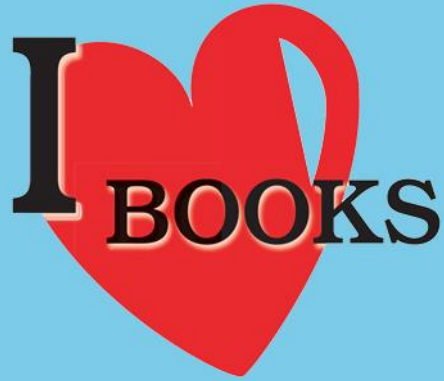




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Opening extract from

Indigo Donut

Written by

Patrice Lawrence

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*You were
water to me
deep and bold and fathoming*

*You were
moon's eye to me
pull and grained and mantling*

*You were
sunrise to me
rise and warm and streaming*

*You were
the fishes red gill to me
the flame tree's spread to me
the crab's leg/the fried plantain smell
replenishing replenishing*

Go to your wide futures, you said

'Praise Song For My Mother' by Grace Nichols

1

It was coming back again, like a film on slow stream, except someone had hit the mute button. The silence made it worse – it meant everything else was turned up to full. There was the smell: old tea mugs and burnt toast and smeared plastic takeaway boxes. The taste in her mouth: sugar so harsh it made her head hurt, like she'd breathed it in and it had stuck in clumps behind her eyeballs. She remembered how the last few jelly beans had rolled out on to the floor in front of her, stabs of colour between the ashtrays and crumpled cigarette papers. Or had they been M&Ms? A silver mobile phone was balanced on the magazines on the sofa next to a tangled pile of clothes. They were for her, her mum had said. She could try them on later.

Where are you, Nanna?

She was fully in the memory now. She looked down at her feet. Her bare toes in her sandals were still crusty from the sand pit at the park. She hunched over, hooking her hands around her knees, bracing her back against the door. It stayed shut. And everything behind it stayed silent.

Maybe she should knock. But Daddy had said she could

only come in if there was an emergency, something like a fire. He'd checked the cooker was turned off and smiled at her mum.

'See, Mahalia. It's okay. We won't be long.'

He'd pulled her out of her mum's arms and planted her on the floor. Her mum had bent over and kissed her on the nose.

'That's a magic kiss, sweetheart. You'll be all right.'

Then her mum had followed her dad into the bedroom and closed the door.

But she wasn't all right. She'd been all right where she was before. In Mummy's arms. She closed her eyes and screwed up her face, turning so her ear pressed against the door. Suddenly, her head was full of sounds. Different sounds, from before she was brought here. Her fingers squeaking across the wet sand pit as she gouged out a long, windy river. The wooden elephant, the giraffe, the lion, the zebra – all lined up. She was going to bury the crocodile deep in the sand, ready to nip the elephant's trunk when it bent over to drink in the river. Or was it the giraffe's neck . . . ?

She could hear the slosh and thud of water filling the buckets and the shrieking as the other kids soaked each other. And Nanna's voice cutting through it all, telling her they had to go soon, after one more ride on the twirly slide.

Then the thump as the boy dropped from the swing,

screaming for his mummy, and Nanna fading away as she ran over to help him.

And the man, over by the bench, calling her name. She hadn't known who he was. He'd promised to take her on an adventure, but he'd left her in this room.

Nanna?

She opened her eyes. The sound stayed turned up. Two bird puppets were arguing on CBeebies. An ambulance – or was it a fire engine? – howled in the distance, getting louder, like it was charging towards her. And the banging, hammering on the front door, so hard it made her cry out for Mummy.

And her name. Someone was shouting through the letterbox.

But she didn't want to open that door. She wanted to open the one that would lead to her mum.

Something shifted behind her. She twisted round as the bedroom door opened. Grey trainers. Jeans. A pillow lying in the middle of the dark floor, like it was floating. Feet on the bed, toes shiny with nail polish. A hand dangling down, like it was waiting to be held.

