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My May Day Diary

Saturday 30 April

OK, here goes. Facts are the easiest . . . start with the facts. I'm twelve years old today. Twelve years and four hours old. I was born at seven o'clock in the morning. So, to be exact, twelve years, four hours and twenty-two minutes old. My twelve-year-old self is neither tall nor small, neither skinny nor 'plumpy,' as Krish calls Laila. My twelve-year-old self has long, dead straight black hair, and dark brown eyes that my dad says sometimes turn black with emotion. My skin's brown, but not brown enough to hide my blushes. Looking in the mirror, which I do quite a lot recently, I would say I don't love myself (my teeth have come down a bit wonky), but I don't really mind how I look. My Nana calls me a 'beauty', but she would, wouldn't she? Like I said, facts are easiest, but none of this really says very much, does it? Maybe words just aren't my thing. Give me a paintbrush any day. My school reports always say stuff like 'Mira now needs to work on building her confidence and contributing to class discussions'. Now that *is* something I really hate to do. The main thing about me is whenever I open my mouth to say anything in class I blush up bright red so that before I've even opened my mouth, everyone knows how embarrassed I am, and after that I just clam up and lose the will to live. The mad thing is I actually can't stop thinking. I wake up in the middle of the night worrying about things like . . . how I'm going to get through a lunch hour if Millie's not around . . . and well, I suppose I can say it here can't I? Since Pat Print's writing class I have mostly been waking up thinking about Jidé Jackson's smile.

I'm a doodler and a daydreamer and a night dreamer. The last few weeks it's been, nightmares mostly, really bizarre stuff that freaks me out. Actually, I've been feeling a bit strange lately, it's hard to say exactly how, but it feels like I'm walking a tightrope. I'm not sure what it is I'm going to fall off, but it definitely feels like I'm about to find out.

I am sitting in my Nana Josie's flat, with the rest of my family gathered for the usual birthday tea. I would rather not be here. Mum and Dad have given me a mobile phone, a

watch and a diary. The mobile is a sea-green pebble, and it fits perfectly in the palm of my hand. The watch has a black leather strap, glass face, silver edging and a number for each hour. It's definitely my first grown-up watch and that somehow seems like a sign. I'm into signs, omens, superstitions . . . whatever you want to call them . . . mostly *I* call them 'Notsurewho, Notsurewhat'. This watch makes me think that something is about to happen to time. Today feels like the end of something, and the countdown to the beginning, of this, my red leather diary with golden edging at the corners of each page.

'Where are the dates?' I ask Mum as I flick through the pages of the diary.

'I thought you'd prefer to fill them in yourself. That way you can write as much or as little as you want and, knowing you, I expect you'll want to add the odd artwork. When I used to keep a diary, some days I had nothing much to write about and other days I'd write pages. It's more of a journal really . . . for your writing class.'

So I start writing, just like I would for any other piece of homework, because Pat Print's told us to, only now I've found something to keep all my secrets wrapped up in I can't stop, because no matter what's happened to me before today, or what's going to happen in the future, something is happening to me right now. Present tense.

Nana is inspecting my new mobile phone.

'It's *quite* pretty, I suppose, but I just don't understand what the point of having a mobile phone is at your age . . . and I'm sure I read somewhere that the rays can cause tumours. Uma, have you checked that out?' Nana calls out to Mum, in the next room. I don't think Mum even hears, she's too busy trying to get Laila to stay still while she changes her cacky nappy.

'I mean who are you going to call? You're always with your Mum and Dad or me anyway.'

Jidé Jackson . . . he's the person I would most like to call, but I'll never have the guts to actually do it.

'Well?' nudges Nana.

'You, Mum and Dad, Millie, Aunt Abi, Nana Kath and Grandad Bimal,' I list.

'That's five numbers. I rest my case.'

Nana Josie is quite hard to argue against, even if you really disagree with her, which I do, about the phone, but of course I don't say anything. She has her feet up, resting on my knees. I smooth my hands over the skin of her cracked brown leather soles. On the sides of each foot, she has hard bony knobbly bits, bulging, where mine are smooth. Her feet are icy cold, like she's just stepped out of the North Sea, but it isn't cold. In fact, it's a sunny day, the cherry blossom trees are out in the garden, like they are every year on my birthday . . . but Nana feels cold, because she's so thin. She feels cold all the time these days.

