

STORM



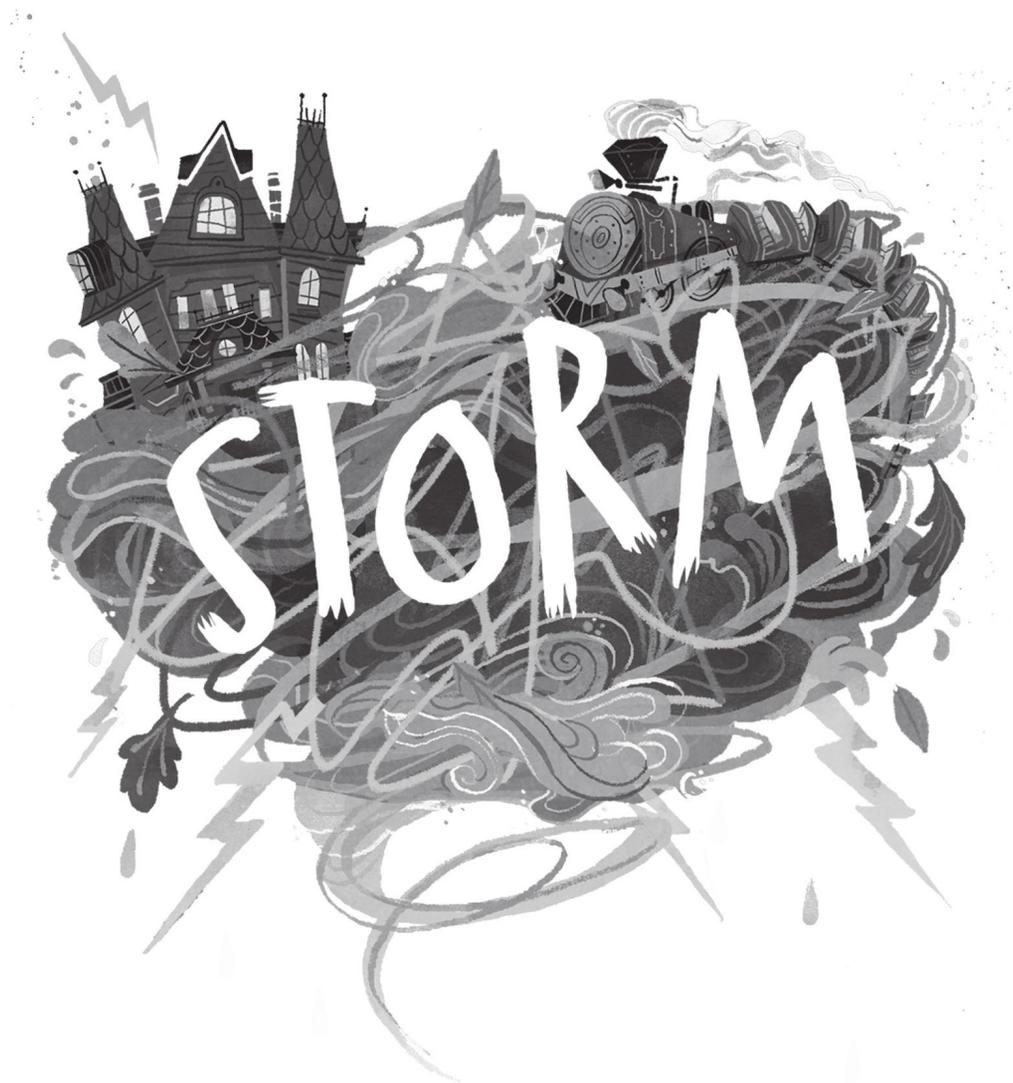


Books by Nicola Skinner

BLOOM: THE SURPRISING SEEDS OF SORREL FALLOWFIELD

STORM





NICOLA SKINNER

Illustrated by Flavia Sorrentino



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*All of this book is dedicated to Ben and Polly.
Except for a few chapters towards the end,
which are for Meg and Saul.*



Poltergeist: a type of ghost or spirit responsible for loud, chaotic and destructive disturbances. A noisy ghost.

From the German *poltern* (to make sound) and *geist* (ghost).

Some people think we don't exist.

They're wrong.

PART 1



- 1 -
A BIT EGGY

WHEN YOU'RE BORN, you're a baby. That's something we can all agree on. But you're not *just* a baby. No.

You're a story.

A beautiful, bouncing, gurgling story.

A tale to be treasured.

And not just one story either. You're all of the stories, all of the time. You're an adventure, a love story, a thriller, occasionally a horror – yes, I am looking at you, you naughty little scamp – all rolled into one. And every day is story time now *you've* arrived.

Basically, babies are page-turners, and will only get more fascinating with each passing day. Or that's what their parents think anyway.

Even if no one else does.

Parents *love* talking about their children, don't they? Stick around any school gate long enough and all you'll hear is: 'my treasure this' and 'my darling that'. And what do they love to talk about the *most*?

Our beginning.

Also known as *the Birth*.

This part is special.

