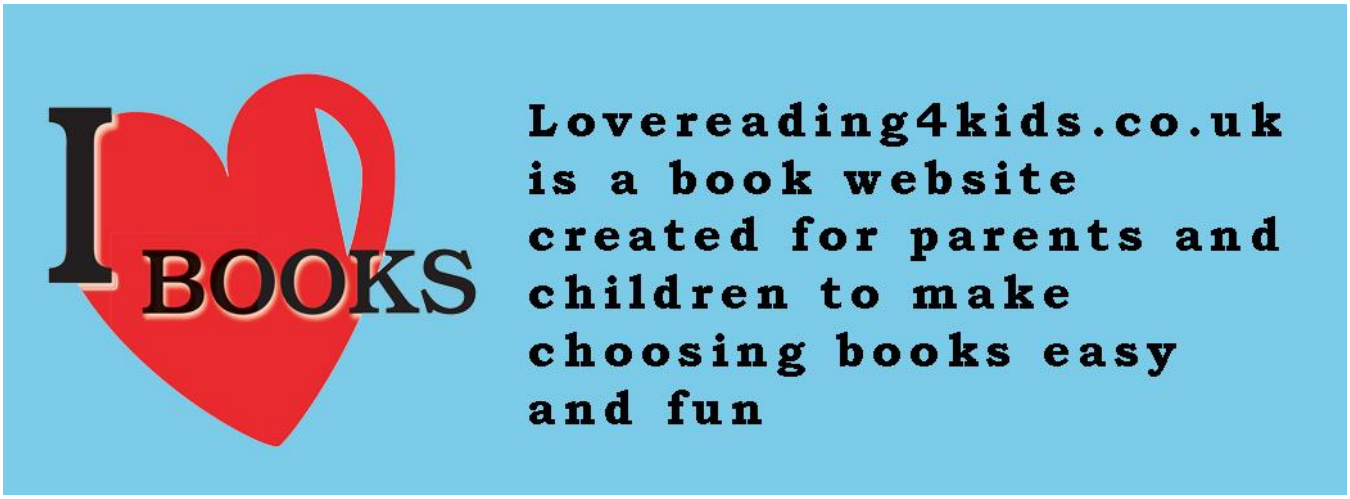


Opening extract from

Whisper to Me

Written by

Nick Lake

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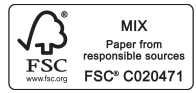
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These are the things that you need to know:

1. I hear voices.
2. I miss you.
3. I wish I could take back what I did to you.
4. What they said in the news, what they said I did. It's not true. You don't have to worry about that.
5. I'm going to write it all down, all about Paris and why I broke your heart, and then I'm going to e-mail it to you. It will take you, I don't know, a couple of days to read. So I will be waiting for you at **5:00 p.m. Friday** by the windmill hole of Pirate Golf on Pier One, where we played that one time.

If you forgive me, when you're done reading this, come and get me. Okay? Think of this as the most screwed-up love letter ever.

I hope you come. That isn't a thing you need to know, it's just true. I hope you do. I hope that when you've read this, you'll understand why I did what I did.

One of the things on the previous page was not true.

I don't, precisely, hear voices.

I hear only one voice.

But please know:

1. It's the same thing, whether you hear one voice or several. I mean, "hearing voices" is just what people say, isn't it? It's the common terminology. It doesn't matter *how many* voices there are.
2. Please don't worry. I'm not doing this to lie to you. In fact just the opposite. I'm going to tell you the truth, right from the beginning. All the things I left out, all the things I deceived you about, everything that happened after you left. *My* side of the story, not what you saw on the news. I'm setting it all down in front of you, once and for all.
3. Like my heart.
4. Like all that I am.

Yeah, okay, that was gross and hyperbolic; I can just see Paris miming putting her fingers in her throat and barfing. Sorry. I get carried away.

And I don't know. Maybe the Ovid quote right at the beginning was too much. But you do love the classics, and Ovid in particular. You said to me once, "Ovid knew more about body horror than any B-movie director"; it was when we were standing between mountains of plush toys, SpongeBobs and Tweety Birds looming over us.

