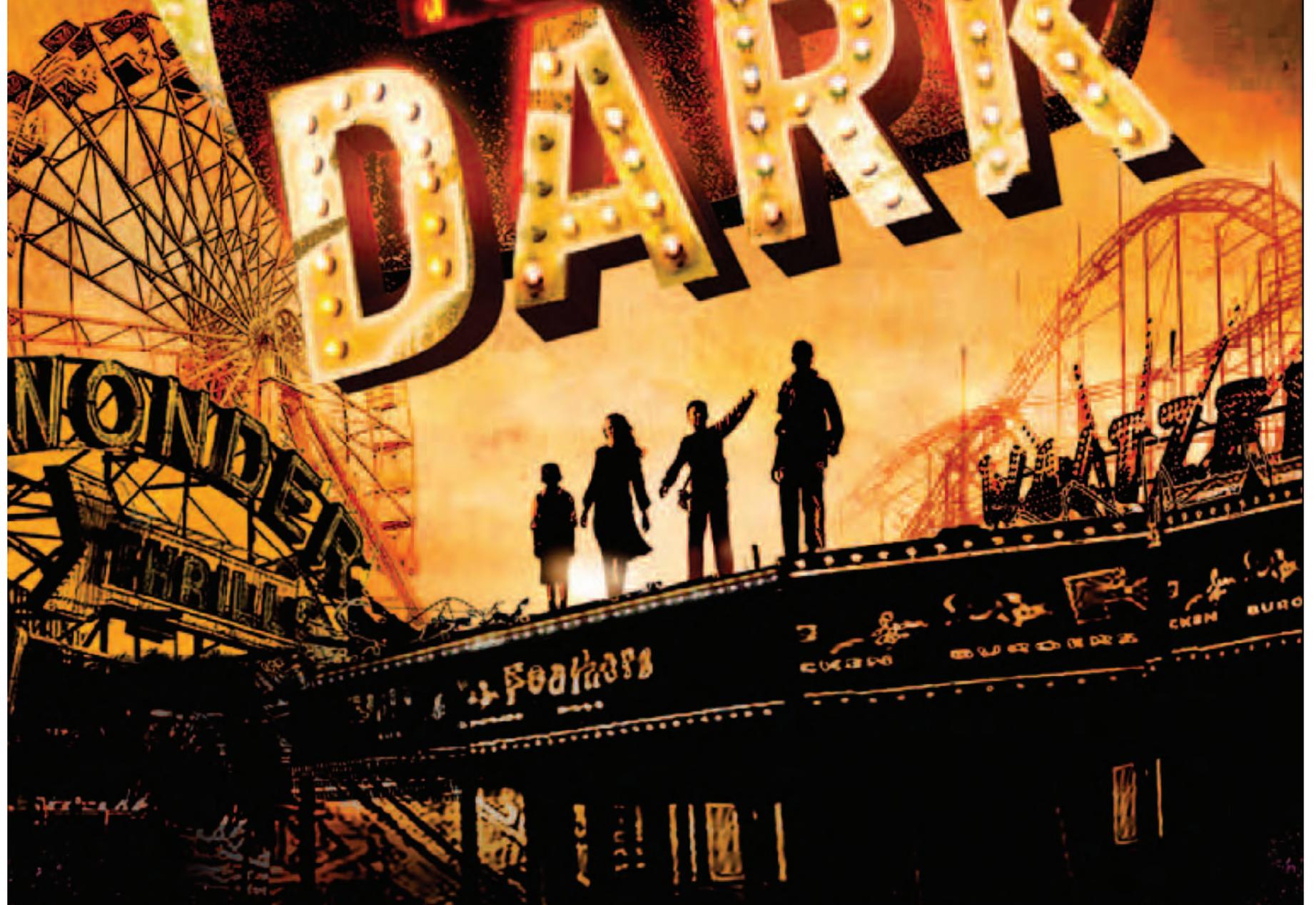


A SMALL FREE

KISSES IN THE DARK



GLENDAMILLARD

from templar publishing

A powerful tale of loss and longing and the struggle to survive against all odds. This is a redemptive story of one boy's search to find a home and a family to belong to and care for.

Skip is a young teen whose life has left him feeling isolated and out of sync with those around him. Neglected by his parents and the foster care system, Skip decides to live on the streets, where he teams up with old homeless man Billy. When war breaks out they meet six-year-old Max, beautiful teenage dancer Tia, and her baby Sixpence.

Together, this fragile family set up home in a deserted funfair, as conflict rages around them.

Praise for
*A Small Free Kiss
in the Dark*

“... if you loved Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now*
and Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog
in the Night-Time*, you will be left breathless
by this stunning novel.”

Canberra Times

“... a beautiful story... this book is delightful
and stands as a testimony to the power of
family, friendship and love.”

Viewpoint

“It is a stark, poignant and gripping story... And, as
always, Millard’s text simply sings.”

