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Opening extract from

Sunny Days and Moon Cakes

Written by

Sarah Webb

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"Life itself is the most wonderful fairy tale."
– Hans Christian Andersen

For Simone, Lola and Rosa Michel

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Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up *Sunny Days and Moon Cakes*. I've wanted to write a book about sisters for a long time. I have two sisters. I'm the eldest, Kate's in the middle and Emma is the youngest. So I know all about being a sister! As teenagers we used to fight a bit, but now we are really close. In this book, Sunny and her little sister, Min, are also very close. They're both from China originally, but they now live with their new parents on a small island called Little Bird.

Sunny's life isn't easy. She has an anxiety disorder called selective mutism and she finds talking to people other than members of her direct family terrifying. She gets terribly nervous and her throat closes up. She only ever talks to Min and her parents. Her greatest wish is to be able to speak like everyone else. Does Sunny's wish come true? You'll have to read on to find out...

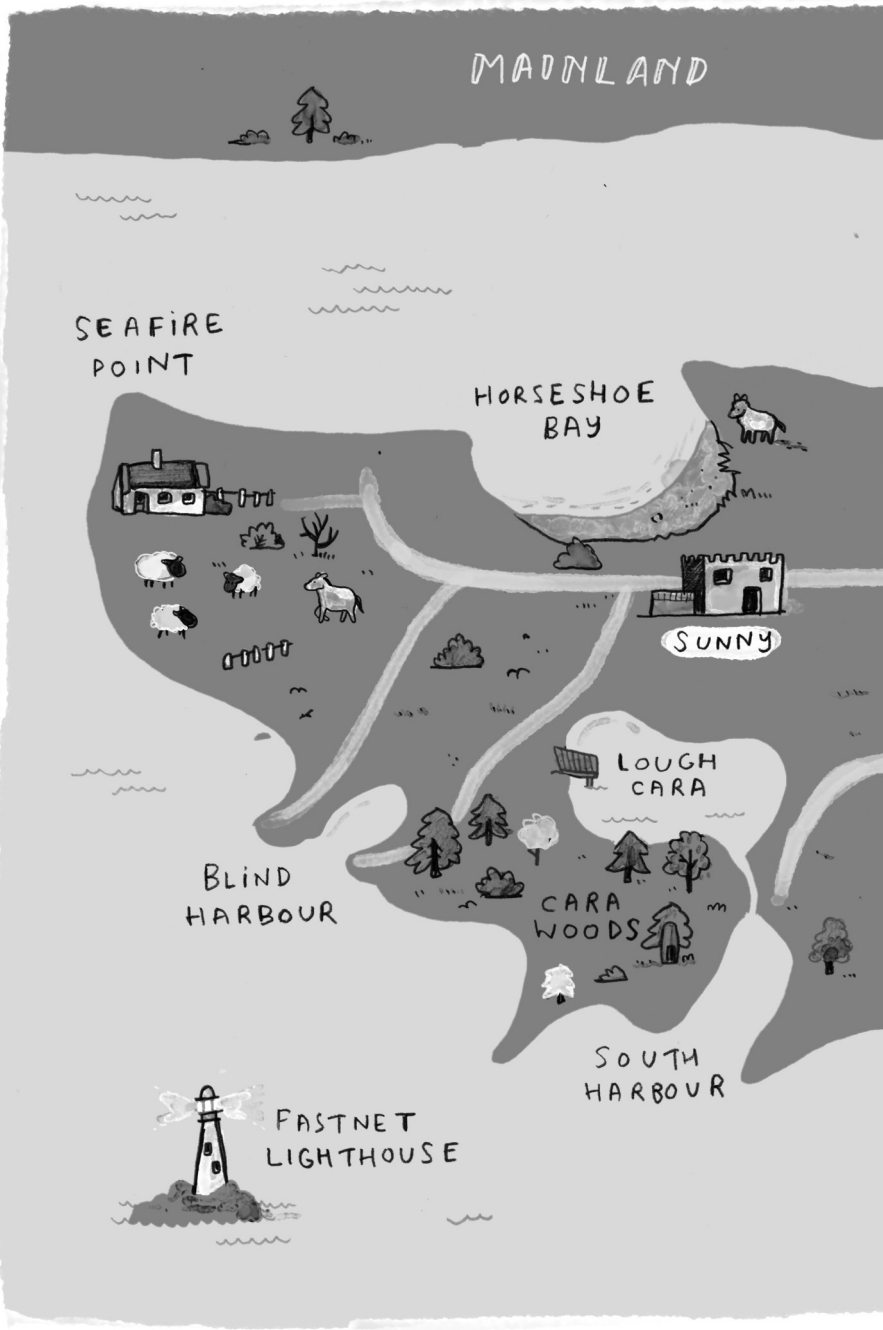
It took me a long time to research selective mutism as I wanted to get it right. I was lucky to meet a mum early on who has daughters with the condition and she was really helpful: reading my manuscript and talking to me about her daughters' lives. I also watched a lot of documentaries and read academic books. An expert in the field, a UK speech therapist called Maggie Johnson, was also a great help.

