A timeless, witty and enchanting story about growing up in a large, complicated family.

Minny is pretty cross.
She has to look after her older sister who's getting bullied for being autistic, her Bible-thumping younger sister, sweet fatherless baby brother, scatter-brained mother, and her granny, whose glare could freeze lava at a hundred paces. And on top of this, now her long-lost dad has announced that he's returning home – with his new girlfriend.

Will she ever have the time to work out why her best friend is ignoring her and how to look half normal in front of the new boy?

'Rich, vivid and rather timeless'
DAISY MAY JOHNSON

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AOIFE WALSH
Too Close to Home

'A beautifully written, heartfelt family drama that spotlights autistic sisterhood'
LIZZIE HUXLEY-JONES

TOO CLOSE TO HOME

AOIFE WALSH

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'A beautifully written, heartfelt family drama that spotlights autistic sisterhood. I love the chaotic, brilliant Molloy family, and missed them when I put the book down'
Lizzie Huxley-Jones

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'A good family story, which encompasses complex issues with a deft touch, and very real, funny dialogue'
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TOO CLOSE TO HOME

AOIFE WALSH

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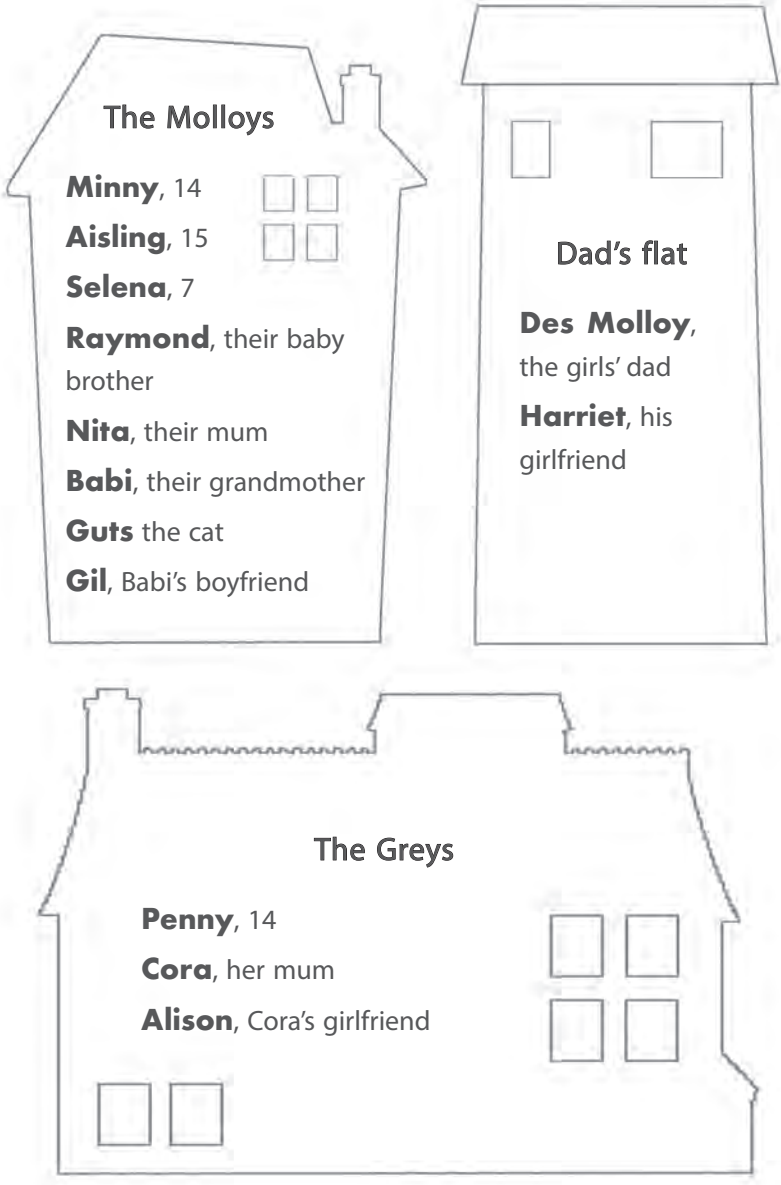
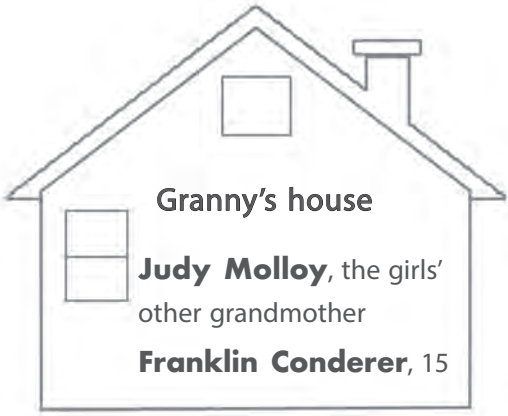
For Oscar and for Ruadh

WHO'S AT HOME?

