The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree

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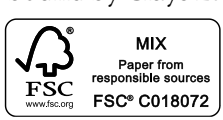
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PART ONE

Seventy metres



1

The Dark

All children are scared of the dark.

The dark is a room with no door and no windows, where monsters grab you and eat you without making a sound.

I'm not afraid of the dark, though.

But I have something else to worry about. I have my very own dark, the one in my eyes.

I'm not making it up. If I were, Mum wouldn't buy me pastries shaped like peaches filled with cream and she wouldn't let me eat them before dinner. If everything were OK, Dad wouldn't hide in the bathroom when the landlady phones, because it's always bad news when she rings.

'Don't worry,' Mum says when she does the dishes after dinner. 'Go and play in your room and don't worry about a thing.'

I hesitate in the kitchen doorway, trying with the power of my mind to make her turn round, but it never works. So here I am in my room, cuddling Ottimo Turcaret, my brown-and-grey cat with a kink at the end of his tail. He doesn't mind being lifted, rolled over on the carpet or chased with the toilet brush. He's a cat, Dad says, and cats are opportunists. I suppose that means they like attention. For me, it's enough that he's around when things are going wrong and I need something warm and cuddly to hug. Like now.

I know something's wrong. I might only be in year five, but I notice everything. My cousin's girlfriend says I have a third eye. She's Indian and has a dot painted in the middle of her forehead. I like that she thinks I have an extra eye, although it would be better if the two eyes I already have actually worked.

Sometimes I feel like crying, like now. My glasses steam up when I'm about to cry. I take them off, so at least they can dry and the red mark on my nose will go away. I've worn glasses since I started primary school. I got these yellow-with-sparkly-bits ones in December last year and I love them. I put them back on in front of the mirror. Without my glasses, everything's a bit misty, like when I have a very hot shower with boiling hot water. My mist is called Stargardt mist, or so Mum and Dad told me. They must've heard about it at the hospital. It says on Dad's phone that Mr Stargardt was a German ophthalmologist who lived a hundred years

ago: he worked out what's going on with my eyes. He also discovered that people who have the same mist as me see black spots in front of things or people, and that these spots get bigger and bigger, until they're huge, and people who see them have to get closer to things to see them properly. The Internet says, *the disease affects one in ten thousand people*. Mum says that special people are chosen by God, but when I think about it, I don't feel that lucky.