Good Reading

For Douglas
G.M.

A TEMPLAR BOOK

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Permission not to have a friend

Skip was my running-away name. It seemed like a good name because of how I skipped school whenever I was doing a runner. I still liked it, even after I found out that's what you call the massive metal bins that demolition crews dump their rubbish in. A skip is somewhere you can shelter when there's nowhere else, and getting a new name is a bit like being born all over again. I hoped my new life would be better than the one I'd left behind.

It was easy, once I decided to go. I made a plan and I kept it in my head because everyone knows you should never write a plan down in case someone else finds it. Even though it was the last day of term before the holidays, I still went to school. That was part of my plan. If I didn't turn up the teachers would ring my caseworker because they knew I'd run away before, only then I hadn't

made a plan so it was easy for them to find me. I heard the other kids telling their friends what they were going to do after school and in the holidays. Some were going to the beach and others were going to stay with their grandmother or their aunty or someone else they were related to. I didn't tell anyone what I was going to do. That was part of my plan, too. I even had a strategy for an unlikely event. If someone asked me over to their place after school, that would be an unlikely event because people only ask you to their house if they're your friend. But if anyone did, my strategy was to pretend not to hear.

Sometimes I made up reasons to myself why I had no friends. They were a bit like the notes some kids take to school so they don't have to play sport because of their sore knee or some other part of them that doesn't work properly. These are some of my reasons:

- Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend because he's moved to seven schools in three years and there's no time for him to get to know anyone properly.
- Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend in case he accidentally tells them something he's not supposed to.
- Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend in case they ask him about the bruises.

- Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend because he doesn't have a proper family to talk about.
- Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend because sometimes he doesn't hear people talking to him when he's drawing, and that makes them think he's rude or crazy.
- Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend because he's no good at maths, and they might think he's dumb.

As well as my excuses for not having friends I also invented other notes I'd like to take to school if only there was someone who'd write them for me.

- Dear Mr Kavanagh, I give my permission for Skip to put his hands up to the sky because that's how he finds out about the light. It's important for him to see where it falls on his fingers and where the shadows begin and end, and the difference between sharp black shadows and soft grey ones.
- Dear Mr Kavanagh, I give my permission for Skip to look out the window whenever he wants and for as long as he wants because he's not being

lazy, he's thinking about important things like colour and light.

- Dear Mr Kavanagh, I give my permission for Skip to spend every day making pictures or looking at other people's pictures because that's how he makes sense of the world.
- Dear Mr Kavanagh, Please don't punish Skip for drawing, even if he's doing it when you think he should be doing maths.

I hoped that where I was going I wouldn't have to explain myself to anyone.

The night before I ran away I got Dad's coat out of the toolshed, where I'd hid it, and stuffed it in my backpack. It still stank of smoke, and the blackened bits around the hem crumbled in my hands like burned toast. I left early the next morning, so no one would ask awkward questions about my bulging bag. School finished at two o'clock on the last day of term, so there was no one from my pretend family waiting to pick me up. I filled my pockets with chalk, and walked to the station. I bought a ticket to the city with money I'd found under the sofa cushions. The train was waiting. It was midnight-blue, my favourite colour for trains, and I stepped onto it before I had time to change my mind. When the doors closed

behind me I felt like a bird had got inside my chest and was beating its wings trying to get loose, and it wasn't leaving much room for me to breathe.

At Central Station I got off. I went to the toilets and put Dad's coat on, even though there was nearly a heat-wave. It was all I had left of him, except what was inside my head. The counsellor told me there had to be give and take if I was going to settle with my new foster family. She said that Mrs Ransome was probably only trying to help me move on when she tried to burn Dad's coat.

When I came out of the cubicle I stood side-on so I could only see the left side of my face in the mirror. That's the side of me that looks brave, thinks brave and acts brave; the side that says I don't need friends or family. It's my chestnut side. Once, my dad said that God was a woman and She couldn't make up her mind what colour eyes She liked best, chestnut-brown or pigeon-grey, so She gave me one of each. I try not to look at things with my grey side because it reminds me of my dad, and I don't want to be like him. Pigeon-grey is like a shadow. It's not real by itself; something else has to be there for it to exist. That's how it was when my mother left: my dad started to disappear.

I stepped out into the subway and got swept along with a swarm of people all looking like they had places

to go. Homes and families was my chestnut thought. Not all homes are happy, the grey whispered like a ghost. I hitched Dad's coat up and put one trainer down on the metal teeth of the escalator, and then the other. It took me up to street level where God rays streamed down between the skyscrapers and made all kinds of interesting angles and shadows. I stopped and put my hands up to the sky, but it's hard to be still in a big city. People bump into you and look annoyed, as if stopping's against the law and looking at the light isn't normal. So I put my arms down and followed the others, but only as far as the Mall.