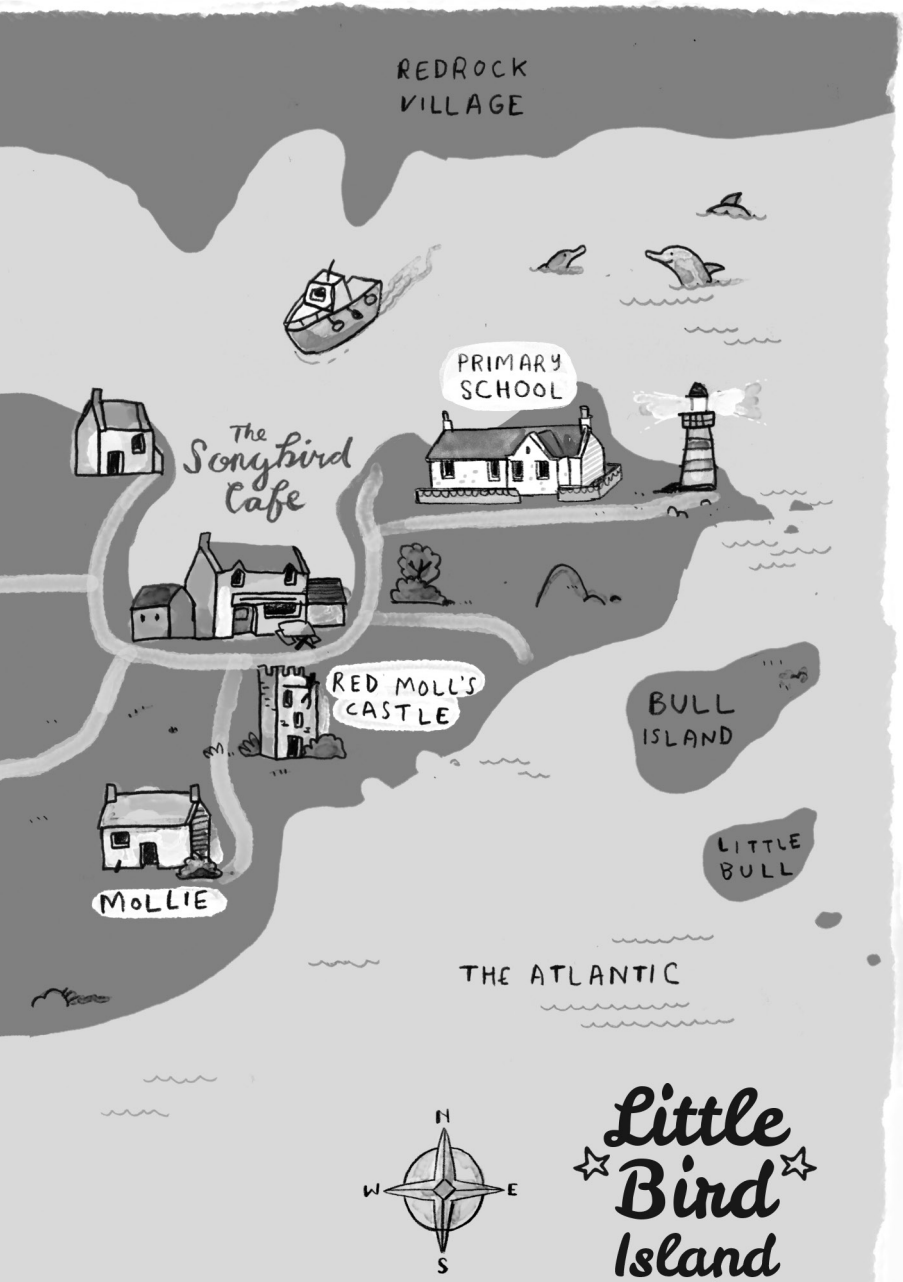
It's amazing how kind people are if you ask them for help with research! Lots of researching went into this book – not just about selective mutism, but about many other things too. I even got to visit Hong Kong and fly in a helicopter with the Irish Coast Guard. To find out why, you'll have to read the book.

