

Praise for

Snowflake

‘An astonishing achievement. Louise Nealon is
ridiculously talented; already I’m greedy for more’

Stacey Halls

‘A sweet, clever coming-of-age story’

Irish Times

‘It’s a long time since I’ve loved a novel as much as
Snowflake. The prose shines with observations about life,
love, family, mental health, milking the cows, and what it
means to be coming of age in the times we live in. I felt

I had discovered a diamond – a real treasure!’

Christy Lefteri

‘Nealon tackles uneasy conversations around trauma and
grief, sex and consent, self-delusion and the fear of what
you might be capable of, deftly and with humour . . .

a story that’s sharp, clever and affecting’

The Independent

‘An incredibly ambitious debut, beautifully written’

Sam Baker

‘Nealon balances humour and devastation well
in this relatable novel’

Irish Examiner

‘A novel for anyone who’s ever felt lost in the
world, Louise Nealon balances humour and
tragedy in a sharp debut’

John Boyne

‘Can a young woman be innocent yet outrageous,
longing to succeed at university yet close to failing,
deeply embarrassed by her manic depressive mother
yet devoted? Yes, yes, yes. Louise Nealon’s beguiling
narrator Debbie is all these things, and much more.
Snowflake is a wonderfully inventive, deeply felt novel
full of the best kinds of surprises’

Margot Livesey

‘Clever, witty, wryly elegant and full of emotional truth’

Irish Independent

‘*Snowflake* is raw, sharp-sighted, affirming, and also very,
very funny. Louise Nealon’s prose shimmers, as do her
irregular and damaged characters. Stunning’

Una Mannion

‘Filled with wonderful, believable characters . . . a
beautiful debut from a writer unafraid to blend the
contemporary with the mystic’

Sunday Business Post

Snowflake

Louise Nealon studied English literature at Trinity College Dublin, and then completed a masters in creative writing at Queen's University Belfast in 2016. She lives on her family farm in County Kildare. *Snowflake* is her first novel and was the biggest-selling debut in Ireland, winning Newcomer of the Year at the 2021 An Post Irish Book Awards.

Snowflake

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*To my parents, Tommy and Hilda,
for their wisdom, love and support.*

The Caravan

My uncle Billy lives in a caravan in a field at the back of my house. The first time I saw another caravan on the road I thought that someone – another child – had kidnapped him on me. It was only then that I learned caravans were meant to move. Billy's caravan never went anywhere. It was plonked on a bed of concrete blocks, right beside me from the day I was born.

I used to visit Billy at night when I was too afraid to go to sleep. Billy said that I was only allowed out of the house if I could see the moon from my window and if I brought him wishes from the garden. On the night of my eighth birthday, the sight of a round, fat moon sent me straight down the stairs and out the back door, the wet grass on my bare feet, the thorns of the hedge grabbing me, pulling me back by the sleeves of my pyjamas.

I knew where the wishes hung out. A coven of them grew close to the caravan on the other side of the hedge. I picked them one by one, satisfied by the soft snap of stem and sticky juice of severed end, the bump of one fluffy white head into another. I cupped my hand around them as though protecting candles from the wind, careful not to knock off a single wisp of wish and lose it to the night.

I twirled the syllables around my head as I collected

them – dandelion, dandelion, dandelion. Earlier that day, we had looked up the word in the big dictionary underneath Billy’s bed. He explained that it came from the French term – *dents de lion* – lion’s teeth. The dandelion began as a pretty thing and the petals of its skirt were pointy and yellow like a tutu.

‘This is its daytime dress but the flower eventually needs to go to sleep. It withers and looks tired and haggard and just when you think its time is up’ – Billy held up his fist – ‘it turns into a clock.’ He uncurled his fingers and produced a white candy-floss dandelion from behind his back. ‘A puff-ball moon. A holy communion of wishes.’ He let me blow the wishes away like birthday candles. ‘A constellation of dreams.’

Billy marvelled at the bouquet of wishes I presented to him when he opened the caravan door. I picked as many as I could find to impress him.

‘I knew it,’ he said. ‘I just knew that the moon would come out for your birthday.’

