

SAMPLE FIRST TWO CHAPTERS

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1

FIN MOVES HOUSE

Fin stared at her face in the bathroom mirror. She looked like a badly drawn girl. Her face was definitely lop-sided. Like someone started a sketch and ran out of time. She was trying to ignore her sister. Ermine was banging on the bathroom door as usual.

“Hurry up, Freak. Time to clear out.” Ermine was right. Since Fin got sick and Gran cut her hair, really short, she did look like a freak. Ermine called her Freak all the time, as if Fin had changed her name when she was in hospital. Fin didn’t care, mostly. She had bigger problems in her life. She’d made a list in a new notebook:

1. Why are Pop and Mop so secretive about our new house?

Conclusion: there must be something very, very wrong with it. Fin didn’t want to leave her snug bedroom. Despite the fact she’d spent the last three months there, lolling in bed, ill.

2. Will I have any friends left at school after being away for so long?

Conclusion: probably not.

3. Will *ex?* best friend Zelda ever be in touch again?

Zelda had moved to a chip shop in Australia. Well, it wasn’t exactly a chip shop more a *fish and chip supper restaurant and Bar-B-Que* according to Zelda’s only email. Zelda lived in a wooden house with a corrugated iron roof, next to the *fish and chip supper restaurant and Bar-B-Que*. There was a big sign. A boy called Tod lived next door. He had a swimming pool, well not Tod, but his mum and dad. Zelda was full of Tod *this* and Tod *that*. She attached some photos of the pool, her and Tod splashing about, showing off. Zelda even added a copy of a school project on something called extinct thylacines by *her and Tod*. Fin didn’t bother to open it.

4. When will I be better?

Conclusion: not for a while.

Fin had Heinoch Shonlein Puerpera. She was still impressed with the name of her illness but pleased it wasn’t a killer. The only thing interesting about it was its name. It was a boring spend-all-day-in-bed-no-school illness.

Ermine banged on the door again.

“This is a parole violation, Freak. Get out, I need the lav.”

Fin unlocked the door slowly. Ermine pushed past and slammed it shut. Fin walked down the stairs. She didn’t want to leave their cosy house. Mop had painted each tiny room a different colour. The sitting room was yellow, the kitchen blue and Fin’s bedroom was lime. Ermine said her room was puke. Mop called it puce. The little house was always warm. It smelt of toast. When Fin got sick, she had to stay in her room for a very long time. Pop spent a whole day off work fixing fairy lights up and down Fin’s bedroom walls and around her window. Fin liked the long twilight. The bulbs glowed blue and pink. Pop promised to do the same in the new house. Mop said that might be inappropriate.

Gran had chipped in: “The whole move is *inappropriate* if you ask me, but no-one has.”

“It’ll be fine, fairy lights will cheer the place up, the...” here Pop paused, “the visitors will appreciate some cheer. I know I would.”

Gran shook her head and asked: “And what about your *new neighbours*?”

Mop jumped in to defend Pop. “There aren’t any neighbours.”

Gran straightened up: “Oh well, don’t come crying to me when one of *them* sneaks up on you in the middle of the night.”

Mop glanced at Fin, who was sitting on the sofa wrapped in a blanket, chewing her nails. Mop frowned at Gran and said: “It’ll be *fine*, if I see anything odd, I’ll...” she paused, “I’ll tell it to sod off.” Fin didn’t understand what they were talking about but she knew she was going to find out pretty damn soon and it didn’t sound good.

It was cold and dark in the street. Pop rubbed his hands together, they made a dry sound. Ermine said he was trying to make fire. Pop unlocked the van door.

“Come on, love, hop in,” said Pop. Fin squeezed herself into the passenger seat amongst bin bags and boxes bound for the new house. Ermine popped bubble gum, in the back, but didn’t offer any to Fin, as usual. Pop rearranged some of the bulging bags, so he could get in. Fin remembered the time Ermine stuck bubble gum in her hair. As Gran had cut it out she told Fin a story.