And I wanted to kick this off with something you love, because I figure at this point you don't like me very much anymore.

Maybe I can change that.

I don't know.



1.

THE PART BEFORE

You know what this place—

I was—

Okay.

Okay.

Okay, so it's not like you need me to introduce you to Oakwood, New Jersey, or to the boardwalk or the amusement park. I mean, you weren't born here like me, but you know every street in this town.

The day it all began was a Sunday. I spent most of the day in my room, reading. Me and my dad never used to hang out or anything, even on the days when he wasn't at the restaurant.

You've never been in my room. It's not very interesting: there's a bed, clothes on the floor, old posters on the wall from when I used to be into horses. I've never taken them down. All along two walls are bookshelves my dad built for me. There are piles of books on the floor too.

Late afternoon, I felt like getting out of the house. When I came down, Dad was in his den at the back, next to the kitchen—I could hear him moving around in there, feeding his pets, or something.

"Where are you going?"

That was Dad, calling to me as I passed.

I leaned in the door. "Beach, maybe," I said. I had my sketch pad, and I felt like finding something to draw down there.

In Dad's room, glass tanks ran along the wall, glowing with yellow and blue light. Twigs and branches in them, moss. And if you got too close—which I didn't like to do—you could see creepy things. A praying mantis. Centipedes.

Dad was in the corner, at his computer, peering at the screen. Hunched over, his muscled shoulders tight. He's spreading a bit in

the middle now, but he's still strong, still tough. Once I saw him pick up a full trash can—one of the big wheeled ones—and move it, without thinking, so that he could mow a patch of our yard. I don't think it even occurred to him to roll it.

"Don't be late," he said. "Not with that guy around."

"What guy?"

"The guy. The Houdini Killer."

"Dad," I said. "It's still light out."

He shrugged. "Don't be late."

"What are you doing anyway?" I asked.

"There's a guy on the forum got some beautiful *Tonkinbolus* from Koh Chang, Thailand—he went there and collected them himself, you believe that? Anyway, he's selling them, fifty bucks a piece. Blue-and-reds, fire-legs. Amazing."

Oh: this is something you need to know.

There are *forums for people who collect bugs*. I know. It's unbelievable, isn't it? And these people have little avatars that say whether they're newbies or Grand Master Bug Collectors or whatever, and signatures every time they post that tell you how many different bugs they have, and the names of them all, and sometimes some kind of generic inspirational quote that has nothing to do with bugs as far as I can see. My dad's list has a *lot* of bugs on it.

"What's a *Tonk*—whatever you said?"

He shook his head at me, like my ignorance on the topic of bugs was a great disappointment to him. "Millipede."

"Right," I said. "Anyway, see you later."

"Millipedes are ancient creatures," he said. "They're survivors. When threatened, they roll into a ball, protect themselves, you know that?"

"Yeah," I said. "You told me."

"Okay. So don't be late."

I nodded and turned to leave—he was already facing the screen again, typing something on the keyboard. Then he smacked his fist down on the table.

"And clean your ******** room, Cass. I'm not going to ********* tell you a-*******-gain."

This is living with my dad:

He says nothing nothing nothing nothing all day long

and then sometimes he says millipedes blah centipedes blah stick insects blah blah blah

and then

flash

like a camera going off, he hits you with something like that.

The only good thing is he doesn't *actually* hit me. Like, with his fists. Just with his words.

It isn't like he doesn't have excuses, for his anger. I have to admit. His wounds, I'm talking about: the ones you can see and the ones you can't. He didn't have armor, like a millipede; he couldn't roll himself into a ball. We'll get to that later.

Also, he curses a *lot*. And I don't really feel comfortable with writing down those words so I'm using stars, which I like, because it means when he's really, really pissed—and that will happen later in this story—the page will be filled with stars, like a constellation.