Nana lies on her schlumfy old sofa, with her bright purple shawl wrapped around her shoulders, holding her present for me in her hands.

'Come on, Mira, aren't you going to open it?'

What I love about Nana is how she's always so excited when she gives you a present. Even though she's this ill, she's still gone to the bother of wrapping it up in pale green tissue paper and covering it with sparkly butterfly stickers. I always open her presents so carefully, because it's like the wrapping is part of the gift, and you don't want to do it too quickly, or it would seem clumsy.

It's a skirt, folded between sheets of tissue paper. It's bright pink (why can't people notice when you've moved on from pink, like years ago?) and sea green, with sequins and butterflies sewn all over it . . . and there's something else . . . a tiny Indian purse, with a button for a clasp. It's one of Nana's; I've seen it before.

'Open it then,' she orders.

As soon as I see her bare wrist, I know what's inside.

For as long as I can remember Nana has always worn this silver bracelet. It's a delicate silver chain with just one charm on it, in the shape of what I always thought was a flower, but now I look closer I see that it's actually some kind of vegetable.

'What is it?' I ask Nana, inspecting it closer.

'An artichoke. Uma! Haven't you ever cooked up an artichoke for them?' Nana calls out to Mum.

'Probably not!' Mum calls back wearily.

The artichoke charm is the size of the nail on my little finger. It has layers and layers of silver leaves, painted at their tips with green enamel. Each leaf gets smaller and

more delicate until it reaches the centre . . . a tiny blood-red heart. I look down at Nana's bare wrist, where this charm bracelet has always lain against her skin, until today that is.

'This hand is past adornment,' she sighs, lifting her bony wrist up to the light and staring at it as if she's doesn't recognize it as her own.

I walk into the bathroom to get changed and I lean hard against the door so Krish doesn't barge in. There is no lock; Nana doesn't believe in them. There are lots of things my nana believes in or doesn't believe in.

I look in the mirror. The skirt is too pretty but it'll be all right with jeans underneath and some Converse, I suppose. I fumble to close the catch on Nana's bracelet, but it's tricky to hold it together and seal the clasp at the same time.

'I can't do up the bracelet,' I tell Nana, coming out of the bathroom.

'Ah! You're a vision,' she whispers, swirling me around.

I hold my wrist out for her to fasten the clasp.

'No, no, no, no!'

At first I don't understand why she's got herself worked up into such a state, but then she holds the two pieces of broken chain apart, one in each hand, as the artichoke heart rolls on to the floor.

'Isn't that typical? I've worn this bracelet forever, and it has to go and break, today of all days.'

The charm rolls towards Laila. Her beady eyes are following its path across the wooden floor as her crab-like fingers reach out to grab it, but I get there first so, of course, she sends up one of her blood-curdling screams.

'Never mind, you can always replace the chain,' Nana sighs, sliding the charm back into the little purse 'It's the heart that matters.'

She's upset. I can tell she's upset and trying to hide it. It matters to her that the chain is broken, and it matters to me, and you can tell by the way no one knows what to do or say next, that somehow all this seems to mean more than it should. Birthdays are like that, aren't they? Too much pressure.

Aunty Abi draws the curtains. We're in the half dark now. It's a bit embarrassing but I have to admit, the flickering candles still make me breathless with excitement. Everyone

sings ‘Happy Birthday’. It’s one those ‘Happy Birthdays’ where people start off slightly after each other and in a different pitch. Krish sings ‘crushed tomatoes and pooh’, as usual, but the rest of them plough on, willing a harmony that never quite happens in our family . . . it’s a relief when they get to the final ‘you’. At least it’s only once a year.

Aunty Abi, who is brilliant at baking, has made me a heart-shaped cake with pink icing (of course!) and white marshmallows on the top. Mum can’t bake because she doesn’t use weighing scales and she’s not precise enough. But Aunty Abi’s cakes always look so pretty – prettier than you could buy in a posh cake shop – and they taste even better.