She touched her nose. The kiss had sunk away. The magic was gone. She wasn't all right. She wasn't all right at all.

2

The spider was big. Indigo reckoned that if an elephant and a tarantula could get it together, this mutant would be their baby. She swatted it into an empty mug and chucked the beast out of the window. It scuttled over the ledge and disappeared.

‘It’s okay, Kee. It’s gone!’

Keely opened the door slowly. ‘Did you close the window?’

‘Yeah.’

Felix’s long face appeared over Keely’s shoulder. ‘The thing was so damn big it could probably smash its way back in.’

Indigo hooked the mug on the stand. ‘Well, if you don’t move your bloody boxes out of my way, you’re going to find its badass giant brother in your bed.’

Felix swaggered into the kitchen and yanked the Chart off the side of the fridge. ‘It says here you lose points if you bad-mouth your bro.’

Indigo faked a big yawn. ‘That’s your handwriting, you idiot. And you are not my “bro”.’

Felix nudged Keely. ‘See how she treats me? But we

know it's all show. She's going to miss me, really.'

Indigo looked up. 'Dream on!' All her spare stuff was going into his room and she was buying the biggest jar of Nutella she could find and leaving it bang in the middle of the kitchen table, spoon stuck in it and all, because she'd know it was still going to be there when she came back.

He *had* to go. That way he'd be safe from her. Didn't he understand?

She wanted to tell him, but it felt like the words were tied on a string to her stomach and just thinking them made the string pull tight.

He was waving the Chart at her, like she didn't know it by heart already. 'Let me see. Indigo Bankes. You have successfully stacked the dishwasher and been granted three ticks. *Bedroom tidy*? A bit of a fail there. No ticks. *Not losing keys*. That's five ticks. How come you get ticks just for not doing stuff? Kee, that's not fair! You never did that for me.'

Keely laughed. 'You were my learning curve, Felix.'

'Your practice model! Great! You should have given social services a discount.'

'Believe me, Felix, they get me cheap. How many ticks have I got?'

'You're doing pretty crap, to be honest, Kee. *Lay off the chocolate Hobnobs*. No ticks. *Keep up the pilates*. Kee?'

'It's seven o'clock on a Tuesday morning in a room

full of skinny minnies.’ Keely shook her head. ‘Not happening.’

‘That means you’re well out of this month’s competition.’ Felix held the Chart close to his face and squinted hard at it. ‘And so, indeed, is Indigo. This month’s treat goes to Yours Truly.’

Indigo swiped the Chart off him. ‘See that?’ She underlined the column with her finger. ‘*Do One Big Special Thing*. I just did that. Extra points – right, Keely?’

Keely nodded. ‘That dinosaur spider was definitely One Big Special Thing, Indigo.’

Indigo flipped a V to Felix.

He shook his head. ‘You’re so definitely going to miss me.’

Keely had turned her back to them, buttering bread. ‘Of course we will, won’t we, Indi?’

Indigo dug her teeth into her bottom lip. Keely didn’t get it, neither. The three years with Felix had been all right. When the thing had sparked off in her, it hadn’t been bad enough that Felix and Keely were in proper danger. But it was only a matter of time. When he finally got his arse out of that door, she had to let him go, crumple him up and shove him into the back of her head, in the darkest, most faraway corner. And it would have to be the same for Keely – push her even further back, past every other foster carer she’d known, so not a single memory could leak through.

Indigo raised her voice. 'So, you going to get me those Atomic Blondie tickets, Kee?'

'Send me the link, hun.' Keely opened the fridge door. 'Sorry, Indigo, we're out of yoghurts. I'll stick some money on your dinner account if you want to grab something in the canteen, okay?'

'Yeah. All right.'

'Or I can make you a sandwich. Though I haven't got much to put in it.'

'You could always go to the fried-rat place,' Felix said.

He was standing by the sink, speed texting. Keely was trying to dodge her way around him. He always managed to prop himself in the wrong place. Indigo wasn't going to miss that. Or when he blasted bloody Grace Jones without his bloody headphones and it was *doof, doof, doof*, through the walls until Keely got him to turn it down. Or when Indigo had to step over his scummy pants on the bathroom floor.

