CLARE WEZE



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THE STORM SWIMMER

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The Lightning Catcher
The Storm Swimmer

THE STORM SWIMMER

CLARE WEZE



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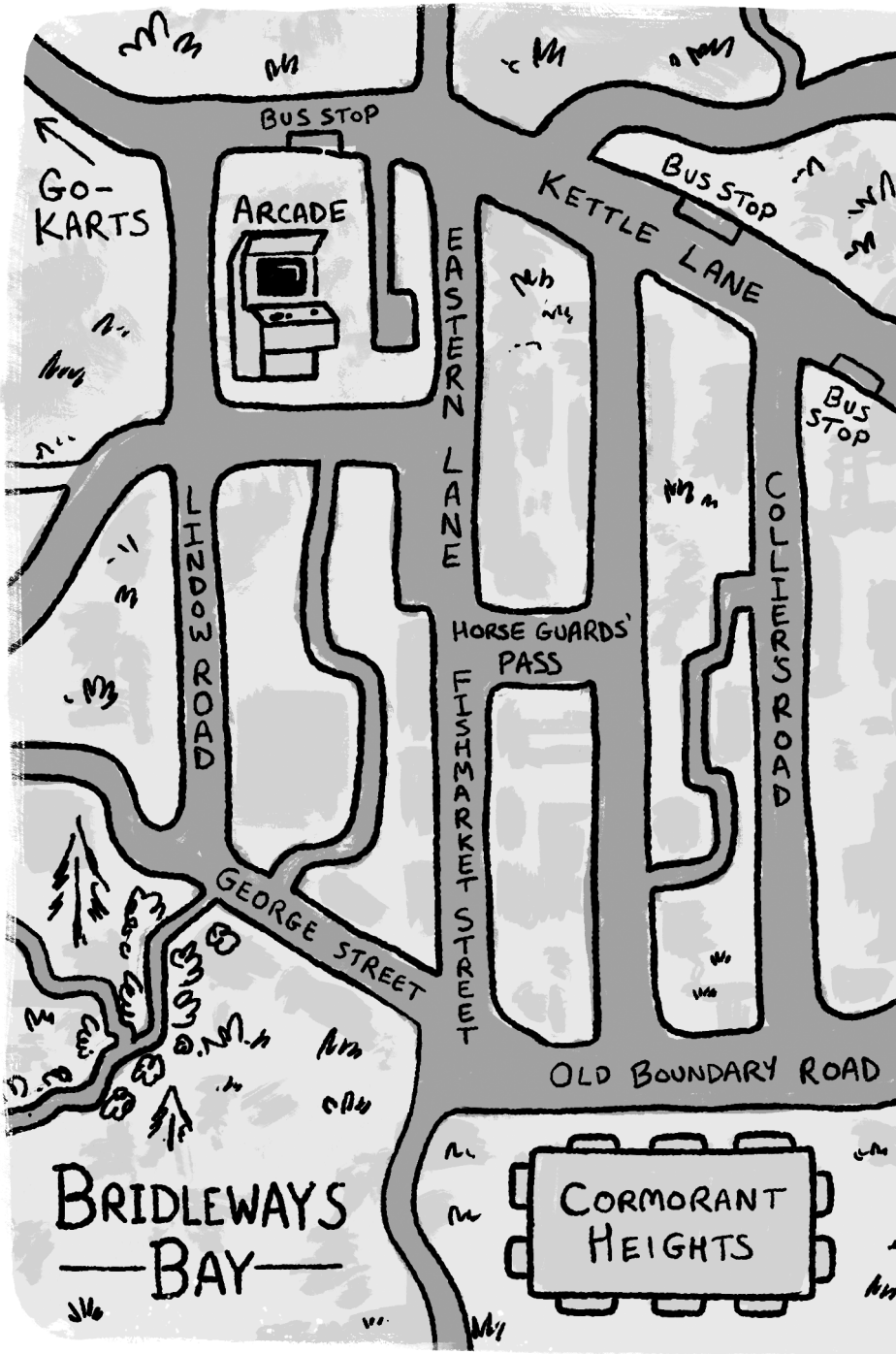
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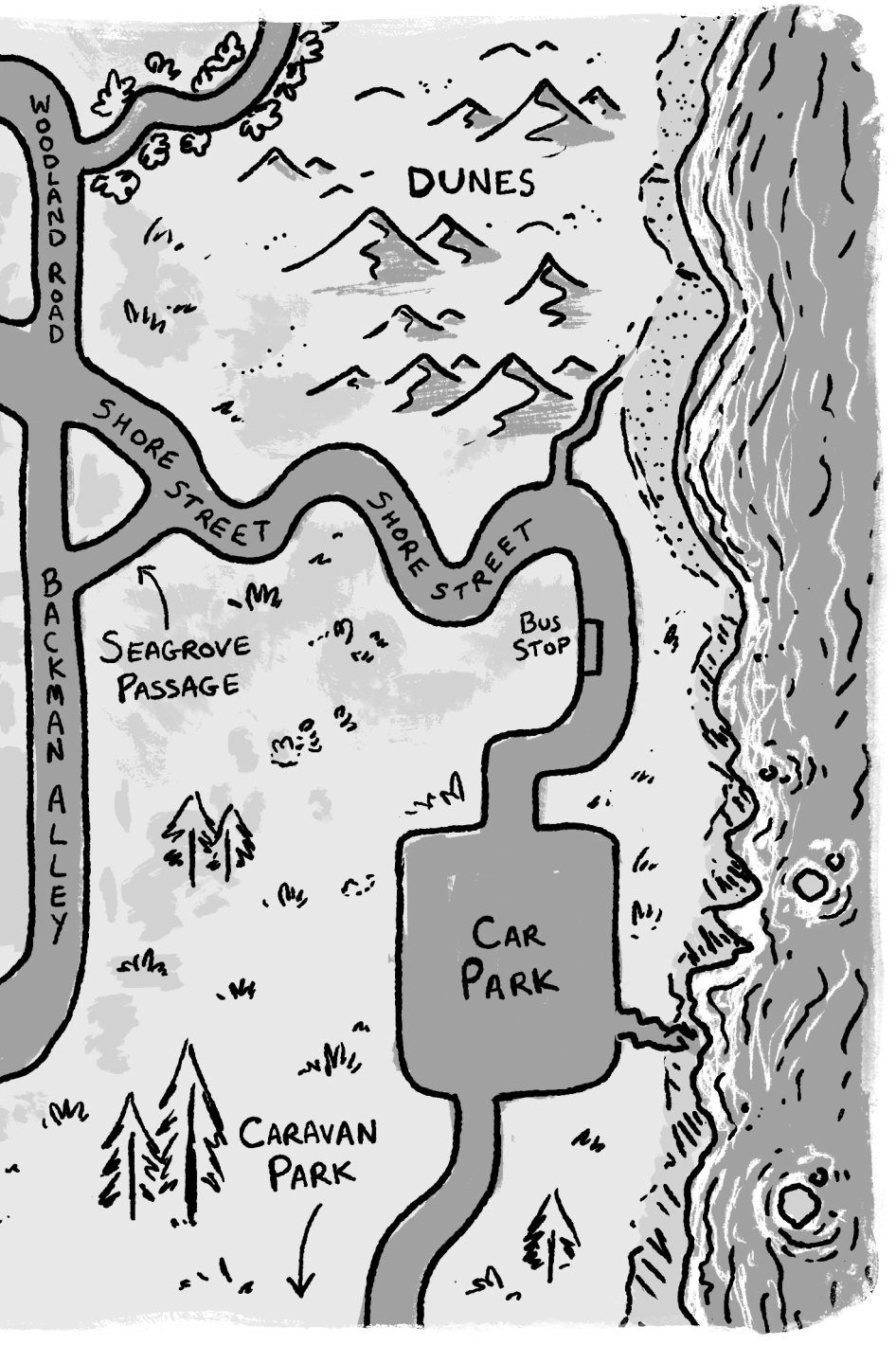
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For Annette and Vernon Waterhouse


