

**Polar.**  
**An audio play.**

**Synopsis:**

**Pip**, a six-year-old polar bear enthusiast and avid environmentalist, confronts the sudden reality of her grandparents' mortality through the metaphor of extinction. Her trusted companion, and closest confidante, is her stuffed toy polar bear as she navigates conversations with a palliative care nurse and her mum. All the while, she remembers the days before she knew her grandparents were poorly.

## **A Note on the World(s) of the Play**

All speech which is marked in *italics* belongs to Pip's internal world; to the place where her thoughts, fears, worries, imagination all live and to the place where Lady Polar Bear comes to life.

All of Lady Polar Bear's lines exist only in Pip's internal world and are voiced by Pip in her 'special' Lady Polar Bear voice.

All speech which is not in italics belongs to the external world.

Pip is the only character who narrates her internal world and interacts with the external world.

## **Characters**

**Pip:** is six years old and likes the yoghurts in tubes that go in her packed lunches.

**Lady Polar Bear:** has been in Pip's life only one month and all of their dialogue takes place in Pip's imagination.

**Nurse:** visits Pip's grandparents daily and has grown very fond of Pip.

**Mum:** is desperately trying to parent at the same time as losing her own parents.

**Gran:** has always picked Pip up from school and thinks sofa armrest covers are a necessity.

**Grandad:** never bothered with school but has read more books on nature than anyone you'll ever meet in your life.

**Scene One: Now**

**(We are in Pip's grandparents' kitchen. The kettle is boiling. The toaster is toasting. The fridge hums in the background.)**

**Pip**

*There's no easy way to tell you this...*

*So I'll try and tell it in a way I think you'll understand best.*

*Because the Nurse who smells like apple washing-up liquid and makes needles disappear into my Gran and my Grandad like a horrible magic trick –*

*our Gran and our Grandad, sorry –*

*says that it's really very important that I help you to make sense of all of this.*

*It's a really very important job that I have.*

*Because this isn't a world that's easy to understand.*

*Not for a polar bear.*

*Or a stuffed one at that.*

*And you're quite new to your human family.*

*And now that you've been with me nearly a whole month and now that things are possibly going to change in a really very big way for us, in a forever-kind-of-way actually, I should tell you:*

*Gran and Grandad are on the brink of extinction.*

*I've not known for long.*

*So I've not been keeping it from you.*

*Not on purpose.*

*I only found out how on-the-brink-of-extinction they were yesterday.*

*From mum.*

*And I was too sad to say.*

*And a bit confused too.*

*But the Nurse said she'd help me to tell you today.*

*While we wait for the kettle to boil.*

*And for the toaster to toast our after-school toast.*

*While mum's on the phone to the doctor upstairs out of earshot.*

*Is that alright with you?*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Of course little cub.*

*Now pass me your paw.*

**Nurse**

Has that kettle not boiled yet?

Patience is a virtue...I suppose.

**Pip**

Sometimes it never clicks at all.

Sometimes it just boils and boils and boils until someone turns it off at the wall.

**Nurse**

How are you ticking along, Pip-squeak?

**Pip**

Well I now know that my grandparents are on the brink of extinction so really not very good.

Because very soon they'll be all gone.

I mean they'll be "gone".

Mum told me not to say "all gone" because it's not like when you finish your tea or your yoghurt.

It's just "gone".

**Nurse**

Oh Pip.

**Pip**

*You know Lady Polar Bear, that's the kind of thing mum says with a smile, but I don't think her smiling means she's happy.*

*Not like normal.*

*When a smile means happy.*

*And a frown means sad.*

*It's a smile which doesn't reach her eyes or her cheeks.*

*Not like normal.*

*When she smiles with her eyes and her cheeks and her ears and her nose, not just her lips.*

*My mum must be the only person who smiles with her eyebrows, I think.*

*Somehow.*

*But not now.*

*Not for a while now...*

**Nurse**

Pip?

