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opening extract from

Sparks

written by

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published by

Scholastic

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sparks



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MARION LLOYD BOOKS

First published in the UK in 2010 by Marion Lloyd Books
An imprint of Scholastic Children's Books
Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street
London, NW1 1DB, UK
A division of Scholastic Ltd.
Registered office: Westfield Road, Southam, Warwickshire, CV47 0RA
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ISBN 9781407111087

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

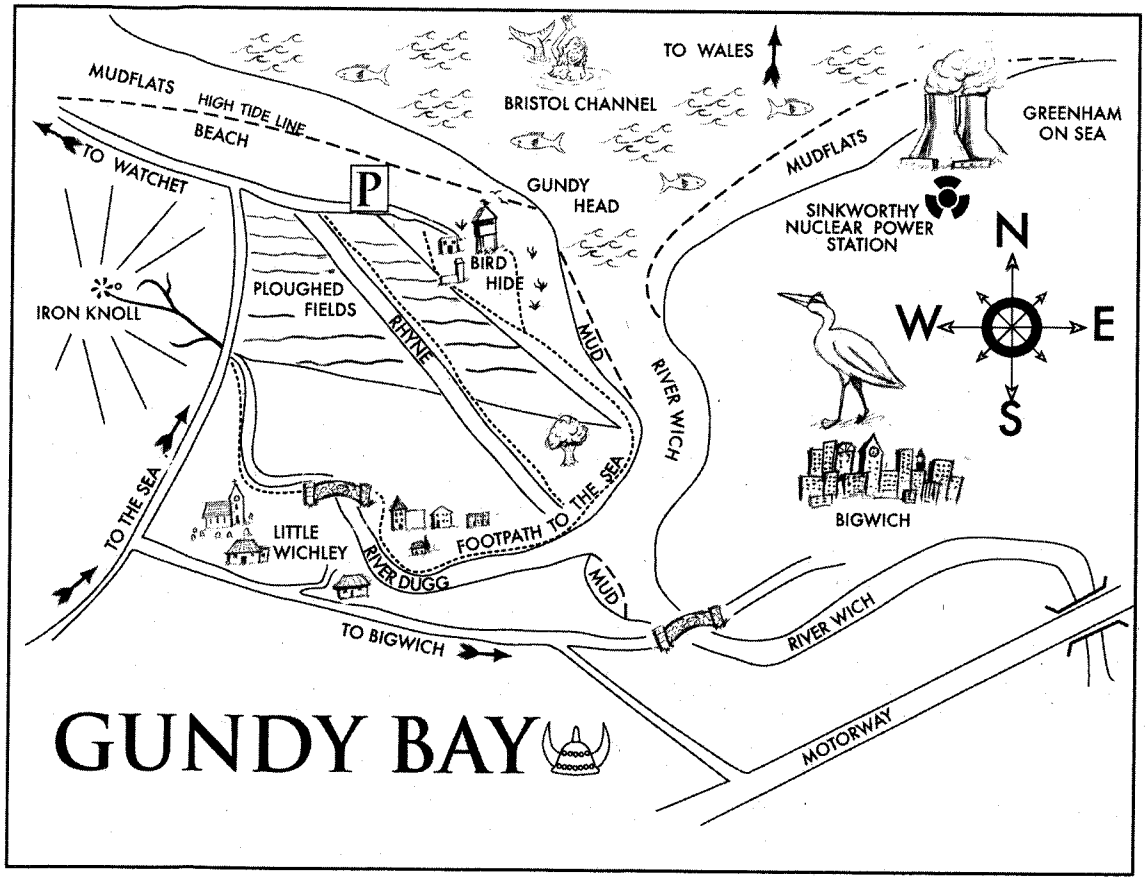
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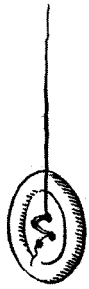
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Bookmarque, Croydon
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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MUDFLATS
HIGH TIDE LINE
BEACH
TO WATCHET
P
BRISTOL CHANNEL
TO WALES
GUNDY HEAD
MUDFLATS
GREENHAM ON SEA
SINKWORTHY NUCLEAR POWER STATION
N
W
E
S
BIRD HIDE
PLOUGHED FIELDS
RHYNE
MUD
RIVER WICH
IRON KNOLL
TO THE SEA
LITTLE WICHLEY
RIVER DUGG
FOOTPATH TO THE SEA
BIGWICH
MUD
TO BIGWICH
RIVER WICH
MOTORWAY
GUNDY BAY



Grandpa

Rain dribbled down Carla's neck as she slipped and skidded over the muddy river path. A few feet below, the River Dugg gushed and foamed, smelling sourly of mushrooms and oil. Half a mile downstream the Dugg ran into the Wich estuary, which then flowed out to sea. Grandpa said the source of the river was a spring up on Iron Knoll. He said if you drank a cup of the water, you got special powers for twenty-four hours.

