

'A gripping and magical tale of friendship and belonging, deeply rooted in landscape and myths.'

Tamsin Mori, author of *The Weather Weaver*

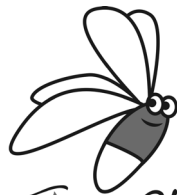
THE SLEEPING STONES



BEATRICE
WALLBANK

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Firefly

First published in 2023 by Firefly Press
25 Gabalfa Road, Llandaff North, Cardiff, CF14 2JJ

www.fireflypress.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 9781915444059

This book has been published with the support of
the Books Council of Wales.

Typeset by Elaine Sharples
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



For Bridget, Bob and Becky,
the other three Bs.

Chapter 1

Dear Griffith (is that how you spell it?)

My name's Mat, which is short for Matylda. My mum is Zofia Kowalska (but everyone calls her Zosia) and my stepdad is John Taylor, and we live in Manchester but we are about to move into the house next door to you.

My teacher Miss Awad said it might be a good idea to tell you I exist. I think you probably already know I exist because your dad met my mum and John. I think Miss Awad is more worried about me moving than I am.

My mum and John make websites and my mum is going to be joining your lifeboat crew (she used to do it when I was small and we lived by the sea). I'm going to be an oceanologist: someone who studies things that live in the ocean. I can't swim but I want to learn. I love the rain and I don't like really hot days or broccoli.

from Mat

Gruffydd read the letter again. Matylda – Mat – hadn't spelt his name right, but he guessed she'd only heard it said. To be fair, he wouldn't have guessed her name had a 'y' in it. His stomach did little nervous hops at the idea of the New Neighbours moving in today. Gruff didn't like change, but it seemed like everything was teetering on the edge of change at the moment. Like the beginnings of a cliff-slip, he could feel small stones shifting beneath his feet, ready to send him on a headlong plunge into the sea. It wasn't the New Neighbours' fault they were moving on to the island when Gruff's family were struggling to stay. But it still felt unfair.

Gruff stuffed the letter in the pocket of his jeans and watched Dad and Hywel the collie dog round up the sheep in Bottom Field below him, the sea sparkling in the sunlight beyond. James was finishing setting up the shearing equipment in the barn and Ffion stood in the field a little way away, rattling a bucket of nuts to encourage the flock to follow her into the temporary pen they had set up. James and Ffion always came to help on shearing day, and any other times Dad and Nain needed an extra hand. Although they were much older than Gruff, they were two of his best friends. *If the farm fails*, Gruff found himself thinking, *James and Ffion won't have jobs here*

anymore. Would that mean James and Ffion wouldn't have enough money to stay on the island either?

He pushed the thought away and concentrated on his current task: to guard the gap between the temporary pen and the farmyard. As Ffion turned and led the sheep towards the pen, shaking the bucket encouragingly, Gruff readied himself for the inevitable. There was always one.

Today, that one was Guinevere.

On the whole, the flock was resigned as they trooped into the pen after Ffion and her nut bucket, but Guinevere was having none of it. In a sudden surge of speed, she charged for the freedom of the farmyard.

Gruff flung himself sideways and grabbed for Guinevere's fleece, but she barged past him like a champion rugby player and sent him sprawling on the muddy, hoof-churned ground.

'Sheep out!' Dad shouted, walking at the back of the flock.

'On it!' Gruff called, leaping to his feet. He wiped his mucky hands on his even muckier jeans and raced after Guinevere's retreating woolly form.

Hens scattering before them, Gruff chased Guinevere across the hard earth of the yard and out onto the coast path. Wildness was in her hooves and she led him along the wide, sandy sweep of the

beach and past the cluster of lime-washed fishermen's cottages. Three-year-old Prem was laughing and waving to them over his garden wall and old Iolo was hanging out his washing in the breezy sunshine.

Guinevere veered off to the right, up the steep scramble of the footpath to the headland at the end of the beach. With nowhere left to go but the sea, she finally stopped running. She turned to face Gruff and did a wee, staring at him like a petulant toddler.

'All right, Guiny,' Gruff gasped, clutching a blossoming stitch. 'The great escape's over. See, you're panting, you impossible sheep. You'll be much more comfortable when you're not carrying all that fluff.'