You've wondered off again.

**Pip**

No I've not.

**Nurse**

"Wondered" not "wandered".

As in, you've disappeared somewhere deep in your own head again.

**Pip**

I was talking to Lady Polar Bear.

**Nurse**

Ah, I see.

**Lady Polar Bear**

*She's got a lovely smile, little cub.*

**Pip**

Why do you smile so much?

It's not really a time for smiling, I don't think.

**Nurse**

I think that the moments when it's hardest to smile are the moments we most need to smile.

Smiles are rebellions against sadness.

**Pip**

*"Rebellion" is a big word and one I've not heard before, Lady Polar Bear.*

*Though you're made of fluff and your eyes are beads, would you maybe tell me what it means?*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*The only human words I know are the ones you've taught me, how am I supposed to know?*

**Pip**

*I suppose you've got a point there.*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Back in the room, little cub.*

*I can see that the nurse is ignoring the clock on the cooker and the watch on her wrist.*

*For now.*

*For you.*

*Which is a very kind thing to do.*

*So you can tell me what I need to be told, so that I can be there – as your polar bear – for you.*

**Nurse**

*I think you're doing brilliantly, Pip.*

*In the face of extinction and all.*

**Pip**

*That makes me feel good inside, Lady PB.*

*To know I've been being good.*

*All this time.*

*Being good.*

*And not getting in the way.*

*And smiling smiles that need to be smiled.*

*And holding hands when they need to be held.*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Which is not always easy to know.*

**Pip**

*Because sometimes a handhold means the tears stop.*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*And sometimes it means the tears start.*

**Pip**

*And we're not sure what's worse.*



**Lady Polar Bear**

*To stop the flood or to start it?*

**Nurse**

Are you going to formally introduce me to your lovely friend then, Pip?

**Lady Polar Bear**

*I'm Lady Polar B-*

**Pip**

*Remember it's just me who can hear you!*

This is Lady Polar Bear.

**Nurse**

How very creative!

**Pip**

*it's a joke, I know, but my cheeks start to feel all hot like when mum opens the oven and the heat hits you like a wall.*

*The hotness of embarrassment hurts.*

*And it starts in your cheeks but ends in hot burning puddles that sting in your eyes.*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Hold it together now, little cub.*

**Nurse**

I'm only pulling your leg Pip-squeak!

I'll have you know that when I was your age I had a real cat called Cat and a stuffed dog called Bunny.

**Pip**

*I really don't know what to do with that information.*

*And I have a slight suspicion that this is a case of just saying something – anything – to make me feel better.*

*Which doesn't really make me feel better at all.*

I know it was a joke, it's okay, I'm alright.

**Nurse**

It's a pleasure to be properly introduced, Lady Polar Bear.

I've heard a lot about you.

And you're very important to Pip.

I know that.

You're a VIPB: a Very Important Polar Bear.

**Pip**

And that's why it's really very important that we tell you, together, the truth.

**Nurse**

So that you can ask us questions.

**Pip**

And have them answered.

**Nurse**

Does that sound alright?

**Lady Polar Bear**

*I'm ready as I'll ever be to be sad.*

**Pip**

My grandparents are dying out.

Sorry –

I know I'm not supposed to say that, I'm supposed to just say "dying" –

Mum says not to say "dying out".

Soon, my grandparents who love me – and you – very much are going to be gone.

And not just gone for a little bit.

Gone for forever.

And that fact makes me feel the saddest I've ever felt.

And it's alright if it makes you feel very sad too.

It's alright if the word "gone" makes your insides knot and your toes all prickly.

Isn't it?

**Nurse**

It's absolutely alright to feel knotty and sad.

**Pip**

Especially when your grandparents are on the brink of extinction.

**Nurse**

Especially then.

**Pip**

Do you know that, Lady Polar Bear?

**Nurse**

She will now.

But you might have to remind her on the days that really feel tough, can you do that?

