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opening extract from

The Ship Between the Worlds

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Ship in a Bottle

David Jones was in trouble—deep trouble. It was the kind of trouble that would leave him with his face rearranged and his new uniform ruined.

He pounded down Park Road, shirt flying, bag bumping on his shoulder. Seven boys raced after him, pushing the other children out of their way. The gang was led from the front by Jason Rickson, better known as Ricko. An ugly boy with close-cropped hair and small, piggy eyes, not even Ricko's mother could think him good-looking. David had made the mistake of venturing this opinion when the gang had decided to amuse themselves by chucking his sports kit around the playground, leading to the present need to run for his life.

Still, I was honest, even if I do end up getting my head kicked in, David thought grimly as he sprinted ahead of the pack. *Mad but truthful.*

David rounded a corner and scrambled over a wall into the Waterside Estate, landing in a prickly bush in a neighbour's back garden. He bit back a curse. He'd forgotten that rose was there. Now, unless the gang decided to follow him, he was protected by the automatic gates and fence that ringed Waterside. With any luck, they wouldn't have seen exactly where he went over.

'Where's he gone?' snarled Ricko, his voice coming from close by.

'Dunno. Over the wall somewhere,' said one of his gormless lieutenants, getting no thanks for stating the obvious.

Bent double, David's breath was coming in painful gasps. He smothered his mouth with a muddy hand, fearing the gang would detect him. But they were too busy shouting a selection of their favourite insults to hear.

'Geek!'

'Wimp!'

'Moron!'

Humiliated, David shivered in the shelter of the wall, waiting for them to give up. They'd get bored sooner or later if they couldn't see him.

I mean, how long can even ape-brained thugs like them keep shouting at bricks? he wondered.

The answer? Longer than he could have thought possible. Kneeling in the dirt he had plenty of time to reflect on how much he hated them—and himself for running away.

I am so pathetic: an A-starred loser. If running from bullies was a GCSE, I could take it this week and get the top mark.

But what could he do against so many? He had asked himself this so many times over the last few days. He didn't dare to tell anyone at school; Ricko had already warned him what would happen if they caught him bleating to a teacher. As for his mum, she had so many problems at the moment, he didn't want to burden her. It was so unfair! He hadn't done anything to the gang but that didn't seem to matter. Ricko had just chosen him for 'the treatment' because he had turned up in class new and friendless. There was only one boy, Mike Tailor, still mental enough to risk sitting next to him. Mike escaped the bullies because everyone thought him pretty cool for his skill on the football pitch. Sadly, his coolness did not extend to protecting David. David knew he was considered the pits of uncool, the class idiot, the victim.

And after weeks of harassment, he was beginning to believe it too.

'Don't worry, Jonesey: we'll get you tomorrow,' jeered Ricko, knowing full well his quarry couldn't be far away. 'Missin' you already!'

With a parting chorus of insults and laughs, the gang finally left to collect a few ASBOs, mug pensioners, or whatever it was they did when they weren't torturing new boys. Shakily, David got up from his knees to walk home.

There was absolutely nothing good about his new life in Waterside, fumed David, inspecting his scratches. Life here sucked.

Well, that wasn't totally true. He hadn't dared tell anyone for he knew it would sound weird (and right now he didn't want to add 'weird' to his list of shortcomings, there was plenty to be going on with already) but he'd begun to have the most amazing dreams. They were always about the same thing: he was aboard a ship—a ship with billowing sails. He spent each night swaying across its deck, clambering in the rigging and looking out for hours across a starlit ocean. And when he woke, he always thought the salt tang of the sea air lingered in his bedroom for a few moments. They were beautiful, wonderful dreams.

Undeniably weird though.

He let himself in at the back gate and stood looking at his house, still not quite believing it was his home now. Immediately below his bedroom window was the conservatory, tacked on to the back of the house like a white and glass cruise liner berthing at a brick terminal. If he looked to the right, he would see another just like it next door. If he looked the other way, there was another, and another—each house with its own little glasshouse attached to the rear. David knew that his father would not have approved: he would have called the house 'boring'. When Simon Jones had been at home, he had promised his son that, if they moved anywhere, it would be somewhere really special—a lighthouse or a ramshackle cottage by the sea, not a new house in a city as far from the coast as you can get.