“Once upon a time a little...” here Gran paused, for dramatic effect. “A little creature was born called Ermine. She was called Ermine because her skin was as white as the Arctic fox and her eyes were as black as coal. Her parents: a poor woodcutter, turned plumber, and his wife, were worried that Ermine was so pretty that she wouldn’t need to grow a personality. One day while walking and wishing very hard for a personality, Ermine didn’t notice a deep well. She tripped and fell headlong into its green-slimy water. By the time the villagers heard her shrill screams and dragged her out she’d found a personality. Deep but unpleasant, like the well. And to this day Ermine covers her face in white powder and black lipstick, so no one knows about her old pretty face any more.”

Every time Ermine stormed in and out of the little house, pink dreadlocks flapping behind her, Gran would wink at Fin. As if to say what do you expect she found her personality at the bottom of a well.

Pop was excited. Fin could tell, he kept repeating himself.

“Seat belts on, seat belts on.”

Fin tried to get comfortable but the van was rammed with stuff. She never liked being in the van. The diesel fumes made her feel sick. Ermine blew a large bubble, popped it and thrust an empty carrier bag over Fin’s shoulder.

“Sick bag, do *not* throw up on my stuff.” Fin took the bag and watched their house disappear behind them. Pop turned into the Avenue and then out onto the High Street. After the roundabout Pop slowed down and pulled over at the side of the road. Fin thought he was going to look for his *A to Z*. Pop never went anywhere without a map.

“You never know, we could get lost,” he always said.

“What and then we’d eat the map?” Ermine always added.

Pop leaned over, rooted around on the floor and hauled up a torch.

“We’ll need this, ladies.” And with that he leapt out of the van and bounded towards some tall iron gates.

“Why have we stopped?” said Ermine, dragging her eyes away from her phone. “We’re here, idiot,” said Fin, leaning forward to peer out of the dusty windscreen.

“Get out then, Freak,” said Ermine. Fin eased herself out of the van. Her legs were stiff and cold. She stood on the pavement, looking at the gates. There was a high brick wall that stretched as far as she could see to her left and right. Everything looked orange under the sodium street lights, even Ermine’s pink hair. Pop was rattling at a chain wrapped tight around the gates.

“Can’t believe it. I took a chain off this morning and now there’s another one, don’t have a key. Ermine, phone Mop, ask if she knows anything about it,” said Pop.

“Can’t,” said Ermine. “No signal.”

“Just try, cross over the road,” said Fin, even her head was getting cold.

Ermine sighed and crossed the road. It was quiet now, the rush hour was over. Fin leaned on the van, ramming her hands into her hoody pockets. She pushed the stretchy cotton down to her thighs. Pop put a cigarette in his mouth but didn’t light up. He was giving up. Fin couldn’t see through the gates. There were no lights the other side, only darkness. The wind clattered an empty vodka bottle along the pavement.

A gate banged down the street and a boy about Fin’s age appeared; hood up, heading their way. Fin ignored him. However, he walked right up to Pop, thrust out a key, mumbled something and walked away fast. Pop raised his eyebrows to Fin and tried the key.

“Woo hoo,” he shouted and waved the chain like a snake trophy. “We are in. Wait here, I’ll drive the van and park behind the gates.”

This was easier said than done. Pop had to lift and push one gate, while Ermine and Fin had to work together to lift and push the other gate. Flakes of old paint pricked their skin. Fin rubbed rust off her hands, onto her jeans, as Pop drove into the darkness. Ermine began to swear.

“Look,” she said, pointing her phone towards a battered sign stating: Darkling Park. “I’ve been here before on a sodding art trip. Park, my arse.”

Fin thought the wall looked familiar but like something in the background she’d never really noticed. They’d probably driven past and walked past hundreds of times before. It was just a big wall. Pop emerged from the van with another torch.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” spat Ermine.

