

**Creative Friction: representations of child-carer
relationships in contemporary children's fiction and
Om Shanti, Babe, a novel for children.**

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degree of PhD

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Abstract

As a way to interrogate and deepen the representation of the two mother-daughter relationships at the centre of my novel, I undertook an investigation of the way understanding of relationships between primary carers and children has been theorised from the mid-twentieth century to the present, paying particular attention to the frequently conflicted period of adolescence. Because my novel is primarily concerned with the relationships between mothers and daughters, feminist theories about mothering were central to my research. The critical component of this submission takes its cue from the way feminists have drawn upon and reworked D.W. Winnicott's explanations of the ambivalence characteristic of mother-infant relationships. Because adolescence usually involves a secondary separation from carers (the first is associated with the infant's experience of weaning and toilet training) it is often accompanied by a return of the repressed feelings of ambivalence. My analysis looks at how these feelings are presented in a range of children's fictions for preteens and teens written between 1975 and 2007. It is notable that across the sample, which examines a variety of carer-child relationships, readers are encouraged to identify good caring models as those which embody a cluster of traditional values and behaviours and which privilege the needs of child[ren]. The primary texts are analysed with reference to the theories of Donald Winnicott, Bruno Bettelheim, Nancy Chodorow, Sara Ruddick, Patricia Hill Collins, Rozsika Parker, and Andrea Doucet. Throughout, the conclusions of my research are related to my novel, *Om Shanti Babe*, which is set in India and compares a mother-daughter pair from the UK travelling in India with an Indian mother-daughter relationship.

Nine children's novels are discussed:

Almond, David, *My Dad's a Birdman* (2007)

Furlong, Monica, *Wise Child* (1987)

Hidier, Tanuja Desai, *Born Confused* (2003)

Magorian, Michelle, *Goodnight Mister Tom* (1981)

Mahey, Margaret, *Memory* (1987)

Morpurgo, Michael, *Kensuke's Kingdom* (1999)

Reeve, Philip, *Here Lies Arthur* (2007)

Wilson, Jacqueline, *Dustbin Baby* (2001)

Wilson, Jacqueline, *The Illustrated Mum* (1999)

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Novel Synopsis

Cassia and her mother, Luella, arrive in Kerala, India on a buying trip for Luella's London shop. Cassia, who is having problems at school, quickly realises neither the trip or India is as she imagined. Her confusion is compounded when she finds out that Luella, who is divorced from Cassia's father, is having a relationship with a local man, Vikram Chaudhury.

They travel north to stay with Luella's friend, Saachi (a lawyer), and her daughter, Priyanka. On the way, Cassia is saved from falling from a train carriage by a local boy, Dev. Arriving in Malabar, Cassia is disappointed to find Priyanka is not as she anticipated - 'Princess Priya' is more privileged, and rather bossier, than Cassia expected. In addition, Priyanka is concerned about her weight which disturbs Cassia as her ex-best friend Rachel's anorexia is the root of her problems at school.

Cassia feels that she is an outsider in her mother's life in India, and when Priyanka inadvertently reveals Luella and Vikram's wedding plans, she is very upset. Priyanka and Cassia become friends only when they realise they share a love of the pop star, Jonny Gold, who is in India apparently looking for a location for his new video.

The girls hope to meet Jonny seeing him as the key to a glamorous future. However, when Saachi, whose work Cassia has come to respect, finds out that Jonny is behind an environmentally irresponsible hotel development, Cassia faces a dilemma which is made more acute when her mother explains that her shop is going bankrupt and will have to be sold unless a profitable new sales-line can be found.

Travelling into the hills with Vikram Chaudhury, who until this point she has mistakenly believed to be involved in the hotel development, Cassia finds a possible

solution to the shop's problems in the form of locally produced beeswax candles. With the help of Dev and his deaf sister, Nandita, Vikram, and Priyanka's grandmother the shop is given a stay of execution.

Jonny Gold arrives at the beach to film the video, which is actually an advert for his proposed hotel. Cassia and Dev confront Jonny, and while they do not immediately stop the development, they have at least lost their illusions about his glamour and have learned to stand up for what they believe to be important.

Preface

My doctoral submission is presented in three parts. Firstly, this preface, which explains how the submission is organised and introduces the second part of the submission, a longer critical piece (and bibliography), *Creative Friction*, which analyses representations of child-carer relationships in contemporary children's fiction. In my own creative work I wanted to explore the feelings of anger, resentment, rejection and confusion associated with the period of adolescence, when issues to do with separation associated with infancy may return as part of the process of growing up and individuation. I was particularly interested in the self-reflection associated with managing ambivalence (simultaneous feelings of love and hate) and how dispensing with the guilt and fear associated with separation on both sides, is represented as transformative in children's literature. I am particularly interested in the way books portraying dysfunctional mother-child relationships often seem to feature surrogate primary carers, portraying this nurturing as a shared, distributed activity carried out by those other than the birth mother. For that reason, although I read widely across a spectrum of children's literature of the last thirty years – the span of time since the publication of Bruno Bettelheim's influential work, *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) which considers the significance of stories in the emotional lives of child readers - I have concentrated on novels in which these elements are foregrounded.¹ The third part of the submission is an original novel for children, *Om*

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Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, (London: Penguin Books, 1976)

Shanti, Babe. Set in present day India, it explores the relationship between two mother-daughter pairs at a time of change in both their lives.

The novel and the critical work have developed in tandem and each has informed the other: in a multi-layered, iterative process, my thinking has been informed by my research and my writing has been informed by this thinking. The challenges of the creative writing have in turn made me review my reading of the texts and reconsider them through a number of different lenses, not least of which is as examples of successful writing for children in both critical, and commercial terms. The dialogue between the two major pieces of work is explored and explained in the critical piece.

When I decided to engage in a period of study at Newcastle University I was following an emerging interest in the understanding of ambivalence in the relationship between mother-daughter pairs, a topic I had earlier explored in a picture book, *My Mother is a Troll* (2006) in which, on her thirteenth birthday, the mother of the protagonist turns into a troll and engages in behaviour the daughter considers inappropriate and embarrassing. I was aware of conflicted feelings in my own maternal relationship, but hoped that I was managing these such that the inevitable separation that would come as my daughter grew up would not mean the end of the relationship. As a writer for children, I was determined that in my own work I would seek to avoid representations of mothers and children that, while acknowledging the significance of these powerful relationships, held to an overtly sentimental view of mothering. It was from this personal situation that the paired research and creative components of this Creative Writing doctoral submission grew.

I initially registered for the MPhil programme (rather than MLitt or Creative Writing MA) because it included both a critical and creative component to the thesis.

This was important as I wanted to engage with a contemporary critical discourse and then to explore some of the resultant thinking in the form of a novel for children. In addition, assuming satisfactory progression, the MPhil offered an option to transfer to the PhD program after one year should this prove necessary for the satisfactory completion of the projects. This indeed proved to be the case and a transfer was approved. Since 2008 this work has developed as a PhD under the supervision of Margaret Wilkinson and Professor Kimberley Reynolds.

We agreed a 70:30 relationship between the creative and critical components, which means that the main part of the submission comprises the novel and the issues writing it involved. The critical and theoretical ideas explored in the research project, and applied to the selected examples here, however, have been very important to the novel and the submission as a whole. Part of the critical work looks specifically how the primary texts used in the critical piece served as guides for the architecture of my own novel, and how they influenced my development as a writer.

Creative Friction: Representations of Child-Carer Relationships in Contemporary Children's Fiction

Chapter 1

The research component of this submission is primarily concerned with how relationships between children and those who are their primary carers (often, but not always their biological mothers) are portrayed in contemporary children's fiction. Using nine texts written between 1981 and 2007 by authors of both sexes and featuring protagonists of both sexes aged between seven and seventeen, it explores how relationships between children and primary carers are experienced and asks whether the texts promote a particular view of these relationships. While the sample texts cannot represent the whole of children's literature over this period, each is well known, has sold well and is by an established writer, so they can be viewed as part of the mainstream of writing for children and young people. Together they show that rather than promoting a monolithic and idealised model of caring, writing for children regularly explores varied practices and changing attitudes to child-carer relationships.

This topic grew out of a long-standing concern with mothering relationships in my own creative work and an interest in how far writing for children has engaged with the often contradictory responses to caring and being cared for. Although initially my focus was on mothering, it became clear that in books for children as in life children encounter many different kinds of primary-caring relationships. While

my research moved beyond mother-child relationships, it has continued to focus on the ways in which conflicted feelings associated with primary carers are represented in children's literature, and the way learning to manage these is associated with positive and transformative change for both children and carers. By transformative change I mean the kind of change which leads to enduring and significant beneficial outcomes, such as increased self-knowledge, empathy, and maturation for both the child and the primary carer.

The research project directly informed the creative component of this project, a young adult (YA) novel called *Om Shanti, Babe (OSB)*, since the scenario in the novel centres on a British mother and her teenage daughter who are experiencing mild, mutual ambivalence as changes in their material situation and relationships with others create anxiety, friction and a sense of separation between them. While travelling together in India they engage with an Indian mother-daughter pair at a similar stage, and find that doing so in combination with new needs, experiences and friendships helps them develop empathy, increase self-knowledge and transform their own relationship. To ensure that the primary texts I discuss would help me develop my own creative thinking, I have concentrated on novels that foreground conflicted feelings that lead to transformative change in relationships involving child characters who, like the daughter in my novel, are no longer infants and most of whom are approaching or in the throes of adolescence. In this way I created a constant dialogue between the research (30%) and the creative writing (70%) components of this submission.

Art and Life

In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) psychologist Bruno Bettelheim posits that fairy tales reveal manifold truths that may serve as guides to help readers find meaning in life.² Bettelheim's interpretations and the argument that it is only fairy tales that adequately perform this function for young readers have been compellingly critiqued by, for example, Jack Zipes (2006) and Nicholas Tucker (1984), and there is widespread agreement that children's literature in general 'is both a crucial and a dynamic part of culture' giving young readers ways to think about themselves and 'how the world around them operates'.³ As John Stephens demonstrates in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992), 'Writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by the author and audience.'⁴ This being the case, as a writer I wanted to be alert to the kinds of influences I am exerting. Given that I am also the mother of a teenage daughter, I needed the distancing mechanism of research and theory to help me interrogate my attitudes. As well as helping me become alert to my own agendas and assumptions, my research has helped me both to understand the significance of the way child-primary carer relationships are represented to children in fiction, and how this reflects recent theoretical interpretations of how these relationships are understood outside children's books. While there are undoubtedly tensions between real world and fictional representations of child-primary carer relationships, the two are interdependent, and I felt it to be important to my writing and thinking to explore the current thinking around being a child's primary carer.

² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, (London: Penguin Books, 1976) all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Bettelheim, after quotations in the text.

³ Kimberley Reynolds, *Modern Children's Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p. 3

⁴ John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, (London: Longman, 1992) p. 3

Managing Friction

The sample texts were selected following a broad survey of children's literature, including fairy tales.⁵ The analyses begin with Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight, Mr Tom* (1981), a young adult (YA) novel featuring a male primary-carer, and end with David Almond's *My Dad's a Birdman* (2008), illustrated by Polly Dunbar, which features a female child as a temporary primary-carer.⁶ Together they offer evidence about the way nurturant relationships between children and carers are currently being represented in children's literature, and show how this understanding affected my decision making in the course of writing *OSB*.

Central to both the sample texts and the novel is the need to manage ambivalence in primary child-carer relationships. *OSB* draws on episodes in life that are likely to create conflicted feelings. In *OSB*, the relatively weak ambivalence associated with adolescence (in contrast to the powerful destructive feelings attributed to babies by Freudian psychologists such as Melanie Klein) is a driving force in the narrative.⁷ I have attempted to portray how these conflicted feelings originate, how they are experienced and how they are managed such that both parties come to a new, positive understanding of themselves and the evolving nature of the relationships between them. At the heart of my own work and in all nine primary texts is a 'coming of age' story. I wanted to understand how the maturation of the child characters is supported by the need to come to terms with their feelings of guilt associated with even mild ambivalence, and how the experience of managing ambivalence might encourage children and carers more successfully to work through their conflicts, and

⁵ an overview of the range of texts is contained in the synopsis of reflective diary and bibliography.

⁶ Michelle Magorian, *Goodnight Mister Tom*, (London: Kestrel, 1981, London: Penguin, 1998), all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as GMT, after quotations in the text. David Almond, *My Dad's a Birdman*, (London: Walker Books, 2007), all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as MD, after quotations in the text.

⁷ See Janice Doane, and Devon Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the "Good Enough" Mother*. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993), all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Doane, after quotations in the text.

so emerge from a difficult episode with their capabilities and self-knowledge transformed.

D.W. Winnicott and the Good-Enough Mother

During the twentieth century several influential child psychologists shaped how the role of the mother was understood in culture and sought to explain the mother-infant dyad in psychological terms.⁸ Amongst the most well-known and well-respected of these was Donald Winnicott who, according to psychologist and writer Adam Phillips, helped to ‘translate psychoanalysis from a theory of sexual desire into a theory of emotional nurture’.⁹ Writing in the 1950s, Winnicott encouraged women not to attempt to be ‘ideal’ mothers, attempting to anticipate and meet their children’s every needs. Instead he valued the ‘good-enough’ mother which he characterised as one who, by using her imagination and common sense, maintains a safe, playful and creative holding environment in which the child comes to understand itself and others as autonomous beings. Winnicott’s holding environment goes beyond the mother’s handling of her baby and encompasses the family and the outside world.¹⁰ Winnicott believed that if a baby was to develop well there should be ‘personal mothering from the start,’ preferably provided by the ‘one who has conceived and carried the baby, the one who has a very deeply rooted interest in allowing for that baby’s point of view, and who loves to let herself be the baby’s whole world’.¹¹ Recognising the inevitable ambivalence infants feel towards their mother’s nurturing - but not always

⁸ for example see Janice Doane, and Devon Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva: psychoanalytic feminism and the search for the “good enough” mother*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993)

⁹ Adam Phillips, *Winnicott*, (1988; London: Penguin, 2007) p. 10 all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Phillips, after quotations in the text.

¹⁰ Donald Winnicott, *Winnicott on the Child*, (Perseus Publishing, 2002) p. 51 all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Winnicott 2002, after quotations in the text.

¹¹ Donald Winnicott, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*, (London: Penguin, 1991) p.88 all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Winnicott 1991, after quotations in the text.

available - body, Winnicott's good-enough mother provides a stable environment and 'transitional objects' a term coined by Winnicott in 1951 to describe the infant's first possession(s) (such things as blankets, toys, dummies), to which it attributes special value, and which provide defence against anxiety. These objects, he designated as occupying an 'intermediate area of experience' between the psychic and external reality.¹² The baby uses transitional objects and transitional phenomena - a term which can extend to 'objects' such as a song or a word- for comfort, play, and as a device to explore the difference between objects that are 'me' (their body) and 'not-me'.

For Winnicott, good-enough mothering in early childhood gives the child a stock of psychic well-being that will be drawn on all through its life. Phillips suggests that Winnicott saw cure as 'care in the service of personal development'. (Phillips, p.12) According to Carol Mavor, whose study of gifted men, *Reading Boyishly* (2008), includes Winnicott, 'Winnicott saw the model for cure like a gift tied with ribbon, as given to us at the start of our own lives by our own mothers'.¹³ By this she means that the experience of good-enough mothering makes children less vulnerable to psychic distress and gives them embedded resources to deal with painful experiences, including the fear and guilt associated with separation, later in their lives. According to Winnicott, this is achieved in part through the mother being the first person to 'take the baby through this first version of the many that will be encountered, of attack that is survived.' (Winnicott 2005, p.124)

The notion that good-enough mothering ensures a 'stock of psychic well-being' is a feature also found in more recent writing about baby care such as in the work of Sue Gerhardt, who argues that there is a direct link between what she regards

¹² Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, (London: Routledge, 2005) p.2 all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Winnicott 2005, after quotations in the text.

¹³ Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 62 all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Mavor, after quotations in the text.

as a dysfunctional capitalist society and the quality of care experienced by generations of children during their early years. She argues that it is ‘important to understand these connections between our infancies and the kind of world we create.’¹⁴

However, while acknowledging that children may experience negative feelings about their mothering, she says little about the ambivalent feelings experienced by mothers (or those primary carers who function as mothers) which Winnicott, who too drew a line between incomplete mothering and delinquency (what he called the anti-social tendency) saw as the inevitable and understandable consequence of being responsible for and responsive to their infants’ needs.¹⁵

Mothering and Hate

Winnicott’s work has impacted and been revisited by feminist theorists particularly in relation to mothering. Winnicott defines the naturally reciprocal relationship of mothering as an activity for one dedicated woman - the ‘ordinary devoted mother’ - but this model is not always reflected in life or children’s fiction. (Winnicott 2002, p. 11) This emphasis on maternal dedication does not imply that Winnicott was sentimental about the practice of mothering, as Elsa First explores in her essay, ‘Mothering, Hate and Winnicott’.¹⁶ First explores Winnicott’s notion that from infancy there is a level of mutual hatred between infants and those who are primarily responsible for their care. Given the unreasonable demands the baby will make on her, Winnicott suggests ‘the mother hates the baby before the baby hates the mother, and before the baby can know his mother hates him;’ indeed, Winnicott went so far as to

¹⁴ Sue Gerhardt, *The Selfish Society: How We All Forgot to Love One Another and Made Money Instead*, (London: Simon and Schuster, 2010)p. 7

¹⁵ Donald Winnicott, The Anti-Social tendency in *Collected Papers: through paediatrics to psych-analysis*, (London: Tavistock, 1958) pp. 306-15

¹⁶ Elsa First, ‘Mothering, Hate and Winnicott’ in *Representations of Motherhood*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) pp. 147 – 161, all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as First, after quotations in the text.

provide a list of reasons why mothers should at times hate their babies (Winnicott 2002, p.146)

First looks specifically at Winnicott's writing about mothering and psychoanalysis and, unlike Mavor, she recognises that it was not simply that mothering was the model for his work as a psychoanalyst, but also that his model of psychoanalysis also informed his model of mothering. In the 1949 paper, 'Hate in the Counter-Transference,' Winnicott says that the 'analyst has to display all the patience and tolerance and reliability of a mother devoted to her infant [...] to seem to want to give what is only given because of the patient's need.'¹⁷ Seeing the practices of mothering and psychoanalysis as similar, not only in terms of providing a safe and secure 'holding environment', but also in relation to the strong feelings of hate experienced by the analyst, Winnicott suggests that in his professional practice the knowledge that the session would come to an end and be paid for gave him a way to manage his feelings of hatred towards a patient in ways not available to most mothers.

Foregrounding this pragmatic aspect of Winnicott's thinking, First calls for unsentimental childrearing; that is, childrearing that acknowledges negative feelings. Sentimentality is useless for parents, she says, because it contains a denial of hate. Significantly, she describes manifestations of hate as a form of self-respect as they allow the mother to acknowledge the unreasonable demands a child will make on her. She values the extent to which Winnicott acknowledges 'the naturalness and inevitability of parental ambivalence toward the child.' (First p.152) First also highlights Winnicott's recognition of the need to acknowledge maternal aggression - allowing mothers to appreciate the reality and validity of their hate (as well as their love) – since doing so allows a mother to play with her own aggression and that of her

¹⁷ Donald Winnicott, Hate in the Counter-Transference in *Collected Papers: through paediatrics to psych-analysis*, (London: Tavistock, 1958) pp. 194-203 p. 202

baby. This is important because it leads to resilience, a state which, ‘requires acceptance of aggressivity and activity in oneself, as a part of one’s own aliveness, rather than fearing that any assertion of one’s own rights will be destructive to the other’. (First, p. 159) While Winnicott was referring specifically to mothers and their babies, this insight informed the approach to mapping the dynamics of the central relationship in *OSB*; specifically in the way the novel portrays the return of conflicted feelings associated with growing up and anxiety about this stage of separation. The relationship between infants and adolescents is explained by German psychoanalyst, Peter Blos (1962) who recognised that adolescence entails a second individuation process.¹⁸

During adolescence a young person’s adult identity develops. This is a painful process during which one alternates between regression and progression: on the one hand, one longs for the infant’s symbiotic relationship to the mother and the surrounding world and one re-experiences the pain of losing the unity with one’s mother and father; on the other hand, one is filled with aggression against one’s parents. Aggression is necessary for liberating oneself from them and for developing one’s own identity.¹⁹

This is precisely the dynamic explored in *OSB*. An example is found in the following extract, taken from the episode in which Luella finds Cassia after she has surreptitiously left a restaurant where Luella is entertaining important investors and made her way to an Internet café. While Cassia does not acknowledge her anxiety, the reader knows that the journey to the café has been problematic and that Cassia has been saved from potential danger by a local girl.

I tried to tell her [Luella] about Jonny Gold, but she was in mini-rage mode and I was too tired to make her listen. She gave me a long boring lecture about not sneaking off and how I’d offended Call-Me-V and embarrassed her in front of her business friends and blah blah blah.

¹⁸ Peter Blos, *On Adolescence: a psychiatric interpretation*, (New York: The Free Press, 1962)

¹⁹ Ulf Boethius, ‘Controlled Pleasures: youth and literary texts’, in Fornas, Johan and Goran Bolin, eds, *Youth Culture in Late Modernity*, (London: Sage, 1995) pp 145 – 169 p.150

She was warming up for the dead-in-a-ditch speech when we got back to the guesthouse and I crawled into bed pulling the sheet over my head. I thought it would be nice sharing a room, but Lula was an angry million miles away. I warned her that the moment she started snoring I would take her credit card and demand my own room. She just frowned and said, ‘Good luck squeezing another penny out of that!’ Then, she said she had jet lag and went back downstairs leaving me by myself, in the dark, again. She obviously cared more about what Call-me-V was doing than me. As I lay there listening to the traffic noise and dogs barking I wished I was back at home, cosy under my own duvet instead of sweating away in India, frizzy-haired and friendless. (*OSB*, p.164)

Luella expresses her anger to Cassia and from the remarks that follow, it is clear that they are both familiar and fairly comfortable with this kind of exchange. What can be read as Cassia’s quite extreme attempt to get her mother’s attention is partially successful in as much as Luella leaves the restaurant and comes to collect her from the Internet café. However, it does not ensure Luella’s presence for long, as Luella leaves Cassia alone in her room and seeks out adult company. Cassia sees this as further evidence of Luella’s separation from her and conjures up a vision of her ‘cosy’ bedroom in London to comfort herself. This is another stage in the dialogue that is helping Cassia understand herself as separate from her mother and so able to participate in the transformation of their relationship in mutually beneficial ways. The scene encourages readers to understand feelings of ambivalence as normal and potentially beneficial. In presenting the row as following a familiar pattern and giving vent to resentment on both sides, it also works to deconstruct sentimental views of the child-primary carer relationship.

Oneness

When First refers to sentimental views of mothering she has in mind such ways of thinking as the belief that the child and mother desire ‘oneness’ and should properly experience only loving feelings toward each other. Such sentimentality is also

challenged by psychotherapist Rozsika Parker in *Torn in Two: Maternal Ambivalence* (1995).²⁰ Parker maintains that, 'A woman's experience of being a mother is as multi-faceted as there are mothers.' (Parker, p.47) Feelings expressed by women who are mothers speak of the most tender love through to the 'deepest and darkest rage'.²¹ This spectrum of emotion is important, and in common with many feminist theories about those who are mothers/primary carers, *Torn in Two* is especially critical of 'self-abnegation, unstinting love, intuitive knowledge of nurturance and unalloyed pleasure in children'. (Parker, p.47) For Parker, the deep and intense bonds between mothers/primary carers and their growing children must be understood to include feelings of ambivalence on both sides. Like Winnicott, she concludes that ambivalence is 'emphatically not synonymous with the inability to love' but rather the experience in which loving and hating exist side by side. (Parker, p. 99) Rather than a manifestation of incomplete mothering, or the result of Oedipal dramas, or even the inevitable and negative outcome of mothering in a patriarchal society – in other words a problem to be solved – Parker presents ongoing maternal ambivalence as an unavoidable and important aspect of an intense relationship that needs to be understood, appreciated, and managed from babyhood to adolescence.

[...] once again, we end up dividing mothers into the good and containing, about whom nothing more need be said or done, and the mothers who require explaining. It is hard, but crucial, to hold on to the idea of mothers as necessarily ambivalent. (Parker, p. 99)

As the analyses in the following chapters show, this way of thinking about mothering is conveyed in all my sample texts as well as in *OSB*.

²⁰ Rozsika Parker, *Torn in Two*, (London: Virago, 1995) all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Parker, after quotations in the text.

²¹ Juliet Miller, *The Creative Feminine and Her Discontents Psychotherapy, Art, and Destruction*, (London: Karnac, 2008), p.36

While she clearly draws on the work of earlier thinkers such as Winnicott, Parker is critical of psychoanalysis, which she suggests recognises the ubiquity of maternal ambivalence only in terms of its negative outcome for the child while ignoring its potential contribution to maternal thinking. Parker, in line with Winnicott, argues that the experience of both loving and hating that is shared between mother and child ‘can be the source of great creative energy in the way that just love or hate existing alone cannot’. (Parker, p.10) She separates maternal ambivalence from bad mothering, arguing that ‘it is part of the internal mechanism necessary to bring creative energy to the relationship and to support necessary separation.’(Parker, p.22)

Parker suggests that the feelings of hate and rage which may surface when the inevitable frustrations of being a mother/primary carer threaten to overwhelm the carer’s sense of self, mobilise fantasies of abandonment and separation. As long as these fantasies remain works of the imagination and are not acted out, they are a useful, creative outcome because in conjuring up these fantasies mothers/primary carers have stimulated their imaginations, provoked their consciousness and engaged in attentive concern for themselves and their children. Through acknowledging even mild ambivalence, as she maintains, mothers/primary carers and children, can come to a better understanding of themselves and their relationships with one another and it is this that interests me as a writer. My reading of a wide range of children's literature suggests that understanding the need to dispense with the guilt and fear associated with separation and to embrace ambivalent feelings informs many representations of mothering/primary care to young readers, suggesting that consciously or not, writers find this insight one they want to convey to children.

All nine of the sample novels conform to this pattern, as will be clear in the analyses that follow. *OSB*, too, incorporates this insight, both through the actions of the central characters and Cassia's reflections on her relationship with her mother, her observations of the interactions between the Indian mother-daughter pair, and through her reading of *The Peacock Spring* (1975) by Rumer Godden.²² The purpose of embedding this text, also set in India and featuring a teenage girl as the central character, was to give a model of child-carer relationships and maturation that was very different to Cassia's and to enable her, as Bettelheim argues fiction (fairy tales) can, to gain some perspective on her own relationships and development. Having Cassia read the book allows her to comment on the situation the fictional character, Una, finds herself in, encouraging her to think about how Una responds, and the problems her actions create.

In her interviews with mothers, Parker shows that although mothers frequently describe ideal moments with their own children that look superficially like a living out of this 'oneness', in fact, as the child grows, the mother's needs for sustenance and pleasure are met not in a state of fusion with the child, but through a state of 'mutuality' or shared gratification, often of a quite mundane nature such as experiencing shopping and cooking together. I read these moments of shared quiet pleasure as being similar to Winnicott's notion of the privacy of self and the value of silences in therapy which Phillips suggests is at the root of Winnicott's ambivalence or the fears of exploitation by the therapist who offers himself up as 'primarily a maternal object.' In them [quiet, shared moments] neither mother nor child experiences the other as the source of either plenitude or deprivation'. (Phillips, p.151) The mother is not the omnipotent figure to be adored or hated and against whom the

²² Rumer Godden, *The Peacock Spring*, (London: Macmillan, 1975) first published in 1975 as an adult title and reissued as a book for children in 2004.

child must struggle to connect with the world outside the domestic sphere. This insight was one I used as I explored the relationship between Cassia and Luella through their interactions in the world outside the domestic. An example of where I play out this movement between Cassia as ‘needy child’ and the adolescent Cassia experiencing conflicted feelings about her opportunity for engagement with the outside world is found in an extract from an episode early in the book when Cassia and Luella are at the market.

The not-talking thing between me and Lula was making me feel sad and it was a relief not to be alone anymore. We went in and slipped off our shoes. Perched on a stool by the counter, drinking juice, I watched as Mrs Jaffrey put out the sample bottles. Then, she put small drops onto our skin and explained that each one was good for different things. Some were just perfumes, but others, like the massage oils, could help you feel better too. With some oils, like Rose, just the smell was enough to change your mood. I wondered if there was a mixture for difficult mothers. Lula said she was looking for a best-seller and we sniffed and sighed our way through Green Orchid, Kerala Flower and something with Juniper that Mrs Jaffrey said was very good for cellulite - I could see from Lula’s expression that a couple of pints would be in the post before we left. I tried to take charge of the order book, but Lula took it off me and wrote down the orders as she went along. This was supposed to be my job and I was left sitting on the stool with no one talking to me and with nothing to do. (*OSB*, p. 173)

Here Cassia is accompanying her mother on what is essentially a business meeting, something it is unlikely she would do in London because she would be in school. She enjoys the experience of learning something new, but she is disappointed when her desire for engagement and mutuality is frustrated by Luella, who in taking away the order book, blocks Cassia from fully participating. The first half of the book is punctuated by these experiences of blocking and feelings of abandonment, but gradually these are replaced by other, more positive emotions that signal a transformation in their relationship.

Winnicott's construction of the 'good enough' mother is helpful when looking at children's fiction because it portrays mothering as enormously powerful in embedding psychic well-being in the child and because it characterises this aspect of mothering as a playful, creative dialogue between the mother and child. In what he described as 'the search for the self' Winnicott stated that certain conditions associated with what 'is usually called creativity' were necessary because 'It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self'. (Winnicott 2005, p.72) As already explained, however, the first shared experience of ambivalence was not the focus of either my research or *OSB*; rather, it is the return of such feelings in adolescence, when delusions of omnipotence have gone and when dependence is less great and separation has, to a degree, already been attained, that concerns me. In particular, I wanted accurately to depict examples of the kind of playful dialogue Winnicott identified as characteristic of successful negotiation of ambivalence between primary carers and children taking place during this later stage. This meant showing moments of tension, conflict and uneasy change before working towards a transformative resolution. An early example of how anticipations of trouble between Luella and Cassia are established can be seen in an extract that takes place on their first morning in India.

The next morning I found Lula sitting on the terrace eating breakfast. As I sat down at the table she looked up from the paper she was reading.
'Morning slumber beast, have some food.'
'Not hungry.'
'Please, have something.'
'Can we go swimming today?'
'There isn't a beach nearby, Cass.'
'I was reading about this place, in the guidebook, Serenity Spa, on Bolghatty Island, it sounds super swishy.'
'I've been there before, it's super expensive!'

‘I could use some of Dad’s Christmas money.’
‘Sorry Cassie, I hate playing tourist when I’m here. Besides, I’ve got an appointment at the bank this morning.’
‘Can I come with you?’
Lula fiddled with one of her earrings, twisting it round and round between her thumb and fore finger.
‘How about instead, I drop you at the spa?’
I took a piece of toast from under its anti-fly-tent and peeled away the crusts. I dipped them one by one in a pot of honey. Normally, Lula does death stare deluxe when I do this, but today she said nothing.
‘Don’t they have any cereal here?’ I said, but she wasn’t listening anymore. She was reading the newspaper. (*OSB*, p.150)

This passage marks the beginnings of Cassia’s realisation that their trip is not a holiday and that because of her business commitments Luella will not be available for ‘play’ at all times. Cassia tries to provoke her mother by doing things - dipping her bread in the honey - that would normally get a reaction. She is frustrated because, like a typical adolescent, she feels stuck between wanting to be involved in the adult world of work and her more childish desires. Later in the same chapter, she reflects on Luella’s response to her wanting to wear a bikini in this conservative, cultural context and her identity as a tourist, which Cassia equates with childhood:

‘You’ll be in tourist world sweetie. I don’t suppose anyone will mind.’
The way she said it reminded me of going to nursery school in a fairy costume and clicky clacky shoes. No one had minded that either, but I was just a little kid then. (*OSB*, p. 152)

Here, Cassia regresses to nursery school. She is caught between being a child and a grown-up, suffering separation anxiety and being insightful enough to realise that she is an outsider. Her mother’s distracted behaviour and refusal to respond to her daughter’s provocations helps Cassia become aware that the identity and territory of childhood/tourist is safe, but constrained. It also creates a dissonance between the pair

that makes Cassia want a degree of separation and so is part of the subliminal process of preparing her to become more independent.

The Mummy Wars

Most writing about child-primary carer relationships starts with mother-child dyads, reflecting the assumption that a child requires constant nurturing from a single, dedicated caretaker, and that it is the biological mother who is primarily responsible for giving this care and attention, that dominated accepted views of child rearing and mothering in white, middle-class western society for decades.²³ But, as the voices of the culturally, socially, and economically marginalised have begun to be heard, definitions of mothering have changed just as the variety and diversity of women's experiences have challenged stereotypical and sentimental ideas of what it means to be female. As will be shown, these in turn have affected carer-child relationships more generally. To understand such changes, however, it is important to map changes in the way mother-child relationships have been constructed.

Playing Mummy

For Mavor, Winnicott's understanding of mothering and curing mirrors those Winnicott himself used when treating his patients – 'holding, caring, mothering, playing the effeminate role'. (Mavor, p.72) Given this, she suggests there is an irony in Winnicott's rejection of femininity in boys. Writing about fears of dependence, Winnicott suggests that while 'a man 'obviously cannot become a mother [...] the development of motherliness as a quality in his character does not get far enough, and femininity in a man proves to be a side-track to the main issues.' Winnicott suggests

²³ see for instance Nakano (1994), Hanigsberg and Ruddick (1999), Mui and Murphy, (2002), Doucet (2006)

instead that he [the man] should rather 'take part in an objective study of the mother's part.' (Winnicott 2002, p.204)

For Winnicott, the gendered separation of parenting roles into female mothering and male fathering (a job he saw as protecting and supporting the mother and being 'strict and strong') extends beyond the breast mother and into the 'environment mother, who actively provides care in handling and general management. (Winnicott 1991, p. 228) Winnicott presents this aspect of mothering as entirely intuitive, flowing naturally from every little girl's experience of 'playing at mothers and fathers at a tender age'. (Winnicott 2002, p.50) Winnicott saw the role of the father as to be 'respected and loved' and to 'take over feelings that the infant has already had towards certain properties of the mother'. (Winnicott 1991, p.114) This is a point where children's literature differs from Winnicott, as it opens up this 'mothering' activity to boys as well as girls. Not only are there early examples of nurturant boys who become primary carers in texts such as *Froggy's Little Brother* (1875), but in more contemporary children's literature the idea that playing with dolls or similar small humanoid figures is good training for nurturant care in both boys and girls is explored in a number of children's books including Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952), *William's Doll* (1972) by Charlotte Zolotow, and Lynne Reid Bank's *The Indian in the Cupboard* (1980). Bettelheim approved of fictional portrayals of boys' 'mothering', seeing it as a useful way of acting out an unconscious fantasy and enjoying psychic comfort. However, like Winnicott, he is literal-minded, describing the boy's desire to bear and care for children as 'desires which cannot be satisfied in reality'. (Bettelheim, p. 56)

Writing for children is just one of many arenas in which differences in 'mothering' and associated critical debates around gender are played out. In analysing my selection of children's texts I am using theoretical models which argue that the role of primary carer is not and should not be the exclusive province of biological mothers. This view is widely upheld in writing for children; my research suggests that for at least the last 30 years, children's literature has tended to construct the activities associated with childcare as behaviours open to and inhabited by women, men, children of both sexes and even animals and machines. The close readings of the sample texts that make up the sections in the critical part of the submission show that these texts embrace multiple and diverse sources of nurturant primary-care. To the best of my knowledge, this eclectic representation of child-carer relationships has not been discussed elsewhere, and so presumably it has not been perceived as contentious within a fictional context. Outside children's literature, however, the identity of being a mother carries important and complex cultural, social, legal, economic, and political meanings.

Like Mother Like Daughter

While children's literature has long portrayed nurturant primary care by those other than birth mothers or even human females, Winnicott and Parker represent dominant theories about motherhood by concentrating on mothering by women, specifically birth mothers. There is also, however, a significant body of work that does not assume that it is only women who can, or should mother. Among the first and most influential theorists to put forward the view that mothering should not be regarded as either the prerogative or the responsibility of women was Nancy Chodorow, whose *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) added a political and feminist rationale to this

premise. Chodorow called for a completely new approach to thinking about what mothering is, who does it and whether changing mothering was central to changing culture.²⁴ It was she who initially sought to replace the term 'mother' with 'primary carer'. *The Reproduction of Mothering* argues that mothering by women, associated as it is with intense and exclusive nurturing, is both problematically constructed and 'one of the few universal and enduring elements of the sexual division of labor'.

(Chodorow, p.3) In it Chodorow questions why this model of mothering as a psychological role requiring specific relational capacities associated with women has been reproduced over generations, concluding that 'people create and recreate aspects of their earliest relationships and therefore 'people's experience of their early relationship to their mothers provides a foundation for expectations of women as mothers.' (Chodorow, p.57) Chodorow's analysis of mothering questions both its gendered nature and the assumptions of psychoanalytic theory about the 'inevitable and necessary single mother-infant relationship'. (Chodorow, p.73) She suggests that while 'there does not seem to be evidence to demonstrate that exclusive mothering by women is necessarily better for infants [...] such mothering is 'good for society' in as much as it produces 'achievement-oriented men' who seek more high-status work and distance themselves from caring because it is an activity done only by women.

(Chodorow, p.75) She argues for flexibility in the identity and exclusivity of the role of the 'primary carer' - a deliberately gender-neutral term coined in an attempt to separate mothering from females.

While an 'account of the early mother-infant relationship in contemporary Western society reveals the overwhelming importance of the mother in everyone's psychological development', what infants and children need, according to Chodorow,

²⁴ Nancy J Chodorow., *Reproduction of Mothering*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: California Press, 1999), all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Chodorow, after quotations in the text.

is not a mother *per se* but a 'constancy of care and a certain quality of care by someone or some few persons'.(Chodorow, p.74) In other words, she attempts to disentangle mothering from biological mothers and even females. From a perspective outside traditional views of mothering, Chodorow suggests that men are in some ways disadvantaged by women's monopoly on mothering as it potentially reduces males' capacities to parent. As a result, men often miss out on what remains one of the 'few deep personal experiences our society leaves us'.(Chodorow, p.213) In the first edition of *The Reproduction of Mothering* she advocates that primary parenting is shared between men and women'.

While encouraging a flexible construction of mothering and recognizing that socio-economic shifts have inevitably changed the content of mothering, Chodorow cautions that change cannot afford to ignore the power of the mothering experience and may demand a re-evaluation of whether what is being done by primary carers who are not actually mothers can still be called 'mothering'. In the revised Preface to the second edition of *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1999) she explains that the profound personal changes emerging out of her own experience of motherhood have made her uneasy about the implications of changes to constructions of mothering. This unease arises specifically around such issues as the economic demands made on working mothers and legal and social moves towards shared parenting and fathers' rights. While not offering a clear delineation of when an activity stops 'being mothering', it appears that her earlier enthusiasm for men's sharing of the 'deep personal experience' it offers has been tempered, and that on reflection 'a feminist recognition of the centrality of the realm of psychological reality would not have singled out a demand for equal parenting as a social goal'.(Chodorow, p.xvi)

Chodorow's position and its changes are interesting in relation to children's fiction because in her initial questioning of the exclusive and necessary single mother-child relationship she opens up primary care giving – or 'mothering' - to a wider group of carers including men. She explains her changed position in the second edition in terms of her own personal and profoundly affecting experience of mothering, admitting that the first edition 'does not pay attention to women's subjective experience of their reproductive and sexual bodies'. (Chodorow, p.xiii) Evidently the experience of giving birth and being a (birth) mother fundamentally changed her understanding of what it means to mother as she had understood it up to this point. This unease about gender and women's subjective experience of mothering is enduring and powerful. Andrea Doucet recounts in the introduction to her controversial work, *Do Men Mother?* (2006), a study of men who are primary carers, the 'Do men mother?' question elicits considerable tension, both creative and abrasive.²⁵ Doucet encountered resistance to her suggestion that if 'mothering is synonymous with the responsibility for children [...] [and] men take on the responsibility for children, then they are mothering' - lies in her conviction that men's claims that they engage in mothering could be appropriated by anti-feminist fathers' groups and used to disempower women as mothers.²⁶ Ultimately Doucet deconstructs her own question and concludes that:

while men are not mothers and fathers do not mother, there are times and places when men's care giving is so impeccably close to what we consider mothering that gender seems to fall completely away, leaving only the image of a loving parent and child. (Doucet, p. 246)

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Andrea Doucet, *Do Men Mother?* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2006), p. 19 all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Doucet, after quotations in the text.

²⁶ Presentation by Andrea Doucet at GBA Conference 2005 http://www.swccfc.gc.ca/resources.gba/conf05-adnotes_e.html

The activity of primary care-giving does not of itself give a person the identity, ‘mother’; nevertheless, in the books discussed in the following chapters it is evident that children’s literature provides a space in which the experience of nurturant care-giving (the kind of mothering experience that affected Chodorow’s original views) is opened up to a wider variety of people. Significantly, unlike academic/theoretical studies of mothering, such works are directed at an audience of children and explore the relationship largely from their perspective and for their benefit. Fiction for children has repeatedly and over time shown primary-care of children as an activity that can be important to and done by many kinds of carers. It is, then, in the spirit of Chodorow's original, a more radical social model of who cares for infants and children.

The Terrible Teens?

Viewing mothering through the lens of psychoanalysis, as the critics so far discussed largely do, inevitably brings its own problems. Paula M. Cooley, like Parker, argues that this is a ‘no win’ task for actual mothers as ‘being a good mother by definition precludes acting like an ordinary, mature adult subject to moral and emotional complexity’.²⁷ For Cooley, the trouble with psychoanalytic theories of mothering into adolescence is that they exclude

theoretical representation of mothering or of childhood from the perspective of actual mothers (or for that matter any other adults as adults). The kind of state generated by the idealization of the family (and by implication mothering) leaves little room for ordinary women to mother ordinarily, that is, to mother in addition to other things that women might have to do or want to do. (Cooley, p. 239)

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Paula M Cooley, ‘Ordinary Mother’ as Oxymoron’ in *Mother Troubles: Rethinking Contemporary Maternal Dilemmas*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) pp. 229 – 249 (p. 238) all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Cooley, after quotations in the text.

