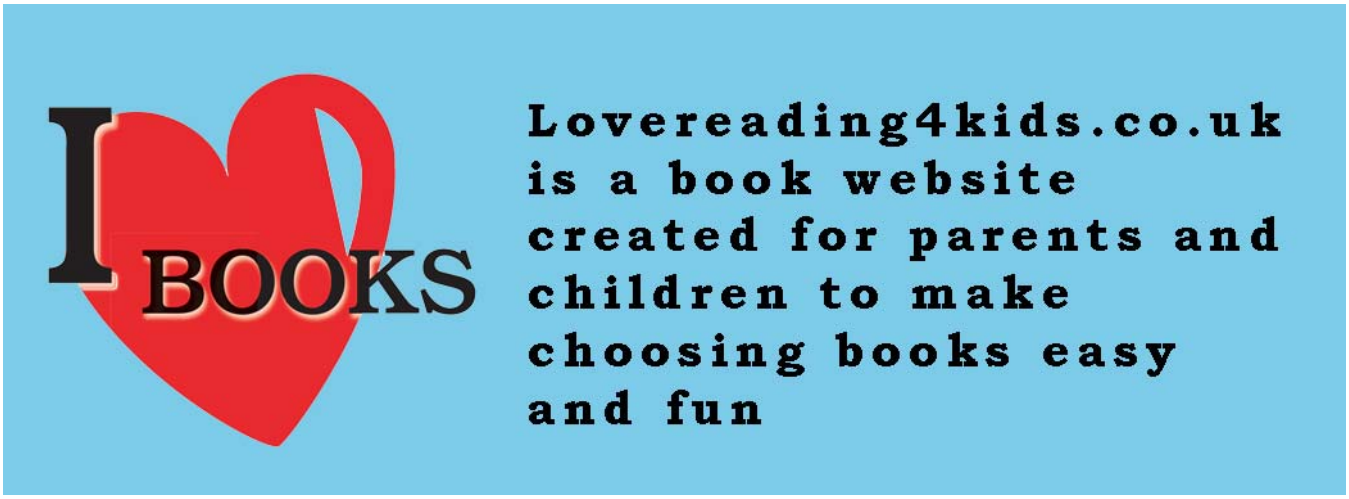


Opening extract from

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Little Bits of Sky

S. E. DURRANT



Nosy Crow

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For Duncan, Rosie and Oliver



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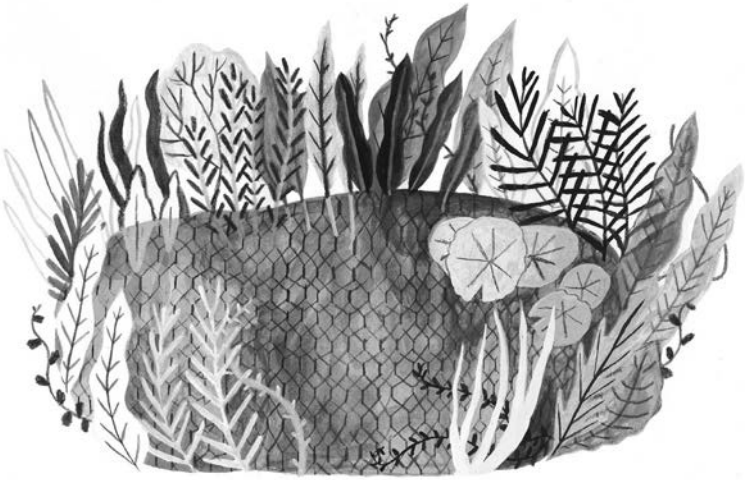
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Today

This is the story of a time when my life turned upside down. Not that it was the right way up before, but for a while it felt like that moment when a clown juggles plates and they're all up in the air and the only thing you can do is hold your breath and hope they don't come crashing to the ground.

I've put this story together from the diaries I kept when Zac and I were children. I wrote them because I felt we were almost invisible and I wanted to make sure our story was told, and also in the hope that life would get better for the small unloved girl that was me, and my even smaller unloved brother. And if life didn't get better or at least more

interesting I was going to make it up – to put in witches and castles and rides in fast cars. But I didn't need to. Life got exciting all by itself.