We filled an empty jam jar with water and blew the cottony heads of the dandelions into it, their feathers floating on the meniscus like tiny swimmers lying on their backs. I closed the lid on the jar and shook the wishes, celebrating them, watching them dance. We left the jar on top of a dank stack of newspapers to stare out of the caravan’s plastic window.

Billy heated a saucepan of milk on the hob of his gas cooker. His kitchen looked like a toy I hoped to get for Christmas. It always surprised me when it worked in real

life. He let me stir the milk until it bubbled and formed little white sheets of skin that I pulled away with the back of a spoon. He poured in the chocolate powder and I whisked the spoon around and around until my arm hurt. We tipped the steaming brown stream into a flask and brought it up to the roof to watch the stars.

It took days for the dandelion seeds to fully submerge in the jar. They clung to the surface, hanging from their ceiling of water until it seemed like they either gave up or got bored. Just when the world thought they were goners, tiny little green shoots appeared like plant mermaids growing tails underwater. Billy called me to come over and marvel at the stubborn little yokes, the wishes that refused to die.

✱

Today is my eighteenth birthday. I'm a bit nervous knocking on Billy's door. I don't really visit him at night anymore. The outside of the caravan is cold against my knuckles. It has a lining of rubber along the sides like a fridge door. I dig my nails into the squishiness and tear a bit away. It comes off in a smooth strip like a sliver of fat off a ham. There is a shuffle of papers and the squeeze of steps across the floor. Billy opens the door and tries his best not to seem surprised to see me.

'Well,' he says, making his way back to his armchair.

'Sleeping Beauty,' I greet him. He didn't get up for milking this morning and I had to do it for him.

‘Yeah, sorry about that.’

‘On my birthday and all,’ I say.

‘Oh fucking hell.’ He grimaces. ‘It’s a wonder St James didn’t leave you in the *leaba*.’

‘He didn’t know. Mam forgot to tell him.’

‘We’re an awful shower. What one is it anyway? Sweet sixteen?’

‘Egotistic eighteen.’

It’s a small victory to see his face scrunch into an amused grin. I wait until he turns his back to fill the kettle.

‘The offers for college came out today,’ I say.

He turns off the tap and looks back to me. ‘Was that today?’

‘Yeah. I got into Trinity. I’m starting next week.’

He looks sad. Then he grips his hands on both sides of my shoulders and lets out a sigh. ‘I’m fucking delighted for you.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Fuck the tea,’ he says, waving the idea away. ‘Fuck the tea, I’ll get the whiskey.’

He rummages around in the press. Plates rattle and a tower of bowls topples over. Billy attempts to knee the avalanche of crockery back into place. I want to clean up the mess to have something to do, but then he stands up, emerging from the press triumphant with a bottle of Jameson.

‘Happy birthday Debs,’ Billy says.

‘Thanks.’ I take the bottle of whiskey from him like it’s a prize in a raffle.

We’re both standing awkwardly. I really don’t want it to

be my idea. I'm supposed to be an adult. I can't beg for things to happen anymore.

'There's a clear sky up there tonight,' he says, finally.

'It's also fucking freezing,' I say.

'There's a hot water bottle in the press if you want it.' Billy reaches up to the door in the ceiling and pulls down the fold-up ladder to the roof. He stomps up the steps in his boots, trailing his sleeping bag behind him like a child going to bed.

I boil the kettle. The odd contents of the caravan peer at me. A wooden model of an old-fashioned aeroplane dangles over his bed. A tiny man is sitting on it as though it's a swing, a pair of binoculars in his hands. We christened him Pierre because he has a moustache.

The hot rubber of the water bottle warms my hands. I climb the steps of the ladder two by two until the night wind splashes my face. It feels like being on a boat. We crawl into our cocoons of sleeping bags and lie down on the galvanised metal sheet that covers Billy's home. The roof is cold and slippery under my hands. It feels like lying on a block of ice. We look at the sky as though it depends on us to hold it up there.

The view from the roof of the caravan is the only thing that doesn't get smaller the older I get. We can hear the cows' hooves swishing through the grass. They come mooching over and sniff around the place to see what's happening. I inhale the dank, musty sweat of the caravan off the sleeping bag. Billy smells of cigarettes and diesel. The sleeves of his jumper dangle over his fingerless woollen

gloves. A hedge of stubble prickles around his mouth and reaches across his cheekbones to join up with the hair behind his ears.

