
Opening Extract from...

Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children

Written by Ransom Riggs

Published by Quirk Books

MISS PEREGRINE'S HOME FOR PECULIAR CHILDREN

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QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA

First paperback edition, Quirk Books, 2013.
Originally published by Quirk Books in 2011.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Number: 2010942876
(hardcover edition)

ISBN: 978-1-59474-603-1

Printed in the United States of America

Typeset in Sabon
Designed by Doogie Horner
Cover photograph courtesy of Yefim Tovbis
Production management by John J. McGurk

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215 Church Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106
quirkbooks.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sleep is not, death is not;
Who seem to die live.
House you were born in,
Friends of your spring-time,
Old man and young maid,
Day's toil and its guerdon,
They are all vanishing,
Fleeing to fables,
Cannot be moored.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

PROLOGUE

I had just come to accept that my life would be ordinary when extraordinary things began to happen. The first of these came as a terrible shock and, like anything that changes you forever, split my life into halves: Before and After. Like many of the extraordinary things to come, it involved my grandfather, Abraham Portman.

Growing up, Grandpa Portman was the most fascinating person I knew. He had lived in an orphanage, fought in wars, crossed oceans by steamship and deserts on horseback, performed in circuses, knew everything about guns and self-defense and surviving in the wilderness, and spoke at least three languages that weren't English. It all seemed unfathomably exotic to a kid who'd never left Florida, and I begged him to regale me with stories whenever I saw him. He always obliged, telling them like secrets that could be entrusted only to me.

When I was six I decided that my only chance of having a life half as exciting as Grandpa Portman's was to become an explorer. He encouraged me by spending afternoons at my side hunched over maps of the world, plotting imaginary expeditions with trails of red pushpins and telling me about the fantastic places I would discover one day. At home I made my ambitions known by parading around with a cardboard tube held to my eye, shouting, "Land ho!" and "Prepare a landing party!" until my parents shooed me outside. I think they worried that my grandfather would infect me with some incurable dreaminess from which I'd never recover—that these fan-

tasies were somehow inoculating me against more practical ambitions—so one day my mother sat me down and explained that I couldn't become an explorer because everything in the world had already been discovered. I'd been born in the wrong century, and I felt cheated.

I felt even more cheated when I realized that most of Grandpa Portman's best stories couldn't possibly be true. The tallest tales were always about his childhood, like how he was born in Poland but at twelve had been shipped off to a children's home in Wales. When I would ask why he had to leave his parents, his answer was always the same: because the monsters were after him. Poland was simply rotten with them, he said.

"What *kind* of monsters?" I'd ask, wide-eyed. It became a sort of routine. "Awful hunched-over ones with rotting skin and black eyes," he'd say. "And they walked like this!" And he'd shamble after me like an old-time movie monster until I ran away laughing.

Every time he described them he'd toss in some lurid new detail: they stank like putrefying trash; they were invisible except for their shadows; a pack of squirming tentacles lurked inside their mouths and could whip out in an instant and pull you into their powerful jaws. It wasn't long before I had trouble falling asleep, my hyperactive imagination transforming the hiss of tires on wet pavement into labored breathing just outside my window or shadows under the door into twisting gray-black tentacles. I was scared of the monsters but thrilled to imagine my grandfather battling them and surviving to tell the tale.

More fantastic still were his stories about life in the Welsh children's home. It was an enchanted place, he said, designed to keep kids safe from the monsters, on an island where the sun shined every day and nobody ever got sick or died. Everyone lived together in a big house that was protected by a wise old bird—or so the story went. As I got older, though, I began to have doubts.

"What *kind* of bird?" I asked him one afternoon at age seven, eyeing him skeptically across the card table where he was letting me win at Monopoly.

"A big hawk who smoked a pipe," he said.

"You must think I'm pretty dumb, Grandpa."

He thumbed through his dwindling stack of orange and blue money. "I would never think that about you, Yakob." I knew I'd offended him because the Polish accent he could never quite shake had come out of hiding, so that *would* became *vood* and *think* became *sink*. Feeling guilty, I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"But why did the monsters want to hurt you?" I asked.

"Because we weren't like other people. We were peculiar."

"Peculiar how?"

"Oh, all sorts of ways," he said. "There was a girl who could fly, a boy who had bees living inside him, a brother and sister who could lift boulders over their heads."

It was hard to tell if he was being serious. Then again, my grandfather was not known as a teller of jokes. He frowned, reading the doubt on my face.

"Fine, you don't have to take my word for it," he said. "I got pictures!" He pushed back his lawn chair and went into the house, leaving me alone on the screened-in lanai. A minute later he came back holding an old cigar box. I leaned in to look as he drew out four wrinkled and yellowing snapshots.

The first was a blurry picture of what looked like a suit of clothes with no person in them. Either that or the person didn't have a head.

"Sure, he's got a head!" my grandfather said, grinning. "Only you can't see it."

"Why not? Is he invisible?"

