Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Circus of the Unseen

Written by

Joanne Owen

Published by

Hot Key Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

CIRCUS OF THE UNSEEN



JOANNE OWEN

CIRCUS OF THE UNSEEN

JOANNE OWEN

HOT KEY BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

Text copyright © Joanne Owen 2014
Illustration copyright © Alexis Snell 2014

The moral rights of the author and illustrator have been asserted.

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

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0114-5

1

This book is typeset in 11pt Sabon using Atomik ePublisher

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



www.hotkeybooks.com

Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
www.bonnierpublishing.com

To grandmothers, especially Edith and Thelma,
whose tales tell truths

Part One

Long ago, when the world was young and people still thought of the marsh and the mists and the witch in the woods, there lived a girl called Vasilisa, whose mother fell gravely ill. On her deathbed, Vasilisa's mother called for her daughter. She took a little wooden doll from beneath her pillow, saying, 'When I am gone, I shall leave you this doll with my blessing. Promise me you'll always keep her with you, and promise me you'll never show her to another soul. Whenever you need guidance or comfort, give the doll food and she will ease your troubles.' Vasilisa promised her mother all of these things.

When her mother died and Vasilisa felt sick with grief, she gave the doll something to eat, just as her mother had said. Then the doll's eyes shone like two stars and she told Vasilisa to lie down and rest, 'For the morning is wiser than the night.' And when Vasilisa woke, she felt some comfort, as her mother had said she would.

In time, Vasilisa's father, a merchant, sought a new wife, thinking his dear daughter deserved a mother and the companionship of women while he travelled the land doing his work, and he was overjoyed to find a woman who had two daughters of her own. But both the stepmother and

stepsisters were jealous of Vasilisa's beauty, and did all they could to make her life miserable. They sent her out to the fields, hoping the sun would burn her skin, and they made her work from sunrise to sundown, hoping she'd turn into a scrawny bag of bones. But each morning Vasilisa fed her doll, sometimes going without food herself, and her doll did her work until everything was done. Her stepmother and stepsisters could not understand why she never burned her skin, or became a bag of bones.

A few years passed like this and, the more tasks Vasilisa was given, the lovelier she became, while jealousy ate away at her stepmother and stepsisters like worms through a corpse. As more years passed and the merchant spent much of his time travelling away from home, his wife sold their house near the town and moved them to a miserable cottage near the forest. And right in the heart of the forest lived an old lady called Baba Yaga, who'd lived away from the world in these woods since the beginning of time. She was in the earth and the marsh, and the mists and the wind. She made the sun and the moon, and the day and the night, and all creatures were her children.

Both her appearance and habits were not of this world. Her body was a skinny bag of bones, and her teeth were like tiny, sharp knives. She flew from one place to another in a giant mortar, paddling her way with a pestle, sweeping away all trace of her path with a broom. Her hut was the only place in the forest where a fire always burned, and she was said to eat children as if they were chickens.

Every day Vasilisa's stepmother sent her deeper into the

forest, ever closer to Baba Yaga's hut, saying she needed wood, or berries, or mushrooms that could only be found in its depths, but every day Vasilisa returned unharmed, thanks to the guidance of her mother's doll. As the months passed like this, and spring became summer, and summer slipped towards autumn, the stepmother's anger became so great that she decided it was time to send Vasilisa directly into the jaws of death.



Chapter One

We'd made this journey hundreds of times, maybe thousands. We'd leave the city and turn onto smaller and smaller roads until we snaked through the village and crossed the toytown bridge to Granny's lane. I wound down the window and inhaled the smell of earth and roses, and the marshy riverbank. Those roses and that river meant we were nearly there, which meant having nothing to worry about, and everything to look forward to.

We turned onto the lane and the house came into view. First the ivy-covered walls and the upstairs windows that jutted out like bony eyebrows, then the small wooden cabin perched beside it, with the rocking horse sitting sentry by the door. It was like something from a fairy tale. I tingled. Everything was as it should be. Actually, everything was better than it should be. There was a huge moon resting on the horizon beyond the house. It looked like a massive, milky egg, pulsating with pink and silver, like a heart beating with light instead of blood. It didn't look real. It was special. *A sign*, Granny would say.