‘You have a story for me,’ Billy says.

‘I don’t feel like a story.’

‘You do,’ he says. ‘I’ll pick a star.’

I pretend to be unenthusiastic and fidget with the zip of my sleeping bag. I tuck my hair behind my ear and wait for him to land on a star.

‘Can you see the North Star?’

‘No, it’s only the brightest star in the sky.’

‘It’s not, actually. The Dog Star is the brightest.’

‘You told me the North Star was.’

‘Well, I was wrong.’

‘That’s a shocker.’

‘So you see it? I’ve shown you it before?’

‘Only a couple hundred times, Billy, but you told me it was the brightest star in the sky.’

‘It’s the second brightest.’

‘And I’m supposed to figure out the second brightest star?’

‘It’s the one with the W near it.’

‘Yes, I know, it’s the one that *seems* like the brightest . . . but it’s not.’

‘I’m just checking we’re talking about the same one. Fucking hell. So, you see those five stars that make the wonky W near it?’

I squint up at the sky and try to connect the dots. I used to pretend I was able to see what Billy saw. I hate the

effort of trying and still not being able to make things out. As far as I can tell it's like reading braille, only using lights that shine from billions upon billions of miles away. There are too many – the crowd of them all staring back at me is overwhelming.

The older I get, the more of an effort I make. Billy breaks the stars down into pictures and stories, and makes it easier to distinguish between them. The W is one of the easier ones to spot.

'Yeah, I know it,' I say. 'The one that looks like a rocking chair.'

'Exactly,' he says. I look over at his index finger pointing up, tracing the stars together in smooth, straight lines. 'Cassiopeia's chair.'

'I remember her.'

'Right so – tell me about her.'

'You know the story, Billy,' I say.

'I haven't heard you tell it before.'

I sigh to buy some time. The characters are beginning to congregate in my mind.

'Go on then,' Billy prompts.

'Cassiopeia was a queen in a past life – the wife of Cepheus,' I explain. 'He's up there too. Cassiopeia was gas. She was lovely like, but people thought she was strange. She wore her hair loose and went around in her bare feet all the time which people found shocking because she was supposed to be royalty. She gave birth to a daughter called Andromeda and she brought her up to love and respect herself – a radical idea, back in the day. Her free spirit was

mistaken for arrogance. Word got out that there was this hippie queen going around barefoot, loving herself and teaching her daughter to do the same. Poseidon wasn't having any of it. He decided to remind humans that they could not run the show. So he sent a sea monster to destroy her husband's kingdom. Cassiopeia was told that the only way to save the kingdom was to sacrifice her daughter, so she did. She chained Andromeda to a rock at the edge of a cliff and left her for dead.'

'The bitch,' Billy says.

'Well, she had no choice. It was either that or let the monster kill everyone.'

'The Greeks were fucking nuts. Can I guess what happened to Andromeda?'

'You can.'

'Rescued by prince charming?'

'Of course,' I say.

Billy passes me the bottle of whiskey. It burns my throat.

'Perseus killed the sea monster on his way back from slaying Medusa and Andromeda was obliged to marry him out of courtesy,' I say.

'Classic. And what happened to Cassiopeia?'

I point up to her. 'She's up there in her rocking chair. Poseidon tied her to it so that as she circles the North Pole, she is upside-down. She's stuck in that chair, spinning until the end of time.'

'Jesus,' Billy says. 'Spending half your time upside-down. It might make you see the world differently.'

'I'd just be dizzy.'

‘Maybe you would at first, but you might get used to it.’

‘I’m happy with gravity, thanks.’

‘Happy enough for me to push you off this roof?’

He shoves my sleeping bag so hard that I roll over and scream. ‘You prick, Billy! That’s not funny.’

‘Not a fan of the birthday bumps?’

‘Stop it,’ I say, but I’m happy and warm inside. I think about my story and take another swig from the bottle. The first sip of whiskey has already sent me spinning up towards the sky.