



# Little Bits of Sky

S.E. Durrant



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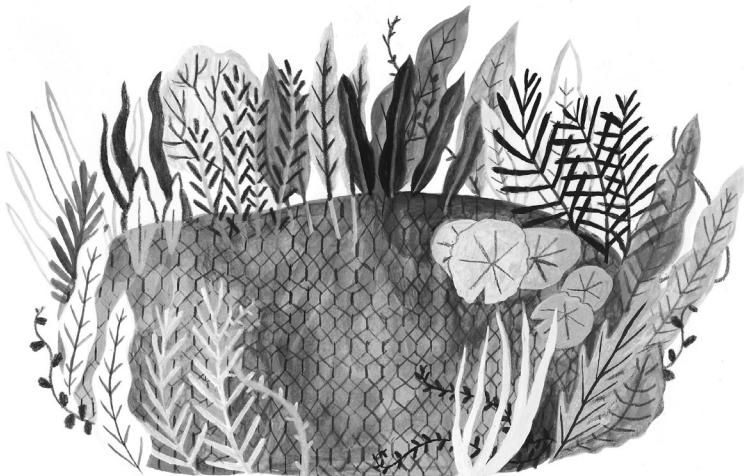
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*For Duncan, Rosie, and Oliver*





# Today

*This is the story of a time when my life turned upside down. Not that it was the right way up before, but for a while it felt like that moment when a clown juggles plates and they're all up in the air, and the only thing you can do is hold your breath and hope they don't come crashing to the ground.*

*I've put this story together from the diaries I kept when Zac and I were children. I wrote them because I felt we were almost invisible and I wanted to make sure our story was told, and also in the hope that life would get better for*

*the small unloved girl that was me, and my even smaller unloved brother. And if life didn't get better or at least more interesting, I was going to make it up—to put in witches and castles and rides in fast cars. But I didn't need to. Life got exciting all by itself.*

*My story starts at Skilly House. The garden there was the wildest place I had ever seen. There was a patch of grass big enough to run around in, and on all sides a tangle of scratchy bushes and shrubs, trailing ivy and a convolvulus that climbed the walls in summer, dotting the garden with flowers. There was a small overgrown pond covered with chicken wire, and there was the fallen tree.*

*I never felt entirely comfortable in Skilly House itself—it was too full of ghosts—but the garden was special. It was the first place I ever felt truly happy. I think Zac felt the same. Not that we wanted to go there, of course.*





# Skilly House

## October 1987

My name's Miracle, but I don't tell anyone. It's embarrassing, especially for a care kid. Maybe my mum thought life would be wonderful and perfect when I was born, but it wasn't and it never has been. That's why everyone calls me Ira. My brother's called Zackery or Zac. Both names are okay, but Zac suits him better because he's always running. If you call him Zackery, he's gone before you get to the end of his name.

We didn't want to come to Skilly. We'd never been in a children's home, and anyway it wasn't fair we had to



move so suddenly. One minute we were eating dinner with Brenda and Alf, seeing how much ketchup we could balance on a chip, the next Anita was chasing us up to our room to pack our bags. I banged my suitcase all the way down the stairs, which is unusual for me. I normally keep my feelings to myself, being the oldest. Zac stood in the hall with that awful sad face he has when misery's wrapped itself around him so tight he looks like he's choking, and I know it will take ages to dig him out.

"Make sure you come and see us, won't you?" Brenda said as she hugged us good-bye.

And that made me feel really sad because I was nine years old and Zac was seven, and we already knew we'd never see them again. And she was the grown-up and she didn't know.

After that Zac made his mouth into a thin, flat line and that was that. There was no point trying to talk to him. We sat in Anita's car and watched the world go by. Our bit of the world, that is: South London.

At first Anita tried to chat. She told us about a James Bond film she saw. She said the actor was really handsome. She probably has his poster on her wall. But we didn't answer, so she gave up trying. I couldn't even think about James Bond. All I could think was, the car windows needed cleaning.



Anita's our social worker. She dyes her hair to match her lipstick. It's usually red, but we never know what kind of red it's going to be. Sometimes it's pink or orange. It takes our mind off things. Maybe that's why she does it. That day it was red like cherries. She looked like a film star stuck in the wrong film with two miserable kids in the back of her car, when really she should have been skydiving or kissing a double agent.