Before I have the chance to get a closer look, Laila dives at the marshmallows, burning her podgy fingers on the candles and sending up an outrageous screech as Mum pulls her clenched fist away. There is no way she’s going to let go of those marshmallows. Now that the spongy sweet goo is safely stored in her hamster cheeks, she scrunches her eyes closed tight and wills it to melt on her tongue.

I blow out my candles in one go. I like to get it over and done with as soon as possible. Krish loves all the attention on his birthday, not me.

‘Make a wish,’ says Mum as I slice into the cake.

I close my eyes and start out wishing that this wasn’t my birthday . . . that it could all be over, but then I end up wishing . . . well, thinking about Jidé. The truth is I can’t get his smile out of my head. Wishes are like that aren’t they, sometimes you don’t know what to wish for and then something or, in this case, someone just springs into your mind . . .

‘Be careful what you wish for,’ Nana breaks the spell and I open my eyes, ‘It might just come true.’

I hope so.

We all take a slice of cake, except for Nana, who promises she’ll have some later, but I know she won’t. Inside the pink icing, the cake is chocolate goo, not just spongy, but thick puddingy chocolate. There’s a moment’s silence while we pay our respects to Abi’s cake. I watch Nana bobbing Laila up and down on her knee and stroking her little plump wrists – ‘fat bracelets’, Nana calls them.

The bell rings, making us all jump. Dad goes to answer, with Piper yapping and hurtling up the garden path after him. Dad walks slowly back down the path and whispers to Nana, very gently, but I can hear what he's saying.

'Well go on then, show him in,' orders Nana, setting Laila down on the floor and slowly pulling herself up off the sofa. She's quite out of breath, but you can see how keen she is to greet this visitor. She's expecting . . . him.

A ridiculously tall man strides down the path, chased by Piper leaping up into the air, all four paws off the ground at the same time, but even his highest jump only brings him even with the man's knee.

'A Norfolk terrier,' he says, fondly bending down and scooping Piper up into his arms.

'That's right,' Nana laughs 'My faithful guard dog!'

I can see Nana instantly likes this crane-like man who has to duck to get through her door.

'I'm Josie. You must be Moses.' Nana smiles and shakes his hand as her words come tumbling out. 'Thank you so much, I wasn't expecting express delivery, but I'm delighted because I've got to crack on with this thing now. You see I want to paint it myself, but I'm afraid if I don't do it soon, I'll run out of energy, or time, or both.'

'It is my privilege,' the man called Moses bows and flashes Nana, Mum and Aunty Abi, especially Aunty Abi, a smile full of white teeth. He turns to Dad and nods. I know exactly what Dad's thinking: 'You can't trust anyone with teeth that good.' Dad always says that.

'This is my son, Sam,' says Nana, gesturing to Dad.

Moses holds out his hand for Dad to shake, but he doesn't exactly shake it, not properly, like he's taught Krish and me to do. He doesn't look Moses in the eye either. Instead his attention is caught by the state of Moses' feet. Moses has sawdust stuck to the bottom of his floppy pink shoes. They're handmade, like the ones Nana wears.

Moses gives Dad a look as if he thinks he's being a bit rude staring at his feet.

Nana coughs.

'And this is my daughter, Abi . . . and Uma.' Nana points to Abi, then Mum.

'We spoke, on the phone,' Abi reminds Moses.

‘Of course, I remember your voice.’

‘It’s her profession, her memorable voice,’ chips in Nana proudly.

‘You are a singer?’

‘Actress,’ Abi mumbles, shooting Nana her ‘Mum, did you have to bring that up’ look.

But, it’s true. Aunty Abi does have a beautiful low velvety voice.

‘And these are my grandchildren, Mira and Krish.’

I nod. Krish says ‘Hi!’ and Laila makes a high-pitched screechy noise, throwing both her arms into space, demanding to be picked up.

‘Oh! And not forgetting Laila, of course,’ Nana laughs at the spectacle of Laila’s desperate outstretched arms.

‘Pleased to meet you all.’

Moses talks slowly and just a bit too quietly, so you have to lean forward to hear him.

