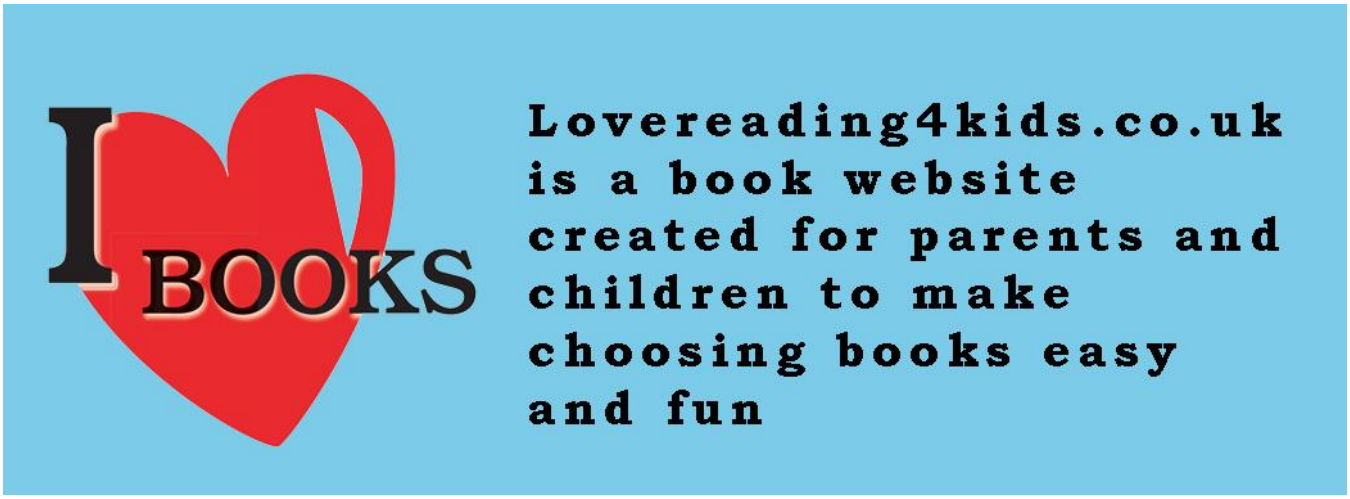


extracts from

The Stars at Oktober Bend

Written by

Glenda Millard

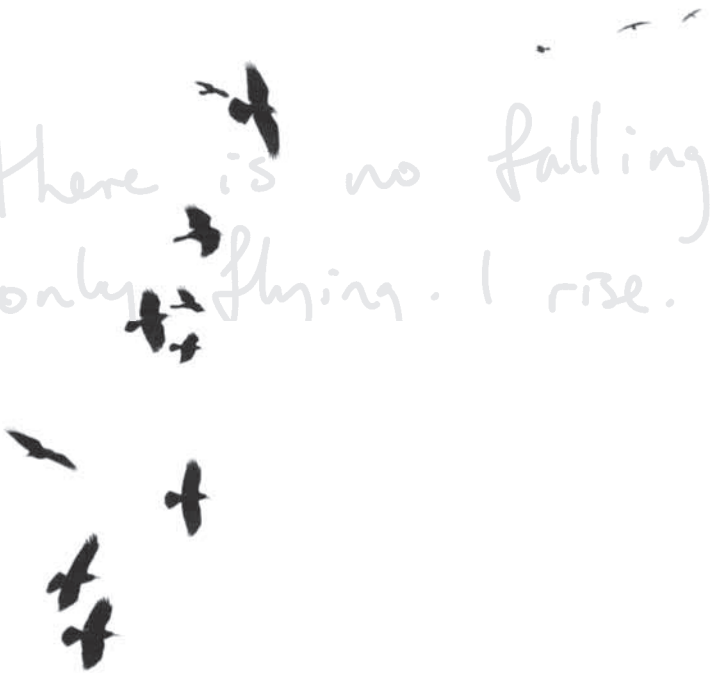
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there is no falling.
only flying. I rise.