My story starts at Skilly House. The garden there was the wildest place I had ever seen. There was a patch of grass big enough to run around in, and on all sides a tangle of scratchy bushes and shrubs, trailing ivy and a convolvulus that climbed the walls in summer, dotting the garden with flowers. There was a small overgrown pond covered with chicken wire and there was the fallen tree.

I never felt entirely comfortable in Skilly House itself – it was too full of ghosts – but the garden was special. It was the first place I ever felt truly happy. I think Zac felt the same. Not that we wanted to go there, of course.



Skilly House

October 1987

My name's Miracle but I don't tell anyone. It's embarrassing, especially for a care kid. Maybe my mum thought life would be wonderful and perfect when I was born but it wasn't and it never has been. That's why everyone calls me Ira. My brother's called Zackery or Zac. Both names are OK but Zac suits him better because he's always running. If you call him Zackery he's gone before you get to the end of his name.

We didn't want to come to Skilly. We'd never been in a children's home and anyway it wasn't fair we had to

move so suddenly. One minute we were eating dinner with Brenda and Alf, seeing how much ketchup we could balance on a chip, the next Anita was chasing us up to our room to pack our bags. I banged my suitcase all the way down the stairs, which is unusual for me. I normally keep my feelings to myself, being the oldest. Zac stood in the hall with that awful sad face he has when misery's wrapped itself around him so tight he looks like he's choking and I know it will take ages to dig him out.

"Make sure you come and see us, won't you," Brenda said as she hugged us goodbye.

And that made me feel really sad because I was nine years old and Zac was seven and we already knew we'd never see them again. And she was the grown-up and she didn't know.

After that Zac made his mouth into a thin flat line and that was that. There was no point trying to talk to him. We sat in Anita's car and watched the world go by. Our bit of the world that is: south London.

At first Anita tried to chat. She told us about a James Bond film she saw. She said the actor was really handsome. She probably has his poster on her wall. But we didn't answer so she gave up trying. I couldn't even think about James Bond. All I could think was the car windows needed cleaning.

Anita's our social worker. She dyes her hair to match her lipstick. It's usually red but we never know what kind of red it's going to be. Sometimes it's pink or orange. It takes our mind off things. Maybe that's why she does it. That day it was red like cherries. She looked like a film star stuck in the wrong film with two miserable kids in the back of her car when really she should have been skydiving or kissing a double agent.

It took us ages to get to Skilly. The traffic was all jammed up and I thought the cars must look like ants from the sky. And I know ants are meant to know exactly what they're doing but it made me wonder if they felt like we did inside. Lost.

When we finally stopped we were in a street just like the one we came from. Nothing was any different. There were no fields or mountains or waterfalls or chimpanzees or kangaroos. There wasn't even a park. It was just a normal London street with all the houses and flats squeezed in together like rotten teeth. If we hadn't been in the car for an hour we'd have thought we just went round the corner.

As Anita parked the car my heart started jumping around. It always does that just when I wish it would stay still, like if I want people to think I don't care what happens when really I do. It's hard to look like you don't

care what happens when your heart's doing somersaults.

Anita got out our cases and opened the gate to a crumbling old house. I had to pull Zac to make him come. He didn't want to move. He just wanted everything to stop there and then, like if the world could stop that would be good. When I pulled him he banged his head on the window. He didn't say anything but I knew he hated me.

The house was tall and scruffy with white paint peeling off, like it had been painted a hundred years ago and nobody had bothered to tidy it up ever since. A man was tying a rosebush to the wall. He was trying to stop the roses trailing on the ground. They were small and red and their petals were falling off but he still wanted to tie them up. I expect they looked nice in summer.

Anita said, "Hello," and the man turned round.

He was wearing an old leather jacket and his hair was full of ringlets, not shiny like a princess but all tangled and sticking out. He smiled when he saw us and his face filled with creases. I didn't want to like him but I couldn't help it.

"I think the wind's going to blow up a bit," he said.

He waved a bit of string.