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BACKMAN ALLEY
SEAGROVE PASSAGE
BUS STOP
CAR PARK
CARAVAN PARK



Chapter 1

Ginika wouldn't have chosen this spot for their goodbye picnic tea, but Dad kept changing his mind. There had been a nice wide street not far from their old flat. She could have stood there and looked up at her old bedroom window, but Mum said she couldn't get near the place without coming out in a rash. Then there had been the road right next to her favourite train line, but a wailing man holding his head in his hands spoilt it for Dad.

But after Kingsland Road, Dad had snaked and jerked the rattling campervan down clever side roads to give her a view straight through to a distant Tower Bridge and glittering skyscrapers. She'd glimpsed the river, seen silhouettes of boats and buses. She'd been part of a roaring surge of traffic, so that now, sitting at the campervan's little

picnic table, she felt powerful and brave enough to do this: persuade her parents to let her carry on living with them.

In this campervan, on these London streets.

She put down her fork, swallowed her mouthful of jollof rice and started soft and easy, repeating what she'd rehearsed to perfection. 'You know, I really don't mind being squashed up in here. I don't need space at all, or a bedroom of my own. I'm so much smaller than you that you've probably forgotten how tiny a space I can fit into …' Her words ran into the usual expression on Dad's face whenever she raised the subject: fed up. Tired. Mum had looked down at her hands as soon as she'd started speaking.

Ginika took an extra-deep breath and tried to keep her mind on the prize: life in a campervan! She'd be the only one of her friends to live like this, and they would be *so* jealous. 'I know you think I need a proper house, but I really don't—'

Dad held up his hand. 'Ginki – I know what you're going to say and we've been through this. You can't live in here with us.'

'I *so* can!' Even if the campervan was small, it had to be better than moving hundreds of miles away.

'Darling,' Mum said, 'you've been as brave as anything about the move and we're proud of you. All this mess is nothing to do with you – there's no need for you to be

squashed up and slumming it with us. You can have all that healthy space and normality by the sea.'

'But why *right now*?' Ginika said. 'We've got loads of stuff planned for the last summer holiday before big school. *Everyone's* coming. And the end-of-summer show – how can I miss that?'

Mum stared into her jollof bowl and sighed. 'There will be other dance shows—'

'Not ones I've rehearsed so *perfectly*. Everything's in it. Every move I've ever learned.'

Mum shook her head. 'It has to be now. And you *love* Grandma and Grandpa! It'll be so nice for you up in Cumbria. The fresh air! The beach! Sea! Jellyfish!' She glanced between Ginika and Dad as if she had to give them equal eyeballing. 'And Clawdy-puss. He *loves* you. It's going to be a treat.'

'Why don't you just talk to me like you talk to each other?'

'We do,' Mum said. 'We are.'

'You're not. It's all fairy stories.'

'Ginika—'

'It's all *you'll love it, such a treat*. If it was so fantastic, you'd be coming with me.'

'We have to work.'

'There are jobs around Grandma and Grandpa's.'

'No there aren't, Ginika!'

That made no sense.

'Yes there are,' Ginika said. 'Grandma and Grandpa work really hard in their boarding house. They never stop. You've told me that.'

'Yes, but there aren't jobs for *us*. You don't understand.'

Ginika looked from Mum to Dad, but neither spoke. 'I don't *want* to live there without you,' she said into the silence. 'I don't want to leave my friends, or miss the show, or miss … everything. I live *here*. If you're staying, why can't I?'

'Look,' Dad said. 'Neither of us is going to be here enough to take care of you. It's going to be non-stop work. It's as simple as that.' He took a sip of tea and a huge bite from his yam croquette, as though the subject was closed.

'But I don't mind you being busy,' Ginika said. 'Mum, I could go to Alisha's after school and when you do the sleeping-over-at-work thing—'

'Ginika, I'm going to be doing sleep-ins practically every other night,' Mum said. Her voice was getting higher and louder. 'And anyway, we can't all fit in here.' She wiggled her shoulders and pulled away from the cupboard she was leaning against. 'Not comfortably. Not in everyday life. Dad can't go on sleeping on the floor. Can he?'

Ginika shook her head. 'But—'

'There isn't room for three in this bed.'

'So why don't we just rent another flat with room for all of us—'

'Because the campervan solution is the obvious one,' Mum and Dad said together, as though they'd been rehearsing too. As soon as they spoke, something clattered outside and three or four boys' voices suddenly rippled into laughter, close by, just under the window next to the bed.

Everyone looked at the window. Clip-cloppy footsteps faded away.