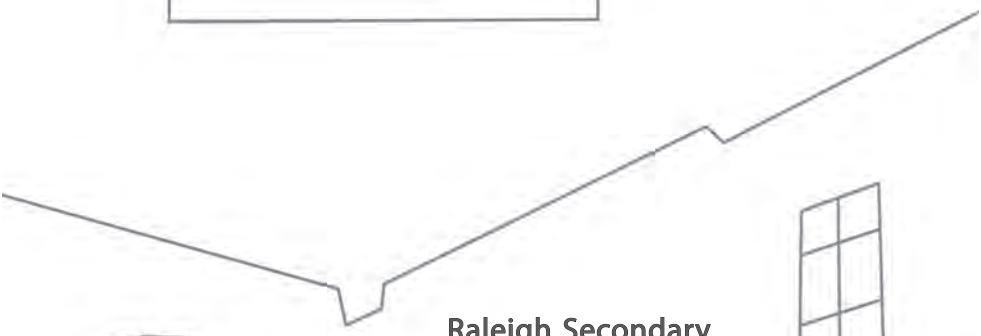

The Molloys
Minny, 14
Aisling, 15
Selena, 7
Raymond, their baby brother
Nita, their mum
Babi, their grandmother
Guts the cat
Gil, Babi's boyfriend
Dad's flat
Des Molloy, the girls' dad
Harriet, his girlfriend
The Greys
Penny, 14
Cora, her mum
Alison, Cora's girlfriend



Granny's house

Judy Molloy, the girls' other grandmother

Franklin Conderer, 15



Raleigh Secondary

Mrs Fansham, German

Miss Kittling, PE

Mrs Lemon, English

Jorge, Penny's boyfriend

Linnea Jessop, Year 9

Maria Hoyle and **Georgia McDonald**, Year 10

Veronica Sedgwick, Year 10

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 astro-turfed 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 damp 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.

'Minnyminnyminnyminnyminnyminnyminnyminnyminny-batman. 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 bustled 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 Molloys, 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 fanny 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 lit-er-a-ture,' 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.

Minny 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. Minny 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.

'Darrrlink,' 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 extra-ordinary 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.'

'It had better be. The pan will smell of fish bones for a month, and so will my fingers.'

'Nonsense,' Gil said, stopping guzzling, swallowing a belch and reaching across Ash to pat Babi's hand. Aisling promptly dropped her fork, which clattered against her glass. 'There's nothing wrong with a woman's scent reminding you of the good food she's given you.'

'Oh my God,' Minny said under her breath. She saw her mother look down at her plate with round eyes.

'Anyway,' Nita ploughed on after a pause, 'something exciting happened to me today. It looks as if we might be asked to take the play to the Edinburgh Festival!'

'What's the Edinburgh Festival?' Aisling asked.

'Can I come?' Sel looked anxious. It had taken about a year for her to get over not being allowed to be in the play – their mother's drama group was for kids with disabilities and special needs, but Selena didn't see that as a reason why she shouldn't get the starring role in every production.

'When?' Minny didn't want to ask what would happen to them.

'What would happen to them?' Babi demanded.

'It's just an idea.' Sometimes their mother looked like she was going to cry; it was the kind of face she had. 'It'll probably come to nothing. And if it did, it would only be four or five days at most.'

Babi snorted. 'I can't help remembering what happened the last time you went away for a few days.'

Nita went scarlet.

'What happened?' Selena asked, tipping up her bowl to get the broth.

'Nothing,' Babi snapped. She shouldn't have said it, not in front of Gil. The last time Nita had gone away on her own she had come back pregnant with Raymond.

When the stew was all gone and they were eating boring Neapolitan ice cream, because the dairy-free stuff Ash had to have only came in dull flavours, Babi asked Gil to help her with the clearing away. 'No, Mama, you did the cooking,' Nita protested. 'The girls and I will take care of it.'

'No, no,' Gil said, all jovial. 'You've got enough to do, Nita. And I'm sure the girls would rather be painting their nails or something, eh? I enjoy being shut into a confined space with Milena.' Minny tried not to gag. She had an unwelcome memory of the day, around last Christmas, when he and Babi had only just got together and she turned round in the greengrocer's and they were smooching behind the counter. It was also the first time she had seen unpicked Brussels sprouts, sticking out alternately from sticks. She had found them disturbing.