But he wasn't here any more, and David and his mum had washed up on the Waterside Estate to face a life without him. Yeah, it *was* true: life here sucked.

The following morning found David hard at work, escaping his worries in the job before him. Running his fingers through his wiry brown hair, he looked happily down on the model floating in a sea of cotton threads and scraps of cloth that

littered the surface of his desk. It was not something he told most people but he was really in to making things and was pretty good at it, even if he did say so himself. His current project was almost ready now. When he had fitted the last sail, the miniature ship he had copied from his dreams would be finished. His grandad, a fellow model enthusiast, was coming that afternoon and had promised to help him manoeuvre it into the big bottle David had found to house it. The tricky part was ensuring that the three masts would rise smoothly when he pulled on the thread attached to them. If it worked to plan, the miracle of the ship in the bottle would be complete. He looked forward to his mother's bemused questions as to how he had managed to get such a large thing inside so small a bottle—she would never guess the secret.

'School!' his mother called from downstairs. 'Get a move on, David!'

Reluctantly, he put down the triangular patch of white cotton he had intended for a sail at the prow of his ship. He wished he could stay all day with his model in its glass cocoon but he knew from experience that his mother would make him face school—and Ricko—whatever excuse he invented. He'd previously tried claiming to be ill with most infectious diseases known to

mankind, ranging from flu to (on one particularly desperate occasion) plague, but somehow, after clucking sympathetically, his mother always prescribed breakfast and a bracing walk to school as the cure. Heaven help him if he ever was really sick.

Oh well, perhaps today the gang would leave him alone, he thought optimistically.

Who are you fooling? his more cynical side chipped in as he closed his bedroom door.

Later that afternoon, David had reason to feel smug. He had won a small, but he felt, significant victory for the victims of this world. He had managed to outwit his tormentors by climbing over the playground fence and taking a detour down the canal. For once he was going to have a peaceful and uneventful evening—or so he thought.

'I don't know why you did it.' He recognized his grandad's voice speaking heatedly. David hovered outside the back door, schoolbag over one shoulder, listening. Great, this was just what he needed. An argument. His mother and his granddad—his father's father—did not get on well. He knew better than to walk in on one of their 'family discussions'.

'Of course you know why!' his mother replied, her tone waspish.

'But buying a place like this on land prone to flooding! It's the same everywhere—these new developments—built where they shouldn't be. And the gates—great ugly gates shutting out the riff-raff like me. I have to buzz to come and see my own grandson. You've put him in a prison—a luxurious one but a prison nonetheless.'

'When you've quite finished insulting my home—'said David's mother.

'What was wrong with the old place?' his grandad ploughed on. 'It had so much character—'

'I'll tell you what was wrong with the old place,' she said, finally losing it. 'When your son decided to up and leave his wife and child without so much as a goodbye, I couldn't bear to live there a second longer. What do you think I am? Made of money?'

'We would've helped—'

'No! I don't want your help. I can manage.'

'But can't you see that the boy's not happy here?'

'He'll settle down. It's early days yet. His father's only been gone a few months.'

His grandfather sighed. David was relieved: it sounded as if he was backing down.

'I know, I know, Jean. I'm sorry—I spoke out of turn. You're managing very well, all things

considered. I'm worried about Simon too—but he'll be back when he realizes what a fool he's been.'

'Maybe, but I'm not sure I'll want him when he does pitch up.'

'But David will—a boy needs his father.'

David's mum didn't reply to that but thumped something hard on the ironing board.

The storm was blowing over. It was safe to go in. David entered the kitchen and found his grandad sitting with a mug of tea, his mother ironing; both pretending they hadn't just been yelling at each other. He played along, pretending he hadn't heard.

