

URSULA DUBOSARSKY



PIERRE'S NOT THERE



With illustrations by
CHRISTOPHER NIELSEN

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*For Jan Preston and Mike Webb-Pullman,
true friends who saved the day x*

UD

*For Suzanne, who takes my hand
and leads me to the river*

CN

CAST

(in order of appearance)



LARA



MOTHER



PIERRE



OLD HORSE



MR PUNCH



ZADY



BEAR-KING

Chapter **ONE**

Lara had always wished she was a dog, and one day, just for a short time, she actually became one.

This is how it happened.

It was on a day when Lara was going with her mother to work, because it was the school holidays. They had to get up very early in the pale morning to take first the bus, then the long train journey along the snaking tracks while the engine buzzed and the train stopped and started again at station after station. Lara thought it would never end. Finally they burst, the two of them, out of the train, down the escalator

and into the dazzling wideness of Circular Quay and the row of wharves with ferries moving in and out like slow dancers across the glassy harbour.

Lara breathed in the salty air and the sunshine burned her throat and she felt like she was floating. Flying! Now the sky was blue, not white, and the air was warm and would only become warmer.

‘Quickly,’ said Lara’s mother, ‘and we’ll just make it.’

So they rushed through the turnstiles, their bags bouncing, hanging onto their hats, down to where their ferry was waiting impatiently, pulling on its mooring.

Lara and her mother crossed the gangplank onto the ferry. Lara wanted to run up and across the curving metal bridge by herself, but her mother held her hand tightly in case she fell over into the waves below. It was impossible, as the barrier on either side of the gangplank was too high, unless Lara took it into her head to dive over the edge. She didn’t mind her mother’s grasp. She liked the feel of the familiar fingers wrapped around her own, like a rope she

could hold onto and use to pull herself upwards, out of the depths, if she had to.

The deckhand shouted, trundled in the gangplank and a horn blew a long whinnying cry. The ferry broke loose from the wharf and pushed out onto the waves and as the ground moved beneath her, Lara felt as if she was heading into another world.

The muddle of passengers dashed to find seats, indoors, out on the deck, up the stairs. Lara felt something stab her inside as she saw her mother heading for one of the indoor seats.

‘Can’t we sit outside?’ she cried. ‘Please!’

She couldn’t bear to be stuck in the stuffy grey room with the small windows and the heat and hum of the motor. She had to be outside – to be free!

‘Yes, all right,’ said Lara’s mother. She had already taken out her book from her bag, ready to sit and read. ‘Off you go, then, and find us a spot.’

Lara ran out onto the deck. The ferry was crowded because of the holidays and the benches were full of knees and ankles and baskets and bags and big hats

and the smell of sunscreen lotion and the fizz of cans being opened and laughter and complaints and sunglasses and towels and small children and smaller babies and a very old lady with a thick walking stick and a veil and a smell as sweet as fairy floss. Lara picked her way in and out of it all, hopping, jumping and springing as lightly as she could, like trying not to step on flowerbeds in a garden.

‘Sorry,’ she said, several times over. ‘Sorry, sorry,’ until there was a gap and she leaped through and found a slice of a bench right at the front of the boat where nobody was. Her mother, following her, slid down to sit on it and held her book on her lap for a moment, then breathed in deeply.

Lara flung herself up to the arrowhead of the boat, the furthest tip of the ferry. How lucky that she was the first one, the only one, there! She leaned over as far as she could and felt the faint splash of spray on her cheeks as the waves around her rose in jagged peaks that disappeared as quickly as they were formed.



The ferry pushed onwards between the jutting green headlands. Her mother calmly read her book as the ferry churned on. Lara stood watching the land pass and the ocean broaden, in a kind of trance. Seagulls sailed in the sky above, catching drifts of wind, swooping down to the water's surface and up again with their mysterious cries.

Lara looked down into the dark green water below, scudding past. There would be sharks down there, and stingrays. Forests of seaweed. She could swim, of course she could, but this would not be

like a swimming pool or even the beach where you could retreat to the sand if the waves were too high. Still – to be able to be somewhere else, deep in the ocean, somewhere where nothing was familiar or known, where you could even become someone else ...

She felt a thumping at her feet, coming through the floorboards.

‘Oh!’ said Lara.

In front of her, in the dark space under the tip of the boat, half-hidden in shadow, was a dog. It lay paws stretched out like a stone lion at the gateway of a palace. Its head was huge and so were its haunches; its fur was thick and rough. The dog gazed at Lara, its eyes yellow like honey in the sunlight. It wagged its big heavy tail, *thump thump*, on the ground.

Lara, who loved all dogs, knelt down and held out her hand towards it, as she had been taught to do with animals she didn’t know.

‘Hello, dog,’ she said.

The dog blinked. Its eyelids were thick velvety



curtains. Slowly, with consideration, it licked Lara's fingers.

‘Good dog,’ she said. ‘What’s your name, then?’

Gently, she felt under the matted fur of its neck for a collar and tag. There was no collar.

‘Are you a ship dog?’ said Lara. ‘Do you belong to the captain?’

The dog opened its mouth and let its great tongue hang across the row of shiny teeth on its bottom jaw.

‘I bet you would be a good swimmer,’ she

murmured. The dog turned its head slightly, listening, its black ears pricking up. 'If you fell into the water, you wouldn't be afraid.'

Dogs could swim without being taught. She sighed, remembering the weeks of swimming lessons she had done, all the kicking and breathing practice, *one, two, three, breathe! One, two, three, breathe!* Dogs, though, knew exactly what to do, and nobody had to show them. They swam valiantly, with their heads above the water, their four legs churning below, the bubbles rising to the surface.