It was on Carla's list of Things to Do.

She shoved aside the metal sheeting and entered Grandpa's garden. Pushing through dripping nettles, she raced up to the barn. "Grandpa," she called, "I've got something important to tell you." She knew something was wrong as soon as she stepped inside. Grandpa's barn was usually full of noise. Drills whirred, saws roared and grinding machines buzzed as Grandpa worked. He was building a small boat and it was nearly

finished. But today Carla heard only the rush of the river from the end of the garden and the rain drumming on the skylight.

Freya, the children's mother, said Grandpa's barn was like an exploded rats' nest. There were piles of crates of screws, nuts and bolts and vast coils of wire were stacked against the walls. Grandpa had lengths of pipe and metal propped in the corners, and his stuff covered every surface: silver foil and pogo sticks nestled in amongst chainsaw chains, cans of spray paint and old paperback novels. A line of crystals hung in the dirty window, so when the sun shone the place was filled with rainbows. Napoleon, a large stuffed black bear, towered in one corner. He and Grandpa had been together since Grandpa's navy days. Legend had it that the bear had once saved Grandpa from drowning. Napoleon had a singed back and a missing foot where Grandma had chucked him on the bonfire before Grandpa had managed to rescue him. But the centre of the barn was dominated by *Valkyrie,* Grandpa's boat. Grandpa had been spending days and nights on her. She was a small, flat-bottomed sailing boat and was awaiting a final coat of paint. Other than that, she was finished. Or as finished as she could be, Grandpa said. He wouldn't know what needed doing until he took her out on the water – which might be this weekend. Carla hoped she'd be one of the very first crew. Grandpa had high hopes that *Valkyrie* would win the Gundy Bay boat-building competition.

Grandpa was Good with His Hands. He could mend anything, from backfiring cars to snowstorming televisions. He sorted out sputtering tractors, blunt lawnmowers and silent generators. And in return for a hot dinner delivered at seven o' clock every night, he fixed things for the members of Little Wichley Ladies Baking Club.

But where was he?

Yesterday, after school, all three children had gone over to Grandpa's barn – he had a little cottage at the front of the garden, but he only went in there to sleep, and not always then as he had an old, dusty couch behind a mountain of used car tyres in the barn.

Grandpa had looked up from a paint chart as the children had trooped in. "You're only here for cake! Why don't you get your mother to make one, instead of thieving from me?"

"She only bakes cakes when she feels inspired," said Penny. She took the paint chart and examined the colour he had circled.

Duck-egg Blue

"If I only did things when I felt inspired, I'd never do anything," huffed Grandpa, removing the lid from a battered flowery tin to reveal half a thickly iced chocolate cake. He fished in his overalls for his penknife, wiped the blade on his trousers and cut four large slices.

"You haven't washed your hands," said Penny,

eyeing his oil-grained fingers. At nine, she was particular about such things.

"I'll eat yours then," said Grandpa, giving her a piece anyway.

"Who made it?" asked Carla. "Not Mrs Davies?"

"No, this is Mrs Roper's, thank God," muttered Grandpa. He turned to Woody, who at twelve was only eleven months younger than Carla. His birthday was at the end of March and Carla's was at the beginning of May. Every April, they were the same age. The problem, as far as Woody was concerned, was that as he was two inches shorter than his sister everyone assumed he was much younger.

"You're quiet," said Grandpa, giving Woody the biggest slice of cake. "What's up?"

"He's being bullied," said Penny.

"Am not," said Woody, giving her a murderous look.

"He is," said Penny. "He wet the bed when he stayed over at Gary Bradley's. Now the whole school knows and Mikey Dobbs's gang are harassing him."

"I spilled my water," protested Woody. "I never wet the bed."

"Lots of sailors do wet the bed," said Grandpa, ruffling Woody's hair. "It's to do with being surrounded by all that water. The water in their bodies wants to get out and join the ocean. When I was at sea, there was a steady drip, drip on to the deck, and rivers of pee pouring out the portholes. And that's a fact. That's why

sailors sleep in hammocks – so they don't have to wash out sheets."

Penny stared at Grandpa. "Are you telling the truth?" she asked.

Grandpa stared back, deadpan. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"Yes, because—" began Penny.

"Have my chocolate cake," said Carla, pushing it into her sister's mouth. "I'm full."

Grandpa winked at Woody. "Your blood is full of sea salt," he told him. "Just like mine."

"I still didn't wet the bed," grunted Woody.

