

WHITE RABBIT RED WOLF

TOM POLLOCK

WALKER
BOOKS

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For Jasper.
Welcome to the world.

This story is a lie.

1

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NOW

Mum finds me in the larder. I crouch in the corner, flinching from the sudden light in the doorway. My mouth is full of blood and shards of porcelain.

I want to spit, but that'll show her the mess the splinters of salt cellar have made of my gums. Jags of it are still digging in under my tongue and stabbing into my soft palate, but I can't swallow in case they stick in my throat. The salt rages in the cuts in my tongue. I try to smile at Mum while moving as few of the muscles in my face as possible. A drop of spit seeps through my lips and streaks red down my chin.

Mum exhales once, gathering herself, then bustles in through the doorway. She slaps a handful of paper towel over my mouth.

"Spit," she orders. I do. We look at the wadding in her palm. It's like a tiny battlefield, blood and bits of china

bone – as if I've choked up the remnants of the fight that just took place in my head.

She pokes at the mess with a finger. "What happened to counting?" she asks. I shrug. She tuts and sighs. "Open," she tells me.

I hesitate, then tilt my head back and gape. "Aaaah. Oo I eed illings?"

She laughs, and I relax a little at the sound. Her hands, warm and confident, move my jaw to catch the light. Her laughter fades. "Oh, Petey," she murmurs, "look what you did to yourself."

"Zit baa?"

"I've seen worse. You won't be heading to hospital, but still…"

She reaches into the pocket of her dressing gown for a pair of flimsy surgical gloves and pulls them on.

Surgical gloves, I think queasily, in her dressing gown. At four in the morning. Wow, am I predictable.

She reaches into my mouth. "Ready?"

I give her hand a squeeze.

"Three, two, one, and *here* we go."

With a series of wince-inducing tugs, she pulls the remaining bits of china from my gums and drops them tinkling onto the larder floor. The base of the salt cellar is gripped in my right hand. Its broken top rises in white crenellated jags above my fingers, a mirror to the teeth that crushed it. I can still feel it giving way. The panic like a ratchet in my jaw, making it clench tighter and tighter around the porcelain,

until the instant where I knew I'd pushed it too far and shrapnel exploded into my mouth.

When she's done, Mum tugs the gloves off, balls them and sticks them on one of the empty shelves. She pulls a small pen and a black notebook from her other dressing gown pocket. I eye the thing resentfully, even though I know it's only her way – she's a scientist.

"OK," she says. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

She gives me Look No. 4. If you have parents then you'll know No. 4; the one that says: *At present, sunshine, the shit you're in is only at ankle level, but push me any further, and you're going to need scuba gear.*

"This stuff may be inside your head, Peter William Blankman, but I'm going to have it out in the open," she says, palming the pen and picking up a tin opener from a shelf. "Even if I have to come and get it with this."

I snort and the shadow of the attack recedes a little further.

"I had an attack," I admit.

"I gathered. We talked about counting as a way to get you through it."

"I tried that."

"And?"

I look at the mess in my hand. "I was unsuccessful."

Another Look, longer and sterner, edging into No. 5 – *Ve have vays of making you talk, Herr Blankman* – but all she says is "Unsuccessful *how*?"

I probe the raw places under my lips with my tongue and wince. "I ran out of numbers."

Look No. 5 is replaced by outright disbelief. "*You* ran out of numbers."

"I did."

"Peter, you're one of the best mathematicians your age in London, maybe the country."

"I don't know about *country*." I do know about the country. If you don't think I check the rankings, you're out of your mind. "But—"

"You of all people ought to know that you can't run out of numbers. Just keep adding one, and presto! Another appears. Like magic."

"I know, but—"

"Only it's not magic," she says acidly. "Only maths." She folds her arms. "If you managed to exhaust the limitless resource of positive integers, Peter, just *think* what you're doing to my patience."

Silence. I glance at the larder door, and consider making a run for it.

"Petey," Mum says, and all the humour's gone from her voice. The shadows under her eyes are deep, and suddenly, I'm sharply aware of how big a deal today's going to be for her, and how every second we do this gnaws away at a little more of her sleep.

"Why are you eating crockery? Talk to me."

I blow out my cheeks. "OK…"

It was a tactical error, really, a screw-up. I saw the attack coming a mile off; I should have been more prepared.

