

BEING IMPOSSIBLE[★]



HIAWYN ORAM

About the author

Hiawyn grew up in South Africa, studied English and Drama after school and worked as an advertising copywriter before becoming a full-time writer. Since then, she's had over ninety children's books published all over the world including picture books, poetry, plays, young fiction, story collections and the scripts and lyrics for two musicals, *The Vackees* and *The Mermaid*. Her work in children's television includes development and scripts for the animated series *Sheep*, *Marvellous Milly*, *Wilf the Witch's Dog* and *Big Cat, Little Cat*. The animated series *Mona the Vampire* is based on her books with Sonia Holleyman. Most recently, Hiawyn has written the *Rumblewick* series for Orchard, about a cat and his unwilling witch.

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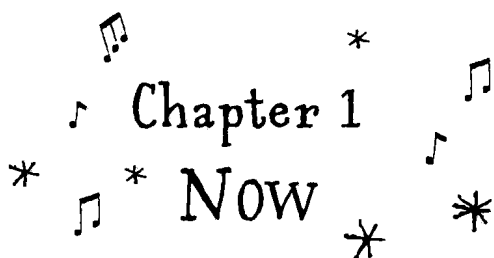
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To Katie S. with thanks



Chapter 1
NOW

I like to watch dominoes falling. My boyfriend sets them up on the table in his room at college.

He has a knack for setting up dominoes. A whole box of them in a long curvy line. When he says 'ready', I flick the first one with my fingernail. And down they go in a slow, sure ripple. Clack, clack, clack. Each helpless not to follow the domino before. I like the fact that the last tile ends up flat on its back only because the first one fell.

This chain of dominoes falling. It reminds me of the way things happen that make other things happen which, in turn, change all things for ever in ways they wouldn't have changed if the original thing hadn't occurred in the first place.

In the chain of events that altered me and my

family for all time, you could say the first domino to topple was my grandfather.

He tripped over a cracked paving stone in Melbourne, Australia and broke his hip.

This made my mother catch the first plane out to take care of him, which brought a strange thin woman to take care of us.

Her name was Eve Everett and with her came a bird – a child-hating parrot called Mimi.

Almost the moment they moved in my father put his DO NOT DISTURB sign on his study door and my older sister Verity went to stay with her best friend, Farah.

If these things hadn't happened I wouldn't have been sulking in the vegetable garden when I was. If I hadn't been in the vegetable garden when I was, I wouldn't have found Tiff. If Tiff hadn't come into our household, I can't imagine how my life would be. Probably still impossible.

But, luckily these things did take place and this is that story...hard to believe for some but perfectly true anyway.

Chapter 2
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At the airport our mother hugged us in turn. 'Now, take care of your dad and each other and be nice to Mrs Everett. Once you get to know her you'll see...she's a lovely person.'

Verity mocked. 'Mum! She's a skeleton who wears too much jewellery and her hair is practically mauve!'

Our mother glanced at our father for support. (Though she needn't have bothered. He was gazing into the distance, not listening as usual.) 'I've known Eve Everett since I was eighteen,' she said. 'She taught me at Nursing College and she's a dear. Now please...for Grandad's sake, all pull together.'

There was nothing to do except nod and hide our tears and let her do what she needed to do – get to her broken father.

There was nothing to do about Mrs Everett either because when we got back from the airport, there she was. Already moving in.

Her rust-coloured car was parked in the drive. Her suitcases and a TV were piled in the hall and she was fussing over a scruffy parrot in a white metal cage.

‘This is Mimi!’ she announced. ‘And Mimi...’ she jangled her bracelets and pointed a bony finger at each of us, ‘this is Mr Dempster, Paul, Verity, little George and...uh...Logan, as in the loganberry, I assume,’ (meaning me).

Mimi made a rude noise. Mrs E ignored it. ‘Mimi will live with me in my room since she does so *hate children*.’

Hate children! The parrot mimicked her, its eyes darting.

‘Well, that’s not a very suitable pet for someone who takes *care* of children.’ Dad looked shaken. ‘Did my wife agree to this?’

Mrs Everett frowned, then remembered who was boss and gushed, ‘Of course, Mr Dempster, your wife knows all about Mimi! Now, Paul and George, please take my cases up to my room. I’ll need the afternoon to settle in.’

‘Sure,’ said Paul, easy-going as always. ‘I’ll take the

big ones, you take the little ones, George.'

'OK,' George mumbled. He stepped up to Mimi's cage.

'Why *does* she hate children, Mrs Everett? Maybe she doesn't really know any...'

He was about to put his finger through the bars to stroke Mimi. Mrs Everett rapped his hand. '*Never* do that, young man! Unless you want to lose a finger!'

