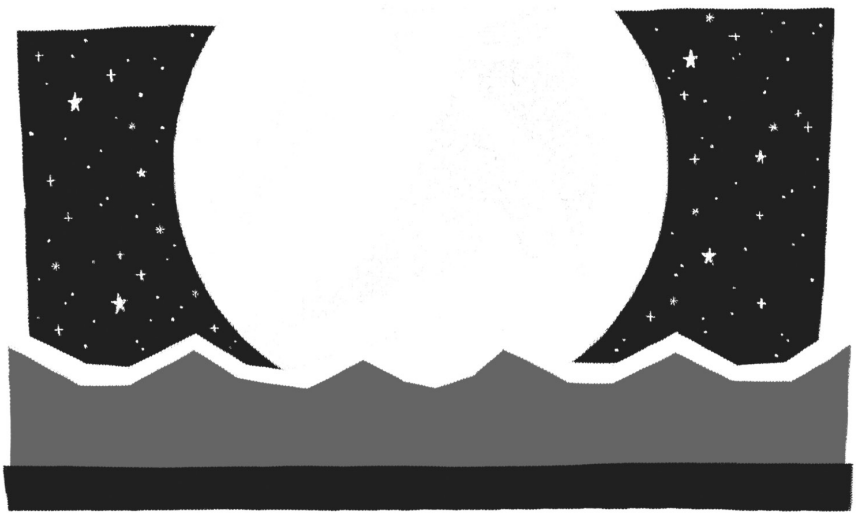


1
OCTOBER
The lost girl

The lost girl looks like me. Even though she's two and I'm nearly eleven. She's got the same wavy hair and gappy teeth and her hair could be red like mine, though it's hard to tell in a black-and-white photo. You just have to guess. (My guess is it's red.) The photo's bent at the edges as if it's been carried around in someone's pocket and the corners got turned over. The girl's wearing a short-sleeved dress with a white collar and she's standing on the stones on Brighton beach with the West Pier in the background (the pier that burned down).

She might be smiling but she's also squinting as if she's got the sun in her eyes or maybe an eyelash. I can't really tell. All I know is on that day, whenever it was, she stood on the beach with a bucket at her feet and an ice cream in her hand. Looking like me. There could be a seagull hovering out of sight waiting to dive-bomb her ice cream, or she might have let the ice cream drip down her wrist because she never liked it in the first place. She just held it for the photo. Or it might have been the best ice cream she ever tasted.

Mimi pulled her out of a box of old photos and propped her on the mantelpiece next to the bracelet. She called her the lost girl.

Every now and then, if we leave the window open or if someone walks in the door, the photo flutters on to the carpet.

On the back it says *Coral*.

Bad things, good things

My name's Iris and my grandma's name's Mimi. And that's what I call her. The whole family does. I know some people think it's weird but it's not weird for me or my mum or even the two-year-old twins. I've been staying with her for five weeks. If I could I'd stay here forever,

I would. I've got my mum's old bedroom all to myself and there's no damp or black mould crawling across the walls like in my real bedroom. There's no water seeping in at the corners either, and even though the room's full of Mimi's stuff I don't mind at all.

Other good things are:

There's a seagull living on the roof.

I don't have to see my dad pull his hair out while he looks at the mould in my bedroom.

I don't have to hear my heart pound when the twins pull the radiator off the wall or think they can fly by jumping off the kitchen table (yes they've done both).

And I don't have to watch my mum run out of the door eating a slice of toast because she's late for work and spend the whole day worrying she might have choked on her way to the hospital (she's a doctor) and there'll be no one there to do the Heimlich manoeuvre. (The Heimlich manoeuvre, in case you're wondering, is what you do when someone's choking. I learned it after one of the twins tried to swallow a Christmas bauble.)

Even though Mimi's house is not far from mine, living here is the opposite of living at home. We eat when we feel like it, we talk when we feel like it, we listen to each other. We bake cakes. We make a mess. And we sit on the sofa and look at her millions of photos from when she

was a photographer. It's a ten-minute walk to the beach. These are the good things.

The not so good things are: the shower's cold, I don't always get breakfast, things go missing. But that's mostly it! More good than bad.

Mimi's seagull

Our seagull always calls twelve times – *kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah kee-yah* – then takes a breath. I'm calling our seagull *her* because you can't really tell with seagulls. Not unless they lay an egg. And there's no egg. Not this year anyway. She's my new, non-human friend.

I communicate with our seagull telepathically. I'm pretty sure she understands. I think she's trying to tell me my life will be perfect when I'm twelve.

I've been trying to work out if other seagulls call the same number of times but I've noticed they don't. Our seagull's special. The seagull on Lee and Danny's roof over the road calls eight times, ten times or sixteen times (all even numbers). That might mean something – I've no idea. Then again, it might not even be the same seagull. I only know ours. And if you're wondering how

I know ours, all I can tell you is it's something to do with the way she tilts her head. And the look in her eyes.

The seagulls on the beach cry any number of times. The most I've heard is one hundred and thirty-eight times from two seagulls circling a family eating chips. (Yes really!) It's probably a record.