He shook Anita's hand and then he shook ours. I acted like I always shake hands but really it was the first time

it ever happened. Zac's hand went all floppy like when he pretends he's ill. People don't normally shake hands with care kids. Sometimes they don't even look at us.

"I'm Silas," the man said. "Welcome to Skilly."

He's the only Silas I've ever met. He's probably the only one in London. People don't call their kids Silas any more. It's an olden-days name.

We walked to the front door and he rang the bell. There was a sign on the wall that said *Skilly House 1887*, which means it was built a hundred years ago, which is a century. I thought of all the kids who must have stood on the doorstep before us wondering what would happen next. Maybe their mum had been run over by a horse and carriage or their dad had got stuck up a chimney or maybe they just ran out of luck. I turned my face to stone so whoever opened the door wouldn't see how I felt inside. Zac was taking lots of breaths like he was puffed out. Only he wasn't puffed out. He was scared.

But the woman who opened the door wasn't scary at all. She was beautiful. She was smiling and smiling, like she'd been looking forward to seeing us all day and finally we'd come.

"Children!" she said. "Come in, come in. We've been waiting for you."

She put out her arms and wrapped them around us.

It felt so nice. She had yellow beads on the ends of her dreadlocks and they bounced like bees. I wanted to hold one but I didn't. I just touched one really gently so she wouldn't notice. It felt lucky.

Silas said, "This is Hortense. She'll settle you in."

Then he went back to his rosebush.

We went inside with Hortense and stood in the hall. It was dark and the stairs went up and up and I tried to imagine them going all the way up to the sky and at the top there'd be a big burst of light. Then I had a feeling someone was watching us, and when I turned round I saw a woman standing in a doorway. I thought she was a ghost at first. A shiver went right down my spine. She was very thin and she was standing as still as a skeleton and she was staring at me and Zac like she wished we'd never arrived. Like if she could wind back time she'd make us walk right back out of the door and lock it behind us.

Hortense said, "Meet Mrs Clanks, manager of Skilly," and the woman came over.

She walked really straight like a soldier and her shoes went tap-tap on the floor so I knew she was real. Ghosts don't make noises. It takes all their effort just to be here at all. That's why you don't see them much.

She was old and her hair was tied back and she had a frown between her eyes that looked like it had been

there forever. Like she might have been the first baby ever to be born with a frown. She was wearing boring grown-up clothes except for one thing. She had a pink shiny ribbon in her hair. I wondered if someone had put it there and she didn't know yet. But it didn't make me want to laugh. It made me embarrassed.

She shook Anita's hand and said, "Good afternoon."

Then she smiled at me and Zac. Only it wasn't the kind of smile that makes you glad to be there. It was the kind of smile you give someone when you wish they lived hundreds of miles away, like in Australia.

"Hortense will show you your room," she said.

She said it just like that. Not "Hello" or "How was your journey?" She said it like a plumber had come to fix a leak and she had to tell them where the pipes were. And they better get on with it before everything flooded. Not like some kids had come to their new home where they might have to stay forever.

I wanted to shout that we weren't staying. I had to grit my teeth to stop it coming out. I wanted to shout that we hated it here already and we were going back to Brenda and Alf. But I couldn't. Zac would be upset and anyway it never works. Even if the cutest little kid makes a fuss nothing changes. Not if they're a care kid.

Anita usually smiles when she leaves us because

smiles spread. If one person smiles, that makes the next person smile and it goes on and on. You can cheer up a whole crowd of people that way. It's like magic. But that day she couldn't smile. Her face just wouldn't make the right shape. She knelt down in front of me and Zac and gave us a kiss.

"Off you go," she said. "I'll see you soon."

She still looked like a film star only now she was in a war film watching her children be evacuated to the country and she was being brave. She left cherry lipstick on Zac's cheek, then she wiped it away.

We followed Hortense up the stairs. I pretended she was an angel taking us to heaven but I couldn't do it for long. Kids were peering at us through the banisters and sticking out their tongues. A tall boy threw a ball of paper at my shoulder. I pretended I hadn't noticed but I could hear him sniggering.