"Hey, look at the brain on this one!" He raised his eyebrows as if I'd surprised him with my powers of deduction. "Millard, his name

was. Funny kid. Sometimes he'd say, 'Hey Abe, I know what you did today,' and he'd tell you where you'd been, what you had to eat, if you picked your nose when you thought nobody was looking. Sometimes he'd follow you, quiet as a mouse, with no clothes on so you couldn't see him—just watching!" He shook his head. "Of all the things, eh?"

He slipped me another photo. Once I'd had a moment to look at it, he said, "So? What do you see?"

"A little girl?"

"And?"

"She's wearing a crown."

He tapped the bottom of the picture. "What about her feet?"

I held the snapshot closer. The girl's feet weren't touching the ground. But she wasn't jumping—she seemed to be floating in the air. My jaw fell open.

"She's flying!"

"Close," my grandfather said. "She's levitating. Only she couldn't control herself too well, so sometimes we had to tie a rope around her to keep her from floating away!"

My eyes were glued to her haunting, doll-like face. "Is it real?"

"Of course it is," he said gruffly, taking the picture and replacing it with another, this one of a scrawny boy lifting a boulder. "Victor and his sister weren't so smart," he said, "but boy were they strong!"

"He doesn't *look* strong," I said, studying the boy's skinny arms.

"Trust me, he was. I tried to arm-wrestle him once and he just about tore my hand off!"

But the strangest photo was the last one. It was the back of somebody's head, with a face painted on it.

I stared at the last photo as Grandpa Portman explained. "He had two mouths, see? One in the front and one in the back. That's why he got so big and fat!"

"But it's fake," I said. "The face is just painted on."

"Sure, the *paint's* fake. It was for a circus show. But I'm telling you, he had two mouths. You don't believe me?"

I thought about it, looking at the pictures and then at my grandfather, his face so earnest and open. What reason would he have to lie?

"I believe you," I said.

And I really did believe him—for a few years, at least—though mostly because I wanted to, like other kids my age wanted to believe in Santa Claus. We cling to our fairy tales until the price for believing them becomes too high, which for me was the day in second grade when Robbie Jensen pantsed me at lunch in front of a table of girls and announced that I believed in fairies. It was just deserts, I suppose, for repeating my grandfather's stories at school but in those humiliating seconds I foresaw the moniker "fairy boy" trailing me for years and, rightly or not, I resented him for it.

Grandpa Portman picked me up from school that afternoon, as he often did when both my parents were working. I climbed into the passenger seat of his old Pontiac and declared that I didn't believe in his fairy stories anymore.

"What fairy stories?" he said, peering at me over his glasses.

"You know. The stories. About the kids and the monsters."

He seemed confused. "Who said anything about fairies?"

I told him that a made-up story and a fairy tale were the same thing, and that fairy tales were for pants-wetting babies, and that I knew his photos and stories were fakes. I expected him to get mad or put up a fight, but instead he just said, "Okay," and threw the Pontiac into drive. With a stab of his foot on the accelerator we lurched away from the curb. And that was the end of it.

I guess he'd seen it coming—I had to grow out of them eventu-

ally—but he dropped the whole thing so quickly it left me feeling like I'd been lied to. I couldn't understand why he'd made up all that stuff, tricked me into believing that extraordinary things were possible when they weren't. It wasn't until a few years later that my dad explained it to me: Grandpa had told him some of the same stories when he was a kid, and they weren't lies, exactly, but exaggerated versions of the truth—because the story of Grandpa Portman's childhood wasn't a fairy tale at all. It was a horror story.

My grandfather was the only member of his family to escape Poland before the Second World War broke out. He was twelve years old when his parents sent him into the arms of strangers, putting their youngest son on a train to Britain with nothing more than a suitcase and the clothes on his back. It was a one-way ticket. He never saw his mother or father again, or his older brothers, his cousins, his aunts and uncles. Each one would be dead before his sixteenth birthday, killed by the monsters he had so narrowly escaped. But these weren't the kind of monsters that had tentacles and rotting skin, the kind a seven-year-old might be able to wrap his mind around—they were monsters with human faces, in crisp uniforms, marching in lockstep, so banal you don't recognize them for what they are until it's too late.

Like the monsters, the enchanted-island story was also a truth in disguise. Compared to the horrors of mainland Europe, the children's home that had taken in my grandfather must've seemed like a paradise, and so in his stories it had become one: a safe haven of endless summers and guardian angels and magical children, who couldn't *really* fly or turn invisible or lift boulders, of course. The peculiarity for which they'd been hunted was simply their Jewishness. They were orphans of war, washed up on that little island in a tide of blood. What made them amazing wasn't that they had miraculous powers; that they had escaped the ghettos and gas chambers was miracle enough.

I stopped asking my grandfather to tell me stories, and I think

secretly he was relieved. An air of mystery closed around the details of his early life. I didn't pry. He had been through hell and had a right to his secrets. I felt ashamed for having been jealous of his life, considering the price he'd paid for it, and I tried to feel lucky for the safe and unextraordinary one that I had done nothing to deserve.

Then, a few years later, when I was fifteen, an extraordinary and terrible thing happened, and there was only Before and After.