‘Where are you from?’ asks Nana.

‘Denmark.’

‘I knew it,’ Nana laughs, patting Moses on the shoulder. ‘It’s a hobby of mine, accent spotting.’

‘Usually people think that I am from Germany,’ Moses says, flicking his long fringe away from his eyes.

Moses has a thick mane of blond hair flowing right down to his shoulders. He’s a definite hippy. From the back he looks like a girl, with his green linen shirt and white baggy trousers, and his collection of woven friendship bracelets and rings. Around his neck he’s wearing a white stone with a hole in the middle on a leather strap. Moses is the sort of hippy you always meet around Nana’s.

‘Ah! A fellow lover of holey stones,’ Nana claps her hands together in excitement. ‘I have quite a collection of those at my cottage in Suffolk.’

‘This is certainly a coincidence,’ Moses smiles, holding up his holey stone. ‘That is the exact place I found it, on a beach in Surf-folk.’ That’s how he pronounces it, with an ‘L’ in folk. ‘The ladies in the museum told me they call them ‘hag-stones’. If you hang them in the doorway they keep those evil spirits from your door.’

‘Nonsense! I don’t believe in all that. I collect them because I figure, if they’ve got a hole in them, they’ve already had a long and interesting life. I often wonder how many human lifetimes it takes, to make a hole in a stone,’ Nana babbles on.

You can always tell when Nana’s nervous, because usually she chooses her words quite carefully.

Dad raises his eyes to the sky and smiles at Mum, but I agree with Moses: it is a real coincidence about the holey stones, because they are one of the things that Nana’s obsessed with. We’ve got our collection in Suffolk, and she always carries one in her pocket and she’s given me one of her favourites, which I never take off, even at school (well it’s not strictly speaking ‘jewellery’, is it?). Nana says a holey stone can tell a better story than a whole one. She talks like that, my nana. You’re never quite sure you’ve understood exactly what she means.

Moses is still grinning from ear to ear. He casts his eyes around the flat at all Nana’s objects and paintings. He especially likes the half-finished painting on Nana’s easel, the one with the baby Indian elephant standing on a giant pink lotus leaf.

‘These are your paintings?’ Moses asks, walking over to take a closer look.

‘A spattering of them,’ Nana says, following Moses’ eyes around the room.

He smiles and bows to her admiringly. Then he turns to Dad.

‘I’ll need some help carrying it in from the car.’

‘Of course,’ mutters Dad, looking as if he’d rather not.

Dad and Moses walk out into the garden together.

‘This garden is beautiful,’ Moses says.

I hear Dad telling him that we used to live here but that, since we left, Nana has transformed the garden. It’s true – when we lived here, it was a real mess

This is the flat we were born in, me and Krish. You walk in through a wooden gate in a tall brick wall, which in summer is covered in roses, like you’re in a secret, picture-book garden. Once you’re inside, you step on to the slopy brick path, the ‘herringbone path’, Mum calls it. When we lived here, the garden was all overgrown with trees, and the grass was mud because we used to wheel our bikes all over it, but Nana has made the garden grow. These days, as soon as you walk in you get blasted by the smell of

cherry blossom, hyacinths and the sweet scent of straggly winter honeysuckle, which Nana says just goes to prove that beauty is more than skin deep. I wish we still lived here.

Nana follows Dad and Moses up the path. Mum whisks Laila off the floor and we parade up the herringbone path together, through the tall wooden gate in the wall and out, on to the street. Moses has double-parked his car, although he doesn't seem to be in a particular hurry. He has one of those long blue Volvos that can fit everything in the back – children, dogs and luggage – except this car doesn't have any of those things in it.

A queue of traffic is building up behind the car. A woman in a brand-new shiny black jeep throws her hands up in the air, beeps her horn and starts shouting at Moses, who walks slowly around to her window.

'I am so sorry to make you wait. I won't be so very much longer,' he says in a polite and patient voice.

Now she looks even more annoyed, and the other cars start beeping too, as if to echo how angry she is.

'Take your time!' she yells back at Moses. He ignores her.