I loved writing Sunny's story and I hope you will like reading it.

Best and many wishes,
Sarah XXX

P.S. For teacher's notes on using The Songbird Cafe Girls series in the classroom, see www.SarahWebb.ie.


MAINLAND
SEAFIRE POINT
HORSESHOE BAY
SUNNY
LOUGH CARA
BLIND HARBOUR
CARA WOODS
SOUTH HARBOUR
FASTNET LIGHTHOUSE


REDROCK VILLAGE
PRIMARY SCHOOL
The Songbird Cafe
RED MOLL'S CASTLE
BULL ISLAND
LITTLE BULL
MOLLIE
THE ATLANTIC
N
W
E
S
Little Bird Island

Chapter 1

"Sunny!"

My little sister, Min, runs into my bedroom, trips over the edge of my zebra-print rug and ends up in a heap on the floor. "Oops!" She jumps up and giggles. "Ready for your birthday party?" she asks.

I stop sketching to pull a face at her. "Do I have to go?"

"Sunny, of course you do! Alanna's organized it for you."

Alanna is the kindest person I know and she has always been wonderful to me. She's planned a birthday party for me at the Songbird Cafe, which she owns and runs. I can't let her down by not being there.

And it doesn't look like Min's going to give me a choice anyway. She yanks my arm, pulling me out of my chair. For a tiny thing, she's surprisingly strong.

"Come on, lazy head!" she says, dragging me out of my bedroom and down the long corridor. I almost stumble over one of the loose boards in the floor.

Our home is full of holes. We live in a castle, you see, a *real* castle on Little Bird Island. I know! Crazy, isn't it?

Living in a castle is a lot of fun. The bedrooms are all on the ground floor, along with the kitchen. Then there's our huge living room on the first floor, which has a second-floor mezzanine, or loft, suspended above one end of it. There's also a small third floor that opens onto the roof parapets – built-up walls with wide slots like gappy teeth that were designed to protect soldiers on the roof from being attacked.

Our castle was built in the fifteenth century. It sits on top of a hill, and you can see all the way across Horseshoe Bay to the mainland from one side of the roof and out across the Atlantic Ocean from the other side. Whenever there's a whale sighting, me and Min sit up there with Dad's telescope and watch for their long grey backs.

I wish I could stay in my castle today. I hate going to the cafe in the afternoon when it's full of visitors from the mainland. Being surrounded by strangers doesn't bother Min one bit – she's a right chatterbox and will talk to anyone. I'm the exact opposite. When I am outside the house, I go all quiet. Back in China – where I lived until I was eight – I could speak to anyone, even people I didn't know. But then Papa died and my whole world changed.

I try not to think about the past. I need to focus on my new life. It's hard to fit in, though, when you have no voice. In China, I knew who I was – Soon Yi, a chatterbox like Min, with lots of friends. Right now, I don't know who I am…

Chapter 2

As Min and I walk down the hill towards the Songbird Cafe with Mum, Min is full of questions as usual. "Will there be chocolate cake? I love chocolate cake. And fairy cakes? And…" She gabbles away, and I zone out until she asks, "Will Mollie be there, Mum?"

"I think so," Mum says. "Alanna certainly invited her. And Landy and Cal."

Little Bird is very small – only about two hundred people live here and only six of them are around my age: Mollie, Landy, Cal, and three other girls called Bonnie, Chloe and Lauren.

Landy and Cal are nice to me, but I wouldn't call them friends exactly. It's different with Mollie. We most definitely *are* friends. She doesn't seem to mind the fact that I can't speak to her. We communicate in other ways.

