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Opening extract from

East of the Sun, West of the Moon

Written by

Jackie Morris

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For Hannah Stowe and Erin Keen,
with love.



JANETTA OTTER-BARRY BOOKS

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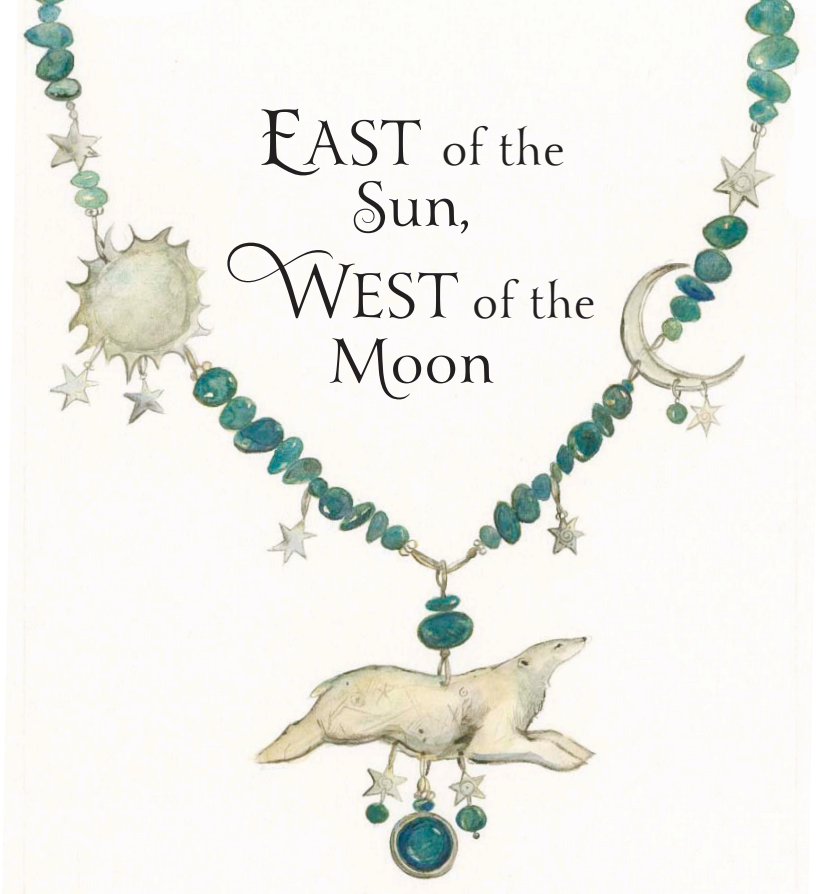
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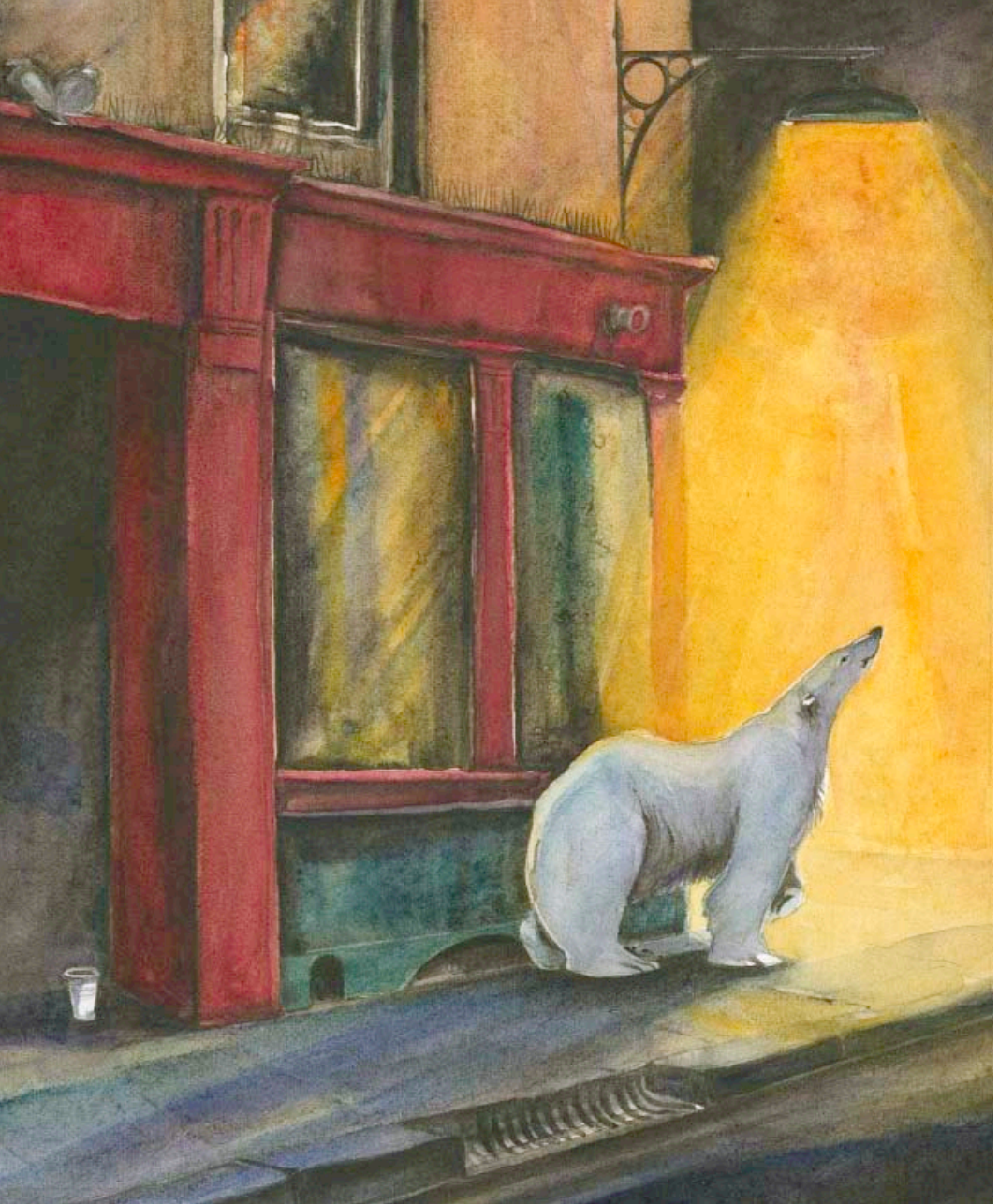
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EAST of the Sun, WEST of the Moon