'Why don't you just bog off!' Dad spits at her under his breath.

'Sam!' Mum always tells Dad off for swearing, even though, like Nana, he's got a whole repertoire of made-up not-quite swear words.

Then Charlotte, Lizzie's Mum from across the road, appears on the front steps of her house.

'This is turning into a bit of a spectacle,' Nana laughs.

'Everything all right?' Charlotte asks Mum, looking worried. .

'Well, we're trying to get *this* –' Mum points into Moses' car – 'into the flat. Ideally we could do with a parking place.'

Charlotte peers into the car. I watch the blood slowly drain from her face as it finally dawns on her what's inside.

'I see,' she nods, staring back at Nana, her eyes filling up with tears of sympathy before she pulls herself together and springs into action. 'Of course. I'll move my car. They'll all just have to back up.'

Charlotte is redirecting the traffic, running into her house for car keys, reversing, forcing all the other drivers to back up so that Moses can park his car right where she was

parked, outside Nana's flat. It's like one of those puzzles where you have to move the pieces around in the right order, to make the pattern work.

By this time Jeep Woman's face has turned purple, there are car horns blasting off all down the street and Nana Josie, Krish and me have got the giggles.

'I'm glad you find this so funny! Some of us are in a hurry,' Jeep Woman screams out of her window.

Nana is suddenly seriously not amused. She can do that, Nana . . . just suddenly turn from sunny to steely in a few seconds. Now she's walking over to Jeep Woman and sounding out every word as if she might not quite understand English.

'That is my coffin, in the car in front. And if you don't calm down, you'll be getting straight out of your big fat jeep and into one of those yourself. Now concentrate on your breathing and calm yourself down. We breathe the same air you know . . . if only you weren't set on poisoning us all.'

Then Nana turns on her heels with her nose in the air and walks as slowly as I've ever seen her, back to the pavement. Normally Nana's a bit of a strider. Dad, who is laughing now, puts his arm around Nana's shoulders and kisses her on the cheek. 'Oooooh! Go, girl, go, girl,' chants Krish. Moses' head is bobbing backwards and forwards, rocking with laughter. Jeep Woman looks at Nana like she's the devil and quickly clicks her 'window closing' button as if Nana's about to attack her!

'You'd think *we* were the ones in the armoured vehicle,' Nana yells after her. 'Big fat Jeep! Is it really necessary, in the middle of London? Does nobody care about global warming? Her children will fry.'

Nana's on a roll.

Now that Charlotte has sorted the parking situation, she's offering to take us 'kids' off Mum's hands. I watch Moses and Dad ease the casket, which is basically a freshly painted white box, out of the car and carry it through the gate in the wall. Nana goes to follow them in, but stops short. Mum seems like she doesn't quite know what to do for the best. She looks at us, as if she's asking *us* to decide. Then suddenly Nana takes Krish and me by the shoulders and turns to Charlotte.

'The thing is, it's Mira's birthday today, so we're having a bit of a party, but thanks for the offer.'

Charlotte casts me a ‘poor you’ look but wishes me a happy birthday anyway.

‘Thank you,’ I mumble.

Dad and Moses are carrying the casket into the front room. It’s quite hard for them to balance it, because Moses is much taller than my dad. They carry the coffin with Moses walking forwards and Dad walking backwards, so it seems to dip downhill, forcing its way into my dad’s body.

‘Just plonk it in the middle,’ orders Nana, steering them through the room like a traffic conductor. It’s not something you can really ‘plonk’ though, is it . . . a coffin? Nana stands and looks at it for a few minutes as if she’s inspecting a newly delivered piece of furniture.

‘Good,’ she nods. ‘Just what I wanted . . . a blank canvas.’

Moses asks if we can send him a photo when it’s painted, so he can use it in his ‘Eco-Endings’ catalogue, but, by the looks on their faces, I don’t think Dad or Aunty Abi are very keen on that idea.

‘I’m sure it could be arranged,’ smiles Nana helpfully.

Moses folds his legs in half, bending his body as low as he can, like an adult with a bad back trying to talk to a toddler. Suddenly his arms are around Nana’s shoulders and he’s hugging her! Nana looks a bit surprised, but she lets him hold her.