Mollie is new to the island. She only arrived in February. Her mum's a television presenter and is always travelling, so Mollie is living with her great-granny for a while. I hope she stays for ever and ever.

"Is Cal better then?" Min asks. Cal had a really bad virus recently. He had to stay at home and rest for ages. He's missed loads of school and no one saw him for months. Poor Cal.

Mum nods. "Much better. You OK, sweetheart?" she asks me. "We don't have to stay long, but it would be rude not to show up. Alanna's gone to a lot of effort for today. She wants to thank you for everything you did for the cafe. It would be closed now if it wasn't for you, Landy and Mollie."

A couple of months ago, developers tried to buy the Songbird Cafe and turn it into a hotel, but Mollie organized a campaign to save it, and I designed a Save the Songbird logo and posters. It worked too!

I walk on ahead, not wanting to hear any more about the party. I'm not good with crowds. Even small ones make me nervous. My heart is racing, my palms are sticky and I can feel my whole body getting more and more tense. I try taking a few deep breaths to calm myself down, like Doctor Hogan suggested. Milkshake breathing, he calls it – breathing in s-l-o-w-l-y through your nose and out s-l-o-w-l-y like you're blowing milk through a straw and trying not to make the bubbles go over the top of the glass.

I wish I wasn't so scared all the time. It's my birthday. I should be happy and, knowing Alanna, she'll have planned a terrific party. She's probably baked me a cake too. Plus, she's my friend, and I do want to see her. Along with Mollie, she's my *only* close friend. I'm homeschooled by my mum, so I don't know that many people.

Being the only one in the class can be a bit full on, so whenever I need to get out of the house – and away from Mum – Alanna lets me sit in the cafe and draw. Sometimes I help her in the kitchen – cooking, or stirring her special herbal remedies. I always feel safe when Alanna's around, even though I can't speak to her. If the cafe had closed down, it would have been terrible, for the island and for me. The cafe is my happy place. And I think a lot of the islanders feel the same way.

I'm even more nervous today than usual and not just because of my birthday party.

We've been talking about visiting mine and Min's birth country for years now, but I didn't think it was going to happen so soon. Then Mum and Dad brought it up again a few weeks ago, and this morning they surprised me with plane tickets to China. They said they were a special birthday present, to celebrate me turning thirteen. That's Dad for you – once he's made up his mind about something, it happens, quick as a flash.

Mum and Dad are so excited about the trip, Min too. But even thinking about going back to China makes me jittery. And I don't need to feel any more anxious right now. I wish I could stop thinking about it.

I feel Mum's hand on my shoulder. "I understand parties are hard for you, Sunny. And I'm proud of you for trying."

I give her my best attempt at a smile. It's not Mum's fault I can't relax and act like a normal person. Even Doctor Hogan

isn't sure why I'm like this, and he's a top doctor. He's nice, but a bit stern and he wears funny-looking spotty bow ties. He says I have an anxiety disorder called selective mutism, which means that when I get worried or nervous, my throat closes up and I can't talk. I don't choose not to speak – I physically can't.

When we walk through the door of the cafe, I'm relieved to see only a few people inside. Mollie, Cal and Landy are sitting on the leather sofa and armchairs overlooking the harbour. As I walk in, Mollie jumps to her feet, grinning. "Hey, birthday girl," she says. She gives me a big hug, and her fluffy black-and-white striped jumper tickles my nose. "You look great as always. Love the jeans! Are they new?"

I look down at my metallic-silver jeans and then up again, to smile at Min.

"Birthday present from *moi*." Min points at herself. "Don't I have impeccable taste?"

"Yes, Min." Mollie grins and rolls her eyes. "Impeccable."

Everyone laughs. Min's tiny – she only reaches up to my waist – and I think people forget that she's actually eight, not five. She's a bit of a character. People think she's so clever and funny. She's always teasing me, but she's impossible to tease back cos she knows she's a mini drama queen and laughs at herself all the time.

"She got an iPhone too and loads of art stuff," Min adds. "And a trip to China. We're going in a few weeks."

"Cool!" Mollie says. "You're so lucky, Sunny. China – how

amazing is that? And it's great about the iPhone. We can text each other now."

