

Nanny

Lizzy is here today,

Lizzy is here today,

Touch the sky,

Touch the ground,

Lizzy is here today!

She makes me sing the song with her out in the garden, sitting on the muddy grass. We clap our hands and slap our knees in time. Her coordination is dreadful, and she frequently misses her own hands and knees, face scrunched with delight and concentration. *Touch the sky, touch the ground.* When I took the job, her family said that she spoke very little English and that I was there to help her improve her language skills as well as to look after her before she starts nursery in September. Over the past few weeks we've developed a sort of language built on pointing and miming. She taught me this song and it's the only thing we can sing together. We keep clapping, our fingertips red from the cherries I dissected for her snack, pulling the pips out individually and passing the emptied fruit into her plump hands. We've established that she's here today and now it's my turn. *Manny is here today* – it's not my name but a strange misinterpretation of my role as 'nanny' and I never correct her. We sing through the verse and she pauses; we've run out of people who are here today. Well, her parents are upstairs working in their home office but I take care not to remind her of that as I

know it will lead to a desperate scramble as she tries to get to them. It has been a tricky week and any sound from upstairs has reminded her that they exist, making her wail until they come down to see her. They asked me for a 'quick chat' after work the other day and talked about 'finding coping strategies' for Lizzy's attachment issues. I nodded along, not mentioning that I was missing my bus home. Frowning, she looks around at who else could possibly be here. Then her puzzled look turns to joy as she gestures to the grass around us. *Grass is here today!* She's not wrong about that, the grass is certainly here and tickling my legs as we sit and sing, stretching towards the sky, digging into the ground.

Another child I looked after was forced to have me put them to bed one night when their parents were late coming home. We went through the routines of washing hands and brushing teeth and putting on pyjamas with tiny tractors printed all over them. Then they climbed into bed, head just visible beneath the clutter of blankets and teddy bears. *Will you tuck me in like Mumma does?* He asks as I start to leave the room. For several minutes I try, folding blankets, plumping pillows and shaping the duvet around him. He's still not satisfied. I lose my patience and tell him to go to sleep. Plugging in his night light, I turn to look at him and we freeze for a second- him scowling at me, the mum imposter, and me who has never tucked a child into bed before. I go downstairs and wash up all his special colourful cutlery he used for dinner, taking care to dry it and lay it out for his breakfast tomorrow. The job ends a few months later. I sit on a bus in another city and suddenly remember his bedroom and the secret jar of lollipops kept under his bed that he thought I didn't know about.

Tree is here today! Fence is here today! Helicopter is here today!

We take turns listing and singing the things that we can see, keeping the rhythm of the clapping going. Eventually, we run out of things that are here. Her joy falters then, hands slowing and breaking the pattern. There are surely more things that are here? Then, with a sharp clap, she beams and points to an empty space on the grass- *Peppa Pig is here today!* For the smallest second as I look, I think I'll see the cartoon pig somehow come to life and playing with us in the garden. Of course, she's not there but Lizzy doesn't care and carries on singing. She lists off all her favourite cartoon characters, and turns her head, smiling at where she imagines them all to be. *Touch the sky, touch the ground.* I can feel dirt under my fingernails and my hands start to burn a little from the endless clapping. When we get to the end of all the cartoons that are here, she starts listing family members. Aunts, uncles, grandparents and all sorts of friends are here today, apparently, and they flock around us, singing in harmony with Peppa Pig and the Hungry Caterpillar. And now I can see the grass too, waving in time and hear the helicopter, miles off, droning out a rhythm. The earth seems to be vibrating and spinning with our incantations. The fence joins in, stamping its posts. Clapping our hands and slapping our knees, we keep listing all the things, people and places that are here. *Touch the sky, touch the ground!* She laughs, and the spell is broken, characters and friends shimmering out of sight. We go inside and play with the alphabet puzzle she loves. Each piece is placed gently on the rug and the ones with any tearing or peeling from overuse are separated out from the others. She never puts the puzzle together

herself. Instead, I lift a piece in front of her and she thinks, sometimes for a long while, before gesturing at where she wants it to go. We finish the puzzle and she marvels at it, delicately touching the pieces. I leave her like this and she doesn't look up as her parents come down and take over.

The bus is late and it's suddenly freezing. I wait. Each of the houses on this residential street are tucked up next to each other, blinds and curtains pressing against the windows, keeping in the light. I stamp my feet on the pavement and rub my hands together. Perhaps one last spell to make the bus arrive? Very quickly, I fling my hands up to the sky and bring them back down to my shoes. *Touch the sky, touch the ground!*

The bus arrives.