'I don't paint my nails,' Selena remarked, mixing her ice cream up so it would turn into a weird sludge she could drink. 'I'm not allowed to use make-up till I'm older. But I'd like to go and read some of my Bible.'

'Still slogging away at it then, Selena? What do you think of that?' He nudged Minny.

Minny thought it was mental, obviously. 'I think it's up to Selena.'

'It's great literature, apart from anything else,' her mother said brightly.

'Well, so they say, but I could never get my head round that. Seems to me a little girl could find better things to do, playing with her friends or what-have-you. Still, it's not up to me, is it?'

'No,' they all said together.

He put an apron on, to clear the table. Over his horrible belly. It was the flowered apron their father used to wear when they made bread on Sundays. Minny couldn't relax until they'd finished stacking the dishes up and Babi had replastered her face and she and Gil had gone out; she never did proper homework on Fridays, but since they weren't allowed the TV on, because Ash was doing hers and Sel was drawing urns and daisies around the edges of her sums, Minny looked at some doctored Soviet photographs in her history textbook for a while. She thought she wouldn't mind a job like that, just rubbing people out. Then Ash had finished what she was doing and left the computer, so Minny glanced at her emails. She was about to shut it down when a new message flashed in from Uncle Kevin, with the subject 'Marvellous Minny'.

'*Minnymouse!*' it started, which was what she'd been called when she was little – all one word, like that, like lollipop or cantaloupe. '*You are a martyr to your own brilliance, and*

to this terrible woman who is obviously sexually unsatisfied in her marriage or perhaps never actually learned to read but has risen to the eminence of English teacher only through trickery and deceit. I'm speaking to Mam later if I can get hold of her and I'll have her on the rosaries for you every night that you get a decent teacher next year who might stand a chance of appreciating you. I loved the sound of Mr Fahey who took you to see The Tempest, *he sounded just my sort of man. I'm guessing from what you didn't say about him that he's handsome and sad with sensitive hands and hair falling into his eyes. Am I right? Don't tell me if I'm not. Anyway it doesn't much matter as long as it's someone bright enough to be glad to have a pupil who can string a couple of clauses together and actually reads books that aren't about vampires. You should tell her all the Salinger books you've read, and Vonnegut – can you imagine? It might put an end to her. Your mother's right, you'd love Jane Austen. Also I was just thinking the other day, you're ready for Steinbeck. I introduced your dad to him when he was fourteen and it was love, it truly was. The time might be ripe.*' Sometimes Minny got a great urge to call her uncle, and *hear* him talking like that, even if she couldn't see him. He never even came to visit his own mother any more; it must be three years since he stayed at Granny's and probably more.

Actually, Minny realised, she missed her granny too. She wondered for a second if Nita was deliberately trying to stop them seeing much of her. Nita had always been driven a bit nuts by Granny, who filled them full of fizzy drinks

and sweets whenever they went to her house, and did things like taking them out for milkshakes even though Aisling was dairy intolerant. They'd never rowed, but once when Granny was round, Minny had found her mother alone with her back to the kitchen door and her arms stretched out pressing against it, whispering things to herself. But no, unless her mother was playing a very long game, it couldn't be that; she used to get Granny round to babysit and everything. That would have been more awkward now, with Raymond and all, but anyway they were old enough not to need a babysitter any more. Since the baby came, and especially since she had to go back to work afterwards, Mum had chilled out a lot about them being home sometimes by themselves. Usually Babi was meant to be there, but it wasn't as if that made much difference, apart from the cooking.

After the baby was in bed Minny sat about waiting for people to come downstairs and start annoying her. In the end she turned the telly off and wandered upstairs. Ash was in the bath singing to herself. Her mother was drying Sel's hair while Sel brushed it, standing with her eyes shut. Minny waited in the doorway till Nita looked up. 'Shut the door, sweetie. I don't want to wake the baby.'

Minny did shut the door, with herself outside it. She heard the dryer being turned off, Sel yelp in protest and then her mother put her head around the door.

'Are you all right?'

'Fine.'

'Is there something you want to talk about?'

'Not really.'

'Is it about Ash?'

'No,' Minny snapped. Then she said, 'Well, Mrs Fansham told me to tell you she was upset in chemistry but wouldn't say why.'

Her mother blew a raspberry. 'That woman. Thank God the school year's nearly over. Look – never mind. You want to talk about something else, don't you? The thing is, I've promised to read to Selena before she goes to sleep.'

