

Sally Nicholls

CLOSE YOUR
PRETTY
EYES

 SCHOLASTIC

To my grandparents,
And all other patcher-uppers of families.

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I think I might be a witch.

Something went wrong when I was born. Other babies got blue eyes and curly hair, but I came out howling and evil. Other babies were sweet and innocent, and their parents loved them, but my mum hated me right from the start.

“I always knew you were a devil,” she used to say. “And look how right I was.”

Because my mum didn't love me, I had to make other grown-ups like me instead. Right from when I was little, I could make them do what I wanted. I was more powerful than thunder, and I loved it.

But no one ever loved me. I don't suppose anyone ever will. Sometimes people think they do, but that's before they find out what a monster I really am.





THE SIXTEENTH HOME

This is the story of what happened to me the year I was eleven and went to live with the Iveys. You don't have to believe it if you don't want to. Mostly people don't believe me when I tell them things. Mostly they're right not to, because quite often I tell lies, but this time I'm telling the truth. Everything in this story happened like I said it did.

The Iveys were a foster family. Before I came to them I was in this children's home in Bristol called Fairfields, but my ex-foster mother, Liz, thought I'd be better off in a family, and Jim Ivey said he was willing to give me a try. Jim was a friend of Liz's, which was why she asked him to take me. Even after Liz chucked me out for reasons that were totally not my fault, I still saw quite a lot of her. She came to visit me at Fairfields and told me all about Jim, how he lived in this big old house on a farm, with a pig and

ducks, and how he was a long-term foster carer, so if we liked each other I could stay until I grew up. I scuffed my feet along the floor when she told me that, and didn't say anything. I've been in foster care on and off since I was a baby, and Fairfields was my fourteenth placement, so I'd stopped believing people when they said I could live with them for ever and ever. I'll tell you about my other so-called homes sometime, and you'll see why.

The Iveys lived outside Bristol, in the proper countryside. It took my social worker, Carole, ages to drive there. At first there were houses and shops, then fields, then fields and hills, then Carole turned the car off the big road on to this little road, which went on for ages along the side of the hill, with hardly any houses or anything. Then she turned off the little road, through a gate and into a farmyard.

"Come on then, cross-patch," she said. I didn't bother replying. Carole was a new social worker. I've had so many over the years, I've lost count.

We got out of the car. I could see:

A long white house, with a green door and windows all with four panes of glass, like a house in a picture book.

A barn with a big door opening on to a big dark space.

A duck pond, with ducks. A yard with chickens.

Carole knocked on the door. A man answered.

Social Services had sent me pictures of the whole family, so I knew who he was. His name was Jim and he was the dad. There wasn't a mum, which was the best thing about the placement as far as I was concerned. Jim

was little and wiry and smiley. He wasn't old, exactly, but his hair was beginning to go grey. He had his little girl with him – Harriet, her name was. She was the daughter. She had dark hair and freckles, and she was wearing a red-and-white pirate bandanna, an eyepatch and a plastic hook on one hand.

“I see you've got pirates,” said Carole, and Harriet pressed backwards into her dad's legs.

The porch was full of welly boots and footballs. I tried to remember how many kids lived there. I thought it was three and a baby, but it looked like more from the boots. The kitchen was big and old-fashioned. There were kids' pictures all over the walls, and a boy sitting at the kitchen table, drawing. He was Jim's son, Daniel. He was eleven. He smiled at me, then he went back to his picture. I went and looked over his shoulder. It was a pencil drawing of a complicated alien city. Towers and skyscrapers were sticking up into the sky. Spaceships zipped around the towers. Weird alien plants grew out of the pavements.

“Hi,” Daniel said, looking up. I didn't say anything.

Jim took Carole and me on a tour of the house, with Harriet trailing behind, still wearing her hook. The house was long and narrow and dark and old.

“It's eighteenth century,” said Jim.

There was a dining room, and off it, a little office with a computer. There was a living room with wooden floorboards painted black, rugs, old-fashioned chairs and sofas all different, and bookcases with glass doors, full of old books. All the stuff was tattered-looking, which made

me worry, because the worst foster placements were the ones where they wanted you for the money. The house was pretty big though, so they probably weren't *that* poor.

The living room had a real fireplace with a real fire. There was a cat on its back with its stomach turned up to the flames, and a big black girl with a baby sucking on her boob. She was the other foster kid. She glanced at us when we came in, then looked back down at the baby.

"Hey, Grace," said Jim.

Grace grunted.

"This is Olivia, OK? Olivia, this is Grace. She's your new sister. The cat is Zig-Zag. And this little girl is Maisy."