This dilemma, is at the heart of the historical and contemporary ‘Mommy Wars’ which while, for the most part, not seeking to compel women to mother full-time, or without support, set very demanding, child-centred standards for what constitutes even good-enough mothering and question who is qualified to provide the socially critical nurturant care which is no longer available to the child when the mother chooses to act like ‘an ordinary mature adult’.(Winnicott 2002, p.12) Because they stand on different sides of the ‘Mommy Wars’, for Chodorow, Cooley, Gerhardt and Bettelheim, unlike Winnicott and Parker, maternal ambivalence is a problem to be solved rather than an inevitable, necessary, and manageable part of ordinary mothering. In their models of mothering, ambivalence is the result of not getting mothering ‘right’ as a consequence of patriarchal domination, personal ambition or economic and social pressures. And not ‘getting it right’ is portrayed as having profound social consequences well beyond the immediate family; especially when the child becomes an adolescent.

For psychologists and psychoanalytic theorists the transformative potential of good mothering and the powerful and negative consequences of incomplete mothering are seen to have significant and enduring consequences for society. Winnicott, for example, argues that if anti-social behaviour is not transformed by the completion of emotional development through some sort of suitable ‘home substitute’ ‘they [the young person] will force us [meaning society] later to provide stability in the shape of an approved school, or, in the last resort, four walls in the shape of a prison cell. (Winnicott 1991, p.231) A very different focus on mothering and its effects is found in the work of feminist philosopher, Sara Ruddick, who links mothering and global peace.

Blessed are the Peacemakers

In *Maternal Thinking – Towards a Politics of Peace* (1989), Ruddick positions mothering (specifically informed by her own experience of motherhood) as a thoughtful response to the challenges of bringing up socially responsible children and making the world a more peaceful place.²⁸ She starts with the claim that ‘labor or practice forms consciousness’ and that by observing and reproducing practice thinking can be transformed. (Ruddick, p.62) In line with Chodorow’s original stance, Ruddick says ‘maternal thinking’ can and should be done by those other than just the biological mother or their female substitutes.

Briefly, a mother is a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life. I *mean* “her or his”. A woman is no more, a man no less “naturally” a mother, no more or less obligated to maternal work, than a man or woman is “naturally” a scientist or firefighter or is obligated to become one. (Ruddick, p. 41)

Ruddick acknowledges the strong, sometimes hostile, feelings children may arouse in the adults who give birth to and/or care for them, but she says that to be committed to meeting children’s demand for preservation ‘does not require enthusiasm or even love’. (Ruddick, p.19) In this way she deals with ambivalence by emphasising the obligation not to harm the baby, negating the requirement to love the baby and, by implication, taking away the strong emotional dissonance, and possible guilt, generated by co-existing feelings of love and hate.

The preservative aspect of maternal thinking - the first of her demands – is, for Ruddick, the central immutable aim of maternal practice; the commitment to

²⁸ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a politics of Peace*, (London: The Women’s Press, 1990), p. 62, all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Ruddick, after quotations in the text.

achieving that aim is the ‘constitutive act of mothering’.(Ruddick, p.19) This suggests that this ‘constituent’ aspect of mothering is pragmatic, based on the value of *all* children’s lives, and not restricted to those with whom there is an emotional bond. Ruddick’s views about mothering bringing responsibility for *all* children’s lives, which can be read as being similar to Winnicott’s notion of the importance of the continuation of ‘reliable holding in terms of the ever-widening circle of family, school and social life’, is highly significant in the context of writing for children. (Winnicott 2002, p.238) Her work prompted me to consider my own writing as a form of mothering and to interrogate the values I am embedding in *OSB* when I write about what Stephens describes as ‘arguably the most pervasive theme in children’s fiction [...] the transition within the individual from infantile solipsism to maturing social awareness.’(Stephens, p.3)

It is Ruddick’s third and last aspect of maternal thinking (social acceptability), guided by the absolute demands of the first (preservation of the life of the child), that underpins her argument that adopting maternal thinking by primary child-carers is transformative and synonymous with peacemaking. There is, she maintains,

A feminist maternal politics of peace: peacemakers create a communal suspicion of violence, a climate in which peace is desired, a way of living in which it is possible to learn and to practice nonviolent resistance and strategies of reconciliation. This description of peacemaking is a description of mothering. (Ruddick, p.244)

The central claim here – that because of its rationality the universal adoption of ‘maternal thinking’ encompasses only minimal ambivalence and so can liberate the world from war - ignores the conflicting ideologies and cultural diversity of the mothering/primary carer role. It suggests that those who do not adopt Ruddick’s model of mothering/caring and who, for example, encourage their children into the

armed forces or indeed fight themselves are not mothering/caring ‘properly’. While most would hope for a peaceful world for everyone, the refusal to participate in any military structure or action ignores the reality that in many communities entry into the armed forces may represent the only way to achieve education, social agency, and any measure of economic self-sufficiency. Moreover, it negates the validity of actions taken by threatened communities for whom violent struggle is not a ‘choice’ in any meaningful sense. While there is much to be said in favour of Ruddick’s view that mothering engenders concern about the state of the world in which children live, her denial of using violence is simplistic when viewed in a broader historical and cultural context.

Ruddick’s ideas about peace are not obviously played out in *OSB*; however, Luella is portrayed as mindful of the social impact of her business decisions and there is a level of activism evident through Saachi, who Cassia comes to admire for her stance on socio-political issues. In the following extract, in which Priyanka and Cassia are talking about the arrival of pop star Jonny Gold to film a video on the beach, Cassia recognises that participation in social activism can bring personal risk.

‘Can you imagine how amazing it would be if he came here?’
Priya shrieked when she read it out. ‘Amma would have a nervous breakdown, she absolutely hates pop music and all those people tramping over her precious ecosystem, she’ll go mad!’

I felt a bit uncomfortable hearing Priya talk about her mum like she was crazy. Loopy Lou was one thing, but Saachi was something else. The last few days, she’d been really nice to me and told me lots about her research, which was not the yawn fest I’d imagined. She’d defended exploited workers, stood up for women’s rights and even got arrested a couple of times. (*OSB*, p. 217)

Having Priyanka express doubts about her own mother’s values, and contrast this with Cassia’s positive reflections on Saachi’s work - ‘not the yawn fest I’d imagined’ - made it possible to show Cassia’s transformative change through her growing maturity and changing attitudes.

With caveats, Ruddick's thinking is useful to consider in the context of my research because it suggests that engaging in what she calls maternal thinking – in her terms 'doing mothering/being a primary carer' – is profoundly transformative in ways that bring benefits to the individuals concerned and the wider society. In a number of the selected fictional texts, the responsibility for primary care of a child is an unexpected and initially unwelcome event. Though Ruddick's conclusions are not fully supported in these fictional accounts, reading *Maternal Thinking* alongside the sample texts helped make sense of Ruddick's claims because texts such as *Goodnight Mr Tom* (1981) and Margaret Mahy's *Memory* (1987) portray males who have been alienated but who through their nurturant carer-child relationships re-engage positively with their family and communities.²⁹ By contrast, in another of the texts I discuss later, Philip Reeves's *Here Lies Arthur* (2007), his commitment to violent political conflict constrains the nurturant care-giving of the central male character, Myrddin.³⁰

Diverse Voices

While both Parker and Winnicott acknowledge the role played by maternal ambivalence, Parker's work on mothers/primary carers and older children articulates a different construction of mothering from that of Winnicott, not least because she incorporates a more diverse range of voices, including those of women from communities that were previously under-represented in much theoretical discourse. Large segments of experience, specifically those of women who are not white and middle class, have previously been excluded from theories of mothering. While

²⁹ Margaret Mahy, *Memory*, (London: Dent and sons, 1987) (London: Harper Collins, 2002) all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as, *Memory*, after quotations in the text.

³⁰ Philip, Reeve, *Here lies Arthur*, (London: Scholastic 2007), all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as *Arthur*, after quotations in the text.

theorising about motherhood will not be helped by supplanting one group's theory with that of another, acknowledging diversity promises to improve understanding of mothering and maternal ambivalence

Since *OSB* is set in India and includes an Indian mother-daughter relationship, diverse voices feature in the novel to a degree; however, given my limited knowledge of India, it was a strategic decision to portray the Indian mother, Saachi, as a relatively wealthy, English-speaking professional who has been educated in the UK. Just as making Cassia a tourist in India allowed me to limit what she might be expected to know about Kerala and its multi-ethnic residents, making Saachi and her daughter, Priyanka, almost Anglo-Indian helped me portray their relationship without too much recourse to stereotypes. The novel is written in the first person and therefore everything is seen through the eyes of a young British tourist, affording a good measure of control over what is expected, what is revealed, and what is and isn't seen. These expectations are foregrounded by having Cassia voice some of her (mis)conceptions of the country and of Priyanka, who she visualises as different to her in a variety of ways. In fact, Priyanka turns out to be more sophisticated and privileged than Cassia expects, and this adds to Cassia's sense of being excluded, of being not quite real, as she feels herself to be a stranger in what she describes as her mother's 'other life'. This increases her sense of separation from her mother but again in ways that turn out to be positively transformative.

New Indian Girl?

Luella's close relationship with Priyanka, which is based on a shared interest in design, makes Cassia jealous, and initially Cassia is hostile toward the ambitious Indian girl. To avoid simplistic stereotypes and clichés, the portrayal of Priyanka has

been informed by Michelle Superle's (2009) research into representations of Indian girlhood in contemporary English language children's literature, specifically her identification of the 'New Indian girl', a character Superle suggests is prevalent in contemporary children's literature written by Indian women authors. Superle asserts that these non-traditional and idealistic portrayals are characterised by girl protagonists who 'work to overcome restriction in search of empowerment'. She suggests that the authors 'aspire toward ideality and, by modelling successful, empowered child characters, they [...] invite young readers to act to create change on both the individual and societal levels'.³¹ Creating Priyanka in the mould of 'New Indian girl' is intended to draw on idealistic portrayals similar to those by writers who through blood and cultural ties are identified as Indian, and for arguably similar reasons: a desire to avoid stereotypes of restricted girlhood. Thus the Saachi-Priyanka relationship both offers a parallel mother-daughter relationship that helps Cassia and Luella work through their ambivalence and provides another model of a professional woman who is also a successful mother in the way she manages ambivalence.

At intervals in the narrative, both Cassia and Priyanka express doubts about following their birth mothers' professional choices: instead, they are inspired to replicate some of the achievements of each other's mothers. The reason for this was to show that children learn from their own mothers *and* their network of relationships. Making Priyanka an aspiring fashion designer, who identifies herself with Cassia's designer mother, allowed me to use the creative writing to make points I wanted to incorporate from the theoretical reading.

It Takes a Village

³¹ Michelle Superle. 2009. *Contemporary English-Language Indian Children's Novels as Aspirational Literature*. PhD, Newcastle University. p.17

The tendency to ‘universaliz[e] from a narrow social and class base of experiences’ for which Winnicott, Chodorow and Ruddick have been criticised is addressed by Asian-American sociologist, Evelyn Nakano Glen.³² In her introduction to *Mothering – Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (1994), Nakano Glen takes a thematic approach to mothering (as elsewhere in this discussion, synonymous with primary caring) that widens the scope of activities and behaviours from which definitions of mothering must be constructed. While attentive to the powerful ideological forces which construct and shape family life, Nakano Glen’s definition of mothering as ‘a historically and culturally variable relationship in which one individual nurtures and cares for another’ makes mothering and nurturant caring synonymous, opening up the territory across sexes and generations and locating its flexibility in a dynamic socio-political context. (Nakano Glen, p. 6) Her account is concerned with the historical experiences, cultural contexts, and material conditions under which primary care-giving is done. She argues that what she terms mothering done by ‘non-dominant’ groups is necessarily different from that done by those who are white, heterosexual and middle-class, and that idealised models do not acknowledge the problematic assumptions that underpin them such as economic security and ‘the luxury of seeing themselves as individuals in search of personal autonomy, instead of as members of communities struggling for survival’. (Nakano Glen, p.6)

As the critics of the tendency to universalise white middle-class experience have pointed out, particularly for women of colour and those from non-dominant communities, mothering cannot be analysed in isolation from its context. Nakano Glen argues that for women of colour, for instance, ‘motherwork’, is seen as work

32 Evelyn Nakano Glenn ‘Social Constructions of Mothering: a thematic overview’ in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. by Evelyn Nakano Glen, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, (New York: Routledge, 1994) pp. 1 – 29 p.3, all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Nakano Glen, after quotations in the text.

done on behalf of the family and beyond that the group: the two are related since ‘individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and identity.’ (Hill Collins, p.48) The use of terms such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘identity’ suggests that for Nakano Glen, as for Ruddick, ‘motherwork’ (while for the purposes of this discussion again this is a synonym for the work of caring, though Ruddick has only women and biological mothers in mind) includes an active social and political component. However, she suggests that women from dominant communities may not mother in this way on behalf of those outside their family and this does not fully acknowledge the contribution middle-class women (white and of colour) have made to women’s suffrage, children’s rights, and social justice.

A construction of mothering as the collective practice of a social group which may be unfamiliar to the white middle classes is explored further by Barbara Katz Rothman. In a deconstruction of the three key ideologies which she sees as shaping motherhood - ‘Patriarchy, Technology, and Capitalism’ - Rothman defines mothering (in this case unambiguously equivalent to primary caring) as an activity or a project grounded in social relationships rather than a right conferred by genetic ties.³³ Her aim is to establish mothering as a practice of nurturing and caring that should be genuinely valued and encouraged in a wider set of participants, both women and men. Without this context, women, she says, take on a disproportionate, and unsustainable responsibility for nurturing in society.

If women are not to drop from exhaustion and lose all pleasure
in life someone is going to have to help with the kids [...]
Mothers also need men who can mother because *we ourselves*

33 Barbara Katz Rothman, ‘Beyond Mothers and Fathers: ideology in a patriarchal society in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. by Evelyn Nakano Glen, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, (New York: Routledge, 1994) pp.139-160, all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Katz Rothman, after quotations in the text.

need that mothering – women are tired of mothering the whole world. (Katz Rothman, p. 155)

Peggy Cooper Davis, a lawyer and former family court judge, argues, as did Chodorow, that for the child, having one single object of supreme affection is unhealthy. She calls for moderation in the psychological parent models which demand a constancy of mothering from an almost ever-present person. She accepts that the realities of mothering are hard to delimit, but suggests that this variation in the sentimental ideal is damaging because in custody battles, for example, it denies that a child's security can come from familiar surroundings and a 'loving engagement with imperfect others'.³⁴ Her work grows out of her conviction that cognitive and emotional growth requires the encouragement of multiple child-caregiver relationships forming a network of attachments in which the child learns to recognise and accept the autonomy of others.

The reality of children's multiple bonds and the importance of children's developmental need to learn to recognize (and be recognized by) other independent minds require that we acknowledge, and allow them to acknowledge and resolve, their attachments, whether they are old or new, and whether or not they can promise to be uninterrupted. (Cooper Davis, p. 258)

Like others whose views are discussed in this overview, Cooper Davis supports the idea that men are capable of 'emotionally responsive nurturant care giving' and the body of theoretical work around new models of parenting that recognise this. (Cooper Davis p. 263) These models are built on two insights. First, is the recognition that the requirement that the psychological parent be omnipresent is unfeasible - a product of

³⁴ Peggy Cooper Davis, 'A Reflection on Three Verbs: to father, to mother, to parent', in *Mother Troubles: rethinking contemporary maternal dilemmas*, ed. By Julia E. Hanigsberg and Sara Ruddick (Boston, Beacon Press, 1999) pp.250-278, p. 274, all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Cooper Davis, after quotations in the text.

denial generated by the fantasy of the ‘perfect’ mother - and that it is destructive to children’s psychological health for them to ‘expect a world peopled with omnipresent, selfless and benevolent (m)others’ who by implication have no minds or will of their own. (Cooper Davis, p.251) The second is the recognition that infants and children need (and want) not only a measure of comfort and security, but also the challenge of interacting with other minds – minds that prove their ‘otherness’ in that they ‘do not act invariably in fulfilment of the child’s wishes’.(Cooper Davis, p.269)

Cooper-Davis retains the conviction found in Winnicott and others that children need to separate from mothers through an engagement with others, and the conviction that mothers must be supported in this by others who are differently bonded to their children. She also suggests that these networks of care may comprise many of the same powerful characteristics as the mother-child dyad, such as maternal ambivalence and the creative, transformative potential arising from managing that ambivalence. From Cooper Davis I have developed a fictional network of ‘imperfect others’ of both sexes who are able to support my young characters, and their mothers – ordinary mature adults - as they negotiate their changing relationships and come to an acknowledgement of their own and one another’s subjectivity. As with the sample texts, this network includes friends, those met by chance, and those tied by blood.

Challenging the Ideal?

The close readings of the sample texts that make up the following chapters draw on recent critical studies of carers and children. Because of the long-held assumption that carers will be female and probably children’s biological mothers, most research in this area has been done by feminists wishing to understand the implications of being carers for women. This has given rise to several research questions:

- 1) How does contemporary children's literature represent primary-carer relationships and how far do these reflect feminist critiques of mothering?
- 2) What alternative nurturing relationships are offered and how do these compare to traditional mothering?
- 3) Is mothering idealised or are idealised versions of traditional mother-child relationships challenged?
- 4) How is ambivalence in relation to primary-carers presented? Is it portrayed as threatening, destructive, or positively transformative?

These questions are in line with the understanding that children's literature is deliberately encouraging readers to hold particular views of how the world works; in this case, how primary carer-child relationships function.

Happy Endings

While incomplete relationships between birth mothers and their children are central to several of the texts in my sample, this does not prevent them from being optimistic and reassuring. In part this reassurance comes from recognition of the fact that while not all families are happy, a bad initial experience of mothering need not be terminal; these books repeatedly show that the experience of incomplete mothering is painful and may arrest development; that there are many ways of being nurtured, and that cycles of bad mothering can be interrupted.

As well as showing that biological mothers are not always the best carers however, the sample texts include those that portray transformative primary care provided by those of different ages, classes and both sexes. While the final version of *OSB* concentrates on the relationship between Cassia and her birth mother Luella, at different points in the novel's genesis I experimented with a range of possible

alternative carers for Cassia and with making her father both gay and a nurturing parent as a way of challenging traditional stereotypes about primary carers. Ultimately I decided that these experiments did not complement the way the novel represented how carers and adolescent children achieve a transformative relationship, so they were excised from the text. Nevertheless, such relationships are found in contemporary children's literature and did feature in my research and so chapters three and four consider portrayals of primary care by both men and boys.

Summary

This overview has established that to some degree in both theoretical discourse and children's literature ambivalence is accepted and presented as a normal, unavoidable and even desirable aspect of mothering/ primary-carer relationships. While at its most powerful in infancy, ambivalence returns in a weaker form in adolescence, a time when managing conflicted feelings can be a creative and transformative experience for those in primary-carer child relationships because it focuses the attention of both parties not only on their relationship, but also on the subjectivity of each. I have explained how in *OSB* my research encouraged me to replace the idea that conflicted feelings are indicative of incomplete mothering – a problem to be solved - with something children are more likely to experience.

This overview also maps the way critical debate has opened up the idea (one well established in children's literature) that nurturant primary care-giving is not considered the exclusive practice of birth mothers. While 'mothering' continues to be the term used by most theorists, it is problematically associated with women and so for the purposes of this discussion the terms 'primary care', 'primary carer' and 'primary caring' are used to refer to a potentially transformative set of practices

including nurturing, nourishing, caring for, and looking after an infant or child. It may also form the basis through which children fashion their identities and learn their place in society. This inclusive construction of primary care-giving suggests a practice which reflects ideological and cultural diversity, and is responsive to social change. As the following analyses will show, children's literature provides a forum where precisely the kind of openness to nurturant care-giving that has been called for by theorists has long been played out, and I have been able to integrate this into my own creative work. As the following chapters show, I have also identified a more constraining ideology regarding primary child-carer relationships. This paradox is a consequence of the fact that while the books are progressive in that they are open to nurturant care-giving by different kinds of people, the behaviour those people engage in is consistent with an allegiance to a romantic view of mothering in that they are extraordinarily committed and ultimately successful. There are exceptions (notably in the work of Jacqueline Wilson), but particularly in pre-teen fiction there is a significant tendency towards this traditional view of what it means to care for a child. Most significant is the fact that these texts suggest children will always ultimately find a source of nurturant care at least good enough to move them beyond infantile solipsism.

The following chapters consider the kind of primary care-giving portrayed in selected texts through three lenses which have emerged from this theoretical overview and analyse how these portrayals influence my fictional writing. Chapter 2 considers whether children's literature depicts abandonment or interrupted mothering as a cycle which can be interrupted - and transformed - though the intervention of primary care-giving by someone other than the birth mother. It explores Winnicott's notions of reparative 'holding' environments and the role of ambivalence in this surrogate

relationship; how it is experienced and how it is managed. And, because it is so central to my own creative work, the management of conflicted feelings remains a theme which runs through all three of the following chapters. In *OSB* I use these insights to show the effect of the loss of friendship, fears of rejection, the influence of another woman (who is not her birth mother) and men on the choices Cassia makes about her future. Chapter 3 looks at how fiction for the young portrays children who undertake primary-care in the context of mental illness and considers whether their nurturant care-giving is portrayed as restorative or as transformative. In the preparatory work for the novel (though this is no longer apparent in the final draft) I used this to examine how even a temporary change in the status quo of adult ‘carer’ and ‘cared for’ child illuminates the dynamic nature of acknowledging subjectivity and may support maturation. Chapter 4 looks at fiction that shows primary care-giving being undertaken by initially reluctant adult men. These texts are read through the lens of peacemaking, leading to an examination of whether nurturant care undertaken by men who are not otherwise engaged in parenting transforms their relationship with themselves and with the wider world. In *OSB* I seek to show how the nurturing men and boys in the young protagonist’s ‘network of care’ play a significant role in Cassia’s emergent social and environmental consciousness.

Overall, the analyses show some of the ways contemporary children's books help readers to understand loving primary relationships and highlight their emphasis on reassuring readers that not only can they withstand feelings of anger, resentment, rejection and confusion, but that it is normal for these relationships to be conflicted given the emotional investment on both sides. The texts are scrutinised for their capacity to portray both sources of nurturant primary care-giving and the way they describe the potentially creative processes stimulated by the attendant feelings of

ambivalence. Reading the texts through these lenses has informed my writing by causing me to respond creatively to questions such as whether children's literature promotes a particular view of care-giving and to consider whether this view is one I want to uphold.

Chapter 2

Continuity of Care through Surrogate Carers

The three texts analysed in this chapter all feature children whose birth mothers are alive but who fail or refuse to look after their children so that the children, who in Winnicott's terms have had their mothering 'interrupted' and have experienced a failure in their environment, are given or attach themselves to surrogate mothers. In Monica Furlong's *Wise Child* (1987) and Jacqueline Wilson's *Dustbin Baby* (2001) formal surrogate arrangements are put in place by official institutions but in Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused* (2002), the daughter of an alcoholic mother attempts to attach herself to the mother of her best friend.³⁵ The fact that all three need to have their biological mothers replaced means that these novels belong to the significant category of stories that feature abandoned children who have been deprived of a stable home life. In the texts in this chapter the child protagonists struggle with their sense of self and express concern that they are not quite 'real'. While these children are no longer infants – though in some cases they return to an quasi-infantilised state - these text illuminate Winnicott's contention that the sense of personal existence derives from caring and that 'if maternal care is not good enough, then the infant does not really come into existence, since there is no continuity of being'.³⁶ As Bruno Bettelheim explains, stories about abandonment arouse strong emotional responses in children because there 'is no greater fear in life than we will be deserted, left all alone.' (Bettelheim, p.145) In these stories fear of desertion is closely linked to ambivalence because the longing for the one who has abandoned them is matched by

³⁵ Monica Furlong, *Wise Child*, (New York: Knopf, 1987) all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as WC, after quotations in the text.

Jacqueline Wilson, *Dustbin Baby*, (London: Random House, 2001) all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as DB, after quotations in the text.

Tanuja Desai Hidier, *Born Confused*, (London: Scholastic, 2002) all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as BC, after quotations in the text.

³⁶ Donald Winnicott, 'The theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship' *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* 41 (1960), 585 – 595 (p. 594)

the hurt and anger felt about being rejected. There is often, however, a particular kind of anxiety about ambivalent feelings towards a second or surrogate primary carer; having been rejected by the first carer the possibility of rejection is very real. As well as difficulty in accepting and trusting a surrogate carer, these stories address an often unexpressed anxiety that the children at the centre of the narratives may share their birth mothers' failings. Such fears are well founded: as Nancy Chodorow explains, the skills and attributes of mothering/primary caring tend to be reproduced unless effective interventions interrupt cycles of failed relationships.

Addressing such fears is one of the primary functions of fairy tales according to Bettelheim. Fairy tales, he says,

...speak about his [the child's] severe inner pressures in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and – without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails - offer examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties. (Bettelheim, p. 6)

Fairy tales do not have a monopoly on addressing such fears, however. Replacement primary carers arising from abandonment or other kinds of failed mothering occur frequently in children's literature, from traditional tales to recent novels such as those discussed in this chapter.³⁷ Such texts encourage readers to explore feelings and issues of abandonment and the development of a sense of identity which Blos argues, in adolescence, alternates between progression and regression. They also introduce a diverse range of alternative primary-carers, all of whom provide the kind of safe and stable holding environments that Winnicott described as being the role of both the mother and the therapist in meeting neglected developmental needs. Interestingly, given Winnicott's view of the importance of play in development, in two of the texts

³⁷ see Margaret Rustin, and Michael Rustin, *Narratives of Love and Loss: studies in modern children's fiction*, (London: Verso, 1987)

creative and imaginative activities have an explicit role in sustaining these holding environments. For example, in *Wise Child*, Juniper encourages Wise Child's experiments with herbal healing remedies – a skill in which she exceeds Juniper - and in *Born Confused*, a photographic dark room that has been provided by the young woman's parents become a place of refuge, reflection and revelation. Focusing for the moment on progression and regression, however, it is notable that in *Dustbin Baby* it is April's reflective journey through her childhood (a kind of regression into a psychic space) that allows her to move forward. Similarly, in *OSB* I use India and the embedded book set in India, *The Peacock Spring*, as a new location which is at odds with Cassia's expectations as real and psychic transitional environments (what Winnicott called the 'place where the secret is') providing Cassia with the support she needs to manage her transition to autonomy and so help bring into being the moment when adolescent ambivalence is transformed into a new, mature and mutually more satisfying relationship between mother/primary –carer and child. (Winnicott 2002, p. 77)

While all the texts discussed in this chapter look at female surrogates, as will become clear in other chapters, children's literature offers many possible types of successful alternative primary carers. Arguably, however, ambivalence is particularly acute when, as in the case of these novels, the surrogate is a female of similar age to the biological mother since that can make her seem more like a rival than a needed replacement. In *OSB* there are no formal surrogates, but both adolescent girls temporarily attach themselves to alternative mother figures as a response to adolescent feelings of ambivalence towards their biological mothers. Eventually, both Cassia and Priyanka work through their ambivalence to arrive at a new, more mature and

independent relationship with their mothers. The following extract illustrates Cassia's feelings of ambivalence:

I didn't want to be angry with her, but I was. My whole life was going down the tubes and it was her fault. Mean, spiteful words jumped into my head and fizzed there. It would be so easy just to let them out, to blame her for everything. But, it wasn't really her fault. I knew how hard she worked and how much the shop meant to her. She didn't mean for it to turn out this way. I looked at her hands twisting at her earrings and watched the expression on her face as she tried to pretend everything would be okay. I realised how much it must have cost to buy my plane ticket. She could have just left me with Dad, but she knew I was unhappy and lonely and so she brought me with her even though it must have made her money troubles even worse. I felt a big wave of love surge up from my toes to the top of my head.

'Don't worry Mum. You'll work it out and I'll help – I can stay off school for as long as you need me to.' (*OSB*, p. 228)

Significantly, Cassia works through her adolescent ambivalence as she accepts that finance has been a pressing issue and that her mother might easily have left her at home in London rather than going to the expense of bringing her with her to India. It is the realisation that her mother has been attentive to her greater emotional needs - that she has not been abandoned - that allows her to accept that her mother too has emotional needs outside their relationship. In *OSB*, then, I show both how ambivalence motivates Cassia's fantasies about abandonment, and that, through engaging with her ambivalence, Cassia is able to overcome these fantasies, engage her creative capacities, recognise the subjectivity of her mother, and gain maturity. The benefits to both mother and daughter are shown when Cassia comes up with the idea that helps solve her mother's business problems.

Unlike Cassia, in Furlong, Wilson and Desai Hidier's novels the child characters experience real rather than imagined abandonment by their birth mothers and must manage the conflicted feeling aroused by this and their surrogate primary care. The texts, as with those in the subsequent chapters, are discussed in

chronological order of publication in order more easily to locate them in a time-line of wider social change.

Monica Furlong, *Wise Child* (1987)

In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who bade us care for the homeless and the fatherless, I am asking you this morning to find a home for this little sister of ours, reminding you that charity is the essence of our faith, and that you will be piling up a reward for yourselves in heaven. (*WC*, p. 12)

Wise Child is a historical fantasy set in Scotland in the ‘Dark Ages’ when the clash between the old and new religions was characterised by suspicion of female knowledge and violence against women suspected of using it. The central character, nine-year-old Wise Child, has been abandoned by her mother, Maeve, and after the death of her grandmother, it is reluctantly agreed by those in authority that she will be raised by the local ‘witch’, Juniper. Wise Child is apprehensive about living with a witch, but understands that in the absence of her mother, she has little choice but to go with the person who is willing to care for her.

From the time Juniper takes charge of Wise Child it is clear to readers that Juniper is, from a modern perspective, an effective surrogate and that Wise Child has confused notions of how children should be cared for. For instance, recalling the beatings and other punishments she received when living with Maeve, and which evidently were not uncommon she questions Juniper about her disciplinary approach.

“Well, why don’t you beat me, then?” I was genuinely puzzled.
“I can’t be bothered,” she said.
“That’s no way to bring up a child,” I said primly,
copying the voices of the village women I knew, and because Juniper
began to laugh again, I laughed myself. [...]

“You’re a very strange person,” I said. “And you’ve no idea how to bring up children.”
“I’ve got you to teach me,” she said (*WC*, p. 48).

Juniper’s mothering/primary caring skills are the result of the nurturing care she herself experienced from an older witch; in other words, Juniper is reproducing the good mothering she herself had. The physical benefits of her care are soon apparent as *Wise Child* becomes healthier, plumper, stronger, and cleaner.

Wise Child is written from a feminist perspective and so, as well as seeking to reassure readers that being abandoned does not mean that a child is unlovable or permanently consigned to a precarious existence, it also explores female experience under patriarchy. Her mother’s rejection of *Wise Child* is associated with Maeve’s beauty and the false existence its temporary power has led to. Although set in the past, Maeve is shown acting out the fantasy expressed by many of the women cited by Parker: Maeve rationalises her abandonment of *Wise Child* by suggesting that caring for a baby is an unreasonable demand on a woman with other interests. When, after *Wise Child* has lived with and improved under Juniper’s care Maeve wants her daughter back, she attempts to lure the child with promises to teach her to ‘dress beautifully so that one day men will adore you as they adore me.’ (*WC*, p.122)

Maeve’s route to maturity is through sexuality. Juniper, by contrast, offers a model of empowered, educated and independent femininity which initially seems less attractive to *Wise Child*. Her divided loyalties at this point result in ambivalent feelings towards both women. The beginning of positive transformation comes when, having opted to live with Maeve, *Wise Child* is able to reflect on and appreciate the care she received from Juniper.

The pain her absence has caused Juniper makes *Wise Child* feel the kind of guilt Parker suggests is symptomatic of the process of negotiating conflicted feelings.

In contrast to her second failed experience with Maeve, however, the bond between Wise Child and Juniper is shown as generating normal and manageable ambivalent feelings in them both. At one point, for instance, Wise Child declares that she hates Juniper, but, ‘Juniper simply nodded and walked on.’ (*WC*, p.150) This incident reassures readers that it is safe to experience *and* express ambivalent feelings in the context of a good child-carer relationship; ambivalence is not a problem to be solved, rather it is an indication that their relationship has been normalised, even validated, through ambivalent feelings being experienced and acknowledged.

Wise Child is anxious about aspects of her birth mother being reproduced in her, but she is reassured that Juniper’s committed and nurturing care will inform her own ability to care for others in the future. In this text, then, Furlong, writing as a feminist in a post-Chodorow mould, shows that the act of being a primary carer is more important than biological connection. *Wise Child* shows that a good-enough primary carer can be as effective as a good-enough mother. Wise Child is not only made healthier and happier through Juniper’s nurturant care, but she also gains knowledge of healing and embraces her identity as a powerful independent woman by becoming a witch like Juniper. In this way the novel helps readers to understand what Bettelheim argues is the necessity of engaging with ‘the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity (Bettelheim, p.24) *Wise Child* is a compelling example of contemporary children’s literature which portrays this struggle and shows that if children are courageous and experience good-enough primary care, they are likely to thrive. This was a message I wanted to embed in my novel. For this reason I have Cassia discover that she has valuable skills and is creative through her interactions with the Indian mother, Saachi, who to some degree functions as a temporary alternative to Luella. Through Saachi Cassia comes to see that she has the

capacity to become a good lawyer and that this will bring her agency in the adult world. The Saachi-Cassia relationship replays mother-child ambivalence in a more focused way. At a pivotal point in the story, Saachi explodes Cassia's fantasy about the pop-star Jonny Gold (she believes he is a heroic figure who will help save the local village), provoking strong feelings of resentment in Cassia. Saachi, like Luella, is able to manage Cassia's aggression and this demonstration of Saachi's resilience gives Cassia the confidence to share a painful secret with her.³⁸ The experience of managing conflicted feelings transforms both the developing relationship between Saachi and Cassia and between both pairs of mothers and daughters.

Temporary surrogates also feature in the second novel about maternal abandonment: Jacqueline Wilson's *Dustbin Baby*. Like Furlong, Wilson explores the difficulties of recovering from having a known but neglectful mother, although April, the young protagonist of *Dustbin Baby*, has never known the identity of her mother. Where Wise Child has to negotiate the reality of an unsatisfactory biological mother, April's ignorance about her mother leads to romantic fantasies about her and the nurturant care she believes she is missing.

Jacqueline Wilson *Dustbin Baby* (2001)

I'm like an actress. I've had to play lots and lots of parts. Sometimes I'm not sure if there's any real me left. No, the real me is *this* me, funny little April Showers, fourteen years old. Today. (*DB*, p.10)

On the first of April, a newborn baby girl is found abandoned in a dustbin behind a pizza restaurant. 'Dustbin Baby', as she is called in the press, is rescued by a seventeen-year-old boy, Frankie, and handed over to social workers who name her

³⁸

see Winnicott and First who argue for the importance of mothers being able to withstand ambivalence.

April. The book begins with April being fostered by a single woman, Marion, a retired teacher. Marion is not April's first foster mother and as a consequence of her fragmented history, April lacks a sense of who she is in the world. She dreams of finding her birth mother, believing that this will provide her with a sense of identity and stabilise her life.

Jacqueline Wilson is one of the UK's most popular and prolific children's writers whose books validate the experiences of children from many different backgrounds including those from 'functional' nuclear families and those from a kaleidoscope of non-traditional 'dysfunctional' families. That April believes her current relationship to be dysfunctional is made clear at the start of the book when, on her fourteenth birthday, she is disappointed by receiving a gift of earrings rather than the hoped-for mobile phone she has received from Marion. Failures in April's infancy are still unresolved, so on this day another failure (the earrings) triggers feelings of not existing. Resentfully April truants from school and makes a tour of all the foster homes she has lived in. April's primary care has been undertaken by a number of women, and April believes that if she revisits these people and places from her past she will also somehow locate herself in the present. April is in search of what might be described in Winnicott's terms as her 'True Self' or the source of what is 'authentic in a person' and she believes that this can be given to her only by her mother.

(Phillips,135) Her truanting is a necessary regression for her return to a past or infant state allows a release from an arrested state of development. In running away, she is rejecting Marion, who she can't call 'mum' and who gets things like birthday presents and packed lunches 'wrong'. April feels guilty about her hostile feelings towards Marion, but justifies these on the grounds that Marion is not her *real* mother. This suggests that April idealises mothering believing (in a way that Winnicott, First, and

Parker argue against) that her *real* mother would be more responsive to her wishes and not provoke negative emotions.

April believes that only her birth mother can truly identify her: ‘I think about me. I don’t know how to be me when I’m by myself. I don’t know who I am. There’s only one person who can tell me and she’s got no way of getting in touch.’ (DB, p.17) Although April formulates this thought, it is in fact Marion who insists that April should be given access to her personal file, on the grounds that it is her basic moral right to learn about her past. (DB, p.40) April’s ‘mothering’ has not been good enough in Winnicott’s terms because it has not yet given April a sense of where the boundaries between ‘me and not me’ lie. By giving her the file, Marion does what she can to give April a sense of her identity, but April feels herself to be like a cut-out doll, staying the same basic shape but being coloured in differently with each change of home. The analogy suggests that April’s sense that her nurturant care has been incomplete is preventing her from feeling coherent and real. This block is dismantled in the course of the novel, for gradually it becomes clear that she *has* been cared for - collectively ‘mothered’ in Cooper Davis’ terms - in as much as her cognitive and emotional growth has been supported by loving engagement with imperfect others (though not in all cases successfully) and she *does* have the capacity to move forward as a mature and coherent young woman.

With the help of the information in the file, April goes in search of the people who have done the ‘colouring in’ over the years to retrieve or reclaim a dimension she believes has been missing. When she arrives at the first home, however, her first foster mother, Pat, does not remember April until she is reminded that April was the ‘dustbin baby’ who cried a lot. This signals the extent of Pat’s mothering and, unsatisfied with this encounter, April moves on. After her time with Pat, April was

adopted by a married couple. While April wanted to have 'Mummy' all to herself, she now suspects that she was only adopted to help Mummy to keep 'Daddy'; when that failed and 'Mummy' committed suicide April was returned to care. In this text, as with *Wise Child*, good-enough primary care appears to be unable to encompass a competing sexual, relationship which takes attention from the child.

Revisiting the children's home where she was placed next, April is happy to see that Gina - a former resident who led April into criminal activity - is now one of the counsellors. Gina has evidently been helped by the provision of a suitable home-substitute, just as Winnicott suggested is possible through the provision of appropriate institutions which provide a 'strong stable environment with personal care and love and gradually increasing doses of freedom'. (Winnicott 1991, p. 230) Seeing Gina with her own baby, April's conscience begins to prick her and she considers phoning Marion, who she knows will be worried. She unconsciously associates Gina's attentive and loving mothering with Marion's care for her. However, she doesn't call, rationalising this again as Marion's fault for not buying her the mobile phone she wanted for her birthday. April feels entitled to punish Marion for failing to 'mother' her on her terms and in an idealised way. Children's urge sometimes to punish a primary carer is not unique to surrogates and is behaviour I incorporate in *OSB*. A good example is the episode discussed in the Introduction, when Cassia decides to leave the restaurant where her mother is entertaining business associates and go to an internet café. I make her ambivalent feelings clear by having her do something she knows will upset her mother, even though it means she will get the wrong kind of attention from her mother.

I said I had to go to the bathroom and when no one was looking I sneaked out of the side door. Lula probably wouldn't notice I'd gone,

she was so busy being best buddies with Call-me-V and not taking any notice of me. Maybe she wouldn't even care. (*OSB*, p. 161)

Leaving the restaurant alone and in the dark quickly generates uncomfortable feelings for Cassia as April's journey does for her. Cassia's situation is very different from April's, but both show how a fantasy ideal can be confusing for children. Books like those discussed in this chapter and, I believe, *OSB*, can help replace such a fantasy with a more realistic model of mothering that can be used to help manage anxiety arising from the separation associated with maturation.

April recalls that it was at her next home, Fairleigh, that she met Marion, who was one of her teachers. Deciding not to revisit Fairleigh, she reflects on her education and her full and stable life with Marion. While not yet ready to acknowledge her as 'mum', she does acknowledge that Marion's attentive concern for her makes her 'almost as good as a real mother'. (*DB*, p.141) She thinks about her birth mother and what she might be doing now. She considers the difference between Marion, who has fulfilled the role of primary-carer, 'a mum', who she knows cares about her and who she misses and her vision of her 'real mum', who left her in the bin. April questions her assumptions about the relative significance of these two women and her investment in an idealised mother she thought she must find in order to feel secure in herself. The text encourages readers to realise along with April that Marion's imperfections and her ambivalent feelings towards her are a normal part of good-enough mothering and not a 'problem to be solved'. By moving beyond her romantic notion of mothering, April is able to experience the benefits of the good-enough mothering Marion has provided. As with *Wise Child*, the acknowledgement of ambivalence as normal indicates maturation in the child and a transformation in the child-carer relationship.

There is only one place left for April to visit on her journey of self discovery; she makes her way back to the pizza restaurant where she was found and there discovers a message written on the bin with a phone number. The number belongs to Frankie, the boy who first found her and who is now married with children of his own. At his urging, she calls Marion in the culminating realisation that both Frankie and Marion are, in their own ways, truly attentive to her, truly care about her and that they are 'family'. This gives her a secure enough identity to be confident to accept that her birth mother has not been the 'real' mother of her imagination. She is able to project herself into the future and see herself as a good caring person who will be able to mother differently. Her mothering will be reproduced, but as with Wise Child, it will be the good-enough mothering which she has received from Marion that she passes on, rather than the incomplete mothering she experienced from her birth mother. This is the sense of self she has been searching for: she has stopped treading water looking for her 'real' mum and now she has the new beginning, the normality, she craved.

Learning to value and accept her mothering relationship with Marion stabilises April. Significantly, Marion is not presented in terms of a sentimental ideal: she makes mistakes that April exaggerates. More importantly, however, she gets the right things right and, in accepting her own ambivalence and Marion's good-enough mothering, April has found a person who enables her to locate and identify herself in relation to others. April has been fearful that her abandonment has defined her life, forever depriving her of an authentic identity, 'normality' and the ability to mother. In this optimistic text, Wilson stresses the agency of the child and the manageability of ambivalence so that April's search ends when she realises she *is* being mothered, and the fact that it is by a surrogate rather than her biological mother does not negate the

fact that she is loved, and that she has the capacity and the desire to love back. The dominant message in *Dustbin Baby* is that sometimes children have to be helped to recognise when good enough mothering is taking place and to feel confident in the relationship. In this Wilson's novel is similar to *Wise Child*, and to some degree it is a feature of all the texts discussed in the following chapters. Beneath the surface of the story is a very conventional belief that unlike the failed mothers represented by Maeve, Pat and 'Mummy,' good-enough mothers do not divide their attention between a child and a partner but concentrate on the needs of the child. It is not insignificant that both Juniper and Marion are single women. The final book considered in this chapter, Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused*, is addressed to slightly older readers which may account for the fact that it shows that a loving parental relationship need not be incompatible with successful primary care of a child.

