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The Beginning Woods

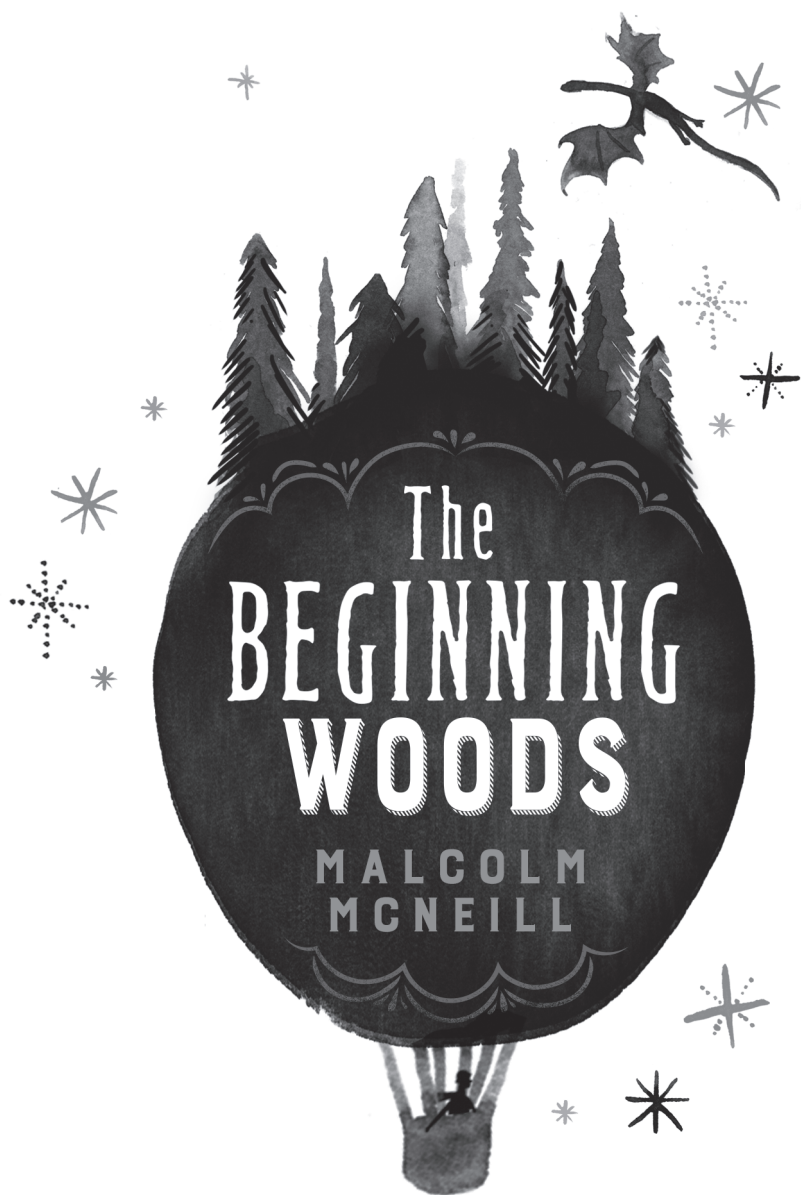
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Prologue

There was a time, not so long ago, when a strange phenomenon swept the world, baffling scientists and defying explanation.

It had nothing to do with gravity or electricity.

It altered no weather patterns, sea levels or average temperatures.

The migration of beasts across the globe did not change, and plants continued to grow, bloom and die in their proper seasons.

Even the biochemical reactions that sustain life went on with unceasing vigour, as they had for millions of years, propelling organisms down myriad paths of development, just as the continents drifted apart, moved by the massive forces generated in the bowels of the earth.

Almost the entirety of creation was ignored by the new phenomenon, which concerned itself with one thing alone.

Us.

The crisis took place in every country. It was compared to a plague that knew no boundaries, or a fire that ravaged a forest. But scientists were able to cure the plague, and the secret of putting out fires had been discovered long ago.

There was no stopping the Vanishings.



When they first began nobody realized what was going on. Crumpled piles of clothes were discovered at the bottom of gardens or in cupboards under stairs, but that was no reason to suppose someone had been Whisked Away Into Nothing, that they had Ceased To Exist, that they had been Cancelled Out.

Such things were unheard of, after all.

Then the Vanishings began to spread. Before long thousands were Vanishing every day, and it became clear something unusual was going on—especially from a scientific point of view.

Of course, whenever a great problem threatens the world all enemies put down their swords and work together to find a solution. This was the case with the Vanishings. Scientists came from far and wide to form an International Symposium in Paris, and a special fund was set up to provide them with everything they needed to carry out their research.

It was decided to house the Symposium in the Trocadéro Palace, an old museum filled with ancient artefacts, archaeological treasures, paintings, sculptures and fossils. Artists and inventors had gathered at the Trocadéro in 1878 to mark their achievements at an International Exposition, so there was a pleasing historical precedent, but since then the palace had fallen into disrepair, and an immense effort was required to renovate it in time for the Grand Opening.