It was three twenty-nine in the morning and I was still awake. My eyes felt like pebbles in my skull and the ceiling seemed to flex and warp before them like a cream-painted ocean.

Big day coming up, I thought. A big day that was due to start in three hours and thirty-one minutes, so it would've been a spectacular idea to close my eyes and get some sleep. Except I couldn't, because I knew I had to be up in three hours and thirty-one minutes, and that fact was freaking me out.

Big day coming up, Petey. Huge, massive day, and so very, very public. One false move will ruin it, not just for you, but for the whole family, so you really, really ought to get some shut-eye.

I stared at the ceiling. I stared at the clock. Three hours and twenty-nine minutes. Conditions were perfect.

Peter, this is mission control. We are at defcon one. All green lights. You are go, repeat go, to have a screaming shit fit.

It started the way it always does: the hollow ache in my stomach that I used to mistake for hunger, but that no food would ever satisfy.

Three hours and fifteen minutes. Three hours and fourteen minutes and fifty-three seconds, fifty-two seconds, fifty-one… That was eleven thousand six hundred and ninety seconds. I wouldn't be ready.

Feel that? You feel sick. You can feel that nausea

stretching in your stomach if you close your eyes, it will only get worse. You'll be a zombie, and you need to be at your best. Because, if you're a millimetre off your game, you'll have an attack *there*. Not here at home, where Mum and Bella can cover for you, but out there, in the world, where people can see, people with phones, filming it. And then it'll be on YouTube, your blood in the digital water. It'll drift and disseminate everywhere, the stain of it. And everyone will *see* and *judge* and *know*.

I hesitate. Mum's pen hovers over her notebook.

"Usual physical symptoms?" she enquires.

"Tight chest," I confirm, ticking them off on my fingers. "Racing pulse. Dizziness."

"Hands?"

"Damp as Lance Armstrong's jockstrap."

Look No. 4 returns. "I can do without the colourful similes, Peter."

"Sorry." I close my eyes, remembering it. "So, I tried the three lines of defence, just like we talked about…"

ONE: *Get moving.*

I scrambled out of bed and fled for the stairs. Motion is good: blood in the veins; blood in the muscles. It forces breath when breath is hard to come by.

TWO: *Get talking.*

I was a pressure cooker and my mouth was a release valve.

Through gritted teeth I let the frantic stream of gibberish whirling around my head out into the world. Sometimes, hearing the bullshit I'm thinking is enough to persuade me it isn't true.

"You're going to have the biggest, most epic public meltdown in history. It'll go viral. Fuck viral, it'll go pandemic. They'll film kids reacting to kids reacting to watching you, and get hundreds of millions of hits. You'll change the lexicon. 'Meltdown' will vanish from the dictionary and be replaced by 'Petey', as in 'doing a Petey'. The next time a cheaply constructed uranium power station gets swept up in a tidal wave and the zirconium rods crack and gamma radiation floods out to blight the surrounding city with cancerous death, the Nuclear *Petey* will be on every front page of every news site on the Internet!"

OK, that sounded a little ridiculous. I started to feel a bit calmer.

"You will, literally, shit yourself in public."

I stumbled on the bottom step. *That*, on the other hand, sounded horribly plausible.

I ran into the kitchen, pushed myself up onto the corner of the worktop like the world's clumsiest ballet dancer and cast frantically around the room for something I could use to get a grip. But all I saw was open shelves crammed with cereal and pasta boxes, pine-faced cupboards, the big silver fridge and my hazy, monstrous reflection. The oven clock's green digits burned: 03:59.

Ten thousand, eight hundred and one seconds.

THREE: *Get counting.*

Distract yourself. Break the attack up into countable pieces, little chunks of temporal driftwood. Concentrate on keeping your head above water until you make it to the next one.

"One," I said. "Two." But my real, out-loud voice sounded weak and tinny next to the countdown inside my head.

Ten thousand, seven hundred and ninety seconds…

"Three … four…" I managed, but it wasn't working. A separate part of my brain had taken up the count while my panic continued, unimpeded and undistracted. I needed something else, some trickier puzzle to drag my attention off the hot churning sensation in my lower abdomen.

"And that," I tell Mum, "is where I really screwed up."

"Oh?"

"I switched from counting whole numbers to their square roots."

She stares at me. "How many decimals?" she asks eventually.

"Six."

She winces.