Granny was waiting outside. She rushed towards us,

smiling and waving her arms. You'd never have known she was so old. She had such soft skin, and her long hair was still autumn-red. From the back, she might have been in her twenties or thirties. She was wearing her favourite spotty green dress, which she claimed to have had since she was eighteen ('Things were made to last back then,' she said), but I noticed she had nothing on her feet, and hoped Mum hadn't seen. She was worried about Granny starting to forget things. I'd seen it a few times myself – like when we'd go to the shop and I had to remind her why we were there, or the time she forgot about the jam and it boiled over and ruined the cooker – but don't we *all* forget things? To me, she didn't seem old enough for us to be properly worried. I mean, with her looking so young, and being so full of life. Still, I'd had to promise Mum I'd look after us both before she'd let me stay on my own for the whole of the Easter holidays.

Granny practically pulled me from the car.

'I can't tell you how happy I am to see my girls,' she said, linking arms with us. 'And look at the moon! All rosy for my Rosie! Never seen it so fat. What can it mean? It must be a sign for something,' she said, which made me smile. 'Will you come in for a cup of tea before you head home, Greta?'

'I'd love to, Mum, but I should get straight back on the road. Look after each other, won't you? No mischief, and not too many late nights.'

'And you take care of yourself, my darling.' Granny hugged Mum tight. 'I do love you, you know.'

'Course.' Mum looked surprised, and I was too. I mean,

Granny was affectionate, but she and Mum didn't really use the 'L' word. 'See you in a couple of weeks.'

'Before you go, I was wondering if you'd be around tomorrow?' Granny asked. 'In case Rosie needs to call. It is her first time staying without Daisy.'

'I think Rosie's big enough to do just fine on her own, but she can call whenever she wants. See you soon, love.'

I could smell Granny's ginger and coffee cake as soon as I stepped into the hall. One of the things I loved about coming here was that it had always been the same, and it always stayed the same. Same furniture, same smells, same feeling of being warm and content even before you'd sat by the fire or scoffed any cake. Granny took hold of my hands and gave them a squeeze.

'I *have* been looking forward to having you all to myself. I love you both the same, of course, but I think I'm far too old and dotty for Daisy now she's so grown up. Promise me that won't happen to you. Promise you'll always be you.'

Unfortunately, I couldn't promise I wouldn't grow up, but I promised Granny I'd never outgrow her. I knew I could keep that one.

'But I wouldn't worry about Daisy,' I said. 'Everyone's too something or other for her. She's like Goldilocks, except with Daisy nothing's ever just right.'

I was quite pleased with myself for thinking of that, I have to admit, and it made Granny laugh too.

'You look lovely in that dress,' I told her. 'Are we going out somewhere special later? Should I get changed?'

'Thank you, Rosie, love, but you don't need a special

occasion to look nice, do you?' She smiled. 'I've always found that dressing up and looking nice makes *every* day special.'

That was one of the things that made Granny Granny. I mean, she didn't need some big reason to make an effort to look her best. And, actually, it wasn't 'making an effort' with her. That's just what she did. It was no effort at all. So we stayed in for a special night and made a pot of spicy stew together. My hand slipped with the paprika and I thought I'd ruined it, but Granny said the best ones were supposed to taste fiery. To prove it, she added another spoonful. While it simmered away, we chatted about what we'd been doing since we'd last spoken. I told her I really liked my new English teacher because she let us write our own stories, and that I thought Daisy had a boyfriend, and yes, I was still playing tennis.

'Oh, and I've been thinking about auditioning for a play.'

'How wonderful!' Granny practically whooped. 'It's been a while, hasn't it?'

'Don't get too excited. I'm not sure if I'll actually do it. I mean, I'm probably not good enough.'