Pop smiled. “No, popsicle. Welcome to your new, and very grand, home: Darkling Park.”

“But it’s a graveyard,” wailed Ermine.

Fin was shivering but she felt as if she was getting hotter and hotter. She wiped her greasy forehead with her sleeve. Her stomach wobbled. She was going to be sick. The rushed tea of baked beans and plain chocolate biscuits churned. Fin didn’t even like plain chocolate biscuits. She bent over: spurt, splatter, another splatter bigger than the first and a dry heave. She felt better. She didn’t feel queasy any more, just hungry and shaky. Pop put his hand on her shoulder and passed her a grubby hanky. He looked sad like it was his fault. Ermine screamed and jumped about. Fin thought she’d been stung.

“Now look what you’ve done.” Pop and Fin looked at Ermine. Ermine stuck a boot out towards them. Her new black 18 buckle boots were coated in sick.

“We’ll clean them up later, in the great scheme of things this isn’t a...” Pop didn’t finish. Ermine wasn’t listening. She’d turned her back, prodding her phone. This gave Fin a chance to smile in the darkness.

“Jeez, no wonder you kept this a secret,” said Ermine. Pop smiled and passed Fin a torch. Ermine continued to complain.

“I came here in Year 10; never in a million years thought I’d end up living here. Karma’s a bitch... *where exactly* are we going to live?” Ermine frowned. “It’s not a tent is it?” Pop and Mop had lived in a tent in Spain when they first got married. They’d laugh about no water and a loo made out of plastic bags.

“No, it’s a house, overthere,” Pop pointed into the darkness. “Come on, we’ll walk. I’ll come back for the van after dinner.” Fin smiled again *if* Ermine hated it so much maybe she would *have* to like it. Really, really like it. Though, as they walked down a cracked road into the darkness she wasn’t so sure.

The brick wall blocked most of the orange street light. There were trees on either side of the narrow road. Fin could hear them rustling and settling in the breeze. Ermine walked closer to Fin than she had in a long time. The torch light was feeble against the black empty space. It was cooler here. Fin could smell damp earth and rotting leaves. The hum of buses and cars faded. It was like being tipped out of London into the countryside, as if a forest had sidled up to the main road after dark.

“I can’t get a signal,” Ermine muttered.

“That might be the hospital, it’s over there,” Pop pointed into the black. “This used to be a country estate about 200 years ago.”

Ermine groaned. Fin sighed, not only were they in for a long walk, by the look of things, but Pop was launching into a history lecture. The wind picked up and they were sprayed with some dead twigs.

“Ow!” shouted Ermine. Pop continued, oblivious: “Lord Basel’s family built the estate, but when he died, he left no heir. His son died of cholera, when he was your age, Fin. Anyway, he left his estate to the London Board of Works for a hospital and cemetery. Now this is really interesting...”

Fin and Ermine looked at one another. Ermine rolled her eyes.

“Lord Basel had a grand scheme to build a Workers’ Spa with fountains...” Fin and Ermine both slowed down so they heard less of the lecture. Pop forged ahead talking and waving his arms about for emphasis. His torch caught headstones and large marble plinths carved with letters and dates. Ermine tried to ignore the graves; hissing at Fin if she dared shine her torch left or right. However, Fin was interested *and* she was annoying Ermine, a win/win situation.

“I just want to read what they died of,” she said to Ermine.

“That’s not on the graves, but it should be,” said Ermine, taking up the challenge.

Soon both Fin and Ermine were zigzagging across the narrow road, pushing past spikey bushes to read the graves. Most of them were pretty boring. People like Vera and Ivan died in 1871 and were sadly missed. Sometimes they found whole families, as their eyes adjusted to the dark, they read about children buried long before their parents. They began to suggest suitable deaths depending on names and ages: miner’s lung, the pox, a terrible drunken fall, crushed to death by a falling drunk, terrible.