Then he looks her straight in the eye and says in a very serious voice, ‘So, Josie, I wish you a happy ending.’

Nana laughs. ‘That reminds me of something –’ she’s scanning her brain for the exact words – ‘Frida Kahlo said something like that on her deathbed . . .’

Nana loves Frida Kahlo. She’s one of her favourite artists. She’s goes on and on about her. She wants to take me to her exhibition in June.

‘Now how did Frida put it?’ Nana asks, as if ‘Frida’ is one of Nana’s very best friends, rather than a dead artist. ‘Ah yes, “I hope the exit is joyful – and I hope never to return.” I share her sentiments exactly.’

Moses laughs nervously, like he doesn’t know exactly what to say. So he just says goodbye, very slowly tipping and bowing himself out of the room, backwards.

After Moses has left, we all sit around, looking at the coffin.

‘So that’s what the grim reaper looks like!’ Dad mumbles.

‘Who’s the grim reaper?’ Krish asks.

‘Moses,’ says Dad.

‘Don’t talk such nonsense, Sam! I liked him.’

‘You would! Danish hippy dude. Just your type!’ teases Dad.

‘A bit too young and intense for me.’ Nana giggles like a little girl.

Nana’s coffin is right in the middle of her front room and stops the conversation.

Nana always used to say ‘casket’, when she was talking about it, but now it’s here, she calls it a ‘coffin’. Somehow a ‘casket’ seems quite light and friendly, like you could put a picnic in it, or dressing-up clothes . . . but a coffin is just plain grim. I ask Nana why she’s suddenly started calling it a coffin.

‘May as well call a spade a spade, Mira.’ She shrugs.

For a few minutes nobody goes near; nobody touches it.

Then suddenly Krish has lifted the lid and is jumping up and down inside. He moves like that, my brother, like a gecko lizard – now you see him, now you don’t. You can never quite know where he’s going to pop up next.

‘Krish, what do you think you’re doing? Get out of there!’ Mum spits out the words as if Krish has really done something terrible.

‘I’d rather this, Uma, than the silence,’ Nana sighs, touching Mum on the arm to calm her.

Krish bobs up and down, in and out of the coffin, making jack-in-the-box faces at Laila. She giggles. Each time he peeps over the edge, Laila giggles a bit louder. Usually when Laila laughs it sets everyone off, but not today.

‘You’re a good boy for entertaining your sister. Our little jack-in-the-box,’ Nana says, tousling his long sandy hair. ‘Don’t let anyone cut this hair, it’s your crowning glory,’ Nana tells Krish, kissing him on the forehead. Krish grins at Mum. She doesn’t say anything, but I can tell she’s annoyed. She’s spent the whole week trying to persuade Krish to get a haircut!

I was here the day Aunty Abi had to do the research to find the coffin company. It's called 'Eco-Endings' because they do 'ecologically friendly' funerals. That means they don't use hard woods that destroy the rainforests. Some people have wicker baskets or grow a tree where they're buried, that sort of thing. I remember when Aunty Abi called them, they asked her lots of questions on the phone and she told them that Nana was very ill and that she's an artist and wanted to paint her own coffin. Aunty Abi said the man on the phone, who was Moses, thought that was fantastic. He said he would quickly knock together a hardboard casket, paint it white and drive it to London himself. Aunty Abi went quiet on the phone after that, and told him that she'd call back later. Nana was so excited. She wanted to know how long it would take to get here.

'I haven't ordered it yet. They need your exact measurements.' Aunty Abi looked suddenly sad when she said this, as if she had only just realized that it was Nana who had to fit inside the coffin.

Nana ordered me to go and hunt around for her tape measure. When I'd found it, she got up off the sofa and lay on the floor. Aunty Abi and me just stood and stared. Without saying another word, Aunty Abi measured Nana from her head to her toes.

'Write this down . . . five foot,' said Abi.

'Five foot what?' Nana asked.

'Five foot nothing, Mum,' whispered Abi, which made Nana laugh, but there was no sign of a smile on Abi's face.

