

Also by Lian Tanner

THE ROGUES

Accidental Heroes
Secret Guardians
Haunted Warriors

A Clue for Clara
illustrated by
Cheryl Orsini

THE HIDDEN

Ice Breaker
Sunker's Deep
Fetcher's Song

THE KEEPERS

Museum of Thieves
City of Lies
Path of Beasts

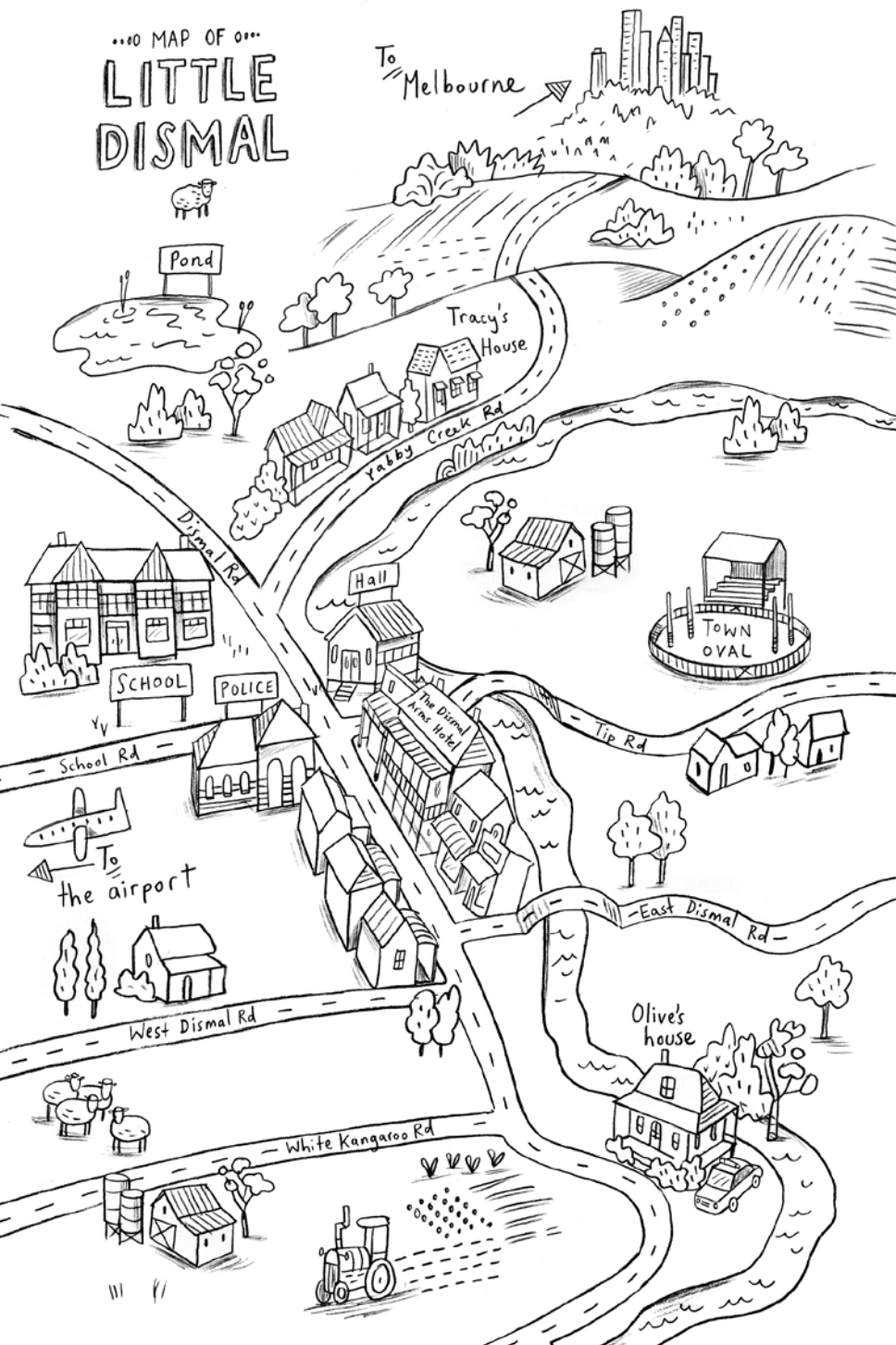
Ella and the Ocean
illustrated by
Jonathan Bentley

RITA'S
Revenge

LIAN TANNER

Illustrated by Cheryl Orsini


ALLEN & UNWIN
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Rita's diary

Anyone can keep a diary.

Some people make an awful fuss about it, as if it makes them important and clever.

Some people.

Some *chooks*.

But keeping a diary is not hard. First you name the day.

Today

Then you name the time.