Beads of sweat were forming on the dark brown skin of Dad's forehead. 'We have some serious debts to repay, Ginika. We hung on and tried to make the rent for much longer than we should have. We've got nothing for a deposit.' He made *one-potato*, *two-potatoes* with his fists on the table with every word, like he was stacking all the reasons on top of each other, thinking he was explaining everything, but really, he was crushing it. And he looked like he had more reasons, spare reasons, piles of them.

'But if you sold this,' Ginika said, drained now, her voice close to a whine, 'wouldn't you have a bit of money for a new flat?'

Dad laughed. 'Sweet, this van's a *wreck*!'

'It isn't worth more than a couple of months' rent, and anyway, then what?' Mum said. 'Keeping the van means

paying no rent for a while. No rent means the difference between surviving and going under.'

She made it sound like they were drowning.

'Perhaps I could stay at Alisha's quite a lot then,' Ginika said. 'And just live in here with you at weekends!'

Dad shook his head. 'We need to get you far, far away, where you'll be safe.'

Mum's little finger touched Dad's, and pushed it slightly. If Ginika hadn't been hyper and focused, she wouldn't even have noticed. It was *so* subtle. The hairs on the back of her neck tingled. There was definitely more to know than they were telling her. And last week, just before the last of their belongings were taken away from their flat, there had been a quiet struggle going on between the two of them. They were very discreet and clever about it, but not clever enough for Ginika.

'Safe from what?' she asked. 'What aren't you telling me?'

Mum closed her eyes for a few seconds, as though fighting to stop herself from speaking. She was cross with Dad. He must have done something. But what?

'Safe by the sea. Comfy, with space all around you,' Dad said, but he looked hot and edgy, as though he had a spring coiled in his spine and was ready to leap.

There was definitely some kind of extra trouble going on. Ginika could tell that from the way they looked at

each other, *and* from the times they tried *not* to look at each other.

And Dad's face had been weird since the eviction. Whenever Ginika saw him before he knew she was there, before he'd had time to make sure he looked 'cheerful', his face was pinched, like he was thinking of horrible things. And he was restless, as if he was expecting someone to jump on his back. He always managed to pull himself together, but she could see him doing it – it was like a curtain coming down. His legs would relax, and then his arms, but his neck stayed hunched and stiff and ready for action. It was as though he thought someone was hunting him.

Were they? Why? What had he done?

'We'll build up again and be back on our feet in no time,' Dad said. 'But for now, Mum and I need to just squash in the campervan while you stay healthy and spacious by the sea. With you up there, Mum can take more shifts at the care home and I can do unlimited hours in the delivery van, and it'll all come good much faster.'

Ginika pushed her fork around her bowl and took a deep breath. 'But what if I didn't even have any grandparents here?' she said. 'Where would you have sent me then? Would I be going to Nigeria, to live with Grandma and Grandpa Orendu?'

Both of them looked at her. Dad didn't gasp, and neither did Mum, but the air around the little table now felt gaspy and shocked and knotted.

'Ah, Ginki, Ginki … not good,' Dad said, shaking his head. 'Grandma and Grandpa Orendu would love to have you, but you *do* have grandparents here, who are also lovely, and that means you can have a nice, comfortable home with them by the seaside, out of the way of this ridiculous mess we're in, because why should you go through this rubbish too?'

Mum's shoulders were getting lower. So was her head. She looked like she would disappear completely under her blonde fringe if she could.

'You haven't even said how long it's going to be *for*,' Ginika said.

They looked at each other again.

Dad said, 'We're not sure just yet…'

Dad's knees bumped Ginika's under the table again. It happened every time he moved even the smallest amount. Everyone's breath was too close. Normally, this campervan smelt of ink and oil and summer. Tonight, it smelt of rice and yams and people.

'See, darling?' Mum said. 'It's just too much of a squeeze. We'd all get bad-tempered with each other if we tried to move you in here. It's bad enough with just me and Dad.

Come on, it's nearly five thirty. Let's get to the park. Message Alisha to meet up. You'll feel so much better when you've said goodbye properly and made some plans for video-calling each other. You could do dance routines together that way!'

There was another silence. A heavy one, full of deep and uneasy thoughts.

'Please be brave, sweet,' Dad said. 'I know you can.'