Pop stopped up ahead and called them. He was standing in front of what appeared to be a grassy mound like a traffic island. As they caught up with him, he swept his torch beam across the island. Ermine and Fin stared as the yellow light caught a weird collection of palm trees and bulbous firs. White stone statues leaned towards them. Angels with broken wings gazed up at the night sky. Ugly chubby faced cherubs smirked. Fin took a step closer using her torch to make a path up the overgrown bank. Some of the statues had lost arms or heads. These lolled in the ivy. Fin stepped over them. She tripped up now and again as brambles snagged her jeans. At the top there was a stone zebra standing on a marble plinth. Before Fin had time to find death clues about the zebra, Ermine caught up with her, puffing.

“I remember this. Art trip, Miss Tolstoy got us to photograph broken limbs and headless torsos. Weird. That’s not a zebra by the way.” Ermine stopped. She was interrupted by a low growling sound coming from the other side of the not-a-zebra. Fin and Ermine stood very still. Fin felt her short hair stand up on the back of her neck. Pop glanced about, grabbed a thick stick and walked towards the sound, making as much noise as possible. The growling stopped. They all held their breath. Pop sprang forward, banged his stick on someone’s grave and shouted: “Get out of here.” Something large crashed away through the brambles.

“Probably just a fox... or a lost dog” said Pop in a loud voice, frowning. Ermine and Fin walked quickly back to the cracked road. Whatever it was had gone, for now.

They all began to walk faster. Up ahead Pop’s torch caught two stone angels; both had lost a wing. Pop handed his torch to Ermine and rooted about in the undergrowth. He only took a few seconds but to Fin it felt like an hour. She stepped closer to Ermine and tried not to look beyond the yellow torch light. Pop gently lifted a wing from the damp earth and laid it down at the edge of the road.

“This is why we’re here. I’m going to be caretaker and fix this lot, protect them from harm, well vandals,” he said. “You guys can help.” He picked up a marble hand and passed it to Ermine.

“Yuck,” said Ermine and passed it straight to Fin. It was heavier than it looked but Fin liked its cool smoothness. The fingers curled together as if they were meant to be holding something. She decided to wash it in hot soapy water whenever they arrived at their new house. It might be useful.

“Onward comrades, this way” said Pop. And instead of following the road ahead they turned right down another narrower road, only just big enough for the van.

“Is it far?” said Fin. She felt tired and queasy again.

“No, just down here, past the tree line, Mop’s got the dinner on.” At this news both sisters groaned. Mop’s cooking was awful. Gran and Pop usually cooked while Mop washed up. However, recently Mop had taken over at the stove as Gran was moving to her own place, Sheltered Accommodation it was called. So far they had been treated to brittle pasta, burnt toast, vomit trifle and mutant stir fry.

“Come on, not far now, guys,” said Pop.

This road was muddy and uneven. It undulated under Fin’s trainers. She stumbled twice. Her torch battery began to fade. Her hands were numb. Both Fin and Ermine started to walk closer to Pop. The wind was noisy in the trees above their heads. A fox hurried across the path ahead. The headstones were smaller here; some had given up and fallen over. Fin couldn’t see very far but she kept checking behind. What if the thing that growled came back? She turned again and nearly jumped out of her skin. Her torch caught two glowing eyes. But it was only the fox watching them.

Fin puffed in relief and stopped to tie up her trainers. Their loose sloppy feeling had been bothering her since they left the van. She put the marble hand

down on some mashed leaves. As she retied her right lace there was a loud thrashing sound in the bushes to her left. Ermine and Pop seemed very far away. Fin stayed low, near the path and waited. Her heart pounded in her ears. She didn’t have to wait long. There was a crash when something large burst through the bushes and shot across the path. Ermine shrieked. Pop spun round trying to point the torch towards the noise. Fin knew it was way too big to be a fox. The giant shape reappeared; it was easily as big as Fin. It barged back through the undergrowth, leapt across the path and vanished in to the night. Fin stood up.