I got out of there quickly, left him with his stupid forum. I went out into the little front yard with its grass brown already, even though it was only May, and over a month of school still to go. It was shaping up to be a hot summer, the air sticky and close, though the ocean was still cool—I knew that because I had gone for a swim the previous day and nearly froze my fingers off. Not that it was stopping the vacationers: I had seen the buses unloading blinking

college kids into the sunlight, and the boardwalk filling up with people in T-shirts, crackling with the energy of being released, from work, from normality.

Only this place *is* the reality for me.

And there were still fewer vacationers than the year before, a continuation of an ongoing trend that was the source of pretty much all of Oakwood's problems. Who knows? Maybe the local psycho was killing women because he worked in one of the strip malls that closed down and he's pissed that he lost his job.

Anyway.

Our house, as you know, is in what the locals call the "town." Which is to distinguish it from "the walk," i.e., the strip that runs along the beach lined with arcades, slot machines, stores selling BURGERS PIZZA HOAGIES, fortune-tellers, games, tattoo studios. And of course the amusement park on the piers, on which more later.

I don't know how you saw our house, when you first came. How it made you feel. Me, it always makes me feel sad. It's like you've stepped from VACATIONLAND! into the clapboard shored-up, scaffolded reality behind it, as if you've gone behind the film-set veneer. You can still hear the ocean—we're three blocks back from it, and the sound of the waves, the constant *tssschhh*, pervades the air for maybe four blocks. And as I stepped out into the yard that morning, I could smell the ocean and hear the calling of the seagulls.

The walk is all neon and lights—me, I lived backstage. Among the trash.

Sorry! This is super not-cheerful already.

What I mean: all the houses on our street are the same—little, cheap identical white blocks. Porches that, if we were facing the water like in Green Harbor down the coast, would be charming.

But ours are usually covered in car tires and broken furniture and other junk, some of it human.

A yard out front, a garage to the side of it, with an apartment above it. That part you know very well, but we'll come to you later.

I think it would be bad enough to live in a place that looks like every other place on your street, the suburban nightmare of America. But add to that the squalor and the pretending to be something it isn't, and to me it's everything that's wrong with Oakwood, New Jersey.

Or it was anyway. I guess maybe I feel kind of different about it now, after everything that's happened.

The part I love is the walk to the beach, because you go down Ocean Boulevard and as you get closer to the water, you start to pass those old historic motels that you love too. "Doo-wop architecture," they call it. Or "New Jersey vernacular." Like Vegas with more modest ambitions: strange space-age structures like interstellar ships that landed in the wrong place, and Egyptian pyramids and Hawaiian palaces. Neon signs, fifties' angles.

The Honolulu.

The Sphinx.

The Flamingo—with its flamingo-shaped pool out front.

Hardly anyone stays in these places anymore, but a few years back the town bought a bunch of them, to preserve them, which is about the best thing Oakwood ever did.

That's layer five of the town, because you think of Oakwood, if you grew up here, like something made of levels, like those cutaway diagrams of the ground, striations of different materials, loam and humus and igneous rock and whatever. There are seven, from land to sea, and they go like this:

— Mall land.
— Crushing, miserable poverty, boarded-up buildings, broken houses, broken people. (Keeping it cheerful!) The rhythm of the waves a background hiss.
— The residential layer. Houses. People live in them. Garages, gardens. Which merges with:
— Two blocks from the ocean: A sudden air of affluence. Vacationing joggers, running past their own parked cars. The ocean louder now, a soundtrack, whispering *fun*, saying *escape*. Even locals start to feel the pull at this point, which is why a lot of them stay in the town and never go near the walk—it's too painful.
— One block: those crazy pop-art motels, with their art-deco lines and neon. [To complicate matters this layer also includes some crushing poverty, just like layer two, so that the touristy part of town is bracketed by rundown buildings, like this sentence is bracketed by . . . well, brackets.]
— The boardwalk: pizza slices, girls gone wild, and people with facial tattoos.
— The beach: swimmers, lifeguards, seagulls stealing fries.

And of course there are layers of time too—the ghost town of winter, the crowded madness of summer. This story, since it's the story of you and me, happens in the summer. But you know that already. It's weird, telling you what happened, when you know so much of it.

But there is so much you don't know.