**(Pause.)**

I'll pop back in a moment, your mum's tea's going cold down here, I'll take it up.

**Pip**

Okay doky.

**(Silence. The Nurse leaves Pip and Lady Polar Bear together.)**

*I think, Lady Polar Bear, that on the days that feel really tough, I'll remind you of the days that felt really good.*

*So that we can remember how good the good days can be.*

*And hope for gooder days to come...*

*You know, my happiest day in forever wasn't so long ago.*

*My happiest day isn't so far in the past.*

*My happiest day was the first afternoon of the Christmas holidays.*

*After-school.*

*We hadn't even met yet, so the best really was yet to come.*

*Anyway.*

*Me, Gran and Grandad are all snuggled up on the sofa in their living room.*

*And we're just about to watch a new programme about a polar bear family on the nacho channel....*

**(Scene One should flow into Scene Two as Pip continues telling her story to Lady Polar Bear.)**

**Scene Two: Memory One**

**(Pip's grandparents' living room. The indistinct murmur of the TV can be heard.)**

**Pip**

*Grandad says what he always says –*

*or said –*

*as he changes the channel to his favourite channel in the whole TV world:*

**Grandad**

"Nacho", here we go!

**Pip**

*Which makes Gran say:*

**Gran**

Nat Geo.

As in, National Geographic.

Not "nacho".

As in, well, "nacho".

**Grandad**

I don't think I've ever had a nacho, you know –

That rhymed!

**Gran**

Of course you've had a nacho.

Who hasn't had a nacho!

**Pip**

*Grandad, giggling, says to me:*

**Grandad**

Do you know we're in danger of lots of endangered animals disappearing like the now dead dodo did?

**Gran**

Trying saying that again quickly.

**(Grandad does. Pip erupts in giggles.)**

**Grandad**

You know I feel like a bloody dodo nowadays with all of my aches and pains.

**Pip**

You feel like a flightless bird?

**Grandad**

Like an extinct one.

**Gran**

If you were a bird you'd have to be a flightless one, wouldn't you?

**Grandad**

Because I'm down to earth?

**Gran**

Because you're bleedin' useless more like.

**Grandad**

No love for Grandad Dodo today I see.

**Pip**

*Grandad chuckles and winks at me with both eyes as he reaches for the remote.*

*It's a blink, really.*

*But I know it's meant to be a wink.*

*He just never learned how not to blink with both eyes when winking.*

**Gran**

It's starting!

Silence!

**Pip**

*Cushioned between gran and grandad, I slip into the gap between sofa seats, and fall in love you're your world Lady PB, a world made of ice and snow and blue water.*

**Grandad**

Bloody majestic creatures.

**Gran**

Not many left now in the world now, you know.

**Pip**

Can I have a hot squash in the break, please?

*Oh Lady PB, that was the best afternoon after-school in the whole of my –*

**Scene Three: Now (continued...)**

**(The Nurse returns to Pip's grandparent's kitchen and interrupts Pip without realising.)**

**Nurse**

Tea delivered, grandparents checked in on.

Success.

So Pip, has Lady Polar Bear thought of any questions she'd like you to ask me?

**Pip**

Let me see.

*Lady PB, any questions for me?*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Let me think for a moment.*

*It's a lot to take in....*

*Oh I do have a question but it might sound a bit silly.*

*Why are they on the brink of extinction?*

*Is it global warming? or climate change? or people not using the bins the right way?*

**Pip**

*That's a very good question I think.*

Why are Gran and Grandad going extinct?

**Nurse**

Would you like me to answer, Pip?

**Pip**

Yes please.

**Nurse**

Your grandparents are very poorly.

The sort of poorly that's very hard to make less poorly.

Or to make better.

It's the sort of poorly that just needs lots of care.

**Pip**

But what I don't understand is how Grandad's been poorly so long, and Gran for so little but somehow Gran's a lot more poorly than Grandad?