“What the?” Ermine shouted.

“Some sort of dog?” asked Pop. Fin looked for the fox, it was gone. Whatever it was it had a very long tail. And maybe stripes across its back? Fin didn’t know much about dogs. She was frightened of them when they barked. But she had never, ever seen a striped dog. Fin forgot all about the marble hand. They began to walk away, very fast.

BLIND TWIN HOUSE

There was a squeaking sound up ahead. Pop shone the torch towards another sign, on a pole, high above a low brick wall. The sign swung back and forth in the breeze as if it was repeating itself: *Blind Twin House* it read.

“Is that the name of our new house?” said Fin. She expected it to be a practical joke, this couldn’t be real. Or could it?

Ermine rolled her eyes and jabbed at her phone.

“Put your phone away and follow me,” said Pop. There was another iron gate but this one lent against the wall, its hinges rusted through. They walked under the tall trees. A door-shaped hole appeared in the blackness, revealing Mop with another torch. She was wearing her splattered cooking apron. Mop’s torch was covered in chocolate dribble.

“Come in. I’ve made a cake for our first night in our new house.”

Before they could step into the hole Pop cleared his throat in a theatrical way. He smiled and shone his torch up the brick façade. The house towered above them; layers of bricks and boarded up windows.

“Welcome to Blind Twin House.” Fin was glad Pop was smiling; he had been frowning since he was made redundant. Now they had a new house and Pop had a job, sort of. “Desperate,” muttered Ermine as she stomped into the hall.

Pop wedged the heavy door shut. The square hall was as big as their old house. The walls were bare plaster. The cold floor was covered in red Lino, some of which had been ripped up to reveal black and white stone tiles, like a chess board. Stairs snaked up into a dense darkness. Fin shivered. She didn’t want to look there for too long. What if a face appeared? There were five tall doors; they all looked like they had been dyed with black ink.

“Come into the kitchen, our new kitchen,” said Mop. Mop was grinning. “Fuses have gone again, so I had to get more candles. We don’t have that many so I think early to bed.” This was one of Mop’s favourite phrases.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, I’m not spending a night in a dump called Blind Twin House,” said Ermine. Fin felt the same but guessed it was their only option. Perhaps the kitchen would be more like a normal house?

Pop and Mop ignored Ermine’s protest. Fin held her breath. Would Ermine storm out and risk being attacked by whatever was lurking outside? Instead they both followed Mop towards the second door on the left. It led to a long narrow kitchen. The kitchen table was covered in cutlery and piles of plates and crumpled newspaper. A burning smell came from a battered stove.

“Oh damn,” Mop said, grabbing a tea towel to rescue the cake.

Mop cut the burnt top off and smeared it with jam. Pop, Ermine and Fin washed their hands at the chipped enamel sink. Then they sat down on their wooden chairs from home. Mop pushed mugs of scalding tea across the table. She began to point out some original Victorian fixtures, as she called them, from Lord Basel’s time. It was difficult to appreciate the ornate plaster ceiling because it had been suffocated by layers of paint. Three candles rammed into cups and two torches didn’t give much light.

“The wall paper’s probably from the 1950s” said Mop pointing at the mottled pattern: knives and forks lined up next to onions and grapes.

“It’s vile,” announced Ermine. “God, look, there’s even a cabbage.”

“So why’s it called Blind Twin House?” asked Fin pouring herself more tea, before it stewed “And why are all the windows boarded up?”

“That’s a surprise for tomorrow morning, let’s show you round,” said Mop, picking up her torch.

“And I’ll try to fix the fuse box,” added Pop. Fin worried he might go back to the van alone. But Pop began to rummage about picking up screwdrivers and duct tape from some of the half unpacked boxes on the kitchen floor.