In *Dustbin Baby*, April's separation anxiety has a basis in reality: her biological mother has actually abandoned her. In *Born Confused*, a young woman looks for mothering from her best friend's Indian mother because her own mother, like *Wise Child*'s mother Maeve, is physically present but emotionally absent and apparently uninterested in her daughter. This prompts the young Indian woman to reflect on and reevaluate her own feelings of isolation from her mother and her culture. As well as addressing the oldest readers in my sample, *Born Confused* is unusual for its inclusion of a version of mothering that serves as an alternative to western mothering.

Tanuja Desai Hidier, *Born Confused* (2002)

-I have a J Lo-dressing, single, alcoholic, *photographer* who has completely lost touch with her Indianness for my only daughter! It is all my fault, Prabhu, what did I do? (*BC*, p. 64)

Dimple Lala, one of only two Indian pupils at her high-school, has just turned seventeen, and her best friend Gwyn, 'the little rich girl who lived like an orphan' has decided to get her a fake ID and a boyfriend. (*BC*, p.36) Dimple's mother, Shilpa, and father, Bapuji, both doctors (though Shilpa no longer practices), also have plans to find a 'suitable boy' but, to Dimple's despair, they are looking for someone from the same cultural heritage as Dimple. However, when Gwyn – Dimple's 'supertwin' - is abruptly dumped by her boyfriend, she begins to see desirable boyfriend qualities in Karsh Kapoor that Dimple has missed. Gwyn's desire for Karsh is much like her desire for Dimple's clothes, jewellery and mother: she wants her 'Indianness' which, it becomes clear, is not just a fascination with exoticism but a desire for the stability and parental attention she lacks. Gwyn's attempts to take over the key relationships in Dimple's life prompt Dimple to look at her mother and her cultural heritage through Gwyn's eyes. Dimple feels guilty about her ambivalence towards both her mother, who has given up a career to be her primary carer, and the Indianness she embodies. The fact that as well as questioning her own mothering she is rejecting her Indian background – brought into sharp focus by her parents provision of a 'suitable boy' - brings about a crisis of identity for Dimple.

They weren't seeing the hungover bad girl who dressed like a circus attraction; before them was the good Indian daughter, kheer-saver and homely girl, demurely previewing her wedding day duds. In other words they weren't seeing me at all. (*BC*, p. 71)

As this passage shows, instead of seeing unconditional love, she sees parents who don't know her: like April, she is misreading the signals. It is only when Gwyn embraces Indianness in her attempts to win the heart of Karsh, a popular DJ well connected in the fashionable South Asian socio-political scene, and enrolls Dimple's unwitting mother as part of her plan, that Dimple starts to negotiate her ambivalence and to realise that she understands her parents less well than they understand her. Nevertheless, Shilpa is initially pleased with Gwyn's enthusiasm for Indian family life, regarding it as a good influence on Dimple. She assumes that Gwyn only wants to learn from a 'proper' mother, her own, the alcoholic Lillian, being absent. Just as Dimple comes to see Karsh through Gwyn's eyes, so she comes to see her own mother differently too. Prompted by Gwyn's enthusiasm for all things Indian, Dimple finds Shilpa's old dancing clothes hidden in a trunk and has a glimpse of her mother as a young woman, 'when it wasn't too late and the music was just beginning.' (*BC*, p.122) In scenes like this, *Born Confused* shows mothering/being a primary carer brings some loss of independent identity for both mother and child.

As Gwyn becomes more involved in Dimple's extended family, Dimple's sense of confusion grows and she starts to negotiate her ambivalence towards her parents. Specifically, Dimple begins to understand her cultural confusion as being bound up with her relationship with her mother. While hanging a Feng-shui wealth-creating mobile in the living room Shilpa points out that,

-It isn't only food that goes through the umbilical cord, beta, said my mother from the podium, dramatically rolling her cotton top up a smidge to reveal her belly button [...] -memory and dreams and history – all the things of the third eye – these pass through, too, like spiritual food. (*BC*, p. 235)

Prompted by feelings of confusion about Gwyn's apparent assimilation into her family, and appropriation of the boy she to whom she is now attracted, Dimple manages her ambivalent feelings creatively by exploring issues of identity through her photography. This creative self-reflection is at the heart of Parker's argument that engagement with ambivalence and the guilt it engenders is a positive force in maturation. Dimple discovers, to her surprise, that her capacities as a creative person may have come to her through her dancing birth-mother. With her camera and her art, which Boethius might see as functioning as an extension of Winnicott's transitional object 'what one creates oneself and what one uses and consumes', Dimple's creative exploration, prompted by her ambivalence, has revealed her mother to her as a complex person with a life before and beyond mothering. (Boethius, p.151) Dimple empathises with her mother and acknowledges her self-hood by recognising her mother's sacrifices; this brings the benefits of transformative mothering. Their relationship is based on a pattern that Parker suggests is normal and desirable within maternal/primary caring relationships: active and creative management leads to successful negotiation of ambivalence and results in mutual respect between carer and child.

While Dimple's parents are shown as having an attentive and loving relationship, Gwyn's mother is closer to Wise Child's Maeve and 'Mummy' in *Dustbin Baby*: she is a mother whose attention is focussed on the father to the exclusion of the child. This prevents her from being good-enough in the role of primary carer. However, while in both *Dustbin Baby* and *Wise Child* good surrogate mothering comes to the protagonists from a single adult woman, Gwyn - and ultimately Dimple too - see the relationship between Dimple's parents as supportive of Shilpa's mothering. In a statement that brings to mind Winnicott's notions of a

psychic storehouse, Gwyn refers to Dimple's parents' feelings for her and one another, saying, 'You could use all that love to go out and conquer the world!' (*BC*, p.204) This was a message that I wanted to put across in *OSB*, even though Cassia's parents are divorced. Their separation does not detract from the fact that both are caring and supportive of Cassia and each other. For instance, her father is shown as being understanding of both Luella's relationship with her Indian 'boyfriend', Vikram Chaudhury, supportive of her mothering, and protective towards both Luella and Cassia. This is clearly articulated in a telephone exchange between Cassia and her father

'Your mum loves you, Cass. She didn't do any of this to hurt you.'

'Did you know already, too?'

'Yes kiddo.'

'But, why didn't anyone tell me, Dad?'

'Because you were so unhappy at school, sweetie and your mum thought it was best if you met everyone and got to know them first, with no pressure.'

'But, Call-me-V isn't like you, Dad.'

'You mean Vikram?'

'I won't call him Dad ever.'

'You don't have too. Just call him Vikram. He is a good man, Cass, and he really loves your mum.'

'Dad! Did you get him checked out or something?'

'Oh yes, I can't have my precious girls getting mixed up with a creepster! (*OSB*, p. 150)

Cassia's surprise about her father's knowledge of and involvement in the relationship between Luella and Vikram Chaudhury allows the reader to reflect on the care and attention that Cassia benefits from, but is not apparently aware of.

In *Born Confused*, Dimple's parents are united in their efforts to bring her together with Karsh, but it is Shilpa who becomes protective when she realises that Gwyn has romantic intentions towards Karsh and she begins to undermine Gwyn's

efforts to impress him. Asking Dimple if she can borrow not only her wardrobe, but also her mother, Gwyn explains that she intends to throw a party and cook for Karsh. Dimple is puzzled that her mother, ‘with all her sixth sensory perception, hadn’t even been an itty bitty idlee suspicious about this request?’ (*BC*, p.292) Shilpa is amused by her question and warning Dimple not to taste the chicken (which she has made too spicy in an attempt to sabotage Gwyn) she reminds her daughter that, ‘I am Kshatriya, she said –We are warriors.’ (*BC*, p.295) The sabotaging of Gwyn’s food by Shilpa can be read as a refusal fully to meet the oral demands of the (greedy) child who is not her own, a theme Bettelheim associates with fairy tales that are concerned with children’s need to work out some kinds of problems while they are still dependent on their parents.

The relationship between good-enough care and food – both eating and not eating - is a significant theme running through *OSB*, from the anorexia of Cassia’s best friend, Rachel, to Cassia’s gradual acceptance of spicy, Indian dishes. While the use of food developed in order to build tension in the narrative, my research allowed me to recognise what I had done and understand how it was working in the text on different levels. In an early chapter Vikram Chaudhury’s sister in law, Lalitha Chaudhury, a woman Cassia initially mistakes for his wife, uses cooking and eating as a way of comforting her. Cassia sees the Indian woman’s talents as a cook as a desirable attribute.

‘I think you are a little afraid of Indian dishes, Cassia, m’n?

‘I just don’t like spicy things very much.’ [...]

They sizzled as they hit the hot oil and I watched them bob about in a cushion of bubbles until they turned golden brown. Whatever happened, Call-me-V would have to be a complete ejit to swap Mrs Chaudhury’s cooking for Lula’s. (*OSB*, p. 169)

Cassia describes her own mother's cooking as comprising of ready meals from 'the whoopsie counter'. She contrasts Mrs Chaudhury's cooking favourably with her mother's, but she does this in terms of the benefits to Vikram Chaudhury rather than suggesting that home-cooked meals are something she misses.

Born Confused validates a culturally different style of mothering from the one Gwyn has been used to. However, it is significant that it is validated for Dimple rather than Gwyn, who is hurt by her attempts to replace her own mother. Gwyn's attempts to appropriate parts of Dimple's life are portrayed as being the actions of a lonely neglected child. Gwyn is in need of nurturant care and Shilpa's surrogate mothering is shown, at first, as responsive to the needs of the child and highly desirable. However, her mothering cannot be entirely appropriated by Gwyn once she (in Shilpa's eyes) threatens her own daughter, Dimple's, happiness.

At the end of *Born Confused*, Dimple and Karsh are in love. Dimple has resolved her guilt at the feelings of ambivalence she has towards her mother, and Gwyn and Dimple are friends again. Symbolically, Gwyn has adopted a different style of dress, arriving at a cross cultural party in a 'roaring twenties number' which reflects her white western cultural heritage and suggests that there is at least the possibility of coming together with her own birth mother, but possibly also that she will reproduce the bad mothering she has experienced. *Born Confused* portrays Gwyn as having been stabilised by her episode of nurturant care by Shilpa. Gwyn has (temporarily) embraced the attributes of a different culture so as to access Shilpa's mothering, while Dimple has accepted her cultural heritage, and her mother's mothering, including her success as a creative person, as a valuable birthright which will support and sustain her maturation.

This novel is of particular significance to my own creative work for two reasons. Firstly, the contemporary middle-class professional Indian family resonates to a degree with Saachi's family in *OSB* in terms of its economic situation and the broadly liberal, feminist ideology both implicitly and explicitly portrayed. The second reason why *Born Confused* was significant to my novel is because, as with *Born Confused*, the ambivalence experienced by the central characters in *OSB* is managed within the wider social group rather than between the more insular mothering-mothered dyad of either *Wise Child* or *Dustbin Baby*. Cassia experiences ambivalent feelings about her mother's independent professional and personal life and she is helped to see this as normal – a stage in maturation, rather than an indication of failed mothering or a problem to be solved – by the Indian mother-daughter pair they are staying with. Interventions by the Indian mother, Saachi, and prospective step-father, Vikram Chaudhury, help Cassia to see her mother more empathetically as an individual, as someone who is in need of support, and dealing with conflicted feelings herself. Additionally, like Dimple, Cassia is helped by Saachi and others she encounters in India to recognise her real talents and to have a vision of herself as a mature adult with gifts to offer.

These three texts, which show surrogate primary-care being undertaken by women who are not the children's birth mothers, all demonstrate to young readers that it is possible to recover from abandonment and interrupted mothering and that ambivalence need not be fearful or damaging. April, Gwyn, Dimple, and Cassia all experience the feeling of being 'unreal' though their situations are very different. As Dimple shows and Freud observed, most children go through a stage of rejecting their parents and these texts show that this is normal and that most people come through

this phase with their relationship changed but still intact. These novels allow children's birth mothers to fail, and demonstrate that when this failure is irrevocable, the children are able to find good enough primary-care elsewhere. They show that ambivalence is a normal characteristic of child-primary carer and relationships and for the most part well within the capacities of the child and the adult to manage. They show the experience of the child-carer relationships (in some cases constructed as 'mothering') as transformative - a practice that requires hard work, and dedication - rather than the automatic outcome of being or having a mother. The texts suggest that there must be a focus on the needs of the child, and that what the child *needs*, rather than wants, is something the one offering the nurturant care must understand and be prepared to enforce, without actually using force or relying on a right to moral authority. But, they also show that taking on the role of primary-carer is demanding and that growing up is partly facilitated by recognising this and being less absorbed with the self and learning to empathise with others starting with the primary-carer. Through these texts young readers are encouraged to understand that not everyone is able to provide nurturant care for a child, but that when (birth) mothering fails, there are often others who are willing and able to intervene: protecting children is the responsibility of wider social groups than those bound by blood. There is a communal, collective responsibility to ensure children are cared for and an understanding that a failure of mothering is damaging. However, it is interesting to note that while apparently flexible in their views on who can mother, children's books tend to adhere closely to some traditional aspects of the mothering ideal. For instance, in all three texts the one providing primary care for school age children is portrayed as omniscient and omnipresent. Research indicates that, like both Luella and Saachi, the majority of female mothers in the UK are in full or part-time employment outside the

home and therefore those women mothering young readers in contemporary society may not be available to those young readers to the same degree as the home-based Juniper, Shilpa, or retired Marion. These fictional good-enough mothers and primary-carers have gifts to pass on and they are almost entirely focussed on the needs of the child. Their nurturant care brings healing and great joy, but it is portrayed as requiring an active and committed engagement with the child-carer relationship and a willingness to endure emotional pain and self-sacrifice that Winnicott considered the lot of the ordinary devoted mother.

In the texts discussed in Chapter 3, primary-care is undertaken not by adults by a range of young people. The status quo of adult carer and cared-for child is temporarily reversed, and this changes the dynamic of the relationship between them. In *OSB* I wanted to explore an episode during which a child might come to feel responsible for the nurturant care of an adult and to consider how this might be understood and how it may play out. In the final draft, my fictional mother, Luella, does not suffer emotional or psychological problems to the same acute degree as do the characters in the following texts, nevertheless Cassia recognises she must take a significant, supportive role if she is to help her mother to overcome a difficult episode in their lives.

While Chapter 2 was concerned with abandonment, ambivalence and the reproduction of mothering over generations, in the three texts discussed in the following chapter the nurturant care the children provide gives rise to fears about the loss of childhood and consequent conflicted feelings about their new role. Creatively managing this kind of ambivalence, generated by the emotional demands of caring for someone who seems unreachable, unwilling to engage, and even ungrateful for their

help, has healing potential for a parent or, as in the case of *Memory* (1987), a vulnerable stranger.

Chapter 3

One Flew into the Cuckoo's Nest: children as primary-carers during episodes of mental illness

The emotional and physical cost of mothering/primary caring, has been well recognised by therapists such as Winnicott, who describes the job of parenting into adolescence as, 'the long tussle which you will need to survive' and theorists such as Chodorow who saw the dilemmas, and consequent unhappiness of mothering being passed on from one generation of women to the next. (Winnicott 2005, p.193)

The relationship between failed mothering/primary caring and the mental illness of the mother/carer was a feature of *Dustbin Baby*, which showed depression leading to the suicide of April's first adoptive carer. Jacqueline Wilson presents this woman's depression as a process of withdrawal - a kind of abandonment, which plays out in her growing inability to keep April safe and which positions the child as an overwhelming burden. The notion of children as burdens is not new; for instance, it occurs in many fairy tales, most clearly in a story such as *Hansel and Gretel*. The theme of longed for yet burdensome children – another source of a carer's ambivalence - is explored in the work of teacher, Carolyn Steedman, whose *The Tidy House* (1982) exposes mythologies about working-class mothering through an analyses of the creative writing of young girls as they explore their notions of what mothering means and the conflicted emotions they anticipate they will experience when they come to mother.³⁹

Analysing the children's response to Carl, the fictional child they created and imagined raising, Steedman asserts:

³⁹ Carolyn Steedman, *The Tidy House*, (London: Virago, 1982) all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as Steedman, after quotations in the text.

They understood the desire for babies, their pretty talk, their funny ways, but they knew at the same time their mother's deep ambivalence about their presence. The irritation of Carl's presence was a representation of the difficulties they knew they presented to their own mothers. (Steedman, p. 23)

Steedman's research clearly shows that even at a young age children are aware that a portrayal of primary care which ignores the emotional burdens it can bring only represents the sentimental ideal – love of babies' pretty talk and funny ways. The texts in this chapter explore how far this understanding can be drawn upon when roles are reversed and children find themselves in the position of caring for parents. All focus on child characters' responses to mental illness in parents and how taking responsibility for the primary care of an overwhelmed adult contributes both to recovery in the adult and maturation in the child. Although for these children there are benefits from assuming a caring role, the importance of ensuring that this is a temporary reversal of roles is underlined through the responses of other characters to what they see as the inappropriate burden that caring places on a child.

While there are many stories in which children 'have prematurely exposed themselves to experiences for which they are not ready' this tends to be portrayed as a consequence of leaving home rather than as a consequence of remaining within the family.(Bettelheim, p. 168) The view that childhood is a distinct phase with its own needs, and that children as carers miss out on important aspects of childhood, is enshrined in legislation such as the Children's Act (1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). But alongside a disquiet which drives the growth of support services for young carers, there is also an acknowledgement, echoed in these texts, that caring has the potential to bring out desirable qualities in young people.

Findings in two reports by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation stress that, 'Young carers

matured quickly and gained practical skills that aided independence’ and that, ‘the positive impacts [of caring] included maturity, responsibility, life skills, and a close and loving relationship with parents.’⁴⁰ Described in this way, the benefits of the caring undertaken by these young people include many of the outcomes of Winnicott’s good-enough mothering. However, Winnicott was very clear that in taking on responsibility too soon the child, specifically the unhappy adolescent who becomes the ‘establishment’ and so loses ‘all the imaginative activity and striving of immaturity’. (Winnicott 2005, p.197) In the case of David Almond’s *My Dad’s a Birdman* (2007) and Jacqueline Wilson’s *The Illustrated Mum* (1999), the one who comes to be cared for by a child is that child’s birth parent.⁴¹ In Margaret Mahy’s *Memory* (1983), a young man undertakes the primary care of an elderly woman he meets casually one night. Whether or not they have an established relationship with the adult for whom they care, and regardless of the time period involved, each of these young people struggles with the ambivalence associated with being a primary carer. A consequence of these interludes is that they have their own care interrupted too, and importantly for the purposes of this discussion, all also manage their conflicted feelings and successfully undertake significant episodes of transformative care. These episodes lead to healing outcomes for the one being cared for and the restoration of equilibrium in the lives of the children. Because I was particularly interested in the positive transformations that may accompany mothering these models informed my depiction of caring relationships in *OSB*.

In an earlier draft of *OSB*, the collapse of her business precipitated a severe depressive episode in Cassia’s mother (then called Lula), and led to Cassia taking on a

⁴⁰ Chris Dearden, and Saul Becker, *Young Carers in the UK: The 2004 Report*, (London: Carers UK 2004) p. 5

⁴¹ Jacqueline Wilson, *The Illustrated Mum*, (London: Random House, 1999, 2000, 2007), all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as IM, after quotations in the text.

caring role. The following extract comes from this draft and shows Cassia observing the beginnings of her mother's depressive state.

I poked my head round the guestroom door and saw Lula hunched over her sketchbook. Her camera was set up on the table with images of the Kathakali show running on a loop. Coloured pens lay in a sprawl beside the sketchbook, but the page she was working on was just covered in numbers. Lula didn't even look up as I came in and set the pink tea down on the table. She looked a heartbeat away from all-day pyjamas. I closed the door quietly behind me.⁴²

In later drafts this aspect of the story was changed to allow the development of other strands of the narrative, leaving Luella more distracted than incapacitated and so reducing Cassia's caring role. However, even when Luella's emotional absence was considerably diminished, I explored the idea that Cassia might see the loss of the business as a threat to her home life and particularly her mother's ability to provide the kind of care she needs and so attempt to restore equilibrium in their lives by saving the shop. For that reason Cassia explicitly links her emotional needs to the success of her mother's business - not simply because of the economic implications, but because the shop is part of Luella's identity and Cassia understands this to be important to her and to her mother.

I couldn't believe what she was telling me. It had to be a mistake or some kind of horrible joke.

I thought about our lovely shop. The way it smelled of incense and lemon grass. The rich colours of the cushions and rugs I lay on to play with my dolls when I was little. People's faces breaking into smiles when they walked through the door. It was our little palace and Lula was the queen bee - no wonder she'd been stressy. (*OSB*, p.169)

⁴² OSB c:/documents and settings/owners documents/PhD/om shanti complete manuscript.doc p.78 last modified 13th September 2009

In the books featured in this chapter, child characters are faced with adults suffering considerably more emotional distress than Luella's. Winnicott has written about mothering and psychoanalytic cure in ways that aid interpretation of the scenarios they depict; however, Winnicott is always concerned with how mothers/carers use empathetic, playful, and creative thinking in response to children while these books show children using the same skills to reach adults who are temporarily lost to them and themselves.

Margaret Mahy, *Memory* (1987)

Nineteen-year-old ex-tap dancer Jonny Dart has been drinking and fighting his way through the fifth anniversary of his twin sister Janine's death, which occurred during a childhood game of ritualised dares. Jonny believes he was responsible for Janine's death and is looking for the only other witness, his sister's best friend, Bonny Benedicta, to help him accurately recall the event. Since Janine's fatal cliff-top fall, Jonny has withdrawn into the insular, emotionally volatile character he calls the Wolfman, who wants both to remember and forget. Jonny is like April in that he has been arrested by this trauma. He too is returning to the past to try to heal himself – regressing to progress. The process is facilitated when he meets his alter ego in the form of Sophie West, an old lady evidently suffering from dementia. Despite her confusion Sophie has a curious allure.

I'll walk her to the corner, thought Jonny. Just to make sure she's safe. But as he walked after her like an obedient dog, he was filled with a credulous enchantment.

'What's your name, anyway?' he asked her, being deliberately offhand and disrespectful so that she would know he wasn't really under her control. (*Memory*, p. 39)

Returning with Sophie to her house, Jonny finds it brimming with evidence of her confusion and vulnerability, conditions that, it transpire, correspond in important ways to Jonny's own state for like Sophie, Jonny cannot access crucial memories.

Reluctantly he finds himself drawn to caring for her and from that first night, the repercussions of the relationship begin to affect Jonny. Conflicting aspects of himself compete to dominate his feelings, indicating that his emotional self is highly unstable.

Several people were at war somewhere in his head – a good-hearted Jonny who had once been a boy scout and wanted to see an old lady home; the mad searching Wolfman, expecting the city to guide him with magical clues even though he was not sure what he was searching for; and then a third man, overlapping both the other two, but on the whole more real than either of them, who might suddenly take over and say, 'for God's sake what *am* I doing *here*? How did I get *into* this? How do I get *out*? (*Memory*, p.49)

Significantly, this passage, which begins with multiple identities and ends with a unified I, reveals how the process of caring can over-rule conflicting notions of self. In this case it begins a process that sees Jonny increasingly committed to a caring role. Jonny brings some order to Sophie's chaotic home, going shopping with her and cleaning the house. Everywhere he encounters fresh examples of her precarious housekeeping and questionable personal hygiene which arouse feelings of disgust and compassion in almost equal measure. Jonny is oppressed by this obligation and feels trapped by the heavy weight of responsibility. He describes strong ambivalent feelings towards Sophie and struggles with the guilt they engender. He sees that his role as carer undermines his identity as Wolfman.

For all her demands, Sophie is compliant: she is grateful for both attention and affection. Jonny's relationship with Sophie becomes more complex when he realises that negotiating her memory loss has given him the opportunity to re-examine *his* and

to question the accuracy of his ideas about himself. Sophie's uncritical kindness wrenches at him and makes him feel old and damaged while, like a child, she is 'the innocent dangerously adrift in a savage night-world'. (*Memory*, p.54) He overcomes his distaste – even horror – at her old body and finds some beauty in her fragility and childish mind. Playfully, he enters her world, reflecting it back reassuringly to ease her fears and to maintain her trust and happiness. Jonny sees these stories are important to Sophie and plays with her, so entering a shared holding environment that enables him to restart his emotional development.

Jonny is able to develop a better sense of self by creatively managing his ambivalence towards Sophie; this understanding is consistent with Parker's view that such positive outcomes for self-identity can be the case for carers when even mild ambivalence is acknowledged. Jonny begins to understand both their encounter and his care more fatalistically as part of a process for which he is being rewarded in an abstract but valuable way. Trying to give Sophie all the care she so obviously needs makes Jonny thoughtful, resilient, resourceful and brave. And he is not the only one feeling the effects of his attention. Although Sophie will never 'get better' or 'grow up,' she does change in response to his care.

He brushed and combed her hair, parting it in the middle
and curling it down around her ears as well as he could. Washed
and brushed, free from food stains, she was indeed a dear old lady.
Jonny was surprised how being cared for changed her. (*Memory*, p. 228)

Just as Sophie is changed from child-like innocent to dear old lady by being cared for, so Jonny's caring gives him opportunities to move beyond childhood. At the climax of the story, Jonny leaps from a balcony to confront his childhood fears in the form of a gang of bullies from his school days. The night ends with Bonnie, who Jonny has

found living in the flat next door to Sophie, revealing that Jonny was not responsible for his sister's accident. Although the revelation allows him to be reconciled with his family, Jonny returns to live with Sophie. This time, however, he is also able to step back and focus some attention on his own life because both the state and Bonnie are now helping him care for Sophie. Despite the benefits temporary caring have brought, Mahy makes it clear that as a young person Jonny is not expected to undertake the role of primary-carer unsupported or for an extended period. Jonny knows that he cannot offer Sophie the increasing levels of support she will need for ever. Nevertheless, the text establishes that for the moment Jonny is nurturing his own life and happiness as he cares for her.

Mahy's moving tale of the curative powers of care both enacts and extends Katz-Rothman's claims that the through practice of nurturing – an activity or project she sees grounded in social relationships and enacted in a social group - we learn to care about others since *Memory* teaches that through caring for others we learn to care about ourselves. Jonny's nurturant care has involved a deep personal experience that Chodorow associates with mothering but which she shows has traditionally been denied to men. Through his capacity to care Jonny has released the guilt he has been carrying, earned respect from Bonnie and the professional advisor he consults about Sophie (both of whom are initially sceptical about his capacity to provide care), and gained a perspective on himself that allows him to engage with the world in a positive way. One reason why Jonny manages his role as carer so well is that he is 19 – effectively no longer a child. The girls who intermittently have to care for their bipolar mother in Jacqueline Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* are much younger and consequently the challenges of their episodes of caring work differently for them and their mother.

Jacqueline Wilson, *The Illustrated Mum* (1999)

‘You’ve been drinking,’ Star said coldly, though Marigold’s voice wasn’t really slurred. ‘Dol, you should go to bed.’

Marigold giggled. ‘It’s like you’re the mummy, Star. Should I go to bed too?’. (*IM*, p. 45)

Marigold, the illustrated mother of the title, is having her birthday celebrated by her two daughters, Star and Dolphin. They are trying hard to accommodate her mercurial moods and spontaneous urges for yet another tattoo but, despite their best efforts, the morning ends in disharmony. Marigold gets her new tattoo and stays out all night celebrating at the pub. The two girls comfort one another and protect themselves from unwelcome external interference by preparing to disguise their distress. Nevertheless, they are fearful of being taken into care because of Marigold’s stories about her own childhood. While they wait they talk about their mother; while the younger Dolphin remembers the fun her mother’s behaviour can generate, her older sister has darker memories.

We ate Cornettos and Mars and Soleros and Magnums, one after another, and then when they all started to melt Star mixed them all up in washing up bowl and said it was ice-cream soup.

‘We lived on stale bread and carrots all the rest of that week because she’d spent all the Giro,’ said Star. (*IM*, p. 39)

Star equates mothering with the provision of good, nourishing food rather than childish treats like ice-cream. She is impatient with Marigold, whose brain she knows is ‘wired a different way from other people’s’. (*IM*, p. 40) Marigold will not seek help and Star, who believes this unwillingness to get treatment means she does not love them, is struggling to cope with caring for both her mother and her sister. She works

hard at school because she sees this as the way to escape her material situation, which she recognises as both inadequate and the best her mother will ever be able to provide. For the younger Dolphin, the need for connection to her mother is more pressing than autonomy. She mourns the loss of toys and teddies forgotten, repossessed, and abandoned because of the family's nomadic existence. These elusive transitional objects 'scooped up in a rubbish cart and spewed out on some awful rubbish dump' symbolise the fragility of her hold on Marigold and her mothering. (*IM*, p.84)

However, on occasion, Dolphin is able to confide in her mother, who comforts and reassures her: 'She pulled me on her lap and rocked me as if I was a big towel baby'. (*IM*, P.44)

On a walk initiated by Dolphin to distract her mother from using a new credit card, Marigold asks for reassurance about her mothering and gets it from Dolphin. Her favourite fairy story, in a book Marigold assumes she stole from the library, is *Hansel and Gretel*, about children lost together in the woods. The work of Bettelheim suggests this is a text Marigold may have been particularly drawn to because it reflects her psychic pain. Marigold promises Dolphin that despite the bad things she has done she will never leave them. In an episode that illustrates what Bettelheim describes as the immature oral fixation at the centre of *Hansel and Gretel*, Mother and daughter make a house together from the pieces of cake Marigold has brought to feed the ducks. Marigold confides in Dolphin about her own lack of mothering.

'I *had* a mother, She just didn't want me. I didn't care though. Know what I really did want?' Marigold looked at me, her green eyes very bright. 'A sister. I was desperate for a sister. That's why I'm so glad you and Star have each other.'

And we've got you too. You're like our big sister,' I said. (*IM*, p.57)

Marigold desires to provide something her own mothering lacked, but instead of offering the nurturant care and attentive love she has missed and establishing herself as a mother, able to provide a stable family environment and caring behaviour, she transfers her role to that of a sister and so requires her daughter to care for her. This text works as a fictional illustration for children of Chodorow's theory that without the intervention of other sources of good mothering, interrupted, failed mothering will be replicated over generations of daughters.

Despite the symbolic house building and assurances that she will not leave them, Marigold is spinning away from her daughters, and Dolphin, who is bullied at school, looks for a place of refuge. She finds it in the school library with its 'giant teddy bear', librarian, and a new friend, the gentle Oliver, who has mother troubles of his own. (*IM*, P.67) The reappearance of Star's father, Mickey, in Marigold's life precipitates a crisis. Mickey is much more interested in parenting Star than partnering Marigold, and he makes it clear that he is not going to join resume their relationship. Seeing this as a chance for escape, Star plans to take Dolphin to Brighton with her to be with her father, leaving Marigold behind.

Star's ambivalence towards her mother causes her pain and confusion as her fears of being unable to 'escape' from Marigold are matched by her feelings of love and responsibility towards both her mother and her sister. With her father's prompting, Star openly questions Marigold's ability to care for her and her sister and expresses her unwillingness to continue to care for Dolphin herself: 'Why should I always have to look after you?' (*IM*, p.120) Because the roles of mother and sister are conflated, this is more traumatic for Star and positions her as being able to meet either her own or Marigold's needs, but not both. Her dilemma becomes more acute when Dolphin won't leave her mother and is angry with Star for abandoning them. Star is

now ‘torn in two’ – precisely the way Parker describes the sensation of ongoing maternal ambivalence - and she chooses to meet her own needs for support. Although at one level this signals a failure of care for Marigold and Dolphin, by deciding to care for herself she sets in motion changes that eventually benefit all the members of her family and restore Dolphin and Star to their proper condition as children. The transformation is not easy or immediate, however, and Star’s abnegation briefly transfers the responsibility of carer to Dolphin. After an exhausting day of searching for Star, Marigold begins to collapse; to keep her going until they can reach home, Dolphin decides to play the game of mothering that Marigold likes.

‘Yes, I’m the mum and you’re my little girl Marigold. Dear, dear, you’ve got yourself in such a silly state, darling. Let mummy wipe your nose again,’ I said. ‘Now come along with me, there’s a good girl. I’ll tell you a story as we go, right, precious?’ (*IM*, p. 114)

In this situation, playing mother is not just a game. With Dolphin’s assumption of authority over their journey home there is a definite change in the relationship between them. Dolphin’s enactment of mothering calms Marigold becomes calm. But while this mothering is comforting, it is neither sustainable nor transformational; mother and child are incapable of restoring their equilibrium.

Star’s absence precipitates a breakdown in Marigold which Dolphin realises she is not able to manage by herself. Despite knowing Marigold’s fear of hospitals and aware that it will leave her completely alone, Dolphin calls an ambulance and Marigold is taken into hospital. After Marigold is admitted to hospital Dolphin is left alone. It is her friend, Oliver - another child carer - who helps her now. They track down Dolphin’s father who begins the official process of having her looked after, conveying that this is a right children can expect to demand from those linked to them

by blood ties; however, the rights and responsibilities of blood ties in relation to care are shown to be far from simple or automatic. Dolphin's father, who has other children and who is apparently much less self-interested in his unofficial daughter than is Star's father, manages her care in collaboration with the social services. Dolphin goes to a foster home while Marigold is being treated. Counting Star, Dolphin's foster mother is Dolphin's third experience of being looked after but her first experience of the kind of stable home-life and caring behaviour that Winnicott would regard as good-enough.

In contrast to Marigold's childhood experience and Dolphin's fears, she finds her foster mother, Aunty Jane, to be a kindly woman whose house is filled with good food, plentiful hot water, and nurturing symbolised by the presence of happy babies who Dolphin is able to help care for, so showing her strongly developed nurturing capacity. Being fostered is pleasant and reassuring for Dolphin and when Star arrives to join her she guards the relationship jealously: 'What makes you think you've got the right to barge in here? This is *my* foster home, not yours. I had to get it all sorted out because you left me'. (*IM*, p.217) Dolphin seems to be expressing a desire to punish Star for letting her down similar to that which April expressed toward Marion in *Dustbin Baby*, but she is also acting out normal sibling rivalry indicating that they are now both children rather than mother and daughter.

The Illustrated Mum explores what may happen when gaps in nurturing are too big, and illustrates the diversity, and distribution of sources which may fill those gaps and through which healing may come. It also portrays fractured and unreliable nurturing, when mothering becomes a game of pass the parcel between people who are unable to mother adequately over an extended period. In this way Wilson's text suggests that children should not be expected to take on caring responsibilities which

are beyond their capacity or inappropriate for their age. *The Illustrated Mum* also helps readers understand the need for the kind of support provided by professionals such as D.W. Winnicott, who helped not just children but those mothers who struggled with mental health issues associated with the work involved in caring for children.⁴³ Additionally, it reassures children that they are not expected permanently to take on the role of carer and that others, including the state, have a responsibility to look after vulnerable people like Star, Dolphin and Marigold.

As the book comes to a close, Marigold has a moment of insight into her own mothering and there is recognition that chimes with Chodorow's theories about the way mothering is reproduced.

...in the end I blurted out all sorts of ugly things about my mother and all she's done to me and how I hated her. Then I realised, I'm the same. I've done some of the same stuff to you two. You must both hate me.' (*IM*, p. 222)

But they don't hate her. They have experienced ambivalent feelings both in caring for Marigold and being looked after by her. Their hate has been matched by love, and managing this ambivalence has brought positive changes to all their lives. Their sense of self-hood through connection to others undergoes huge transformations in the course of the novel. In being able to care for Marigold well enough and for long enough, they have found care in a greatly expanded network of others including their fathers, school, friends and social welfare organisations. Between them a diverse group of 'imperfect others', including Marigold, will keep attentive love present and visible in their lives. The cycle of incomplete mothering has been interrupted.

⁴³ see for instance Winnicott 2002, *What Irks?* pp. 139 – 154

David Almond, *My Dad's a Birdman* (2008)

“Mr Crow,” insisted Mr Poop. “What is your occupation? What job do you do?”

“I’m a birdman!” snapped Dad. “Yes. I’m a birdman. I think I used to be something else, but now I can’t quite remember what it was. “I’m a birdman!”(MD, p.23)

Like *The Illustrated Mum*, *My Dad's a Birdman* involves a young person taking on responsibility and caring for a parent. Lizzie Crow’s mother has died and her father, Jackie, is dealing with his grief by taking flight emotionally and acting it out. Despite being coaxed and gently bullied by his apparently self-sufficient young daughter, he doesn’t wash, he doesn’t get dressed and instead of eating ‘proper’ food, he hunts for and eats beetles in the floorboards when he believes no-one is watching. Lizzie, an only child, has taken on the role of primary-carer role in the house.

His shoulders drooped and his arms dangled by his side. Lizzie got her school bag, then kissed his cheek. She smiled gently and shook her head. He was just like a little boy standing there. (MD, p.12)

Jackie enters a competition to fly across the River Tyne using wings made from feathers he has collected in the garden. Her father believes that winning this contest will make Lizzie proud of him, a belief that may be related to the need he feels to prove himself to his daughter and to himself. But Lizzie just wants her Dad back.

“See?” he said. “I’ll be a real proper birdman. It’s all for you, lass. You’ll be so proud of us.”

“But Dad,” she said softly, and she held him gently by the arm, “I don’t need you to be a birdman. I just need you to be my Dad.” (MD, p. 36)

Lizzie is compassionate and responsive to her father's unhappiness. She is troubled by his confusion and apparently understands his need to escape into a fantasy. As she admires the wings, she remembers her father's ability to make birthday gifts and toys for her. She sees evidence of his careful craftsmanship in the wings and understands that despite his current mental state which makes him feel absent he is still active and present in some accessible way.

Lizzie is a conscientious student, torn between wanting to care for her father and going to school as her father tries to insist she should. As with *The Illustrated Mum*, ambivalence is experienced as a choice between meeting the needs of the notional child –Jackie - and those of the one doing the caring. The arrival of down-to-earth and disapproving Auntie Doreen brings Lizzie and Jackie closer together. Doreen's care is portrayed as prosaic and unimaginative, but she does concern herself with the well being of both Jackie and Lizzie and in a way this provides Lizzie with enough support to allow her to engage more creatively with her conflicted feelings about her father. Lizzie, like Jonny and Star, has tried to care for her father by encouraging him in good habits - clean clothes, nourishing food and fresh air. Seeing her father's rejection of rational Auntie Doreen, who is concerned by what she sees as Lizzie's inappropriate sense of responsibility, Lizzie intuits that the way to reach her father is to join in with his fantasy in the literal nest he has created. To connect with her father she must use her imagination and play with him, and initially this must be on his terms. As with Winnicott's good-enough mother and his own role as a psychoanalyst, Lizzie's care in this holding environment - her father's creation - is responsive, collaborative and playful.

“Would you really help us?” he said.
She smiled. Of course she would help. It'd be like when she'd helped

him paint the playhouse, or when she'd helped put the final touches to the puppets. It'd be like when they'd planted that little ash tree in the garden together, when Dad said they made a great team. (*MD*, p. 52)

Jackie's bereavement has destabilised his sense of self and he needs to use his imagination to remake his identity. They send Auntie Doreen away and set to work through a day and a night to make Lizzie her own pair of wings. Working together draws her father's imagination away from the flying competition and back into the comfort of family and home.

Birds tweeted and whistled all around. The city traffic rumbled and roared. Dad giggled as he thought of what they could do next.
"We need a nest, Lizzie," he said.
"A nest?"
"Aye. To make it all proper. To make us like proper birds."
Lizzie looked into his eyes.
"Go on," he said. "It'll make me happy." (*MD*, p. 55)

Lizzie's father even produces an egg and sits on it until it hatches, symbolising that he is now a single parent for Lizzie. He expresses his desire to care for her and constructs this around physical strength and protection. "Birds is the best in the world at looking after their little'ns, you know," said Dad. "They bring them up good and strong. They protect them from all dangers." (*MD*, p.57) In describing this protection as something which birds do well, he expresses doubts that, as a human man, he may not be capable of caring for her properly, presumably an anxiety brought about by the loss of his wife whom he was evidently unable to protect from all dangers. Lizzie tries to get her father to engage with the possibility of failing to fly, but he is confident because he is a birdman and she is strong and brave. Significantly, it is her mother who has assured Lizzie that she is 'the very bravest of the brave.' (*MD*, p.63) There is no doubt that Lizzie's was a good-enough mother, and Lizzie reproduces her own mothering to help

her father. Jackie Crow moves from his position of abandoned isolation through Lizzie's willingness to enter his (bird)world. As the story unfolds, Lizzie's father slowly returns to her and he acknowledges that it will not matter if they cannot fly across the Tyne because her nurturing has enabled him to recognise that something more important has been achieved. His care for her does not have to be perfect or one sided, it is a relationship of mutuality.

“I love the night,” said Lizzie.

“Me too,” said Dad. “And you're right, you know.”

“What about?”

“You're right,” he said again. “It doesn't matter if we fly or if we fall. We've got each other. We're doing it together. That's all that matters. (MD, p.80)

My Dad's a Birdman reassuringly illustrates the possibility of the restoration of equilibrium between adult carer and child after an episode of mental instability and the positive, reassuring outcomes of caring both within and outside the family unit. While Dolphin's actions brought a responsive network of other supporting adults into her life, Lizzie has restored the dyad of caring adult and cared for child within her own family. Both Wilson's and Almond's children are responding to extreme crisis; in *OSB* the problems Cassia faces are less acute, but she too demonstrates care by helping save her mother's business. Her caring stimulates her creativity and together these mobilise additional support from a wider network of adults who are able to realise the potential of both Cassia's and her mother's ideas.

All three texts show how even when carer-child roles are reversed ambivalence can be managed by engaging empathetic, creative capacities. They show the role of primary

carer as difficult and complex, requiring dedicated attention and resilience; they also show children as capable for a time of providing nurturant primary care. All the protagonists are changed by their experience of caring. They gain status and maturity and are rewarded for their nurturing by restored equilibrium and better relationships with their carers. Although they benefit from their time as carers, the rights of the young protagonists to be children, to have only manageable responsibility, to enjoy learning, recreation, and to be cherished is strongly underscored in each novel. In none of these texts is primary care by children expected to be a permanent state. Jackie Crow may be inclined to flights of fantasy, but he will stay out of the nest; Marigold is expected to take her medication, and Jonny will finally grow into adulthood. In *OSB*, Cassia's role in the business is also temporary; however her increased maturation and intersubjectivity are permanent. This is signalled by the suggestion that she will return to India in the future to help Saachi and also become active in environmental projects, an interest in which has emerged as part of her transformative experiences.

So far the texts discussed have shown surrogate women and children taking on the role of primary carers. The next chapter considers texts in which episodes of transformative nurturant care are undertaken by adult men. They undertake the primary care of children with whom they have no blood ties and, as with *Memory*, it comes to them unexpectedly and generates conflicting emotions about the expectations and demands of their initially unwelcome roles. However, in accordance with the pattern that has been established in the works already considered, for these men too even relatively short periods of caring result in profound positive changes in their relationships with themselves and the wider world.

