts out shy, doing notes like he’s thinking. He looks like a pirate, or a rock star, and sometimes like a vampire, but in a nice way. Amy’s mum cuts his hair for him, like she cuts ours, because he doesn’t like going into town, even though he’s twenty-seven. Or twenty-three. First he plays the song about smugglers and brandy and ponies. It’s our favourite. It makes our backs feel crawly with fear and we love it. Bill Hodge is smacking Finbar’s tabla drums. Bill’s only five, but he is really good at drumming. Everyone plays and we all join in singing the choruses, then Finbar plays another, and another, and we all get closer to the fire because it’s icy cold. The stars are glittering. Mum’s shirt has got wet and I’m freezing, so Jim gives me his big jacket. Amy is hunched in her cloak like a bat.

Jim and Finbar play the song about the man who’s *seen fire and seen rain*. I can feel it in my chest, like nice-sadness. *Yeah*, says Amy, *me too*, and we rock ourselves, and stare into the fire. Rani and Martin Hodge get up from the sofa and waltz around over the splashy Yard. They look like ghosts or dolls. Then Finbar and Jim play ‘Country Roads Take Me Home’, which me and Amy love. We’re singing, *take me home where I am born, take me home where I am born* – over and over and over, until we’re dizzy and our cheeks feel fuzzy.

When the singing stops, Harriet and Adam do a Love Kiss, on the mouth, and we all pretend to throw up and Amy goes, *Mu-um! Da-ad!* My mum has her head on Jim's lap, and Niah's little white potato face is behind a blanket. Bryn and Eden are curled up with them, half asleep. My whole family looks like a heap of puppies. I'm glad there's not space for me, I'm not sleepy.

'Mum,' I say, 'will you tell the Story?'

'Oh, Lan,' says Mum, 'really?' But we know she wants to.

'Yes, Gail, tell it,' says Amy. So Mum does.

The Story always starts the same: Seven Years of Bad Luck.

'I was married to Lachlan's father for seven unlucky years,' says Mum. She's the only one who ever calls me Lachlan.

'Poor Gray Parks,' she says, 'I was a virtual child.'

They met at university. She was too young for marrying, which was why they had the Bad Seven Years.

'Seven miserable years. Then! At the exact same moment I found out I was pregnant, I realised I was in the Wrong Life.'

Amy leans and whispers in my ear, *it was not her right life*. That's how the story always goes.

'It was not my right life,' says Mum.

She didn't want to be living in boring London with boring Gray Parks, so, the very next day, she left, with *half her things in a bag* and me in her tummy.

*Lucky you were in her tummy*, whispers Amy, and I nod. We've talked about it before. We always think Mum might have left me behind in the wrong life with Gray Parks if I hadn't been in her tummy, but I was, so Mum (and me) went to stay with Harriet and Adam, in Bristol, because Harriet is Mum's best friend from school. Harriet

was pregnant too. And she was really happy to see her, so was Adam, because *old friends are the best friends*.

‘And my luck changed,’ says Mum.

*Forever!* whispers Amy, and her hands appear out of her cloak, like a magician. We love that bit.

Harriet always joins in when it gets to Mum’s luck changing. She pulls off her hair tie, and her hair springs out and fluffs up in the firelight, like a golden fleece stuck on her head.

‘Adam had a lot of acting work that year,’ she says, ‘so it was just me and Gail in the flat, getting bigger and bigger.’

After Harriet stopped work because of being pregnant, they just lay around reading the papers. Everything they read was *depressing*, like about the greenhouse effect and battery chickens. And Palestine. And hurricanes.

‘All around us, the world was so dark and frightening,’ says Harriet. ‘But we were just pregnant. And we blocked it out.’

‘But then!’ Adam says, sitting up tall and putting on his professional scary-story voice. ‘Fate intervened!’

*They weren’t even looking*, I say to Amy.

*It was just by chance*, says Amy.

‘I just happened to see an advertisement in the local paper,’ says Mum.

### *Farm For Sale in Two Lots*

*Traditional Livestock Farm For Sale. 4/5-bedroom Farmhouse, requiring modernisation. A range of modern and traditional outbuildings. Fantastic opportunity for development. Cow House. Bull House. Cart House. Barns. 78 Acres. In need of renovation. Available as a whole, or in two lots.*

They immediately called Rani and Martin Hodge on the phone. Rani and Martin have always been our parents' second-best friends, and make the Home Team. They lived in Bristol, too, and *that very weekend* all five of them came to see the farm together. They walked round all the buildings and all the fields. It still had the old machines, but no animals, because of foot-and-mouth.