“Things just keep getting better,” Pop said fishing out his camping headlamp and snapping it on his bald head. Mop led the tour. At first it was difficult to see. The torch was too small for the big rooms. Mop got excited and kept pointing in different directions. Pop had already unpacked most of their furniture. Mop and Pop had created islands, as they called them. This meant pushing all their cheap, rickety furniture into a corner or around the giant black fire places, or in the oval dining room, in the middle. Ermine said it looked like an amateur theatre production of failed family life. Downstairs there was a basement with a sink and shelves covered in battered tins wrapped in cobwebs. They left Pop there humming and rattling away.

There was a small room Mop said she was going to turn into a study, the oval dining room and a huge room that could be a grand sitting room, *if* they could afford grand sitting room furniture. They couldn’t. With their crappy furniture it just looked sad, thought Fin. Each room was colder than the last. The feeble torch made weird shadows like something was moving towards them, then quickly away again. The walls were covered in old fashioned wall paper: urns and ivy, mutant flowers and weird shapes like giant magnified insects squashed flat for some awful experiment.

“This is beyond creepy,” said Ermine, going up to the walls for a closer look.

Fin didn’t want to go anywhere near the patterns, they looked like they’d start to move.

“Is it like this upstairs?” asked Fin.

Mop smiled. “Not exactly, you’ll see.”

Fin didn’t want to see. The house smelt sad like rainwater.

Ermine shot ahead up the stairs, clomped round the first floor, and found another staircase. Fin could hear her boots moving fast above their heads, like a giant rat in clogs. “Mine,” shouted Ermine, before Fin could say whatever it was, was unfair. But Mop put her hand on Fin’s arm and said “Wait and see. We’ve already set your room up.”

On the first floor there was a white and black tiled bathroom with a giant bath. Next to it was a square room with Mop and Pop’s bed leaning against the bare wall. Next to this was a narrow corridor sort of room.

“This is odd, really odd, it looks like a linen cupboard but I think it might have been a playroom. Maybe, after Lord Basel’s son...” said Mop. “Anyway, someone put up shelves.”

Fin peered in. It was more like a corridor with shelves on either side. It felt warmer than the rest of the draughty house. Behind the shelves someone had painted a landscape of flat green with a sliver of blue sky. There were animals dotted here and there: a leopard, a black bear, a fierce looking pig, an owl and a black stork. Fin couldn’t see more in the torch light; some animals were half hidden behind the shelves as if they were hiding. The painter was quite good, except each animal looked like it was smirking. Fin wondered if that was the intention. It was creepy.

They walked past a wide wooden window seat.

“This is for you,” said Mop pausing at a narrow white door. So this was her new room. Mop twisted the door knob back and forth and pushed open the door.

“Best not shut this door. It’s difficult to open again,” she said. It was long and narrow, but mostly long. There was a fire place. Fin’s bed was made. There was a new anglepoise lamp on her bedside table for reading in bed. Some cardboard boxes were piled against another white door. The only light was a candle in a clean jam jar, so the room had no colour but Mop assured her it was pale blue, sort of faded, she said with a faraway look in her eyes.

“When the chimney’s cleared you can have a fire,” said Mop, turning to go down stairs. Fin sat down on her bed. Her legs ached. Her bed smelt like their old house. Fin felt sad, her eyes were sore. She shone her torch up and down the walls. She was too tired to figure out the silvery shapes: clouds or maybe shells? At least it wasn’t cockroaches.

She just wanted to lie down but a victory yell broke the silence. Ermine had won but Fin wasn’t sure what. She decided to find out. It was the attic, now Ermine’s new room. Fin pulled herself up another steep staircase. The walls pressed in around her. It was almost as if the stairs were carved into the bare plaster. There was a short door at the top leading into darkness. Ermine laughed and clicked her torch on, under her face. However the scary effect was ruined by the house lights flickering on, then off again. For a moment Fin saw a white room with round windows like portholes on a ship. This of course was the best room.

