THE BEAR WHO SAILED THE OCEAN ON AN ICEBERG

emily critchley

Also by Emily Critchley

Notes on my Family

The Bear who Sailed the Ocean on an Iceberg

Emily Critchley



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Patrick found the polar bear in the freezer on Sunday evening.

Tomorrow would be Patrick's first day back at school after the holidays and he had spent the afternoon helping his mum take down the Christmas decorations. Apparently, it was unlucky to have them up any longer.

She'd just asked him if he could take the heavy box of decorations and put them back in their place in the garage, in between the crate of old photography equipment, the bird-watching tent and camouflage netting belonging to Patrick's dad. Patrick had left

the warmth of the kitchen, which still smelled of the spicy stew his mum had made for dinner, and let himself out of the back door. He'd run the few paces from the house to the garage. It was dark and cold out, and he only had his sweatshirt on.

He had struggled to open the back door to the garage one-handed. He could hardly see over the top of the box. The garage was freezing, as cold as outside. He'd fumbled for the dangling cord of the light switch, hoping he wouldn't touch a spider's web.

The large chest freezer they kept in the garage was open and inside was the polar bear. It must have squashed itself in there with some difficulty.

The door slammed shut behind Patrick and he dropped the box of Christmas decorations.

Patrick stared at the polar bear, unable to believe what he was seeing and, if he was being honest with himself, a little bit terrified.



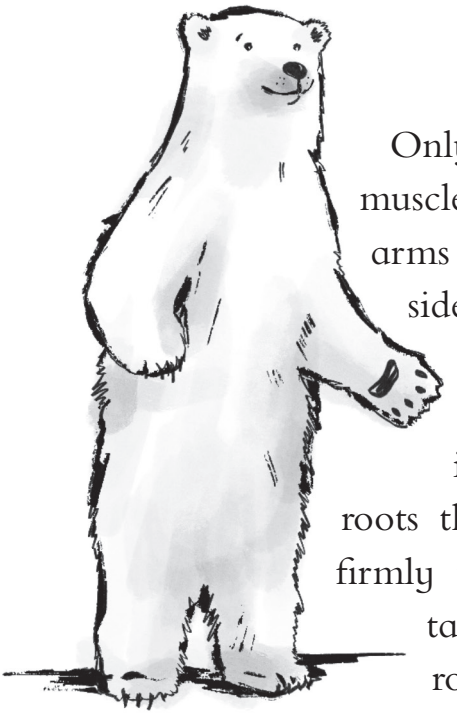
He had never been this close to a polar bear before or, actually, this close to *any* bear before. He'd seen a brown bear once at Whipsnade Zoo but that bear had been quite far away, and behind thick glass. This bear was right in front of him. It had whitish fur, small ears, a large head and huge paws. Its nose was black and shiny. Patrick could only imagine how sharp the polar bear's teeth must be. He tried to think what he knew about polar bears. Weren't they carnivorous?

The polar bear opened its eyes.

Patrick looked at the polar bear and the polar bear looked at Patrick. The bear certainly didn't look much like a vegetarian. In fact, he looked hungry.

Exactly what a polar bear was doing in the freezer in the garage hadn't even occurred to Patrick. He was too busy shouting at himself in his head:

RUN!



Only he couldn't. His leg muscles felt tight and his arms were pressed into his sides. Something seemed to be gluing him to the spot. It was as if his feet had grown roots that were fixing him firmly to the ground, long tangled roots like the roots of the cress seeds he'd grown on cotton wool on the classroom windowsill in Year One.

The polar bear lifted one of his large front paws. 'Terribly sorry,' he said. 'I don't believe we've met.'

Patrick froze.

'A trifle stuffy in here,' the polar bear said, waving his paw in front of his face.

Patrick opened his mouth but no sound came out.



'I hope you don't mind,' the bear said, pointing to the floor. 'I helped myself to a few snacks.'

'S…s…snacks?' Patrick's voice sounded high-pitched and squeaky compared to the deep, booming voice belonging to the polar bear.

Patrick looked at the floor. He could see an empty packet of cod fillets and two empty boxes of chicken Kievs.

'They were a little crunchy, even for me,' the polar bear said. 'And I've known some cold fish in my time. Literally, I mean.'

Patrick nodded meekly.

'I was not referring,' the polar bear continued, 'to the common idiom meaning an unfeeling, hard-hearted individual, although I've known a few of those in my time too. The Atlantic walrus. Now, there's a cold fish. Shallow divers. Like to keep themselves to themselves. Paranoid too. Always think

we're going to eat them, which I suppose we occasionally do.'