**Nurse**

They're different kinds of poorly.

They're poorly in different places and some places in our bodies are better at handling illness than other places.

I tell you what, though, you've got good at soaking the sponge in Gran's water and wetting her lips so she doesn't feel so thirsty, Pip.

You're doing my job for me!

**Pip**

I think it looks like a tiny iceberg on a stick, that sponge.

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Hey! That's what I said!*

**Pip**

Lady Polar Bear thought that first though, you know.

She's really much cleverer than you'd think for a bear.

**Nurse**

Tell me about Lady Polar Bear.

Tell me about the first time you met.

**Pip**

At Christmas.

Gran and Grandad adopted her for me.

You know I'm not really sure I knew what I was asking for because I thought she'd be real.

I thought I'd be getting a real-life polar bear.

Not a really big one.

But a little one, maybe.

Apparently I'll get postcards from the real polar bear that's somewhere – I don't know where – one day soon.

Because apparently, Gran and Grandad did really adopt me a real life polar bear too...

*Oh Lady Polar Bear, my nose is dripping.*



*And there's a lump in my throat which is making it impossible to say what I want to say to the nice Nurse.*

*And I've made your fur all wet with my drips.*

*Because I'm remembering Christmas.*

*And I'm worrying that it might have been our last.*

*Our last all together....*

**(As the memory takes over, Scene Three melts into Scene Four.)**

## **Scene Four: Memory Two**

**(The faint hum of Christmas music can be heard.)**

**Pip**

*It was the best, you know, Lady PB.*

*Because I met you.*

*And because the “nacho” channel was on loop.*

*And we made biscuits that were shaped like bear cubs and dipped in white powder icing.*

*And my family of five – Gran, Grandad, Mum, me and you – ate them (or pretended to), snuggled up on the sofa, watching a polar bear family drifting on ice.*

*Oh my eyes are leaking.*

*Because I’m remembering the skinny polar bear whose fur coat looked like a baggy cagoule, all on his own, searching for fish for his tea or a friend to play tig with.*

*And I’m hoping it’s never just me, alone on the sofa, as I hold on to you for the very first time.*

*And I’m promising, quietly, in a whisper, in your ear: I will never let your ice caps melt.*

**(Pip bursts into tears.)**

**Scene Five: Now (continued...)**

**(The Nurse hastily seeks to comfort Pip's sobs as they all sit at the kitchen table.)**

**Nurse**

Can I get you a tissue, little Pip?

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Just wipe your nose and your tears on me, little cub.*

**Pip (sniffing)**

It's alright, Lady PB doesn't mind.

**Nurse**

Now that's friendship for you!

**Pip**

I don't think Lady PB wants to know any more.

Not for a bit.

So can we just have hot squash and toast and be quiet for a bit?

**Nurse**

Of course.

You've been really brave and grown up telling Lady Polar Bear all of that.

Making sense of it all, like that.

So she won't be so confused or so scared about how the next few weeks might go.

**Pip**

Because there's not long left.

I know.

**Nurse**

Yes.

Because we have to start thinking about goodbyes.

The best goodbyes possible.

**Pip**

That's what mum said.

Yesterday.

When I was more confused and more scared than I think I am now.

**Lady Polar Bear**

*What happened yesterday, Pip?*

*What happened exactly?*

**Pip**

*I want to protect you from yesterday.*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*And I want to look after you today, little cub.*

**Pip**

*Well if I'm going to tell you the truth, then I might as well tell you the cold, hard whole of it.*

*Do you think you can manage that, Lady PB?*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*For you, I could manage anything.*

**Pip**

*You're going to have to give me your paw for this bit...*

**(Scene Five melts into Scene Six.)**

## **Scene Six: Memory Three**

**(Pip's mum's car:. In the background, the sound of indicators ticking away can be heard.)**

### **Pip**

*I'm not allowed to take you to school, as you know, which is why you weren't with me as I sat in the car with mum outside Gran and Grandad's house yesterday after school.*

*At the end of my first week back at school after the holidays.*

*You weren't holding my hand yesterday, like you are now, when mum told me:*

### **Mum**

There might not be long left.