I liked the Mall right away. Banners stretched from one side to the other like smiles, the never-ending kind of smile you'd give your mother if she came back for you. People acted different in the Mall. They walked slow if they felt like it. They looked in windows and sat on steps and fed their lunch crumbs to the birds. I spotted a bunch of people watching something and I edged in between them till I could see what they were looking at.

There were three people drawing on the pavement with chalk. There was an old black woman, a young guy with a barbed-wire tattoo around his throat and a man with wrinkles like canyons on his forehead. I figured he might be someone's dad, or maybe his wife had left him or else he'd been in a war sometime, because you don't

get wrinkles on your forehead like that for no reason. The weirdest thing was that no one told the people drawing to scram, and no one spat on their pictures or peed on them. It was like a miracle. I knew I'd been right to come. I sat down on Dad's coat and watched. The pictures were good, really good. I'd never imagined proper artists using chalk. The only reason I did was because I could get stubs of it for free.

The black woman looked up at me. I couldn't tell what colour her eyes were. They were wet and dark and shining, like pools of deep, still water. For a second I thought I could see pictures in them, like I was looking right inside her to where her memories were. She smiled, and I wondered if she knew what I'd seen or if she could see the pictures I kept hidden inside myself. Then she went back to her drawing. She had long white hair and a necklace made of feathers, shells and string. The feathers were bright red and sky blue. I never saw feathers like that before. City birds are nearly always dull, except for the pigeons with their rhubarb toes and emerald-and-violet collars. I wondered where the black lady came from, and if she missed the birds.

I sat there for a long time, maybe hours. The old lady with the magic eyes left but I was still there when the two guys wrapped their chinks up in scraps of rag and

slapped the rainbow-coloured dust out of their trousers. After they'd gone I took a closer look at the pictures. An old man was looking too. I'd seen him before, in the crowd. It was Billy, but I didn't know him then.

There was a picture of an American Indian wearing a feathered headdress. It was drawn to fit inside an oval shape, and the colours were orangey-brown and white, like a really old photo. You could tell the guy who drew it knew all about light and shade because of the wrinkles on the Indian's face. It looked like you could stick your fingers in them. Beside the Indian picture was another oval with writing in it. Together, the two ovals looked like one of those locket girls hang around their neck, only this one was much bigger.

The old man, who was Billy, said, "It's s'posed to be Chief Seattle. He's famous for some speech he made over a hundred and fifty years back. Said some pretty important things that people have remembered ever since. That's a bit of his speech." He nodded towards the words inside the oval.

My mother's photo also fits inside a locket. I wished I could remember if she said any important things to me, so I could write them in the oval opposite her picture. I know it's not a hundred and fifty years since I saw Mum, but it sure seems like a long time. They told me I was

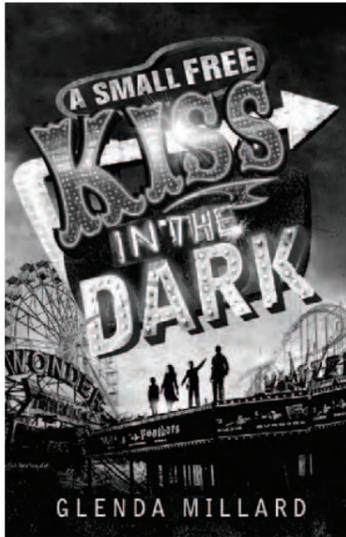
nearly twelve, but sometimes it felt like I'd been around a lot longer. Maybe they lied about my age; they told me other things that weren't true. All I knew for sure was that I was somewhere between being born and being dead.

I wished I could draw my mother on the pavement, next to Chief Seattle, but I can't remember her face. Her photo was taken from far away. She was standing in a backyard, next to a clothes line and in front of a shed, and she was holding something small, wrapped in a blanket. I can't see what's inside the blanket but I know it's me. The person who took the photograph didn't know that shadows are as important as light. We need both of them to help us see things the way they really are. In the photo of my mother there aren't any shadows, and I can't see her face for the light.

The drawing next to Chief Seattle was done mostly in red and black. These are the colours of war. Once I saw a war on television, but my dad threw a chair at it and sparks and smoke and a terrible stink came out. It was like the war had really been there, inside the television. We didn't have a television after that.

Billy said the name of the war picture was Armageddon. There was a diagonal red stripe across it, the way the council does when something is banned, like dogs or skateboards. I think the artist wanted war

banned, which is a good idea because wars kill a lot more people than dogs do and I don't think skateboards have killed anyone at all yet.



a small free kiss in the dark
by Glenda Millard

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Glenda Millard is an award-winning Australian author. She began thinking about the main character for *A Small Free Kiss In The Dark* after noticing a newspaper headline about 'urban tribes', and she wondered what life would be like for a young homeless boy, living with people thrown together in circumstances beyond their control. While the backdrop for this story is war, her intention was to capture the indomitable nature of hope.