Diary o'clock

I keep my diary in my head so I don't lose it. But sometimes I like to write it on bits of paper. Here's some of my writing.



And here's some more.



They are in secret duck language, so you probably won't understand them.

I will explain.

The first one is about the courage of ducks, and how much braver and smarter we are than other birds.

Like chooks, for example.

The second one is about that last fateful Talent Night, when—

But no, I don't want to think about Talent Night.

I will go to the pond instead, and see if Great-Aunt Myrtle has forgiven me.

Pond o'clock

'So,' says Aunt Marcia. *'This chook who everyone's making such a fuss of. What's her name?'*

'Clara,' says Aunt Charlene.

'What sort of stupid name is Clara?' demands Great-Aunt Myrtle. She is so old

that all her feathers are ragged at the ends, and she can only see out of one eye. But she's still the fiercest duck in the flock. And the most important.

So I say, *'It's a chook name. A stupid chook name. Ha ha ha.'*

Great-Aunt Myrtle doesn't even glance in my direction. But the circle of empty water around me seems to grow wider. And colder.



'People are calling her a hero,' says Aunt Charlene, as if I haven't spoken. *'Just because she stopped the Simpson human stealing a few sheep.'*

'Apparently she thinks she's a real detective now,' says Aunt Deirdre.

'I'm amazed she could even find her own feathers, much less a bunch of missing sheep,' says Aunt Charlene. *'She's a chook, and you know what they say about chooks.'*

Everyone laughs. (I laugh loudest.)

Aunt Charlene pretends to be a chook trying to swim, and we laugh again, even though she does the exact same act at every single Talent Night—

No, I *will not* think about Talent Night.

Great-Aunt Myrtle spends a moment or two dabbling for insects, then blows a few bubbles and says, *'When I was in the lower pasture yesterday, the cows were mocking me.'*

Aunt Charlene gasps. *'What did you do?'*

'I bit their tails until they ran away.'

We all clack our beaks in approval. (I clack loudest.)

'But it's not just the cows,' Great-Aunt Myrtle continues. *'The pigs, the horses – they think we're a joke. And it's Clara's fault. She's been telling people that ducks are mad, and now every bird and beast in town is saying the same thing. And laughing. Even the humans.'*

She narrows her eyes. *'They shouldn't laugh at ducks.'*

The rest of us narrow *our* eyes, too. (My eyes are narrowest.)

My cousin Vera, over on the windmill side of the pond, cries, *'Because we know where they live!'*

At that, the aunties set up a great quack of agreement. *'Yes, we do.'* *'Well said, young Vera.'* *'She'll go far, that duck.'*

I wish *I* had thought of saying, *'We know where they live.'* I wish they'd quack in

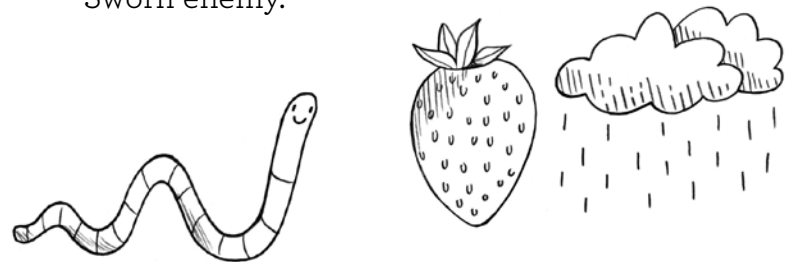
agreement when *I* speak. But they won't. I am in disgrace. No matter what I do, they pretend I'm not here.

Half past Vera-is-a-pain-in-the-tail-feathers

Great-Aunt Myrtle waits until the noise dies down. Then she says, *'So, it's been a while since we had a sworn enemy ...'*

There are a number of words that will get a duck's immediate attention. Worms. Rain. Strawberries.

Sworn enemy.



Every duck on the pond (including me) stiffens.

'You mean—' says Aunt Marcia.

'Revenge,' says Great-Aunt Myrtle. *'On Clara.'*

For telling lies about us. For saying we are mad, when we are not.'

Aunt Deirdre flaps her wings. *'Excellent idea. We'll make that chook's life a misery.'*

'When do we start?' asks Aunt Charlene.

Aunt Marcia clears her throat. *'I'm all for revenge, Myrtle. And of course it's your decision. But Clara has friends in very high places these days.'*

There's a moment of silence. Then Aunt Charlene says, *'We can't let that stop us. I'd go after her, but I did the last one, and it seems dreadfully unfair that I should have all the fun.'*

'I wish I could do it,' says Aunt Deirdre, *'but my ducklings are about to hatch.'*

'I would lead the way myself,' says Great-Aunt Myrtle. *'But I have to pay back an insult from the pigs on the Waddle farm. I've left it far too long already.'*

They look at each other. They look at my

cousins. Everyone suddenly develops an interest in the algae that floats under the surface of the water.

