

JACQUELINE WILSON

Illustrated by Rachael Dean



The Primrose
Railway
Children



I knew something was the matter. Mum and Dad kept having these arguments. They didn't shout or yell – they whispered in another room so we couldn't hear properly. Somehow the hissing sounds were worse, even though we couldn't make sense of the words.

I woke up once and heard them downstairs in the kitchen. I looked at my watch. It was half past two in the morning! They always went to bed at half past ten, after the news. I usually heard them go to bed because I took ages to fall asleep.

I couldn't sleep because I was having trouble at school. My best friend, Amelie, was suddenly acting really weirdly. We'd been friends ever since we started in Reception when we were four and a half. We were devoted to each other from the first day, when I made Amelie a pink bead necklace and she made me a blue one. We used to wander around hand in hand, and pretended we were



sisters. We did look quite alike in those days actually, both of us a bit podgy, with fair plaits down to our shoulders and brown eyes. We liked doing exactly the same things too: we dressed up in our Disney Princess costumes and drew pictures with the sky right up at the top and stick people floating above the grass and played elaborate imaginary games with our teddies.

But now we were nearly ten we were totally different. Amelie's hair fell all the way to her waist, smooth and shining. Mine was curly and still wouldn't grow much past my shoulders. Amelie wore tiny skirts and tight tops and sparkly shoes. I'd have liked to wear them too, but Mum said I looked better in my dungarees and canvas boots. Amelie's felt tips had all dried up because she preferred playing on her iPad, but I still liked art. I drew lines of girls with their sparkly shoes firmly on the grass and I gave them all names and made up stories about them. I didn't play with my teddies any more, but I still acted out all sorts of imaginary dramas, when I knew I could be strictly private.

Amelie went to a real drama school on Saturdays now, and gymnastics and ballet after school. I didn't want to go to gymnastics because I found it difficult even doing a forward roll. I tried ballet too, but if I'm honest I was a bit rubbish at it, and got stuck in the elementary class with the babies. Dad and I danced together to old rock music instead, and he said I did a mean jive.

I *did* want to go to Amelie's drama class, but Saturdays were



Family Days. Mum went off to work before we got up on weekdays, and she generally didn't get home till I was in bed, but on Saturdays we all went swimming at her gym and then went to Pizza Express, and spent the afternoons going to the cinema or a museum or a stately house.

It was especially good going with Dad. He'd act out scenes from the film with me afterwards, and he'd tell me stories about the things in the exhibition and he'd show me around the stately house as if he was Lord Dad and I was his little Lady.

Mum and Dad and Perry and I still went on these Family Days. But nowadays my big sister Becks saw all her friends on Saturdays and hung out at the shopping centre instead. Perry didn't really want to come on Family Days either, but he didn't *have* many friends, and Mum and Dad said he was too young to stay at home by himself.

I'd always had lots of friends, thank goodness, but Amelie was always my best-ever friend – only now she seemed to have gone off me. We still sat next to each other at school but we didn't whisper together or pass each other little notes. She was forever craning round to send a scribbled note or whisper to Kate. They went to the same gymnastics class – and now Kate had started ballet too. She went straight into the intermediate class because apparently the ballet teacher said she had natural talent. Amelie and Kate started doing little dance routines together in the playground.



I tried to join in at first. They didn't actually say anything horrid, but they kept looking at each other, their lips twitching, as if they were laughing at me.

Amelie and I still went home together. Dad and Amelie's mum took it in turns to collect us in the car, but I found out Kate sometimes had a sleepover at Amelie's house after gymnastics or ballet. Amelie hadn't asked me to come for a sleepover for ages.

'Well, we'll ask Amelie to sleep over at ours,' said Dad.

So I did, but Amelie just shrugged and looked awkward, and said she wasn't really allowed to on school nights any more – which was a downright lie. That wasn't the worst of it though. I heard them whispering together in the playground, and Amelie said to Kate, 'If I tell you something awful about Phoebe, will you swear not to tell anyone else ever?'