"2.828427, 3, 3.162278, 3.316…" I stumbled, syllables like marbles in my mouth, sweat clammy in my hands and between my shoulders. I tried again. "3.316…"

But it was no good: I'd run out of numbers.

I looked around in desperation for something – *anything* – else to fill the roaring whirlpool inside me. My eyes prickled

and my heart lurched drunkenly behind my ribs. In the dim wash of street light the kitchen seemed to be *shrinking*, the walls falling in towards one another. For a second I thought I could hear the beams creaking.

Sometimes when it gets really bad, I see and hear things that aren't happening. *Shit*. How had this gotten so far away from me? I swallowed hard and reached for my last gasp "in case of emergency break glass" sanity preservation technique.

FOUR: *Get eating.*

I threw myself at the fridge and yanked out a Tupperware of last night's curry. The sticky brown mess was freezing to the touch as I dug my fingers in and started shovelling. I chewed frantically: a futile rearguard action, knowing that I couldn't feed the hole inside me fast enough; hoping that the sheer weight of the food would push the panic rising out of my stomach back down again.

"And it just sort of escalated from there."

Mum frowns and scribbles. She's taken only the occasional note, flagging any details she thinks might be significant for later consideration.

"OK," she says. "You ran out of numbers and you ate. Not ideal, but in the moment you do what you have to. Still" – she nods at the half salt cellar in my fist – "that doesn't seem to be the prime candidate for comfort eating."

Keeping her eyes on mine, she eases it out of my grip and replaces it with her hand. Her fingers squeeze mine.

She pushes the larder door open and leads me from my hiding place.

The kitchen looks like a football crowd rioted in it. Cupboards hang open, drawers wrenched from their fittings and overturned on the floor. Cartons and pickle-smeared jars, bags and rinds, and fragments of dried pasta lie everywhere. Flour is scattered like a half-hearted English snowfall.

"I ran out of numbers," I murmur, shell-shocked. I don't even remember doing this. "And then…" And the shame, which has been licking its way up through me like a flame at paper, finally takes hold. "I ran out of food."

Mum clicks her tongue against the inside of her teeth. She closes her notebook, pockets it, crouches among the debris, and begins to put her house back in order.

"Mum," I say quietly, "let me."

"Go back to bed, Peter."

"*Mum*."

"You need to go back to bed."

"And you don't?" I practically wrestle a drawer from her hands. "You're the one collecting an award in seven hours. You have to give a *speech*." I can't think of anything more terrifying than giving a speech in public. And I spend *a lot* of time thinking about terrifying things.

She hesitates.

"Please, Mum. Leave me to do it. I think it'll help."

She can tell I'm serious. She kisses me on the forehead and rises. "All right, Peter. I love you, OK?"

"OK, Mum."

"We'll work it out. We'll beat this."

I don't answer.

"Pete? We *will*. Together."

"I know we will, Mum," I lie.

She picks her way between the broken glass and the smears of spilled juice. As she leaves, she bends down and retrieves a fallen picture, dusts it off and puts it back on the fridge. It's a black and white shot of Franklin D. Roosevelt with the caption "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Mum finds the quote inspirational; me, not so much. Just eighteen days after those words left his mouth, the Nazis cut the ribbon on their first concentration camp at Dachau.

Uh, Mr President? There are some German Jews here who'd like a word with you about your theory.

I shove the drawers back into place, slap the thirty-second president of the United States face down and grab a broom.

I ran out of food. It was the truth – as far as it went – and Mum had accepted it. I hadn't told her that while I shovelled curry into my mouth I was looking away from the knives and scissors and sharp worktop corners; that when I'd bitten into the salt cellar it had felt not like an ending of something bad, but the beginning of something worse.

I keep having to break off to run to the loo to be sick. My belly may be able to hold up to four litres of compacted food, but it can't do so *indefinitely*. (Stomach acid in

a lacerated mouth, by the way? Really hits the sweet spot in the Venn diagram of *ugh* and *ow*.) I feel like I've been turned inside out and am wearing my stomach lining like a soggy cardigan.

I'm rinsing the spilled milk off the fridge shelves when I hear a little *click click click*; it's coming from the phone handset which is resting on the worktop. It hasn't been hung up properly. Mum must have been using it; she's the only human being I know who still uses landlines. Who could she have been talking to at 4:29 in the morning?