Everyone except me.

This-is-my-chance o'clock

I might have disgraced myself beyond bearing. I might have done something so un-duck-ish that no one will even look at me.

But there's a way back, and I have just seen it.

I take my fate in my beak and say loudly, *'I'll do it.'*

'Who was that?' demands Great-Aunt Myrtle, dropping a clump of algae.

'It's Rita,' says Aunt Charlene. *'The one who thinks she's a poet.'*

'Not anymore,' I say quickly. *'That thing at Talent Night was just an accident...'*

They're not listening. Great-Aunt Myrtle says, without looking at me, *'Ducks cannot be poets.'*

It's not on the list of approved activities.'

'Why on earth,' demands Aunt Marcia, 'would anyone want to do something that's not on the list? Tell them, Myrtle.'

List o'clock

Great-Aunt Myrtle waddles up onto the bank and strikes the Pose of Wisdom.

I have tried to do the Pose of Wisdom, but it's harder than it looks. You have to stand on one leg, and stretch out the other leg and your wing at exactly the right angle without falling over.

I fell over.

Perhaps I should have taken it as a sign.

'Pay attention, all of you.' Despite her age, Great-Aunt Myrtle is



so well balanced that she doesn't even wobble. *'Here is the list of approved activities, handed down from the beginning of time.'*

Even the smallest ducklings paddling in the shallows lift their heads and listen.

'Dabbling, diving and preening,' recites Great-Aunt Myrtle. *'Flapping and foraging. Flying, hissing and biting.'*

By now, we're all reciting with her. My voice is the loudest, but still they take no notice of me. *'Chasing cows and pigs. Mockery. Rude songs. Piracy, bullying, revenge, warfare and general thuggery.'*

'What about murder?' asks one of the ducklings. *'Are we allowed to do murder?'*

'Only if the other person deserves it,' says Great-Aunt Myrtle.

'Which they usually do,' adds Aunt Marcia.

Great-Aunt Myrtle folds her tattered wing, then stretches it out again to emphasise her point. *'Please note that poetry is nowhere*

on the list. It's not at the beginning, it's not in the middle, and it's not at the end. There is not even the slightest hint of poetry. Which means—'

Now at last she turns to glare at me. *'Which means that we do not do it.'*

I blush under my feathers. But at least she's taking notice of me.

'Let me be the one,' I beg. *'Let me take revenge on our sworn enemy.'*

Aunt Marcia and Aunt Deirdre go into a huddle, whispering to each other. Aunt Charlene paddles around me in circles, muttering under her breath.

Great-Aunt Myrtle doesn't move.

'I'll wreak a really good revenge,' I tell her. *'Something that will make everyone sit up and take notice. Something that will teach them not to laugh at ducks.'*

Aunt Charlene looks thoughtful. *'Maybe we should give her a chance.'*

'No,' snaps Great-Aunt Myrtle. *'I'll send someone reliable. Like Vera.'*

On the other side of the pond, Vera flaps her wings enthusiastically and begins to paddle towards the aunties.

I block her way. *'I'll be so reliable,'* I say.

But Great-Aunt Myrtle just dips her beak in the water, tilts her head back and takes a drink, as if the matter is settled.

Desperation o'clock

If I miss this chance, my life is as good as over. No one will ever swim beside me again. No one will look at me. No one will talk to me. I will be the loneliest duck in the world.

So I tuck my wings tightly against my body and cry, *'I don't want to be a poet. I hate poetry! It's not on the list. Ducks can't be poets.'*

Something inside my chest hurts when I say those words, but I ignore it. Because Great-

Aunt Myrtle's head whips back around and she stares at me. *'Do you mean it?'*

'Yes!'

'We could let her try.' Aunt Charlene waggles her tail feathers. *'It can be a test.'*

'Yes, a test,' says Aunt Marcia. *'And if she fails ...'*

'Or if she commits poetry ...' mutters Great-Aunt Myrtle.

'... Then we know where she lives,' cries Vera.

'Yes, we do.' *'Well said, youngster,'* quack the aunties. *'She'll go far, that Vera.'*

I hardly hear them. I'm already thinking ahead, trying to work out what I can do to Clara.

It'll take me a while to sort out the details. But whatever it is, it's going to be spectacular.

It's going to be amazing.

And it's going to make every duck in the town of Little Dismal forget that I once wanted to be a poet.

Still today

Happiness o'clock

As I fly away from the pond, the wind catches my wings and ruffles my feathers. I am on a mission for Great-Aunt Myrtle! Soon I will be part of the flock again!

*Happiness wells up inside me
as warm and beautiful
as a new-laid egg—*

STOP! I almost fall out of the sky in horror. That was the beginnings of a poem!

What's wrong with me?