JACKIE MORRIS

FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS



In an iridescent sparkle of frosted light he appeared, a huge white bear, shifting and shimmering into solid form. Frost stars clung to his thick pelt. He shook himself and they danced around him like an echo of the Northern Lights.

Noise and lights and smells, hurrying people, sirens, car horns and engines. People rushed by, coat collars high against the cold, and only the child in a pushchair saw and gasped, pointing at the white bear in the dark city street.

He sniffed the city air deep into his black nose. Car fumes, perfume, sweat and oil, metal, rubber, rotting vegetables, cigarette smoke, winter – and beneath it all the faintest trace of 'her'. She had walked here earlier.

He shook his giant head as if to shake the noise out of it and followed the stream of scent that was her, moving fast through the scurrying crowds. A ghost of a bear, unseen by the busy busy people, passing cars, buses and bikes, people on their way home from work,

others on their way to work, people huddled in sleeping bags in shop doorways. He moved towards the edge of the city, past prostitutes in short skirts and huge coats, and the slow-cruising cars, past the huddled dealers of drugs on corners of parks and streets.

As he came out from the streets of shops towards the houses and flats, he stopped to sniff deeply again. In a doorway, down a dark alley he saw a child, no more than twelve, huddled in a bundle of blankets. Beside her was a cup and a sign that simply said "Please". He felt what she felt: lost, lonely and afraid, stone-cold and balanced on the edge of life and death. She saw him as a flickering image – a memory, a wish, something half-remembered from a story in another life.

He caught the scent of the one he searched for and set off at a run down the street away from the shops. But first he moved closer to the child and breathed on her, and she felt the bear's hot, fishy breath wash through her with a healing warmth, even to her frozen fingers. Then he breathed into the cup. As he lumbered away into the night she watched, amazed. She picked up the cup. It was heavy with gold.



The girl stood by the window and watched the beginning of the snow falling. She was cold and tired. She pulled the blanket round her a little tighter and went to help her sister with the fire.

This evening they would have a feast. After school she had gone with her brother round the market stalls as they were closing up, packing away boxes into the backs of vans. Fruit and vegetables too ripe to sell another day were thrown away or left by the side of the road. They had collected enough for a good meal, and the old lady who kept the wholefoods stall had slyly given her a bag with rice and bulgar and even, she discovered when she unpacked the bag later, a small bag of fruit sweets.