Now Carla, wiping the rain from her face, looked round for her Grandpa. She noticed a puddle of blue paint pooling over the floor from under *Valkyrie's* trailer. Grandpa was always in his barn, *always*. Unless he was out fixing something for the Baking Club, but that was unlikely as his dinner was due to arrive at the garage door in five minutes and Grandpa never missed that. Maybe he was having a nap – something he'd been doing a lot recently. She crossed the barn and peeked behind the vast pile of tyres at the back wall.

"Grandpa," she whispered. Because he was here after all, lying on his couch with his head tucked into his chest and his knees drawn up, like a little boy sleeping. But he was too still, and too quiet. And he looked so *small*. When Carla stepped over and touched his arm, he felt cold. "Oh," said Carla. A white button hung by a

single thread from his cuff. "Grandpa," babbled Carla, "we're getting a puppy. Mum finally said yes. Woody found an advert in the paper and tomorrow we're going to look. It's half-term, you see, no school. . ." Carla straightened Grandpa's collar. "There are two boys and a girl. They're a spaniel cross." She stopped talking and a tear fell from her eye and landed with a plop on Grandpa's shoulder blotching his shirt.

Grandpa wasn't breathing.

There was a rushing in her head, like the river was flowing from one ear to the other, as she crumpled to the ground.

Someone was calling.

"Magnus? Magnus? Time to down tools, old man. "Where are you? I nearly drowned bringing this over." Carla sat up and watched as a short, plump woman with damp grey hair appeared with a steaming dish of food.

"Miss Hame," whispered Carla – she couldn't speak any louder – "Miss Hame, I think . . . I think my Grandpa has died."

"I doubt it," said Miss Hame. "I've made his favourite, spiced lamb stew. He wouldn't miss that." Through blurry eyes, Carla watched as Miss Hame shoved aside an oil can with her elbow and set down the stew.

"He'll be having forty winks," she said, stepping closer and patting the rain from her coat. "Do get up, dear – this floor is *so* dirty."

Carla shut her eyes.

There was a pause.

"Oh," gasped Miss Hame. "Oh, *Magnus*!"

Opening her palm, Carla found a small white button.

"Grandpa?"

Illustration
to come

Napoleon's Neck

Woody was eating with the pig. In the last twenty-four hours Mum had developed a very short temper and when Woody had dribbled gravy down his front for the third time, she'd yelled at him.

"If you are going to eat like a pig, then go and eat with it."

Carla found her brother sitting on the garden wall, gloomily throwing potatoes for Aurora, Mr Jones-next-door's sow.

"It's not my fault I spill everything," said Woody. Grandpa had said that Woody was clumsy because he had the brains of a tall man.

"*You're going to be at least six feet tall, only your arms and legs haven't caught up yet,*" Grandpa said. "*Your brain sends out tall-man messages to the rest of you. So things are a bit uncoordinated when your hands can't reach what you THINK they can. Don't*

worry," Grandpa continued. "*Everything grows at an uneven rate. If I plant a packet of seeds, they don't flower at the same time. It's nature.*"

"Mum says you can come in now," said Carla. "But I've brought out your pudding in case you don't want to. It's only tinned peaches." Woody took the dish of peaches from Carla and emptied it over the wall. They watched as Aurora demolished them.

"Everything's rubbish," said Woody. He had red eyes from crying. Carla looked away. Everyone kept bursting into tears. She'd found Mum in floods over the oven, and Dad had been sniffing over breakfast. Even Penny, who tended to keep her head about most things, had shut herself in her room and would only come out for meals. But Carla, apart from the one tear she'd shed when she'd found Grandpa, hadn't cried at all.

"Have a good cry," Miss Hame had advised, rather bossily. "It helps, you know." But Carla didn't want to cry. It was impossible that Grandpa wasn't here any more. She couldn't believe it, even though she'd seen him with her own eyes. And anyway, she knew where he was – at the funeral parlour of his old mate Mr Salt, the undertaker. Mr Salt said the children could visit any time they wanted as the funeral wasn't scheduled until next Saturday. There was a whole week to get through, and Carla didn't even have school to distract her as it was half-term. Mum had cancelled going to see the puppy. Carla understood why of course, but she wished Mum had rescheduled the visit for a better day. Then

she felt mean about her wish. Grandpa had just died, and here she was moping over a puppy. But she couldn't help feeling disappointed. She'd wanted a dog for *years*. They only had a one-eyed cat called Nelson, who had no time for anyone but Dad.

"Only last week Grandpa told me he didn't know how he was going to stick being buried next to Grandma," blurted out Woody, kicking the wall with his heels. "He said she'd drive him bonkers. He said he'd have to rise from the grave and find another, more peaceful one. And he wasn't joking."

