

“The Bloom family will absolutely have your heart. Ada Bloom is a sweet, precocious girl traversing that strange territory on the edge of childhood. Her sister Tilly and brother Ben are testing the waters of adulthood, each in their own way. Their parents, Martha and Mike, are both tempted by people in their lives, old and new, in disastrous ways. Readers will be spellbound by this honest and tender accounting of each Bloom family member, told in a chorus of voices, revealing an intimate and flawed family portrait that leaves you feeling connected to everyone around you. Martine Murray’s stunning debut is a true delight.”

—**JULIA FIERRO**, *The Gypsy Moth Summer*

“Murray’s beautiful gift for language and keen eye for nuanced human behavior shine in this story of a long, hot summer that shatters the innocence of young Ada and unravels her family. I felt this wonderful story as much as read it.”

—**SUSAN CRANDALL**, *The Myth of Perpetual Summer*

“In this story of a young Australian family whose concealed deceptions are driving them apart, Murray writes with sensual tenderness about the buried yearnings that threaten and sustain our most cherished relationships, as well as our perverse human tendency to constantly test their strength.”

—**COURTNEY MAUM**, *Costalegre*

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**THE  
LAST SUMMER  
OF  
ADA  
BLOOM**

**MARTINE MURRAY**



TIN HOUSE BOOKS / Portland, Oregon

*For Mannie*

# 1

Ada found a forgotten windmill. She was walking with PJ in the patch of bush between her house and Toby Layton's. She was already nine and still wearing her jumper back to front. PJ was old and broad as a wombat, with three legs that worked, so he waddled along and Ada often had to stop and wait for him. She swished a stick, absentmindedly whacking at the tea tree and singing over and over again, "Did you ever come to meet me, Farmer Joe, Farmer Joe?" She couldn't remember the next line. She wasn't sure the words were right, but because she was alone, and because it was her traveling-along song, she sang as loudly and confidently as a trumpet. The bush was unaffected by her song. This was the great consolation trees provided—they heard her without commenting.

It was early enough that the air was cool and there was a damp, silvery gleam and rustle to the leaves. The song ribboned ahead, as if escaping, drawing her through the thin trees and pale sky as if she belonged to the landscape—as if she were not the child Ada Bloom with a bunk bed and a green bike and words to speak and homework to do, but a creature whose soul could rise with the trees and enter by the breath of song.

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Ada followed her song deeper into the bush, until the windmill loomed up before her. Its tin blades creaked and flapped like startled elbows, causing Ada to swallow her song whole. She gathered herself with some indignation. She had never seen this windmill or the little clearing it presided over. Was it right that it should be here, hiding away in her own patch of forest? Its stature made it seem important but also forbidding, like the headmaster at school, whose appearance caused in Ada the same sort of disobedient urge she was feeling now. And if Mr. Gray had been a windmill instead of an old headmaster, this was exactly the sort of windmill he would be: stern as a judge, with a ghostly clanging air and rotting on the inside.

The windmill was cross, Ada could tell, because it had been forgotten. It was terrible to be forgotten. As if it were a curse to think it, Ada dropped to her knees and scratched her name into the dirt with her stick. *Ada is here.*

But the windmill didn't care. It was bitter and stricken, so haunted with olden times and so neglected by current ones that its struts were as rutted and splintering as old people's bones. From its damp wooden skeleton came the stink of rot. Ada never wanted to become an old person. The old windmill was secretly forlorn about it and probably dying. Yet it wasn't this aspect of death that scared Ada, but more the sense that the old windmill was possessed of a life and that, with the remaining shreds of it, it rattled and stood, guarding its last tenure with mad gusts of faltering pride. Ada moved forward to touch it, half hoping for a nasty great-aunt shriek. Instead, and in a malevolent silence, it revealed a great never-ending hole, which it straddled, and from which came a chill breath of buried darkness. Ada stepped back.

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PJ gave the hole a wary sniff. This hole definitely had some intent; it was square and lined with wood. Fixed to one side was a wooden ladder whose first rungs had almost rotted away.

The ladder went farther into the hole than Ada could see. She dropped her stick in and watched the hole swallow it. She didn't hear it land.

Her mind began to dance. What lay at the bottom of the hole? Did the hole even have a bottom, or did it go right through the earth? What would happen to her if she dropped into the hole? A pleasant tremor of danger passed through her; she squatted next to PJ for comfort. Then she stood up and pushed some dried leaves and twigs into the hole with her foot and leaned over to watch them fall. The sight made her vision almost black with dizziness and she ran back through the bush, as if something were chasing her, even if it was just the thought of climbing down into that hole.

She ran home to get the others. There was no point in climbing into the hole if nobody saw her do it.

Tilly was at the window, reading. She uncurled her legs and frowned disbelievingly. "Don't tell Mum or we won't be allowed to go there." She sighed, as if weary of the hole before she had seen it.

Let her be bored. Tilly was already seventeen and had taken on grown-up airs. But after Ada had rounded up the littles, and Raff Cavallo and Ben, Tilly decided she would come, after all.

Ada led them through the bush to the old windmill. She was planning to show Raff her trees. Especially William Blake, who was the largest, a blue gum. Ada had found names for the trees on the spines of her mother's books. In her mind, Emily Dickinson,

who was a black-tailed wallaby, was standing nearby, marveling at Ada's courage.

But Emily Dickinson wasn't there, and Ada didn't tell Raff anything about William Blake. Instead, as they all followed her through the bush, she bloated up with a shy sort of importance, so that she marched irreverently, like a grown-up, ignoring the trees.

When Tilly saw the endless hole, she pretended it wasn't anything. She said it was a mineshaft left over from the gold rush. She walked back through the bush without even dropping a stone into the hole. Ada watched her disappear into the tea tree and fumed. Tilly had ruined the hole's mystery. Tilly had named it, though it was too full of gloom and portent to be gathered up into a name.

Raff watched her go too. He watched her intently for ages, and he jerked his head away as if he'd been stung. He picked up a stone and flung it at the windmill blades, which it hit and ricocheted off. None of the others cared though. It was clear that the most thrilling way to use the hole was to dare to climb down the ladder and to see how far it went.

"I'll go first, since I am the one who discovered it," Ada declared. If she went first, before the big boys, everyone would know Ada Bloom was someone.

The hardest part was that the first rungs were rotting. If her foot slipped or a rung gave way, she would fall down the hole like that stick. She went as fast as she could, so as to not leave her weight anywhere for too long. Tilly was wrong—the hole was alive, swarming with secret blackness and doom. Ada could feel it. Hidden there were the earth's insides: the unseen, long-silenced,

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rattling bones of life's endings. And it reached up and around her with a cold-tongue quiet. She drew herself into a tight fist of concentration and went deeper. Down into elsewhere, while the world faded and the bush sounds hushed, and the daylight shrunk itself into a heartbeat of brightness above her.

Ben was shouting at her. The panic in his voice came chasing her down the hole.

Her stomach unfurled. If she didn't get up right away, she would fall. She raced against the old windmill, against its endless, obliterating hole. A monstrous, unholy death had her within its grasp.

She reached the top and wriggled out, blinking in the light and gasping with relief.

Ben glared at her. "You shouldn't have done that, Ada," he said.

But Ada was elated. She had gone so close to death and escaped it. She gazed up triumphantly at Raff Cavallo. For one glorious moment their grins burst together in a conspiratorial fire, but in the same instant Raff trampled it all with a snort of laughter. "Crazy kid," he said. "You could have died."