Chapter 4

Men as primary carers

This chapter focuses on three texts in which adult men become the primary carers for children to whom they are not related: Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mr Tom* (1981), Michael Morpurgo's *Kensuke's Kingdom* (1999) and Phillip Reeve's *Here Lies Arthur* (2007). Following on from the previous chapter, the mental illness of a birth mother is a feature of *Goodnight, Mr Tom*, but in *Kensuke's Kingdom*, Will is separated from his mother when he falls from the family sailing boat while in *Here Lies Arthur* Gwyna's mother is assumed dead.⁴⁴ Initially *OSB* also incorporated a male who becomes involved in Cassia's care as I experimented with having her father's boyfriend, Lou, accompany Cassia on the trip to India. The plan for this version of the story involved their initially hostile relationship changing as he engaged in maternal thinking and worked to provide the emotional support she required. However, while I find the novels discussed in this chapter both interesting for what they have to say about men as primary carers and in relation to the theories about mothering and peace put forward by Sara Ruddick in *Maternal Thinking – Towards a Politics of Peace*, these experiments proved to me that in *OSB* I was more interested in mother-daughter relationships.

The three texts discussed below are examples of how contemporary children's fiction opens up nurturant care to men, despite the fact that none of the men who take on responsibility for children is consciously seeking this role. In the context of Ruddick's theories it is notable that, although located in very different times and

⁴⁴ Michael Morpurgo, *Kensuke's Kingdom* (London: Heinemann, 1999) all subsequent page/line references are from this edition and are given in parentheses, abbreviated as KK, after quotations in the text.

places, war and conflict feature in all three books, and all also show that caring for a child changes the male carers' attitudes to both conflict and their local communities.

Michelle Magorian, *Goodnight Mr Tom* (1981)

Set in the first year of the Second World War, *Goodnight Mr Tom* is the story of damaged nine-year-old evacuee William Beech (known to his mother as Willie), and Thomas (Mr Tom) Oakley, the elderly widower in whose home he is placed to escape the anticipated bombings of London. For William, the move offers escape from a failed home life shaped by cruelty. His mother is a religious extremist who justifies her abuse of William on the grounds that it is sanctioned by God and is the only way to control a child. There is no suggestion that Mrs Beech struggles with the guilt Parker associates with normal maternal ambivalence, and no indication that her care encompasses any of the creative engagement that Winnicott and Ruddick identify as a vital component in successful mothering. Although like the adults in Chapter 3 she is portrayed as mentally ill and therefore unable to mother in the way that Ruddick assumes women will, unlike those essentially loving women Mrs Beech's actions are unambiguously abusive. Ruddick argues that violence is incompatible with maternal thinking and this text clearly identifies Mrs. Beech as unable to think maternally. Her failure is highlighted when her son is removed to a place of peace, the small parish in the countryside, where he experiences transformative nurturant care of the kind that Ruddick equates with mothering. Although conforming to the pattern by which we have seen children's writers affirm that cycles of failed mothering can be interrupted, *Good Mr Tom* does not recuperate Mrs. Beech as she does not in turn allow herself to be cared for by her son.

When readers first encounter Tom it is not clear that the move will bring improvements for William. Tom is a withdrawn, unsociable widower, and care of William is imposed on him by the authorities. When he opens the door to the Billeting Officer who has brought William to stay without consulting him (Tom lives near a church, the only stipulation made by William's mother as necessary in his new guardian), William sees 'a towering giant with skin like coarse, wrinkled brown paper and a voice like thunder.' (*GMT*, p. 10) He glares at William and speaks abruptly to him as well as to the Billeting Officer.

William is a submissive and compliant child; he expects violence from Tom and anticipates being beaten as inevitable. This, and the fact that he is physically and emotionally overwhelmed when he arrives, causes him to vomit up his food and wet the bed. Seeing William's fear, Tom's guarded behaviour quickly changes to something more compassionate and nurturing, qualities he has kept alive after the traumatic deaths of his wife and son through his relationships with animals. He is particularly close to his dog, Sammy, and readers as well as William quickly realise he has both a capacity and a need to care and nurture which comfortably expands to include the boy's specific needs.

'Well Sam,' Tom whispered, 'I don't know nothin' about children, but I do know enuff not to beat 'em and make 'em that scared.' [...]
'I don't know,' he said anxiously, 'I ent 'ad much experience at this ere motherin' lark,' and he grunted and puffed at his pipe.
Sammy stood up, wriggled in between Tom's legs and placed his paws on his stomach. (*GMT*, p. 20)

With Ruddick's theories in mind, it is significant that Magorian specifically names Tom's actions, which he believes should *not* include violence towards the child, as mothering. As with Winnicott's good-enough mothers, Tom's care of Will is involved

and attentive. Also like a good-enough mother, Tom experiences ambivalence about the demands of the relationship, for while it requires no financial expenditure he cannot meet there are emotional costs. These come from opening up feelings he has repressed since losing his family and the requirement to reconnect with village life. Fear of emotional connection and the lack of value placed on the care and nurturing activity associated with femininity is something that feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan has characterised as particularly masculine, Tom's initial fears about emotional connection are shared by all the men who nurture in the texts discussed in this chapter.⁴⁵

He made his way downstairs to the front room and turned Willie's damp clothes around. [...] 'Best not get too fond of the boy, Thomas,' he muttered to himself. [...] He glanced at Willie's thin grey clothes. S'pose another pair of socks and one of them balaclava things wouldn't come amiss, he thought, sinking into a quiet reverie of jerseys and boots. (*GMT*, p.35)

As this passage shows, Tom is guarded, but he also wants to be connected. Much of Tom's early care of the boy centres on providing food and clothes, neither of which has been adequately supplied by his mother. This concern with the physical health and well being of the child are acts of what Ruddick calls 'preservative love' and which she identifies as a core component of maternal thinking. Again, each male primary-carer in the selected texts engages in acts of preservative love. But preservative love on its own does not equate to good-enough mothering. In this case, Willie's mother has done enough to preserve him, but what Winnicott calls his stock of psychic wellness is profoundly inadequate. He is unused to the care and attention that Tom provides, such as reading to him, encouraging him to make friends, providing him

⁴⁵ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: psychological theory and women's development*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982)

with art materials and ensuring that he attends school. Under Tom's curative care, Willie begins to recover and to acquire a stock of psychic wellbeing. Soon William comes to be known in the village as Will, a change that represents the new life and identity he gains through Tom's good-enough caring.

Unusually, in terms of theoretical representations of men left in charge of children, but like all of the male carers in these texts, Tom is a competent homemaker. Doucet identifies this as an area where women's and men's practice of what she terms mothering often diverges, observing that men who are primary-carers tend not to give housework the attention that women believe appropriate. In the sample texts men are shown as competent at domestic tasks and in these examples children's literature is helping children to realise that men have the capacity to care of children. Tom's home is a clean, cosy place. This does not make him effeminate, nor does it stop him from making time and space for the play that Doucet claims men prioritise over housework. As part of meeting Will's needs for friends, education and imaginative play, Tom begins to engage differently with the village community, much to their surprise and approval; because he is a man and because he has been reclusive it is seen as remarkable that Tom takes on this role with such competence and commitment. The village women express some surprise at Tom's nurturing capacities, seeming to affirm the expectation that in his situation women might instinctively have sought out new nurturing roles to help their recovery. Because he is a man, Tom's need to nurture has not been recognised.

Magorian contrasts Tom's nurturant care with the actions of William's fearful, rules-bound mother. Unlike his mother, Tom experiences William as a biddable child, who is grateful and appreciative of his care. The damage inflicted on William by his mother is severe and life threatening, but as is often the case with those who have

been abused, even after the alternative experience of living with Tom, he still feels connected to her. When William's mother becomes ill and he is returned home to help care for her and his baby sister, he imagines that she will be proud of him and declare her love for him. In fact, once home she resorts to beating him and locking him under the stairs as she has always done. These actions demonstrate the extent of his mother's mental illness in refusing his care. When he returns to his mother's house he feels himself to be two people (Willie and Will). Maternal failure is interrupting what Winnicott describes as the 'going on being' of the infant, though in this case Will is an older child. (Winnicott 2002, p. 38) Significantly, at the end of the chapter he thinks about Mr Tom and his own room and knows himself to be Will. His identity is intact because of the good-enough caring he has finally received.

An aspect of Tom's caring that is less explored in other books discussed in this text relates to gender balance within individuals. Tom identifies being overly compliant as undesirable in a boy and attributes Will's docility to the fact that his mother's mothering has not been balanced by any masculine influences. When he arrives to live with Tom, Will is portrayed as bound, dependent and as a consequence unable to be properly 'boyish'. While living with Tom helps Will develop masculine interests and attributes, these are not at the expense of the qualities of nurturing and empathy often associated with femininity. The book ends with an affirmation of both his caring capacities and the secure masculinity of both Will and Tom. In the closing scene Will sees the aging Tom and understands that it will soon be his turn to be looked after. In a complex moment of insight, Will's ability to nurture is confirmed by the feelings this provokes and by his decision to name and gender their relationship.

Will noticed now how old and vulnerable Tom looked. It unnerved him at first for he had always thought of him as being strong. [...] Will swallowed

a few mouthfuls of tea and put some fresh coke on the range fire. As he observed it tumble and fall between the wood and the hot coke, it occurred to him that strength was quite different from toughness and that being vulnerable wasn't the same as being weak.

He looked up at Tom and leaned forward in his direction.

'Dad,' he ventured.

'Yes,' answered Tom, putting down his library book. 'What is it?'

'Dad,' repeated Will, in a surprised tone, 'I'm growing!' (*GMT*, p.304)

In *Goodnight Mr Tom*, then, Michelle Magorian shows nurturing, attentive love as able to be provided by both sexes and associates it with balanced individuals. She credits it with the power to transform lives, to heal, and to be reproduced, as Chodorow's research claimed. Magorian also locates it in a place of peace, the country village, and establishes this environment as a place where Ruddick's maternal thinking can develop, in contrast with the war-torn city where Will was abused.

Tom's care begins with the provision of basic necessities and develops into more complex nurturing which brings about transformation and growth in the life of both adult and child. In *Kensuke's Kingdom*, an elderly Japanese man living alone on a tropical island since the Second World War finds managing his ambivalence toward a shipwrecked boy much more difficult because of what the child symbolises and the danger he brings.

Michael Morporgo *Kensuke's Kingdom* (1999)

Twelve-year-old Michael and his family are ten months into a round-the-world sailing trip when Michael and his dog are lost overboard and rescued by an elderly Japanese man, Kensuke. Though grateful for his rescue, Michael begins to think of himself as Kensuke's captive and is resentful that he is not allowed to light a fire and summon help. 'We were not friends. We would not be friends. He would keep me

alive ... but only so long as I lived by his rules'.(KK, p.76) One of the rules is that the pair live separately. Michael keeps to his side of the island, but is prevented from swimming in the sea by Kensuke, and this further fuels his sense of being a prisoner. Rebelliously, Michael goes into the sea and he is stung by poisonous jellyfish. Michael is again rescued by Kensuke, who takes him back to his cave and nurses him. This second rescue involves the helpless Michael being reduced to a state of dependence akin to that of an infant and their relationship becomes more traditionally one of carer and child rather than in the first rescue, when Kensuke deemed Michael capable of being independent. Despite his initially hostile treatment of the boy, in entering the dangerous waters, Kensuke performs preservative care, but it is the care he gives the boy afterwards that changes their relationship significantly.

...whenever I woke Kensuke was always there sitting beside me. He rarely spoke and I could not speak, but the silence between us said more than any words. My erstwhile enemy, my captor, had become my saviour. (KK, p.100)

After a period of conflict, resistance and mutual misunderstanding, this episode and the healing and nurturing which Kensuke provide, marks a turning point in their understanding of one another and can be read as a kind of rebirth – similar to that of Will's emergence from the cupboard - that makes Michael Kensuke's son.

From this point, they live together in Kensuke's cave and Michael finds out that violent poachers (an invading enemy) are the reason for Kensuke's desire not to be found. Kensuke's care of the island's resident orang-utans and his sense of responsibility for their safety have caused him to reject the only other human on the island, but when Michael is revealed as helpless and in need of care, Kensuke's nurturing is able to expand to include the human child. Michael finds out that

Kensuke was trained as an obstetrician who believes that his wife and a son were killed during the bombing of Hiroshima. Kensuke explains that he was angry at Michael because, after the war, he believed all people to be hateful,

‘I not want to see people. For me all people killer people. I not want you on my island. I leave you food. I leave you water so you not die. But you make fire. I want people stay away’ (KK, p.125)

Although after nursing Michael Kensuke comes to regard him as a son, Michael remembers his birth family and when beset by ‘a sudden powerful longing to see them again’ he puts a rescue note into a bottle and throws it into the sea. (KK, p. 127) He feels very guilty at this deception, a typical outcome of negotiating his ambivalent feelings towards Kensuke who he wants to leave, but who he does not want to hurt. After Kensuke finds the bottle they live in silence until, on seeing a female orang-utan searching for her lost baby, Kensuke begins to empathise with Michael’s mother: ‘When I think of Tomodachi (the orang-utan), I think of your mother. Your mother, she too lose her baby. She lose you. That very sad thing for her.’(KK, p.133) This mother-child bond is acknowledged as special and something that should be protected.

After Kensuke agrees to light a rescue fire the pair become close again and exchange stories about their lives. They have managed the guilt associated with feelings of ambivalence by acknowledging that the relationship must undergo another change. While anticipating separation, they enjoy the mutuality that Parker suggests, above oneness, is the desired condition of mothering/being a primary carer. Kensuke teaches Michael to paint and they play football together. As with Tom, there is a reminder that Kensuke has a masculine identity which is not compromised by the nurturant, primary-carer role. Although Kensuke looks after the orang-utans he does

not couch this responsibility in maternal terms, but rather refers to himself as a ruler doing his duty: 'This is my place. This is Kensuke's Kingdom. Emperor must stay in his kingdom, look after his people. Emperor does not run away. Not honourable thing to do.' (KK, p.158) Kensuke's care of the island's animals is compassionate and tender, but it has taken the experience of managing his ambivalence towards Michael to transform Kensuke's previously entirely hostile feelings toward people. The authoritarian Kensuke of Michael's early encounter has been transformed into a more gentle, child-centred man. When Michael's parents finally locate their son, Kensuke decides not to rejoin mainstream society, but it is his feelings of love and responsibility for his animal family that keep him on the island rather than an enduring hostility toward people.

In the next text an enduring hostility toward a childhood enemy, the Saxons, drives the actions of a man committed to defend his island, Britain, against invasion. However, in *Here lies Arthur*, unlike *Kensuke's Kingdom*, a child in need of rescue is quickly seen as offering an opportunity rather than a threat.

Phillip Reeve, *Here Lies Arthur* (2007)

The conflict against which the child-primary carer relationship in Reeve's book is set is the invasion of Britain by the Saxons around 500 AD at the time of King Arthur. Escaping from one battle, ten-year-old servant child, Gwyna, slides into an icy river where she is found by Myrddin the Bard. Gwyna initially mistrusts Myrddin, though he wears 'a look that could be taken for kindness and talks to her softly as you would talk to a scared horse' (*Arthur*, p.12) For Myrddin this unexpected encounter brings an opportunity to use the Gwyna to further his own ambitions; he uses her to create

the event which becomes the Arthurian myth of the Lady of the Lake. Myrddin's objective is to restore peace to Britain. Like Ruddick's project for peace, he wants to allow boys to 'grow to manhood without learning to butcher one another', but paradoxically he regularly uses violence in his attempt to achieve this since his plans involve creating in Arthur a leader strong enough to stop the 'petty squabbling'. (*Arthur*, p.81) After the success of the illusion and despite knowing that it may endanger both Gwyna and Arthur, Myrddin decides to keep the girl with him. For Myrddin, there is a particular kind of ambivalence at play here: Gwyna is both endangered and protected by Myrddin's conflicting desires to use her for the greater good and to shield her from harm. To protect her, Myrddin insists that Gwyna take on the identity of a boy. Myrddin transforms her, just as his stories have transformed the all too flawed King Arthur. Though initially she mistrusts Myrddin, the change of gender identity becomes a transformation she values: 'Myrddin said he was not an enchanter, but he worked magic alright. He turned me into a boy, and he turned Arthur into a hero.' (*Arthur*, p.54) Gwyna happily spends a year as a boy (Gwyn) while Myrddin tends the wounded after the battles he has been largely responsible for staging.

During her time living as a boy, Gwyna encounters her opposite in Peri, a boy who has been dressed as a girl by his mother to protect him from being killed in battle as his father and brothers have been. Both Myrddin and Peri's mother care for their children by disguising, even apparently manipulating, their sex, but while Gwyna knows that she is 'performing' the role of a boy, Peri believes himself to *be* a girl.

Myrddin has changed Gwyna in other ways too.

This was what my time with Myrddin had done to me. In the old days I'd never given a thought to the future, and not much to the past. I'd lived simply in the now. [...] Just an animal walking about on two legs, that's all I was until Myrddin changed me. It seemed to me sometimes I'd been

happier that way (*Arthur*, p.105)

Through his care Myrddin has given Gwyna a future, a sense of personhood, but she has conflicting feelings about what this means for her. This is not the normal frustration associated with ambivalence between child and carer because Gwyna clearly does not have a strong sense of identity. Myrddin is manipulating her in ways that prevent her from feeling entirely real and this is another example of interruption in the 'going on being' that Winnicott argued for infants was a product of successful mothering/caring. In this episode we see this failure being enacted beyond babyhood and into adolescence. Like April in *Dustbin Baby* and the 'colouring in' done by April's mothers, the problems are associated with the fact that decisions involving the child are motivated by the needs of the adult – paradoxically in this case Myrddin's project for peace that ought to be harmonious with Ruddick's theories - rather than in response to the needs of the child.

The onset of puberty makes the disguise untenable, and recognising that Gwyna must resume her female identity, Myrddin engages a wider network of others by bringing her back to her old home to be a woman amongst other women: wanting her to have 'the hope of a good marriage one day, and children of her own'. (*Arthur*, p.270) This exposes flaws in the way he manages the role of primary carer, not least because the girl feels abandoned and used. He has not helped her to understand his genuine attachment and so is surprised when, while she is reporting to him in her capacity as his spy in the king's household, she hears (in his questions about her) an expression of concern for her wellbeing:

But while we were working together, wrapping the wrecked leg in white cloth that kept soaking through red, he asked me softly if I was all right, and if I had been harmed or frightened by the raiders. As if it

meant something to him. As if *I* meant something to him. (*Arthur*, p. 171)

Myrddin's role as master strategist and his role as primary-carer for a child are clearly in conflict; this is ambivalence at work in an unusual context. He is emotionally engaged with Gwyna, but, once again, he chooses to act for the larger project of peace and thus endangers Gwyna, who must flee with the Queen, Gwenhwyfar, who has betrayed her husband, Arthur. In caring for the distraught Gwenhwyfar, Gwyna discovers her own mothering capacities.

Three times I ran on ahead. And three times I went back for her because I couldn't bear to leave her alone and helpless. [...] It was like she was a child, and I her mother. I held her hand and tugged her after me. (*Arthur*, p.207)

But, Gwyna cannot save Gwenhwyfar, who drowns herself in a lake, evidence that her caring skills are still imperfect because of the care she experienced. She is not yet able to break the cycle of failed care.

Gwyna only comes to understand the role Myrddin has played in her life, and so heal herself, when he is dying. While she is nursing him, which requires the reversal of roles that enables her again to experience being the primary-carer, Myrddin tells her about the pleasure and pride he has taken in her achievements, and how much pain he felt during the year she lived away from him caused. He realises that Arthur has not been the man or the king he had hoped, but Myrddin now understands his life in terms of Gwyna, who has been 'a good daughter to me. And a good son, too'. (*Arthur*, p. 271) Myrddin has managed his conflicted feelings - the ambivalence generated by the difficulties of managing his dual role - by hiding his love from Gwyna. Because the extent and nature of Myrddin's care have been disguised, Gwyna has been denied the ability to love him back and feel normal

ambivalence towards him. According to Bettelheim, children must *know* that they are cared for if a relationship is to deliver its full potential: ‘the tender affections from which there grows a different kind of love’. Until this point, Myrddin’s nurturant care has partially failed, not only because he has put his political ambitions ahead of Gwyna’s needs, but also and more significantly because Gwyna has not been aware of his love and therefore has not had a sense of herself as having been beloved. This has denied her some beneficial outcomes of a dedicated and transformative primary-carer relationship, such as the development of a good internal object which ‘depends for its qualities on the existence and aliveness and behaviour of the external object’ and a well stocked psychic storehouse. (Winnicott 2005 p. 13)

Myrddin’s death-bed revelation goes some way to completing his nurturing of Gwyna by illuminating his love for her in terms which contribute to her psychic wellbeing and sense of self. The optimistic ending to this story, which sees Gwynna and Peri come together, making a living through storytelling and music, suggests self-determination and a happy future - he finding of what Winnicott might describe ‘as a life worth living’ offers a complex and satisfying resolution to the young reader. (Winnicott 2005, p.87)

Though Myrddin and his project for peace have not prioritised Gwyna’s safety and so in Ruddick’s terms he has not completely fulfilled the primary requirement for maternal thinking, nevertheless being a primary carer in this text is portrayed as compelling and satisfying for a man. It can compensate for professional disappointment, even when the person is motivated by deeply held political conviction. But Myrddin’s ambitions for Arthur have constrained his care, just as Kensuke’s hatred of people initially constrained his. The role of primary carer is not portrayed as more important or even more worthwhile than political power, but the

achievements and failures of Arthur are of less significance to Myrddin at the end of his life than the life of his son/daughter Gwyna and the pride he takes in her personhood. The failed schemer has not been able to transform Arthur, but he has at least partially transformed the orphan girl who previously lived only in the now and was no more than an ‘animal on two legs’. (Arthur, p.215)

In these texts, children’s literature is seen opening up the deep personal experience of the child-carer relationship to adult men and showing nurturing in the context of conflict as healing and transformative. These texts value nurturant care whoever does it, and they specifically validate men’s capacities as primary carers. However, as with the women and children seen in earlier chapters, there is a surprisingly traditional message about mothering contained in these texts: if they are to be successful, the men undertaking primary care must prioritise the needs of the child above any other ambitions – even when this includes an explicit project for peace which, according to Ruddick, ought always to be compatible with maternal forms of care. The retired countryman, Tom, undertakes his role as Will’s primary carer with a complete focus on the needs of the boy and for the first time participates in the defensive activities of the village. Michael returns to his mother and Kensuke remains on the island with its permanently needy children (the orang-utans) to defend them against invaders, while Michael, who had prior experience of good-enough mothering that is re-enacted during his time with Kensuke, returns to his family. In *Here Lies Arthur*, Myrddin’s political ambitions compromise his care, but eventually his role as primary-carer helps him to reflect with some acceptance on his political failures.

As these examples show, children’s literature explores issues around child-primary carer relationships for child readers in ways that make many of the same

points about ambivalence, gender roles and social attitudes explored by the theorists who have studied such relationships from the perspective of adult carers. The work of helping children understand and negotiate feelings of ambivalence associated with primary carers is central to *OSB*, as will become clear in the second, and majority, element of this submission, the creative writing project.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

That night I finally finished the Peacock book. In the end, just as the girl in the bookshop said, Una had got into loads of trouble and got dragged home by her dad. She thought being with Ravi would be all lovely and romantic, but it wasn't the happy ending she'd expected and she was going back to England all alone. The whole family thing her Dad wanted had crashed out big style, because he didn't see that his girlfriend was a really rubbish step mum. I felt sorry for Una. In a way she'd just copied what everyone around her was doing, keeping secrets and telling lies. She only wanted for her family to love her, but they'd got all caught up in their own dramas and she'd been pushed away. It wasn't like that for me. I didn't know how it would work out with Dev, but me and Lula and Uncle V had the bits of a proper happy ending, now. (*OSB*, p. 202)

In my analyses of the sample texts I consider the kind of primary-carer relationships each portrays and indicate how these portrayals have influenced my creative writing. My theoretical reading gave me informed insights into both mothering/ the nurturant care provided by a child's primary-carers and into debates around them, and this led me to develop characters who are mothers in ways that explore the role of primary-carer in the light of these debates. In order to enrich my own representations of mothering, I first interrogated the texts, seeking to understand how they encourage child readers to recognise and manage feelings of ambivalence as they experience it, recognise it in those who are their primary carers, and negotiate it as part of the route to maturity. I was determined to learn from these texts and my research and to avoid constructing a romantic version of a mother-daughter relationship. I drew on the sample texts as I looked for ways to portray the ambivalences in Cassia – and to a lesser extent, Priyanka's – mother-daughter relationships and to show how both benefited at times from alternative sources of nurturant care. I wanted to help child

readers think about the degrees of ambivalence they may experience in their own primary-carer relationship(s).

My reading has shown me that children's books have the ability to influence their readers.⁴⁶ I have also been made aware that there is a considerable body of work for adults about mothering and caring for children which ranges from serious academic studies to popular manuals. By contrast, children's primary source of information about relationships is stories. Children's literature has done a valuable job in showing both that biological connection does not guarantee that someone will make a good primary carer and that there are many possible sources of nurturant care. The books discussed here are just a small number of the many works across the history of writing for children that have provided reassuring messages to children about who and how they may be cared for. They are equally representative of another important message frequently found in writing for children: that carer-child relationships are not always perfect and that both child and carers will feel a mixture of emotions about caring and being cared for. The depictions of the child-carer relationship in my sample texts are just some of the many ways children's books may help child readers to think about their rights and needs in relation to their care and to understand the sometimes volatile relationship between those who are primary carers and those who are being cared for. Such stories may also help them to recognise bad mothering and their own capacities to take on the role of primary carer *in extremis*. As Rustin and Rustin argue,

Good writing for children both describes complex mental life, and invites its readers to share in it by identification, the narratives themselves providing material for reflection.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ see for instance, Mallan (2009), Reynolds (2007) and Spufford (2000).

⁴⁷ Margaret Rustin and Michael Rustin, *Narratives of Love and Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Fiction*, (London: Karnac, 2001) p. 254

The portrayals of primary-carers in these nine children's texts – and also in *Om Shanti Babe*, I believe - depict nurturant care as an important transformative experience for both parties. For the most part these transformations are overwhelmingly positive and include physical and psychic healing, a positive sense of self in relation to others, and an enriching connection to a wider society and social group. They portray the role of primary carer in an unsentimental way in so far as they allow birth mothers to mother incompletely and portray a spectrum of ambivalence as a normal part of the experience of caring relationships. The message delivered to young readers is that people can nurture and care for others regardless of their sex or (with caveats) their age. This care and nurture extends beyond the obligations of blood ties and can encompass the fragile stranger.

Overall, this sample of children's texts shows that good-enough nurturant care is available from a variety of sources and offers the assurance that even after a poor start, children, and sometimes adults too, may find it. And, these books affirm, if they do, they will grow stronger and happier no matter who provides it. Networks of nurturing others can occupy the spaces left by incomplete mothering, and this engagement with others brings important opportunities for maturation and self knowledge on both sides.

Added to this paean to good enough primary-care is the conviction that incomplete or otherwise failed primary care need not be reproduced over generations. All the texts show that interventions of at least good-enough nurturant care can interrupt cycles of failed caring and lead to better outcomes for children, so that those who have experienced even a short period of good-enough care will in turn be able to care for others. Significantly, the practice of primary-care as depicted in this selection

of juvenile fiction does not require an overwhelming sense of love and can be enacted well (enough) by good (enough) people. It is to a degree negotiated; it does not confer ‘ownership’ of the child because rights are ‘earned’ through care and must be agreed on by the child.

It is a comforting, optimistic, hopeful picture. However, it is important to note that these positive and transformative portrayals of demanding but relatively unproblematic primary-care, while apparently inclusive regarding sex and age, are often also highly conservative. For example, it may appear that the role and value of the single adult primary carer is being validated, but this validation comes with conditions. In the sample of contemporary fiction that has been discussed, with the possible exception of Kensuke, those characters who are shown as successful primary carers are located in the domestic realm. While not rich, they are financially independent. They may have other work, but it does not compete for attention with the needs of the child; indeed, their practice is used as an aspect of the child’s training or socialisation. Significantly, because they are single, there is no other adult to compete for attention or to disturb the constancy of care. Aside from *Born Confused*, fathers are either absent or relegated to the margins.

While allowing women as birth mothers to ‘fail’ and not explicitly promoting a view of how women as mothers should mother, these texts do take a particular stance on the primary-care of children as a dedicated and entirely child-centred practice. In my own fiction I attempt to retain positive and optimistic portrayals of the world while avoiding overly sentimental constructions of primary carers and, as I have indicated, many of the choices I have made as a writer have been informed and influenced by the research component of this submission. However, it would be inaccurate to imply that the creative piece followed from the as a simple, worked

example. In fact, the two pieces emerged in parallel: *Om Shanti, Babe* is an original, creative response to a strong, story-telling impulse and as such it must stand as a work of children's fiction in its own right. In order to achieve this creative objective it was necessary to use a style, genre, and narrative arc appropriate for the story and its young readers. Nevertheless, in these creative and structural decisions, my research and the sample texts both played significant roles. For example, the narrative has a strong and resolved plot and a happy ending which is typical of the sample texts and of children's literature generally. The use of a first-person narrator is also found in six of the nine sample texts and is a common device in contemporary writing for the 10+ readership. Self-deprecating humour is a familiar component in fiction for pre- and early teens and the resulting 'knowing', but immature voice allowed me to foreground my young central character's self-reflection and make her growing maturity and self-awareness more engaging.

In common with the books in my sample selection, *Om Shanti, Babe* is a conservative text in terms of style and plot. However, it is much less conservative in its portrayal of mothering/primary caring. As a direct result of the research undertaken as part of this submission, *Om Shanti, Babe* does not depict sentimental, entirely child-centred primary care as normal or desirable. My research made me conscious of how I was constructing child-carer relationships and because of this I regularly challenged and interrogated my own values and aesthetic choices as part of the process of writing. Examples of how this is evidenced in particular episodes and decisions about characterisation have been shown alongside analyses of the primary works in the preceding chapters. The creative part of the submission demonstrates how the influence of the research on, for example, the way the novel represents such things as what it means to be a good-enough carer, the way it shows adolescent

ambivalence being negotiated and articulated through characterisation, tone of voice, and providing access to interior thoughts, and the decision to conclude with some socially beneficial outcomes of successful caring. The title of my novel, *Om Shanti, Babe*, was chosen to evoke both the place it is set, India, and as a way of signalling the major theme of both pieces of work. As the character Dev says, ‘Om is the sound of the universe and Shanti means peace. It can be said as a way of wishing well to someone you care about.’ (*OSB*, p.100)

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Honey Hunters of the Blue Mountains, (Keystone Foundation, 2007)

Om Shanti, Babe

1

I woke up with sweaty pits and hamster-cage mouth. Five thousand miles on an airplane and three dinners in one day, but, as a look in my wash bag showed, no toothbrush! Running my tongue over furry teeth, I found a trail of crusty drool in the corner of my mouth. I groaned and rubbed my eyes, remembering, waaaay too late, the triple thick mascara I'd applied back home. Uber-cool Cass arrives in style. Did this happen to people in first class, I wondered? Maybe they had special cabin crew to tidy them up while they slept. Or maybe rich people just didn't drool. I unpeeled a thread of hair from my sticky cheek and tried to see through the curtain dividing us from the free champagne and goody bags. I'd begged Lula to go for the upgrade, but she'd gone blah blah blah about it being bad enough needing two tickets.

A TV screen embedded in the seat back showed a red arrow tracing a path from London and nudging land at our final destination. The cabin crew were starting to pack up the duty-frees and I was running out of time to get to the toilet. I wasn't sure I could even make it past my snoring neighbour, whose body spilled over the seat like a vanilla muffin. A pointy elbow war had broken out at take-off, with our arm rest

as the front line. Around Dubai I had called - apparently very convincingly- for a sick bag and he'd moved pretty fast for a big bloke. During all the fuss, Lula had woken up and shot me a level three death-stare. Her range ran from one to seven, starting with thin-lips-furrowed-brow and ending at total face freeze. She was asleep now. I watched her lips move and wondered what she was dreaming about.

She turned her head towards me and yawned. 'Nearly there, Cass. Are you excited?'

'Just a bit!

'You know Bollywood isn't proper India, don't you?'

'Yeah... I bet it's pretty close though!'

I'd been practising dance routines over Christmas until Lula threatened to cancel our film club membership. How she expected me to learn anything about India was a mystery.

Lula sighed, then peered at me over her glasses. 'Are your eyes meant to look like that?'

'Like what?'

She passed me a packet of tissues from the pocket in the back of her seat. I squeezed passed Mr Snoozy, and joined the toilet queue.

After I'd rinsed out my mouth, I sat for a while staring into the dull glow of the mirror. My mum was right, my face was a car crash. I'd tried to get the Bollywood diva look, but my stubby eyelashes and limp, mousey hair just wouldn't play. I scrubbed the mascara off and splashed lots of cold water about. I looked in the mirror again – even more tragic. It wasn't fair. I knew from the movies that all the girls in India would be really pretty, with long dark hair and huge eyes. How was I ever going

to fit in? The seatbelt signs flashed and a grumpy air hostess harassed me back to my seat.

As we came into land, Lula patted my shoulder and pointed out of the window. Below us were fishing boats painted in bright colours, their nets stretched out across the water behind them. On the river bank, flat-roofed houses sat neatly bunched together between the fields. An early-morning light was just touching the tips of the palm trees, turning them pink and gold.

Lula used this combination of colours in loads of her fabric designs. She called it Kerala Dawn and usually it sold by the truck load. Lula's shop was named after me, Cassia. Lula said, just like the cassia tree, we started as a tiny idea that just kept growing. Everything she stocked was from southern India, Kerala to be specific, all free-range and nicey-nicey – my mum was kind of a fair-trade freak, but the shop was super-successful and we even had a few celebrity clients.

Just before Christmas, Cassia was featured in a magazine under the headline, *'Shops to Change the World'*, but I don't think the world noticed and now we were having our biggest ever January sale. It was weird having the shop so quiet. Lula rearranged the shelves a million times and ranted to Auntie Doré about cheap stuff from sweat-shop factories being unfair competition. Yes, she'd definitely got a bit crazed without some winter sun, so the spring buying trip was brought forward. And guess what? This time I was tagging along too. School? Well, that was another story.

It took forever to get through Customs, and by the time we'd dragged our battered bags to the exit I was ready to shriek. I was in India to get sunshine and glamorama, and all the stupid forms and waiting for our cases was getting in the way! The doors opened at last and warm air gushed in like a sauna. A mix of hot earth and incense

sticks curled up my nose and a row of ancient buses parked beside the exit doors added exhaust fumes to the fragrant mix. There were about a zillion people milling about too. Most of them were on their phones and the noise was unbelievable.

Lula snapped on sunglasses and launched herself into the crush. She seemed to have special crowd-negotiating powers, but I kept bumping into people and ‘sorry!’ became a sort of dreary chant. I was waiting to cross the road when an old man tripped over my bag and muttered something unfriendly-sounding under his breath. His thin legs poked out from the baggy sort-of-shorts he wore. I tried to think nice thoughts, because he was old, but it was pretty gross. My case had left a scratch and a little blood was trickling slowly over his knee. I looked around for Lula. She was way ahead of me by now and slowly disappearing into the crowd. I shouted another ‘oops, sorry!’ to the old man and then ran after her yelling, ‘excuse me!’ at random until I caught up.

Lula was waving at someone, and through the crowd, I spotted an emerald-coloured car I recognised from her photos. It was the Green Goddess, but it looked smaller and more old-fashioned in real life. An Indian man was making his way through the crowd towards us.

‘Cassia, I want to introduce you to my friend, Vikram Chaudhury.’

The man smiled and reached out for my bag. His hand was cool and smelled of sandalwood. ‘*Namaste, Namaste*, welcome, Cassia, and welcome back to Kerala, Luella. I trust you had pleasant flight?’ Lula experimented with a bit of banter in Malayalam and he only winced once so I thought she must be doing ok. She went to evening classes and in the weeks leading up to a buying trip she chattered her way through repeat-after-me tapes while she made dinner.

Mr Chaudhury had been escorting Lula around for about three years now. She said he acted as guide, and finder of misplaced stuff. Even in London, Lula left a trail of purses, glasses, and keys behind her.

Mr Chaudhury was leading the way back to the car. Lula walked close beside him deep in conversation. They looked strange together. He was about the same age as her, plumper and not so tall. He wasn't wearing proper Indian clothes and his short-sleeved shirt was a brighter pink than anyone in London would have dared buy. I hurried to catch up with them and linked my arm through Lula's.

We stowed our bags in the boot and inched out of the crowded car park, horn blaring. Lula sat in the front, so I had the whole back seat to myself. I stretched out my legs and wriggled my toes. Eau de stink-foot lurked around my sweaty shoes. I wondered if Indian girls got smelly feet. Probably not.

Everything went fast-forward when we joined the highway and the traffic noise went up a couple of levels too. The road was lined with giant adverts for business schools, new apartments, and women loaded down with gold wedding jewellery. A girl pulled up alongside us on a moped. Her helmet was painted with the Indian flag. It matched her outfit. I watched her steer past the front of the car, then she swerved out to avoid a massive pothole in the road. The Green Goddess braked hard. I slid forward in my seat and so did Lula. Her eyes were shut tight behind the giant sunglasses.

Mr Chaudhury patted her hand. It was his bad driving that threw us around so I was surprised that Lula didn't say anything. She didn't even push his hand away.

'Relax, ladies. You will be pleased to note that January is road-safety month in Kerala.' I could hardly hear him through the blaring of horns and squealing of brakes.

Lula pointed to a sign by the road that urged us to 'AVOID RASH DRIVING'. Not a chance! Looking around, the only way to do that would be to stay in the airport.

Moped girl sped off and we rejoined the random madness of Ernakulam in rush hour.

The traffic got worse as we got closer to town but Mr Chaudhury never shouted or got stressed out. Maybe the little stone elephant sitting on the dashboard kept him calm. Or perhaps it was the St Christopher stuck on to the steering wheel.

Lula had one just like it, tied to her bicycle basket.

Lula got a bottle of water out of her bag and passed it back to me. 'It's snowing back home, Cass. I bet your school friends wish they were here with you!'

'Yeah, I bet they do,' I replied. But I didn't really mean it.

'Year ten is hard work. I hope they'll take class notes for you.'

'Yeah, me too,' I replied. But, I didn't mean that either.

'Maybe you could find some nice postcards to send them?'

I opened the window a bit wider and fiddled with the seat belt. The buckle was hot to the touch and the webbing rubbed against my neck. I took my music player out of my bag. The battery was flat.

'Are you feeling ok Cass?' She was using her *'Idiot's Guide to Teens'* voice.

I ran my tongue over my disgusting teeth. 'Have you got any mints?'

Lula rummaged around in her bag. 'No, sorry,' she said. 'Drink some more water.'

'It's not cold enough,' I said, dropping the bottle on the floor. When I saw Mr Chaudhury was frowning in the rear view mirror I looked away. Why was he looking at me like that? It was kind of rude for him to keep staring at Lula, too. Why didn't he just concentrate on driving? That was his job, after all.

2

The heat got fiercer, and my jeans were clinging like the skin on hot milk by the time the car stopped outside our guesthouse. I slid my feet back into squelchy shoes and looked through a pair of metal gates at the guest house. The building was three storeys high and white like toothpaste. Swirly trellising around the balconies reminded me of paper doilies at an old ladies' tea room. Mr Chaudhury lifted our bags out of the boot and pushed open the gates. A smiley lady in a dark-green saree came hurrying out of the house and hugged Lula. I guessed she must be Mr Chaudhury's wife.

‘Namaste! Namaste! Luella, my dear, it is so so good to see you again.’ She turned to me and clapped her hands. ‘This must be little Cassia about whom we have heard so very, very much!’ She shooed Mr Chaudhury back to the car, then stood back, and studied me. She was so keen to see my sweaty face and dreary hair that she put her glasses on. I felt like an ornament on Lula's super-discount shelf. ‘Actually, not so little, I see. She is like you, Luella, but with much of her father too, I think.’

I looked at my sandals. Dust had settled into the spaces between my toes outlining them in yellow like a little kid's drawing. I wondered what Lula had told her about Dad. Most of the time, they got on ok, now he had left.

For ages I had dreams that he'd come back and live with us again. I hoped that he'd change his mind and realise we loved him more than anyone else ever could. Sometimes, when he had a newspaper deadline to meet, he used to yell about the noise I made, and for the first few weeks I thought him going was my fault. The day he left, I put my cd player in the cupboard under the stairs. Lula found it one day and

told me the reason Dad had gone. Then she turned the music up loud, and we cried and ate a tub of ice cream together.

‘Don’t be shy. All good dishes need mixture of ingredients, Mrs Chaudhury said, flipping her saree shawl over her shoulder. ‘Please come, Cassia, I will show you where you are sleeping.’ Mrs Chaudhury slipped off her shoes and opened the front door.

I picked up my bag and followed her inside. The house was cool and the smell of jasmine and sandalwood drifted along the hallway. Mrs Chaudhury’s bare feet made a soft slapping sound as she walked. Her toenails were painted dark red. Maybe I should have taken off my shoes too? I pictured my swollen feet leaving a line of sweaty prints on the polished wooden floor and clenched my toes. I wondered how she would feel about her husband flirting with Lula. Maybe they didn’t mind that sort of thing in India.

Lula and I were sharing a room up on the top floor, with doors that opened on to a flat roof. Tubs of tomatoes lined the edge. I stepped through the fly-screen doors and looked out across the garden. Paper lanterns hung from the branches of a tree, like origami fruit, and from the lawn below I heard the hiss of a water sprinkler. On the ground-floor terrace I could see Mrs Chaudhury carrying glasses and a tall jug. Mr Chaudhury and Lula had their heads together over the shop order book: the order book *I* was supposed to be looking after. Lula was even letting him make notes on the pages.

I went back inside and tugged at the doors. The wooden frame stuck and they closed with a bang. Inside the bedroom, a ceiling fan turned, gently moving the warm air around just enough to make it breathable. I slid out of my shoes and put my bag on

the bed nearest the door. The mosquito nets were a glamorous touch, but I'd expected our room to be a bit more five-star-and-mini-bar. Dad wouldn't have rated it at all.

I cranked up the ceiling fan and, as the blades began to turn faster, something moved on the wall. A pale pink lizard had scuttled along and stopped just inches away from the light switch. It blinked. A tiny tongue shot out of its mouth and slid back between its jaws. I stood very still, holding my breath. The lizard blinked again as I moved slowly away from the wall and ran for the door. Lula would have a fit when I told her and, while Mr Chaudhury got rid of it, I would be able to reclaim the order book. But when I got downstairs no one seemed bothered about mini-beasts stalking the walls.