The stair carpet was so old you could see threads where the soft bits had worn away. It might have been nice once because it still had flower patterns but now they were muddy like at the bottom of a pond. Every step creaked and the creaks were all in different places. Some were in the middle of the step and some were on the edges and some steps seemed fine but when you took your foot off they gave a little squeak. You could never go up or down

those steps quietly; you'd have to learn where the creaks were.

There were drawings on the walls, and writing that had been smudged out, maybe because it said someone loved someone else and they changed their mind or maybe because it said something horrible.

And there was dust on every step. I had to try really hard not to think about it because dust comes from dead skin so it must have come from the children who walked up the stairs before us. Maybe even from children who are dead. I just concentrated on counting the steps. I always do that in new places. I always count the steps going up so I know how many I have to go down. It's one of my habits. From the hall up to our room is forty-seven steps.

Our bedroom is right at the top of the house. You can't go any further. It's nice like that. No one walks past. When we got there Hortense said, "Best room in the house," and opened the door like we'd just arrived on holiday or something, not in a children's home.

But actually it's OK. It's got a sloping roof on one side and a window on the other and from the window you can see the garden. There were two beds with duvets and bobbly blankets and there was a sink with yellow stains going from the taps to the plughole. There was

a wardrobe and some drawers and a table, and there was tape stuck to the walls where kids had taken off their posters. There was a rug on the floor that was so old the colour had faded away, and under the rug were floorboards.

Hortense put her head to one side and looked at us like a heron searching for fish in a pond.

"It'll feel very different when you've settled in," she said.

Then she opened the window and a breeze came into the room and it felt lovely and I looked out and saw a bird fly into a tree.

"Now," Hortense said, "come and see the garden."

The garden at Skilly is amazing. It's huge and raggedy and full of hiding places and, even though there are buildings all around, it feels like it's on its own. There was a shed and a pond with chicken wire over the top and there was a huge tree in the middle. When the sun came through the leaves it made patches of light on the grass.

We had the garden all to ourselves that afternoon. We didn't know then but that's what they do with new kids. They let them play in the garden on their own. At first Zac wouldn't let go of my hand but then he found a stick and started hitting the tree. Bits of bark were flying off. I didn't say anything. I just walked away. Then I spun

round and round until I was so dizzy I had to lie down, and as I lay there I let my head fill up with the blue sky and then I didn't want to shout any more. That's the thing about the sky. No matter how bad things are you can always look up at the sky and then you feel better.

Afterwards we had tea in the kitchen with the other kids. They hardly even looked at us. I pretended not to look at them either but really I kept taking glances. They all did different things with their food. It showed their personalities. Some ate really quickly and wanted more, some only ate the best bits; some just pushed their food around their plate and didn't eat at all. Some kids made a mess and some were really tidy and put their knife and fork together when they finished like they were in a restaurant and the waiter would come and take their plate. The boy who threw the paper at me didn't even chew. He gulped his food down like it was melted ice cream even though it was shepherd's pie. When Hortense wasn't looking he put some mash on his fork and flicked it at me. It landed in the middle of my plate. I didn't eat after that. It put me off.

As soon as we could get away we ran up to our room and looked out at the garden. It was nice to be so high up. It's like being invisible. It was dark and windy outside and the tree was shaking. Two pigeons were sitting in the

branches but they didn't mind. They just rocked from side to side. They were used to it. Silas was carrying some tools into the shed and his hair was blowing in his eyes.

Then we got into our beds and just sat there for ages. I didn't read or draw or anything. I wanted to be paying attention for when Zac spoke.

At last he said, "Why are the walls so high?"

It was the first thing he said since we left Brenda and Alf's.

"It's an old house," I said. "That's how they made them."

"Were people taller then?" he said.

"No," I said. "I think they were smaller."

He looked annoyed.

"Why then?" he said.

"I don't know."

"Can I get in with you?" he said.

I nodded.

He ran to my bed and curled up beside me. People like Zac because when he's not sad or angry he's funny. He makes up games and he can run really fast and he likes to chase people or be chased and to run down the street ringing doorbells. And kids like that even if grown-ups don't. Especially old ladies don't.