It took us ages to get to Skilly. The traffic was all jammed up, and I thought the cars must look like ants from the sky. And I know ants are meant to know exactly what they're doing, but it made me wonder if they felt like we did inside. Lost.

When we finally stopped, we were on a street just like the one we came from. Nothing was any different. There were no fields or mountains or waterfalls or chimpanzees or kangaroos. There wasn't even a park. It was just a normal London street with all the houses and flats squeezed in together like rotten teeth. If we hadn't been in the car for an hour, we'd have thought we just went around the corner.

As Anita parked the car, my heart started jumping around. It always does that just when I wish it would stay still, like if I want people to think I don't care what happens when really I do. It's hard to look like you don't care what happens when your heart's doing somersaults.



Anita got out our suitcases and opened the gate to a crumbling old house. I had to pull Zac to make him come. He didn't want to move. He just wanted everything to stop there and then, like if the world could stop that would be good. When I pulled him he banged his head on the window. He didn't say anything, but I knew he hated me.

The house was tall and scruffy with white paint peeling off, like it had been painted a hundred years ago and nobody had bothered to tidy it up ever since. A man was tying a rosebush to the wall. He was trying to stop the roses trailing on the ground. They were small and red and their petals were falling off, but he still wanted to tie them up. I expect they looked nice in summer.

Anita said, "Hello," and the man turned around.

He was wearing an old leather jacket and his hair was full of ringlets, not shiny like a princess but all tangled and sticking out. He smiled when he saw us, and his face filled with creases. I didn't want to like him, but I couldn't help it.

"I think the wind's going to blow up a bit," he said.

He waved a bit of string.

He shook Anita's hand, and then he shook ours. I acted like I always shake hands, but really it was the first time it ever happened. Zac's hand went all floppy like when he



pretends he's ill. People don't normally shake hands with care kids. Sometimes they don't even look at us.

"I'm Silas," the man said. "Welcome to Skilly."

He's the only Silas I've ever met. He's probably the only one in London. People don't call their kids Silas anymore. It's an olden-days name.

We walked to the front door, and he rang the bell. There was a sign on the wall that said SKILLY HOUSE 1887, which means it was built a hundred years ago, which is a century. I thought of all the kids who must have stood on the doorstep before us, wondering what would happen next. Maybe their mum had been run over by a horse and carriage or their dad had gotten stuck up a chimney, or maybe they just ran out of luck. I turned my face to stone so whoever opened the door wouldn't see how I felt inside. Zac was taking lots of breaths like he was tired out. Only he wasn't tired out. He was scared.

But the woman who opened the door wasn't scary at all. She was beautiful. She was smiling and smiling, like she'd been looking forward to seeing us all day, and finally we'd come.

"Children!" she said. "Come in, come in. We've been waiting for you."

She put out her arms and wrapped them around us. It felt so nice. She had yellow beads on the ends of her



dreadlocks, and they bounced like bees. I wanted to hold one, but I didn't. I just touched one really gently so she wouldn't notice. It felt lucky.

Silas said, "This is Hortense. She'll settle you in."

Then he went back to his rosebush.

We went inside with Hortense and stood in the hall. It was dark and the stairs went up and up, and I tried to imagine them going all the way up to the sky and at the top there'd be a big burst of light. Then I had a feeling someone was watching us, and when I turned around I saw a woman standing in a doorway. I thought she was a ghost at first. A shiver went right down my spine. She was very thin and she was standing as still as a skeleton and she was staring at me and Zac like she wished we'd never arrived. Like if she could wind back time, she'd make us walk right back out of the door and lock it behind us.

Hortense said, "Meet Mrs. Clanks, manager of Skilly," and the woman came over.

She walked really straight like a soldier and her shoes went *tap-tap* on the floor, so I knew she was real. Ghosts don't make noises. It takes all their effort just to be here at all. That's why you don't see them much.

She was old and her hair was tied back, and she had a frown between her eyes that looked like it had been there forever. Like she might have been the first baby ever to



be born with a frown. She was wearing boring grown-up clothes, except for one thing: she had a pink shiny ribbon in her hair. I wondered if someone had put it there and she didn't know yet. But it didn't make me want to laugh. It made me embarrassed.

She shook Anita's hand and said, "Good afternoon."