'They are called Geckos, Cassia. We think of them as our guests. They will help keep your room free of spiders and flies,' Mr Chaudhury said. His teeth were very white and when he smiled, his mouth crinkled at the corners. What a creep. He'd made it sound like geckos were his best friends and that I was some kind of teen psycho-killer.

Lula looked a bit embarrassed. She had told me loads about India, but, clearly, there were some things she'd left out.

When I got back to our room the lizard was in exactly the same place on the wall. As I watched, a fly crawled slowly past it.

'Well, go on then, get busy!' I muttered as I undressed. I washed my hair and stayed under the cool water until my feet wrinkled. Then I brushed my teeth, slid into holiday shorts and was ready to hit the streets. Lula and the Chaudhurys were eating by the time I got back downstairs. The food smelled of lime and coconut.

I wanted us to make a quick exit, but Lula called out from the terrace, 'Come and have some food, Cassie. Vikram is a great cook - it's utterly delicious!'

‘I’m not really hungry yet,’ I lied.

‘Are you going exploring already?’

‘Yeah, I need some exercise.’

I thought Lula would come with me, but it was Mr Chaudhury who stood up.

‘Perhaps I should escort you, Cassia?’

‘That’s kind of you, Vikram,’ said Lula, as she piled more food on to her plate.

‘It’s OK, I like being by myself. Anyway, I’ve already got a guidebook.’

Lula frowned. ‘Well, if you’re sure. Stick to the main road and don’t be long! You could get a couple of tubes of mosquito repellent while you’re out.’ She took a bundle of rupees out of her bag. ‘Perhaps a long skirt would be better for sightseeing, Cass?’

‘Sorry! No time to change now.’ I pocketed the money and headed quickly for the gate.

As it clanged shut behind me, Mrs Chaudhury said something to Lula. I stopped to listen some more, but their voices were muffled by the hedge. This wasn’t *exactly* how I had pictured our first shopping trip. The pavement outside the gate was all broken up and I kicked a stone hard into the scrubby grass.

The road from the guesthouse followed the boundary of a dusty playing field. Tall trees lined the edges and a yellow dog lay panting in the shadows. In the centre, a game of cricket was starting. I stood and watched for a while. The dog wandered towards me. I went to stroke its head, but saw its back was covered in stinky red scabs and changed my mind. Grosserama! Why hadn’t someone called the RSPCA?

I followed the map in the guidebook to the main shopping area and wandered up and down the high street for a while, buying postcards and browsing the gift shops.

Most of them had radios going and I practiced a few dance moves while I shopped. A couple of local people watched me. I added a bit of swagger to my *running-man* and finished with *slide-glide*. They probably hadn't seen proper street dance before.

I hadn't walked far, but my belly was making whale noises. The guidebook said there was a popular café just around the corner and, following the map, I shimmied down the next side street.

The breakfast menu was written out on a chalk board by the door, in English, thank goodness. Fruit and cinnamon toast sounded just about perfect and I went inside. I stopped and stared at a painting titled 'Little Red Riding Hood' that hung near the entrance. Miss Hood wore a saree with a bright red cloth draped over her head. A white tiger was lurking in the shadow of a palm grove, but she hadn't noticed.

Magazines and copies of the Hindu Times were scattered about the crowded tables. I sat down and gave the waiter my order. Everyone around me was busy eating so I checked my purchases while I waited for breakfast. I was a big postcard fan. I started the first one without thinking. '*Rachie, babe! Inja hot but not very B'wood yet... I think our driver has a crush on Loopy Lu aaargh!!! He's married though so I guess she's safe...xoxo*' I turned the card over and looked at the picture. I'd found some especially gruesome images of a Goddess waving a sword and a severed head. She was called Kali and she had four arms. She looked pretty angry about something. I imagined Rachel's face cracking into a smile when the card arrived. The old Rachel. The new Rachel would do something else entirely.

I sat and chewed on my nails for a bit, then tore the card into little pieces. The waiter came back with my food and I brushed the pieces on to the floor.

The plate was stacked high and chunks of papaya sat in pool of honey.

'Enjoy,' said the waiter.

I got my head down for a serious calorie-fest and ate until my jaw actually hurt. Swallowing down the last of a pineapple smoothie, I let out a sigh of pleasure, leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. Conversations from the surrounding tables murmured soothingly in my head. I was seriously sleep-deprived and must have drifted off for a minute or two, as my head banging against the back wall woke me with a start. Some little kids at the next table looked away, giggling. I did a quick spittle check, but my chin was clear.

The café was hitting rush hour and a line of people stood waiting. A group of local girls crowded around a mobile phone. They were laughing at a message or maybe it was a photo. Seeing me stand up, they hurried over and grabbed the empty seats. I heard them use a few English words mixed up with stuff I couldn't understand. I guessed they learned English at school. I wondered if they'd like to practise. I could be their new British Best Friend.

The waiter came to take their order. He cleared away my plate and I wished I hadn't trampled my food down so fast. I smiled and tried a '*Namaste*' to the girls, but I guess they didn't hear me. They were exactly how I imagined they would be - really pretty with straight, dark hair and huge eyes. God, how lame was I. Of course they didn't want to talk to me. I picked up my bag and left. They probably already had all the friends they needed.

3

Just past the post office, I saw a shop with a painted wooden sign, *Stop n Save* hanging over the door. Bundles of plastic shopping bags dangled from hooks outside. The counter ran across the full length of the shop and lots of the stock was piled in boxes behind it. Sacks of rice, beans, and nuts sat on the floor. There were no prices on anything and the displays looked a bit random. I thought Lula would have been very *tsky-tsky* if she'd seen it. But she was probably still heads-together with Mr Chaudhury.

There seemed to be a special queuing system going on and I missed my turn a few times. Then, when it was only me left in the shop, I asked for Jungle Juice, a brand of mosquito cream I remembered seeing in the chemist at home. The man behind the counter looked confused and pointed to a crate of soft drinks. I tried again, carefully saying each word quite loudly.

An old lady came into the shop and stood beside me. She said something quietly to the man. He shrugged and stared at my scorched-pink legs. I made a buzzing sound and pointed to an imaginary mosquito hovering over my arm. My finger followed its flight then stabbed me on the elbow. The old lady coughed and dabbed her eyes with her saree. The man just carried on staring.

It was very hot in the shop and the shiny cover of the guidebook was slippery in my hands. I opened it and tried to find the word for mosquito cream. I heard the old lady's bracelets jingling as she lifted her shopping bags impatiently from one arm to the other. I was having a bit of trouble breathing. The man was still staring down at

my legs and then, just as I was about to cave, I saw the bit about malaria in the guidebook and shouted it out.

‘Ah! *Odomos!*’ the man and the old lady said at the same time.

‘Yes! *Odomos!* Can I buy two bottles, please?’

‘Yes, yes, but not from here. This is the wrong sort of shop. You must be in a different shop for such things. Goodbye.’

The old lady stepped forward quickly to take her turn and I staggered out. I felt a bit stupid, but why didn’t they just sell the sort of stuff that visitors really needed?

Directly opposite was the entrance to a funky-looking bookstore. A Harry Potter was in the window and I stepped inside. Comics piled on a shelf rustled gently, their pages rising and falling as a ceiling fan stirred the air. A woman behind the counter glanced up from the till and said, ‘Namaste.’ Her hair was plaited and she had a red dot between her eyes.

I said ‘Namaste’ back, putting the palms of my hands together to copy the little bow thing she’d done.

It took a few minutes for my eyes to forget the bright sunshine outside and, until I could see properly again, I just ran my fingers along the book spines. The shelves were tightly packed, loaded with cook-books, yoga manuals, travel guides, and second-hand novels that tourists had traded in. I picked through other people’s reading, feeling like a spy. Someone had made notes in *One Night at the Call Centre* –a total double-digit death-stare offence, yes indeed!

‘You might like this.’ A girl sorting books in the next row was holding up a paperback, *The Peacock Spring* by Rumer Godden.

‘What’s the story?’

‘Actually, it’s about a British girl who comes to India and gets herself into all sorts of trouble.’

‘Is it funny?’

‘No! Not at all!’

‘Does it have a happy ending?’

She didn’t answer straight away, which wasn’t a good sign.

‘In a manner of speaking... the girl, Una, goes back to school and actually that is what she really really wanted all the time.’

‘Sounds perfect,’ I said, but I didn’t mean it. How could going back to school ever be a happy ending? I read the blurb on the back. It sounded like she was in for a hard time. ‘Thanks.’

‘You are most welcome. This copy is trade-in, so it is with discount too.’

With a smile, she handed me the book and went back to alphabetising the shelves. I couldn’t put it back, but when she wasn’t looking, I grabbed something from the fast cars and random explosions section as well, checking out the cover which showed a man on a jet-ski, waving a big gun.

The lady at the till watched as I sorted out Lula’s rupees and then gave me my change. She dropped the books into a cloth bag with the name of the shop printed on in thick ink.

‘Excuse me, do you know where I can buy some *Odomos*, please?’

‘Yes, there is chemist shop nearby. Mosquito cream is very sensible, though keeping covered up will help greatly, you know.’ She pointed over the counter at my legs. What was these people’s problem with skin? Even Loopy Lou was on my case. It seemed like now we’d arrived she was acting even more mentalist than usual.

Maybe Mr Chaudhury was a bad influence.

No one was about when I got back to the guesthouse. I changed into long trousers and wandered around the garden for a bit, hoping Lula would appear. Why had she gone off without me and where had she gone, anyway? I wanted to give her the *Odomos* and tell her all about breakfast and the bookshop. There was no sign of Mr Chaudhury either. The lawn sprinkler was still turning and I let jets of cool water run over my grubby feet. Mrs Chaudhury waved at me through the kitchen window and said that Lula would be back very, very soon and that I should rest before lunch. She passed me an icy glass of soda. I went upstairs, took a pile of cushions off the beds, and sat out on the roof sipping my drink. It was a mixture of lime and ginger. I really wanted a coke, but in a weird way the spicy taste sort of suited the view.

I read the blurb on the back cover of *The Peacock Spring*, again. It looked interesting, but I wasn't in the mood for a proper, girl story and I cracked the spine on Mr Jet-ski instead. He didn't let me down, the body count hitting double figures well before the pages did.

As I finished my drink, I heard someone talking on the downstairs terrace. I leaned over to see if it was Lula back again. I couldn't see very well through the leaves, but her voice carried up to the roof.

'I hope she's OK... nothing serious, anyway.' I guessed she was talking about me and I ducked back behind the plants.

A man's voice came in reply. 'It is all probably just storm in a teacup.' It sounded like Mr Chaudhury.

She's been moping around the shop for weeks.

We will keep her busy.

'I expect the sunshine will do her good, too.'

‘And what about you, Luella? You have enough on your plate without dramas cooked up by teenage girls.’

‘This trip would be easier if she’d stayed in London. I just wish she was happy at school.’

‘Happy or unhappy, the sooner Cassia is back pursuing her education the better.’ His words flew through the bunches of green tomatoes and landed with a slap.

Without thinking, I picked up the book I’d been reading and threw it into the garden as hard as I could. My lips felt trembly and I took a couple of deep breaths. What did Mum mean and why were they talking about me? Our life was none of Mr Chaudhury’s stupid business. This was supposed to be *our* time together, just me and Lula. I was supposed to look after the order book and help her with the shop business, not him. I wasn’t going back to school. I was going to work in the shop with Lula, for ever, and nosy Mr Chaudhury wasn’t going to get in between us.

4

The next morning I found Lula sitting on the terrace, eating breakfast. As I sat down at the table, she looked up from the paper she was reading.

‘Morning, slumber beast, have some food.’

‘Not hungry.’

‘Please, have something.’

‘Can we go swimming today?’

‘There isn’t a beach nearby, Cass.’

‘I was reading about this place, in the guidebook, Serenity Spa, on Bolghatty Island, it sounds super-swishy.’

‘I’ve been there before, it’s super expensive!’

‘I could use some of Dad’s Christmas money.’

‘Sorry, Cassie, I hate playing tourist when I’m here. Besides, I’ve got an appointment at the bank this morning.’

‘Can I come with you?’

Lula fiddled with one of her earrings, twisting it round and round between her thumb and forefinger.

‘How about, instead, I drop you at the spa?’

I took a piece of toast from under its anti-fly-tent and peeled away the crusts. I dipped them one by one in a pot of honey. Normally, Lula does death-stare deluxe when I do this, but today she said nothing.

‘Don’t they have any proper breakfast cereal here?’ I said, but she wasn’t listening any more. She was reading the newspaper. ‘Oh for goodness sake, some pop star is visiting and it’s a bigger story than the fair-trade conference.’

‘Who?’

‘Jonny something... Jonny Gold.’

If sound had a colour, then the squealing noise I made was super-pink. Lula’s eyebrows went shooting up her forehead.

‘Hand over that paper right now!’ I practically shrieked.

With a sigh, she tore out the page and flipped it across the table. There he was, my supercrush, Jonny Gold, tousled hair, dark eyes, little-boy-lost expression and a killer tattoo on his suntanned forearms.

The story had a bit about his new record, *Om Shanti, Babe* but it seemed like the reporter was more interested in his ‘stunning (and now ex) film-star girlfriend’ than in Jonny’s music. He guessed Jonny was sulking somewhere Taj Mahalish – miaow!

My dad would have called this a kiss-kiss-cry-cry story. He was proper journalist and spent half his life in a flak jacket and the other half going through people’s bins.

‘Come on, Cass. If we’re going to catch the ferry to Bolghatty we need to get our skates on.’

I carefully folded up the picture of Jonny Gold and slid it into my back pocket.

‘Will it be OK to wear my bikini?’

‘You’ll be in tourist world, sweetie. I don’t suppose anyone will mind.’ The way she said it reminded me of going to nursery school in a fairy costume and clicky-clacky shoes. No one had minded that either, but I was just a little kid then.

Lula came with me as far as the reception desk, and said she would be back to pick me up at lunchtime. Aside from the staff, no one else was around and I felt a bit abandoned when she left. I mean, I was all by myself in a strange country. Dad would not have approved.

Lula hadn't said much on the boat ride either, and kept making notes in the order book. Losing this notebook was the one thing, aside from global poverty, that sent Lula into a complete, hysterical panic. It had a note taped on the front cover offering a big reward to finders in Malayalam, Hindi, Urdu, and about fifteen other languages including English. In the back of the book were the names and addresses of her regular customers and she'd spent ages this year writing them all extra-special Christmas cards. Lula seemed super-stressy today, but I guessed it was just one too many breakfast coffees.

The pool was shaded by jungly creepers that scaled the walls around the courtyard and formed a green ceiling high above the water. I floated on my back, staring up at pink flowers dangling down like grow-your-own earrings. Through half-closed eyes, I watched tiny birds darting from flower to flower, their wings all blurry against the leaves. A waterfall bubbled out of the wall and splashed on to the painted tiles lining the pool. Even the tables were inlaid with coloured glass, and the whole place felt like a shrine to Saint Deluxury.

As I floated across the pool, I could hear the thud of my heart beating. It vibrated in my head, mixing with the gurgling sound of the water. Just then, I wondered what sound my soul would make - maybe a humming noise or something like a purring cat asleep in the sun.

There was a Jonny Gold song I loved that said your soul could travel no faster than a galloping horse, so when we zoom about it takes it a while to catch up. As I floated in the deep end, the noises around the pool muffled by the water in my ears, I imagined my soul somewhere near Mumbai heading south, a tiny firefly of pulsing pink light homing in on me from high in the sky. I wondered what happened if you kept moving so fast that your soul never found you again?

A shadow passed over the sun. I lost concentration and sank. Under water, my normally uncooperative hair floated gently around like a shampoo advert and I held my breath for as long as I could. Would I still have friends if I had shampoo advert hair? I pictured myself swimming up to the surface and spotting my ex-best-friend Rachel sunbathing, poolside. I'd sneak up to her and shake cold water all over her back. She'd be a bit mad with me, but she wouldn't be all chicken-bone thin and sad. She wouldn't be hiding her shrinking body in big clothes. Her hair wouldn't be falling out and she wouldn't be throwing up her lunch and weighing herself all the time either. She would just sit up in the lounge and smile. Then, we would order a big plate of chips and go for a swim and argue about what we would wear that night. We would talk about Jonny Gold, and dream about meeting him and getting back-stage passes and him thinking we were so cool and dedicating a song to us.

I surfaced with a gasp. It was time to get out. I kept my eyes closed as long as I could, but Rachel wasn't lying on a lounge. I was still all by myself. They had normal food so I ordered a cheese toastie and a coke and started on my peacock girl-in-trouble book.

It was weird reading about an English girl coming to India. It's not like we were similar or anything – Una, the heroine, was a big brain, rich kid who wrote to her dad, Edward, in Latin, for fun! Her mum was dead and she was not as pretty as

her little sister, Hal, plus her governess, Alix, was kind of mean because she (the governess) was secretly sleeping with Una's dad and everyone disapproved especially the servants who thought she was not quite 'Pukka', whatever that meant. Everyone was keeping secrets and it was getting them all into trouble. I finished my coke and ordered an ice cream. I was about to dip my spoon into a creamy mound of chocolate when a shadow fell across the table.

'I am very sorry, Cassia, but that is not a good idea.' It was Mr Chaudhury. He picked up the plate of ice-cream and gave it back to a passing waiter. 'Actually, I am of the opinion that ice-cream is best left to our American cousins. It is not really an Indian speciality and you do not want to get sick in your first week here, do you, m'n?'

I was so surprised that I dropped the spoon. It landed on the table with a clatter.

'Where's Mum?'

'Her meeting has gone on a bit. She said she is very sorry and I have come to collect you, instead.' He was smiling at me and his smile was wide and friendly, but I felt furious about my ice-cream.

'Pack up your things, Cassia. There is a ferry due soon and on the journey we can talk. It will be pleasant to get to know you a little better.'

But, all I thought was, '*I definitely don't want to get to know you Mr creepy ice-cream stealer, so why do you care about getting to know me?*'

5

We walked in silence to the ferry. Well, I walked in silence while Mr please-call-me-Vikram did his tourist-guide thing. I sat in the women's section of the boat and, from the other side, he pointed out crummy old buildings that lined the banks. When we landed, he launched into the history of Kochi. He did know loads about the place and I had to admit that some of it was interesting. But I was still mad about my lost ice-cream and stuck with giving him the silent treatment.

He had run out of 'Boy's own Fascinating Facts' by the time we reached the guesthouse, which was a relief. But, to my complete horror, as we approached the gate I saw the jet-ski book lying on the step. I hadn't expected to see it ever again. Hopefully, Call-me-V would just think a tourist had dropped it, or something.

He picked the book up, read the title, and raised his eyebrows.

'It just slipped out of my hands.'

'Do you wish to have it back?' He held the book out to me and we both stared at the mangled remains.

'No, thanks. I've got another one.'

'I can only pray that it is a little more worthy,' he sighed.

'Oh, there you are.' Lula had come through the gate, and she looked tired.

'Move over, Cass, I've had a right cow of a day and I really need a shower.'

She marched straight past us and into the house. I noticed Call-me-V's surprised look and I guessed he hadn't seen Lula in a stress-strop before. I followed her up the stairs and sat out on the roof listening as the water ran and ran. Lula hardly

ever shouts, it's like the bad mood seeps out of her skin and she has to wash it down the plughole before she can be nice again.

I stared out across the empty garden. There was no one for me to talk to and nothing for me to do until Lula got out of the shower. I got a cushion off my bed and picked up the peacock book. Things were getting worse for Una and by a super-weird coincidence there was a character called Vikram in it, now. He was an ex-prince who lived in a huge house and was in love with the wicked step mother/governess, too. Alix, the governess, tried to ignore him and pretend nothing was happening, but everyone could see what was going on. I felt sorry for Una, like she was a friend in trouble. But then I thought, if I had a real friend I wouldn't need a book one.

That evening I sat staring at a heap of clothes cascading out of my case. Lula had banned the shorts, and anyway, even plastered in Odomos, being covered up would stop the mosquitoes gorging on my flesh like it came with extra fries. Jeans and a long-sleeved kaftan were at the top of the heap, so they would have to do.

We were having dinner at a local restaurant. Lula said the owner, Mr Rao, told you what was on the menu and that was that. I was a bit nervous about the food. Even though we sell Indian stuff, the shop keeps Lula too busy to cook properly in the evenings and we eat a lot of random ready meals. She used to get the organic ones, but lately it's been whatever's on the whoopsie counter.

Dad loves restaurants, the fancier the better, and he always books ahead. When we go for our Dad-Daughter bonding sessions he always treats me to a big dinner. He's really fierce about table manners and drilled me about not using my left hand for eating in India. He even threatened to write 'poo-paw' on it, to remind me why I

shouldn't. He told me mathematical zero was invented in India, so I didn't see why toilet paper hadn't caught on yet.

Lula had a headache and decided we should walk the short distance through the streets. I was hoping her bad mood would keep Call-me-V out of the way for the evening or even better the rest of the trip. But no, there he was, smiling away as he guided us to the restaurant. He had got dressed up and he even looked sort of handsome. I expected Mrs Chaudhury was sad about being left behind and I was a bit disgusted that Lula didn't invite her, too.

On the way I saw a lady sitting in the dust on the opposite side of the road. She didn't have proper fingers on her hands and she was holding the stumps out to the people passing by. I couldn't help staring at her even though it made me feel sad and a bit sick. A man walked by her, talking on his mobile phone. I saw his gold watch catch the light as he tossed some money on the ground, but he didn't look at her. He didn't even stop talking on his phone.

The restaurant was full, but Lula saw some Indian business friends and we joined them at their table. I wanted to sit next to her, but her friends had brought their little kids along and so instead I became children's entertainer for the evening. Over their chatter, I could just about hear Lula talking about threads per inch and shipping costs. I needed to learn about this stuff too, but it was too noisy in the restaurant to listen properly.

The waiter brought a mixture of dishes on a big platter. In the middle was some naan bread and a bowl of soupy lentil stew. The kids got stuck straight into the food, scooping chunks of coconut-scented fish on to the naan and topping it with a dollop of yoghurt stuff.

I was thinking about having a try when Lula said she was sorry there weren't any chips, but that if I wanted she would order an omelette or something for me instead? She said it quite loudly and the whole table stared at me. It was totally humiliating and my appetite instantly dried up with shame. Why didn't she just mash a baby banana and have done with it? I just picked at the naan bread and watched the tinies demolish the chicken. They had a kind of milk smoothie thing for pudding and my impersonation of a walrus with drinking-straw tusks made them laugh themselves into exhaustion until they fell asleep in their chairs.

I watched to see if Lula had noticed me not eating, but she was getting deeply into work stuff. I tried to interrupt her and she looked a bit cross. Then Call-me-V said there was an internet café nearby and why didn't I take a tuk-tuk and "do some surfing" and Lula said "what a good idea", and that she'd be along soon and then she gave me another bundle of rupees.

Call-me-V stood up and said he would escort me there. Why couldn't he just mind his own business? I didn't want him trailing around after me, pointing out "historical monuments from our colonial past" like some history teacher. I said I had to go to the bathroom and when no one was looking I sneaked out of the side door. Lula probably wouldn't notice I'd gone, she was so busy being best buddies with Call-me-V and not taking any notice of me. Maybe she wouldn't even care.

Next thing I knew I was out in the night, by myself, trying to choose between a gang of auto-rickshaws.

One of the drivers dropped his cigarette butt into the dusty ground and walked towards me. 'Where are you going?'

'The internet café on Church road, please.'

‘I know a better one, I will take you there, much better prices.’ He pointed me towards his tuk-tuk. It was painted in swirls of neon and had a Ferrari sticker on the front. Lining the dashboard were plastic figures of Elvis Presley. Their hips jiggled and twinkled in the glare of the street lamps.

‘My mum said I have to go to the one on Church road.’

‘My one is better, very popular with tourists, come!’ He was standing right in front of me. I could smell cigarette smoke on his breath.

‘It’s OK, thank you. Maybe I should just walk.’

‘It is very, very far to walk, you must please come with me.’

I looked back at the door of the restaurant. Light and loud voices spilled out on to the street. I wanted to go back inside, but I was too embarrassed to face everyone. If I couldn’t even take a tuk-tuk by myself they’d think I was a real baby. I looked at the other drivers laughing together in the dark.

‘Just take me to the internet café on Church road, please.’ I held out the bundle of rupees.

‘Hey, stop hassling her, yah!’ an arm reached out and pushed down my outstretched hand. I recognised the girl from the bookshop. She said something else to the driver. I didn’t understand it, but she sounded pretty annoyed. His friends were laughing at him now and he looked down at his feet until she’d stopped scolding.

‘OK, OK don’t shoot! Please, please, lady, get in.’ The girl held my wrist and pulled me towards the tuk-tuk.

‘Actually, I will ride with you, if that’s OK?’

‘That would be great, thanks.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Cassia, I’m from London.’

‘So, how are you getting along with your book?’

I told her that Una had just met Ravi, the poet boy who lived in the garden, and that she was sneaking off to see him at night. I said I thought it was nice she had someone to talk to.

She shook her head and patted my hand. ‘As a matter of fact it is going to get worse before it is getting better.’

There was a computer free at the internet café, so I bought a packet of crisps and settled down for an hour in the online world. Dad had already emailed with a reminder about washing my hands after you-know-what and not drinking the tap water. The man spent his life laughing at danger but where I was concerned...

I was impatient to catch up with the online gossip about Jonny Gold, so I did a quick reply to Dad making it sound like I was on intravenous boiled water and covered in a layer of sunscreen as thick as icing sugar. Trust my luck to get born into a family that burns the second the temperature gets above zero.

The news from Gilded Bear records was a real eye-popper. It seemed Jonny had flown from London to Bangalore to make a music video for *Om Shanti, Babe*. He said he “wanted to be close to the spirituality that had inspired the new song”. I was so surprised I actually said, ‘OMIGOD!’ out loud, which was practically a grounding offence in our house. Bangalore was almost up the road, in India terms, which meant I could actually be sharing air with the golden one. I’d been in supercrush mode over Jonny for nearly a year and just the thought of him made my hands shake so much I could hardly type straight.

I listened to the track online. The words were all about being chilled out, and it had a *sitar* bit for the chorus, but it didn’t sound as Indian as I expected. I was still

reading Jonny Gold's amazing song lyrics when I saw Lula waving at me from the doorway. There was no sign of Call-me-V and I logged off. I tried to tell her about Jonny Gold, but she was in mini-rage mode and I was too tired to make her listen.

She gave me a long boring lecture about not sneaking off and how I'd offended Call-Me-V and embarrassed her in front of her business friends and blah blah blah. She was warming up for the dead-in-a-ditch speech when we got back to the guesthouse and I crawled into bed pulling the sheet over my head.

I thought it would be nice sharing a room, but Lula was an angry million miles away. I warned her that the moment she started snoring I would take her credit card and demand my own room. She just frowned and said, 'Good luck squeezing another penny out of that!' Then she said she had jet lag and went back downstairs leaving me by myself, in the dark, again. She obviously cared more about what Call-me-V was doing than me. As I lay there, listening to the traffic noise and dogs barking, I wished I was back at home, cosy under my own duvet instead of away in India, sweaty and friendless.

In the middle of the night I got up for a drink of water. Lula still wasn't in bed and I sat by the window, looking out on to the garden. Shadows of two people danced on the lawn and I leaned out to take a better look. Through the branches of the lantern tree I saw Lula and Call-me-V. They were standing very close together holding hands. Then he leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

6

At stupid o'clock I woke up with my arms all tangled in netting. Itching feet told me that some little visitors had got through the layers of Odomos and bitten me. I scowled at the geckos lurking by the skirting board. I'd had a bad dream. I felt a knot in my stomach and rubbed my head.

Suddenly, my dream came screeching back into my head. Only I knew it wasn't a dream. Lula and Call-me-V had been kissing in the garden in the middle of the night. I'd seen them with my own eyes. I felt sick. It was just like the peacock book, only Call-me-V wasn't Ravi, the handsome poet, he was our driver, and Lula wasn't Una, she was my mum! Poor Mrs C! I just lay there, eyes shut, watching an action replay of the stomach churning kiss over and over in my head until I thought I was going to heave.

'Five minutes, Yogi Bear!' Lula shouted from the bathroom. She was singing to herself. It was a happy sound, totally tuneless, but happy. How could she be happy?

I put my head back under the bed covers. Lula shouted again from the bathroom. She'd found a yoga class and said it might be good for my dancing. But I didn't feel like dancing now, I felt like screaming.

I dragged myself out of bed and hunted around for a clean t-shirt.

In the guidebook it said that Yoga was a really big deal here and there were lots of different styles to choose from. There was even one where you just stood around and laughed. I'd read that Yoga started over two thousand years ago and, if you practised it every day, it was supposed to make you feel 'at one with the divine'.

They did it at our community centre and the ladies always looked quite cheerful coming out. As I pulled on my leggings, I thought it would take more than yoga to make me feel cheerful.

We walked the short distance across town to the class. The streets were already busy with people hurrying along. Lula said the loudspeakers I could hear were calling people to pray in the mosques. Small piles of burning rubbish were dotted along the pavement. A man was sweeping dry leaves on to the piles. It looked like the smoke was making his eyes hurt.

It was practically dawn, and I couldn't believe Lula didn't get a tuk-tuk. Where was Call-me-V? I thought he was supposed to be our driver. Then I realised he was probably still snoozing in bed with poor Mrs Chaudhury and I had to rub my eyes hard to get rid of that picture, too. What was I going to do? Lula and Call-me-V couldn't get it together, could they? Mrs Chaudhury would die of a broken heart. What if he came and lived with us in London? Would he help Lula run the shop instead of me and what would our customers think about having an Indian man in the shop?

Maybe we should just fly back home now, before it was too late. I could pretend to be very very sick or something. Then I remembered school and realised I was trapped here, in Kerala, with my mad, irresponsible mother and her horrible, cheating boyfriend. Lula did her chatty-Cathy act all the way, but I was on silent mode. She looked a bit confused, but I figured that served her right.

We made our way to Mahatma Gandhi road and found the school. It was in the downstairs of a building beside a convent. Painted in blue letters on the wall outside it said, *'Let us be happy to do what we can'*. I imagined a hooded nun sneaking out in

the night with a spray can and wondered what God would think. Incense drifted out of the front doors.

Inside, it was clean and brightly lit but not nearly as glitzy as the Serenity Spa. Blue yoga mats were laid out ready and in the middle there was a small group of serious looking people standing completely still and breathing very loudly. Of course, I was the youngest person in the room – where were all the teen yogis? Oh yes, probably still in bed!

My stomach gurgled and the teacher gave me an encouraging smile. ‘This is a good sound. Your belly is waking up.’

‘Yeah, waking up grumpy,’ I muttered.

The lesson started with a long stretch the teacher called a Sun Salutation. It was quite easy and made me feel more awake. Then we did some twists and some standing on one leg. I couldn’t keep my balance and hopped around the room for a bit until the teacher caught me. It started to get a lot harder after that and only a very bendy couple were left trying to tie themselves into pretzels. The effort was turning their faces purple. Lula seemed to be enjoying it and the teacher kept telling her she was doing really well. Then she lost her balance and giggled when he caught her. What was happening? First, Mr Chaudhury and now a yogi! Was she always like this in India? It was a good thing I’d come along this trip to keep an eye on her.

We got to the guesthouse and I went straight upstairs for another shower. When I came down again, breakfast was laid out on the terrace. Mrs Chaudhury seemed a bit hurt as I turned down everything she’d cooked, but how could I eat her food when I knew what was really going on? A guilty conscience didn’t stop Lula tucking in. I groaned and laid my head flat on the table on top of the order book.

‘You OK, Cass?’ Lula asked. ‘I thought you might like to come to the market with me this morning.’

‘I’m feeling a bit sick, actually.’

‘Was it the yoga?’

‘Yeah, sort of...’

‘Well, I have to go, I’m afraid. Would you mind if I left you behind?’

‘I don’t care; you always do whatever you want, anyway.’

Lula’s coffee cup cracked back on to the saucer. She was staring at me. I knew I was being rude and at home she would have fired off a double-barrelled death stare. It flashed for a moment, then Mrs Chaudhury came in with more toast and she lowered the guns.

‘You are very welcome to stay with me today, Cassia, if you like?’ Mrs Chaudhury was smiling and I felt my face go red. ‘We can do some cooking and maybe you would like a *mehandi*, m’n?’

I didn’t know what a *mehandi* was, but before I could ask, Lula butted in.

‘That sounds lovely, doesn’t it, Cass. Say thank you to Lalitha.’

I couldn’t believe how nicey-nicey she was being. Never mind thank you, what was she going to say when Mrs Chaudhury found out? “Oops-a-daisy I didn’t think you’d mind if I lip-locked with your husband. Let’s have a lovely cup of tea.” Really...I mean...really!!’

After breakfast, Lula and Call-me-V set off in the Green Goddess and I helped Mrs Chaudhury’s kitchen lady clear away the dishes. She made us both a glass of ginger soda and me and Mrs Chaudhury sat at the table.

‘Shall I open the shutters? Then we can have a nice view of the garden.’

The lantern tree cast a shadow on to the floor. I moved my chair keeping my back to the open window.

‘I think you are a little afraid of Indian dishes, Cassia, m’n?’

‘I just don’t like spicy things very much.’

‘Actually, food here in Kerala is not so spicy-dicey. Shall we try to make something sweet, like coconut cookies?’ She fetched some storage jars from a cupboard and set them out on the table in front of me. As she measured the ingredients from each jar in turn, her gold bracelets jangled. They’d probably been a present from Call-me-V. They were so pretty, but she wouldn’t want to wear them when she found out. I remembered Lula putting her wedding ring away in a little box when she and Dad split and I suddenly felt so sad, I could hardly follow what Mrs Chaudhury was saying.

‘This is Rava, I believe you call it semolina, next is sugar, then powdered cardamom, grated coconut, and last of all a little milk. Wash your hands and you can knead this into dough.’

I slid my fingers into the crumbly mixture, cupping my hands into scoops and pressing and folding it around until a soft lump formed. She showed me how to take chunks of the dough and roll it to make little balls. I licked my fingers. The mixture was sweet and smelled delicious. We squished the balls into patties and laid them in a pan on the stove. They sizzled as they hit the hot oil and I watched them bob about in a cushion of bubbles until they turned golden brown. Whatever happened, Call-me-V would have to be a complete ejit to swap Mrs Chaudhury’s cooking for Lula’s.

‘So, Cassia, while our morning treats are cooling down I shall give you a mehandi, a henna tattoo, and you can tell me all about London. I have never been and I am looking forward to seeing it.’

‘Are you going on holiday?’

‘I am hoping to see the Queen and Vikram wants to visit your mother’s shop, of course.’

My stomach gave a lurch. I looked up at Mrs Chaudhury. Did she suspect anything? She was so nice, how could Lula do this to her? Why didn’t she find someone in London, someone like Dad?

Mrs Chaudhury was pointing at some photos from a magazine. The girl’s hands were completely covered with lines and swirls traced out in orange dye. As I looked down at the pictures she gently stroked my fingers, ‘I think this one would be very nice for you, you have such pretty hands. It is a pity you are biting your nails.’

She took a small, cone shaped package off the shelf behind her and snipped the pointed end with scissors. I was embarrassed when she lifted my sweaty hand on to her lap, but the silk felt cool and reassuring.

‘Shall I put somebody’s initials in the design? On a weird impulse I asked her to paint JG, for Jonny Gold, surrounded by tiny stars on to the inside of my wrist. Smiling, she asked if that was my boyfriend’s name and I said, ‘Yeah, right, I wish!’ Mrs Chaudhury gave me a strange look and said, ‘Be careful what you are wishing for, my dear,’ in a deadly serious voice. ‘Tell me, who is this Mister Jolly Gee you are thinking about?’

‘He’s an amazing singer in this band and he writes all the songs. He’s really famous in England.’

‘And why do you like him so very, very much?’

‘Because he’s really cool and he cares about stuff and when I listen to his music it’s like he almost knows who I am. I mean, if I met him, I’m completely positive we’d get on really well straight away.’

‘He sounds like a dream, my dear, and sometimes that is how things should stay.’

‘Mrs Chaudhury, have you and Mr Chaudhury got any children?’

‘Me and Vikram with children?...no!’ she looked astonished and then started to laugh. A fat drop of henna flew out of the packet and landed on my arm.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude.’

‘Cassia, I have a grown up daughter, but Vikram is not my husband, he is my brother in law!’

‘Your brother in law?’ I stared at her. My mouth was hanging open and there was a low whining sound in my head like a million bees were nesting between my ears.

‘Yes, my husband, Vikram’s brother, was killed in an accident when my daughter was a little girl and so we came to live here, with Vikram.’

‘Oh, that’s nice... I mean I’m really sorry about your husband.’

‘Yes, Cassia, I am sorry too, being a widow lady is not very nice, but Vikram is a kind, kind man. Now hold still and let your Auntie Lalitha finish this mehendi. From the look on your face I think we are both needing some milk and cookies!’

The next day, a tuk-tuk was parked ready for our trip to the spice market, so after cinnamon toast and mango juice at the guesthouse, me and Lula made our way through the human, and animal traffic towards the trading district, Mattancherry.

We seemed to have escaped from Call-me-V, but instead of giving me all her attention in a good way, Lula was acting annoyed. She asked me why on earth I'd thought Vikram and Lalitha were married, which I said was a pretty dumb question as they were the same age, lived in the same house and were both called Chaudhury.

We passed through a really old bit of Kochi in silence. Goats wandered down the pavements picking at rubbish piled at the side of the road. I guessed there wasn't really room on the street for wheelie bins. Falling-down houses with trees growing out of the roofs lined the road. Looking through the padlocked, iron gates at the grand entrances I thought some seriously rich people must have lived here once and I wondered what had happened to them. Why did they leave their houses to just fall down? If they didn't want them, then why didn't they let other people live in them? I leaned out of the tuk-tuk as we passed a palace. The driver said the Portuguese built it five hundred years ago as a present for the king. It didn't look much older than the other buildings, but tourists, and a party of local school kids, were queuing on the stairs waiting for the doors to open.

I wanted to know more about Call-me-V, but I couldn't find the right words to ask my grown-up mum if this was a serious boyfriend thing or just a...what? Serious relationships were all that adults did, wasn't it? And how did her being someone's girlfriend and my mum work when we were all together? What if I wanted ice-cream

again? Would she let me or would it be Call-me-V's Indian rules while we were here? What if he was really mean to me? Would Lula take my side or buddy up with him? And what if stuff happened that was more serious than ice-cream? Would she still love me?

We parked up on Bazaar Road and started our buying expedition with perfumes. This was where Lula got the incense sticks and fragrance oils we sold in the shop. A red-and-black painted board outside the door listed all the different flowers they used in their mixtures. Tiny glass bottles lined the mirrored shelves of the shop. The owner, Mrs Jaffrey, knew we were coming and she'd prepared a selection of new mixtures for Lula to try.

The not-talking thing between me and Lula was making me feel sad and it was a relief not to be alone any more. We went in and slipped off our shoes. Perched on a stool by the counter, drinking juice, I watched as Mrs Jaffrey put out the sample bottles. Then she put small drops on to our skin and explained that each one was good for different things. Some were just perfumes, but others, like the massage oils, could help you feel better too. With some oils, like Rose, just the smell was enough to change your mood. I wondered if there was a mixture for difficult mothers. Lula said she was looking for a best-seller and we sniffed and sighed our way through Green Orchid, Kerala Flower and something with Juniper that Mrs Jaffrey said was very good for cellulite - I could see from Lula's expression that a couple of pints would be in the post before we left.

I tried to take charge of the order book, but Lula took it off me and wrote down the orders as she went along. This was supposed to be my job and I was left sitting on the stool with no one talking to me and with nothing to do.

I was bored and fed up, but Lula loved trying to haggle over the prices. She started off with an insanely low offer, but Mrs Jaffrey wasn't playing. There was a bit of, 'I am just a poor shop keeper' on both sides, but Mrs Jaffrey didn't cave. Lula tried hard, but I think the perfumes ended up waaay more expensive than she'd budgeted for.

Once we'd finished writing up the orders and arranging shipping, Mrs Jaffrey said she had a surprise and reached under the counter. She presented me with a tiny blue bottle with a silver lid and a purple tassel.

'Cassia, this is a very special perfume, I hope you will like it. It is a blend of Lotus for your smile, cinnamon for your name and even a bit of pepper for your energy.' She opened the bottle and passed it over to me. I took a deep sniff and a sweet flowery smell curled up my nose. It made me think of Sunday mornings, when Lula lights incense sticks and we re-stock the shelves together. I suddenly felt homesick and I wanted to get out of the shop and be in the sun.

Our next stop was the ginger factory. It was built around a huge courtyard and the knobbly roots were laid out on the warm stone floor like a giant carpet. Lula said they would stay there, drying in the sun. They didn't have long to bake. The monsoon was due in another few months, and then this whole place would get a daily bath.

Lula bought a few samples for a catering business she'd started with some friends. At Christmas, her sister, Auntie Doré said Lula should, 'Focus on the shop for pity's sake, Loopy Lou!'

'Well, I think it is time for lunch and a nice cup of tea,' Lula said, sounding more cheerful. I hoped she had got over her bad mood and was going to be nice to me for a while.

We found the tuk-tuk and made our way to the Spice Café. As we went inside I saw Call-me-V sitting at a table by the waterside. Of course, that was why she had cheered up. It was him she was happy to see, not me. Call-Me-V checked Lula's list in the order book. I tried to look over his shoulder.

'Have you talked to any of your friends at school yet, Cass?' Lula said it in a super casual voice, but I didn't bite. I definitely didn't want to talk about that stuff in front of Call-Me-V.

'How's Auntie Doré getting on in the shop?' I said.

'Well you know Doré, always ready with business advice,' Lula said in a really sarky voice.

'Maybe you should listen to her sometimes.'

'When I want advice like that I'll ask Cruella De Ville!'

'Yeah, cos she's available for a quick chat!'

'Cass, if Doré had her way, we wouldn't bother about organic, fair-trade or anything else. She thinks I'm daft to work the way I do and maybe she's right, but it's MY shop and I'll run it MY way or...'

She was blasting out a scary, goddess-level death-stare and had my hand in such a tight grip my fingers were turning blue.

'OK, I get the point, you can let go now,' I said.

She glanced down and gave the mehendi a good long look. 'Vikram has arranged tickets for a theatre show for us all. I told him you were interested in dancing. Isn't that nice of him Cassia?' she said, looking all dolly daydream at Call-me-V.

Actually a dance show sounded pretty cool, but I didn't want to go with him. I didn't even want to go with Lula. Didn't she realise what a terrible example she was

setting? I knew he wasn't married or anything now, but everyone knew holiday romances were a disaster.

It was just like my Peacock Spring book. There was Una, falling in love with the poet, Ravi, and getting trashed by her step mother, Alix. I was beginning to see why, for Una, going back to boarding school might look like a solid plan B.