Pulling out the bad things made it easier. She could already feel him curling round the edges and getting smaller.

Keely was still big and solid, though. She made the world around Indigo feel solid too. But that didn't matter. Indigo couldn't risk it. She knew what was inside her and what it could do.

Right now, Keely had her hands on her hips. 'Chicken

shops are the devil's work, Felix. Don't encourage her, unless you want her to end up like me.'

Felix slipped his phone in his pocket and went and flung his arm round Keely's shoulders. 'There's nothing wrong with you.'

Keely shrugged him off. 'I wish my knees agreed. They are definitely wrong.' She kissed Felix's cheek. 'Go on, or you'll be late.'

'Who cares?'

'Felix . . .'

'Joking!'

'And let me know if you're staying at Wade's. Just so I don't call the police.'

'Ah.' Felix's voice from the hallway. 'Those were the days.'

The front door banged shut behind him.

Keely wrapped her sandwiches in cling film and stashed them in her lunchbox.

'You okay, Indigo? You've gone all quiet.'

'I'm all right.' Though her stomach felt like it was tugged right up to the top of her head.

Keely leaned over and kissed Indigo's forehead. Indigo breathed in her scent – cucumber and posh Gaultier perfume. Social services should scrape off this smell and put it in bottles so they could spray it on all foster carers, because that's how real mothers were supposed to smell.

Indigo knew she should be a real daughter back, putting her arms round Keely, maybe kissing her too, because Keely deserved it.

But she held her breath and did her statue thing until Keely moved away.

Keely's lips twitched like they were giving Indigo a little shrug and then she smiled. Her sparkly nail tapped the Chart. '*Be on time*. We all need ticks for that one. You're in double English first thing, aren't you?'

'Yeah, with Queen Crapheads Saskia and Mona. Do I have to go?'

'You promised.' Keely squeezed her shoulder.

Statue! Statue! But it was too late. Indigo had let herself sink into the squeeze. She *had* to do better.

'It's only been three weeks, Indigo. Not long enough to give it a proper go. It's probably your last chance, remember?'

Yeah, she remembered. It didn't mean she agreed.

'*And* you made me fork out for that Topshop jacket. It's not exactly Pitt Academy's dress code, is it?'

'It looks good, though, Kee.'

'It's beautiful, my darling! So put it on. Go to school. Feel great and be good.'

'Is that your new catchphrase?'

'Yup. And I'm off to light up the lives of Tottenham's happy shoppers. I'll see you later, hun.'

A swish of bag, footsteps down the hall and the front door, quieter this time. Keely always caught it before the wind did.

Indigo rinsed her bowl and spoon. She'd better get sorted. She slid her timetable out from under the fridge magnets. Every day at Pitt was pretty crap, but Thursdays were extra shite. Saskia, Mona, the grinning slimeball Levy, and that stupid seat she had to sit in, right up front under the teacher's nose. And then there was that weird-looking boy, Bailey, right behind her, trying to pretend he wasn't having a good old gawk. Typical. The tall, skinny one with the mad hair *had* to be the one that was into her . . .

She dropped her timetable next to the Chart, went into her bedroom and plugged in the hair straighteners. She should have wiped them down first because yesterday's anti-frizz serum was not smelling good.

God. She was supposed to read that poem for English. Mr Godalming had given her a little sideways look when he handed out the worksheet. She'd seen the title and shoved it straight in her bag.

'Praise Song For My Mother'.

Godalming must know. Most likely all the teachers did. They'd probably tossed a coin in the staff room. *Last one left gets her*. Then, when Godalming realised he was the loser, he'd have asked more questions. And it was always someone else they asked, not Indigo, because it was easier to talk

about her than to her. He'd have seen the list of schools she'd been chucked out of. Maybe he knew how many foster homes she'd passed through. And he'd read about her mum and her dad and how they'd found Indigo curled up by the bedroom door.

