



*I have been lonely for such a very long time
The years turn so fast and so slow it all blurs into one
so many winters
so many springs
so many summers
and now it is autumn ... again
... again ... again ...*

*A skein of geese passes in the pale sky
when they see me they honk their hellos
The birds know that I am still here
I watch the geese vanish into the autumn sky
and I try to remember
the days the weeks the months the seasons
when I too was alive*

*So long ago
So very long ago*



SILENT VALLEY



Our old car turns off the narrow mountain road on to an even thinner lane and I stare out the window at the autumn emptiness. The engine makes a grinding noise as the lane gets steeper; I slip into a lovely daydream of the car breaking down and us having to get towed on a rescue van all the way back to Bristol and me spending half-term doing fun things with Cooper and Nizrana and all my friends at home, rather than being stuck over here in Ireland, visiting my long-lost grandma, in the middle of absolutely empty nowhere.

But we don't break down. Our car moans and groans and climbs the lane that snakes up and up and up until we're so high that we're actually in the clouds and the road ahead has practically vanished – it's white and misty like we're driving through milk.

'Don't drive too near the edge, Mummy!' pipes up

my little brother from the back seat.

'I'll do my best, Pip,' says Mum. Her fists are tight on the steering wheel and I can see the little flicker of her pulse in the vein on the back of her hand. She looks so tired and tense that even though she's the grown-up and I'm only twelve, it makes me want to look after her almost.

'Don't worry, Mum – we're nearly at the top of the mountain,' I say in the cheeriest voice I can find, as I squint into the white uncertainty.

'You don't actually know that, Edie!' declares Pip. 'It could still be lots and lots of miles away. We might actually be lost because we haven't been to see Lolly for ages and ages and ages so Mummy might not really even remember the way to Fortune Farm and it's so foggy the road might go right off a cliff and—'

I see Mum's throat do a swallow. I turn to Pip and give him a *shut up* look.

'What?' says Pip.

The car engine makes an even more horrible crunching sound as we turn another tight bend and just as we're picking up speed again Mum slams on the brakes and we all jolt forward.

A ghostly grey shape looms in front of us, through the mist. 'What is it?' I whisper.

Mum inches the car onwards.

'It's a sheep! It's actually a sheep!' shouts Pip,

bouncing up and down like it's the most exciting thing on earth. I guess when you're six, pretty much *everything* seems like the most exciting thing on earth!

The sheep peers at us through the mist for a few seconds, then goes back to eating a tuft of grass growing right in the middle of the lane. Mum sighs and puts the handbrake on; we wait while the sheep nibbles.

'Ooooooh!' squeals Pip, pressing his nose to the window. 'It's like we're on a real-life safari!'

Mum laughs then. 'It doesn't take much to keep our Pip happy, does it, Edie?' She smiles at me, like we're a team, and I smile too – my heart feels warmer to see the twinkle come back to her eyes.

'Look, Mum.' I point to where I can just make out the dim outline of a tree. 'I think the fog's starting to clear!' And almost before the words are out of my mouth the mist swooshes away and the world appears, like opening a curtain. We're right at the top of the mountain and everything is impossibly green.

'So many sheeps!' breathes Pip in delight, wiping the window with his sleeve. 'Can I get out and say hello to one?'

'They're half wild, Pip.' Mum smiles wearily. 'They'll never let you near them.'

'Can I try, Mummy? Please? That one's looking right at me.'

‘They’re all looking right at you, Pip,’ I say, turning in my seat. ‘Because they’re HUNGRY!’ I lick my lips ominously.

Pip narrows his eyes. ‘That’s not true, Edie! I know sheep don’t eat people – I’m not stupid.’

Mum sighs. ‘Oh, don’t bicker, you two. Listen, hop out and stretch your legs for five minutes. We’ve been on the road for hours and you both need to let off some steam before we get to Lolly’s house or you’ll drive me round the bend.’

‘You’ll actually drive us round the bend!’ giggles Pip, pointing gleefully at the wiggly-windy road ahead.

‘Ha ha! Very funny!’ says Mum. I roll my eyes, but I let myself smile a little smile too.

Pip puts on his favourite *I’m Bats About Bats!* cap and goes pootling off on his sheep safari. I grab my sketchbook and step into the gusty freshness; even the air tastes green. I scramble on to a big boulder and gaze out across the valley, full of mist, like a huge bowl of cloud soup.

I flip my sketchbook open to a brand-new page and, taking my pencil out of my ponytail, pull up my hood against the wind. I smooth the new page to stop it flapping and in the top corner I write today’s date, 28th October, then I add *Silent Valley*. It’s a pretty stupid name if you ask me. Even though there are no city noises

like back at home – no car engines, no builders' drills, no squealing toddlers – this valley is not even slightly *silent*: I can hear the buffeting of the wind on my rain jacket, the moany *maaaaaas* of the sheep, and from somewhere in the misty sky a strange sound I can't quite place – a kind of squeaky, honking noise.

The sound comes closer and the big shadowy shapes emerge through the mist; a flock of geese, flying together in a V shape, so close I hear their wingbeats.

'Look at those geeses!' shouts Pip, pointing.

With my pencil at top speed I sketch the geese, but within minutes they're only specks in the pale sky.

Turning my gaze back down into Silent Valley, I gasp in surprise. The mist has drifted away and a whole hidden world has emerged from the gloom; I flip to the next page and start to sketch again – my picture is only pencil grey but what my eyes see is full of colour. Deep green fields; reddening autumn trees; the silvery surface of a huge lake ... or *lough*, as everyone says over here. 'Lough,' I whisper, practising as I draw, like *lock* but with an extra vacuum-cleaner sound at the end. 'Lougggggghhhh!'

Chewing on my pencil, I peer out over Silent Valley and I get the funniest feeling ... like somehow, in all this huge emptiness ... there's something I'm not quite seeing ... like ... something is kind of hidden ...

'Silly!' I murmur to myself. I squint my eyes and

follow the twists and bends of the narrow road all the way down the mountain and along the shore of the lough to where it disappears into a dense cluster of trees, then re-emerges – way over on the other side of the water – at a whitewashed farmhouse where the road just ends. Lolly's house, so little and alone beneath these towering mountains and glowering skies.

I clutch my sketchbook to my chest. I know Lolly's house so well, from way back, from always, but seeing it again after all these years doesn't fill me with joy, like it once did. Instead it makes my tummy feel heavy and knotted.

'Fortune Farm,' I say aloud. And a sudden wind rises, howling soft and mournful through the emptiness.