I'm Phoebe. I felt like she'd set me on fire. I burned all over. What was she going to say that was so awful? She knew all my secrets. Would she tell Kate about the time in Year Two when I wet myself? It was shameful and even my tights got sopping, but I was only little after all. Would she tell Kate about how I tore up Perry's precious *1,001 Facts about Amazing Animals* notebook last week? It was very mean of me, but he'd only compiled twenty-three facts so far, and he was being so annoying, singing the same song over and over again until I wanted to scream. Would she tell Kate that I'd copied a little poem out of an old book and pretended



I'd written it myself, because I wanted to show off to Dad? He thought it was marvellous, and even Mum was impressed at first – but then she Googled the first line and found me out. That was truly awful, and when I told Amelie I made *her* swear not to tell anyone else ever.

I listened hard, my heart thudding, waiting for her to betray me. But she didn't mention that poem.

'I heard my mum talking. It's about Phoebe's dad,' Amelie said. Then she put her mouth right up to Kate's ear and whispered.

I couldn't hear a single word, but Kate gasped and put her hand to her mouth in a silly affected manner.

'No!' she said. 'You're joking me!'

'You two are the jokes!' I burst out, confronting them. 'What lies are you spreading about my dad?'

Amelie blushed. She's very fair, but when she blushes she goes tomato red and looks almost ugly.

'I don't tell lies!' she said, which was clearly a lie in itself.

'Is it really true that—' Kate started, but Amelie shoved her quite hard to shut her up.

'Ouch!' Kate protested.

'I was just telling Kate that your dad used to be quite famous,' Amelie blurted out.

'Really?' I said, disconcerted. Because this wasn't a lie; it was true. In fact, Dad used to be *very* famous. He was on television for



years and years before I was born. Becks says she can remember watching him when she was really little. You can still find his programme on YouTube. It was for little children, on CBeebies, and it was called *Robinson*. That's our surname. Dad's first name is Michael, though Mum and everyone else call him Rob.

There's this old book called *Robinson Crusoe*. Dad's got a much-thumbed Penguin classic copy. He's going to read it to me some time, but says it's rather old for me at the moment. He's told me a bit about the story though. The Robinson in the book is shipwrecked onto a desert island. So my dad made this pretend island, all sand, with pebbles for rocks. He created a little dough Robinson figure who lived all alone in a mud hut in the middle of the island. At the beginning of every programme he made little Robinson come out of his hut and Dad said: 'Here's Robinson. Who is he going to meet today?'

He didn't ever meet any people, but he met monkeys and pigs and wildcats and dogs and turtles and dolphins and jellyfish and even a woolly mammoth. If there was no one about he had a chat with the vegetables in his garden patch. He once had races with his runner beans. It's a bit weird, but it *was* for very little children.

There were *Robinson* books too. My mum published them – that's how they met. You used to be able to get toy Robinson islands as well. We've got a big one up in our attic. Dad and I used to play with it lots, just the two of us. I think Becks did too once



upon a time. Perry never saw the point. He used to get irritated with Dad.

'It's all wrong! Woolly mammoths were prehistoric creatures, so they're extinct now. Monkeys and pigs and turtles and all the others can't *talk*. Potatoes and carrots can't either. And those runner beans are silly – beans can't *run*.'

But maybe other children also thought Robinson silly, because the programmes went out of fashion – and Dad did too. He tried out all kinds of other ideas but the children's television people didn't like them. He tried adult television as well, science fantasy scripts. They were meant to be funny but no one laughed and they didn't get made. He got as far as a pilot half-hour for radio called *Cats in Space*, but it was never made into a series. Mum tried to persuade her editorial department to publish a *Cats in Space* book, but without any success.