A tin can whirs, kicked across the tiles. I start, but then relax when I look round. It's Bel.

We're not identical, obviously, but the similarities are there: same skin, freckle-dusted in summer and winter alike; same dark brown eyes; Mum's sharp nose and sharper jawline; and … well, there are probably some features we got from Dad. There are differences aside from the obvious ones too – she's dyed her hair crimson; her cheeks dimple more deeply when she smiles; oh, and I'm the only one with a four by two centimetre dent above my left eye. As though a careless potter had left a thumbprint on me when I went into the kiln. An original flaw.

Only it isn't original, not even close.

My sister stomps into the kitchen, scratching sleepily at her head. She takes in the devastation, shrugs like it's no big deal, and drops to her knees on the floor. I rush to her side and we work together, sorting and tidying, rebuilding and making right.

I don't ask Bel to stop. I don't feel guilty. I never have with her. We're quite the team.

I haven't shut off the tap properly. It drips into the sink with a sound like a bird tapping on a window.

RECURSION: 6 YEARS AGO

Rainwater dripped from the hem of my school uniform trousers where they dangled over the floor. I stared downwards and listened to the *click click click* of high heels striking lino as they approached up the corridor. Shouts and laughter carried from the playground outside.

Bel sat across from me, below a noticeboard of school notices. She was folding a train ticket over and over until she had to pinch it hard to keep it shut. She looked up and winked.

"Don't worry about it, little bro; we'll be fine."

"Little?" I shot back. "You're *eight minutes* older than me."

She beamed at me, beatific. "And no matter what, I always will be."

After twelve strides the clicking heels stopped, and Mum stood between us, arms folded, her face set in a classic Look

No. 7: *This had better be good – I was advancing the cause of science.*

She opened her mouth to speak just as the door next to Bel's chair opened and Mrs Fenchurch, our brand-new – and by the end of the day likely to be ex – headmistress, emerged. Bel stood up respectfully and took a step towards the door, but Fenchurch waved her away like a wasp.

"No, Anabel. I wish to speak to your mother in private." She turned to Mum and stuck out a hand. "Mrs Blankman."

Mum took the proffered hand and followed Mrs Fenchurch inside. Bel and I exchanged an incredulous glance. Not only had Mum let this stranger touch her, but she hadn't corrected her to *Dr* Blankman. This really was serious.

"Mrs Blankman," Mrs Fenchurch said. "Thank you for coming. As I mentioned over the phone, I'm afraid we have no alternative but to…" The rest was lost as she closed the door behind her. My stomach sprang up into my throat. No alternative but to what? Suspend? Expel? Bring back corporal punishment?

I stared at the door, desperate to know. Bel kept her eyes on mine, a weird smile on her face.

After a moment, the door handle began to turn smoothly anticlockwise. Without a sound, the door swung open, just a quarter of an inch. Something that had been jammed into the latch socket fell out and fluttered to the floor, where it squirmed slowly like a dying insect: a cardboard train ticket.

Voices bled through the crack.

"…you not reconsider?" my mother was saying. "She's been here less than a week."

"I dread to think what she'd manage if we gave her a month then!" Mrs Fenchurch exclaimed.

Mum sighed and I knew she'd just taken her glasses off to polish them. I also knew she was about to leave a long silence and … yep, there it was, occupying the conversation without actually saying anything.

"She's…" Fenchurch was struggling. "She's highly disruptive."

"She's enthusiastic."

"She's a little demon."

"She's *eleven*. You're aware of Peter's condition. He relies on her. It's crucial that they not be separated."

"You know what she did?" Fenchurch demanded.

A pause, a flicker of paper. Mum consulting her notebook. "She pinned a boy to the floor and inserted two live earthworms into his nostrils, one of which exited through his mouth via his lower left sinus. As I understand, there was no permanent damage."

"But the boy hasn't stopped crying since!"

"I meant the worms were fine," Mum said calmly.

"Mrs Blankman—"

"*Dr* Blankman." Even I shivered as Mum issued the correction. "Mrs Fenchurch, you are aware" – another turned page – "that immediately prior to the incident with the invertebrates, the boy in question – Benjamin Rigby – and his

friends were attempting to intimidate Peter into giving up his rucksack."

Another silence. The kind that you can only squirm in.

"Rigby says he didn't touch Peter; witnesses agree he only said a few words, certainly not enough to justify your daughter's conduct. Even the words didn't amount to much."