Then she smiled at me and Zac. Only it wasn't the kind of smile that makes you glad to be there. It was the kind of smile you give someone when you wish they lived hundreds of miles away, like in Australia.

"Hortense will show you your room," she said.

She said it just like that. Not "Hello" or "How was your journey?" She said it like a plumber had come to fix a leak, and she had to tell them where the pipes were. And they better get on with it before everything flooded. Not like some kids had come to their new home where they might have to stay forever.

I wanted to shout that we weren't staying. I had to grit my teeth to stop it coming out. I wanted to shout that we hated it here already, and we were going back to Brenda and Alf. But I couldn't. Zac would be upset, and anyway it never works. Even if the cutest little kid makes a fuss, nothing changes. Not if they're a care kid.

Anita usually smiles when she leaves us because smiles spread. If one person smiles, that makes the next person



smile and it goes on and on. You can cheer up a whole crowd of people that way. It's like magic. But that day she couldn't smile. Her face just wouldn't make the right shape. She knelt down in front of me and Zac and gave us a kiss.

"Off you go," she said. "I'll see you soon."

She still looked like a film star, only now she was in a war film watching her children be evacuated to the country, and she was being brave. She left cherry lipstick on Zac's cheek, then she wiped it away.

We followed Hortense up the stairs. I pretended she was an angel taking us to heaven, but I couldn't do it for long. Kids were peering at us through the banisters and sticking out their tongues. A tall boy threw a ball of paper at my shoulder. I pretended I hadn't noticed, but I could hear him sniggering.

The stair carpet was so old you could see threads where the soft bits had worn away. It might have been nice once because it still had flower patterns, but now they were muddy like at the bottom of a pond. Every step creaked, and the creaks were all in different places. Some were in the middle of the step and some were on the edges and some steps seemed fine, but when you took your foot off they gave a little squeak. You could never go up or down those steps quietly; you'd have to learn where the creaks were.

There were drawings on the walls and writing that had



been smudged out, maybe because it said someone loved someone else and they changed their mind, or maybe because it said something horrible.

And there was dust on every step. I had to try really hard not to think about it because dust comes from dead skin, so it must have come from the children who walked up the stairs before us. Maybe even from children who are dead. I just concentrated on counting the steps. I always do that in new places. I always count the steps going up so I know how many I have to go down. It's one of my habits. From the hall up to our room is forty-seven steps.

Our bedroom is right at the top of the house. You can't go any farther. It's nice like that. No one walks past. When we got there Hortense said, "Best room in the house," and opened the door like we'd just arrived on holiday or something, not in a children's home.

But actually it's okay. It's got a sloping roof on one side and a window on the other, and from the window you can see the garden. There were two beds with duvets and bobbly blankets, and there was a sink with yellow stains going from the taps to the plughole. There was a wardrobe and some drawers and a table, and there was tape stuck to the walls where kids had taken off their posters. There was a rug on the floor that was so old the color had faded away, and under the rug were floorboards.



Hortense put her head to one side and looked at us like a heron searching for fish in a pond.

"It'll feel very different when you've settled in," she said.

Then she opened the window and a breeze came into the room, and it felt lovely. I looked out and saw a bird fly into a tree.

"Now," Hortense said, "come and see the garden."

The garden at Skilly is amazing. It's huge and raggedy and full of hiding places, and even though there are buildings all around, it feels like it's on its own. There was a shed and a pond with chicken wire over the top, and there was a huge tree in the middle. When the sun came through the leaves, it made patches of light on the grass.

We had the garden all to ourselves that afternoon. We didn't know then, but that's what they do with new kids. They let them play in the garden on their own. At first Zac wouldn't let go of my hand, but then he found a stick and started hitting the tree. Bits of bark were flying off. I didn't say anything. I just walked away. Then I spun around and around until I was so dizzy I had to lie down, and as I lay there I let my head fill up with the blue sky, and then I didn't want to shout anymore. That's the thing about the sky. No matter how bad things are, you can always look up at the sky, and then you feel better.