On the way to the theatre Call-me-V explained the style of the performance they were doing was called *Kathakali*. It was a mixture between a musical and a play and there weren't any words as the actors sort of spoke with their hands and eyes. Call-me-V said they trained all their lives to learn the stories and the parts properly.

It was sounding a bit too old-school for me and I was beginning to wish I'd gone for belly-ache and a trip back to the guesthouse. But with our tickets, we got a card that explained the extreme facial expressions, which really helped to sort out what the characters were up to.

The performers got ready on stage and as they were doing their make-up Lula got her camera out. Almost everyone in the cast was a God or Goddess, and the stories were all about the battle between heavenly worlds and demon worlds. All the actors were men, but they seemed to be making a real effort, aside from the coconut-shell boobs.

Lula put her camera away as people arrived to take their seats. The music started and everyone settled down. The story was introduced by the main singer. It was a demon woman versus heroic prince set up and everyone who'd read the story knew that in about two hours time, it would end badly, for her.

Our seats were under the balcony and every few minutes a pistachio shell landed on the floor in front of me. I looked up and scanned the faces staring out at the

stage. They were mostly in deep shadow, but a light from the stairs caught the pistachio eater in silhouette. It looked like one of the little kids from Mr Rao's restaurant. He was drumming his hands in time to the music and this was sending shells spinning off the balcony railing.

'Look! It's your friends up there,' I said. Lula looked up and shook her head, 'I don't think so.' Her chair scraped noisily along the floor as she twisted back to the stage, and the boy looked down. He waved at me and put drinking straws into his mouth like a walrus. He looked so funny I couldn't help laughing. The people seated around us started shushing, and Lula hissed, 'for goodness sake, Cassia, stop fidgeting'. A shower of empty shells landed on my head and when I looked up again the boy was sitting on his mother's lap and the adults were all looking a bit annoyed.

At the interval, walrus-boy came running up and offered me a handful of sweaty, green pistachios. I took a couple and cracked them open. I guessed his parents hadn't seen us because there was no sign of them downstairs, or up on the balcony and Lula was pacing about like she wanted to leave.

'Aren't you going to say hello to your friends?' I asked as she walked straight towards the exit.

'No Cass, I don't think that would be a good idea,' she said. Her face looked tight and witchy. But, just as we reached the doors, Mr and Mrs Met-at-the-Restaurant appeared. For a second they looked as uncomfortable as Lula, but then all the adults did this freakish face-morph thing and it was full-on 'how lovely to see you!' and 'wasn't the show wonderful!' Watching them, I almost believed everything was OK, (weird, but OK) until we were in the tuk-tuk going home and I felt Lula's hand. Her pale fingers were trembling and as cold as ice lollies.

8

It felt like the middle of the night when Lula cajoled me out of bed. I blundered about in a daze, trying to get dressed with my eyes closed. They cracked open once I reached the bathroom, but after a look at my scarecrow hair, I shut them again.

Lula had decided on the public-transport option and we were booked on the early morning commuter train that would take us up the coast, north to Kannur. It seemed Call-me-V was driving us as far as the station. But, after that I was looking forward to it being just me and Lula again, for a while. As he loaded our bags, he showed me the triple-decker tiffin tins (India's weird version of the picnic hamper) stowed in the boot.

'My sister in law is worried you are not getting enough to eat, Cassia. She thinks you are having hollow legs and is blaming your mother for naming you after a tree!' he said.

We crossed the bridges back to the mainland and parked outside the railway station. The platform was like a zombie film with sleepy people staggering on and off the train. Studenty tourists swung their enormous back-bags around like weapons of mass decapitation. Inside the carriage the aisles were packed with boys selling drinks, newspapers and snacks. Call-me-V pushed on ahead and we 'excuse-me'd' our way to our seats. He seemed to be hanging around a bit, getting our cases up on the rack and ordering drinks. When the whistle blew I expected to see him make a run for the doors. But he settled himself down next to Lula and opened out a newspaper. Once the train set off, Lula inflated a travel pillow and rested her head against the window.

She looked really exhausted. A deep frown made a ridge between her eyes and she was twisting an earring like it could grant her three wishes.

Perfect, just perfect. I thought I'd have Lula to myself for a bit. I really wanted to talk to her about school and stuff, but I couldn't while Call-me-V was poking his nose into our lives. In London, she kept saying things like 'when you get back to school, Cass', but I never wanted to go back. I couldn't go back. I'd wanted to tell her about what was happening to me with Rachel and the other girls, loads of times. But, lately, Lula was so stressy, and unpredictable, I was scared she'd throw a major emo fit and go stomping off to the head teacher and then she'd find out I'd been skipping lessons and it would get even worse. All those times she thought I was at dance practice when really I was hiding out in the library.

I'd really hoped that here, in India, she'd relax and things would go back to go back to how they were when I could tell her anything and she'd make it all right. She used to be Mrs Fixit, but recently she'd changed. I knew she couldn't just magic my problems away, but I did expect her to at least have time to listen. Now Call-me-V was always around and ruining everything.

I stared out of the window. The view of palm tree and fields reminded me of the plane journey coming over. It felt like a million years ago now and pretty much everything was different to what I'd expected. So much for escaping from my problems - it felt like I'd just got a whole new set to worry about.

I opened my book. Una was in trouble, too. The governess, Alix, had gone a bit psycho because she had stolen whisky and Una thought she should tell the truth and not let a servant get sacked for it. I felt a bit sorry for Alix too (even though she was a horrible person) because her mum was Indian, but her dad wasn't and she didn't fit in with the English people or the Indians and it made her scared and a bit mad. If

Edward wasn't such an old-school dad it would probably have been OK. But, he was too busy working to see what was happening.

Gradually everyone around me either fell asleep or pulled out laptops and started tippy-tapping away. Apart from the view out of the window, it was much more like a regular London commuter train than I'd expected. In the movie version someone would definitely be singing by now.

We'd not been travelling long but my stomach was already rumbling. Lula and Call-me-V were still dozing so I took my tiffin box to the corridor between the carriages.

The train doors were left open and the countryside trundled slowly past in widescreen. I sat with my feet resting on the outside step and watched people start their day. A group of women were washing clothes in a river. Right next to them others were cleaning cooking pots and bathing. I tried to imagine what it was like not having your own bathroom. My mouth felt weird when I thought about cleaning my teeth in washing water.

Being in India was confusing. In the train it was all wi-fi world and outside it was washing-in-the-river. It was hard making them fit in my head at the same time.

We were going to stay with Lula's old college friend, Saachi. Lula said they had a daughter, Priyanka, who was my age, so there would be someone to hang out with at last. I'd thought about what she'd be like and I was sure she'd be really nice and excited to have an English friend to teach her dance routines! I'd wrapped up some colourful bracelets I'd found in a shop on Oxford street in tissue paper and written, 'To my new friend, love Cass' on it in gold pen. I tried to picture her face as she opened the package. She'd be really happy to have something pretty from a big city shop. She probably didn't have any proper, fashionable stuff.

I tried to imagine what she would look like and how she would talk. I would lend her my music player and she'd definitely want to hear all about my life in London. I wondered if she'd have her own room – probably not. Perhaps she could come and stay in London some time. I could show her our flat, the telly, and the dishwasher. I could tell her about all the cool stuff me and my friends used to do at the weekends. I wouldn't miss Rachel and the others at all, if I had an Indian friend to show around.

The train lurched slightly as we crossed a gap in the tracks, and I felt the hard thump of the door swinging into my back. The jolt made me lose my footing on the outside step, and, before I could do anything to stop myself, I was sliding slowly but unstoppably into the view. I scrambled to get a grip on the floor, but my hands just skidded through the dust. Just as I was about to be pitched out of the train, there was a sharp pain in my arm and I felt a hand clamp my wrist in a tight hold. I was pretty sure I opened my mouth to scream at that point, but I was being dragged back through the dirt on my bum and all I heard was train door as it slammed shut behind me.

'That was very foolish.' A local boy, about my age, was staring down at me. 'You might have been killed and you have made me spill my chai.' He had dropped one of the paper cups he was carrying and it lay crumpled on the ground. Puddles of milky Indian tea had formed around his feet and mixed with the dirt on the train floor. The unappetising brew was sloshing in my direction. I tried to stand up but my legs suddenly wouldn't work properly. As I looked up at him, he took a step closer and I leaned away, pressing my back against the sharp edge of the carriage door.

'Here,' he said, and handed me a cup half-full of warm chai. My hands were shaking too much to hold the cup properly, and as I gulped down a mouthful, I felt

some dribble down my chin and on to my t-shirt. The boy was still staring down at me. 'Where are you coming from?' he said.

'Kochi.'

'No, your native place.'

'Oh, London.' My throat felt tight and my voice sounded a bit squeaky.

'If you are ever wanting to get back, you must fasten the door properly.'

'Sorry,' I squeaked again.

'What is your name, girl from London?'

'Cassia.'

'Hello Cassia, my name is Porthos.'

'Really? Like in the *Three Musketeers*?'

'No! Really my name is Dev. I just like the story.' He was smiling now. 'May I sit with you?'

'I've got some food. We could share it,' I said pointing to Auntie Lalitha's picnic.

I was covered in dirt and his clothes weren't exactly designer, but there was a newspaper in the bin which I unfolded on to the floor. The spilled chai soaked through in patches, but at least it wasn't running all over the carriage. I mopped my hands on my jeans and unsnapped the lid of the tiffin tin. On the top layer sat three coconut cookies. I passed one over to the boy and, as the sugar hit my stomach, I started feeling less shaky.

'What do you do, Cassia?'

'I help my mum with our shop.'

He was staring at me. I felt my face getting hotter. I didn't know if it was shock or because he was really handsome. Maybe this was how Lula felt when she

looked at Call-me-V. That thought made me feel shaky again. I took another big gulp of chai.

‘Why are you not at school?’

‘I’m going to be a dancer.’

‘How will you learn to dance if you don’t study?’

‘I don’t mean ballet, I like more modern stuff like street dancing and Bollywood.’

‘Really?’ Dev said with a puzzled look.

‘Yes, really! What do you want to do?’

‘Computers and world-class cricket,’ he said. ‘But, for now, my job is to rescue foolish tourist girls.’

‘Thank you for saving me.’

‘That is OK, you are nearly family.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Your mehandi. I can see from the initials that you will be marrying my grandfather.’

‘Ha! Ha! Mr Lifesaver!’

He stared out of the window, rubbing at the dust on the glass with his fingers. I thought he was going to say something else, but he must have changed his mind. We had pulled into a station and I realised it was time to go back to my seat. I thought about spending the rest of my holiday with Lula and Call-me-V and for a few seconds I imagined running away with Dev instead. He was probably sitting in third class, but I expected it was more fun there with people chatting and hanging out. Maybe I’d make some new friends. Then, I remembered Saachi’s daughter would be waiting in

Malabar and I imagined giving her the bracelets and swimming in the sea all day and teaching her how to dance, like me. She'd be so disappointed if I didn't show up.

'Goodbye, Mr Musketeer. I have to go now.'

'Chal, goodbye, Cassia from London. I will tell my grandfather he is making a good match.'

I watched as he disappeared down the corridor. Then, I carefully flattened the paper cup and put it into the pocket of my jeans.

Lula and Call-me-V were already awake when I got back to our seats. He dragged our cases off the racks and we 'excuse me'd' our way towards the exit. Dev was gone and the sticky puddle of chai was already evaporating in the midday heat.

I got off the train feeling very crumpled and a bit sweaty. The platform was heaving with people, but no one seemed to be in a hurry.

'Good grief, Cass, look at you! How on earth did you get that mucky on a train?' Lula asked. I looked down at my torn, dust-coated jeans and filthy finger nails. How many layers of shoe dirt had they scraped up as I slid towards a mangling on the tracks? And what if Dev hadn't been there?

9

We took a taxi from the station to the village. Call-me-V sat in the front, chatting on with the driver. He hadn't brought any bags with him, but it looked like he would be hanging around for a while longer. I wondered if this was just part of his looking-after-us job or because he and Lula had a romance going on. I expect she paid him really well - maybe that was why he was sticking so close to her.

The taxi stopped in front of a wooden building. Windows set high into the walls reflected birds squawking, in the surrounding trees. It looked like a really massive garden shed.

'Is this where they live?' I asked.

'Oh no, Cass, Saachi's house is right down by the beach. This is one of Vikram's new projects. He wanted us to see it before it gets renovated.'

Call-me-V took a key out of his pocket and fitted it into a padlock on the door. The wood creaked and the door swung open on a dusty room.

'This used to be a candle-making workshop - the old equipment has to be cleared out. But isn't it a lovely space, Cass?' Lula was practically skipping about and I could tell she had her decorator head on.

'Vikram's got great plans for this building,' she said. I looked around at the shed. It didn't even have a proper floor. Hanging from hooks on the wall were big, metal cooking pots and a thick layer of wax was caked on the wooden workbench. I ran my thumbnail across the yellow lumps and the smell of honey seeped into the air.

Although it was a dump, the smell in the shed reminded me of Auntie Doré's super-cool dining room with its rows of expensive scented candles.

Lula was warbling on about solar panels and I wondered if Call-me-V was rich like Auntie Doré. He didn't look rich, but maybe rich people in India acted the same as everyone else. What did he do, besides driving Lula about? I tried not to stare as I imagined him in an office like Dad's, or at a really fancy restaurant, with friends. He glanced over at Lula and I swear she actually blushed. This was getting gruesome, worse than gruesome. Lula skipped about a bit more, talking about earth-tone palettes and rustic surfaces while Call-me-V smiled at her like she was the most wonderful thing he'd ever seen. Then, from her handbag Lula produced a packet of incense sticks.

'Ah, you think we should have a *Puja*, Luella, m'n?' said Call-me-V. He passed her a tiny elephant statue attached to his keys. 'I will get some flowers,' he said and walked out.

'What is a *Puja*?' I said.

'A sort of spiritual housewarming, and request to the Gods for help with our new enterprise.' She looked wistful when she said it and then her face went all pink again as Call-me-V came back in with a bunch of blooms I'd seen hanging from a tree by the door. They put the statue on the workbench and laid the flowers in front of it.

'We must wash our hands first' said Call-me-V, opening a rusty tap on the wall. Brownish water dribbled into a bucket on the floor. It took a while to run clear and they both rinsed their hands. I stuck my hands in my pockets. Then Lula lit the incense and waved the scented smoke in the air while Call-me-V muttered some stuff I couldn't understand. When I couldn't stand any more, I sat outside, watching the

taxi driver smoke cigarettes and talk on his mobile phone. He was having a huge argument with someone.

Lula and Call-me-V came out, eventually, and we got back in the taxi. I sat in the front this time and the driver found a music station to listen to. I asked him to turn it up really loud, but even though I couldn't hear Lula and Call-me-V, I could see them reflected in the rear-view mirror, scribbling drawings and numbers and stuff in the shop order book. I wondered what they were doing. The shop wasn't Call-me-V's business, it was Lula's. But when they did the shed Puja, Lula talked about *their* new enterprise like it had something to do with her, too.

Lula's friend Saachi and her daughter, Priyanka, were standing outside their house waiting to meet us. Parked in the drive was a car that made the Green Goddess look like a joke. When I saw Priyanka, like something straight off a film poster my heart dropped into my grubby shoes and stayed there. I knew the train journey hadn't done my outfit any favours, but compared with Priyanka I looked like a charity advert. Why hadn't Lula told me she was rich, beautiful, perfect?

Lula was so pleased to see her that she nearly knocked her over.

'Look at you, bonny girl! You've grown so much since last time saw you. This is my daughter, Cassia.' she said, pushing me forward. Priyanka smiled and smoothed down the spotless, silk top stretched tightly over her round stomach. Her long, super-straight, advert-perfect hair was pulled back into a clip that matched the colours of her outfit. She had a friendly smile, but I saw her staring at my torn jeans. I tried to force myself to smile back, but my mouth wouldn't work properly.

Saachi said, 'hello, Cassia, I've heard so much about you,' and then she suggested we all go inside to freshen up.

I thought Lula would introduce Call-me-V, but it was obvious pretty quickly that they all knew each other already. I was the only new person, the stranger, the one who needed to be introduced. It felt like Lula had this secret Kerala life that I had just barged into. And now, as we walked into the massive, marble hallway, she was practicing her Malayalam with Priyanka while Saachi talked with Call-me-V. Everyone was talking and smiling at each other, everyone but me.

If I hadn't fallen out with Rachael I'd be at school now and all this would be going on a million miles away. I betted that Lula would have preferred it. Then she could have hung out with Princess Priyanka instead of me.

Priyanka's room was at the back of the house. From her balcony there was a postcard-perfect view of the sea. I put my scruffy suitcase on the guest bed. The present I'd got her was in the bottom of my wash-bag. As I looked around the room, I could see she already had loads of much prettier bracelets just heaped up on her dressing table. She had lots of other stuff I hadn't expected her to have too. I left the wash-bag in my case. Why would she be interested in my rubbish present?

Priyanka wanted to show me round, but I just wanted to get to get away from everyone, her included. I unpacked my swimming costume and stomped down to the water with Priyanka following behind.

'Don't go out too far, Cassia. Actually, it is quite dangerous once you get past the breakers!' Priyanka called out in a bossy voice as I marched across the sand.

I ignored her and ran as fast as I could into the water. I would show her. I body-surfed a couple of small waves, landing gently back into the shallows. Priyanka sat neatly on the sand like one of Lula's plump and very pretty sofa cushions. The sky was a bright, clear blue and I floated on my back to watch the tiniest of clouds float

by. Now this was more like it, I thought, as I ducked and splashed about in the warm, salty water. Maybe I could just stay in the sea forever and forget about everything until it was time to go home. But then I remembered things were completely rubbish there, too.

‘Stop fooling around, Cassia. There is a big wave coming!’ Priyanka shouted.

I turned to look. She was wrong about the wave. It wasn’t big, it was VERY big. I tried to dive under the swell, but it caught me full in the belly and knocked me off my feet. I tumbled over and over in the pounding water. All the air had been punched out of my lungs, my chest was aching and I was starting to think seriously about panicking. Then, its fun done, the ocean dumped me on the beach like a sack of wet washing. I spat out a mouthful of fish-bath. Through my stinging eyes I could see Priyanka laughing at me. I emptied sand out of my costume.

Priyanka handed me a beach towel as I dragged myself out of the water. I must have looked even more pathetic than when I arrived. Had she waited to tell me about the wave until it was too late? At least the scouring had got my hands clean.

The Mehandi had faded a little, too, and that made me think of Jonny Gold and Dev and being rescued, and I started to feel very sorry for myself and I had to go back to the sea and splash more water on my face. Priyanka kept talking to me about how great it was to meet me at last, but for a while I pretended the water in my ears had made me deaf. I knew I was being mean, but I couldn’t stop. She just wasn’t what I was expecting. I lay face down on the sand and let the hot sun bake me dry. I hoped it would burn out the bad feeling that was building up in my stomach. I really needed a friend, someone who would like me, so why did I get landed with Princess Perfect who had all the jewellery she needed and didn’t like swimming?

When we got back to the house Priyanka told me Saachi had arranged a ‘welcome to the Malabar’ party and some of the neighbours were invited. She said she would fix my hair and lend me an Indian outfit, until I got my crumpled clothes sorted out. She had chosen a long top and baggy trousers she called a salwar kameez in emerald green, to ‘compliment my eyes’. Of course it also matched the shade of envy I felt when I saw her amazing collection of clothes. It was in three sections, one she called sarees-for-the-aunties, then there was a rack of salwar tops for everyday over jeans and, just to make me feel really tragic, she had a more western, designer selection for holidays abroad. None of it had any creases, rips, loose threads, or stains of any kind. It was also grouped and ranked by colour and shade.

She laid the outfit on my bed and waited for me to try it on. Even though it was really pretty, I didn’t want to wear it, but she kept on at me until I agreed, just to shut her up.

‘What is this grunge meets high street look you favour, Cassia? Is it very on-trend in the UK right now?’ she said, watching me dress.

‘Yeah’, I replied. ‘All the celebs are leaving their clothes scrunched up in a bag for a week before they wear them.’

‘It must be fabulous to be so close to the heart of fashion, Cassia.’

‘Yes. It’s terrific,’ I said.

The party wasn’t totally in our honour. There was something going on in the village that had everyone up a height, and Saachi had got a protest group started. She and Lula had been deep in ‘do you remember whens’ ever since we’d arrived, so Call-me-V and Princess Priyanka had taken over as party-planners, with me as their scruffy assistant. Working from a hand-written, double-sided list (yes, that’s right, a list!) we arranged chairs out on the veranda and set a row of anti-mosquito coils burning.

Multi-coloured paper lanterns hung in the garden and we re-filled them with tea lights.

Priyanka had arranged with her mum that we could have a canopy in the garden for the ‘young folk’ and we filled it with rugs and cushions from the house. All the guests were bringing food and something to drink, so by early evening all we had left to do was cut and clean the banana palm leaves we would use as plates. This was a super-green solution for party plates and best of all, no washing up! Of course, first someone had to shimmy up a palm tree and hack off a couple of branches and it seemed I’d been volunteered. Priyanka pointed to the rope footrests circling the trunk at regular stages. The palm tree was bent over and towards the top the trunk ran almost parallel to the ground.

I scrambled up to the first support, and then gripping the trunk with my legs I hauled myself along to the second and then the third rung. Aside from getting properly bruised knees, it was pretty easy. A few more hefts and I’d reached the top of the trunk. The penknife Priyanka gave me was wedged in my back pocket, and as I twisted round to get it I looked down. Priyanka and Lula were watching me from the garden.

‘Can you see any bananas yet, Cass?’ Lula called up. I tilted my head back and looked into the leaves. There were no bananas. Instead there was a generous bunch of what even I recognised were coconuts.

‘Banana palms are the other side of the house, Cass,’ Lula laughed.

In fact, they both laughed quite a lot. Priyanka’s ‘hilarious prank’ was obviously a family favourite. I decided to stay in the tree for a bit. My eyes were still stinging from the sea water, but from up high I could see the ocean and the beach, girls playing netball, and the white birds picking flies off the buffaloes’ backs.

‘Come on down, Cass,’ Lula called. ‘There’s a lime soda ready in the kitchen.’

I didn’t reply.

Once they had gone back inside, I climbed down and took a long shower.

When I got out, I looked at the green top Priyanka had laid out for me and I even held it up in front of the mirror. She was right - the colour did look really nice with my eyes, but I couldn’t wear it - I was too upset about the coconut joke. So I put it back in her wardrobe. I thought Priyanka would be more ordinary and that she’d like me and I’d feel like the special one. But instead, I felt like a stupid lump, whose mum laughed at her because she couldn’t even tell a banana tree from a coconut.

As it got dark, the guests started arriving, all loaded up with dishes of steaming rice, fish, coconut-scented curry, and boxes of sweets. Lula had made some chocolate cupcakes as our contribution. Priyanka saw them and I heard her say, ‘Oh goodness, Auntie Luella, those do look delicious!’ Lula beamed at her with pleasure. I watched Priyanka’s face as she carefully picked one out. Maybe she’d been warned about Lula’s cooking because I noticed she only broke off a tiny piece before setting the cup-cake down again.

The food table was getting crowded with people arranging their contributions. Everyone was very glamorously dressed - except for me. I hadn’t packed anything partyish so I was stuck in jeans and t-shirt. Priyanka’s loaned salwar would have been perfect.

As a full moon rose above the trees, a group of musicians appeared and set up their instruments in the middle of the garden. They had brought two kinds of drum and a sitar. The neighbour’s children taught me a routine from their favourite film, so

I showed them a few street-dance moves which made them laugh a lot, and after a bit of practising we twirled and stomped our way round the garden.

Dancing cast a spell on me. Christmas, school and mean girls floated away into the moonlight. This would be what my life would be like every day when I was older, and on TV. There'd be dancing and parties and glamour, and Jonny Gold and his band playing just for me.

As soon everyone had cleared their plates, Saachi asked the musicians to take a break. And, once the garden had gone quiet, she started to speak. I could tell by people's expressions that it was all serious stuff and she had to keep stopping as angry muttering broke out. Priyanka did a whispered translation of the most important bits and I thought I got the picture. A developer had bought a big piece of land along the beachfront and was building a luxury hotel complex on the cliffs. The mangrove trees, which protected the coast from flooding, would be cut down, the beach would be fenced off and many of the villagers would lose their homes. The developers wouldn't talk to anyone from the village and no one was sure where their money was coming from. Saachi had been doing some investigating through her legal contacts and she was trying to find out who was behind the scheme. Anyway, everyone had got their angry heads on and Saachi got a round of applause for her efforts. Lula did a little speech about how much she loved Kerala, Call-me-V beamed a big smile at her, and the adults got all teary eyed about shared values and blah-de-blah.

I sat by myself and listened to the waves rolling on to the beach. It sounded like Saachi had done loads of research and I wondered why she cared so much. It wasn't like her mansion house would be going anywhere.

The next morning at breakfast there was no sign of Call-me-V and I guessed he'd left after the party. I wondered if he'd gone back to Kochi or maybe he had a guest house near here, too.

Lula was only picking at her toast and she kept twisting her earrings round and round. Maybe she was missing him already. Poor Lula, I'd never thought she might be lonely before. She'd been by herself since Dad left. When I asked her if he would still love me, she hugged me until I practically couldn't breathe.

But Lula would be OK, she was with me and Saachi and Priya now so she wouldn't miss Call-me-V for long. We were going fabric-buying later, just the two of us, and I decided I would be super-nice and helpful to show her that she didn't need him around any more.

Priyanka's grandma, Granny-ji arrived while we were eating. She poured some tea, "the cup that cheers", and asked me if I was feeling "in the pink". I replied that I wasn't quite sure. Saachi explained that she used to be an English teacher and gave lessons to families in the village using old children's books. Saachi said that for years she'd believed that Enid Blyton's Famous Five were real British kids. I wondered if she missed being a teacher now she was old and I promised to send over some top-quality, modern teen-lit. Then Granny-ji patted her chest and said, 'Oh still my beating heart!' which made Lula laugh so much she spilt her coffee.

Saachi told Lula that Priyanka still hadn't decided on what career path she was going to follow, but that she was seriously considering Law.

‘Amma, you’re so boring! You think everyone should study law.’ Priyanka pushed her breakfast away, uneaten, which was really rude of her.

‘There’s nothing wrong with being boring, Priya. As a matter of fact, if you work hard, you can make a difference in the world, you know.’

‘Amma! I want a profession with much more stylish outfits.’

I saw Lula smile, but I thought Priyanka was being a spoilt brat.

Saachi didn’t reply, but she looked a bit cross.

Priyanka asked me what I wanted to do and I told her about being a dancer. She said girls here went to dancing school when they were really young and studied for years if they wanted to do it seriously. Things were different in London, I said. Then I explained about helping Lula in the shop, too. I saw Lula and Saachi exchange a look and no one said anything after that.

We cleared the table and got ready to go out. Saachi offered to give us a lift into town. I thought Priyanka was going to school, but she appeared from her room holding a sketch pad. Apparently, Princess Priya had taken the day off and Lula seemed really pleased. So, it wasn’t going to be just the two of us after all.

I shut the door of our room with a bang. It wasn’t fair, Lula was my mum, not hers. I didn’t see why Lula wanted her to tag along. I could help, but Priyanka didn’t know anything about the shop. I went into Lula’s room and hunted around for the order book, but that seemed to have disappeared with Call-me-V.

As we cleared the hill out of the village, I saw the site of the hotel development. Saachi asked if we wanted to take a closer look and she stopped the car at the side of the road. Priyanka stayed in the car with Lula, but I followed Saachi up the path.

The building site looked empty and we walked beside the wire fence which went all the way around the plot. Golden bricks, like chunks of cinder toffee, were stacked in neat piles against the edges. The complete circuit took us to the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea. Whoever ended up staying in this hotel was going to get an amazing view, I thought. I wondered how I'd feel if I was a rich person wanting a beach holiday. Would I care about a few mangroves and some village houses? I could definitely picture Auntie Doré here that was for sure. I walked over to the board with the artist's impression on it.

‘Wow! Saachi, come and look!’ I called. She followed me over and stared up at the drawing.

The picture of the tall glass tower had been partly covered in spray paint and the words ‘BEARS BEWARE’ were graffitti'd over the top of it in gold. Someone had done a very careful job on the letters, even though the words didn't make much sense.

‘But, I do not understand... there are no bears near here,’ Saachi said.

The name of the investment company, Aurum Incorporated, was just visible through the paint.

‘Wouldn't it be nice to have a hotel with shops and restaurants here, Saachi?’

‘As a matter of fact, I don't mind them building a hotel. Tourists bring money and jobs. But this is not the right place. The costs to the people and the environment are much too high.’ She looked so fierce when she said it, like the Goddess Kali gone nuclear, I felt a bit sorry for Aurum Incorporated when she caught up with them.

‘When did you decide to be a lawyer, Saachi?’

‘When I was old enough to notice how the rich treat the poor.’

‘Do you think Priyanka will feel the same as you?’

‘Priya notices only frocks at the moment, I’m afraid. And what about you, Cassia, why do you want to be a dancer?’

I started to answer her, telling her stuff about fame, and parties and being on TV, but somehow saying it out loud to Saachi, it didn’t feel like a proper thing any more, I couldn’t find the right words and my voice didn’t sound like I really meant it. I stopped talking and felt my face go red. She probably thought I was an idiot. But, she wasn’t looking at me with a for-goodness-sake expression, she was really interested and was taking my answer seriously. I managed to mumble something about how being part of the dance group, us all working together to put on a show, connected me to something bigger than myself and then she smiled and nodded her head. ‘That is how the law feels for me, too. Putting something right in the world, even something quite small, makes me feel that what I do matters and that I matter, too. You know, we have more in common than you might imagine, Cassia.’ She linked arms with me and we walked away from the building site together.

When we got back to the car, I saw Priyanka passing Lula her sketchbook. They had their heads together as Priyanka turned the pages showing Lula drawings of wedding dresses and pictures cut from fashion magazines. As I climbed into the back seat, Lula closed the sketchbook. I wanted to tell her about seeing the graffiti, but seeing her snap the book closed made me feel shut out. Like there was a secret between her and Priyanka and I wasn’t included.

The weaving workshop was just how Lula had described it. Piles of fabric parcels labelled with far away destinations filled the office like giant sugar cubes. Back at the shop, my Saturday job was to check the delivery and carefully cut through the stitching that held the parcels together. Then we’d go through each bale of fabric and

check it against the order book. The packaging was covered with colourful customs stamps and it seemed a waste to just chuck it away. I'd had the idea of turning it into carrier bags for the shop. I'd cut out bit squares making sure to get a bit of the coloured customs stamps on each panel. Then I stitched them together with waxed thread. Making the bags was how I earned my allowance.

When we moved out of the office and into the busy weaving shed, it became very hot even though all the windows were open and fans whirled in the roof. Lula looked at the colours on the wooden weaving machine while the man operating it tugged on a string making the thread fly from side to side. I watched his feet, as he controlled the up and down criss-crossing of the cotton with foot pedals. The fabric appeared really slowly, line by line. I realised that this was where Lula's ideas turned into real stuff and, watching her face, I could see how much she loved it.

The weaver was sweating and taking big drinks of water as he worked. He said his kids wanted to move to Bangalore and get office jobs where they would get better money and proper holidays. Lula said she'd heard about all the call-centres, 'summoning the young like the Pied Piper.' Then she laughed and said she expected to be talking to his kids about her overdraft some day soon.

After the first few of inches of fabric were visible, Lula looked relieved and I guessed the sample was working OK. We all went back into the design room and the manageress got out a book full of fabric squares. This fabric was much finer than the material Lula usually got for cushion covers and bedspreads. Priyanka kept holding pieces against our skin, then making notes in her sketchbook. She picked out an emerald green square which changed colour to a soft pink when it caught the light, and held it against my face, then she and Lula made a sort of death-by-chocolate delicious noise together and Priyanka scribbled in the sketch book, again. They

obviously didn't want me hanging about, and I really needed a cold drink so I left them to it. There were shops on the road, but after my Odomos humiliation I was a bit nervous about setting off alone.

'Are you looking for something?' the manageress was standing beside me.

'I'd like to get something to drink.'

'I am arranging to get chai for your mother - would you like one, too?

'OK.'

I must have sounded a bit disappointed because she said, 'The shop sells drinks out of the fridge. Maybe you would prefer cola or a lemonade?'

'Oh, that would be great!'

She told me how to say "please" and "how much?" and I set off up the road, practising *dayavuchetu* and *etra?* under my breath the whole way.

The boy working in the shop looked a bit like Dev and when I tried out the words the manageress had taught me, he smiled, which made me blush and then I got so embarrassed about blushing that I started to choke on my drink. My eyes watered and cola was leaking out of my nose. He stopped smiling and looked really worried. It probably wasn't good for business to have a customer explode in your shop.

Seriously, why was I such a freak? I would never make friends here, or anywhere else.

Maybe Rachel had done some kind of voodoo curse on me from London. After all, I had nearly fallen out of a train, practically drowned, and now I was choking to death. It wouldn't be so bad if it had all happened in private, but someone was always there, watching me. Though if Dev hadn't come along I'd be a train-mangled freak which was worse. I wondered where Dev was now - a million miles

away. I'd probably never see him again and that thought made my throat close up again.

My eyes were watering really badly now and the boy handed me a packet of tissues from the counter. I ripped the wrapper open and buried my boiling face in a nest of cotton. I stood very still, gasping and wheezing until my breathing got normal, then I tried another sip of coke. The bubbles helped and I set the bottle back on the counter which was stacked high with that day's Indian newspapers. Staring up at me from the front page, I saw super-handsome Jonny Gold's picture. My breathing went funny again and I quickly glugged the last of the drink down. I had no idea what the story was about, but I had just enough rupees left to buy a copy so I put the money on the counter and rushed back to the weaving workshop.

Saachi's car was pulling up by the entrance when I got back and Priyanka and Lula stood waiting by the door. They were chatting together and Priyanka had a parcel tucked under her arm. I could see bits of fabric sticking out of it. I wondered if they'd even noticed I'd been gone. I tore out the Jonny Gold article and stuffed it into the pocket of my jeans. I had no idea how I would read the story, but I certainly didn't want to share Jonny Gold with Priyanka.

When we got back I ran to my room and grabbed my swimming costume. Priyanka was in the kitchen when I got back downstairs. Her sketchbook was lying on a table in the hallway. I picked it up and started flicking through the pages. In the beginning it was all traditional English wedding dresses, big meringues of white satin and little kids in pink. Then, as I flicked through the pictures got more Indian-looking, more colourful with layers and beautiful patterns printed on to the fabric. I could see Priyanka was really good at drawing - no wonder Lula made a fuss of her.

I felt a stab of jealousy and turned to the middle of the book. Even the faces on the figures looked lifelike, lifelike and weirdly familiar. There was a picture of a pale girl in an emerald saree style dress and standing next to her was an Indian girl in blue with advert-perfect hair. Underneath, in very neat writing it said, **The Bridesmaids**. The book suddenly felt very heavy in my hands. I turned the next page. In the same neat handwriting Priyanka had spelled out **Auntie Luella and Uncle Vikram-ji's Wedding!** And, underneath the words, in a beautiful pink and orange dress was a picture of Lula, my mum, Auntie Luella, all smiling and happy and standing beside her was the bridegroom, Call-me-V.

The air in the room suddenly popped and then everything fell away. I had walked out over a cliff, cartoon style. Only it wasn't a cartoon, it was real and I wasn't running in mid-air, I was falling fast.

The next few minutes were kind of a blur. I remember tearing the page of Lula and Call-me-V out of Priyanka's stupid sketch book and throwing the bits around like confetti. Then there was Priyanka shouting, 'Stop it Cassia!' and Lula telling me to calm down and then just a numb weepy feeling until Saachi shut me in her office and put the phone in my hand. In the background, I could hear Priyanka's angry voice and Lula saying, 'I'm so sorry' over and over.

It took a few rings before Dad picked up. Then, I heard his deep voice mumbling down the phone and I almost started bawling again.

'Hi, Dad.'

'Hello kiddo, what's up?'

'How do you know something's up?'

'Dad radar. Is there trouble in paradise?'

'Yeah.'

'Hot chocolate with marshmallows trouble, or Dad, get your passport trouble?'

'It's an even worse kind, Dad.'

'Deep breaths, Cass, and tell me all about it.'

So I did. I didn't want to hurt him, but I told him about Lula and Call-me-V and their embarrassing secret romance and how I'd found the Indian wedding pictures in the sketch-book. I told him how left out of everything I felt, like everything was being organised in secret. How scared I was about life here being so different from my life in London. How I missed watching TV and eating heat-and-eat-food. How lonely it made me feel when I didn't understand what people were saying and how stupid I felt when I didn't know how stuff worked – I couldn't even shop properly!

I told him about the scabby dog I'd seen and the lady without proper fingers, how I didn't really like the food and that no one was allowed to wear shorts or eat ice cream, how the trains doors were really, really dangerous and the way some people had big houses and laptops and some people washed their clothes in the river.

Dad laughed, 'rich people live differently to poor people all over the world, Cass. Your mum loves you. She didn't do any of this to hurt you.'

'Did you know already, too?'

'Yes kiddo.'

'But, why didn't anyone tell me, Dad?'

'Because you were so unhappy at school, and your mum thought it was best if you met everyone and got to know them first, with no pressure.'

'But Call-me-V isn't like you, Dad.'

'You mean Vikram?'

'I won't call him Dad ever.'

'You don't have to. Just call him Vikram. He is a good man, Cass, and he really loves your mum.'

'Dad! Did you get him checked out or something?'

‘Oh yes, I can’t have my precious girls getting mixed up with a creepster! Was it a nice dress, the one Priyanka designed for you?’

‘Yeah, I suppose...actually, Dad, it was really pretty. She must hate me now.’

‘Probably not. Go and say your sorries, Cass. It will be OK you know, in the end.’

He sounded so sure and I really wanted to believe him. But I’d made a total idiot of myself and Priyanka was really angry.

‘Everything will feel better soon, Cass, I promise. Now, it’s still stupid o’clock here and I need my beauty sleep.’

‘OK, bye Dad, I love you.’

‘Love you back, kiddo.’

I held the phone close to my ear until the line clicked out. I wanted to believe Dad, but I wasn’t sure. I had stopped crying, but I wasn’t ready to face anyone in the house yet. I sneaked out on to the terrace and ran along the beach. My chest hurt from shouting and my face was covered in dried snot and salty tears. I dunked my head in the warm water and tried to wash away all the lonely, angry sadness that filled my head. Maybe I should just go home. Catch a plane back to London and stay with Dad for a bit, maybe for ever. Lula could stay here with Call-me-V and Priyanka could be her replacement daughter. She’d probably do a better job of it than me.

I’d walked away from the sea now and ended up on the edge of the village by a children’s play park. Small kids scooted around me on their way to the swings. I was just sitting, slumped on the slide, staring into space when I heard a familiar voice beside me.

‘Are you in distress, again, Cassia, girl from London?’

I was half expecting it to be a trauma-related hallucination, but when I opened my eyes Dev was smiling down in full 3D. My heart sort of flip-flopped and I found myself grinning like the little kids twirling on the roundabout.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I live here!’

‘Oh Dev. I wish you could drag me out of trouble this time.’

‘Perhaps another cup of chai?’

‘You sound like my mum. She believes warm beverages have magical properties!’

‘You should listen to your amma. They are usually right about such things.’

‘You haven’t met mine! Would you like to go for a walk?’

‘First, I must check my sister is at practice.’

‘What’s she practising?’

‘Come with me and you can see, London girl.’

We walked through the back streets of the village. The houses here were very different to Saachi’s. We passed people sitting outside, preparing food. They were waving flies away from the dishes and keeping dust from scudding up into the pans. It was weird seeing people cooking on the roadside, but then I thought it wasn’t really so different from a BBQ in the back yard – which Lula totally loves even though we always end up with burgers garnished with bits of grass and flies floating in the squash.

We came to an open square by a school. Set up in the middle was the dusty netball court. Close up, I could see that faded lines marked out a rather uneven playing surface. The hoops were cut from old metal drums and neatly plaited strips of multi-coloured plastic made the nets.

A game was going on and the two teams of girls were in full match voice. I couldn't understand what they were saying but it sounded pretty fierce. A girl in a blue bib, with GS stitched on it, looked up as we arrived and waved cheerily at Dev. Seeing me, she nudged some of her team mates and the game slowly came to a stop. The girl came over to us and then she and Dev started waggling their fingers at each other. It was like watching the Kathakali dancers again and I realised they must be doing sign language.

‘Cassia, I would like you to meet my little sister, Nandita. She is the team captain.’

‘Hi, I play netball at school, too,’ I said. She looked questioningly at Dev. He signed something to her and she smiled.

‘She is saying you are very tall, but are you any good at shooting?’

‘I used to play a mean goal attack...’

Nandita smiled and led me on to the court. She sent one of the girls off and handed me a blue bib. Then she pointed to our goal end and the game started again. It took me a while to get warmed up and until I'd been barged a few times I was ridiculously polite. But, after a few pointy elbows had hit home, I got some good passes across the circle to Nandita and even had a couple of shots at goal myself. Our team was already ahead, but when I dropped a ball cleanly through the hoop from the edge of the circle I got big high-fives off the rest of the team. Through it all, Nandita was totally focused on the game and the whole team watched her for direction. She reminded me of Rachel, at rehearsals, getting everyone working, but making the hard work feel like fun. After half an hour, I was completely exhausted and dripping with sweat, but I hadn't stopped smiling the whole time. I hadn't been with a big group of

laughing girls for ages. The last time I saw my school friends no one had been laughing.

The girl on the sidelines blew a whistle and the game stopped. Everyone piled off the court to get drinks out of their bags. Dev handed me a bottle of water, and laughed at something his sister signed.

‘Nandita is saying you can stay on the team, if you like.’

‘That would be so great!’

‘It is a pity the court will not be here for so very long,’ said Dev, frowning.

‘What do you mean?’

‘This space is to be a car park for the new hotel.’

‘What will Nandita’s team do then?’

‘We do not know.’

I watched Nandita packing up the netball kit. The other girls were starting to walk home now. They strolled away, chatting, arms linked together. I watched them go, wishing they were my friends and we were all going off together for pizza and a coke somewhere.

‘Has your sister always been deaf?’

‘No. When she was little, there was a tidal wave where we lived and it washed away our house. Nandi was in the water for a long long time and afterwards she could not hear any more.’

‘Do you mean the Tsunami?’ I remembered Lula crying at the pictures on TV, trees and cars floating away into the sea.

‘Sport is not just a timepass thing, it is very important to her.’ He was bouncing the ball hard on the ground as he spoke. It made a hard, slapping sound on his skin as he caught it.

‘I have to go now, Dev, but I know someone who is trying to stop the development. Maybe she can help?’

‘That is kind, Cassia, but rich people usually get what they want.’

I remembered what Saachi said about how the rich treat the poor and how it made her want to be a lawyer, ‘You can trust Saachi!’ I said.