"With my son," Mum observed drily, "it doesn't take much."

I flushed. I thought back to the playground, to the three boys, suddenly so tall and standing so close. And, even though it was only my fifth day at the school, I could see, I mean properly *see*, my future. Like a vision from a vengeful god, day after day, year after year. I could feel the bruises and hear their laughter and taste the blood running from my nose even before they'd laid a finger on me. It must have shown on my face because Rigby actually asked me, "What are you so scared of?"

He must have been delighted to have found so easy a mark.

No, it doesn't take much.

"…Anabel can be very passionate," Mum went on. "Perhaps her reaction was excessive, but I'm sure someone with your disciplinary experience understands the value of putting down a marker."

"A marker?" Fenchurch sounded nonplussed.

"Peter is timid, Mrs Fenchurch. That makes him a target and, if I may be blunt, secondary school is a *zoo*. If he is to survive here, the other children need to know he has protection."

From her seat opposite, Bella winked at me and mouthed *little bro* again. I flipped her a middle finger and she grinned.

"I'm sorry, Mrs— Dr Blankman." Fenchurch had regained some of her composure. "But I have an obligation to the boy's parents."

Mum cut her off. "I've spoken to the Rigbys already."

"You have?"

"Yes."

"But … how did you…?"

"Mr Rigby works with a former colleague of mine. He put me in touch. They are willing to leave the disciplining of my daughter to me if I leave their son's to them. Which only prompts one question: are you willing to do the same?"

"Well … well… I suppose if … if…" Fenchurch sounded like she was drowning, trying to find a scrap of conversational driftwood to hold on to.

"Thank you. Will that be all, Mrs Fenchurch? Only there's a neuron that requires my attention."

"Neuron?" Fenchurch said, sounding wrong-footed.

"A single brain cell," Mum clarified, her tone implying that said single cell was more interesting, and likely more intelligent, than the woman she was talking to.

Four seconds later, the door swung open. Mum stood in the doorway, one black high heel placed very deliberately over Bella's ticket.

"Uh, Mum?"

"Tell me in the car, Peter."



No one spoke as we drove home. Any word could be the spark to light Mum's fuse. I was staring gloomily out of the window when I felt something scratchy pressed into my palm. It was the train ticket. A series of apparently random letters had been scrawled on it in blue biro.

I smiled. Bel didn't have my head for number codes so we'd been messaging each other with Caesar shift ciphers. A Caesar shift is about the simplest code in the world – perfect for the Roman emperor who's long on secrets but short on time.

To make one, you just write out the alphabet, a–z, then pick a secret phrase – like, I dunno – *O shit Brutus* – and write it out underneath the first few letters of your alphabet, dropping any repeated letters. Then you follow it with the remainder of the alphabet, in order, so you get something like this:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
O	S	H	I	T	B	R	U	A	C	D	E	F	G	J	K	L	M	N	P	Q	V	W	X	Y	Z

Then you write your message, substituting every letter for the one below it, and *bam*, your message is safe from the prying eyes of teachers, parents and marauding Visigoths.

Unfortunately, because you only have to guess the keyword, codes this simple are even easier to break than my nerve. I studied the letters, tried a few combinations in my head and stifled a laugh.

Demon, I mouthed. She smiled back. Like any secret

shared, it was a hug, a way of saying *I'm here*.

Suddenly, Mum let out an exasperated breath and pulled the car over. For a heart-stopping moment I thought she was going to tell us to get out, to never come home.

You'll have to go and live with your father. He was her worst threat, the monster under the bed.

If you can find him.

Instead she sighed. "Don't do that again, Anabel."

"I was only—"

"I know what you were doing. Don't. It's too big a risk. This time we got lucky, but not every meat-headed brat in that school will have a father whose job I can dangle in front of him."

"Yes, Mum."

"And, Bel?"

"Yes, Mum?"

The edge of Mum's mouth curled. "In case there is a next time – which I expressly forbid, you understand – don't use earthworms. They're lovely creatures and they don't deserve it. Use Coca-Cola: it'll hurt more."

"Yes, Mum," Bel said solemnly.

Mum nodded and pulled back out into the road.

I sat back, relieved and awed. A spitting rain flecked the window and I watched the wet, leaf-plastered streets slide past.

I wanted to be like my mum when I grew up.