Afterward we had tea in the kitchen with the other kids. They hardly even looked at us. I pretended not to look at them either, but really I kept taking glances. They all did different things with their food. It showed their personalities. Some ate really quickly and wanted more, some only ate the best bits; some just pushed their food around their plate and didn't eat at all. Some kids made a mess, and some were really tidy and put their knives and forks together when they finished like they were in a restaurant and the waiter would come and take their plates. The boy who threw the paper at me didn't even chew. He gulped his food down like it was melted ice cream even though it was shepherd's pie. When Hortense wasn't looking, he put some mashed potato on his fork and flicked it at me. It landed in the middle of my plate. I didn't eat after that. It put me off.

As soon as we could get away, we ran up to our room and looked out at the garden. It was nice to be so high up. It's like being invisible. It was dark and windy outside, and the tree was shaking. Two pigeons were sitting in the branches, but they didn't mind. They just rocked from side to side. They were used to it. Silas was carrying some tools into the shed, and his hair was blowing in his eyes.

Then we got into our beds and just sat there for ages. I didn't read or draw or anything. I wanted to be paying attention for when Zac spoke.



At last he said, “Why are the walls so high?”

It was the first thing he said since we left Brenda and Alf’s.

“It’s an old house,” I said. “That’s how they made them.”

“Were people taller then?” he said.

“No,” I said. “I think they were smaller.”

He looked annoyed.

“Why then?” he said.

“I don’t know.”

“Can I get in with you?” he said.

I nodded.

He ran to my bed and curled up beside me. People like Zac because when he’s not sad or angry, he’s funny. He makes up games and he can run really fast, and he likes to chase people or be chased and to run down the street ringing doorbells. And kids like that even if grown-ups don’t. Especially old ladies don’t.

But Zac doesn’t like other people. Not really. He doesn’t trust them. The only person he trusts is me, so I can never let him down. He’s my responsibility.

“What will it be like here?” he said.

“It’ll be okay.”

We could hear people talking downstairs.

“Do you think there are ghosts?”

I shook my head, but really I was wondering too. I



wasn't worried about the kind you can see through, or the kind that look like sheets. I was worried about all the children who lived in Skilly before us and all the clues they left behind, like the scribbles on the walls, and all the sad eyes that must have looked out of the windows and wished they were somewhere else.

"No," I said. "There's no such thing as ghosts."

Zac's mouth was wobbling.

"Shall I tell you a story?" I said.

"The special one?"

"If you want."

He nodded.

I always make up stories for Zac. Usually he kills a monster and rescues the villagers or the schoolchildren or the sailors who are drowning because a sea monster sank their boat. But the special story is different because I don't know if I made it up or not.

Zac always says things like, "What was Mum like? Did she cuddle me?" And he doesn't want me to say I don't know, so I have to give him an answer. And that's how we got our story.

"Mum was holding you," I said. "You were really tiny and you were holding her finger like you'd never let go, and she was kissing you and her hair was curly like ours, and she thought we'd be happy forever."



I stroked his hair and his eyes flopped shut and then he was asleep. That's what he's like. All he has to do is close his eyes.

I couldn't get to sleep. I kept thinking about all the people we'd lived with before we came to Skilly. I always knew we wouldn't stay with Brenda and Alf for long. They were old, and Alf kept losing things. He needed Brenda to look after him, not us. Before them there was Petra, who got a job working night shifts so she couldn't look after us anymore, and there was Alara, who kept telling us we wouldn't be there for Christmas (and we weren't). There were the Grimbles, who said they'd keep us forever, but then their new baby arrived. And there was Adam, who didn't have enough chairs for everyone to sit down at the same time. And then there were all the short stays with people we called Nan or Auntie but who weren't relatives at all, and the woman who was mean to us so Anita had to take us away.

I used to tell Zac we were like gypsies—always travelling to exciting places—but I stopped saying it because it didn't make moving exciting. It made it worse. But that night I pretended there was a horse sleeping outside and an old-fashioned caravan with flowers painted on it, and in the morning we'd go on an adventure. We'd go down a long road with grass on both sides and trees blowing in the wind, and there'd be hills in the distance, and me and



Zac would be holding the reins and singing. And then I realized I didn't know if horses sleep standing up or lying down and I was trying to work it out, and I think that's when I fell asleep.

## The Storm



At first I thought I was having a nightmare. I was bumping all the way down the stairs. The banging was really loud, and I was trying to count the steps and thinking it's going to really hurt when I got to the bottom. But when I woke up, I could still hear banging. Zac was holding on to me really tight and digging his fingers into my arm. His eyes were squeezed shut.