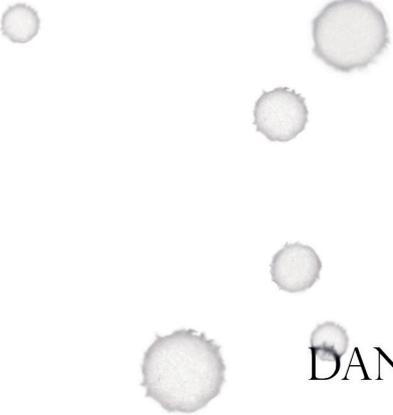
Grace didn't say hello, and neither did I. I've had more sisters and brothers than I can count. The only ones who mean anything are my real sister and brother, Hayley and Jamie. And I haven't seen Jamie since he was a baby, so probably he doesn't count either.

Grace was one of the bad things about the placement. I don't like big kids. The best placements are ones where it's just you, because then the other kids can't hurt you.

My room was up this poky flight of stairs. I hate dark places and I didn't want to go up, but I was afraid Jim might get angry if I didn't, so I had to. The top floor was a long corridor with doors off either side. As you walked along, you had to keep going up a step or down a step, as though whoever built the house had kept changing their mind about how high the floor should be. My room was at the very end of the corridor. It had a bed and a desk and a chest of drawers, but apart from that it was totally bare.

The walls were white, with Blu-tack marks from some other foster kid's posters. There was a clown mug with a couple of chewed-up old pencils on the desk, which made the whole thing look even sadder.

If someone tells you you can stay for ever, then puts you in a room with old Blu-tack marks made by some kid who doesn't live there any more, that tells you everything you need to know.



DANIEL

Jim left me upstairs to unpack, but I didn't. I stayed upstairs for about two seconds, and then I came back down. I hate being on my own. I hate it more than anything. I'd rather be screamed and shouted at than ignored.

There was another staircase at my end of the corridor. It was bigger than the creepy little stairs we'd come up, but not by much. On the landing was a black-and-white photo of an old woman. She looked really old; Victorian or something. She had white hair and wrinkles and she wore a bonnet. She was staring straight into the camera and scowling at me like she hated me. I *definitely* hated her. She looked just like my old foster mother, Violet, who was evil, evil, evil.

Stare all you like, evil woman, I don't care, I thought. But I did care. Just looking at her made me remember

horrible things, like what it felt like to be hated, and what it felt like to be small and completely in someone's power. It was as though the woman in the photo was made up of the worst parts of all the worst people I'd ever lived with: my mum, and Violet, and all those temporary homes where they just wanted rid of me as soon as possible.

I could *feel* the hatred coming out of the photograph, and it made me not-at-all-happy about this new family. Why did they have a picture of this woman on their wall? Was she a friend? A relation? Was she going to come and visit? I'd sort of hoped that a friend of Liz's might be OK. But a woman like Violet was a real problem. Could Victorian people still be alive nowadays, or was it too long ago? I moved schools so much, I kept missing the Victorians. I knew they were older than The Beatles, and spitfires, but I wasn't sure if that meant they were all dead. Paul McCartney wasn't.

I went downstairs. Carole and Jim were in the kitchen, drinking tea and talking about me. Harriet was drinking squash.

"Hello, Olivia," said Carole. "Unpacked already? That was quick." I scowled at her. Daniel laughed.

"Dad, can we show Olivia outside?"

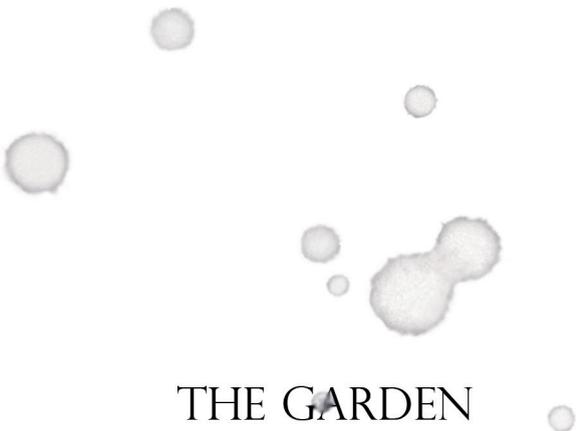
"Yeah!" said Harriet. She waved her hook enthusiastically. "Come and meet the pig! And the goats!"

"Go on, then," said Jim.

"I expect I'll be gone when you get back," said Carole. I shrugged.

"Goodbye?" she said. "Thanks for bringing me?"

I gave another shrug. “See you,” I said, not looking at her. Then I went out the kitchen door, pushing against her as I passed.



THE GARDEN

I felt better as soon as I was outside. I liked the farmyard. I wondered if there was a tractor. I was pretty sure kids were allowed to drive tractors in farmyards.

“Is your dad a farmer?” I said.

“No,” said Daniel. “Well – not really. The fields are all rented out. He’s an IT consultant mostly, but not so much at the moment because he looks after Maisy when Grace is in college.”