Next we had to measure across the widest part of Nana's body, but the truth is, it was quite difficult to find a widest part. Abi told me to write down 'under one foot' and that included quite a bit of extra space.

'Only *you* could make your daughter and your granddaughter measure you up for your own coffin,' groaned Abi.

'Well, someone's got to do it. Come on, I need to get this thing painted while I've still got life left in me. Get on the phone and tell him my vital statistics!' Nana bossed Abi along.

So Aunty Abi called 'Eco-Endings' back and asked for Moses. Nana was drinking some water at the time, but when she heard the name 'Moses' she burst out laughing, splattering her water halfway across the room.

‘Ask him if that’s his real name?’

That set Aunty Abi off laughing, but her laugh was the kind that could just as easily turn to tears at any moment. Nana was still choking on her water when Abi finally calmed down and gave Moses Nana’s measurements.

‘Five foot . . . No, I’m sorry, you’ll have to convert it yourself. We’re very retro here – we only do feet.’

‘He wants to know if we’re sure?’ Abi asked as her eyes filled with tears. ‘Apparently that would be the smallest adult coffin that they’ve ever made. Moses says we should make it a bit bigger, otherwise it might look like a child’s coffin.’

Nana just shrugged. ‘Suits me.’

And I remember the chill that that thought sent through me . . . a child’s coffin . . . how wrong is that?

Just like Pat Print predicted, the past does come creeping its way in. Ordering that coffin was in the past, but now it’s sitting right here in front of me, in the present. Not much of a present, is it? There’s nothing funny about it; not even Krish can make us laugh now.

In the silence I can hear the tinny ticking of my new watch as if someone’s turned up the volume . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . it’s as if the coffin is waiting for Nana to die.

‘Mira, you’re supposed to eat your cake, not sit in it!’ teases Krish, pointing to a brown stain on the back of my new skirt.

I can’t stand any more of this, so I run into the bathroom and lean hard against the door, swivelling my skirt around to inspect the damage. I take it off and rinse it under the tap, but it doesn’t come out. What does it matter? Everything’s ruined anyway. I slump down on the toilet seat. Then I see it, on my jeans, the same dark stain. I pull down my jeans and there it is again, not birthday cake, but a brown-coloured bloodstain.

‘Mira!’ calls Nana, knocking on the door. I quickly pull up my jeans, keeping one foot against the door until I’ve done up my zip and button. Then I let her in.

She holds my hand and places her tiny artichoke charm in my palm, closing my fingers around it.

‘I’m sorry this all had to happen on your birthday, but I want to explain something to you. I’ve given you this, Mira, because you’re so special to me . . . how can I explain?

Most people, by the time they get old, have grown themselves tough little shells around their hearts. Babies, like little Laila, start off with tender, loving, trusting hearts, but gradually, gradually, they learn to protect themselves and, as the years go by, grow tougher and tougher layers. Look at this! The outside layers of an artichoke are so tough, they're not even worth eating, but they get more and more tender as you come closer to the heart. These tough outer layers stop you feeling so much, so people walk around with hard little hearts that no one can touch. Of course, there are some people who don't have a choice, they just never learn to protect themselves . . . now that can be a blessing and a burden.'

All I want is for Nana to stop going on about the charm and let me sort myself out. All I want is for Nana not to notice the bloodstain.

'What kinds of people don't have a choice?' I ask her to try and distract her from my skirt.

'People who need charms!' she smiles, kissing my hair 'You'll know them, when you meet them. Mira, darling, I am sorry the coffin arrived today, that was bad timing, I'm afraid, but . . . I wanted to ask you . . .will you help me to paint it?'

I nod.

'I knew you would,' she whispers as she lowers my head on to her shoulder.

As soon as I get home I search the bathroom cupboard for the pads I've seen Mum store in there. I peel off the strip and stick one into my knickers. Even though it's supposed to make me feel grown up, having a period, this actually reminds me of one of Laila's nappies. It doesn't hurt, just like Mum told me it wouldn't, except for the ache in my belly. I suppose I *should* tell Mum, but she'd just make a big fuss of me and try to celebrate or something. I don't think I can take any more celebrations, even if it does mean I can get my ears pierced. That's when Mum said I could (when my periods start), but just for now, this is one birthday present I'm going to keep to myself.