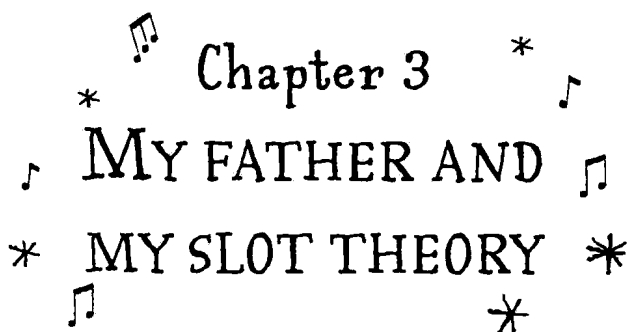
George gasped. A bright red patch appeared on each of his cheeks.

Mrs E blushed herself, then lifted Mimi's cage and set off up the stairs. The cage was difficult to manage. Paul politely offered to help. She refused.

'OK,' he said, cheerfully, 'let's get these cases done, George, then we'll go out with our boards.'

The boys struggled with the luggage. Verity and I pleaded silently with Dad. *Do not leave us alone to cope with this woman and her hate-filled parrot.*

He did not meet our eyes – just rubbed his forehead and disappeared into his study with an embarrassed 'Hmmmph'.

Chapter 3
MY FATHER AND
MY SLOT THEORY

I don't like saying it but I have to: my father has never been a normal father. In fact, come to think about it, he has never been normal, full stop.

For a start, he is a composer. At this time, while the first dominoes in this story were falling, he composed nothing but weird experimental music with more silences in it than notes.

When he was composing, he always hung a 'DO NOT DISTURB' sign on his study door. And, as he was almost always composing, 'DO NOT DISTURB' was almost always on his door.

Once, when no one else was home and I cut myself, I had to interrupt him. He stared without seeing me. Only when some of the blood dripped

onto one of his precious noteless scores, did he pull himself together and try to help.

Of course, we knew he loved us. Some days you could feel it coming off him like radar beams. Sometimes he'd sit at the kitchen table listening to us as if talk had just been invented and we were its inventors. In those moments he seemed to glow with the excitement of having us for his own.

Otherwise, he never took or fetched us from school like the other fathers who worked at home. He never helped us with our mother's birthday. He never came on holiday with us and he never played any kind of ball game with Paul and George.

Our mother said it was because he was a genius and we should not expect him to be any other way. I accepted that – because of my theory.

I call it the Theory of Slots and this is how it goes: in every family there are just so many Slots (or roles, as in chances to be something).

Once someone in a family has taken a Slot – e.g. the Rebel Slot or the Maths Boff Slot or the Ace Footballer Slot or whatever – that's it. No one else can occupy it because there's only room for one person at one time in each Slot.

Other members of the family have to circle round until they find an empty Slot they want and then – if

they've got their wits about them – quickly pounce and grab it.

People prove the theory all the time without even knowing it: *Oh, she's the clever one in the family*, they say. *He's the sporty one. She's the creative one, you know.*

Luckily, because kids are always changing, they don't have to stay in the same Slot forever. With grown-ups, it's the opposite. They can choose how they're going to be before any of their children are born. That's how they get the Slots they really want. And once a grown-up is in one, mostly there's no getting them out of it. They're there for life.

And so it was with our father. He'd bagged the 'I-Am-A-Genius-So-I-Am-Excused-If-I'm-Weird' Slot before any of us came along. Now, if one of us wanted to be The Mad Loner doing something only forty-nine people in the world are interested in, we couldn't be. He was there. He had that role and he wasn't budging.

Anyway, back to the day Mrs Everett and her parrot moved in. Having disappeared into his study, Dad reappeared. He placed his DO NOT DISTURB sign on its hook – crooked, because he wasn't watching what he was doing – and closed the door in the way he always did – *tight, shut, keep out.*

A moment later we heard the high soft notes of his glockenspiel.

‘OK.’ Verity pouted her pretty mouth. ‘I can see what’s going to happen. He’ll be in there night and day and we’ll have to cope with Mrs Bonyfingers by ourselves. It’s so unfair. Hey, d’you know what I’m going to do?’

I shook my head though I had a fairly good idea: she was going to ask her best friend Farah if she could go and stay at her house.

And I was right.

She tossed her long blonde hair. ‘I know her mum’ll say yes. She adores me.’

Out came her pink and silver mobile. Gliding on perfect willow-wand legs, she slid into the sitting room and lay on the sofa – all the time chattering excitedly to Fa.

Watching her now – lolling about, gracefully occupying the ‘I’m-So-Pretty-And-Adorable-I-Don’t-Have-To-Do-Anything’ Slot – I could see she was going to slide out of this situation. And it made me spit.

If Verity went to Farah’s and Dad withdrew completely, what would I have to become in our motherless household? The One Pretending Everything Is All Right When It Isn’t? The One Having To Pair