'I wish I could swim like you, without having to learn,' she said, closing her eyes, and everything around her became silent and invisible. 'I wish I was free, from school, from swimming lessons, from everything, like a dog.'

The ferry's engine changed gear, the speed of the boat dropped and a bell rang. The land became larger and closer, and Lara, opening her eyes, could see the leaves on the trees and birds on the branches. The brilliant white furrow beside the boat turned to soft

foam. People called out to each other, babies cried. Her mother closed her book and put it back in her bag and stood up, ready to go, holding one hand to her forehead to shield her eyes against the sun. The ferry swung in towards the waiting wharf.

The dog also got up and shook itself, stretching its huge legs.

‘Time to go,’ said Lara, kindly, to the dog. ‘Your owner will come and find you now.’

She stroked the top of its head, and the dog made a rumbling sound, not a growl, more like a purr.

‘Come on, Lara!’ said her mother.

The deck was a huddle of moving people, eager to get off. The ferry swayed to and fro as it came to rest and the load of passengers – friends, family, strangers – were pushed, laughing, even screaming, grabbing onto each other as the grey wooden wharf posts, covered with seaweed and mussels, creaked and shuddered.

Lara turned for one last glimpse of the black dog. But it had already gone.

Chapter **TWO**

Lara and her mother stepped across the gangplank, back onto dry land.

‘Steady!’ called the deckhand, grinning to the queue of pushing passengers. ‘Wait a bit, and we’ll all get off.’

In front of the wharf was a long, green park with thick grass and tall Norfolk pines with drooping dark-green branches. Beyond the edge of the grass was a smear of a beach with white sand, sparkling like glitter. It was a place where people came for the day, to picnic, to play, to swim or to walk through

the bush that grew in tangles along the coast.

‘Afterwards,’ said her mother, ‘we’ll have our lunch on the beach and you can have a swim.’

In her mother’s string bag, Lara knew, were towels, swimsuits, sandwiches, bananas and a bottle of lemonade that had been in the freezer all night. Usually her mother would pack some slices of cake as well, and the fact that she didn’t this time made Lara suspect that she might be planning on buying them an ice cream from the

kiosk next to the big fish and chip shop, where already – at half past nine! – there was a line of customers and Lara could smell the fat and the salt and the fish being parcelled up



and handed over the counter. There was a giant ice cream cone painted on the wall, dripping multi-coloured flavours of gelato ...

With the crowd, they walked up the sandstone path that led through the middle of the park. Along the way people dropped off in little groups, like bits of loose gravel, and they spread out rugs and lay down on the grass, or tore off their clothes ready to swim, or began kicking a ball. Lara was overcome with a need to run – she just had to run – and she took off, upwards, holding her arms out as far as they could go on either side.

‘Watch where you’re going!’ came her mother’s voice behind her, with the calm tapping of her heels on the pathway. ‘There’s no hurry.’

There *was* a hurry – there was! It was like the bursting feeling she had when the teacher handed out the paintbrushes at school and she was afraid there wouldn’t be enough, or the stampede of children when the bell rang for lunch, as though the playground might disappear if they didn’t get

there in time. She ran and ran, arms outstretched, through the trees, like a seagull in full flight.

She stopped, panting, at the low stone wall where the park ended and the street began, and waited for her mother. The park was dappled with morning shadows. Something loped in and out of the pines, their trunks as straight as fence posts, winding its way back and forth.



It was the big black dog from the ferry! Where was its owner then? There was nobody walking in front or behind with a lead, or tossing a stick, or

calling for it to follow. Had it got off the ferry all by itself? It didn't look at all like a stray dog, lost and lonely. This was a free dog ...

Lara's mother reached the top of the park, just as the dog ran away through the trees.

'What are you staring at, Lara?' her mother asked, smiling quizzically.

'Only a dog,' said Lara. 'The dog that was on the ferry.'

'Ah, a dog,' said her mother. 'Let's cross the road.'

There was a row of houses in front of them facing the ocean. Lara knew which one they were going to without being told because her mother had often described it to her. It was built of mulberry brick, with a sloping slate roof that was grey with salt and green with moss. The white window frames curled like cream on a birthday cake, and there was a chimney on the roof, and the clouds floated above it like puffs of smoke.

At the peak of the roof a flag flapped and cracked in the gusts of sea wind. It was faded and torn and

had a picture of a big brown bear on it on all fours,
and behind the bear was a swirl of golden stars.



‘What country is that?’ wondered Lara.

Her mother laughed.

‘No country I’ve ever heard of,’ she said.

They walked in the front gate. Garden beds on either side of the pathway leading to the door were filled with rosebushes thick with flowers, red and yellow like flames. Lara’s mother knelt down in the

earth next to one of the rosebushes. Lara knew what she was searching for – the key. There were all sorts of places that people left their keys hidden when they weren't at home. In their gardens, or in pots, or even in passageways full of spiders.

Her mother carefully pushed apart the thorny rose stems, until she found a little blue pot between the lacy roots and decaying petals. She slipped her fingers into it and extracted a key, then got back on her feet, dusting her knees. She fitted the key into the lock of the front door and gave it a couple of twists. She took it out, pushed it in harder and twisted it again.

‘There’s a trick to it,’ she muttered. ‘It always takes a bit of a turn, this way and that.’

The house doesn't want us to come in, thought Lara. It wants us to go away.

But she was wrong. The lock gave way and the door opened wide.

OUT NOW

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