I smile and nod at her. My heart sank this morning, though, when I opened the package from Mum and Dad and found a phone inside. "It's not for ringing people," Mum explained quickly. "It's for all your music and for using the Internet. And texting your friends."

"Thanks," I said, relieved. I felt so bad for Mum and Dad. That was the second time my face had dropped while I was opening my presents. The first was when I opened the envelope with the airline tickets for China. My parents try so hard, and I am always disappointing them. They deserve a normal daughter, not one like me – a weirdo who can't even talk to anyone but them and Min.

"Thought I heard Min's voice," Alanna says, interrupting my thoughts. She bustles out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel. Her dark brown hair is in two plaits today, like mine, and she's wearing yellow dungarees under her pale blue chef's apron.

"What do you think of the birthday lanterns, Sunny?" she asks. "Mollie and I had such fun making them." She waves at the red Chinese lanterns that are looped across the window. They're made of a silky material that shimmers in the light.

As I look at them, an image flitters across my memory. *Huge red silk lanterns swaying in the breeze.* I try to hold on to it, to remember where I saw those lanterns, but it's gone.

"Do you like them, Sunny?" Alanna asks.

I nod. Her eyes are so kind and understanding that I feel like hugging her.

"They're beautiful," Mum says, speaking for me. "We had some paper ones up for the Lantern Festival, but these are much bigger, and I love the silk." Mum is very keen on keeping us in touch with our heritage. We always decorate the house to celebrate things like Spring Festival and the start of the Chinese New Year. And now we're off to China, to see our old home and to visit the orphanage where we lived after Papa died.

I turn away from the lanterns and my back stiffens when I spot two strangers sitting at a table near the counter. Birdwatchers from the look of them – they're wearing wellies, and green jackets with lots of pockets. *Breathe, Sunny,* I remind myself. *Take long, deep breaths. Mum's here and Min's here. Nothing bad's going to happen. No one's going to try to make you speak.*

"Sit yourselves down and I'll bring out the party food," Alanna says gently, guiding me away from the strangers.

"Beside me, Sunny." Mollie pats the seat to her right. As soon as I've joined her, she presses something into my hands. "Happy birthday. I hope you like it."

It's a present wrapped in rainbow-coloured paper. I open it carefully. Inside is a beautiful silver bracelet with a tiny dolphin charm on it.

"That's Click," Mollie says. Click is the island's resident dolphin.

"And me and Cal got you this." Landy hands over another present.

"It was Mollie's idea," Cal admits, brushing his floppy black hair out of his eyes.

I smile at them shyly. I didn't know Landy that well until we worked on the Save the Songbird Cafe campaign together and I still feel nervous around him. I'm even more anxious with Cal as I haven't seen him much recently. Cal's mum, Mattie, runs a sea safari for the tourists, as well as working on the ferry to the mainland. Cal helps her out sometimes and he has promised to take us whale spotting in the summer. We went last year and it was amazing.

Landy and Cal are always nice to me. They never tease me, unlike Lauren and Chloe. Thank goodness they're not here today.

I open the tissue-paper wrapping on Cal and Landy's present and find a silver-and-turquoise charm in the shape of a globe, no bigger than my thumbnail. If you look carefully, you can make out the different countries, just like on a real globe.

I carefully click the new charm onto the bracelet Mollie gave me, next to the dolphin one. Then I hold out my wrist and look at Min, who helps me to put the bracelet on. I never have to tell Min what I want – she always just knows.

"The silver matches your jeans perfectly," Min says and then beams at everyone. "We all have impeccable taste."

Everyone is laughing again as Alanna walks towards us, laden down with plates, two balanced on each arm. Mollie and I help her put them down on the coffee table in front of the sofa. There are tiny sandwiches with their crusts cut

off, chocolate-chip cookies the size of your hand and finally, my favourite, moon cakes, which are round pastries filled with a sweet red-bean filling. They're Chinese and are usually eaten during Mid-Autumn Festival. Alanna knows they're my favourite thing in the whole wide world and she often bakes them especially for me, with a nightingale stamped onto the top of each one. "Nightingale" is what she always calls me.

My Chinese Mama used to make the most delicious moon cakes for my birthday too. And she'd decorate the whole house with balloons and streamers and she'd draw me a beautiful card. She was a brilliant artist.