'Of course you're good enough, darling. Why wouldn't you get picked? Have some faith. Besides, trying is better than doing nothing.'

'It didn't go so well last time, did it?'

I still had nightmares about that. I'd frozen on stage about a year ago. Me, the girl who'd been tipped to get a scholarship to a fancy drama school, had crumbled right in front of the director, and everyone else going for the same part. I'd started crying too, and locked myself in the toilet

until Mum collected me. Humiliated doesn't get close to how crappy I felt. I fell from Promising Talent to Pathetic Failure in those eternal three minutes I was on that stage, unable to remember a word of my lines and desperate for the ground to gobble me up.

'Don't be scared of yourself, Rosie. Don't be scared of failing and, more importantly, don't be afraid of what you can do. Promise me you'll take the audition.'

'Promise,' I said, hoping I wouldn't have to break it. I knew she was right. I *shouldn't* be scared, but knowing all that didn't stop the doubting and worrying about making a fool of myself again. Then, as I laid the table, I found myself daydreaming about what I should wear to the audition. Granny had a knack for knowing how to get under my skin – in a good way, I mean.

'I haven't had goulash as good as this for years. Decades, even,' she said, and I have to say it was one of the most delicious things I'd ever eaten. 'Tastes like being bundled up in a big coat around a bonfire, don't you think? All snug and smoky. Exactly how I remember it tasting there.'

'Where?' I asked, thinking she meant a restaurant we'd been to.

'Nowhere,' she said, wiping her hands on her apron. 'Nowhere important.' But the spark in her eyes told me different.

'What's the big deal? Just tell me.'

'Perhaps you won't think it's a big deal. Perhaps you'll think it's a very tiny deal, or nothing of a deal at all.' There it was again, that naughty twinkle. She looked as if she was

bursting to tell me something. 'I'm not sure I should say anything, Rosie. Your mother will be mad at me. I really shouldn't.' But then she told me her secret, which was that our goulash tasted exactly like the ones she'd eaten in Poland, where she'd lived when she was a young girl.

I had no idea she'd lived anywhere other than here, but I guess she spent so much time asking us about our lives that we never really asked much about hers. As she told me about her time there – learning the language and making friends with people who clearly became like family to her – she sparkled like nothing I'd ever seen in a person, which made me excited too.

'How long were you there?' I asked.

'Not long enough,' she said, and the spark faded a little. 'It was a dream, Rosie, an absolute dream. The bee's knees. I met my first love there too.' She fell quiet for a moment. Her brow furrowed and she clasped her neck. I'd never seen her look so serious. Then she waggled a hand, as if to wave away her words. 'I shouldn't have said anything. Your mother will be furious. It was a lifetime ago, before I had her, before I met Granddad.' She reached for a hunk of bread.

'Why did you leave?' I asked. 'It sounds like you didn't want to.'

'I had to. My mother – your great-grandmother – was very ill. I was needed at home, back here. What else could I do?' She shrugged. 'Then, because of the war, I couldn't return and, by the time it was possible to travel again, I learned that the place had been bombed and there was nothing and no one to go back to.' Her voice wavered.

'So you didn't *ever* go back?'

'It was bombed, Rosie. What would I be going back to?'

'But have you actually checked?' I asked. 'Maybe some people did survive. I could help you find out about them if you want. You could go back there. We could go together.' I knew I was getting carried away, but this seemed like something worth getting carried away with. I mean, it was romantic and exciting and *true*. A piece of secret history. 'Unless you check, how do you know for sure?'

'I know,' she said. 'The letters stopped coming, there was a newspaper report. It said people left the village, but even they were killed, just as they were about to cross the border into safe territory. Like I said, no survivors. Finish your food. I'm not in the mood for any more interrogation. You can't turn back what's happened. You just have to get on with it. You learn to get used to all kinds of things.'

She suddenly looked so upset, and I felt bad for going on about it. I didn't know what to say to make her feel better, so I did as she asked and finished the goulash. But I couldn't help myself. I'd seen how excited she'd been, and how much these people meant to her.

