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Opening extract from
The Otherlife

Written by
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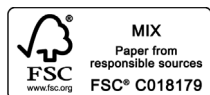
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A GUIDE TO THE NORSE GODS

*Here are some of the main Gods and monsters
that appear in this book.*

Asgard	The home of the Gods
Baldr	A handsome and noble God, the son of Odin and Frigg
Fenrir	A fearsome wolf. Son of Loki and father of Hati and Sköll
Freyr and Freyja	God and Goddess, brother and sister
Frigg	Odin's wife, mother of Baldr
Hati	The wolf who chases the moon across the sky at night
Heimdallr	The God who keeps watch from Bifrost, the rainbow bridge
Hermódr	The messenger God. (Also written as <i>Hermóðr</i>)

Hødr	Blind God and brother of Baldr. (Also written as <i>Høðr</i>).
Jormungandr	The ocean-dwelling World Serpent
Loki	A mischief-making, shape-shifting God
Odin	Father of the Gods. He only has one eye, having sacrificed the other in exchange for wisdom. (Also written as <i>Óðinn</i>)
Skoll	The wolf who chases the sun across the sky each day
Sleipnir	An eight-legged horse who is ridden to Hel, the underworld
Thor	Son of Odin and a ferocious warrior, whose prized possession is the hammer Mjollnir. (Also written as <i>Þórr</i>)
Tyr	A brave God whose hand was bitten off by the wolf Fenrir

BEN

MAY 2012

There's a God in the Stonehills' garden.

I've been out here for a while now, waiting for my T-shirt to dry. About a quarter of an hour ago I made the mistake of going into the library, where some girls were making Flaming Sambucas, cackling with drunken hysteria. Clear liquid splashed on the carpet; shot glasses cracked underfoot. Someone pushed past me. I staggered, and somehow, as one of the girls was waving a long-handled lighter like a malevolent wand, the hem of my T-shirt caught fire. Not just any T-shirt: my vintage, '94, Pushead-designed Metallica T-shirt, and the most precious item of clothing I own.

Pushing my way through the crowd, I drenched it in the downstairs bathroom, where a genuine Matisse stands watch over a shell-shaped sink. I lamented the scorch mark, a dark scar on white cotton. Then I retreated to the terrace, where the wicker furniture is set out in a mathematical arrangement and every potted plant is so beautifully maintained that it could have come straight from a gardening catalogue. Normally when the Stonehills have parties, there's a handful of people out on the terrace, drinking and smoking and shouting, and maybe a few

people here and there on the lawn. But for the moment, I'm the only one.

The low drone of guitars and drums surges in waves from the basement, where a jam session is going on. In a bit, the Stonehills will let off fireworks. More and more people will come, alerted by social media. Sooner or later the police will turn up. They always do. It's definitely time to go home, but I'm slightly too drunk to make the decision to leave. I've had three Coronas: too many, considering that it's a Wednesday night, and I have an exam in the morning. Nobody here cares about exams. Money will get them wherever they want to go. I don't have much in common with any of these people, apart from a love of metal.

I shouldn't have come to this party.

All day I've been feeling different. On edge, my head full of unwanted electricity. I've been feeling like something unusual is about to happen.

Now I think maybe it is.

Eyes unfocused, I look down the stretch of polished lawn. The garden is lit by solar lights, glowing like half-buried stars from the flowerbeds. Counting them, I let my gaze travel further and further back. And that's when I see it. Another light. A different light. Right at the end of the garden, past the fishpond and the organised ranks of roses and miniature lemon trees. Up where the yew trees grow tall and close together and the ground rises higher as it reaches the wall. There's an old treehouse that the Stonehills

used to play in when they were younger, custom-made by some bewilderingly expensive company. That's where it is, this other light. Just under the treehouse. But it can't be a solar light. For one thing, it's the wrong colour. Also: it's moving. Fading in and out, circling, dipping . . . as though it's looking for someone. I have seen this kind of light before. I know what it means.

There is definitely a God in the Stonehills' garden.

And that means the Otherlife is back.