At least Godalming didn't put on the usual performance – that look, his head to the side, a bit embarrassed and a bit sorry, not sure if he should really say something.

He hadn't said, *If you ever want to talk about your mum, Indigo . . .*

So, she hadn't had to say, *No, I don't*. Then watch his head tilt to the other side.

She stretched out a strand of hair and ran the straighteners down. It smelled like she'd been standing too close to bonfires.

All the teachers probably got strict instructions not to mention her dad. Adults never did. It was only other kids who wanted to know every detail about what happened in that stinking flat in south London, like they hadn't Googled it already. Maybe the adults thought you could catch murder off her, like the vomit bug. Or they didn't really want to know what it looked like. A pillow. Sparkly nails.

Breathe.

See? It was easy for the thing to wake up, scrabbling and hooking her insides, heaving itself through her. All those counsellors and key workers and social workers tried to tell

her it was something else. It was only that care worker in Medway who'd nearly got it right, when she yelled at Indigo that the apple didn't fall far from the tree. The apple didn't fall at all. It was the same apple. Same seeds. Same thing inside her that her dad had. It was always alert, always waiting. It made him pick up a pillow and hold it and hold it until . . .

BREATHE!

And again!

It loosened and dropped back down inside her. Not all the way, but enough.

Breathe.

Easier now.

She checked the mirror. She looked like she'd been standing under a helicopter. No way was she facing Pitt Academy like this.

The letterbox banged. Crap. It was nearly nine. Indigo uncoiled another clump of hair and clamped it between the straighteners.

The letterbox crashed again. For God's sake! She was not going out on the street with a head full of greasy frizz. She propped the straightener on her hair-clips tin and went into the hallway. A few letters and a pizza menu were scattered on the mat and a package was jammed in the letterbox. She scooped up the letters and dropped them on the radiator shelf. The package was a small padded

envelope, with Keely's name and address scrawled in Biro, though half the writing was lost on the other side of the letterbox. Indigo tugged at it. Jesus, the postman must have used a hammer to bang it in. It was well stuck. Keely needed to have a word next time she saw him. Indigo gripped the envelope tight, feeling the plastic bubble wrap inside pop beneath her fingers. She pulled again. One sodding centimetre. Indigo did not have time for this. Her straighteners were probably going to set fire to her room soon. One hard yank and . . . the stupid thing was free.

Great. Keely's delivery looked like it had picked a fight with all the other letters in the sack. The sticky brown paper had peeled away from the bubble wrap and the flap had come half-unstuck.

Indigo gave the envelope a little shake. There was something small and solid inside. She squeezed it. Hard edges. Maybe Keely had been on eBay again and forgotten to check the size – like the time she swore the hand-carved rocking chair was such a bargain and when it came, it just about fit in her palm.

Indigo sniffed. Shit – she was right about her straighteners! She dropped the package on top of the other letters. It had a council postmark. She should have noticed that before. It could be anything. It could be from anywhere in the whole of the council, but these sorts of packages usually came from social services. Last time,

it was a couple of old photos of Scarlet and Coral for Keely to give to her. But that was last year. There couldn't be anything else to send.

Indigo picked up the envelope and shook it again. The small solid thing moved around.

The envelope was already damaged. If the thing inside it just happened to fall out, Keely couldn't be too mad. Indigo slid her little finger in the gap where the flap was unstuck and turned the envelope upside down. The thing fell against her finger. A corner, smooth, maybe wooden. She wiggled her finger. The gap got a tiny bit bigger. And a tiny bit more. That was it. Suddenly, the thing fell into her palm.

Indigo stared at it. It was a kid's toy, a small wooden crocodile. Its body was painted cartoon-green and the white on its teeth had peeled, but Indigo knew that already. She closed her hand and squeezed. The chipped bit at the tip of its tail dug into her skin. She knew that was going to happen too. And she knew how heavy it should feel, even though her hand was much smaller the last time she held it.