Bungee jump

I'm sitting on the step in Mimi's little back garden, watching the seagull watching me from the top of the shed, when a voice says, "Have you ever done a bungee jump?"

A boy's peering over the top of the hedge.

"Have you? Have you?" he says.

I shake my head.

"I'm going to do one when I'm old enough," he says. "It's going to be one of my challenges."

I look away but he carries on.

"I thought it was just an old woman lived there," he says.

I grit my teeth. If I don't speak to him, maybe he'll stop talking. He doesn't.

"I thought it was just a crazy old woman who talks to the moon."

"She's not crazy," I say, "and she's not just an old woman. She's my grandma, if you want to know. And she's called Mimi. And I live here too."

"OK," he says. "I'm coming through."

He drops out of sight and a stick followed by two hands pushes through a gap in the bottom of the hedge. Then comes curly black hair with leaves caught in it and a pair of glasses falling off a nose and behind them a face all screwed up and concentrating. He stands up and shakes himself down.

"We're in the same class," he says, "you and me. I'm Mason."

I know he's Mason. He's the boy who started my school two weeks ago, who throws paper aeroplanes across the room when Miss Sharma's not looking, who tells jokes no one laughs at and walks out of school alone.

And now he's my neighbour.

Mason

Mason stays forever, poking at things with his stick, talking about his mum and her driving lessons and his hobby collecting marbles and his new room. The seagull gets bored and flies up on to the chimney. If I could fly

up there myself, I would.

Eventually I say, "I'm going in now."

Just like that. Quite rude really. I watch out of the kitchen window as Mason waits for a few minutes then crawls back through the hedge. As soon as he's gone the seagull flies back down to the shed and screeches. Twelve times.

Here's what I learned about Mason:

He just moved next door with his mum who works as an accountant for a big company, which means she's always, always, always in the office or working at home (Mason's words). And his mum's brilliant with numbers (Mason's words). He says you can give her any numbers and she can add them up or divide them or multiply them. All in her head. He's pretty impressed with his mum.

His bedroom is next to mine. They both look on to the little back gardens and we have the same flat roof outside our rooms. He says if we want we can meet on the flat roof sometimes. (I don't want.)

He can't stay still, even for one moment.

He goes to the flea market every week to look for marbles (his grandad gave him his first one).

His grandad's very old now. Mason says he's losing his marbles. (He thought this was really funny and explained

he didn't mean real marbles. I think I'd already worked that out.)

He wants us to walk to school together and go to the market together and do lots of things together. (I don't want to do anything with him.)

He thinks Mimi's garden and his garden is just one garden with a hedge down the middle.

That means he thinks it's his.

Me and the seagull

"Have you made a new friend?" says Mimi.

"No."

"Oh, that's a shame," she says. "Just I saw you talking to that boy."

I shrug.

"Not wanting to be rude," she says, "but you could do with a friend."

"That is rude," I say. "And anyway, you're my friend. You and the seagull."

She wraps her arms round me. She smells of her special purple soap.

"That's very sweet," she says, "but wouldn't you like a friend your own age? And species?"

She's laughing.

"Ha ha," I say. "Not really."

"Well, aren't we lucky then?" she says. "Me and the seagull."

And she digs her fingers into my ribs and tickles me, so even though I'm annoyed I can't be annoyed for long.

Interesting things about Mimi

My dad calls Mimi a live wire. My mum rolls her eyes when he says this because Mimi's her mum and maybe it was no fun growing up with a live wire. Because a live wire is full of electricity and jumps around all over the place and if you're not careful it can give you an awful shock. Dad doesn't mind, though. He's an electrician when he's not looking after the twins. He knows how to handle it. And I don't mind either. It makes life interesting.

Anyway, things about Mimi:

Small.

Very thin.

Gappy teeth like me (and Coral).

Long white hair – it used to be brown. (Me and Mum got the red hair.)

Patterned scarf in her hair or round her shoulders.

Wears earrings – sometimes dangly ones, sometimes shiny studs.

Likes bright dresses with patterns.

Wears yellow sandals in summer and red ankle boots in winter and pink slippers in the house.

Messy. Mum says very messy. Mimi has stuff everywhere and she likes it. (I like it too actually.)

Puts ribbons on things – kitchen drawers, baskets, her apron, her swimming costume, her finger.

Moves like a bird – fast, like she might be about to take off. If she had wings, I don't think she'd ever come down from the sky.

Every now and then she does a little dance. In the kitchen, in the living room, in the street. (Yes, it's embarrassing.)

Her face usually goes up – smile, eyebrows – but when it goes down it goes down a very long way and she looks about a hundred years old.

Loves to swim in the sea. She's done it since she was a little girl.

A bit forgetful.

Likes to laugh.

Her most precious thing is the bracelet she keeps on the mantelpiece. Her dad made it for her before he was killed in the war. He sent it home to Brighton when Mimi was four years old. Mimi says it's worth nothing and everything all at the same time. It's got five red wooden beads, three metal beads and a small green metal whistle

and they're threaded on to a bit of string with a knot you can tighten.

Oh, another thing about Mimi is she wants to sort all her photos before she dies.

I said, "You're not going to die soon, are you?"

And she said, "Not if I can help it."