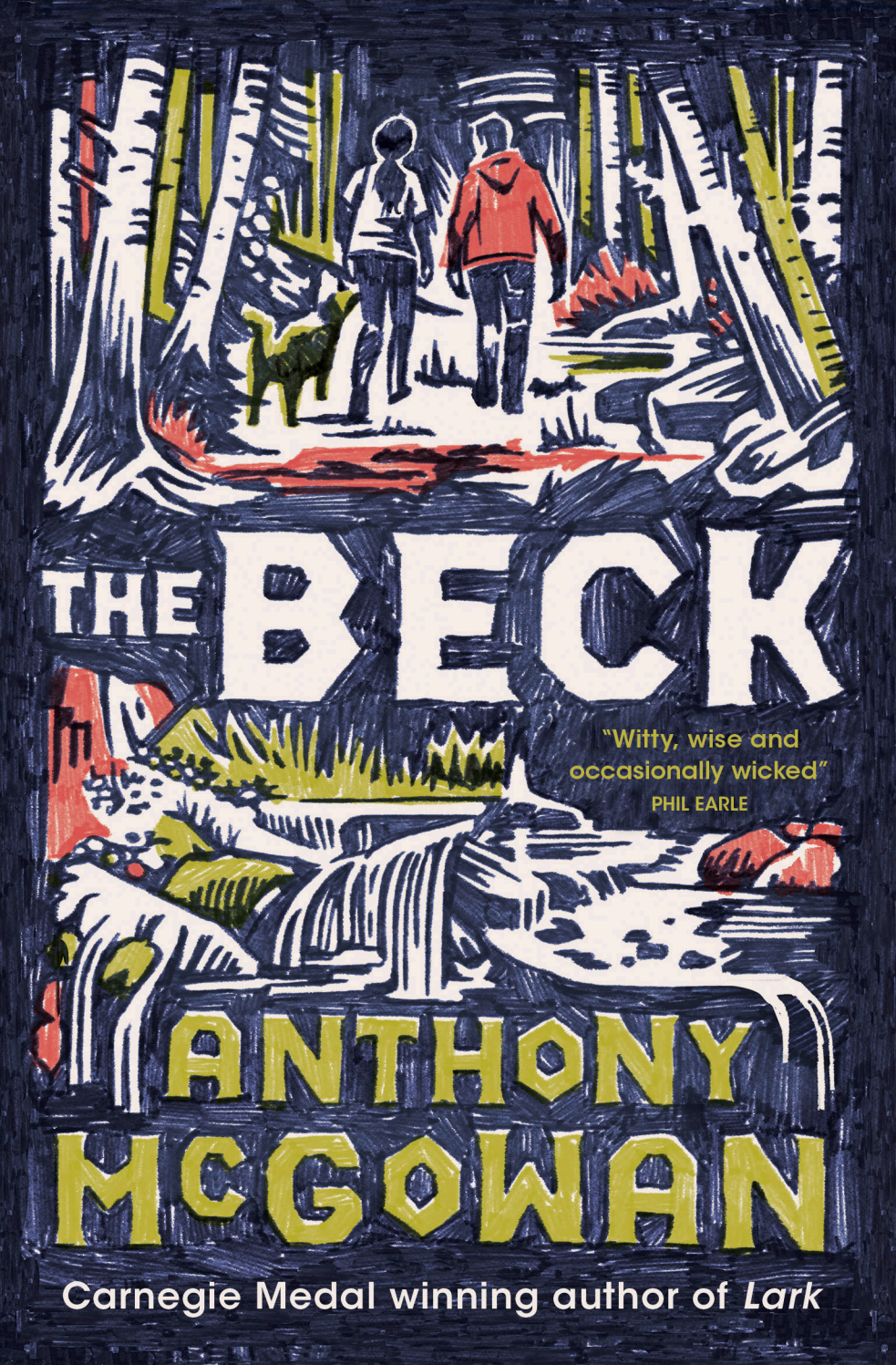

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To the Wyke Beck, and the people,
young and old, who live on its banks as
it winds its way through East Leeds

One

Dumped

"Oh, look," said Mum, trying to make her voice sound bright and happy. "There's a baby sheep!"

"Lamb," I said in a flat voice.

"What?" Mum asked.

"A baby sheep is a lamb."

"I know that," Mum replied. "But saying 'lamb' makes it sound like, well, dinner. And it's just there. In the field. Playing."

I was sitting in the back of our car with my head pressed against the window, watching the boring fields go by. I liked feeling the bumps and vibrations on my forehead. They helped take my mind off what was coming up. And what was coming up was being dumped at Grandad's house.



"I don't want to go to Grandad's," I said. My voice sounded whiny and annoying even to me.

"It'll be fine," said Dad. "Anyway, it's only for a couple of hours while me and your mum sort some things out in town."

"But there's nothing to do," I complained. "And Grandad's house smells funny."

"And there's his wig," added my mum. I could tell she was trying not to laugh.

Grandad's wig was famous. Not "on the news" famous, but famous in our family.

"Don't," said my dad. "He's not been the same since Granny ... went. Your grandad's let himself go a bit. Granny kept him more ... normal."

"Great," I said. "And you're dumping me there for the whole day."

"Two hours," Dad corrected me, "then we'll be done, and we'll pick you up."

The closer we got to Grandad's, the more I dreaded it. I only ever got left with Grandad when all the other babysitting options were used up. It was like when you look in the cupboard for some



biscuits, hoping for maybe a Jaffa Cake or a Jammy Dodger, and all you find is a cracker. Or nothing.

The countryside turned into the town. All too soon we were in Grandad's estate, with its windy streets and rain in the air. Houses made of red brick that had a sickly wet look even when it hadn't been raining, as if the houses were sweating out some kind of poison. Half of the gardens had old junk dumped in them. Fridges, mattresses, a microwave, a doll without a head. A head without a doll.

"It's worse than ever," said Mum.

"I remember when it was all right," said Dad. "I loved growing up round here. All the stuff we got up to ..."

Dad was always going on about the things he used to do when he was a kid. Like building dens, bonfires, fireworks. All the things he doesn't let me do.

There was no drive or garage at Grandad's, so we parked in the street, in between a white van and the skeleton of another car without any doors or wheels. The white van was filthy, and someone



had written "cLeAn mE" on the back of it in the muck. Someone else had written some bad words underneath that as an answer – most likely the bloke who owned the van. You can probably guess what it said.

"Come on then," said Dad, and we got out of the car.

"I'll stay sat here," said Mum.

"Suit yourself," said Dad.

There was a little bit of garden running up to the front door. It was neat compared to some of the other front gardens. There were some flowers and a bird table with a string bag of peanuts hanging from it.

Dad pressed the bell, but there was no *ding-dong*, so then he knocked at the door.

Still nothing.

Dad tutted and knocked harder. Suddenly, there was some frantic barking.

"Has Grandad got a dog?" I asked hopefully.

"Dunno," said Dad, looking puzzled. "It's the first I've heard about it if he has."



He knocked again. After more barking, finally a muffled voice came from inside.

"I'm on the bog!"

Dad looked at me, and I looked at Dad.

"We're going to be late," Mum yelled from the car. Dad checked his watch, then knocked again.

"Just leave it on the doorstep," came the voice.

"It's us, not a bloody delivery!" shouted Dad at the door.

Then Mum honked the car horn.

BEEEEEEEEEEEP

"I've gotta go," Dad said. "We can't miss this appointment. It's important."

He rushed to the car and honked goodbye on the horn as he was driving off.

BEEP.