'It was very run-down, and sad,' says Harriet. 'But it was so beautiful, and it was Frith.'

Except it wasn't called Frith, because the people who lived here were called Lacey, so everyone called the farm Lacey's Farm, but it's *real* name was Frith.

'Frith means sanctuary in Old English,' says Mum.

'It's actually Norse,' says Rani, who knows most things in the world.

'Whatever,' says Mum. She hates being wrong.

So Harriet and Adam sold the flat, and Rani and Martin sold their house, and Mum got as much money as she could out of Gray Parks, and they went to the auction, and bought the farm.

*All in about two days.*

When they started renovating they lived all together in the Farmhouse, and in a caravan, and in a tent, and Mum and Harriet got more and more pregnant and it rained every day.

'Tell us about Jim!' says Amy.

'All right,' says Mum. 'So: that spring, 1998, I heaved myself off to do a carpentry workshop near Ledbury.'

'You didn't even want to go!' I remind her.

'I didn't even want to go,' says Mum, 'but it's lucky I did – because guess who was running the workshop?'



‘JIM,’ say me and Amy together.

Mum says if you ever come across something completely good, you should hold on to it. Jim is Mum’s Completely Good Thing. He’s mine as well.

‘And I looked at Gail,’ says Jim, and we all go quiet because his voice is soft and he sounds very serious. ‘I looked at Gail and I knew. That woman is the love of my life.’

The newspaper ad for Frith is glued on the first page of the scrapbook. All the pages are black cardboard, with beautiful curly silver writing Rani did, saying what things are.

There’s a photo of Jim and Adam when the septic tank came.

And the Big Room before it even had a floor.

The best one is Jim making the Rope Bridge, and the three Dads lifting it up with a pulley.

There are loads of pictures of me and Amy on grown-ups’ backs while they mend walls or pick stones, and quite often me and Amy are just lying in the background on rugs or something, while they make Frith *fit to live in*.

‘Me and Lan were here first, and we’re the best because we’re the oldest,’ says Amy. ‘Then, after me and Lan was Josh.’ She counts on her fingers.

‘Then Mum and Jim had *Eden*,’ I say, ‘and *Bryn*.’

‘And Martin and I had *Bill*,’ says Rani, ‘and *Lulu*!’

Bill and Lulu are asleep, so they can’t join in.

Finbar flicks a guitar string so it makes a deep sound that goes on and on, until he puts his hand flat on the strings.

‘And Harriet brought me home, too.’ He does his smile

that looks sad, as well as friendly. ‘Along with Brown Dog, strays that we were.’

‘We didn’t forget *you*, Finbar,’ says Amy.

We don’t remember when Finbar came to Frith, we were too little. And we don’t remember Brown Dog – he died.

They stuck the Farmhouse and the Cowhouse together with the Big Room, and fixed up the Carhouse for the Hodges. And got Poacher and Christabel and Ivan. And the chickens –

And the goats.

And more chickens.

And some more goats.

And made the Orchard into an orchard again.

I yawn. Amy catches it and she yawns, too.

‘Don’t forget the turkeys,’ she says.

The Story always just goes off, into smaller and smaller memories. There isn’t any ending because it’s the story of how we came to Frith. And we’re never, ever, ever, leaving.

## The Surprise



AMY

We're off school for the day to go and see about a flatbed trailer. We're in the back of the Lada. It's going really fast, and our bums are banging on the hard seats. I've got my head pressed against the glass to stop it wobbling, and the hedges whip the Lada like they're trying to make it gallop. The grass is yellow and sun shines in silver flashes in and out of rain clouds. Some of the hedges flying past are high and wild, with little spotted leaves dangling off, but some of them have torn white ends like giants have ripped them up with big teeth.

Jim's in the middle, between me and Lan, and Mum's driving and Dad's next to her going on about how much fuel and feed we need for the winter. They found the flatbed trailer in the local paper. We've never had a proper one before, which is why me and Lan got the day off, but Gail didn't come because of Niah.