"Ghosts!" he whispered.

But I knew it wasn't ghosts. I could hear the wind howling outside. I jumped out of bed and ran to the window. It was the middle of the night, and a storm was crashing through the garden. It was pulling up bushes and ripping pieces of wood off the shed and throwing them into the air. The tree was rocking from side to side, and all the time the wind was wailing. It was like when a kid has the worst tantrum ever, and you know you won't be able to calm them down. You just have to wait for it to be over and hope they don't break too much.



“Zac!” I called. “Look!”

Zac got to the window just as the tree blew over. It was amazing! The wind was pushing it so hard, it went diagonal, and then suddenly it couldn’t get up again and crashed to the ground. As it fell it howled like it was a dying animal, and its roots came up and they were being blown by the wind, so it looked like the tree was still alive. Like an antelope being eaten by lions. Only it wasn’t alive. It was dead.

At first me and Zac could hardly breathe. Then we started laughing like we were on a ride at the fair. We felt sick, but it was brilliant. We could hear people running around downstairs, but we didn’t go down. We just sat on my bed and listened to the storm, and I crossed my fingers and hoped the house wouldn’t blow over.

Seeing the tree blow down was one of the best things I ever saw. I know it shouldn’t be, but it was.

The storm was gone by the next morning. I don’t know if it went somewhere else, but it wasn’t in London. We couldn’t wait to see what had happened. All the Skilly kids ran out into the street. We didn’t even have breakfast. Another tree had blown down right across the road and landed on a car. There was a dent in the roof, and the windscreen was smashed into tiny pieces. I don’t think you could ever fix it.



Bins were blown over too, and rubbish had gone everywhere. There was a banana skin stuck in the branches of the tree and some plastic bottles and lots of wrappers. An old man wearing a bathrobe was sweeping glass off his path, and two women were trying to get a bike off some railings. It was twisted on so it looked like a cartoon, and there was a crisp packet stuck in the wheel. The women were half laughing and half annoyed. Because even though the storm was amazing, the bike was ruined.

Silas's rosebush had completely disappeared. Even the string was gone. It probably went miles. It might even have landed in someone else's garden, and in summer people would wonder where the red roses came from, because maybe they only planted white. Silas wasn't annoyed, though. He was laughing.

"I didn't think it was going to be *this* windy," he said.  
"Go down in history, it will."

And it really will, because it was the biggest storm for three hundred years. That means even before Skilly was built and when women wore long dresses and couldn't vote or go to school. And there were no cars or TV and there was no electricity, and people played the piano in the dark and the whole family would sing along. Me and Zac might be in history books too, because we saw what happened.



On the news it showed what else the storm had done. There was a house with its roof blown right off. You could see into the bedroom. You could even see what kind of wallpaper the people had and what books they were reading.

The wind blew lorries over too. It just picked them up and threw them on to their sides, and they were lying across the motorway like elephants that poachers had killed to take the tusks. And the wind threw trailers into the sea so all the pots and pans were floating around.

We Skilly kids were really excited. We already knew everything could be turned upside down at any moment, and now everyone else could see it too. We ran into the back garden and climbed onto the tree and just kept staring at it because we couldn't believe it was lying on the ground when it used to be up in the sky. We kept running along the trunk and jumping off the roots, and we did it over and over, and every time felt just as amazing as the first time.

Silas cut the branches off the tree, and we gathered them up and put them in a pile with the wood from the shed. And as the leaves and twigs crunched under my feet, I had to stop and take a deep breath because I realized I was happy and I was so surprised.

"We'll have a great fire with this lot," Silas said.



And we did. On Bonfire Night we stood in the garden and ate hot potatoes and watched the flames flickering in the big hole where the tree used to be.

The tree's been lying in the garden ever since. Silas cut steps into it so the little kids can get onto the top. The bark's crumbling and covered in moss and kids have written their names on it. I scratched *Ira and Zac were here 10/16/87* into one of the steps, because we saw the tree fall and that makes us part of its history, and also because it was our first whole day at Skilly. The kids here call the tree the ship or the raft, and we run along the top of it or hide behind it and ambush each other. And when the garden's quiet I lean against it and draw, or just shut my eyes and listen, because when no one's outside the garden sort of hums.