Patrick gulped. He wiped a shaky hand across his damp forehead. Here was a polar bear talking about eating walruses. Walruses were very large animals with big tusks. If the polar bear felt he could tackle a walrus for lunch, a twelve-year-old boy would surely not be much of a problem.

'The cat does seem to have got your tongue, rather, doesn't it?' the polar bear said. 'You do speak, don't you? Or do you just squeak? The Arctic tern. Now there's a squeaky bird. Always twittering on about this and that.'

Patrick made an attempt at clearing his throat. He didn't want the polar bear to mistake him for an Arctic tern. Did polar bears eat birds? Was there anything they *didn't* eat? This one seemed to like chicken Kievs.

'I'm sorry,' Patrick said, his voice coming



out clearer this time. 'I do speak. I guess I'm just not used to finding polar bears in the garage on a Sunday evening.'

'No one is much used to finding polar bears,' the polar bear said thoughtfully. 'We're an elusive lot. Except when we're hungry.' With that, the polar bear heaved himself out of the freezer and moved towards Patrick.

Patrick retreated in horror, flattening himself against the garage door. He felt something crunch under his trainer, probably a bauble. He shut his eyes, bracing himself for the white light and the cherubs with the tiny wings. He was about to become a polar bear's dinner.

Time seemed to slow down as Patrick waited for the end. He decided he'd had a short but fulfilling life. He'd seen England reach the final in the European Cup. He'd ridden the Vampire at Chessington World of Adventures and not been sick. He'd been

runner up in the junior talent contest with his best friend Tommy Jenkins who had moved away in Year Six, even though their disappearing trick had gone wrong and the audience could see Tommy's toes sticking out from under the sheet they'd borrowed from Tommy's nan. Better than that, Patrick had won first prize in Year Four for the Peter Pan costume his mum had made for him on World Book Day. Luckily everyone had been too young to make fun of his green tights.

It hadn't been a bad sort of life.

As Patrick was thinking all this he realised he was still alive. Very slowly, he opened one eye.

The polar bear was standing in front of him, holding out a paw.

Patrick opened his other eye.

The polar bear didn't move, he simply held his paw out patiently.

He felt himself reaching for the polar bear's



paw. He wasn't able to shake it, exactly. He wouldn't have risked his fingers between the polar bear's claws. Still, it was a handshake of sorts. Patrick pressed his hand against the polar bear's large, padded paw and they moved their paws/hands in an up and down motion that resembled a handshake.

'It is customary,' the polar bear said, 'when making a preliminary introduction, accompanied by a handshake, that the two parties involved reveal their names.'

'Oh,' Patrick said. 'It's Patrick. Patrick Jolly.'

The polar bear straightened himself. 'Wilbur Ambrose Cedric Barnaby Montague. The third,' he added. 'But most call me Monty.'

Patrick had never known anyone with three middle names. And he wouldn't have said the polar bear was a *Monty*. He looked like he should have a name that was more fierce, somehow, more suited to a polar bear. Maybe something like *Fang* or *Crusher*. Patrick

supposed people didn't always suit their names. There had been a boy at his primary school who wore large square glasses and often had his jumper on inside out. His name was Bradley but Patrick had always seen him as a William. What sort of name would someone give to a non-threatening polar bear? He definitely didn't want to encourage the polar bear to be more fierce. He tried to think of something more cuddly, something a polar bear at a zoo might be called.

'What is it?' the polar bear asked.

'It's just, you don't really look like a Monty,' Patrick said, before he'd had time to think about it.

The polar bear frowned. 'Well, what would you have said then?'

'Snowy?' Patrick suggested.

'Snowy?' The polar bear raised an eyebrow. 'I can assure you I have never known a friend, relative or acquaintance called *Snowy*.'



'Sorry.'

The polar bear, or rather, *Monty,* sniffed loudly. 'Quite alright,' he said.

It was then Patrick remembered he was only supposed to be putting the Christmas decorations in the garage and that he had now probably been quite some time because of talking to a polar bear and all. He didn't want to worry his mum. She'd wonder what he'd been doing. The thought of telling his mum he'd found a polar bear in the garage was unthinkable. She had enough to worry about what with trying to feel better and Patrick's dad being away for work.