'Please tell me something else. I won't say anything to Mum. Promise.'

'You know more than you think,' she said, provocatively. 'Lots of stories I've told you came from there.'

That made sense. I mean, she used to tell me and Daisy loads of amazing fairy tales when we were small. 'Can't you tell me something else?' I asked. 'Something real?'

'All tales are real, Rosie. All tales tell truths.'

I smiled. I should have known she'd say something like

that. 'Tell me the tale of the man you fell in love with, then. Tell me the truth about that. What was he like? Was he why you wanted to go back?'

She stood up and straightened her dress, and I saw that her hands were shaking. She had this confused look on her face, like she didn't know what to do with herself, like she was lost.

'The answer to your question is yes,' she said. 'I wanted to go back to him. To him, and the girls.'

I followed her from the kitchen, part of me feeling guilty for pushing her to tell me more and upsetting her, but part of me dying to know more. The living room felt warm with her perfume, and it was much tidier than normal. There were usually piles of books everywhere, and pieces of material for whatever dress she was making strewn over the sofa and armchairs, but everything had been put away, and all the bookcases and ornaments looked freshly dusted. She saw that I'd noticed.

'Just been clearing away the old cobwebs,' she explained. 'Putting everything in order. Except things aren't entirely in order. I've lost a necklace. A silver necklace with a charm. Give me a hand going through these drawers, won't you? I really must find it, Rosie.'

We went through every drawer in the desk, every compartment of her sewing box, every pot and vase, but we didn't find it. Granny got down on her hands and knees and started feeling under the furniture. 'I have to find it, Rosie. I really do.'

'I'll do that,' I said, and I knelt beside her. I couldn't bear seeing her scrabbling about on the floor like that. She was frantic. 'It has to be somewhere. Why don't you make some tea and I'll look for it?'

‘Make some tea? Make some tea?’ she snapped. I felt crushed. Granny was never short-tempered. She was never nasty, so I guess that just showed how much she wanted to find this necklace. But she did get up and she did go to make tea and I carried on searching the room. I went through the same drawers again and again. I picked through every box of cotton reels and needles, checked on every shelf and bookcase, but still nothing, so I joined her in the kitchen. She was reading something on a piece of paper at the table. Her hands were trembling as her lips mouthed the words. When she noticed me there, she wiped her cheeks dry.

‘Did you find it?’

I shook my head, silently begging her not to snap at me again. ‘Not yet. Sorry. We can check the other rooms. What’s wrong? Why is it so important?’

She cupped her face in her hands, and I didn’t know what to do or say. I swallowed hard and asked if she needed anything. My voice came out as a whisper. I wasn’t used to things being this way round. I mean, she always made *me* feel better.

‘I’m sorry, Rosie. I just can’t remember where I put it. It was a gift from my old friend, you see. From my Bear and the girls.’ She shook her head. ‘It’s my own fault. I should have taken better care of it. It’s frustrating. Maddening. Not knowing where things are.’ She folded the paper and put it in a cake tin. ‘Why don’t you go and collect some eggs for us to paint? I promised Josephine we’d bring her some. I’ll be all right. I’ll join you in a bit. I’ll just check the drawers again.’

It seemed like it might be a good idea to give her some space so I took a torch and went outside to the chicken pen, hoping she *would* be all right. I didn't want to see her cry again. The pen was at the side of the house, next to the cabin. Mum hated the chickens. She said Granny had decided to get them around the same time she started to forget things, but it seemed to me that they were good for her. They meant she wasn't on her own so much. I mean, I know they're only chickens, but they gave her something to look after. Granny once told me she kept them near her cabin in case she needed to borrow their legs and run away, because you never knew when you might need to make a quick escape. This had made me giggle, but now all I could think about was the people she'd left behind in Poland. What if some of her friends *had* survived? There had to be a way to find out, to know for sure.

I'd collected about a half a dozen eggs when Granny came out, holding the cake tin.