So much.

So, I walked past the crazy motels until I came to the start of the

boardwalk, where the wooden struts of it collapse into tufted sand dunes. The way my route goes, I join the walk on the south side, right at the end, so when you come to the sand you have the whole sweep of the bay to your left, the long, wide wooden boards lined with little shops and restaurants, one of which is Dad's restaurant of course, my restaurant too, I suppose you could say, the family restaurant, where . . . well, we'll get to that later; and jutting from the boardwalk, the enormous piers with their roller-coaster rides rising up like the backs of sea monsters, the expanse of gray-yellow sand. The fairground atmosphere.

From that vantage point, it's beautiful. Which is why I have never tried to draw it.

I scanned the sand until I saw something that looked more promising. Then I walked out onto the beach, checking it out, taking my time. Yeah, it looked good. I went out farther, toward the ocean.

Now I was just past Pier One and a little south, so I could see the curve of the old Accelerator, like a wooden dinosaur's back, and the slowly turning wheel of the Elevator taking people in their little seats high up into the sky, for a bird's-eye view of the worst town on the Eastern Seaboard.

What I was doing, I was planning to draw a dead seagull. That was my thing: I don't think you ever knew that. I don't remember mentioning it. The thing being: to find the ugly things, the things people don't usually notice, and draw them in my sketch pad. Like:

Electricity poles.
Trash cans.
Broken windows.
And, in this case, dead seagulls. The bird was just where

the water and sand met, way beyond the end of Pier One. I don't know why the ocean has receded so much here, I—

Oh my God.

I just realized something. My dad with his gross insects. Me drawing the ugly things. We were both collecting stuff other people discounted as unattractive. *We were doing the same thing*. Mom always said we were more alike than I realized, he and I.

So, right here on page 13, I want you to make a mental note of this: me and my dad, we're not too different. We both got threatened, and we both reacted in the only way we knew how, by instinct, like millipedes rolling into balls. He's not as bad as you might think, you know, from him throwing you out and all. He's like me—he just faced his anger outward instead of inward.

Of course, when I say he's like me, you may view that as a bad thing, I don't know. I guess I'll see on Friday, from whether you turn up or not.

Where was I?

The beach. I don't know why the ocean has receded so much and left such an enormous strip of sand—three hundred yards at least. I mean, I read almost anything but definitely not geology or whatever the right -ology would be. Mom said the ocean was scared of the white trash who come here in the summer, so it retreated. That day, there weren't too many people to retreat from: it was happy hour and the vacationers were already in the bars, apart from a few

I could see posing for photos in the just-abandoned lifeguard stands, holding each other, kissing.

That's a tradition: to sit in the stands and watch the sunset, with a boy or a girl. It's like our version of the overlook in those movies where people drive up to the vantage point above the town, and make out on car hoods.

Something else you already know, I remind myself, and the thought of it, of you and me pressed against each other in that deep, wooden lifeguard's seat, the warmth of you . . . it makes me almost come undone, slide into loose disarray, like untied laces.

Deep breath.

Another.

Apart from that, the only people on the beach were a couple of runners and a kid flying a kite shaped like Olaf from *Frozen*.

Whatever the reason for the ocean pulling away, it's one of my favorite things, the way the long piers with the amusement park on them have gotten stranded on the wide, wide beach, barnacled struts resting on dry land—the way you can walk around them and under them, into the dark spaces.

The shadow of Pier One was behind and to the left of me; it was almost like I could feel the cool of it. I walked toward the gull with my sketchbook under my arm, two HB pencils in my pocket.

If you didn't know already, which you do, you would guess from this that I was not the most popular kid at Oakwood High School. I mean, sketching dead birds is not what gets you voted homecoming queen. And of course there was the piñata thing. I might tell you about that later.

Anyway, I'm delaying.

Here's what started everything:

I was getting closer to the seagull now, and I could see that there were crabs eating it. Hermit crabs, some of them. People think hermit crabs are cute, but I can't think of anything creepier. Some dead thing's shell, with legs poking out of it. Scuttling. Feeding on corpses. Living in a borrowed skin of death.