The Flatbed-Trailer-Man's house is at the top of the hill,

and we stop in front and all pile out. When the man comes to meet us, two dogs like big fluffy brown bears come racing out with him and nearly knock us down. Me and Lan tuck in to Jim's sides, and Dad pretends to look for something in the car. Dad is scared of strange dogs. And being ill. And disappearing. He says, *oh God, Harriet! I'm disappearing*, and Mum has to say, *Adam, it's fine, you're fine*.

'Get away,' says the Trailer-Man to the dogs, yanking their collars. He's really tall like his house, with bony eyes that look like they've got stains round them.

'They're all right,' says Jim, who isn't scared at all. The dogs don't even leap at him. He's like a god in a cartoon, who can put out his hands and *calm the seas and the wild beasts*.

In the house, the Flatbed-Trailer-Man puts on the kettle, and says his kids are at school, and Dad says me and Lan are only off because it's an *insect day*, which is a lie, because we take loads of days off whenever. Dad's really good at lying because of being an actor. He can say *anything* and people believe him.

From the window ledge we can see brown-and-white cows' bums all squashed together in a barn. The grown-ups start drinking tea and finally, after about a million years talking about antibiotics, we all go outside. The mud in the farmyard is like poo soup, and it's so smelly it makes our eyes water. Jim is the quietest grown-up at home, but when we're out he does all the talking, basically, because he's the only one who grew up in the country, all the others feel like fakers. Except Dad, who thinks he fits in everywhere, when in actual fact everyone notices him, because

he's very good-looking and noisy. The flatbed trailer looks brand new and enormous. They check it isn't broken, and me and Lan climb up onto a rusty machine that's like a centipede, and hang off the prongs, upside down to watch. It's only exciting for about one minute, then they keep *on* talking about it, so we drop back down into the mud and go off exploring. The two big dogs slurp after us and I say, *don't look round, Lan. Act natural*, because dogs know when you're scared.

There's a wire fence in front of us, with some chickens on the other side. Ours are much nicer. These all look the same. Then I stop walking, because past the chickens there's a horse.

The horse is brown, with a fluffy black forelock and a furry tummy. *That colour is called bay*, I say to Lan. Lan wants a horse too, but not like me. Not with his whole body and heart. The horse is standing totally still, with its long black tail and black forelock blowing to the side and its big eyes watching every single thing we do. I run to the chicken fence and Lan and me climb over and the chickens scoot off, all wobbly on their legs. One of the dogs does a big round *WOOF* to stop us, but we don't listen. We can't go over the horse's fence because it's barbed wire. I stretch my hand towards the horse, and the horse stretches its nose over the fence to my hand. The points on the barbed wire disappear in the fur on its neck. Its breath is huffing on my cold palm. I look into its eyes and say, *Lan . . . it's so cute*, but that's not what I mean at *all*. Beautiful, is what I mean, or important, maybe, or mysterious. *If it's a boy, it's called a gelding*, I say. Me and Lan can tell if goats are boys or girls, but we're not used to horses. I think it's a boy, though.

*If it's a girl, it's a mare, or when they're young they're called colts or fillies. Boys are colts and girls are fillies – I can't stop talking. But then we hear Mum calling for us.*

'Ooooo-eeee . . .'

She always calls like that, like a train. And we always ignore the first one. I don't want to leave the horse. But Mum calls again –

'Oooo-eeee, La-an . . . Amy . . .'

We wait as long as we can, but then run back through the ugly chickens and climb the fence with the dogs frowning at us.

The flatbed trailer looks too big and posh for the Lada even if it isn't brand new. Jim gives money to the man from his pocket bundle. They shake hands, and I pull Mum down to me and whisper in her ear about the horse. She just gives me a look like she feels sorry for me. *Can we come back?* I say. *Shush*, says Mum. She's so annoying.

Dad says –

'OK, kids, time to go. Hop in.'

I sort of forget the horse for a *second*, because the whole reason we came was to ride home on our new flatbed trailer.

*Can-we-go-on-the-trailer-can-we-can-we-can-we?*

Mum says we'll bounce off and probably die, but Dad says –

'It's fine, if they fall off, they'll scream, won't you, kids?'

And Jim thinks it's OK, so Mum gives in.

'That's not a good idea,' says the bony-eyed Trailer-Man, but we're already on, so sucks to him.