We are reflected in the bathroom mirror, Nana and me. I am wearing my birthday skirt. My lace is undone, so I bend down for a moment to fasten it, but right next to my shoe there is a tiny circle of blood, about the size of a one-pound coin. 'What's this?' I ask

Nana, but when I stand up again, she's not there. I run into the front room to look for her, but the room is empty; all the furniture has gone; everything except the coffin.

Nana's coffin is painted with bright blue waves, leaping dolphins, butterflies and birds; birds everywhere. Right in the corner, peeping out at me, is a little dog that looks like Piper. When I peer closer, I can see that the dog has his leg cocked over the corner of the coffin, sprinkling yellow pee across the sea. I laugh. Then I see her . . . Nana Josie, lying in her watery coffin . . . floating . . . her face half covered. I reach for her hand through the icy cold. 'Nana, wake up, wake up,' I whisper, but she doesn't open her eyes. I try to lift her body, but she slips back under. Then I see something moving under her blouse, and I think she is alive after all – that must be her heart beating – so I lift up her top, and thousands of tiny birds fly out. I look down at Nana. The coffin is empty, plain wood, no water. A dog yaps wildly, and the painting of Piper jumps off the coffin and runs out into the garden. Leaves rustle and tiny birds swoop round and round the room.

Now the waves begin to roll on a rough sea. Dolphins surf on the wind, diving down into the deep water. The birds panic, battering their wings against the windowpanes, desperate to be freed. I fling the window wide open and let them escape into the garden. They gather and sway on currents of air, separating and coming together, migrating birds, agreeing their moment to leave. They are so high now . . . faraway dots in the clouds. I stand and watch until the sky is empty.

I go back into the flat and find Piper's bright red lead. Out on the Heath I try to walk fast, but people stop me and ask, 'How is Josie?' and I say, 'I think Josie has flown away,' but people keep on following me. More and more of them, people with dogs, asking where my nana is, over and over again. I try to get away from them, but they follow me up Parliament Hill, hundreds of people with dogs. Big dogs, little dogs, all kinds of dogs. 'Where has she gone?' they ask over and over. I start to run.

I climb to the top and look behind me, but the people have all disappeared. There are hundreds of dogs running free all over the Heath, all except for one huge black dog, like a bear, plodding slowly up the hill, Nana's Newfoundland, Claude. Beside him is my Nana Josie, in her cherry-red crocheted hat and long trailing scarf. She smiles at me. Piper starts to bark, pulling the lead as hard as he can, to get to her. She waves to me,

and climbs up on to Claude's back. He breaks into a trot. Now he pounds towards us with his great big bear paws. Just at the moment, when I reach for Nana's hand, Claude's front paws leave the ground . . . one last kick with his back legs and he is flying. Nana's hat slips off her head and her long black hair streams behind her like the tail of a kite. Piper yaps like crazy and leaps off the ground to catch her.

Now I am running with Piper, flapping my arms, hard, so I can fly after her. I'm hurtling down Parliament hill, flapping, pushing off with my feet, but no matter how hard I try, I can't kick the ground away, and that's the moment when I see him, Jidé Jackson walking closer and closer up the hill, with his arms outstretched towards me.

'You were thrashing around a bit,' Mum explains. She is lying next to me in my bed.

'I was trying to fly. Me and Piper were trying to catch up with Nana,' I tell her, still out of breath.

'Where was Nana?' Mum asks.

'Flying away on Claude's back.'

'Just a dream,' Mum says, like in *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy wakes up and the whole story is make-believe, even the nightmare bits. I wish it was – just a dream – except for the end. I wish I could click my red shiny heels together and make it all go away . . . the blood, the coffin . . . make it all go away . . . except for Jidé Jackson.

11.59 p.m. I wait for the last minute of my twelfth birthday to tick away before I take off my new watch. Maybe if I don't wear it time will slow down and things will go back to normal. Since I strapped it to my wrist this morning something strange has happened to time. I can hear it beating, all day long, under the surface of everything.