PROLOGUE

Greta Woebegone did not believe in ghosts because she was a sensible young girl and sensible young girls tend not to believe in ghosts. That was until the day she was knocked over by a car and died, when everything changed.

But do not be too alarmed. Greta Woebegone did not die for long. You see, the thing about Greta is that she is surprisingly indestructible, and a Volkswagen Passat proved to be no match for her.

But we shall not be starting our story at the scene of an automobile accident. That would be far too dramatic, and this is not that type of book. This is a very serious novel full of *important themes* and *valuable moral lessons*, and not one of easy thrills and cheap laughs. Instead we shall begin by introducing the characters, and build up to

the ‘little car incident’, as it became known in the Woebegone household.

So who belongs to this Woebegone household? Excellent question, assiduous reader.

You have already met Greta Woebegone. She is ten years old, small and unimportant-looking. Beyond that, I am not sure what to say about her – you children all look the same to me. She is, though, the main character of this book unfortunately. And why ‘unfortunately’? Because Greta Woebegone is rather dull.

‘No, I’m not!’ Greta might argue, if it was her turn to talk, which it isn’t. ‘I’m actually rather interesting. I have brown hair. I love dogs and football. My favourite subject is –’

Stop interrupting, Greta. Wait your turn.

Greta lives in Woebegone Hall – a grand name for not such a grand house. The name was given to it by Greta’s great-great-great-great-grandfather, a man high of aspiration and low of wealth. Woebegone Hall is a tall tombstone of a building, a great weathered slab of grey stone peppered with cobwebbed windows.

It has four bedrooms, and Greta's bedroom looks out over the small back garden, the graveyard beyond, where many of the Woebegone family are buried, and on to the factories in the distance.

Greta's brother (even more small and insignificant than his sister) has the bedroom next to hers. He is three years old. I cannot at this moment recall his name. If it were his turn to speak, he would probably say something about lorries or some such. I don't really know – I try not to listen to him.

Greta is fortunate enough to still have both her parents. Her father, William Woebegone, uses a wheelchair, smokes a pipe, has a large beard and moustache, and is always working on his latest collection of poetry. Her mother, Prosecca, also smokes a pipe but has neither beard nor moustache. She does have dyed purple hair, however, and loves yoga, crystals and chanting. And whenever Prosecca chants, William closes his eyes and furrows his brow as if in great pain.

That leaves Mildred Woebegone – or Grandma Woebegone, as she is more commonly known – both

ancient family matriarch and Greta's best friend. Grandma Woebegone lives in the attic, because that is where old women live in stories, even though it is extremely impractical and dangerous to give them rooms at the top of so many rickety stairs. She has a world-record-sized marble collection, and many, many years ago was a racing driver – and a very good one too.

She was all set to race in the World Championship before an accident destroyed her car and left her with a broken arm, and her husband, George Woebegone, made her stop, which was something that husbands could do to their wives in those days.

Grandma Woebegone's bedroom is dotted with black-and-white photographs of her standing next to her racing car, shaking bottles of champagne, laurel wreaths round her neck, and several old trophies that gather dust on her shelf.

Grandma Woebegone is also convinced she can speak to ghosts. This is nonsense. The rest of the family all know there is nothing haunted about their house. The strange chills they all feel from

time to time are just draughts. The weird clunks and creaks that rattle the house at night are just pipes. The creeping sense of dread that shivers up their necks whenever they go into the cellar is just rising damp. And the awful smells that occasionally fill the house are merely coming from the nappy of Greta's little brother (this is true – those nappies are undeniably dreadful).

Finally there is a cowardly ginger cat called Pussy Lanimous. When not hiding under a bed or in wardrobes, it wees on the rugs and fails to catch the mice that scuttle around the house whenever the lights go out, which they regularly do.

And that is everybody you need to know about right now. Well, not quite everybody . . . So who am I? Ah, *that* is the question. But one that will be answered later. For now I shall retreat into the background and allow this little story to unfold.

We begin on a biting grey morning deep in the cold heart of November, as Greta Woebegone makes her entrance . . .