Dev showed me how to say ‘great game’ in sign and I waved goodbye to Nandita.

‘Goodbye, Dev, I’ve had a brilliant time.’

‘What were you feeling sad about when I saw you at the park, Cassia?’

I thought about Lula and Call-me-V, the way they looked at each other and what Dad had said about letting Lula be happy. And I thought about the big wave that had washed away Nandita’s hearing, and the big hotel that would take away her game.

‘Nothing, really, well, nothing as important as this, anyway.’

‘I am happy then. I did not like to see you looking so lost, London girl.’ He stood and watched me as I turned to go. I could still feel his eyes looking into mine, wide and brown, as I reached the house. It made me feel connected to something, something big and important, something that mattered. I didn’t know what it was yet, but right now I thought I knew how Saachi felt.

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Priyanka and I hadn't spoken to each other since I tore up her sketchbook. Saachi and Lula tried to get us to make friends, but for ages Priya wouldn't even look at me. I knew she was upset about her pictures, but it didn't feel like it was totally my fault, not really.

In the end it was Granny-ji who got us all sorted out. She arrived one morning, full of busy, and announced, 'this is a thoroughly bad show and it cannot be going on any longer!' When Saachi asked her what she had in mind she said, 'I am leaving it in the hands of the Gods,' and then Saachi said something about tea and yams and everyone else went 'Aaah!'

It turned out the tea and yam thing was an ancient religious festival called a *Theyyam* that was held in the area every year. Saachi explained that during the ceremony different Gods and Goddesses, called Theyyams, entered the bodies of ordinary people. The honour of being a Theyyam was passed down through families. Once they had put on the make-up and the costume, they sort of became the God or Goddess and you could ask them for help with problems in your life. Each Theyyam had a different main deity and some of them were super-powerful and a bit mean, so you had to be careful what you asked for.

On the way to the festival, I wondered which of my problems I should get the Goddess to help with. I had plenty to choose from, including how I was going to survive a day out with Princess Priya. We didn't say a word to each other in the car.

When Saachi drove away leaving me, Priya and Granny-ji standing silently at the side of the road, I realised it was going to be a very long day.

The festival had been going on since early that morning and now the food tent was dishing out bowls of steaming rice and vegetables to a hungry crowd. We took a plateful to Granny-ji who was parked in a folding chair under a tree, and rejoined the end of the queue. Priya handed me a cup of cool, milky liquid. I must have looked a bit dubious because she said, ‘Try it, Cassia. It is called curd water and it is very good for keeping you hydrated.’

Was she talking to me again?

I took a big gulp of the sour, salty drink and whatever else Priya said was drowned out by my gagging noises. Obviously she was still working the hilarious practical jokes. I wished I’d stayed with Granny-ji dozing under the trees.

By the time we reached the front of the dinner queue, my stomach was gurgling loudly . The days at Saachi’s house had really given me a taste for Indian food and as soon as we sat down I started shovelling spicy rice into my mouth with my fingers.

‘I was going to say we have to hurry Cassia, but I can see that is not necessary.’

Priya’s sarky tone made me feel like throwing my lunch at her.

As I scraped the last scraps off my banana-leaf plate, and wiped my hands on the back of my jeans, I noticed that she had only picked at her food.

‘Are you always hungry, Cassia? She said.

‘Yeah, pretty much.’

‘it’s not fair. You eat so much. Maybe I should ask the Theyyam to make me skinny.’

‘Don’t do that.!’

‘Why? Don’t you want me to look good?’

I shook my head, feeling tears starting at the back of my eyes. Priyanka was scowling at me. Whatever I said now, it would come out wrong. I couldn’t tell her the real reason I was scared of diets, scared of her wanting to be skinny. She would only say I was mean or jealous, just like Rachel did.

Rachel said being thinner made her feel good, but it didn’t seem that way to me. Her moods changed a hundred times a day, from mad laughter to crying in the toilets. I tried to tell her how scary she was being, but nothing I said made any difference. She just got angry with me and made me promise to keep quiet. But I couldn’t, and that’s when it got even worse.

Priyanka picked up our plates and threw them into the rubbish bin. I hoped the Theyyam ignored whatever stupid stuff she wanted, but I still didn’t know what I was going to ask for. Getting Lula away from Call-me-V and back to London was high on the list, and there was the hotel development, too. For some reason, I was getting really bothered about that, bothered enough to push it up to the top of the list, maybe. But what about me? If I could have just one chance to have something, then what should it be? And anyway, how would an Indian Goddess understand what a London girl wanted?

I tried to pretend Priyanka wasn’t there while I watched one man prepare in a shady spot under the trees. He lay down on blankets on the ground while another man got busy with his make-up. This was a really important part of the ritual and the people watching stood by respectful and quiet. Granny-ji had told me that this

Theyyam was the Tiger Goddess, Puliyoor Kali, who had been born to the gods Lord Shiva and Parvathy when they'd gone walk-about in the forest.

Using a fine stick and pots of brightly coloured paste, a make up man drew a swirly design which covered the performer's face and upper body. The background was orangey-gold, with thin lines and geometric shapes filled in with a glowing red colour. A thick circle of black outlined his eyes. Once the make up was finished, the Theyyam was helped into a costume of silver jewellery, and an amazing red and gold hooped skirt. Polished twists of silver, fixed behind his teeth, curled out the sides of his mouth like tusks. Finally, a seriously blingy headdress was lifted on to his shoulders. Then the Theyyam picked up a small hand mirror and stared intently into it.

Granny-ji had explained that when he opened his eyes wide, he would see the face of the Goddess staring back from the mirror so this was the moment he transformed and had the power to grant wishes and solve problems. Even though I'd watched it all happen, it was more than someone putting on a costume and I found I couldn't just stare at him like he was an actor or a dancer, any more. He'd gone from an ordinary man to a Goddess.

The drumming signalled the Theyyam's arrival in the temple square and we scrambled to get a good place at the wall. Lots of the festival goers seemed to have questions and problems. They came into the temple with offerings of money and the Goddess, surrounded by musicians and helpers, made slow, but dramatic, progress around the square. Everyone was a bit pushy, but we held on to our places. The Goddess was getting closer and I still hadn't decided what to ask for. Possibilities flew through my mind, but nothing would stick in my head. I had seconds to decide.

Granny-ji said you had to be careful what you wished for because it could really happen, but I didn't even know what I wanted!

The musicians were getting closer to where we were standing and I started to feel panicky. What if something really random and crazy came into my head as the Goddess passed and it came true? Just thinking this cranked up my panic and my mind went into super crazy mode. I had to get a grip. I took a couple of deep breaths and tried to focus on what really mattered to me. What made me feel happy? Then I realised what I really wanted was having everything back the way it was before. I wanted to go back to when I was a girl who hung out in Camden Market, went to school and had a best friend who didn't hate her. Tears were starting to bubble up in my eyes. I tried hard to stop them before anyone saw.

I rubbed my eyes hard with my sleeve. Then I realised the Theyyam was standing right in front of me, staring unblinking into my face. I had the weirdest feeling that the Goddess could see right into my soul and that she knew what I wanted. I started to feel really hot and dizzy. My mouth was dry and I realised I could hardly speak. I swallowed a couple of times and managed to get out the words, 'I just want a friend'. Everything got a bit weird and slo-mo then and I felt my legs go to jelly and I closed my eyes.

'Cassia!' Priyanka had hold of my arm and she was pulling me away from the temple wall.

'You looked really strange then. People were staring at you.'

'Leave me alone, I'm fine! I just need a drink or something.' Priyanka left me standing in the shade and fetched another cup of curd water.

'Really? This is what you think I need?' I held my nose and swallowed the horrible drink. The taste hadn't changed but after a few mouthfuls it did make me feel

a little better. The Tiger Goddess had passed the spot where we'd been standing and the crowd had closed the gap, but I could still feel her eyes burning into my heart. I wondered what she had seen there - probably nothing very interesting. Why would she bother with my problems anyway?

After my moment at the temple wall, Priya said I should go and sit with Granny-ji for a bit and cool down. We still weren't talking much and I guessed she only wanted to make sure I didn't embarrass her again. We had just wandered past a stand covered with strings of woven flowers and leaves when Priyanka grabbed my arm like a maniac. The bruises from my dramatic train rescue had only just stopped hurting and her nails dug into my wrists.

'By the temple pool. It cannot be true!' she shrieked.

'What? Where?'

'Jonny Gold!'

'Oh purllease!' I said sarcastically, but as I looked over to where Priya was pointing, I saw she was right. Even with a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes, it was unmistakably him. He was moving away from us, so I set off at a run. I didn't know how Priya had spotted him, but this was my chance to meet Jonny Gold and I couldn't let her slow me down.

'He's heading for the taxis. We have to hurry!' I shouted. She still had hold of my arm and I was practically dragging her towards the road. The Theyyam was getting busier and I struggled to make my way against the crowd. I quickly gave up on 'excuse-mes' and barged my way through. I had shaken Priya loose and I was moving faster. I could just see Jonny's hat bobbing above the crowd and despite the crush of bodies, I seemed to be getting closer. I looked around to check on Priya, who was making a high-pitched yelping sound like a crazy person, but when I turned back

Jonny had disappeared into a surge of new arrivals. I jumped up and down trying desperately to keep his hat in sight. Finally, I escaped out of the crowd just in time to see Jonny getting into a waiting car. I watched his tattooed arm, dangling out of the car window, as it disappeared into the distance.

Priya crashed into me and grabbed my wrist again.

‘NOOOO!’ we both wailed together and I realised we were hugging each other. Lost in the craziness of actually seeing, then losing, Jonny Gold, neither of us said a word. Slowly, we made our way to where Granny-ji was sitting. We didn’t bother fighting against the crowd any more either, we just let it push and pull us around like two beach balls bobbing on the tide.

‘Was it really, really him?’ Priya said.

She looked so serious I started to laugh. Then she started to laugh, too. We got louder and louder and more and more hysterical. People were beginning to stare. I got a stitch in my side and I had to stop.

Granny-ji was awake when we finally reached her chair and she clapped her hands together as though she was really pleased to see us. I noticed Priya and I were walking with our arms linked together, just like friends out having a good time. And it was true. Not-so-perfect Priya was a secret Jonny Gold grunge girl, and that meant we were bonded in fan-dom for ever.

We got up late the next morning after an OMG-we-love-Jonny-Gold sesh that went on well past midnight. In the middle of the night, I'd remembered the newspaper with his picture on the front page. The one I'd bought during my choking fit in the shop. I gave it to Priya to translate and she said it was a story about the golden one's new music video. Apparently he was looking for a paradise beach to use as a background and had decided Kerala was the perfect place to start looking.

‘Can you imagine how amazing it would be if he came here?’ Priya shrieked when she read it out. ‘Amma would have a nervous breakdown. She absolutely hates pop music and all those people tramping over her precious ecosystem. She’ll go mad!’

I felt a bit uncomfortable hearing Priya talk about her mum like she was crazy. Loopy Lu was one thing, but Saachi was something else. The last few days, Saachi had been really nice to me and told me lots about her research, which was not the yawn-fest I'd imagined. She'd defended exploited workers, stood up for women's rights and had even been arrested a couple of times. She talked to me about when she realised the law could help to change things and how important it was that people with big voices stood up for people whose voices didn't always get heard. She said, ‘Life isn't all ha ha hee hee Cassia, but there is real joy in realising that everyone and everything is connected together’.

After breakfast Priya and I hung around the garden for a bit wondering what to do. She was all for going back to the Theyyam on a hunt for Jonny Gold, but Saachi

asked if we could help the protest by taking photographs of the mangroves that lined the waterways and protected the land. Mangrove trees grew right into the water perched up on their twisty roots like they were on stilts. Saachi explained that the mangrove trees sucked up salty sea-water through their drinking-straw roots, recycling it into fresh water that could be used in the village vegetable plots. Saachi wanted to record how many there were before the developers started chopping them down. She gave me her camera and we dragged a rowing boat down to the river.

Priyanka and I sat at either side of the boat, with an oar each. But right away she went into full princess mode and for a while we just splashed round in circles, laughing and getting wetter and wetter. When we did manage to go in a straightish line, Priya's oars got tangled up in weeds and lily pads and I was afraid we would capsize. In the end, I suggested she should just read her magazine and leave the actual rowing to me.

It was hard work, but after a while I got into the rhythm of twist, dunk and pull on the oars and the boat slid gently through the water leaving only shallow ripples behind. Further up from the riverbank big, brightly painted houses, like Priyanka's, sat partially hidden behind high walls. Some of them were empty and they looked a bit bedraggled. I thought about taking photos of them for Lula, who liked that sort of thing, but I was on a mission for Saachi and I didn't know how long the batteries would last so I rowed on. Priyanka said the owners were away, working, like her dad, in Dubai.

'I wish he wasn't so far away,' she said.

'Yeah, I know what you mean.'

'At least your dad lives in the same city,' she snapped the pages of her magazine.

‘Does your dad come home often?’

‘Not so often lately, but he sends me really nice presents.’

I slid the oars into the water again, ‘What does he think about the hotel?’

‘He says it is a good thing because it will bring money and jobs. He thinks Amma gets too sentimental about the village.’ Then, she said she kind of agreed with her dad about the development. She thought it would be nice to have some good shops and maybe a few rich tourists around. She told me that her dad got cross with Saachi for getting involved in stuff that he said wasn’t her problem.

‘But, it’s good that she cares about people, isn’t it?’ I said.

She didn’t reply and I wondered how you knew for sure when something wasn’t your problem. The way Saachi talked about the environment seemed really personal, like she had decided one day to *make* it her problem no matter what anyone else thought. She was a bit like Dad, he made stuff his problem too. He got up a height about all kinds of things - mostly war, discrimination, and people who didn't pick up their dog's poo. I thought about them both, taking on the bad guys, like they were on a special mission to protect the world. Maybe one day I would be on a mission of my own. But what could I do? Maybe recording the mangroves for Saachi was a good enough start.

Tucking the oars into the side of the boat, I started taking the pictures she said she needed. Priyanka dropped her magazine. It lay flapping in the bottom of the boat. Skinny models glowered from the glossy pages.

‘They don’t look like that in real life’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They mess around with the pictures to make the clothes look better. Dad says they should be ashamed of themselves.’

Priya frowned. 'But being thin is good.'

My hands started to tremble so much I had to put the camera down. The thought of my new friend, Priya, turning into Rachel made me feel sick. So I told her all about what had happened. I told her about the dieting and the mood swings and about Rachel ending up in hospital. I told her how Rachel went from being a funny, happy girl to an angry skeleton. I didn't tell her what happened to me afterwards. I wasn't ready to tell anyone that bit, yet.

'I was so jealous when I first met you, Priya'.

'Why?'

'I thought I'd be something special here, just because I was from London and then it turned out you were waaay cooler than me.'

'Actually, I was also worried you'd be super-cool, just because you were from London. Imagine my disappointment!' she laughed.

'Oh very Ha! Ha!' I laughed and splashed her with river water.

'I really wanted us to be best friends, Cass.'

She smiled at me and I realised my hands had stopped shaking. I picked up the camera and scanned the riverbank.

'Do you want to be a lawyer like your mum? I asked Priyanka.

'Actually, I would really like to be involved in the fashion industry.'

'Lula reckons London is the world fashion capital, she's been shoving brochures for design courses at me for ages,' I complained.

'I'd love to go to London, but I don't think my father would approve.'

'But Granny-ji is a big fan.'

‘Granny-ji’s never been! Her ideas about England all come from her old books. Once, I heard her ask your amma how the London pea-soupers were these days.’

‘What’s a pea-souper?’

‘Actually, I have no idea, your amma just laughed and said they’d been blown away with the bowler hats.’

I stared across the river, shading my eyes from the glare of the water with Saachi’s camera. While Priya talked about fashion, I snapped away until the low battery light began to flash on the screen.

I picked up the oars and we splashed our way back to where the river joined the sea. I tied up the boat, and we went and sat on the beach. I checked the photos I’d taken. I hoped they were good enough. It looked like they were all in focus and I hoped Saachi would be pleased. I even managed to add the date and time to the album.

We swam for a bit, and then, after agreeing to meet up later at the house, I left Priya on the beach with her magazine and walked down the path which led to the netball court. As I got closer, I hoped I would hear the shouts of a match going on, but there was no one around. A metal fence had been put up all around it and the gate was padlocked. The goal posts had already been sawn through ready for the bulldozers. They lay on the ground like felled trees, the ribbons on the hoops trailing on the dusty ground. Seeing the empty court made me feel really sad for Nandita. I was glad I was doing something to stop the development now and I wondered when I’d see Dev again so I could tell him.

Up on the hill away from the beach, was the fencing which surrounded the new hotel development. A red truck was parked by the entrance gate. I wanted to get a few photos of the site for Saachi, so I turned off the path and started to follow the steep track upwards. As I reached the top I heard voices coming from near the sign board. I couldn't understand the words, but one of the voices sounded familiar.

I suddenly felt really uncomfortable, like I was eavesdropping on someone I knew and it was too late to let them know I was there. I didn't want to be seen so I ducked down behind the truck. The voices got louder and a man laughed. And now I was certain I knew his voice. Gravel crunched as the man walked away from me and I stood up to get a better view.

Even from the back I recognised him. It was Call-me-V. He was shaking hands with a man in a suit who seemed to be showing him around. Whatever Call-me-V had done, it had obviously made the man very happy. I ducked back down behind the truck. What was Call-me-V doing here? Why was he being all buddy-buddy with the hotel developers? I knew he was a businessman like Priyanka's dad so maybe he thought the hotel was a good idea, too. I raised the camera to my face and zoomed in on Call-me-V's head. His big smile was in perfect focus. Seeing it super-sized, I felt confused. He looked so relaxed and friendly, but what was he doing at the development? Had he been pretending all the time to be Saachi's friend. If Saachi found out she would go beyond Kali. Then, with a rush of excitement, I realised I was right about him all along. Now all I needed to do was tell Lula and she would see him for the double-crossing stranger that he was and probably call off the wedding. I pressed the green button and heard the camera whirr and click. It wasn't a loud noise, but Call-me-V looked across the bonnet of the truck and seemed to stare right at me. I felt my face flush and put the camera down.

There was no one at the house when I got back. I ran from room to room, looking for someone to tell my big news, but they were all empty and Saachi's car was gone, too. Even Priya had gone off without me. I took a shower and then went to the kitchen and made myself a drink and a snack. It was weird being here alone. The house was quiet and every sound I made echoed in the empty rooms. I fetched my music player, but the batteries were dead. My Peacock book was lurking under a chair on the terrace. I had nothing else to do so I cracked it open again and caught up with the misery fest that was Una's life.

Her very wicked step-mother, Alix, was shopping in Paris and Una was off with her Dad on an amazing sightseeing trip around India, but she wasn't having a good time and kept being sick. Una missed the poet boy too, but she didn't tell her dad about him. I thought she should, just as I wished Lula had told me about Call-me-V. Secrets just got in the way and made stuff even harder. Then I remembered I hadn't told her about Rachel, either. Maybe, like me, Lula just never found the right time.

'Oh there you are. I've been looking for you for ages, Cass!' said Lula as she appeared on the terrace.

Lula sat cross legged on the ground. All the spiky energy she'd been carrying around was gone. She looked really tired and a bit sad. For a while Lula and I just sat staring out into the garden. She had stretched out her legs and her pink feet lay grilling in the sun. Her toes were already peeling.

I realised I could tell her about Call-me-V now. Dish the dirt about him and the developers. Then she'd realise that he was the wrong person for her and start paying me a bit more attention.

'Mum, can I tell you something?'

'Of course, Cass, but do you mind if I go first?'

Typical, even when I found the right time to say something, it was wrong. I shrugged my shoulders and she took a deep breath, blowing the air out through her lips as though she was about to jump off a very high diving board.

'The shop is in trouble, Cass, and I'm going to have to close it down.'

'What?'

'I'm so sorry Cass. It has been losing money for a while and Auntie Doré says the January sale has been a disaster. I've finally run out of time and money. I hate to do this, the shop means everything to me, and I know I've let you down, but I don't have any other choice.' She said it all in a rush as though she didn't dare to stop.

I couldn't believe what she was telling me. It had to be a mistake or some kind of horrible joke. I thought about our lovely shop. The way it smelled of incense and lemon grass. The rich colours of the cushions and rugs I lay on to play with my dolls when I was little. People's faces breaking into smiles when they walked through the door. It was our little palace and Lula was the queen bee - no wonder she'd been stressy.

'I thought the shop was doing really well...why didn't you tell me?'

'I didn't want to disappoint you, Cass. You like all your nice things.'

She was making it sound like it was partly my fault, that keeping the shop was done for me.

'What about our celebrity clients?'

‘They’ve moved on to the next trend. I think Mongolia is the new kid on the block now.’

‘Can’t Auntie Doré help?’

‘She said she’d put money in, but only if I find a new range to sell.’

‘What about Dad?’

‘Your dad has his own life now. It’s my shop. It’s broken and I don’t know how to fix it, but I won’t ask your dad to throw his money away too.’ She stared out into the garden and started twisting her earrings.

My head was still spinning, and I didn’t really believe what Lula said could be true. But my body felt as if I’d been running down hill really fast. There was a panic feeling in my chest and my arms and legs were all shaky.

I took a couple of deep breaths. ‘But, how could you let this happen!’

‘I’m sorry Cass. I kept hoping things would change and they didn’t and then it was too late.’

I didn’t want to be angry with her, but I was. My whole life was going down the tubes and it was her fault. Mean, spiteful words jumped into my head and fizzed there. It would be so easy just to let them out, to blame her for everything. Yet it wasn’t really her fault. I knew how hard she worked and how much the shop meant to her. She didn’t mean for it to turn out this way. I looked at her hands twisting at her earrings and watched the expression on her face as she tried to pretend everything would be OK. I realised how much it must have cost to buy my plane ticket. She could have just left me with Dad, but she knew I was unhappy and lonely and so she brought me with her even though it must have made her money troubles even worse. I felt a big wave of love surge up from my toes to the top of my head.

‘Don’t worry, Mum. You’ll work it out and I’ll help – I can stay off school for as long as you need me to.’

‘Oh Cass, that’s a lovely offer, but you can’t be on holiday forever.’ She gave my hand a big squeeze. A single tear had run down her face following the smile lines at the side of her mouth and now it was about to fall from her chin. I caught it with the tip of my finger. It shimmered in the sun and then dropped on to the floor.

‘Please don’t cry, Mum. You won’t lose your shop, I promise.’

She wiped her eyes on her t-shirt and sniffed. ‘I’m so sorry Cass, I know you want to help and I love you for it, but I don’t think there’s anything anyone can do.’

‘What does Call-me... I mean what does Mr Chaudhury say?’

‘He says not to worry. It’s just Karma, the good and bad things that I’ve done balancing themselves, and everything will work out in the end.’

‘That’s just stupid! There must be something we can do.’

‘Well, we could just stay here, Cass, with Vikram. It would be much sooner than I’d planned, but there are good schools and you could learn traditional Indian dancing.’

I really hoped she was joking, but she had her super-serious face on. It was worse than I thought. It wouldn’t just be the shop I’d lose; it would be everything I knew.

I was getting used to being in India and even though it was different from what I’d expected, I’d started to enjoy the every day stuff of being here. I thought back to the first days in Kochi, the scabby dog and the beggar lady, and I realised that the stuff that stressed me in the beginning felt different now. I still noticed it, but I didn’t just compare it with what I knew anymore. But being on holiday and catching the

rays was one thing. leaving London and turning into an Indian school girl - that was something else entirely.

I reached out for the camera. If I showed her the picture now, showed her Call-me-V hugging his brochure with his big bad buddy, we could go back to London, and then... what ?

It was so complicated; whatever I did, something would change. How could I decide? I stared at Lula hoping to find a clue in her face. But, she just looked defeated. I was used to Lula fighting for stuff, but now it seemed like my poor mum had no punches left. I remembered how happy she looked when she was with Call-me-V, all smiley and girlish. How she'd walked around the big shed, all serious, with a fan of incense sticks, waving perfumed smoke into the air. I pushed the camera away again. There had to be a better way to do this, a way that wouldn't break her heart.

'Don't sell the shop, Mum, not yet. Wait, just for a bit.'

'I can't wait any longer Cass, I've flapped around for too long already.'

'Please, Mum.'

'Why?'

'Maybe I can think something.'

'There's nothing to be done, Cass.'

'Please!'

'Alright. I won't do anything for a few more days, but Doré wants to get the estate agents on the case before I lose any more money.'

She stood up and wiped her eyes again and said she was going to her room to have a lie down. The way she looked was scaring me. I didn't mind Lula acting a bit loopy lou, but really I expected her to be solid, dependable, sure of everything and

able to sort out all our problems. Now, I would have to help her. But, how? What could I do to make things right?

I sat on the terrace thinking about what had just happened. I remembered our first day here, Princess Priya, the banana trees, the killer wave and the music-filled party. It seemed like it had all happened a hundred years ago. I felt tired and my arms were sore from the rowing. I lay back on the wooden floor feeling the heat soak into my aching shoulders. I could hear the sea in the distance and slowly my eyes were starting to close. Maybe this was all just a terrible dream. I would wake up on the plane with Bollywood on the TV and drool on my chin.

I thought at first the shaking ground was my in my imagination, but when I opened my eyes I saw that the terrace was definitely vibrating. Was it an earthquake? I sat up just as Priya hurled herself across the floor and landed at my feet. She was panting hard, but still trying to speak.

‘It’s him!’ she shrieked finally managing to communicate something I could sort of understand. ‘He’s coming here, he’s actually coming here in actual real life!’

‘Who? And please stop yelling, Priya. Seriously, I’m having the worst day ever and you’re making my ears bleed!’

‘Him! Jonny Gold! He’s found his dream beach and it is this one! You’re wrong, Cassia, you’re not having the worst day ever, this must actually be the best day of our lives.’

When Priyanka finally calmed down, she explained that Jonny Gold’s record label, Gilded Bear, had chosen our beach to film his new song. Then I knew I must be dreaming. Perhaps a coconut had landed on my head and I was actually concussed and raving, or maybe it was Priya who’d been hit on the head – she was raving away enough for both of us. I must have been giving her a proper ‘yeah, right!’ look because she dragged me back into the house and barged into Saachi’s office.

Saachi was talking to someone on the phone. She looked a bit cross and parked the receiver back with a thunk as Priya launched herself into ‘she-doesn’t-believe-me-but-it’s-true-Amma-isn’t-it?’ Saachi snorted and said, ‘Om Shanti, my eye!’ and that yes, it was true, but she couldn’t imagine why anyone would be happy

to have the honky-tonky circus coming to town and why didn't we go away and find something useful to do?

Priya dragged me back into the garden and we headed for the hammock. She was practically hyperventilating with excitement and I was glad when she sat down. She swung her legs over the side of hammock and gave the ground a shove with her feet.

‘We have to get him to notice us, Cassia! We have to get on TV!’

‘Agreed, but what did you have in mind, besides super-loud squealing, of course?’

‘Aren't you the one who's the dancing queen?’

‘Well, yes, but...’

‘No buts, this is serious business! You have to get some kind of dance routine together so I can make the costumes and then we can show Jonny Gold when he comes to the beach, and he will see that I am super talented, and Amma and Daddy-ji will understand that being in fashion has good earning potential and let me go to college in London.’

She gave the ground another hard shove and the hammock swung wildly over the flower bed. She had it all worked out, and I had to admit it was a killer idea. Not just for her, but for me too. If I could get on to Jonny Gold's video, show him what a brilliant dancer I was, then he'd probably want me to be in all his music videos, pay me loads to choreograph and even tour with the band. And, I could talk to him about the hotel.

He would hate the idea of the development, his lyrics were so spiritual he was bound to be an eco freak like Saachi and because he was such an important person he would be able to stop the hotel being built.

Then I could tell Lula and Saachi about Call-me-V and his sneaky investments and Saachi would chase him back to Kochi. And Jonny would be so happy with my dancing he'd buy loads of stuff from the shop and Lula would be able to keep it open, after all and she'd be so happy she'd hardly notice Call-me-V had gone and we could all hang out together in London. It was perfect, utterly perfect!

A fly landed on my arm. I looked down to swat it away and saw that the swirly mehendi tattoo Mrs Chaudhury had painted on my hand was almost completely faded. She had told me to be careful what I wished for, but this was a real wish come true and nothing could go wrong.

‘Alright, Priya, let’s get started. First, we need some music!’

‘No, first we need some outfits!’ She swung out of the hammock and jogged back to the house, shouting, ‘Come on, Cassia, hurry up!’

Priya was on a life-changing mission and it was all a bit scary. How was she so sure of what she wanted? Maybe big ambition ran in her family. Whatever, I was happy to get carried along by her unstoppable energy. I struggled to escape from the folds of hammock which had wrapped me up like a banana skin and followed her up the stairs.

When I got to her room, she was already throwing great heaps of clothes on to her bed and muttering. It seemed safer to stay out of the way, but she pulled me back into the middle of the room and flashed one top after another under my chin. They all looked good enough to me, but within a few minutes she had three piles heaped on the bed. As each outfit was tested she stared for half a second then barked the, ‘Yes!’, ‘No!’, or ‘Maybe’ which decided which pile it joined.

Just as I thought I was going to faint with all the stand-still-and-stand-up-straight! stuff, Priya finally announced that she was satisfied and what did I think?

She propelled me towards the opposite wall. I looked at myself in the mirror. The bluey green silk was the same colour she'd chosen for me for the bridesmaid's dress, the one I'd seen in the sketch pad and ripped up in a fit of jealous temper. The fabric, edged in gold, bounced light on to my face making my skin look smooth and creamy, instead of the pale freckled wreck I was used to seeing. It made my eyes look bigger too and the mop of dreary hair I so hated, glowed around my face.

My lips widened as I smiled at myself. Priya had loaded my arms with bracelets from an overflowing jewellery box and now she was stitching a patterned scarf to the bottom of my jeans.

'This outfit is totally amazing, Priya!'

She was busy changing into a version of my outfit in pink and gold. Standing side by side we looked like an advert for toothpaste and global harmony. I went to my case and took out the present I had bought for her in London.

'Here, Priya, I hope you like them,' I said.

She unwrapped the tissue paper and I watched her face break into a huge smile as she slid the bracelets over her arm.

'*Very* urban cool, Cass! How did you guess this is exactly my style?' I muttered something about Top Shop and she gave me a hug. I found the scented oil Mrs Jaffrey had given me in Kochi and splashed it on our outfits. The room filled up with the smell of flowers.

'That smells delicious!' Priya said. 'Come on Cass, it's time to teach me how to dance!' She snapped the lid of her laptop open and pushed it towards me.

Looking at her Jonny Gold playlist, I realised that, compared with Priya, I was just an amateur. She had everything downloaded, absolutely *everything*, including some mixes I'd never heard. She plugged in a couple of speakers and Jonny Gold's

beautiful voice came pouring into the room like runny honey. I lifted my arms up high above my head, ready to start dancing, and the bangles tinkled as they cascaded down from my wrists. The Golden one had only got to the first chorus of *Galloping Soul* when Saachi came blasting in after him.

‘Girls, you really need to keep the noise down. I’m trying to work, you know.’

‘But, it’s Jonny Gold, Amma!’

‘Well, please take Mr Karma Cola and his music somewhere else.’

‘But, we need to dance!’

‘Cassia, I was hoping you had some time to help me, as a matter of fact. Your photos of the mangroves were excellent and now it is important to catalogue them properly so they can be used as evidence.’

I wanted to say yes, but before I had a chance Priya jumped up.

‘She can’t help you, Amma. She’s helping me!’

‘I don’t understand,’ Saachi said. So Priya explained our plan to her, how getting on the video would help to stop the hotel. Saachi looked a bit sceptical and I realised I would have to choose between dancing with Priya and working with Saachi. I really wanted to do both, but there wasn’t enough time.

‘Could I help with the cataloguing, tomorrow?’

‘OK, if you really need to practice now, go to Vikram’s workshop. The electricity is on and I’m sure he won’t mind.’

I was about to argue – I really didn’t want to bump into Call-me-Sneaky today, but Priya had already scooped up her laptop and was shoving me towards the door.

There was a breeze scudding up from the beach and our scarves twirled to escape, kite-like, into the sky. I thought our costumes looked a bit stagey for a normal day. But I saw how people looked at us and smiled. Priya obviously had a talent for this whole dressing-up thing. She talked non-stop all the way up the road about how she really wanted to do fashion and how she'd had to keep it secret from her mum and dad because it wasn't a serious enough career for them. She'd worked extra hard at school so they couldn't accuse her of wasting time reading magazines and shopping.

In Dubai, with her dad, she raked through every designer shop in the city, noticing what had sold well and what was still dragging on the rails. She'd search out vintage stuff online, too. She'd shown me a tailored wool jacket with huge shoulder pads that Lula had brought over for her on last year's buying trip. I remembered it hanging in our wardrobe for ages. Priya had taken it apart like a clothes surgeon. She stripped it down to the skeleton, exposing the guts so she could see how it was put together.

For Priya, fashion wasn't just frocks it was practically a science project and I recognised that same obsessive head that Lula got when she was looking at fabric. I felt a twinge of jealousy. Maybe Priya should be the one to help save the shop? She probably had loads of good ideas and Lula obviously loved her. Then, I remembered Priya was my friend. It wasn't a competition. She cared about Lula and about me. She didn't think I was a big-mouth loser, which was what Rachel thought. The dresses she'd designed for the wedding were beautiful, especially mine.

'I'm sorry I ripped up your sketch books, Priya.'

'It's OK. Now we're friends, I can do something even better!'

It turned out there was a major flaw in our brilliant plan to impress Jonny Gold with our talents - and the flaw was Priya. I showed her all my best moves, but she just didn't get it. She looked pained by my choreography, as though she was fighting, not dancing.

'Priya! I thought you liked Jonny Gold?'

'I love him! I just can't move like that!'

'Look, just watch me and do *exactly* what I do!' I begged her for what felt like the zillionth time. I swung into the sequence again. Loosing my balance a little in the middle didn't matter because I just added an extra jump and a side-glide step.'

'I am doing *exactly* what you do, but you keep changing it!'

'It's not a change, it's just a bit of... improvisation.'

'But, how can I follow you if you are making it up?'

'How can you be so utterly rubbish at this? I thought all Indian girls were genetically graceful. Just let your body follow the music!'

'But, I can't! That jumpy jerking isn't what my body hears!' she looked as though she was about to cry.

'Please, try again Priya, you're doing really well.'

'You just said I was utterly rubbish!' She sat down.

'I didn't really mean it, honestly,' it was a lie but I couldn't let her give up now - I needed a dance partner.

'Priya, get up. I'll stop shouting, I promise.'

'OK, but this is the last time, my feet really hurt. Actually, my everything really hurts.'

I heard the workshop door open and guessed Call-me-V had arrived. I wouldn't be able to dance while he was lurking. Why did he have to come in and spoil

everything? Wasn't it enough that he was involved in the development and lying to Saachi? The door creaked shut again.

Had Call-me-V been spying on us? I felt a shiver of fury go up my spine and I turned around. The bright sunlight streaming through the open door kept the figure in silhouette, making it hard to see. There were two figures in the doorway now.

The taller one stepped into the light and my heart skipped a beat or three.

'Hello again, London Girl, what kind of trouble are you in today?'

Nandita came in behind Dev, waved to me, and settled herself on one of the workbenches. I cued the music and counted Priya in. They both watched us begin the routine without saying anything. It started off all right, but after the first chorus I was in deep despair. Nandita giggled as Priya flapped around, biting her bottom lip in fierce concentration. I felt strange with Dev watching and I realised my body had gone a bit awkward and off the beat, too.

I knew Nandita couldn't hear the music, so I was really surprised when halfway through the second verse she jumped up and stood facing me and started mirroring every step and twist I took. She seemed to have a way of watching me and moving her own body all at the same time, like there was a perfect pathway between her brain and her feet. Perhaps it was the signing that had trained her to know what her body was doing without checking. I didn't know for sure how she did it, but whatever special powers she was calling on she could dance Priya into the cheap seats. I was feeling some serious pressure, too.

The track came to an end and Priya flopped down on the ground. I was about to do the same, when I realised Nandita was still dancing. The music had stopped, so she must have had a soundtrack in her head that was driving her movements, but they weren't anything I'd shown her. She reminded me of the Kathakali actors we'd seen in Kochi, because Nandita wasn't just dancing she was story telling. I'd never

watched dancing without music before and in the beginning it looked strange. I knew Dev and Priya were still in the room and I knew that there was a busy village on the other side of the wooden doors, but the only sounds I heard were Nandita's feet scuffing puffs of dust up from the dirt floor. No wonder she was so brilliant at netball. She'd move furiously fast then stop and hold a pose until her muscles must have been screaming.

At home I swaggered and clowned to my favourite tracks because it made me feel different, special - I could lose ordinary Cassia in a fantasy of glamour and fame. But it looked like Nandita danced to be more real, not to escape into dreams but to escape from them. I could see that she was a dancer, a proper dancer. When I danced I was having a good time, but compared with Nandita, I was just playing at dance. What was it Dev had said about 'timepass things' and things that really mattered?

Finally, Nandita stopped dancing and did a very serious Namaste bow which I returned. Priya was whooping and clapping madly and over the noise I shouted, 'Dev, how do you sign "that was amazingly incredible!"?' Then, without waiting for an answer, I gave Nandita a huge hug and nearly lifted her off her feet. Dev had been doing something on Priya's computer and I saw him look up and smile at his sister in a way that made my already racing heart bang in my chest.

Priyanaka was making it's-snack-time noises, but I wanted to keep practising so I pretended I couldn't hear her and went to see what Dev was doing.

I guessed Nandita was hungry too because with a bang of the door, she and Priya were gone and it was just me and Dev and it seemed suddenly to have got loads hotter in the room. I thought I should say something, but I had no idea what.

'Your sister is a brilliant dancer.'

Dev didn't answer. He was doing something on Priya's computer and the tapping of the keyboard sounded unnaturally loud. I wiped a trickle of sweat out of my eye.

Finally Dev looked up from the screen, pressed enter and said, 'What do you think of this, London Girl?'

A tune started to drift out of the speakers. I couldn't make it out at first. It sounded like Jonny Gold's new track *Om Shanti, Babe* but there was another beat running underneath it, just nudging the music towards something real, something more exciting. As the song went on, the Indian beat got stronger and Jonny's voice gently faded into the background. Then the music became more melodic, more Indian and I could hear sitars and drums. And now, Jonny was back, his voice drifting in and out of the rhythms with a cool London feel.

'How did you do that?' I said, looking over his shoulder at the virtual mixing desk he'd dug out of Priya's laptop.

'I told you I liked computers and your friend has a lot of music in here.' He patted the machine like it was a puppy who'd done a clever trick.

'You made it sound much more proper Indian.'

'It *should* sound properly Indian - the track is called *Om Shanti, Babe*, after all!'

'What does Om Shanti actually mean?'

'Om is the sound of the universe and Shanti means peace. It can be said as a way of wishing well to someone you care about.' He smiled at me.

'This will be perfect for Nandita! Do you think she'd like to dance with us?'

'She will like that very much.'

'But how will you explain the tune to her?'

‘If the music is loud enough, Nandi can feel the rhythm and also I will show her. I can dance too, London Girl.’

Then, he put on something slow and dreamy and held out his hand for me. I stood up and tried to remember some of Nandita’s graceful moves, but after a couple of steps I realised this was just Saturday night dancing, and it was great. We’d nearly got to the end of the track when, with a dying groan, the music stopped and all the lights went out. In the sudden silence I felt Dev’s hand brushing mine. He was standing very close to me and I could feel his warm breath on my neck. His hand touched my shoulder and then his lips were very close to mine, too.

‘Cassia, I wish to kiss you. Will this be all right?’

Surprised, I pulled back a little and felt his hand drop away. I reached out for it in the darkness, feeling his cool skin and smooth finger nails. My skin went goosebumpy, the hairs standing on end and sending shivers into my spine. I absolutely definitely did want to kiss him, but it had to be a proper kiss, no crashing teeth, nothing bitey, or grabby, or slobbery that might spoil this utterly perfect moment.

‘Cassia?’ he said.

‘Um, sorry, I think that would be all right... I mean, yes.’

And moving towards each other very slowly, carefully avoiding bumping noses, we kissed. And it was perfect, gentle, and exciting and totally amazing. Smiling and holding hands in the dark, I realised Priya was right. This was the strangest, most unexpected, and without a doubt the very, very best day of my life.

It seemed as if a hundred years had passed before Priya and Nandita came crashing back into the workshop with a bag full of food and bottles of water. The electricity was still off, but we hunted around the cupboards, still full of the old pans and candle-making equipment, until we found some samples left over from when Call-me-V's shed was a proper workshop. The wicks were dry and dusty, but they lit easily enough and the golden-coloured pools of light gave the space the feeling of a stage set. Priya said it was like Diwali, the festival of light, had come round again. She said Granny-ji remembered when the workshop had been a good business, employing a lot of local people. They had produced handmade beeswax candles that were well known for burning with a strong, clear light that lasted for ages.

The workshop slowly filled up with the faint smell of honey, smoking up from the melting beeswax, and reminding me of Auntie Doré's super-swishy dining room decorated with perfumed candles.

We washed our hands and then all sat down together and unpacked the food. As we ate, I told Priya about how Dev had saved me from certain death in the train. I might have made it sound a bit too dramatic because Priya looked at Dev like he was a superhero.

It was weird acting all normal after me and Dev had kissed. I wanted to sit close to him, but since Priya and Nandita had come back I felt stupidly self-conscious. I kept remembering the feel of his lips on mine and I realised I was smiling like an idiot. I hoped he felt the same. I thought Nandita had noticed something because she

kept staring at Dev and he kept avoiding her eyes. Luckily, she was practically bursting with questions about Jonny Gold. With Dev signing, I explained about using the dance routine to get Jonny to notice us, and how we thought he'd be so impressed he'd listen to our story about the hotel. It would be brilliant to get such an important person on our side.

While Priya was doing her designer bit on our costumes back at the house, I'd made some notes about the plan and now I pulled them out of my pocket. I realised now that Nandita should be the star, not me - she was a much better dancer and I knew that Jonny Gold would be really impressed by her. I said that we'd have to pick a spot on the beach where he'd be able to see us. Then we could start the music and just let our perfect plan play out. I had a list of things we needed to do and, while everyone was eating, I read it out.

I got a round of applause when I'd finished, just like Saachi at the party when she'd explained about the hotel development to the villagers. Dev smiled at me and Nandita gave me a thumbs-up sign. I realised I'd got them all organised and committed and that meant I must be pretty good at this stuff. Priya started planning a make-over for Nandita. It was so good to be in a gang of friends again.