He took a step towards her, but Guinevere danced sideways and almost lunged past him again. Gruff backed up. If she got past him here she could lead him a proper dance, all round the island. Better to keep her on the short spit of headland and wait for her to calm down.

A stone's throw away from Gruff, a seal bobbed its head up from the waves, looked around, and disappeared again. A tern skimmed the swell, searching for fish, and the breeze ruffled the short, coarse scrub of the headland. With one eye on Guinevere, Gruff looked out at the glimmering water and tried, for a second, to imagine not being here.

He did this sometimes: an attempt to catch himself unawares and see if he could get used to the idea.

He couldn't get used to it. The very thought squeezed his heart so tightly he could hardly breathe.

Gruff glanced at Guinevere, busy grazing on a clump of pink thrift. She eyed him sideways, daring him to try any funny business. Gruff smiled and looked back the way they had come, down the long, low sandy beach towards the lush, green sweep of Bottom Field and the grey stone of the farmhouse and barns.

His eyes were drawn to the Sleepers. No one could look along the beach and not find their gaze resting on those six stones, dark against the shining sea. They led out from the land, heading for the far horizon as though they were the stepping stones of giants.

Gruff imagined the journey out along them. The dangerous jump between each, leaping across choppy white-flecked water; the triumphant arrival on the last stone, arms spread wide to catch the wind between his fingertips. Nothing between him and the mainland.

If his grandma, Nain, were to be believed, no one could stop at the final stone. The Sleepers would tempt you into one more leap, and the waves would close over your head and the current would sweep you away.

Stepping stones to the bottomless ocean.

Nain would be cross with him for just imagining climbing out on them.

A warm, rough nose knocked against his hand. Gruff looked down and grinned. Guinevere had forgotten she was meant to be running away and had come over to see if he had treats.

‘You’re in luck,’ Gruff said. From his hoodie pocket he pulled the stale crusts of bread he had grabbed from the bread bin that morning, guessing (rightly) that shearing day would require some sheep-bribes. Guinevere gobbled one up and nosed for more.

‘Maybe,’ Gruff said, ‘you’ll get some more if you come back with me and take your coat off.’

He turned and began to walk back the way they had come, his hand held in a loose fist at his side – an empty fist, but tantalising to a hopeful sheep. Guinevere followed.

As they left the headland, Gruff glanced up at the Sleepers again. They held his eyes. He paused and watched the swell surge around them.

The Sleepers are hungry and the sea is waiting.

Just an old line from an old story. But there were times when the temptation pulled as though he were connected to the stones by a thread; when they seemed to hold his gaze far stronger, far longer.

Guinevere bumped against him, impatient for more bread. He glanced down at her, then back up again.

There was a figure, standing on the final stone.

Gruff's heart thumped, hard.

Tall and upright, the person stood there. Just stood. Arms at their side, staring out to sea. A long coat – a cloak? – flapped in the breeze behind them.

Scudding clouds hid the sun, and grey light swept in from the water. The stale smell of seaweed round the base of the headland and the fresh tang of salt in the leaping spray seemed suddenly stronger. It caught in the back of Gruff's throat and flicked across his tongue, tasting of hidden places under the water.

No one could have had time to jump along the Sleepers from the beach in the half-second when he'd glanced down at the sheep now nibbling his fingers.

Gruff blinked salt-dry eyes and the stones were empty. Rounding the end of the island beyond them was a small yacht. The mast and sail were a tall, thin shape against the white-blue morning sky.

He relaxed. Mystery solved. He'd seen the boat, lined up with the stone, and imagined a person. A trick of the light and the glittering sea.

But as he led Guinevere back past the beach and through the farmyard, Gruff found the sight

still lingering in his mind, like the after-image from the flash of a camera. Something was wrong. He couldn't put his finger on what, but it was the same sort of feeling he got when Dad had been into Gruff's bedroom to steal back the sellotape or return a book that had been lent to Prem. Tiny differences that told him someone had been in there, even if he couldn't work out exactly what had changed.

Something was wrong about that after-image in his mind's eye. Something was not as it should be.