When you see them eating a bird, it gives you a whole different idea of them.

Then, I saw movement a little farther out, where you get that sheen of thin water between the surf and the dry sand. I realized there were more crabs down there, and one or two were making their way from the gull to something else. As if it was more tempting.

You know when someone has left a door open and you feel the draft? I felt something like that, only inside. I knew whatever it was the crabs were interested in, half-submerged, washed up on shore, could not be anything good.

The water was making a soft sound, like it was hushing me because it had something important to say.

I turned and squinted at the sun. A cloud was just passing over it, and it was turning orange already, low above the buildings of town, nearly sunset. Then I walked a little closer. It sounds stupid, but I remember having a very conscious thought, which was, *oh, so this is what people mean when they use the word "dread."*

But it wasn't so bad—I saw as I approached that it was just a sneaker, one of those ankle-high basketball shoes. It was standing upright in the shallow, foamy water.

I took another step.

Gulls swooped in the air above me, calling, calling my name it almost seemed, *Cassie, Cassie, Cassie*.

I saw bone, glowing white, inside the shoe.

There was a foot in there.

An actual, severed foot. I could see a glimpse of flesh, purple as canned cat food, the bone protruding from it. You heard about the foot, of course, everyone did, but I don't think I ever told you it was me who found it.

In a movie, I would have gagged or shrieked. I don't think I did either of those things: I just stood there, staring.

And at first, I didn't even think about the Houdini Killer, I didn't see that it might be connected. The truth is that the first word that crossed my mind was an ancient Greek one:

Sparagmos.

It means: the act of tearing a person or an animal to pieces, usually for sacrificial purposes. The followers of Dionysus were big on it. The reason this word crossed my mind is that I am a weirdo and a freak and the public library is like my second home. But then, knowing you, I didn't need to tell you any of that.

So I looked at the man's foot, in the shoe, on the beach, and I thought of sparagmos. I was remembering Orpheus, being ripped to shreds by furious Thracian women.

You know the story, probably. Orpheus could charm all creatures and even objects with his music, and because of this and his beauty, he was much desired by almost all women he encountered. Yet after his wife, Eurydice, died, he forswore all others, and this so incensed the women who surrounded him that they began to throw rocks and stones at him. But the rocks and stones loved Orpheus's music, and they would not harm him; they turned away at the last. And so the women took him with their hands, and tore his body apart.

That's the version I like best anyway.

I looked at the foot in the sneaker, thinking of that story, like,

here was the Chuck Taylor shoe of a vacationer who was just *too* good at karaoke and his friends had ripped him apart. I figured it was very unlikely that whoever it came from had been torn to pieces by Thracian women. I was thinking lucidly and crazily at the same time, and the weird thing was that I knew it—it was like there was a part of me standing outside myself, observing me.

I took out my cell phone, and I dialed 911. I said, "There's a human foot on the beach and I don't think it belongs to Orpheus." At least, that's what they told me I said, later. I don't remember doing it.

Then I guess I must have fainted—which is exactly what would happen in a movie—because the next thing I can remember I was in a squad car. They took me to the station and asked me questions and gave me very sweet coffee with lots of sugar and cream in it, and I'll get to all that later because it's important. But, for now, two observations:

1. Looking back, I think maybe seeing the severed foot, plus some associated memories to do with blood and bone, caused some kind of psychotic break pretty much straight away. The clue is that I was looking at a body part and all I could think about was Greek myth. Which probably partly explains all the really terrible things that happened soon after.
2. I assumed it was a man's foot in the sneaker. Because of the style, because it was relatively large, I don't know. That was why I was thinking about Orpheus. But perhaps if it had crossed my mind it might be a woman's, then I would have thought about that other famous victim of sparagmos: Echo, and the way she was

> torn to pieces by Pan's followers, leaving only her voice in the rocks and trees. And if I'd thought about her, then maybe I'd have gotten to voices sooner, and the idea of a murdered woman. And maybe things would have turned out differently, or at least I would have been more prepared for what happened afterward.

But then again, maybe not.