'That's plenty. Let's go to the cabin. The paints are in there somewhere, and we can make all the mess we want, and then hunt for the eggs, like when you were little.'

The cabin was another thing I loved about coming here. I guess it had started out as a shed but had been transformed into what I imagined a cosy Alpine chalet was like. The windows had specially made shutters painted forest-green and mustardy yellow, and the inside walls were covered in tapestries of woods and animals. There was no electricity, but it had a real fireplace.

I found the paint and we decorated the eggs with bright

swirls and flowers. Daisy and I used to do this every Easter, but doing it now without her, after all this time, made me realise how much things had changed now she was older. I missed her. We used to know everything about each other. We used to share secrets.

Once the eggs had dried, Granny told me to close my eyes while she hid them. I'd hardly had a chance to close them when I heard her banging around the room. She was rummaging through a cabinet, all frantic about the necklace again. I could see her breath in the air. I suggested we go back to the house. 'I'll check every room,' I promised. 'Let's go – it's freezing in here.'

She shook her head. 'I'll light a fire. It's time for a fire. I can't wait any longer.'

She knelt in the hearth. There were two nests of Russian dolls there – four round-bellied sisters, laid out in a row. There should have been six, but the smallest of each set had been missing for as long as I can remember. Daisy and I used to play house with them, pretend to feed them tea and cake. Each doll had the words *For DR, for our girls* carved into its base. The 'DR' were Granny's initials – for Dorothy Rose, the same name as mine. Daisy had been named after Dad's mum, and me after Granny, although I'd always been called Rosie. Granny sealed the dolls back inside each other and handed both sets to me, saying one was for me and one was for Daisy, and that we should keep them safe because they'd looked after her, and now they'd look after us, like Vasilisa's doll looked after her in the story.

'What story?' I asked.

'You don't remember it?' She sounded offended. I really didn't remember it, which made me feel guilty, but she'd told me so many.

'What's it about?' I asked.

'You should read it again for yourself,' she said. 'It's one of the best. As I always say, all tales have truths, Rosie, but especially that one.'

With help from a pair of bellows, Granny got the fire going really quickly and we knelt in front of it, rubbing our hands and leaning in far too close to warm our cheeks. After a while, she patted my knee and said I should take some eggs to Josephine. Then she looked at me with these big, wide eyes.

'I love you, my darling,' she said. 'You'll be just fine, you know. And you really shouldn't be afraid of that audition,' she added. 'It's wrong to let fear stop you doing what you need to do. That won't get you anywhere. Always stay strong. Always stay true to who you are, Greta. Always stay true to what you want.'

'I'm Rosie.'

'What?' She looked confused and lost, all twitchy and fidgeting with her fingers.

'I'm Rosie. You called me Greta.'

'I know who you are,' she snapped again. 'Take these eggs.' She handed me three.

'Isn't it too late?' I asked. 'Can't it wait until the morning?'

'It's not even seven yet. Off you go, and don't forget your dolls.'

'I won't be long. I can leave the dolls here.'

I put the eggs in my pocket and left quickly, blinking back

tears. I didn't want her to see she'd upset me, and I didn't want to upset her any further. I shouldn't have picked her up on saying the wrong name.

The air was sharp and made my eyes sting. It smelled like snow was coming, and the moon looked different now. It was a grubby lemon colour, with pinky-grey patches smudged across it. Everything felt smudged. I knew saying the wrong name didn't *have* to mean anything bad. It's easy to get people's names muddled up, isn't it? Mum often called me Daisy by mistake. But that wasn't all, that wasn't everything. I was also worried by the way she was being so snippy with me, and angry with herself.

I walked as far as the village green, and stopped. Josephine, Granny's oldest friend, lived just the other side of it, only another five minutes away, but I suddenly felt terrible about leaving Granny. I had to get back. I started to walk home, then picked up speed until I was actually running. Weirdly, the dolls were sitting just outside the cabin when I got there. Maybe she was annoyed I hadn't taken them with me. I picked them up and went to open the door. It was locked.