Grandma had died years ago, when the children were small. But Carla really didn't want to think about her right now. Woody slid from the wall and plodded listlessly back to the house, leaving his dishes in the grass. Carla found her feet taking her to the bottom of the garden. Before she knew it, she was walking along the riverbank. The water rippled and sparkled in the sunshine. In two minutes Carla was in Grandpa's garden. Surely if she went through the nettles, and into the barn, she'd find Grandpa, hammering and whistling? He'd see her and start singing.

"*The sweetest girl I ever saw*
Sat sucking cider through a straw. . ."

Everything was how he'd left it. Napoleon the bear grimaced down at her, *Valkyrie* sat on her trailer and a mug half full of black coffee sat clouding on Grandpa's workbench. Carla crept behind the tyres to the couch. She hoped that if she wished hard enough,

he'd be there. But of course he wasn't, only a dent in the faded blue cloth where he had lain. Carla took Grandpa's spanner from the bench and cuddled it close. She found herself lying on the couch, curled up, just like Grandpa had been. She thought this might be the moment when she cried, but she didn't. The couch smelled of oil and dust and mud and Grandpa's washing powder.

"Grandpa?" whispered Carla.

She watched the hand of Grandpa's big station clock tick round the dial. After Grandpa had left the navy he'd worked at Bigwich Station for twenty years and when he'd retired they'd given him the clock that had hung above the platform before they'd replaced it with a digital one. She couldn't believe it was less than twenty-four hours since she'd found him. Everything had moved so fast. After the doctor had been (Carla thought that was odd – why call a doctor for someone who had already died?) Mr Salt the undertaker had whisked Grandpa away.

And now Carla was alone. She saw the cake tin up on its high shelf. Without really knowing why, she padded over and stretched up to reach it. There were a couple of slices of cake left, a bit stale-looking but edible. Carla was about to replace the lid when she noticed something. An envelope was taped to the underside of the lid. And it had her name on it.

For Carla Moon. To open after I've gone.

Carla frowned. How could he have known she would go for this tin? Carefully she opened the envelope and unfolded the letter inside.

My dear, lovely Carla,
I thought you'd find this letter, and I was right. You've always had an extraordinary affinity with chocolate cake. Anyway, I've been feeling odd and ill these few weeks and have an inkling I'm on my last legs. Carla, don't be sad. I've had a wonderful life and I'd rather pop off now than be a dribbling wreck later. I'm not going to be all maudlin, but I will say you and Woody and Penny have lighted up my life. By the time you find this letter I expect I'll be in the churchyard, cuddled up to Grandma (!) But I have a request. An old sailor like me is never really at home unless he is on the sea. I always fancied a Viking funeral, where my remains were sent out to sea on a burning boat at sunset, to sail off into eternity. I even made some enquiries, but it turns out it's illegal, so sadly I've had to forget that dream. But Carla, could you do something for me? Napoleon has a small box concealed under the fur at the back of his neck. (He's hollow, did you know that?) It's got some letters inside. They're only silly old things, written to a sailor years ago. Could you make a raft and set fire to the letters and send them off down the river at high tide? I'd rather you said goodbye to me there than in the churchyard.

Love to you, Carla, my beautiful granddaughter,
Your Grandpa.

Carla read the letter again and then her gaze fell upon Napoleon. Directly she was feeling along the back of his neck. His fur was stiff and slightly damp and smelled of mothballs. She lifted up a flap around his scruff and immediately found what she was looking for, a small, flattish box, tied with red wool.

Grandpa's letters.

She eyed the box. She didn't want to read them yet. They were Grandpa's private letters. He might not like it. She could put them in a wooden fruit crate, or make a simple raft from some of Grandpa's wood. It would be easy to carry out Grandpa's wish. Very easy. Carla replaced the letters and stroked Napoleon's fur. He could look after them for a bit longer until she worked out what she was going to do with them. But just suppose, she wondered, just suppose she tried to give Grandpa the funeral he *really* wanted. Could it be done? Was there any way a thirteen-year-old girl could give her grandpa a Viking funeral? She'd have to be quick; the official funeral was next Saturday, only six days away. And according to Grandpa's letter, the whole thing would be illegal, which meant no grown-ups. And there would be some challenges involved in getting Grandpa from the funeral parlour on to the ship. And the ship itself, of course – where would she get one of those? And how would she get it to go out to

sea? No, it couldn't be done. It was much too difficult, and dangerous.

She looked at *Valkyrie*, sitting proudly on her trailer.

"How do you know she'll float?" Penny had asked.

"*Because of the planning in her construction*," said Grandpa. "*As well as the high-grade wood, the precision carpentry, the finely balanced knees—*"

"Spare me," interrupted Penny. "You don't know she won't sink."

"*Yes, I do*," said Grandpa. "*Sometimes you know you can do amazing things.*"

"Yes," muttered Carla. "And maybe I can do this amazing thing." She thought of Woody and Penny.

"But not on my own."