“Bet you can’t see the graves from up here,” said Ermine, bouncing up and down in her giant platform boots. Fin’s eyes slowly adjusted to the dim torch light. The walls were black but the portholes were even blacker, like a ring of spider’s eyes.

“It’ll be like sleeping in a spider’s head,” she said. Ermine paused in her bouncing. Fin slipped out and down the stairs. Ermine followed Fin quickly, slamming her new bedroom door behind her, muttering “I’m not sleeping anywhere until we get electricity.”

After the tour Fin sat down on the stairs, listening to the wind in the trees outside. She could hear the enamel sign squeaking in the breeze. She hadn’t decided if it was annoying or spooky. Mop passed now and then with more boxes and bin bags. Fin wanted to cry but she was just too tired. What was the point, they were never going back to their old house. The new owners were probably already demolishing the garden for their off street parking.

“Cheer up,” Mop sang as she hurried past wearing rubber gloves and a manic smile. “You’ve got your own room now.” Mop stopped lower down the stairs so her face was level with Fin’s. She looked tired and her big hair was covered in plaster dust.

“No more sharing with Gran and the Imperial family.”

Fin trudged back to her room. She took off her trainers and lay on the bed looking at the plaster shapes on the ceiling. They’d once been flowers she decided, but now looked like dollops of melted ice-cream. Her tired eyes rested on the faded wallpaper. It might be a coronet. It was difficult to tell. There was a tap on the door. Fin’s Grandmother blocked the doorway.

“Gran!” Fin got up and ran to her Grandmother. Gran wrapped Fin in a big hug. She smelt of cigarettes and Parma Violets.

“I got a cab, got a funny look coming here. Cabbie helped me open the gate, then took off. Look, doll.” Gran waved a hammer in Fin’s face. She then strode towards one of the bigger boxes wedged in front of the other door in Fin’s room.

“Contraband,” Gran snickered. She used the hammer to prize open the box. She slit the inside with her long nails. She rummaged about through her second-best-scarves and started to take out small silver photo frames; laying them on the bed where they gleamed in the torch light. She drew a chocolate bar from her coat pocket and passed it to Fin. “Supplies.”

Fin unwrapped the chocolate sniffing its deep burnt smell: plain with crackle toffee. This one was a bit rich for Fin so she broke off a small piece and sucked it slowly to build up her tolerance. Gran looked over her shoulder to make sure the coast was clear, before starting to take out her homemade door-stops. Each one was a little bit bigger than the one before. The largest was as big as their family cat, Fat Bastard. He hated the doorstops and had once been caught trying to scratch their faces off. It was Gran who renamed him Fat Bastard after that incident. Now no-one remembered his real name. Gran set them all out around the room, like sentries. They were made of newspaper with something heavy and secret inside. Gran would never give away this secret.

“When you need it, you’ll know,” Gran said, usually after she told the story of how the Tsar’s daughters had diamonds and rubies sewn inside their

clothes. The doorstops were covered in yellowing sellotape but the photocopied faces were still clear: Tsar Nicolas II, his daughters: Olga, Maria, Anastasia, Tatiana Livadiya, (very good at maths, insisted Gran), little Alexei and the Tsarina Alexandra Fyodorovna.

Fin felt better. The Imperial family were like old friends. Since Fin was little, Gran had been telling her bedtime stories about the old country, mother Russia. Gran had left as a baby but she said she was scarred by folk memories, seared into her DNA. When Fin got sick and Gran came to stay she'd brought the Imperial family to keep Fin company. They now circled her bed on the floor, on the mantel piece and on packing crates. Fin hoped they'd keep any ghosts away.

They finished the chocolate and stared at their Imperial friends as the torch battery began to flicker and fail. Fireworks popped in the distance. Fin leaned back on her pillow, her eyes began to close. Gran rattled the other door knob. The door did not open.