'Granny? Are you still there?'

She didn't answer. I went to the window. The shutters were closed, and I could smell burning. There was smoke coming from under the cabin door.

'Granny!' I screamed.

I threw down the dolls, pulled on the handle and kicked at the door, but nothing made any difference. It felt like it was bolted from the inside. I ran to the house and called 999 from Granny's landline and rushed back to the cabin. The

chickens were flapping and screeching and I could hardly breathe for all the smoke. It wasn't long before the fire engine came, and then the whole village. I watched, everyone watched, as the firemen battered down the cabin door and stormed inside. I rushed after them, but Josephine dragged me back by my coat.

I was shaking like mad when I gathered up the dolls, and I saw that the moon was just a great big dirty smear in the sky. I couldn't get that lost look on her face out of my head.



Chapter Two

I don't know how long I'd been there, but sometime later Mum, Dad and Daisy came to Josephine's. Mum was in an awful state. She came at me like a crazy person and asked me over and over again if I was all right. When she eventually let go of me, she begged me to tell her how it had happened, what we were doing in the cabin.

How could it have happened, Rosie? How could it? Why did you leave her?

I couldn't say anything. I just sat there, listening to her words, but not really feeling anything. Dad tried to get Mum to have a lie-down but she wouldn't, she couldn't. Then Dad told me I shouldn't feel bad about leaving Granny alone, that it was an accident, and there was nothing anyone could have done. I knew he was saying that to make me feel better, but I also knew I could have done something, and I knew I shouldn't have left her there. We should have gone back to the house, or we should have both gone to Josephine's. I fetched my coat.

'We painted these for you.' I gave Josephine the eggs, then I gave Daisy her set of dolls, and I started to cry. At some

point Dad carried me up to bed, but I didn't sleep. I spent all night beating myself up for leaving her, but not just that. I also couldn't stop thinking about all that stuff she'd said about living in Poland, and how crazy she'd gone looking for the necklace. I guessed it was from the man she'd fallen in love with there. He had to be her 'Bear'. Maybe she'd been missing him all this time and had never said. Maybe she'd kept it bottled up all these years, and then tidying up and remembering the necklace had brought it all out. I didn't know, and now I never would.

We stayed with Josephine while Dad sorted out the funeral. Those days passed in numbness. No one said very much, and most of what was said was about the 'arrangements'. We were detached from what had happened, and each other, but at least Mum was calmer.

The night before the funeral, Mum and Dad said I didn't have to go, but I did. As much as I was scared of it, I had to be there. I was up and dressed far too early, but didn't want to go downstairs, because that meant it was starting to happen, and I didn't want to feel it happening, because that would make it true. I felt numb and jittery at the same time, suspended between everything. Nothing felt real. Nothing could exist until today was over. I went to the window. There was a thin, sparkly layer of frost covering the green. Almost snow. Whenever it snowed, Granny said it was Lady Snowstorm shaking her skirts from her house in the clouds. She would have loved how it looked right now. We would have made a snowman today. It would have been tiny, but we would have made one.

‘Can I come in, love?’ It was Mum. ‘The cars will be here soon. You should come down, try to eat something.’ She rubbed my arm, and I went down with her, but I couldn’t eat. I sipped some tea and then Dad came to say the cars were waiting.

I was almost sick when I saw the coffin. There she was, only a metre from me, but so far away. I pictured her lying just the other side of the wood. I knew she was wearing that spotty dress, and I knew she had a penny in her pocket. Dad said she’d need a penny to pay the boatman for her passing. He said that was the thing to do. The box was so small. I’d never noticed she was so small. Seeing it made everything more real and less real at the same time. Seeing it was absurd. I mean, seeing that we end up in a little box was mad-crazy absurd.