Overnight, a skeleton of scaffolding sprang up against the walls. Beneath the flapping plastic that cocooned the building a team of sand-blasters went to work on the decades of grime and soot that had blackened the granite and limestone. Hundreds of workers with barrows poured into the museum and carted off the many treasures to L'Hôtel des Invalides, where they were wrapped up and placed in storage. An army of engineers

burrowed deep beneath its foundations, installing laboratories, generators, wires and computers, while gardeners dug their fingers into the barren slopes leading down to the Seine, planting trees and shrubs, decorating them with fountains and pools of water. Finally, stonemasons laid a terrace of granite flagstones in front of the palace, and erected golden statues around it to lend the old building the grandeur it deserved.

The opening ceremony of the International Symposium for the Prevention and Cure of the Vanishings was a great day for the human race: a day of hope and purpose. The palace gleamed like a hero's smile, proudly bearing its pennants and flags as medallions of trust and responsibility. Below, the doctors and professors processed through the gardens, their chins tucked solemnly into their necks, their whole manner imparting gravity, wisdom and, most of all, determination. When they reached the terrace a band struck up and the crowds of people cheered. They were the champions of humanity, proclaimed the trumpets and the drums. They were going to pit the might of science against the mysterious disappearances that threatened to devour the human race.

After speeches, applause, music and cheering the Seekers, as the scientists came to be known, filed into the Trocadéro, where they immediately went to work on a buffet lunch provided by the Mayor of Paris. The people remained outside watching the windows, expecting a triumphant shout to go up at any moment, but the palace only settled into the evening gloom, like an old man in a deckchair folding a newspaper across his face. As darkness fell the crowd began to disperse. Flags, no longer needed for waving, were dropped onto pavements, banners were stuffed into bins and the cafés and bars began to fill up once more.

How long would it take the Seekers to stop the Vanishings? That was the question on everyone's lips. Six weeks? Six months? A year? "We do not know the length of the road ahead of us," the Chief Researcher said in his speech. "We do not know if it will be easy or difficult. We must be patient. We must be cautious with our hopes."

So the world held its breath and waited for the first findings.

Meanwhile the Vanishings continued unabated. In every country, people Vanished without warning. Seeming to sense they were about to be consumed, they took themselves off somewhere secret, like dying elephants. Because of this, most of the Vanishings went unwitnessed—until the telltale puddle of clothes was found there was no reason to suppose a Vanishing had happened at all. But now and again people would find themselves trapped in crowded train compartments, or in business meetings, where it was not possible to escape the public eye. Some Vanishings even occurred live on television. Elenia Diakou, the Olympic champion figure skater, Vanished in front of six million viewers while singing the Canadian national anthem on the gold winner's podium; Paul Herbert, the French financier, unintentionally set the record for the highest-altitude Vanishing when he disappeared from beneath his parachute at 57,000 feet; and Edwin Wong, the virtuoso pianist, Vanished while laying down the final chords of Rachmaninov's Prelude in B minor, which the judges deemed so in keeping with the nature of the piece they awarded him the Queen Elisabeth of Belgium prize, even though he was not there to receive it. It goes without saying that there was no shortage of wild theories to account for the Vanishings—but nobody paid them any attention. Everyone was waiting for the Seekers to crack it. Only they could come up with the answer.

But the days turned into weeks, the weeks into months, and the Symposium doors remained closed. In this vacuum of information a new, frightening idea took hold—that the Vanishings could not be stopped, that they would continue until nobody remained.

Only one thing gave cause for hope, a little quirk in the behaviour of the Vanishings that soon became obvious.

Children did not Vanish.

There was something about children the Vanishings did not like, or could not touch.

But nobody could say what this was.

After two long years of evidence-gathering and fruitless speculation, the Chief Researcher was forced to admit that the Symposium was no closer to understanding the Vanishings than before. In the storm that followed this confession a new man took over—an unknown scientist called Professor Courtz.

His inaugural address on the steps of the Trocadéro inspired fresh confidence in the hearts of those who were afraid. They took comfort in his military-style moustache, his grey hair slicked back with tonic, and most of all in his astonishing blue eyes, which sparkled with intelligence. There was something solid and reliable about him, something well thought out and structured, like a judge's closing remarks or a balanced equation.

He ended his speech with an appeal for privacy to study the Vanishings undisturbed. All future contact, he announced, would be made through subordinates at monthly press conferences. Those watching barely registered the significance of these words. But that public appearance was indeed his last, and afterwards he disappeared from view.

At first this odd conduct was tolerated and even appreciated. The new Chief Researcher was a serious man who did not seek celebrity. Well and good! But after some time his reclusive behaviour lost its appeal. Nobody believed the bland reassurances of the Symposium bulletins, and an idea gathered force that the Professor himself had Vanished, that he—even he!—had succumbed.

It was around this time that the light appeared, glinting and twinkling in the highest window of the Trocadéro. Nobody knew who spotted it first, but there it was, shining through the night when all others had been extinguished. This tiny beacon was all the troubled citizens of the world needed to regain the faith they had lost. When the children of Paris woke from nightmares of empty houses, their parents would carry them to a window and point across the rooftops.

There he sits, they would say. There he sits, working away.
One day he's bound to solve the Vanishings.
One day soon!