Down the terrace steps and along the path, past shadowy flowers and silent sprinklers. Tennis court to my right. I walk like a ghost, my feet light. The sides of my vision are soft. The nerves in my palms are glittering. I look for the light as I draw closer to the bottom of the garden. The early May night air is cold on my skin; my T-shirt clings to me wetly. There's a slight wind; the leaves rustle, as though the trees are breathing. I hesitate for a moment. Then continue.

Now I hear another sound. No more than a whisper: so slithery, so silvery, that it could almost be just a sharp breeze dragging a crisp packet over a scratchy surface. It's an old sound, an oceanic sound. A familiar sound.

'Skoll . . .'

I slow down, still looking for the light. The treehouse looms just ahead, with its peaked roof and shuttered windows. The trees are dark statues against the ivied wall.

'Skoll . . .'

Now I see the light. No: *lights*. There's more than one. Trickles, like the residue of fireworks, leaving gilded traces in the pre-dawn sky. One, two . . . there are seven, eight of them, flickering, assembling in front of me, pixelated against the trees. The eight lights are lengthening, gradually, into tensile, supple legs, and above them a body blooms: pale grey, pearlescent, itself made up of hundreds of filaments of light, rippling and pulsing. An elongated head. The suggestion of teeth. Now I am aware of enormous strength and vigorous movement; I know this is Sleipnir, the horse, and I am aware of his rider, too – not pale grey, but greenish bronze, and also formed of filaments of light.

Hermódr, the messenger God.

He presses his knees into Sleipnir's sides and the great grey horse takes a couple of steps towards me. A wall of movement pushes through the air: particles are displaced, hot and cold at the same time. Hermódr reaches one hand down, as though to beckon me closer. I cannot see his face, but somehow I know that he is sad.

He calls me again, by the name I used to call myself, and finally I hear myself, throat dry and corrugated, replying, in English: 'Yes. I am here.'

Hermódr speaks to me. I can't make out what he's saying. It's been so long since I read anything in Old Norse. He says it again – the same words, three times, four. But I can't understand him. In the presence of the Otherlife, this grand London garden and this mock-Tudor house with its palatial

halls and staircases no longer exist. My burnt Metallica T-shirt no longer matters. Nothing matters but the messenger God and his eight-legged horse, and whatever he's trying to tell me. A little pulse begins near the old scar on the side of my head.

I wish I could understand him.

Hermódr turns away, and I feel the air move again, like an ethereal tide.

'Wait!' I call out. 'Please, wait!'

But the lights grow smaller, fainter, melting into the ivy at the back of the garden. Then, just as they are disappearing altogether, Hermódr turns his head to speak to me one last time. And finally there's something I think I recognise: a couple of words I think I know, something I must have learnt a long, long time ago.

'Dead. He is dead.'

Mum opens the door in her running gear. 'Oh *no*, Ben,' she says.

I avoid her eyes.

'Forgot my key,' I say.

'Not today. Not when you've got exams. I should put you on a lead.'

'It clears my head. Walking.'

'Plenty of daylight hours for that. I must say, though, your head doesn't look especially clear at this moment. *Don't* tell me you've been out all night.'

I follow her into the kitchen.

‘No, not all night,’ I tell her. ‘Couldn’t sleep. Went out about an hour ago, that’s all.’

The kitchen is aggressively bright. There are too many shiny surfaces, reflecting too much light. On Radio 4 the presenter is snapping at the heels of a defensive politician, demanding answers to some unanswerable question. They always sound so angry on Radio 4. Mum manages to fill the kettle, throw bread into the toaster and clink the milk bottle so hard against the table top that I worry the glass will break, all at the same time.

Bright lights, loud sounds, sharp corners. It’s impossible to sit comfortably in the plastic kitchen chair. I blink at the table top, my brain in soft focus. Mum puts a plate of toast in front of me. A cup of tea. The bag floats sadly, a shipwreck, at the top. Then, because I don’t move, she digs a knife into the Lurpak and plasters butter over my toast. If she could eat my breakfast for me, she would. She’s that kind of mother.

‘And today, when we’ve got the French Listening paper.’

‘*We* don’t have a French Listening paper,’ I say through buttered toast.

She ignores this editorial adjustment.

‘It’s a Big Day. Go and have a quick bath and I’ll drive you to school.’

‘Mum . . .’

‘Not now, Ben.’

* * *