'Mum, Selena has been reading the Jerusalem Bible to herself for a year now.'

'I know, but she's only seven, I like to do bedtime stories when I can. And she's a bit sensitive at the moment. I'll be down soon. I promise.'

She wasn't especially. It stayed unusually quiet downstairs, and Minny started watching a film she didn't want to watch because her book was in her bedroom. It was the second ad break before her mother came in.

'Feel like helping me with the washing-up?'

'No.'

'Oh, go on. If I sit down now I'll never get it done, and we'll get up tomorrow feeling as if we live in a fish bin. Please. I'm extremely tired. You don't have to do anything, just stand in there and talk to me.'

Minny sighed and got up, because she had nothing better to do. Even though, as soon as they were in the kitchen,

Nita threw a tea towel in her face so that she could dry. Normally just one of them did all the tidying, because the kitchen was too little and two people got in each other's way; and usually the baby was still up and crawling around tripping you up, or throwing the magnetic letters off the fridge across the room. Most of them were missing now. Minny had arranged the remaining ones into rude words yesterday, and then Selena had come along and tried to change them into Biblical terms, but her concentration wasn't very good for things like that so now the fridge said 'vargin' and 'bullocks'. ('Bullocks?' her mother had asked her. 'Are you sure?' 'Oh yes, all the farmyard animals come up in the Gospel,' Sel said airily.) Minny got the giggles now, wondering if Gil had noticed them.

It was easier to have a conversation when you were doing something, and even with Carole King playing so her mother stopped talking to dance every few songs, she still got quite satisfactorily worked up about Mrs Lemon. 'Stupid woman. If she treats you like that, how's she teaching her non-gifted pupils?'

'Don't know.'

'I hope to God you get a decent one next year. You're so bloody-minded about the subjects you like, especially English, I'm always afraid they'll see your brains as a nuisance and shut you down, the way the maths teachers did with Ash.' Aisling didn't learn maths at school now; Nita taught her at home. The teachers said the way she learned was

incompatible with the way everyone else in the class needed teaching. 'It's probably inevitable in any school, but it's so frustrating. I get really resentful about it. It's like those self-service checkouts in the supermarket that have signs on saying, "Sorry, no fifty-pound notes." Well, what if a fifty-pound note is what you have?'

Minny had finished drying the knives and leaned against the oven. Her mother's face was reflected in the kitchen window, lit up with her hair flopping around it. Minny told her about meeting Franklin Conderer that afternoon – she'd wanted to mention it earlier over dinner, but it was like an unwritten rule that you didn't talk about one grandmother in front of the other unless you absolutely had to. Too much like tickling a bear. 'Why has he moved in with Granny?'

Nita dashed her hand against her head. 'I was going to tell you that. It went clear out of my mind. I rang her just this morning and she told me he was staying. I think it all happened fairly fast as far as Judy was concerned – he's been in some trouble lately, and his mother's not in a great condition at the moment, and it came down to him having to go into care for a while because there was no one else to look after him, and then someone thought of Judy. Bless her heart, taking him in. She's always felt bad about him though, and especially since poor Lou died and he had no one. I mean, besides his mother.'

Minny digested this. Her granny and Franklin's had been

best friends back in the nineteenth century or something when they were both student nurses in London; that was the whole reason they'd known him. When his gran died, his aunt Lou used to bring him round to see Judy; and then he'd lived with Lou for a while when they were about seven or eight. He was at their school, probably for about a year. Then she got ill, and he had to go back to live with his mum in North London. Today was the first time she'd seen him since the aunt's funeral. Franklin's mother was a disaster. Minny had known it at age seven; she always seemed drunk or something, and usually angry when you did see her; and when she wasn't there she was talked about in hushed voices. 'Is it for good then?'

'I think they're playing it by ear. I imagine it depends on how he takes to it, being round here, and if he can keep out of trouble. I never thought he was a bad kid though.' Nita never thought anyone was a bad kid. 'He had issues. No wonder. I hope it works out.' She looked like a painting in the dark window. Chiaroscuro, that was what they called it; Minny's dad used to take them to the National Gallery and walk them up and down, talking all the time. 'Why don't you have a boyfriend?' she asked her mother.

'Why don't you?'

'Yeah, yeah. I'm serious.'

Nita peeled off her rubber gloves, ready to make Minny dance to 'Natural Woman'. 'What on earth would I want a

boyfriend for? I don't have time to kiss my babies at the moment. Between work and you lot and this house coming down around our ears I can't see myself contributing much to a successful romantic relationship, can you?' She seized Minny's hands from behind her back. 'Besides, my self-worth's just fine.'