Behind the supermarket they had dodged the security guards to go through the skips for out-of-date bread and frozen foods. And so they came home with quite a hoard. Now it was quiet in the flat and the smell of stew made it seem almost homely.

They had been poor even before they came to this country: she and her father, mother and three brothers and three sisters. Her father wrote for a newspaper, and when she was young their lives had been good. But then the government had changed and their father wrote things that the new rulers did not like.

They had come for him one night. A knock on the door – then they burst into the house and dragged him away. Days later they brought him back, broken and bruised with threats of what would happen to his wife, to his children, if he continued to write. So they had fled, a frightening journey over land and sea, to claim asylum in this new country.

Yet things were little better here. They were treated as criminals 'while their case was investigated'. Over and over, her father was interrogated about his torture at the hands of the government, was forced to relive the horror and humiliation until he sank into despair. Unable to work, feed or clothe the family, they lived off charity, little more than beggars.

Their journey to the new land had been terrifying. They had placed themselves in the hands of people-

traffickers, afraid of discovery, death, separation. Now they lived with the fear of being returned to their homeland to certain death, and with the dread of their children being taken away by the government in this new country.

At school she had no friends. The other children were frightened by the haunted, far-away look in her eyes.

But tonight they could pretend things were normal. The smells of cooking filled every corner of the room, and her mother sang as she stirred the pot.



The knock at the door brought back all their fears. Was it the police, come to take them away, to send them back?

Father walked to the door and drew back the bolts.

Outside, the white bear shimmered in the orange street-lights. He swayed gently from side to side, and his white-mist breath blurred the frosted air. "I searched for you from afar," he said, his voice slow and gravelly,

but in their native tongue. “May I come in?”

As if enchanted, her father stepped back, and the great bear came into their home. He shook his coat and it sparkled with frost. His white fur carried the dark marks of his trek through the city streets.



From the first moment she saw him, the girl knew that the bear had come for her. How many times had she dreamt of him, of riding on his back, sleeping, wrapped safe in his paws, walking beside him? How many times, on their terrifying journey, had she imagined the bear walking beside her, guarding her family while they slept? Now he was here, as if spelled from her dreams.

He lay down before her, head on his giant paws, snow stars caught in his white white fur. “Forgive me,” he growled, “but I need you. Only come away with me and your family will be well and all manner of things will be well. This I promise you.”

Her mother’s hand was at her mouth. Father stepped between the girl and the bear.

But in the eyes of the bear she thought she could see tears like frozen diamonds, and through to his soul, a depth of sadness beyond her understanding.



It seemed to the others that time had stopped, but then the girl took her father’s hand and knelt before the bear. She reached out with her other hand to touch the bear’s face, stroking his fur, which felt damp and thick and warm, so warm on her fingers. As she moved her hand over his face his eyes closed. He seemed almost to smile and a great sigh shook him. He smelled of the forests, of wildness and of home. From the first touch of fingertips on fur she knew she had no choice.

“I will come with you, Bear,” she said.

But her family all cried out at once. “NO.”

Confusion fell upon the house, and then her father spoke. “How can this be? Here in this city, in the twenty-first century, a talking bear walks into our house? We do not live in fairy tales, we do not live in stories. And he says you must go and all will be well.

Go where? For what? What will he do? Tear you apart and eat you? And what will we do without you? Have we been through so much together to lose you now?"

By his side, her mother had sunk to her knees and was crying, swaying a little while the others clung to her.

The girl cupped the great bear's head in her hands, and breathed his warmth to give her courage. She must go with him.

"I will come back in a week," he softly said. "Be ready. Bring only what you need." With that he was gone, out into the night with its orange lights and distant siren sounds, leaving behind the faintest trace of the forest smell of home.



For a week they argued. They would lock her in, send her away, move away themselves, but to where? There was nowhere they could go. They would go to the police, and tell them what? That a talking bear had come into their house and threatened to take away

their oldest child. The police would think them mad. They began to think they *were* mad, that they had had some kind of collective nightmare. But the girl knew the truth, and when a week had passed she collected into a bundle the few things she would take.

There was a knock on the door. The girl drew back the bolts and there stood the bear. He swayed gently from side to side, bowed his head to her and waited.

To all her brothers and sisters she gave a hug and a kiss, holding the smallest so tightly. Her mother tried to turn away but she took her face in her hands and kissed her. She said, "Forgive me. You know that I have to do this."

And to her father she said, "I love you. Look after them all." She wiped a tear from his ragged face with her soft hand.

The bear knelt and she climbed astride his huge back. Then they were gone.