And I don't want you to be shocked when you go inside.

Because things have changed – things have got a little bit worse – since we were last here for Christmas.

And there'll be things you won't recognise in the house.

And you might not recognise your Gran and your Grandad so well.

I just don't want you to be shocked, Pip.

So that's why I'm talking to you like an adult now, alright?

Like a grown-up?

### **Pip**

*So mum starts explaining to me things that I already know.*

*And she describes things I've already seen.*

*Things that I saw but didn't know were symptoms.*

*Things that I saw but knew not to get upset at.*

*Like Grandad not eating and not leaving his spot on the sofa all day.*

*Like Gran with her headaches, all slow and eyes tired.*

*Like the toilet's new rails and the seat and the bucket in the shower.*

*And the red buttons that hang around Gran and Grandad's necks.*

### **Mum**

They've got new beds set up in the living room now.

Ones with remotes which you aren't to play with.

And the nurse is going to start visiting every day.

**Pip**

How long is not long, mum?

*I wait for her reply, but she just cries instead.*

*So I tell her about the Red List.*

*The Red List of Threatened Species.*

*To help her help me make sense of what "not long left" really means.*

*I go through the list:*

Least concern.

Near threatened.

Vulnerable.

Endangered.

Critically endangered.

Extinct in the wild.

Extinct.

**Mum**

Would you go through the list again please, Pip?

**Pip**

*So I do.*

Least concern.

Near threatened.

Vulnerable.

Endangered.

Critically endangered.

*And she reaches back from the front seat and puts her hand on my knee as I go through the list and she squeezes – twice – too far down the list for me to be pleased that I asked because there's really not long left at all, you know, Lady PB.*

Mum, can I ask-

**Mum**

I'm sorry Pip.

I really am.

**Pip**

I love you, mama bear.

**Mum**

And I love you, little cub.

**Pip**

*That was yesterday then,, Lady PB.*

*That was my yesterday.*

**Scene Seven: Now (continued...)**

**(The kitchen.)**

**Nurse**

You've gone all quiet on me again, Pip.

**(Silence.)**

Do you think it would be alright if I asked you a question or two, Pip-squeak?

**(Pip doesn't say anything; she slurps hot squash and crunches on cold toast.)**

Or I could ask Lady Polar Bear?

**Pip**

She's too tired for questions at the minute.

**Nurse**

That's alright.

**Pip**

Why can't I watch the "nacho" channel in the living room anymore?

**Nurse**

Because the sounds and the colours from the TV make your Gran's head hurt and your Grandad needs lots of sleep.

**Pip**

Your turn now.

**Nurse**

My turn?

**Pip**

To ask me your question.

**Nurse**

Why don't you go in the living room anymore?

Why do you only say "hello" to your Gran and your Grandad through the door?

**(Silence.)**

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Tell her, Pip.*



*She won't think you're bad at being grown-up!*

**Pip (takes a big breath in and then...nothing.)**

I don't really know.

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Except that's not really true is it, little cub?*

**Pip**

No.

Not really.

No.

**Lady Polar Bear**

*So tell me, little cub, what you can't quite tell her.*

**Pip**

*Because I don't like the breathing sounds that the beds make.*

*They give me the collywobbles.*

*Because the smell of I-don't-know-what in the living room turns my tummy.*

*Because it's getting harder and harder to recognise my Gran and my Grandad.*

*And because I don't think they'd really want me to see them like that.*

*All alone.*

*In their separate beds.*

*Drifting.*

*In the living room.*

*Where nothing feels all that alive anymore.*

*It's because they remind me of that skinny polar bear on the NatGeo channel with the sagging skin alone on his ice cap.*