"Tuck in," Alanna says to me, gesturing at the plates of food.

I help myself to a moon cake. It's hard to swallow when I'm nervous, but I manage half of it. It tastes almost as good as Mama's. Min doesn't remember her or Papa. She was nearly two when Mama died; I was six. And then Papa died ten months later and we had no one. Ever since I opened the envelope this morning I can't stop thinking about China and Mama and Papa, and it's making me sad.

"You OK?" Mollie asks in a low voice.

I shrug. "Want to hear my new movie idea?" she asks, clearly trying to cheer me up. Mollie loves films. She recently decided that she wants to be a screenwriter or a movie director when she's older. She's always thinking up new plot ideas. With a TV-presenter mum, I guess it runs in the family.

"Movie?" Min pipes up. She's sitting on the other side of me. "Can I be in it?"

"Sure," Mollie says easily. "It's about this girl who can turn into different animals. A shape-shifter. I need to find someone who can twitch their nose like a rabbit."

"I'm a great twitcher," Min says. "Watch." She scrunches up her face and tries to wiggle her nose.

Mollie stifles a laugh. "Maybe you can be—"

"The star, of course," Min says.

Mollie grins and rolls her eyes at me. "OK, Min, you can play the lead." They start talking about the movie and gradually forget about me. Sometimes Min and Mollie include me in the conversation – they are used to asking me yes or no questions at this stage – sometimes they don't. I'm used to that.

They don't mean to leave me out and most of the time it's a relief. Otherwise I have to do lots of nodding and gesturing, or Min has to jump in and answer for me. It can be frustrating, though, not being able to give my opinion when they're talking about a movie I really like or a game I think is stupid.

I catch Mum watching me a couple of times while Min and Mollie are chatting. She has a funny look on her face, but I just smile at her and she smiles back.

After a while, Alanna disappears into the kitchen and returns with a birthday cake decorated with pink and white icing. She places it on the table in front of me with a "Ta-da!" There are tiny iced roses on it and a yellow ribbon is tied around the middle. It's stunning. The thirteen candles are all flickering, waiting for me to blow them out.

I'm a bit overcome. Alanna's gone to so much trouble today

and everyone's given me such thoughtful presents. I play with the tiny Click charm on my new bracelet, running my fingers over its sleek silver back as I think about the cake Mama baked for my sixth birthday. It was a giant moon cake with my name on it. She died two days later. By my seventh birthday, I was in the orphanage and all I got was a cupcake with a single birthday candle stuck in it, a book and a new hairband. I told Min this once and she didn't believe me. She has no idea how lucky she is – living with Mum and Dad, who love buying us presents.

"Blow the candles out, Sunny," Mum says.

I'm not sure I'll have enough breath. And besides, I hate opening my mouth when there are strangers around.

"Will I help you?" Min whispers.

I give her a tiny nod. Together we take a deep breath. I try to pretend I'm at home, doing my milkshake breathing, and – *whoosh* – they're out.

"Now close your eyes and make a wish, Sunny," Alanna says.

I wish I could thank everyone for my presents, I think, my eyes squeezed shut. *I wish I had a voice.*

I open my eyes, and before I know what's happening they start to fill with tears. I look over at Min for help and she says something in Mum's ear.

"I'm afraid we have to go," Mum tells everyone. "Sunny's dad is cooking a special birthday dinner and I promised we'd be back to help him."

"But I can stay, can't I, Mum?" Min says.

"If that's OK with Sunny." Mum looks at me.

I shrug and then nod. I know it's supposed to be my birthday party, but Min will keep everyone entertained. She's the fun one, not me.

"Hang on for a second, Sunny," Alanna says. "I have something for you. Over here." I follow her towards the cash desk, where she reaches into a drawer and then hands me a package. Inside is a beautiful red-leather-bound sketchbook with a pocket in the back.

I give her a big smile.

"I'm glad you like it," she says. "I can't believe you're a teenager now. I hope the year is good to you. You deserve the sun, the moon and the stars, my little nightingale." She hugs me. She smells sweet – of wild flowers and baking.

I hug her back. I want to stay, chatting and laughing and having fun with my friends and eating all the goodies. But it doesn't matter how much I want to do all that, I can't. Not even on my birthday.