He supposed that when you found a polar bear in your garage, you should probably call someone. Tommy's mum had found a bat in their conservatory last summer. It had flown in through an open window. She'd called the twenty-four-hour bat hotline, only when she'd called, the line had been closed. The

bat had stayed in the conservatory all night, hanging upside down on the curtain rail and pooing on the rug. It had eventually flown out sometime the next day. It was unlikely, he thought, that a hotline existed offering advice on what to do when you find a polar bear in your garage, twenty-four hours or not.

It was a good thing, Patrick thought, that his mum didn't come into the garage much. She said it was cold and full of spiders, which is why she'd asked him to put the Christmas decorations away in the first place.

'I was wondering,' Patrick said carefully, 'if you were planning to stay here tonight?'

'Oh, I should think so,' Monty said, loping casually back over to the freezer. 'In fact, I should think I shall stay for a while.'

'Oh,' Patrick said, his face falling. He wanted to make a suggestion as to where else Monty might go but, right at this moment,



he couldn't think of anywhere. It was getting late and he didn't think it was a good idea for a polar bear to be roaming the Hertfordshire suburbs after seven o'clock in the evening.

He had once heard about a lynx that had escaped from an animal park in Wales. The lynx, considered to be a threat to human life, had been shot. Patrick was pretty sure that if a large cat had been considered a threat to human life, a polar bear most definitely would be – whether he had a name or not.

Perhaps it would be best if he didn't call someone after all.

Another thought popped into his mind. He worried about his garage being so close to their next-door neighbour's house.

Most of the neighbours in Cherry Tree Close were very nice. Mr and Mrs Wilkinson and their three small children lived at number five. Mr and Mrs Abidi and their daughter Sanaya were at number eight.

Simon and Simon lived at number two with their dachshund, Rudolph. It was only Mr Crankly, Patrick's next-door neighbour, who was mean and grumpy. Patrick's mum said Mr Crankly had been in a war, only Patrick could never remember the name of the war. He thought it had something to do with forks.

He definitely didn't want Mr Crankly discovering there was a polar bear in the Jollys' garage planning to stay for a while. Mr Crankly would immediately alert the authorities. He'd know *exactly* who to call. He probably still had guns, or a bazooka, left over from the war.

'I was wondering,' said Monty, interrupting Patrick's thoughts. 'If you had any ideas about breakfast.'

'Breakfast?'

'You know,' Monty said, 'breakfast. The meal that breaks the fast. Most important of the day.'



Patrick realised that Monty was asking him what he should do for breakfast, as in what he should *eat*. He tried to think what a polar bear might like for breakfast. He was pretty sure it wouldn't be marmite on whole wheat toast which is what Patrick was planning to have tomorrow morning, or gluten-free muesli with goat's milk, which is what his mum would undoubtedly be having.

'I'm not sure there's much in for breakfast. But I can go to the Co-op after school tomorrow if you like? I might be able to get you some fish.'

Monty's eyes brightened. 'Fish. Yes, *fish*. Perfect. I should think I'll be able to hold on until supper time. Polar bears are quite used to fasting. Although I *am* known for being a little cranky at breakfast, not that I've ever perceived the trait to be a character deficit. "Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast," as Mr Wilde once said.'

'Mr Wilde? Was he an explorer?'

Monty chuckled. 'I shouldn't have thought so. "A place where birds fly around uncooked" was, I do believe, Mr Wilde's definition of nature.'

Patrick stared at Monty. Although he would never have expected to find a polar bear in the garage, especially not one who spoke, he *certainly* wouldn't have expected to find a polar bear who talked like Monty.

'Who exactly is this Mr Wilde then?'

'Why, Oscar, of course!'

Patrick must have looked blank because Monty stood up on his hind legs, which was pretty alarming, and proceeded to say, rather unnecessarily loudly, Patrick thought, 'Oscar Wilde! Poet. Playwright. Witty raconteur. Gentleman of the finest calibre. Most iconic and prominent figure in late Victorian society!'

'Sorry,' Patrick said. 'Never heard of him.'



Monty sighed and dropped back down onto four paws. 'Never mind. What I was saying is that I should be able to skip breakfast tomorrow if supper is to be provided.'

'Um, great,' Patrick said, thinking he might at least be able to sleep a little better knowing that Monty wasn't starving and could wait until Patrick got back from school. 'I'll see you tomorrow then.'

'Cheerio,' Monty said, waving a paw.

Patrick took several steps backwards, opened the garage door, and slipped outside. He shut the door firmly behind him then sprinted up the path to the kitchen.