It is sacred.

It is long.

Have a look around. Go on.

Are there parents nearby? Is their conversation turning towards childbirth? Do any of them have a funny misty-eyed look on their face? Is anyone – this is the clincher – *clearing their throat*?

If the answer to any of that is *yes*, then I ask you this. Have you got an escape route? If you have, run to it. Now.

If not, tough luck. Did you have something planned for the day? Not any more you don't. Because when a parent breaks into a birth story, it takes a while and there's nowhere to hide.

You will hear:

- a. When the contractions started.
- b. Which hospital they decided to drive to.
- c. What song was on the radio in the car.
- d. Whether that glitchy traffic light had been fixed.

Not to mention:

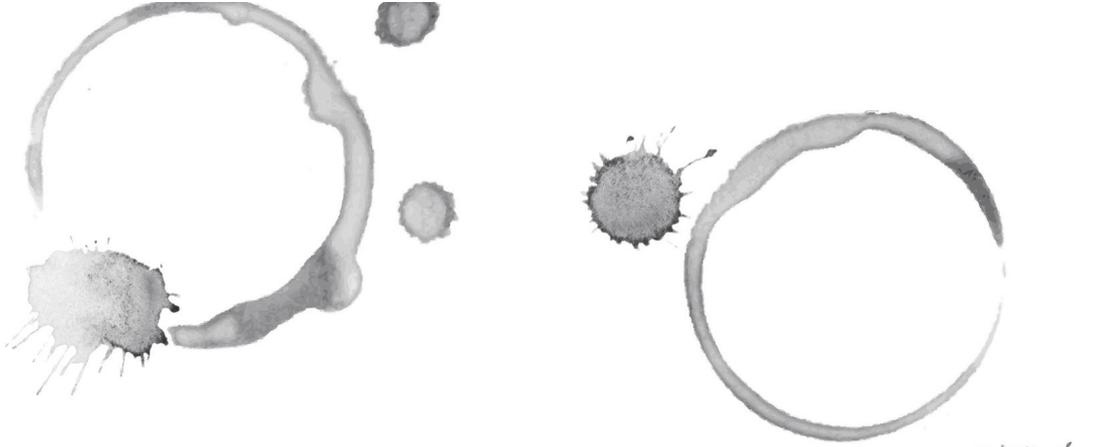
- a. How much the parking cost.
- b. Whether that was reasonable.
- c. What pain relief was available.
- d. And how much the baby weighed.

(This last bit captivates them all, for some mysterious reason. Like farmers and their prize-winning turnips, parents are obsessed with how much their babies weigh. Why? Who knows? Ask *them*, if you don't mind waving goodbye to another day of your life.)

Anyway, you'd better pay attention. Make sure you listen closely and nod thoughtfully in all the right places, as if you're having a fantastic time. If you don't listen hard enough, they'll somehow know, with that uncanny parental sixth sense, and *start all over again from the top*. Then it will be YOU asking for pain relief.

For your ears.

And I'll tell you another thing. For your entire life, how you were born will be used to explain you. Why you *are* how you *are*. Parents will say stuff like 'Oh, it's no wonder our Jasper is so good at



ballroom dancing – after all, he *was* born on a Tuesday just after I'd had a ham sandwich' or 'Well, of *course* Deidre's a dawdler – she was born just shy of the M25!', and all the other parents will nod solemnly like this makes total sense, pour themselves another cup of tea, and say, 'Tell me again what she weighed.'

Mine were the same. They'd bring up the way I was born at the drop of a hat. Especially when I was cross. And they'd always say the same thing: 'Well, that's what happens when you're born in a storm.'

This, of course, would only make things worse. I mean, it's very difficult to discuss the injustice of the recycling rota when your parents just keep bringing up the weather.

From eleven years ago.

It didn't end there either. Once they started, there was no stopping them. My birth story was so well rehearsed in our house it was like a duet. My parents had their lines and they knew them well.

'You

were

born

RAGING.

Frances Frida Ripley.'

That's how Dad would start. 'Salty from the get-go, you were.' (Frances Frida Ripley is me by the way. Hi. Except I'd rather you didn't call me Frances, if that's okay. Frankie's fine.)

Then Mum would interrupt. 'Well, love, that's not completely true. Frankie was a *very* peaceful baby girl. A little wet, a bit cold, perhaps, but so calm. So still. You looked as if you didn't have a care in the world.'

That would have been the hypothermia kicking in, Mum.

'Yeah, you were peaceful, for all of a second,' Dad would add. 'Right up until the moment you took your first breath.' Tiny smiles would fly between them, like birds swooping home. '*That* was when you started raging. And you haven't really stopped since.' Then, at a look from Mum, he'd mutter, 'But we wouldn't have you any other way, of course' and lope off towards his painting shed.

But here's my take on it: what did they expect? Of *course* I lost my temper when I was born. I mean, they were the ones who decided to have a baby on a freezing beach! On top of some pebbles! In the middle of winter! In a *storm*! No wonder I got a bit eggy. Any sensible baby would.