Dad never gave up trying. He's not a quitter. He started writing a detective story and then a historical novel, but they didn't work out either. People said he wasn't really that sort of writer. So he went back to writing *Robinson*. He wrote *Robinson Rhymes*, and a sequel to *Robinson* called *Mrs Robinson and all the little Robinsons* but they were all turned down. Dad even had this idea of being a real-life Robinson on an actual desert island, filming himself. I was glad that idea got rejected because we would have missed him too much. Well, *I* would. *And Perry.*



Eventually Mum got him a job with Melissa Harris, adapting all her Puggy-Wuggy books for television. We can't stand Puggy-Wuggy. He's this goofy little dog who does daft things and wears a selection of awful outfits. He's always getting into trouble, but nobody minds because they think he's so cute. He isn't cute, he's revolting. Even Mum thinks that, but Melissa Harris is her bestselling author, and so she has to act as if Puggy-Wuggy is adorable.

Melissa Harris used to be on television a lot in some soap or other. Then she was in *Strictly*, dancing with Anton, and then she won *I'm a Celebrity* because people thought her hilarious – goodness knows why. She started her own YouTube channel, dressing up her weird little pug in ridiculous outfits, and she got thousands of followers.

Melissa Harris looks rather like a very ancient Puggy-Wuggy. I'm not sure how old she really is, but she looks about a hundred and one. She's got this silly squashed-up face with a button nose and big bulgy eyes, and her clothes are awful too, generally pink. Dad took me to meet her once. She called me a dear little poppet and patted me on the head as if I was a pug. She gave me a big pink cupcake and signed copies of all ten of her Puggy-Wuggy books, though they were much too young for me. Still, I suppose it was kind of her.

She was kind to Dad too. In fact, she totally adored him,



fluttering her eyelashes at him and acting coy. She wanted him to do everything for her, insisting he went shopping with her, and acting like he was a genius if he mended a plug for her. She said his scripts were absolutely wonderful, though she wasn't sure he'd captured Puggy-Wuggy's true spirit. She made him do them again and again. Perhaps it was a way of keeping him coming to see her. She'd even started calling him Robbie-Wobbie. *Really.*

I don't know how Dad could bear it. Well, I do. She paid him a lot of money for five mornings a week. Though I think they've fallen out now, because Dad doesn't go there any more. He doesn't do any kind of work just at the moment. He's still hoping that the animation firm making the Puggy-Wuggy series might make a programme of Robinson too.

'The head of the firm grew up watching *Robinson*. He told me he absolutely adored him. He'd much sooner work on a Robinson series rather than piddly Puggy-Wuggy,' Dad said.

Mum sighed. So did Becks, and Perry joined in. They've had enough of Robinson. But I just know they're going to be proved wrong. I bet Dad will get that film made somehow and Robinson will be a big hit all over again. Then *Dad* will be properly famous all over again.

'My dad's still famous,' I said to Amelie now.

'But—' said Kate.



‘You look him up on Wikipedia,’ I said fiercely. ‘And his Robinson Island toy costs a fortune on eBay.’

Kate screwed up her face, looking remarkably like Puggy-Wuggy, but Amelie nodded.

‘She’s right,’ she said. ‘Come on, the bell’s gone – we’ll be late for lessons.’

I thought Amelie might have gone off Kate a little bit. I hoped she’d go back to being properly best friends with me again. But she hasn’t yet.

So I had enough to worry about, without this new problem of Mum and Dad having these weird whispery rows all the time.

I asked Becks after we got home from school and had eaten our tea if she had any idea what they were rowing *about*.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Don’t look so worried, Phoebes. Parents row sometimes. They get on each other’s nerves. Like we do.’

We were in her bedroom and she was staring at herself in the mirror, practising selfie faces. She pursed her lips in a simpering pout.

‘Do you think I look sexy like this?’ she mumbled, trying not to move her mouth.

‘No, I think you look ridiculous,’ I said. ‘Becks—’

‘What?’ She tried piling her hair on the top of her head, her chin tilted. ‘Do you think I look better like this?’



‘Worse. You look totally ludicrous. Becks, do you think they might be splitting up?’ I whispered the last sentence because it was so worrying.

‘No!’ Becks let her hair fall round her shoulders again and shook her head vigorously. ‘Well, I don’t think so. Maybe Mum’s getting a bit fed up, though. I think she’s an absolute saint working so hard to support us while Dad faffs around doing nothing very much. He didn’t even manage to keep that part-time job with the Puggy-Wuggy woman.’