*Too tired to fish.*

*Too lonely for friendship.*

*Eyes red in sad sockets.*

*Skin three sizes too large for their bodies.*

*Fur shedding and barely there.*

*All grey.*

*And matted.*

*It's because when I look at them, I think they look like they're drifting further and further away from each other.*

*And I'm angry at myself for not being strong enough to push their beds together – like two floating ice caps – and make them one once more.*

*Because I know they'd be happier together.*

*I imagine them pawing at each other.*

*Nuzzling each other.*

*Licking each other's wounds.*

*Nose-to-nose.*

*Paw-to-paw.*

*Bed-to-bed.*

*And I imagine that's what they might really do if we all left them alone.*

**(To the Nurse, suddenly)** Are my grandparents really going to be gone so soon, do you think?

Do you really think?

**Nurse**

What other words can you find in the word "gone", Pip?

**Pip**

*My mind has gone blank.*

*All I can do is squeeze you harder than I've ever squeezed you before Lady PB.*

*Because I don't know the answer.*

*And I know you don't either.*

*I squeeze my hands around your furry belly so hard that you almost disappear, and my clammy palms meet through your warm stuffing.*

**Lady Polar Bear**

*Which would hurt if I didn't know how much more it hurt you.*

*Or how much you were hurting.*

**Nurse**

Pip, when I think of the word "gone", I see two other words – two words that help me better understand the word "gone".

**Pip**

*I don't speak.*

*Not to her.*

*Not out loud.*

*I can't.*

**Nurse**

Go.

On.

Hidden in plain sight.

Hidden in "gone".

Hidden in a sad word, there's a little bit of something better.

Because nothing's – no-one's – ever just gone.

We go on.

Whether we know it or not.

Whether we believe it or not.

**Pip**

Can I please go and give my mum a cuddle?

*I say "cuddle".*

*But what I really mean is "nuzzle".*

**Nurse**

That's not a question you have to ask me, Pip-squeak.

**(The chair scrapes on the floor as Pip hastily gets down from the table and, scooping Lady Polar Bear up, heads to the foot of the stairs. Looking up at the stairs before him, she whispers to Lady Polar Bear...)**

**Pip**

*The mission is simple, Lady PB.*

*But there's danger ahead.*

*Because these aren't just stairs.*

*Oh no no no no no...*

*This is the cold, hard face of a cold ice mountain.*

*So: claws and paws, my friend, claws and paws all the way.*

**(Pip scrambles noisily up the stairs on all fours.)**

**(Breathless as she climbs) We**

*have*

*to*

*make*

*it*

*to*

*the*

*...TOP!*

**NO BEAR LEFT BEHIND!**

**(Pip launch herself onto the landing where she crash-lands.)**

*And now the icy mountain top!*

*Look, Lady PB, everything the ice touches is ours!*

*Follow me...*

*And stay low!*

**(Pip crawls along the landing, then taps lightly on a closed door with her fingertips and purrs softly.)**

*I can hear the hum of mum's phone.*

*Do you think she can hear my purrs?*

**(Pip purrs more loudly than before, almost growling; through the door we hear her mum purr back, then the door creaks open and Pip enters the room.)**

*Purring back at me, mum's breath sticks all hot to my ear.*

*And I do what I think you'd do, Lady PB.*

*I nuzzle her with my cold little nose.*

*I clamber into her lap.*

*I curl up into her and disappear into her fur as her body collapses into me like an avalanche.*

**(We hear the sound of kisses planted hastily and joyfully, then a heavy breath and silence.)**

*You know, I think this moment could be on the "nacho" channel.*

*I think a family of polar bears wouldn't find our little family all that different.*

*Because I really don't think we're all that different from all the animals that me and Gran and Grandad used to watch on TV every day after school.*

*Except we talk more.*

*We use more words.*

*Not that we need them.*

*Not that this moment needs them.*

*I don't think.*

**END.**