5 ALICE

communication strategies

oh patient book of flying! at first the words i put on paper came slow. not like the quick, careless voicewords i heard other people use. in my separateness i searched for fresh words and old forgotten ones. looked for them in the bee-wing book, the dictionary and in library books joey brought home for me. others i collected from the yarns gram spun. book of flying had no ears to judge me. what i wrote there was a conversation with myself.

but even i knew words are made for sharing. sometimes i wrote mine on scraps of paper and took them to the railway waiting room. offered them to passengers and passers-by. no one ever stopped, no one ever took a poem. i guessed they'd heard the stories of my madness and what had made me the way i am. or maybe it was old charlie they'd heard about.

'most people don't understand giving that's for free,' joey said. 'they probably think you want money or you're a religious freak or something.'

that's the way it was in the world outside oktober bend, he said, and i believed him. i couldn't remember what it was like before.

since no one would take what i wrote, i pinned it in places where people might stop and read. railway waiting rooms, fish-and-chip shops, church noticeboards and bus shelters. squeezed them between and under and beside lawn-mowing cards, lost and found notices and babysitting ads. sometimes i pasted speech bubbles on the paper lips of poster models. gave them words so they'd never be like me.

'*in any language a scream is a scream and a smile is a smile.*'

i even invented a word to describe the things i wrote. called them alicisms. i liked that word. it was mine.

in quiet corners, i pinned questions.

is love or flying the quickest way between two hearts?

is love or flying the most dangerous?

is love the only cause of forsaking?

i left spaces for answers and pencils tied to string and did not wonder if my odd questions were signs of shedding twelveness. the only responses were rude ones. until manny came.

9 MANNY

Runaway

I am the running boy. The one who loves Alice. I am called Manny James.

The first time I saw Alice it was late at night and she was sitting on the roof of her house. You do not forget a thing like that.

The moon was big and bright that night and I was out running. Running is what I do when I cannot sleep. When I got to the footbridge over Charlotte's Pass, I stopped to catch my breath. The air was hot and still and I could hear a train in the distance. I looked down at the trees and bushes that grew between the railway and the river and that is where I saw a very strange thing.

It was a house on stilts I saw. I ran that way often, but I swear I never saw that house before. Way up high near the tree tops it was. Like it was floating there.

You must be dreaming, Manny James. Even in this land, houses do not float in the trees. That is what I was thinking when a light came on in a window, high up near the roof of

that house. The window opened and a person stepped out onto a small balcony. It was a girl. Her hair was very long. Down to her waist it was. That is how I knew that person was a girl. She climbed onto the railing, and my heart was beating fast and loud. Almost as loud as the train. Not fast because I had been running, fast because that long-haired girl started crawling up the steep roof and because the ground was a long way down. But I did not shout at her. I did not call out, *be careful, girl!* I could not. My tongue was dry, like the leather tongue of a shoe and my chest was tight with air that could not escape. The train got closer and louder and I watched that girl climb higher.

When she safely reached the top, the air went quickly out of me and I was very glad. But then she stood up and again I was afraid. This time I thought that girl was going to jump. I know what it is like to have no hope. I have been that way.

'No! Don't do it. Don't!' I screamed at the top of my voice, but the train was much louder than me and that girl did not move. She looked like a carving on an old fashioned ship, sailing through the stars. That is what she looked like. The seconds ticked slowly, slowly. Then she threw her hands up, that girl did, and tiny fragments came drifting down all around her. In the place where I came from there is no snow, but I have seen it in the movies. That is what the falling pieces looked like. I did not know it then, but that girl was Alice and that is the picture of her that I keep in my

head. That girl on the roof making snow fall in summer. It is a thing I will never forget. The train passed slowly between us. Its trucks carried grain, not people, and it did not stop at Bridgewater Station. At the far end of the platform the train began to move faster, and by the time it disappeared the roof of the house on Oktober Bend was empty.