But Zac doesn't like other people. Not really. He

doesn't trust them. The only person he trusts is me, so I can never let him down. He's my responsibility.

"What will it be like here?" he said.

"It'll be OK."

We could hear people talking downstairs.

"Do you think there are ghosts?"

I shook my head but really I was wondering too. I wasn't worried about the kind you can see through, or the kind that look like sheets. I was worried about all the children who lived in Skilly before us and all the clues they left behind, like the scribbles on the walls, and all the sad eyes that must have looked out of the windows and wished they were somewhere else.

"No," I said. "There's no such thing as ghosts."

Zac's mouth was wobbling.

"Shall I tell you a story?" I said.

"The special one?"

"If you want."

He nodded.

I always make up stories for Zac. Usually he kills a monster and rescues the villagers or the schoolchildren or the sailors who are drowning because a sea monster sank their boat. But the special story is different because I don't know if I made it up or not.

Zac always says things like, "What was Mum like?

Did she cuddle me?" And he doesn't want me to say I don't know so I have to give him an answer. And that's how we got our story.

"Mum was holding you," I said. "You were really tiny and you were holding her finger like you'd never let go and she was kissing you and her hair was curly like ours and she thought we'd be happy forever."

I stroked his hair and his eyes flopped shut and then he was asleep. That's what he's like. All he has to do is close his eyes.

I couldn't get to sleep. I kept thinking about all the people we'd lived with before we came to Skilly. I always knew we wouldn't stay with Brenda and Alf for long. They were old and Alf kept losing things. He needed Brenda to look after him, not us. Before them there was Petra, who got a job working night shifts so she couldn't look after us any more, and there was Alara, who kept telling us we wouldn't be there for Christmas (and we weren't). There were the Grimbles, who said they'd keep us forever but then their new baby arrived, and there was Adam, who didn't have enough chairs for everyone to sit down at the same time. And then there were all the short stays with people we called Nan or Auntie but who weren't relatives at all and the woman who was mean to us so Anita had to take us away.

I used to tell Zac we were like gypsies always travelling to exciting places but I stopped saying it because it didn't make moving exciting. It made it worse. But that night I pretended there was a horse sleeping outside and an old-fashioned caravan with flowers painted on it and in the morning we'd go on an adventure. We'd go down a long road with grass on both sides and trees blowing in the wind and there'd be hills in the distance and me and Zac would be holding the reins and singing. And then I realised I didn't know if horses sleep standing up or lying down and I was trying to work it out and I think that's when I fell asleep.

The Storm



At first I thought I was having a nightmare. I was bumping all the way down the stairs. The banging was really loud and I was trying to count the steps and thinking it's going to really hurt when I get to the bottom. But when I woke up I could still hear banging. Zac was holding on to me really tight and digging his fingers into my arm. His eyes were squeezed shut.

"Ghosts!" he whispered.

But I knew it wasn't ghosts. I could hear the wind howling outside. I jumped out of bed and ran to the

window. It was the middle of the night and a storm was crashing through the garden. It was pulling up bushes and ripping pieces of wood off the shed and throwing them into the air. The tree was rocking from side to side and all the time the wind was wailing. It was like when a kid has the worst tantrum ever and you know you won't be able to calm them down. You just have to wait for it to be over and hope they don't break too much.

"Zac!" I called. "Look!"

Zac got to the window just as the tree blew over. It was amazing! The wind was pushing it so hard it went diagonal and then suddenly it couldn't get up again and it crashed to the ground. As it fell it howled like it was a dying animal and its roots came up and they were being blown by the wind so it looked like it was still alive. Like an antelope being eaten by lions. Only it wasn't alive. It was dead.

At first me and Zac could hardly breathe. Then we started laughing like we were on a ride at the fair. We felt sick but it was brilliant. We could hear people running around downstairs but we didn't go down. We just sat on my bed and listened to the storm and I crossed my fingers and hoped the house wouldn't blow over.

Seeing the tree blow down was one of the best things I ever saw. I know it shouldn't be but it was.