'That's why people have men, is it?'

'One of the reasons. And I'm not much interested in sex right now either.'

'Oh, *Mum*.'

'Well, it's true. Maybe when you're all grown up I'll regain my libido.'

'Mum!'

'Yes?' She spun Minny around. 'I'll be a foxy – what – fifty-seven-year-old. A bit like my mama.'

'That is pure ram, Mother.'

'Prude.'

There was a patter of feet on the stairs, then a silence, and then Sel put her head sheepishly around the door. 'I'm thirsty.'

'Really?'

'I didn't like the dark up there.'

'What were you reading after I left?'

She peeped through her fringe, over the rim of the glass. 'The Book of the Apocalypse.'

Nita sighed. 'Elise was telling me at work today that her son got nightmares from *Harry Potter*. Some people have

no idea.' She snapped the iPod dock off at the switch. 'Come on, I'll tuck you in again.'

Just as they were trooping out of the kitchen into the hall, the phone went in the back room. It was unusual for it to ring so late; it sounded like cannon fire. Selena plunged for it. 'Hello?' she shouted. Nita winced and shut the door. Minny was looking at Selena, wondering who was phoning at that time.

'Who is it?' she asked, because Sel was just listening. Sel held out the receiver. Their mother took it, then, without putting it to her ear – still holding it at arm's length – she said, 'Go upstairs now, girls. I'll be up in a minute. Go on, up.'

Minny climbed the stairs behind Selena, and followed her into Aisling's room, where Ash was lying on her stomach reading an atlas. She looked round at them.

'Dad's on the phone,' Selena said, her eyes dramatically wide, but her voice sounding surprised that it was such a strange thing to say. Dad, Dad. The last time she'd called him anything to his face, she hadn't been five yet. She'd only just started school.

Aisling didn't seem exactly amazed. Minny leaned against her radiator the way she did when it was on, in winter. Selena was looking from one of them to the other. 'Aren't you as-*ton*ished?' she demanded.

Minny shook her head.

'Why not?'

Minny shrugged.

'I spoke to him last night,' Ash said, turning back onto her stomach.

'You what?' asked Minny.

'He rang last night. You were in the bath. And Selena was in bed. And Mum was still out at work. So I picked it up.'

'And?'

'He said, "Is that Aisling?" And I said it was. And he said it was him. And he asked how I was, so I said I was fine. And then he didn't say anything else, so I put the phone down.'

'Good.'

Selena looked at her, but didn't say anything. She sat down on the end of Ash's bed and tucked her feet up. Ash carried on turning the pages of her atlas. Minny looked at the wall opposite, covered almost completely with a motley set of maps and timelines. There was only one thing framed, a huge cartoon drawing of a scene from *Wacky Races* with an extra car that had Minny and Aisling in it. Uncle Kevin had drawn it and sent it to them for Christmas the year Aisling was six. She used to love *Wacky Races*. Minny wondered again how come Aisling had got to keep it when they got separate rooms. She looked at the poster next to it instead and counted the Roman emperors on it.

It wasn't very long before they heard the light downstairs snap off and their mother coming quietly up. They waited for her to find them.

'Well. You're meant to be in bed, Selena.'

Sel bounced, once.

'So. That was your father. It's thrown me a bit. You know we haven't spoken in a while. But there's no bad news or anything like that, don't worry.'

'What then?' Minny asked, still counting emperors. Ash was lying face down.

'Listen, do you mind if we talk about it in the morning? I know, I know. But I promise, it's not anything bad – it's not that much of a big deal really, it's just that Raymond will wake up if we all stay here, and I'm suddenly very tired. Can we leave it till tomorrow? Good,' she continued without pausing. 'Into bed then now, all of you.'

'Mu-um,' Selena protested, pouting.

'Now's the time to practise some of that Christian patience you were talking about, remember, Sel? Let me get to things in my own time? Come on, to bed.'

Ash rolled over and turned off her light before they'd even left her room. Minny went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth until Nita backed out of her bedroom after re-tucking Selena in.

'What is it, Minny?' she asked in a rocky voice.

'Are you OK?'

'I'm fine.

'Really?'

'Yes. You need to go to bed. I said we'll talk in the morning.'

Minny went into her room, changed into her pyjamas and got into bed. Her pillow felt gritty. It was rubbish being fourteen, and half being the eldest only not really. When they felt like it, and needed you to do something for them, people might tell you what was going on, but the moment they didn't, you were back to being a child.