I was thinking. The arguments with Mum had started up around the time Dad stopped working for her.

‘Becks, you don’t think . . . ?’

‘What?’

‘You don’t think Melissa Harris tried to get off with Dad, do you?’ I asked.

‘Are you *crazy*? She’s ancient. Years and years older than Dad. And why would she fancy him anyway? He’s so untidy and his hair is all over the place – he shambles about like an old scarecrow half the time,’ said Becks.

‘He does not! He’s ever so good-looking! And old women like that Melissa often want younger men, don’t they?’ I said uncertainly, trying to sound like a grown-up. ‘Maybe Mum found out and that’s why Dad doesn’t work there any more. And they’re having all these arguments because Mum’s upset and blaming Dad,



though I don't see how it was *his* fault if Melissa Harris fell in love with him,' I said.

'You've been watching too many rubbish shows about people having affairs,' Becks said loftily. 'Real people just get a bit fed up with each other, that's all.' She was peering at her eyebrows now, reaching for her tweezers. 'Do you think they're getting a bit too bushy now?'

'No, they're way too thin. You make them look seriously weird,' I said.

'They're *groomed*, that's all. I don't want to go round looking like Frida Kahlo, thanks very much,' said Becks.

Dad and I looked at art books together sometimes. I knew all about Frida Kahlo. I loved her self-portraits, even the gory ones. I thought she looked beautiful in her bright dresses and jewellery. I even liked her big eyebrows.

'She's *artistic*,' I said. 'Dad and I think she's marvellous, so there.'

'You and Dad! You totally hero-worship him. You're pathetic,' said Becks, plucking away.

'So are you,' I said. 'You won't have any eyebrows left in a minute.'

I flounced out of the room. I went along the landing to the bathroom to try out selfie faces myself, tripped over four empty bottles of mineral water, grabbed hold of the side of the bath – and





then screamed. There was a baby crocodile swimming inside it!

I charged out, yelling for Dad.

Perry rushed out of his bedroom. ‘Shut *up*, Phoebe!’ he ordered.

‘There’s a crocodile in the bathroom!’

‘Don’t be so stupid! It’s not a crocodile – it’s a newt. Stop screaming like that, you’ll frighten it,’ said Perry.

‘It frightened me! What’s it *doing* there?’

‘I found it in the garden. I think someone’s tried to pick it up and now it’s lost part of its tail,’ said Perry. ‘Look!’

‘I don’t want to look!’

‘Don’t be silly. It’s very interesting. You wait. It will regenerate another tail in a few weeks. I want to watch it do that,’ said Perry.

‘You can’t keep it in the bath for a few weeks!’ I protested.

‘I don’t see why not. We can use the shower instead, or the bath in Mum and Dad’s room.’

‘Oh yeah, I’m sure they’ll be very happy to have us trailing in and out of their bedroom every day,’ I said.

‘Well, they might not be *happy*,’ said Perry, who doesn’t really get sarcasm. ‘But I don’t think they’ll mind too much when they understand.’

I peered down at the creature in the shallow water. It didn’t look so scary now I knew it wasn’t a crocodile. In fact, it looked quite sweet. Perry had piled up part of his mineral collection at one end of the bath and it crawled out onto it for a change of scenery.



‘Why don’t we give it a little waterfall?’ I said, reaching for the cold tap.

‘No! You absolutely mustn’t pollute its environment with chlorinated water,’ said Perry.

‘Ah!’ I said, looking at the empty mineral water containers. ‘Mum’s not going to be too happy about that.’

‘It *needs* spring water. Well, ideally it needs a proper aquarium with a filter and a little dry deck at the top, but I haven’t got enough pocket money, obviously,’ said Perry. ‘Though I suppose Dad might lend me some.’