Oh, God!

Indigo made it back into her room and slid down the door on to the floor. She unplugged the smoking straighteners and shoved them aside. It was too late. The envelope couldn't be stuck down again. The crocodile couldn't be shoved away into the dark.

Breathe.

She lay the crocodile on her rug, ripped the flap off the envelope and emptied the rest of the stuff on to the floor. She poked at a wodge of tissue. The toy must have been wrapped in it. It looked like it had bitten its way free. Then two sheets of paper, one A4, with the social services' address. The other one was smaller, old-fashioned notepaper, folded over.

Indigo scanned the first letter. *Dear Keely . . . Olive Bankes . . . Mahalia's mother . . . long-term dementia . . .* Yeah, Indigo knew that, but that came on ages ago. More writing. Social services were supposed to send this to Keely sooner. *We want to apologise for the unfortunate delay.* No surprises there. Keely was supposed to use her judgement . . . and call if she would like further support. Indigo almost laughed. Keely said that whenever she tried to call them, by the time she got through, Indigo's social worker had changed twice.

And who the hell decided that Indigo needed Keely's judgement? She'd had enough lectures about growing up and taking responsibility for herself. So that was exactly what she was going to do. Take responsibility. She unfolded the creamy notepaper and spread the letter flat against her knee. The writing was on just one side of paper, but the sentences were spaced out, in different colour pens. Sometimes the letters were neat and tight. By the end, they seemed to struggle across the paper.

My beautiful Indigo,

Time is short. This morning I woke up in a strange room, but they said I have lived here for many months now. It won't be long before it's all gone. Even when the words are taken from me, I know you will still be in my heart.

I have asked the care home to post this to you after I pass.

I have written out the address on the envelope first, in case I forget!

I'm not sure how long this letter will be, because writing is hurting.

I post this letter every night.

I want my spirit to rest in peace.

Forgive your father. Find him. Forgive him.

Mahalia told me. Not H. Just me.

Love love love,

Your nanna

Mahalia told me. What the hell could Mahalia say? She was dead! Because that bastard . . .

Indigo's temples felt like she'd pushed the straighteners against her skin.

Breathe! Breathe hard.

This must be a joke from some crappy social worker she'd wound up ages ago and forgotten about. Maybe it

was the care worker who'd yelled at her about the apples and the tree. She'd got the sack for that. *She'd* want revenge.

Forgive your father. That was the biggest piss-take ever.

It felt like that giant spider from earlier had got into her head and was running around her brain.

Another breath, letting the air sink through her body. That was better. Start again. Read it slowly. Hold every word before moving on to the next one.

My beautiful Indigo . . . still be in my heart . . . after I pass.

Indigo's key worker had made a special visit to tell her that her grandma had died. They'd probably told Keely to keep an eye on her too, just in case she couldn't keep it all in, but Indigo had got that one right, watching the key worker talk, but fading out her words to silence. Indigo couldn't even remember what her grandmother looked like, even with the photos they'd sent.

And now this. A weird letter from a mad old woman who kept forgetting where she lived. Proper mad. She must have been. She wanted Indigo to forgive Toby Scott *and* find him!

Find him? Indigo bloody well knew where he was – at the bottom of a cheap council grave with three other deadbeats buried on top of him. He didn't even deserve a headstone to tell people who he was. There was no way she was going up north to stand by that flat square of earth with

her head bowed. Toby Scott. Gone forever. And good bloody riddance.

Except he wasn't totally gone, was he? He'd left her with the thing, banging round inside her, filling out her emptiness. The thing that was waiting to spring out at the people she was supposed to—

love love love

Thanks to him, she couldn't love them. Not ever. They wouldn't be safe.

She hooked her arms round her knees. She kicked out, flicking the crocodile away. The letter was stuck between her fingers; she couldn't let it go. She closed her eyes. She could feel it moving inside her again, stretching out, its heat catching at the back of her throat.

BREATHE, BREATHE, BREATHE!

Oh, God.