We finished eating and Dev cued up the music. Maybe it was following Nandita, or all of us dancing together, but something had inspired Priya and she was keeping time at last. We went through it a zillion times, with Dev making adjustments to the music as we worked on the routine. It was turning into a kind of musical play about squabbling sisters all in love with the same boy. Nandita was the star and we each had different styles of dancing. Dev signalled the changes to Nandita, counting out the beats in sign.

We had it almost perfect when the big wooden doors opened. I was hoping to see Saachi or Lula coming through the door, but it was Call-me-V, jangling the keys.

‘I hope the workshop has been a good place for you, but it is time to be going home now.’

‘Already!’ wailed Priya.

‘It is actually quite late, Priyanka.’

Trust him to come and spoil our fun, I thought. I started blowing out the candles. Dev and Nandita were already heading for the door and I realised I didn’t even know where they lived.

As I reached them, Call-me-V stepped in front of me. ‘Cassia, I am very happy to see you are making new friends here.’

I wanted to get outside, but Call-me-V was determined to get into a conversation. ‘So, where did you meet these young people?’

Why was Call-me-V being so nosy about Dev and Nandita? What did my friends have to do with him? I pushed passed him trying to get outside as fast as I could. I wanted to say goodbye to Dev properly, but it was too late. When I looked around, the road outside was empty. We hadn’t even organised when we would meet again. Why was Call-me-V always in the way, interfering in my life?

Priya came out of the shed and linked arms with me and we hurried down the hill back to the house.

Saachi and Lula were waiting in the living room when we got back. They both had their serious faces on and Lula was twisting her earrings manically. It wasn’t that late and they knew where we’d been, but still I wondered if we were in trouble. The rest obviously hadn’t done Lula much good.

‘Amma! We have to keep practising. You should see us all dancing, it is amazing!’

‘Calm down, Priya. You must please stop shouting and listen. This is important and not easy to say.’ She took a big swallow of water and cleared her throat. ‘I have found out who owns Aurum Incorporated. I had my suspicions confirmed today at the law firm in Kannur. As a matter of fact, the clue was in their name, Aurum. It’s Latin, but until I had some spying done and remembered the graffiti about the bears that Cassia noticed, I couldn’t make the connection.’

I didn’t know what she was getting at, but I could see by Priyanka’s expression that she was at least one step ahead of me and it wasn’t good news.

Saachi looked very uncomfortable. ‘Aurum is another word for gold. The company is registered to something called Gilded Bear Records, in London. I’m so sorry, girls, I really am, but it’s your Jonny Gold who is behind the hotel development.’

‘That isn’t true!’ I protested. ‘He only found the perfect beach for his video a few days ago.’

‘Cassia, I think the story in the newspaper was just a publicity stunt.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘It’s not really a video for his new song, it’s more of an advert for his new hotel. People will see the beach and want to visit it. Having his own hotel here means he will make money out of fans and tourists.’

‘But he’s really into the environment, Amma. His lyrics are all about love and nature. It can’t be him!’ said Priya, shaking her head.

‘I know you don’t want to believe me, but I have seen the evidence. There is no doubt in my mind. Jonny Gold and his record label are the ones building the hotel.’

I sat very still for a minute, and then I felt our dance-practice picnic rising back up my throat. There was a very good chance I was going to throw up. When I thought of all our plans to impress him with our dancing in order to get him on our side about the development, my stomach squeezed into a tight ball. I thought Jonny Gold was going to be the one to help us, and all the time he was the one we had to stop.

I heard someone shout, 'No!' and I realised it was me. I ran out of the room and slammed the door so hard that a chunk of plaster fell off the wall. It landed on the tiles with a sharp crack and a puff of chalky dust rose up from the floor. The stillness of the garden swallowed me up for a while, and all I could hear was my own jagged breathing.

Then, from the house, Saachi's voice cut into the night air. The veranda light clicked on and I saw her silhouette gliding purposefully across the grass towards me. 'Cassia, I'm so sorry.'

'You're wrong,' I yelled back. 'You must have made a mistake!'

'There is no mistake, I'm afraid.'

'It can't be him, Saachi, it just *can't*!'

'Oh, Cassia, I know it's hard when your heroes let you down.'

'I want to go home!' I cried and the tears started gushing, and my nose began to run, and my mouth got tight and watery. She hugged me as I blubbed and howled until my chest hurt.

Suddenly, barking echoed from somewhere in the dark and I felt her laugh.

'I'm sorry, Cassia. I know it's not funny, but you've set the tree-foxes off.'

I rubbed my face on her soft shawl. 'I'm sorry I shouted at you.'

'Don't worry, you had a lot to shout about.'

‘How am I going to tell Dev and Nandita? They’ll be so disappointed.’

‘This isn’t your fault, Cassia. You were trying to do a good thing. You could all still dance, you know. I’d understand. The hotel development isn’t really your battle to fight.’

‘But, it feels like it is now,’ I said. And then I explained about promising to save the netball court for Nandita and her friends, and how I wanted to do something which mattered to other people, just like her.

‘Well, so long as you understand taking on the world will make your life a lot more complicated, Cassia.’

Suddenly I found myself blurting out, ‘Priya doesn’t want to be a lawyer, you know.’

‘I am not surprised. Mums are a hard act to follow.’

‘Lula will look after her if she comes to London to study fashion.’

‘I know. Luella is my best friend. I’ve always thought of her as Priya’s second mother, and I am so glad to have met you, at last.’

Talking to Saachi was different from talking to Lula or Dad and I knew I could tell her things that were difficult to share with them. I really wanted to tell her the whole story about Rachel and me. It was like a bad tooth that wouldn’t stop hurting until it was taken out.

‘Saachi, my best friend, Rachel, stopped eating, but I was the only one who seemed to notice.’

‘What a big responsibility for you!’

‘She wore big baggy clothes, but underneath, I knew she was getting and thinner. It made me scared.’

‘That must have been very difficult for you, Cassia.’

‘She made me promise to keep it a secret, but I couldn’t.’ She was so angry when I talked to one of the teachers. She turned all my other friends against me, too. They started to call me horrible names and they even said it was my fault Rachel was in hospital.’

‘The world feels very lonely when you lose your friends.’

‘I was scared they were right, that it was all my fault and that I deserved to feel bad. I felt ashamed of what was happening to me.’

‘That is how bullies work, Cassia. They make the person feel as though it is their own fault.’

‘Did I do the right thing?’

‘She didn’t answer right away and I knew she was thinking hard about what to say. It really mattered to me what Saachi thought and I realised I was holding my breath.’

‘Yes, I do think you were right, Cassia. Your friend needed help and one day I am sure she will understand.’

‘It doesn’t feel like it, now.’

‘I know, but that will change, I’m sure of it,’ she smiled and gave me a hug. I felt so relieved to have finally told someone, someone who understood how bad I’d been feeling. The relief was so huge I started to laugh, getting louder and louder then the gulps and hiccups turned into crying, again.

Saachi stayed with me, gently stroking my head, until I was all cried out. Then she went back into the house and a few minutes later Priya came and sat with me. I saw she’d been crying, too.

‘Don’t be sad, Priya.’

‘But I can never listen to Jonny Gold’s songs ever again!’

‘Yes, you can. He may be a greedy, lying, creepster, but he can still sing.’

The next morning, after a rather gloomy breakfast, Priya set off for school, grumbling all the way up the road. It was a cloudy day, but still really hot and the lack of air made me feel flat and cranky. Lula hadn't even got up yet and Saachi said I should let her sleep as she had a lot on her mind. She wasn't the only one, I thought.

There was no point trying to find Dev and Nandita and I didn't want to just hang about all by myself. So, when Saachi suggested a trip into the hills, I thought it would be a really good chance to talk to her more about her life in England. She'd told me that she and Lula met when they were students. They were eighteen years old and a long way from home. Lula said hello one morning at the library. It turned out that Lula was looking for a flatmate. Saachi was happy to share with Lula even though Lula couldn't cook and was *really* untidy.

On Saturdays, Saachi searched the west end of the city for Keralan spices. Lula went with her and that was where her obsession with Indian fabrics started. They explored the castles of Northumberland and Hadrian's Wall. Saachi laughed about the weather-related graffiti the Romans left behind and said she'd felt like adding a bit of her own. Lula made a full-length wool coat with an extra thick lining for her. Saachi still has it hanging in the cupboard. They took a market stall at the quayside on Sunday mornings and sold rice pancakes, cushion covers and hand-made sweets to people strolling along the banks of the river Tyne. Saachi started doing free legal work for people and they marched in some political protests.

In those days Lula dressed a bit like a punk and Saachi was mostly in silk saree. They must have looked very odd together, waving placards about mining and nuclear weapons. Lula says that watching the film *Billy Elliot* always makes her cry because it reminds her of being young. When it was time for them to go home, Lula was sad about the end of university, so Saachi invited her to come back to India for a holiday. They used the money they had saved from the market stall to pay for an extra ticket. She told me it had been hard to adjust to life in England and that she was so grateful to Lula for helping her to settle. She said she owed Mum a lot and that they would be friends for ever.

I went upstairs and put on a sweater and jeans as she said it could get chilly once we got high into the forest. As I opened the wardrobe the smell of the perfumed oil from our costumes drifted out. I fetched the little bottle Mrs Jaffrey had made for me back in Kochi, twisted open the tasselled top, tipped a couple of drops on to my hand and breathed in the flowery smell.

Outside on the veranda, Call-me-V was reversing the Green Goddess down the drive and I guessed he was moving it away so Saachi's car could get past. He wound down the window and waved to me from the driver's seat.

'Jump in, Cassia, we have a long drive ahead of us.'

What did he mean, "we"? Then Saachi came out of the house, looking harassed, and said she had been called into a meeting about the development and I would have to go on without her. My face must have twisted because she squeezed my hand and said quietly, 'Vikram is a great guide, Cassia. You will learn a lot and I'm sure you will enjoy each other's company, if you give yourselves a chance.'

I turned to walk back into the house, but Saachi touched my elbow and I stopped.

‘Do this for your mother, Cass. It is so important to her that you at least try to get along with Vikram. He is a good man and he makes Luella very happy.’

Call-me-V smiled and opened the passenger door. ‘I thought we could start with a visit to the elephants. Does that sound good, m’n?’

I looked at Saachi. I couldn’t tell exactly what she was thinking, but I knew she trusted me to do the right thing.

‘I suppose so.’

I climbed into the car and Saachi loaded a couple of tiffin tins on to the back seat.

We left the village and using the back roads we climbed into the hills. We sat in complete silence for ages, but as soon as we reached the forest, Call-me-V went into teacher mode, pointing out sites of environmental interest and birds of prey until, in desperation, I asked him to switch on the radio. When he hummed along to a few of the songs, I closed my eyes, hoping I could shut him out and shut him up for ever.

‘Cassia, you have something bothering your mind. I would very much like to know what it is.’

I opened the window wider. The warm air rushed over my face, making my ears pop.

‘Cassia, please do not stick your head out of the window. It is very dangerous; stones may fly up in your eyes.’

Now he sounded like my dad, seeing disaster around every corner. How dare he act like my dad! Dad was one of the good guys, not like Call-me-Creepy.

‘I saw you at the hotel site, doing deals with the developers,’ I blurted out.

‘Ah yes! That was very good fun.’

‘Fun? Do Mum and Saachi know?’

‘Actually it was Saachi’s idea. Mostly, she is a very sensible lawyer, but every now and then she has an attack of the Secret Sevens. I can only imagine this is what happens when you are raised in a house full of old, English children’s books.’

‘You mean you weren’t investing in the hotel?’

‘Oh no, but they believed I was a rich man from Dubai.’

‘You were spying on them!’

‘Oh, yes, I wanted to wear a false moustache, but your mother and Saachi would not hear of it.’

‘So was it you who found out about Jonny Gold?’

‘I learned just enough for Saachi to put the pieces together.’

I didn’t know what to say. I felt really embarrassed. I’d thought he was deceiving everyone, but really he’d been helping all the time.

‘Are you angry that your Mr Gold was not who you expected, Cassia?’

I thought about Jonny Gold’s songs about rainforests and icebergs, and the things he said in interviews about the environment. I wondered if he meant any of it, or if it was all just a publicity stunt. Jonny must have known about the protest, but he didn’t seem to care. Maybe he should have listened to his own lyrics because, it seemed to me, that Jonny had galloped away from his soul somewhere along the way.

‘No, not angry exactly, I feel a bit stupid, that’s all. And it makes me want to stop the hotel even more.’

‘If you are serious about helping Saachi, Cassia, then perhaps we should do more than just visit the elephants. We should ask for some help.’ He stroked the stone statue sitting on the dashboard, and at the next junction he turned the car up a narrow track which led into the forest.

He pulled up outside the elephant reserve and found a place to park. We unloaded the picnic and sat on a patch of grass in the shade. While I was setting out the food on a rug, Call-me-V told me about the Hindu elephant God, Ganesh. He said that Ganesh rode around on a tiny mouse to show how you should keep your ego small and not let your own sense of importance boss you around. Ganesh was like the patron saint of business people and writers.

But the really big thing about Ganesh was that he was in charge of making and getting rid of problems. He even had a special crook like Little-Bo-Peep, to hook away bad karma. He explained that karma is actions, the stuff you do that brings rewards and punishment. I laughed when he told me that Ganesh's belly was so big because it held the past, the present and the future, like eggs inside it.

'I have no such excuse, Cassia,' Call-me-V said, rubbing his own stomach. 'My build is on the healthy side, but the reasons are laid out on the tablecloth, as you can see!'

'Would Ganesh help me, even though I'm not a Hindu, or even from India?'

'Ganesh has travelled around the world for over 2000 years; I'm sure if you are asking nicely he will at least listen.'

I wondered if it was really that simple, that you found the right god and then asked them to sort things out. Even if it wasn't the way it really worked, I liked the idea that you could put the stuff that bothered you into a question. Maybe making it a saying-it-out-loud thing was the first step to changing things yourself. It was good hearing all this from Call-me-V, he had an interesting way of explaining things that made even the serious bits, fun.

We finished eating, tidied up the picnic and went into the elephant reserve. We'd arrived at bath time, and lying on her side in a pool was a baby elephant. She

slapped her trunk from side to side spraying water into the air. She looked like a guest at an elephant health club. The Mahout, who looked after the elephants, was using a coconut shell to scoop water on to her back. He greeted Call-me-V, then handed me a lump of coconut husk.

‘It is a privilege to wash an elephant, Cassia. They are sacred animals, so make the most of it,’ Call-me-V said.

Feeling very honoured, I greeted the baby elephant and did the hands-pressed-together bow as a sign of respect. Then I rolled up my jeans and waded into the warm, muddy water. Dunking the brush in the bath, I started scrubbing at the baby’s leathery skin. Clumps of dark hairs sprouted out of her back. I touched one with the tip of my finger. The elephant’s body was warm and I could feel her chest expanding under my hands, as she sighed and snorted with pleasure. I scrubbed the crease behind her ears and she nuzzled my arm with her trunk.

‘She is liking you,’ said the Mahout, smiling.

‘What is not to like? This is a very promising young person. She cares about her family and her friends, other people and the environment,’ Call-me-V said, smiling, as though he was proud of me. I felt strange hearing him say nice things about me, especially after I’d been so suspicious.

‘Yes, I have heard from Saachi how you are helping her. She told your mother you have the makings of a very good lawyer,’ he said.

Saachi thought I had talent! I felt my face go red. I stroked the baby elephant’s head and she reached her trunk up to my face. I’d thought everything in my life was going wrong, but maybe Ganesh had put some good karma my way after all.

We stayed until the baby elephant was done with her bath, then Call-me-V fired up the Green Goddess and we lurched and bumped our way further up into the

hills. On the way I asked Call-me-V more about the Hindu gods and goddesses and he told me some of the stories about their lives. Some of it sounded like a major dramarama! I remembered one of the Bollywood films I'd seen. I pictured Dev in one of the leading roles and imagined how handsome he would look as a Bollywood groom arriving at his wedding.

'Are you feeling unwell Cassia. You seem a bit flushed.' Call-me-V opened the window a little wider.

'Mr Chaudhury, when you and mum get married will you arrive on a big white horse?'

He shuddered, 'Actually, I am rather concerned about that myself, Cassia. I am not very fond of horses. As one of your writers observed, they are dangerous at both ends and uncomfortable in the middle.'

'Maybe you could get married in London?'

'It would be a long way to travel to avoid a horse.'

I thought about all the horses at the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace and what it was like in Hyde Park some days.

'I don't think that would work, I said. 'But you could arrive in a proper London taxi, instead.'

'You would have to be my guide on how such things work, Cassia.'

I thought about how Lula had helped Saachi to feel at home in England and how happy Lula was here, in the sunshine, with her friends. Maybe I could learn to feel at home here too. Dad managed to travel all around the world and get along with pretty much everyone he met. He spoke just enough of loads of languages to make friends and turn everything into a big adventure.

‘Mr Chaudhury, If you help me to learn the stuff I need to know about India, I will help you with London life. There is loads you’d have to learn about.’

‘That sounds like a very fair deal to me, Cassia. Thank you.’ He reached over to do a make-a-deal handshake. ‘Now, if you open the glove compartment I believe there is a box of sweets that need to be opened without delay.’

After a long, steep climb, Call-me-V stopped the car at a small tribal settlement. A man in a checked cloth, folded up into shorts, that Call-me-V said was called a dhoti, came out to meet us. They talked together for a bit and then Call-me-V asked if I wanted to see the way wild honey was collected. He got a glass jar out of the Goddess’s boot and we walked up a narrow, tree-lined path. We were going to a nest they already knew about, but Call-me-V explained that when they were hunting for new nests, the honey gatherers would sometimes follow forest birds, who led them to the right place. They rewarded the birds with a bit of the honey in case they took revenge, the next time, and led them to a snake’s nest, instead.

The honey man, Mr Kumaran, stopped and pointed at a bamboo ladder leaning against a tall tree. High up I could see an oval shaped lump wedged into the cleft of a hollow branch. Mr Kumaran gathered a handful of dried leaves, tied them together with string and started a smoky fire going. The pale grey curls drifted up towards the honey comb.

‘The smoke makes the bees drowsy, so they will not be so quick to sting us.’ Call-me-V explained. Mr Kumaran climbed up the ladder, and carefully cut a small chunk of the honey comb, leaving the rest of the nest. Bees started to fly around our heads and we moved away, slowly. A bee settled on my hand. I was about to brush it off, when Call-me-V stopped me.

‘If it breaks its sting, it will die. Just keep very still, Cassia, and let it fly away.’

Mr Kumaran put the lump of honeycomb into a cloth and held it over the jar. Then he squeezed the cloth in his hands. Golden honey oozed out of the comb and ran over his fingers before drizzling down the neck of the jar. He dribbled a taste on my hand, too. It was delicious, strong and sweet. When there was no more honey left to press, Call-me-V put a lid on the jar and we started the long walk back to the Green Goddess.

‘What happens to the left-over wax when all the honey has been squeezed out?’ I said.

‘It can be used for many things, like medicine, cosmetics, and of course, candles. But unless it can fetch a fair price, much of it is wasted,’ Call-me-V replied.

Suddenly I had a wonderful thought. ‘Mr Chaudhury, what are you going to do with the workshop?’ I asked.

Project ‘Save the Shop’ kicked off properly as soon as we got back to the house. On the drive from the hills, I’d described Auntie Doré’s perfumed candles to Uncle V. He made a whistling-through-his-teeth noise when I told him how much she paid for them. I thought if we could make some out of the local beeswax, and perfume them using the special oils from Mrs Jaffrey’s shop, in Kochi, then we would have a great all-Indian product for the shop to go with the new fabrics Lula had designed.

Uncle V knew about the problems Lula was having with the business and he also knew how much it meant to her. He said we could use the workshop for some try-outs so long as we could find proper instructions on how to make the candles. Some of the equipment was still stored in the workshop, but I had no idea how to get from a lump of crumbly beeswax to a beautiful scented candle, and he said he’d rather we didn’t burn the workshop down experimenting. Uncle V explained we would need to work out the costs of making the candles and getting them over to London, too. Even though he thought it was an interesting idea, and said I had a good head for solving problems, he reminded me there was no point unless the candles could make a profit, so I would need to get all the figures ready for Lula to see before I got too excited.

When Priya got back from school that evening I showed her the ‘must do’ list I had written in the car and she got started straight away on packaging designs. I gave her the bottle of perfumed oil for inspiration and soon she was tearing pages out of her

magazines for mood boards. She decided the perfume was “very natural, but with a spicy twist” and should be packaged in something green with a red accent. She got her full creative head on and started to explain colour theory to me. It sounded much more scientific than I’d imagined and pretty soon the whole colour wheel thing started spinning too fast, so I left her in order to get on with my own share of the tasks.

While she was busy sketching, I had a long session on the internet researching the ‘how to’ bit. There was loads online about honey bees and how they were an endangered species in some places. I hadn’t realised how important they were to all the other stuff that we eat, not just honey, but everything that needed to be pollinated, like fruit and berries. I was starting to feel a lot more respectful of bees, and just a bit scared about what was happening to the environment, when I found a beginner’s guide to making candles. It didn’t look too complicated, but we had to get it right or the candles would spit and smoke, or even fall apart completely.

I printed everything off and highlighted the things we would need, like pans to melt the wax, thermometers, muslin to strain out the bits, cotton for the wicks and something to use as moulds. Then, remembering what Uncle V had said, I started researching how much scented candles sold for in the shops. It was a real eye-popper. Most of them weren’t even made of proper beeswax and some of the designer brands were in major double digits for just one candle.

Uncle V had explained that I would need to work the costs out so that after everyone was properly paid we could double the price for the shop. So, now, after trolling through at least a zillion internet pages, I had an idea of the sort of prices we could charge. Because of where the beeswax came from, we would be able to say our candles were totally organic and that would be a big help. I wondered about adding a

bit of information about how important bees were to the environment when we put the candles on the shelves. Then, perhaps people would have an extra reason to buy them.

I went to sleep that night listening to Priya's pencil scratching on her sketchbook. My head buzzing with ideas about how our candles would help the shop, create new jobs in the village and encourage pollination too. I'd never imagined I had bees to thank for the fruit smoothies I loved.

The next morning, I gave Uncle V the equipment list and he went up to the workshop to see what was still there. I wanted to keep the idea secret until I was sure it would work, so we told Saachi and Lula we were doing a school project and after a super-fast breakfast we set off for the workshop.

When we arrived, Uncle V was busy fixing up a camping cooker so we would have enough heat to melt the wax down to a liquid ready to strain. I looked at my list, which he had pinned up on the wall. The bit about the budget was highlighted and the word 'profit' had a double red line underneath. It was going to be a very long day. So much depended on getting the candles right. If this worked, we would have a new product to show Auntie Doré and then she would invest money in the shop to keep it going. If the candles and the new fabric sold quickly, then Lula's money troubles would get better.

Thinking about the consequences, I felt nervous. This was so important to Lula and to our shop, but I'd never done anything like it before. How could I be sure it would work out? As I stared at the list again I realised I couldn't be sure. All I could do was try my hardest, get my friends to help and keep my fingers triple-crossed. It was a risk, but the pressure was making me feel really energised. This must be how Saachi felt when she got stuck into a new case - no wonder she loved her work.

We went to Granny-ji's for the rest of the stuff we needed. She seemed really excited about the candle project and said it could be "the start of a new chapter in my life". She happily emptied her kitchen cupboards and even dug out aprons for us, but we still hadn't found the right thing to use as candle holders. Priya's design needed something natural that would survive the trip to London and wouldn't melt when the candles were lit.

Granny-ji pulled on her apron. It had a picture of Ganesh on the front. I remembered what Uncle V had said about Ganesh helping with new projects.

'Dear Mr Elephant God, we need a bit of inspiration,' I said, putting my hands together and bowing to Granny-ji's belly. I thought about the day in the forest with Uncle V and the baby elephant in splashing in a mud bath, her Mahout using a coconut shell to wash her.

'What about using coconut shells as candle holders!' I said.

'That's brilliant, Cass and exactly right for my design! They could be wrapped in a palm leaf bag and tied up with red ribbon.'

It was one problem solved, but now I had to add coconut farming to the list.

'I think we are going to need more help, Priya.'

'But I thought you were the tree-climbing expert around here.'

'Ha-de-ha!' I replied, remembering my first day trip up the wrong banana palm.

'Actually, I know some people who might be able to help. Leave it to me' Granny-ji said and then hurried us out of the house.

Once we reached the workshop, Granny-ji took charge. In the time it had taken us to get there she'd even got busy on the candle-holders, and an old man with a machete was standing outside with a bag full of neatly halved coconut shells ready for her to inspect. While she and Priyanka made their selection, I got out the beginner's guide to candles and set up a production line. The shed was really starting to buzz. Nandita plaited the wicks from multi-coloured threads. They looked great, but they needed coating in wax before we could use them. I cleared a space on the work bench, ran a mini-washing line along the wall, and found some scissors.

Granny-ji showed me how to dip the wicks in the melted wax, cut them to size and hang them to cool on the line. Then I helped Priyanka sieve and strain the wax and pour it into a pan. It would take a few melt-and-sieve sessions before the wax was clean enough to use.

It was very hot in the workshop and every half an hour Uncle V brought in cold drinks. We were all looking a bit crazed. Nandita had a wild smile and bits of wax stuck to her hair, face and clothes. Priya was back stirring the giant melting pot again and muttering like someone doing spells. I could feel twigs sticking out of my hair and I thought there were probably a couple of bees in there too. Dev had taken charge of the laptop and played us a mix of motivating music. He was also busy with the figures I had scribbled down with the costs and prices from the internet. During a cold-drink break I looked over his shoulder. Under headings like 'postage' and 'wages' he had columns of numbers set into a table. At the bottom a row was labelled 'profit'.

'Wow, that looks amazing! How did you do that?'

'It was not so hard. You did all the research, Cassia. I have just organised it. Now, watch this,' he said, pointing to a number at the top of the table. 'This is the

price you paid for the beeswax, but of course this price can change. So, if it goes up...' I saw him double the number and press enter.

'The profit figure at the bottom has changed too!' I said.

'It is called a spreadsheet and I think it will be very useful for you.'

'Dev, you're a genius, thank you,' I threw my arms around his shoulders.

'It is certainly very impressive, young man. Are you interested in business as a career choice?' Uncle V had wandered over and was looking at the screen. He changed a couple of the numbers and nodded his head approvingly as the spreadsheet converted them into profit.

By lunchtime we were on the third, and final melting and I added a few drops of the perfumed oil to each batch. Then Priyanka poured a little of the molten wax into the shells and I pushed in a length of weighted wick. We wrapped the moulds in banana leaves so they would cool, nice and slowly, then we escaped from the shed and ran down to the sea.

Uncle V and Granny-ji guarded the door of the workshop all afternoon and wouldn't let us in until the sun went down. When we got back from the beach, I was practically hyperventilating with tension. What if the candles hadn't worked? What if we lit one and it just collapsed or, even worse, exploded?

At last, we were all standing in front of the workshop and Uncle V opened the door. The scent of the perfumed oil and beeswax drifted out into the sunshine. At the far end of the shed, watched over by Uncle V's little Ganesh figure, the neat row of candles wrapped in their packaging of palm leaves looked perfect, but what would

they be like inside? I took a couple of steps forward and then stopped, suddenly unsure about what to do next.

‘Go on, London girl, this is it,’ Dev said, pointing towards the work bench.

‘Yes, Cassia, the moment of truth,’ said Granny-ji.

Priya laughed and gave my hand a squeeze. ‘I’m sure they will be fantastic, Cassia. You’ve worked so hard, you really deserve this.’

I felt Nandita’s hand on my back, gently pushing me forward and I picked up the nearest package. I untied the cotton. The palm leaves came away from the beeswax easily and the scent of the perfumed oil got even more intense. I set the candle in its coconut shell holder down on the bench again. Nandita handed me a lighted match. As I held it to the candle, I felt everyone take a deep breath and the match went out.

‘Oh purlease! Can you all just chill out before I have a heart attack?’ I said.

Nandita had another match ready lit and this time the candle wick flickered for a moment and then started to burn with a steady flame. We all stood in silence and watched as the candle filled a corner of the room with a golden glow. Uncle V patted me on the back and said, ‘Well done Cassia, this is a very good show. I am going to fetch Luella and Saachi to see what you young people have done.’

Then he left the workshop to us. Priyanka was studying the packaging for ways to make it better and Nandita was dancing in shadow of the candle flame. I found Dev’s hand and held it tight.

While Uncle V was away fetching Lula, we lit all the candles and completely filled the workshop with golden light, dancing shadows and the smell of honey, lotus and cinnamon. The old shed looked like a palace from a fairy-story. Through the windows I could see birds settling in the trees for the night and the tide coming in made a soothing sound on the beach. There was a slo-mo feeling in the air that made every one really calm and happy. Uncle V made Lula close her eyes as she came in. When she opened them, she gasped and then, as I explained what we had done, I saw she was crying, but in a really happy way. Then she hugged me so tight I thought my ribs would snap.

As soon as we got back from the workshop, Lula locked herself in Saachi's study with Dev's spreadsheet, Priya's drawings, my research, and the telephone. Auntie Doré was top of her call list. She also took samples of the more delicate fabrics she had been working on with the new weaving workshop.

Lula had just one chance to stop Auntie Doré heading for the estate agents and putting the shop up for sale. Before she disappeared, Lula asked us loads of questions about the candle making and Uncle V and Saachi triple checked the figures. So, it was all up to her now.

'Go for it, Mum,' I whispered, as she closed the study door behind her.

While Lula was phoning Auntie Doré, Priya and Uncle V drove Dev and Nandita home and I sat in the living room with Saachi. I was exhausted, but I couldn't relax until I found out what Auntie Doré thought. I could hear Lula's voice through the walls, but the sounds were too muffled to make out the words. Even though I really

hoped it was going well, I felt a bit sad too. If the shop stayed open we would be going home very soon.

Would Uncle V come to London or would he stay in Kerala to get the candle production going? I wouldn't see Priya, Dev, or Nandita again for a long time and when I came back there might be a big hotel on the cliffs and a fenced-off beach.

'Cassia, you should be very proud of what you have achieved today,' Saachi said. 'I just wish the hotel protest was going as well as your candle project!

'Jonny Gold will be here soon to do the video,' I said.

'Yes, what do you think I should say to him?' she asked.

'I'd ask him to build a smaller hotel a little further down the cliff. I'd tell him to leave the mangroves alone and share the beach with the village instead of fencing it off for his guests. He could do loads of good things, if he would just make the development greener and more in harmony with environment, I replied.

'You are thinking very clearly about this, Cassia, well done. It doesn't seem so very unreasonable to ask a multi-millionaire to share the village with the people who already live here, does it?' she said shaking her head.

'He could even build a new netball court,' I said, thinking of Nandita and her team. 'Actually, there are a lot of things he could do if he wasn't so selfish and greedy. Do you think he'd listen to us?'

'You mean you and Priyanka?'

'And Dev and Nandita, just like we planned. Maybe we could still do the dance and if he stops to listen, I could talk to him.'

'It's certainly worth a try. Let's decide in the morning exactly what you need to say.'

The headlights of the Green Goddess flashed across the window and I heard the engine switch off. Priya and Uncle V came in and sat down just as the study door opened and Lula walked into the living room. I studied her face for signs of Auntie Doré's decision, but it was unreadable.

'Well?' said Uncle V.

'Well what?' said Lula.

'Don't you dare torture us!' said Saachi, throwing a cushion across the room at Lula, who ducked just in time.

'Do you mean Doré? Let me try and remember...oh yes...she said...OK! She was very interested in the new fabric range and your candle research intrigued her - it turns out bees are *very* on-trend right now. We have three months to sell enough of the new stock to prove it is worth stocking permanently.'

'Can you do that?' asked Saachi.

'The weavers are all ready and Granny-ji says she can find enough people in the village who remember how the candle workshop used to operate, so we can go into production pretty quickly.'

'That's brilliant news, Mum!'

'It's mostly thanks to you, Cass, you and your lovely new friends. That boy Dev is very handsome, isn't he?'

I froze and Priya started to giggle. I saw Uncle V making arm-waving STOP signs at Lula, but she was being dense and carried on about Dev's friendly eyes and his nice manners. I was glad she liked him and I Wanted to tell her the whole story, but not here and not now.

Uncle V had turned into a human windmill, but it was Saachi who rescued me.

‘OK, young entrepreneurs, showers and then bed! It’s been a long day and you’re still covered in bits of candle,’ she said, chasing us out of the living room.

I stayed under the shower for ages feeling the warm water soaking into my hair. A twig fell from behind my ear and floated towards the plug hole. It was followed by a twist of cotton, and a lump of wax. While Priya showered, I lay on the bed with my eyes closed, letting the day play back in my head like a film. A few times, I rewound to another secret kiss with Dev in the candlelight and wondered how many more we could share before I went back to London. The shop was safe, for a while at least. Me and Uncle V had sorted things out and I actually didn’t mind if he and Lula got married and we lived in India, for some of the year anyway. It would be good to have a second home and a more 3d life. Perhaps I could learn at least one of the languages spoken in Kerala and maybe I could get some proper dancing lessons at last.

That night I finally finished the Peacock book. In the end, just as the girl in the bookshop said, Una had got into loads of trouble and got dragged home by her dad. She thought being with Ravi would be all lovely and romantic, but it wasn’t the happy ending she’d expected and she was going back to England all alone. The whole family thing her Dad wanted had crashed out big style, because he didn’t see that his girlfriend was a really rubbish step mum.

I felt sorry for Una. In a way she’d just copied what everyone around her was doing, keeping secrets and telling lies. She only wanted for her family to love her, but they’d got all caught up in their own dramas and she’d been pushed away.

It wasn't like that for me. I didn't know how it would work out with Dev, but me and Lula and Uncle V had the bits of a proper happy ending, now. There was just one more thing that would make it perfect.

A few days later, at *very* stupid o'clock I was woken up by what sounded like a hurricane blasting at the bedroom window. Priya was already out of bed, standing on the balcony and pointing out to sea. Her lips were moving but no sound was reaching into the room. She looked totally crazed, shouting silently with the curtains flapping wildly around her. Clearly, something major was in progress. I thought about pulling the sheet back over my head and ignoring the dramarama, but then the hurricane noise was joined by someone banging on the bedroom door.

‘I really think you should get up, girls. Dev and Nandita are downstairs and I believe a helicopter is trying to land in the garden,’ said Lula.

That’s when I worked out what Priya was trying to say.

‘O.M.G! He’s here! It’s today! Jonny Gold Video Day is now!’

We threw on our dance clothes and ran downstairs. Dev and Nandita were having some breakfast and Priya joined them. I felt sick. How could anyone eat at a time like this?

Saachi came in holding a piece of paper. ‘Are you sure you’re ready to do this, Cassia?’

‘I think so. Anyway, what have we got to lose?’

‘Well, there’s the beach, the mangroves, the netball court...’ she smiled at me and handed over the eco-hotel wish list. It was short, but very clear. I just hoped we could catch Jonny Gold’s attention for long enough to get the words out.

As we stepped outside I realised it was going to be a lot harder than I'd imagined. After hovering over the garden and flattening all the plants, the helicopter had landed on the beach and sat ringed by trucks full of TV cameras and tents packed with costumes and make-up. Everyone was in a hurry, though their main job seemed to be waving clipboards and yelling at one another.

Between the house and the beach a catering truck was setting up and a crush of people waited not very patiently for breakfast. Surrounding the whole area was a fence patrolled by men in uniform with radio phones and don't-even-*think*-about-it expressions.

We walked up to a gap in the fence just as another truck was coming through.

'We've come to see Jonny Gold.' I said.

'Yeah, you and everyone else!' said the driver. His accent sounded like he was from London, too. I wondered if any of the people who'd invaded the beach were local or if they'd all just landed for the day.

'But we need to talk to him.'

'Believe me, today is not the day,' he laughed.

'Please, could you just tell him we're here?'

The driver leaned out of his cab and pointed towards the beach. 'You think I get close enough to his lordship to give him messages? Sorry kids, forget about meeting Jonny Gold today and just enjoy the sunshine,' he said and he drove away.

I looked to where the driver had pointed. By the water's edge, sitting in an open sided tent set well apart from the craziness was Jonny Gold. He was playing his guitar and staring out to sea. A rope barrier around the legs of the tent, and a woman shouting into two mobile phones, seemed to be keeping everyone away. Huge painted

screens had been set up on the beach blocking out the view of village houses, so it looked like no one actually lived there.

A track from Jonny Gold's new album was playing through speakers attached to the trunks of the palm trees. As I listened, it changed to *Om Shanti, Babe*, the one Dev had used in the mix on Priya's laptop, the one we had danced to in the workshop. The real Indian-sounding segments were missing of course, but the rhythm was the same. It should have been a huge chunk of good luck, but we were stuck on the wrong side of the beach with no way across. Saachi was right. The honky-tonk circus had come to town, but we didn't have tickets.

'Cassia, you know how we were going to walk up to Jonny Gold and start dancing...'

I didn't say anything. There wasn't anything I could say. In my head this was supposed to be the easy bit. We were his fans and I thought he'd be pleased to see us. Looking around at all the people and the equipment I realised it was bigger and more complicated than that. Jonny Gold was only a tiny piece in the money-making machine that was set up here and we didn't count at all. The film set wasn't real in the same way that the village was real. All the cameras would be gone tomorrow and leave nothing behind except Saachi's flattened garden. It was just a big golden bubble. Jonny and his world were inside and we could only sit and watch it float around. I'd wanted to live in a bubble like that once, but I was glad I didn't any more.

'Cass...is there a plan B?' said Priyanka.

'Yeah, we learn to walk on water!' I replied staring at the sea.

'Actually, we don't need to walk because we have a boat, remember,' she replied.

I looked across at Dev. He was signing to Nandita. She didn't look very happy. I remembered how she had nearly drowned and lost her hearing. No wonder she looked anxious, I thought.

Dev took her hand and she followed us round the back of the house to the river. When we reached the boat, Nandita stared at it for a long time and then she stared out at the sea. I could tell she was trying to make herself step into the boat and I thought she was the bravest person I'd ever met. But she looked as if she was going to be sick and Dev was even worse. He knew how scared his sister was and he also knew how important she was to our plan. He looked torn in two and I thought he was going to stop her, but in the end it was Priyanka who stepped up.

'You can do this without us, Cassia. You and Dev row out and I will stay here with Nandita.'

'But how? What will I do?' I said.

'You'll think of something, London Girl,' said Dev, smiling.

We untied the boat and Dev and I dipped the oars into the water and slowly moved away from the river bank. Priya and Nandita waved sadly as we glided off. I knew they were really disappointed at being left behind and it made me even more determined to talk to Jonny Gold.

Soon, we'd left the shelter of the mangroves and were in the open water of the sea. We kept as close to the shore as possible without getting the boat stuck on the sand. The sound from the beach drifted over the waves and I could see Jonny Gold. From a distance, it was like everyone but him was in fast-forward. He was still strumming at his guitar, but now a camera was set up on the sand beside him.

Through the water I could make out the seabed just below us and I felt the boat bump along the bottom, making a scratchy sound as the pebbly sand rubbed on

the wood. We both pulled harder on our oars and drifted back into deeper water. Dev didn't say anything, but I saw him smiling encouragingly at me as I hefted the heavy oar out of the water and then dunked it back in.

My hands were starting to hurt and I stopped rowing for a minute to check how close we were to the beach. From over on the sand, I could see the camera operator was pointing at us and waving. Jonny Gold stood up, shielding his eyes against the sun as he looked over towards us. A motor boat had sped away from the beach and was heading our way. The woman with the mobile phones sat very upright in the passenger seat. She stood up as she got close and I saw her snap the phones closed.

'OK! So here's the deal. Jonny is totally knocked out by you crazy kids, and to say a big *big* thank you for being such fans, he wanted me to give you this.' She leaned forward in the motor boat, flashed a super-white smile, and chucked something towards us. Dev caught it and passed it over to me. It was a signed CD of Jonny Gold's latest album. He'd scribbled *Om Shanti!* on the cover.

'Erm, thanks, but actually we really wanted to talk to him about the hotel.'

The super-white smile disappeared. 'Not possible today, sweetie,' she said.

I looked over to the beach. Jonny had his back to us. I watched as he threw a cigarette butt on to the sand. He thought we were fans, but he couldn't even be bothered to look at us. In my head, I added up all the money I'd spent on his music and all the hours I wasted memorising his lyrics and dreaming about how great he was. They were big numbers for someone who definitely didn't deserve them.

Nandita and Priyanka were standing on the river bank, waving, and in the distance I could see Saachi's house. Granny-ji, Saachi, Lula and Uncle-V were standing on the balcony. The motor boat was starting to drift away from us. The

woman with the phones looked at her watch and bit her lip. I undid the CD case and slipped Saachi's hotel protest wish-list inside.

'Could you give him this letter, please?' I said and threw the CD back to her. It landed in the bottom of her boat.

'Don't you want the CD? She said, looking surprised.

'No. No, I don't. This beach doesn't belong to you and Jonny Gold shouldn't build his eco-disaster hotel here.' I said. The woman looked startled, but she picked up the CD case and then her boat turned away and headed back to the beach.

'I don't know if he will do as you ask, but that was very cool, London Girl,' said Dev, doing a little bow, 'and now I think it is time we got ourselves back on to dry land.'

The cabin crew were coming down the aisle, making sure we were all buckled up. My ears popped and through the airplane window I could see London looming closer. The sky was a solid mass of grey cloud threatening to drop another layer of snow on the buildings below. Goodbye, sunshine, I thought as I watched the River Thames wiggle away from the city.

Me and Priya had a major weep-fest at the airport, but as soon as we took off I realised I was at the beginning of a new adventure - project Cassia, legal-eagle-eco-girl. It was going to be a busy year. I had to get a campaign going to save the honey bee and while Priya was in London in the summer, researching fashion colleges, I would be back in Kerala with Saachi, campaigning against the hotel and learning more about the law and the environment.

The shop would be getting a New Year makeover, thanks to Aunty Doré: she'd already started making shelf space for the candles, new fabrics, and even some organic, mountain honey.

The big wedding was planned for next Christmas, in the village. It would be good to escape London in winter, again. Dad was all excited about travelling somewhere that wasn't actually a war zone and it seemed his new romance was a famous photographer so at least the wedding snaps would be great. I thought it was pretty cool of Lula to invite them both.

I turned away from the window and looked at Lula. Her eyes were closed, but she wasn't asleep. I took hold of her hand and she gave my fingers a squeeze.

‘So Cass, my lovely, clever girl, was India as you expected?’ she asked, smiling at me.

‘No Mum. It was totally and utterly different and I can’t wait to go back!’

The plane rolled to a stop and I reached into my bag for the present Dev had given me. Inside the package, was a CD marked, *Om Shanti, Babe* Kerala remix. I smiled, remembering the day in Uncle V's workshop. Before I left, Nandita had taught me a few proper Indian dance moves that I knew Rachel would love. I would call on Rachel as soon as I got back. I hoped the music and the dancing would help to make us friends, again.

The End.

Om Shanti.