Dad was in a funny mood today. Well, he’d been acting a bit oddly for a while now. He sometimes made a huge fuss of us and told daft jokes and mucked about to make us laugh. Other times he sloped off by himself and ignored us completely. He acted extra-fond of us when we came out of the school gate today, as if he hadn’t seen us for weeks. He gave me a huge great hug and Perry a big grin and a thumbs-up sign. Perry doesn’t like hugs, they make him feel weird.

Dad held back on hugs when we picked up Becks, because even a head-in-the-clouds guy like Dad knows you don’t go hugging your fourteen-year-old daughter in front of all her friends. He complimented her instead.

‘You’re looking great, Becks. I like your hair like that,’ he said.

She shook her head pityingly. ‘What are you on about, Dad?’



It looks a total mess today,' she said.

It *did* look a bit of a mess actually, because she'd tried sticking it up in a topknot, but there were long strands hanging down around her ears so she looked a bit like an Afghan hound. But she could have smiled at Dad, even so.

I suppose I love my brother and sister, but it's hard to like them sometimes. And Mum. We don't always get on. She always swears she doesn't have favourites but it's clear she does, and it's not me. She loves Becks best, because she's her eldest, and they're very alike. They act like they're best friends sometimes, chatting away, watching the same box sets together on Friday nights when Becks is allowed to stay up really late, and they have endless discussions about hair and make-up.

Mum loves Perry next. Because he's her boy? Because he's top of the class at school? Goodness knows.

I come last, as I'm not pretty and I'm not clever. I'm not particularly anything, apart from being good at making things up. And I'm quite good at art. I'm the one who takes after Dad. He says he doesn't have favourites either and he does try really hard to be a special dad to Becks and Perry. He doesn't have to try hard with me. He's my favourite person in the whole world – and I know I'm his.

Perry was looking at me appraisingly now.

'I don't suppose *you* could say you need an aquarium, Phoebe?



I'm sure Dad would get you one if you made out the newt was your new pet. You could pretend you're making up a story about it,' he said, trying to be encouraging.

'*The Amazing Adventures of Nigel Newt?*' I said.

'Yes!' said Perry, though I was just making a stupid joke. 'Go on, Phoebe. Please.'

'If I get you an actual aquarium, will you let me have your marbles?' I bargained.

They're not any old marbles – they're the beautiful old glass kind, with swirls of blue and green and yellow and red inside. They look breathtaking when you hold them up to the light and I wanted to keep them as treasure.

'You could have one of them, I suppose,' said Perry.

'For goodness' sake! One marble in exchange for an entire aquarium?' I said, exasperated.

'All right. One of every colour,' said Perry. He has to be the meanest boy in existence.

'*All* of them,' I said. 'Plus your fossil and your piece of amber and that pretty purple crystal thing.'

'That's real amethyst, Phoebe. You're not getting that. It's the star piece of my gem collection,' said Perry.

'Look, do you want a proper home for this weirdo little creature or not?' I said.

I dangled one finger in the water, touching it to see if I was



really scared of it. The little newt seemed more scared of me, actually, and swam faster.

‘Stop it, you’ll contaminate the water,’ Perry said sternly. ‘And you’ll have to wash your hands thoroughly too, because they’ll have little newt germs on them now.’

It must be so strange living in Perryworld, seeing everything in scientific terms. But he only wanted what’s best for this little newt. He’s my big brother and I wanted to please him. I wanted his glass marbles even more.

I went looking for Dad. I thought he’d still be in the kitchen, loading the dishwasher after tea, having a cup of coffee, doodling ideas in his Moleskine notebook, doing all his usual Dad things. But he wasn’t there, he wasn’t in the living room, he wasn’t in the television den, he wasn’t in his bedroom, he wasn’t in the spare bedroom or either of the bathrooms or the upstairs or downstairs loo. He wasn’t out in the garden or in the shed or in the front porch. He wasn’t in his car or in the garage. He wasn’t anywhere.

I peered up and down the street, though I knew Dad wouldn’t go out and leave us, not when Mum wasn’t back from work yet. I went back into the house and called for him as loudly as I could. I rechecked every room. I was starting to panic. Where on earth had he gone?



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