They took me to see the goats. There were two, in a scrubby field with a goat house. The white one was called Morning and the black one was called Night. They had little fluffy beards. They were cool.

The pig was called Pork Scratchings. She had her own fenced-off bit of field, with a low pig house. The field was all churned up and muddy.

“Here, Piggy, Piggy, Piggy,” I said, but she didn’t come out of her house.

“Come and see the barn,” said Daniel.

The barn was dark and musty and smelled of straw. Upstairs, there was a hayloft you could get to by climbing a ladder. Under the hayloft was a whole lot of stuff for foster kids. There were five bikes in different sizes, three scooters, two skateboards, a pedal tractor for toddlers, a pogo stick, some stilts, a unicycle and a real ping-pong table, with bats and balls.

“Can anyone use these?” I said.

“Sure,” said Daniel.

I had a go on the pogo stick and the stilts, while Harriet played about on one of the scooters. Daniel rode up and down on the unicycle, showing off.

“Let me have a go!” I said.

“All right,” said Daniel. “It’s pretty hard, though, at first.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, but I wasn’t. I couldn’t even get on the first time I tried, and when I finally did, I fell straight off. Daniel laughed.

“Don’t you laugh at me!” I said. “Don’t you *dare!*”

“Sorry,” said Daniel.

“It is hard,” said Harriet. “You’ve just got to practise.”

Like I needed sympathy from an eight-year-old.

“It’s stupid,” I said. “It’s for losers. And clowns. Do I look like a clown?”

Daniel gave me a social-worker look.

“Stop it!” I said. “Stop looking at me like that! I’ll kill you!”

“Calm down,” said Daniel. “I was only looking.”

“No, you weren’t!” I kicked the unicycle, hard. “This is rubbish. I had way better stuff than this with my old family.”

“Hey.” Daniel grabbed the unicycle. “Leave it alone. Just ‘cause you can’t do it.”

He had that expression that everyone starts to wear around me after a while. Hurt. Surprised. Frightened, sometimes, although Daniel didn’t look frightened. A little bit angry and a little bit what-did-you-do-that-for? Daniel had only known me ten minutes, and already he didn’t like me.

“Stop it!” I shouted. “Stop it right now! Leave me alone!”

“Olivia—” said Daniel. But I spat at him and ran away, before he could follow.

Stupid Daniel, making social-worker faces at me. He didn’t even know me. How dare he look at me like that? He was supposed to be my brother. Brothers were supposed to like you. How was I supposed to be nice to him? I was the foster kid. *He* was supposed to be nice to *me*. He wasn’t supposed to already hate me ten minutes after he’d met me. The whole fight was *his* fault for looking at me like that.

I was out of the yard by now and behind the house, on a sort of long patio with a low wall. In the middle of the wall were steps, going down into a garden.

The garden was long and wild. It looked like a jungle; an English jungle, with big sprouty plants, and bushes,

and trees all tangled with ivy. Once upon a time there would have been a lawn, but now it was covered in long grass, nettles, thistles, and white, naked-looking weeds. Stone things stuck up from the wilderness, broken and abandoned. There was this stone basin in the middle, with purple flowers growing up out of the cracks, and dried up dead things.

It was brilliant.

I picked my way across the wasteland towards the stone thing. It turned out to be a fountain – a proper old dried-up fountain, the sort you get in parks. Behind the fountain was a sort of rockery. I spent a good while jumping from one rock to another, and climbing over the tumbledown walls. I was nearly at the end of the garden now. Behind me was a high wall, and a big tree. Under the tree was some sort of flower bed, although there weren't any flowers: just strong-smelling bushy things and weeds. It was dark, and kind of creepy.

I went closer.

It was even darker under the tree. The earth smelled of plant and cat pee, and something else, strong and unpleasant. The hairs rose on my arms. All of a sudden, I was afraid. It was as though someone was watching me. It frightened me, because I couldn't see where they'd be watching from, unless they were invisible. I looked all around me, and back the way I'd come. No one. Yet I was certain that someone was there. I could *smell* their attention. Someone unfriendly, someone close.

“Hello?”

No answer. But I could *feel* the attention sharpen. It was the feeling you get when you're in a room with someone who hates you. Someone dangerous. I felt like a lion-tamer in a cage with a mad, hungry lion, all crouched down low and ready to pounce. Probably. I've never actually met a lion-tamer, but I bet that was how they'd feel.

I was getting creeped out. *This* was why I didn't like being on my own. I used to feel like this when I broke into other kids' bedrooms in Fairfields – like I was trespassing on someone else's space, someone dangerous, someone who would hurt me if they found me. I turned around slowly, trying to see where someone might be hiding.

There was a noise from behind me. Stones falling, earth breaking. I spun round. But there was no one there.