Daisy and I held hands all the way to the church and all through the service, and I knew it was nearly over when I saw a blur of orange through the windows, which made me feel sick again, because I knew why the people wearing those fluorescent coats were there – they were the grave diggers. We went outside in the wind and stood over the frosty hole in the earth. And though it was cold, my head was hot and my hands were sweaty, and I started to think about all the other people here. All the dead people, and all the people around Granny’s grave. All the lives people had lived, and all the lives people were still trying to live. And I imagined I could hear inside everyone’s head, and see everything that made them the person they were, and I felt like I was floating and sinking, all at the same time.

When the words had been said, when we were supposed to leave the orange-coat-men to tuck her in with the earth, I took one of the dolls from the set Granny had given me and dropped it into her grave so she'd have something to look after her. I kept the other doll safe in my pocket. Then we filed away, and I was shaking so much Daddy put his arm around me and practically carried me back to the car. I hated leaving her there, all alone in that box. We just left her there, like I'd left her alone in the cabin.

Everyone went back to Josephine's for tea. I didn't feel like eating, but Mum said I should have something, and handed me a tiny cherry pie. As I bit into it, I found myself smiling about one of Granny's stories. It was about a girl, a bear and a basket of pies. *Mashenka and the Beast Who Walked Like a Man*, I think it was called. I must have been about five or six when she first told me that story and managed to turn a day to remember for all the wrong reasons into a day to remember for a better reason. I'd been riding my bike up and down the lane when a bigger boy turned up and threw something at me. I remember braking hard as it hit the spokes, and then almost flying over the handlebars. Then I saw the thing slither away so fast I hardly had time to see it. But I did see it – a skinny grey snake – and I'd never been so scared.

I dumped the bike, ran to the nearest tree and scrambled up as quickly as I could, thinking there was no way a snake could climb a tree and get me there. The boy stood there, laughing at me, and the worse thing was, I couldn't hide my face or tell him to go away or anything. I couldn't move.

I was frozen there, terrified of being up so high, terrified that making one tiny move would send me plummeting to the ground. After a while, Granny came looking for me. The boy ran off and she had to climb up the tree, prise my fingers off, one by one, and do a lot of talking to get me down.

When I was back on the ground and told her what had happened, she didn't tell me off for being silly and making her climb a tree, and she didn't tell me off for making things up because there weren't any snakes in this part of the world. She listened, and she believed that I believed the boy had thrown a snake at me. Then she took my hand and led me down to the room in her cellar and told me a story about a brave, clever girl called Mashenka, who was taken captive by a bear, the Beast Who Walked Like a Man. Mashenka begged him to let her take a basket of pies to feed her poor parents. Of course, the beast refused to let her go, but he agreed to take them himself, so Mashenka hid herself in the basket and the beast unwittingly brought her home.

I remember asking Granny if she thought I could be like Mashenka, and she told me I already was a brave girl, and that one little thing like what had just happened didn't mean anything. But I told her I wasn't really very brave because I could never play on the lane again in case that boy was there and did it again, or laughed at me for crying.

'Of course you could,' she said, and told me I should never let what other people thought stop me from doing what I wanted. But, she added, if I ever felt scared again,

we could come to our cave in the cellar and feel safe, because nothing could hurt us here, not even bigger boys or skinny snakes.

Now we were here, at Josephine's, I wanted to go to Granny's cellar right then, not hurting, and not feeling scared about how I'd manage without her. But I couldn't just leave, and I knew she wouldn't be there, so I just concentrated hard on what she'd said about being brave, and asked Daddy if he'd get everyone to do a toast to her. He gave me a hug and pinged a knife on a glass and said we should raise our glasses to Granny. I sipped some wine, then gulped down the rest of the glass and felt really dizzy. Mum must have noticed because she came over and fed me more pie and told me how much I reminded her of her mum. I couldn't bear it any longer, so I ran outside to be on my own, but a few minutes later I felt someone behind me. It was Mum. She squeezed me so hard it hurt.

'At least she told you she loved you before it happened,' I said into Mum's hair. And then I remembered what she'd said to me too, before I left the cabin. *I love you, my darling. You'll be just fine, you know*. It was like she'd said goodbyes to us both.