'David, how's my old seadog?' called his grandad, getting to his feet to enfold him in a hug. He had a wrinkled face, brown like a walnut. His bright blue eyes sparkled beneath a crop of white hair, just balding at the crown. His clothes smelt of pipe smoke. David buried his head in his jacket, feeling comforted by the familiar scent. At least Grandad was still here.

Grandad Jones pushed him gently to arm's-length. 'Ready for Operation Restore?'

David nodded. 'Almost.' He was thankful his grandad had not asked him about school.

'Operation Restore?' asked his mother, managing a smile for David. She used to be pretty, but

since David's father had left, her face had settled into an almost permanent frown, two deep lines pinching the skin above her nose. Her black hair was beginning to grey at the temples. 'What on earth is that?'

'Ah-ha!' said Grandad mysteriously. 'It's a surprise. Will it be ready by eight bells?'

David checked his watch. That gave him half an hour as it was three-thirty now.

'Yep, should be.'

'Then I'll just finish my tea in the galley and come up and join you.'

'You and your naval language!' said Mum, not entirely pleased. 'Just like Simon.'

Having Grandad in the house was *almost* as good as having Dad back, thought David as he mounted the stairs. Before his father had disappeared, the two of them had enjoyed larking around, taking zany pleasure in their special sea-language like a couple of daft extras who'd wandered off the set of *Pirates of the Caribbean.* They had often fantasized about what it would have been like to be on board the sailing ships of the past. They'd said 'Aaargh!' a lot in stupid accents. Had fun.

The thought of Simon Jones's absence was like a sharp knife sticking in David's ribs. He had not felt whole for many months and knew he had

taken to slouching almost as if protecting the wound. Perhaps it was this vulnerability that had attracted Ricko to him like a shark scenting blood in the water. But if so, he didn't know what to do about it as the pain refused to go away.

David was jolted from this bleak train of thought when he opened the door to his bedroom. There it was again: that salty tang from his dreams, but this time in daylight. Where had it come from? He went to the window, but it was closed. All he could see outside were the backs of other houses. Strange.

Turning to the desk, he looked for the triangular piece of material he had been using that morning to make a sail. It wasn't there. He looked under the table. Not there either. Under the books? Under the bed? No. It had vanished. While his bedroom might look to an outsider as if the army had conducted a controlled explosion in his clothes drawers, to him there was a pattern to his own clutter. The sail had definitely been moved.

David's thoughts immediately leapt to blame his mother. She must have come in here to clean despite promising to leave his room untouched until he had finished his secret project. Full of the righteous anger of a son whose privacy had been invaded, he went out onto the landing.

'Mum!' he yelled downstairs. 'Did you go in my room?'

She stuck her head out of the kitchen.

'Don't be silly—I've been at work all day. Anyway, I wouldn't take the risk, who knows what you've got buried under your smelly clothes—the *Mary Celeste*, Shergar, they could all be in there and no one would know.'

'Oh.' David's tantrum was put on hold.

'What's up?'

'Lost something, that's all,' he muttered sheepishly.

'Well, if you kept your bedroom tidy like I told you—'

'Yeah, yeah.' David retreated back into his den.

There was nothing for it: he would have to make another sail. He rifled through the scraps of cloth on the desk, looking for some white material. How weird: the desk seemed to be covered in a fine grit. He bent closer, scraping a sample up on a moistened finger. It was sand—silver sand. How had that got there?

'David, have you finished yet?' called his grandad.

'Nearly!' David shouted back, grabbing the scissors and cutting out another sail. He tried to thread a needle but missed several times. How did his father do it? Remembering, he licked the

end of the thread and this time it passed smoothly through. He tacked the sail onto the ship by its three corners. There, that should be it.

His grandad's heavy footsteps could be heard climbing the stairs.

The old man whistled softly behind him. 'Why, David, that's a beauty. It's just like the *Whydah*.'

'The *Whydah*?' David asked, turning his model carefully around in his hands, scrutinizing it from every angle. Its three masts stood straight, each billowing with three sails. The tiny revolving capstan, used to weigh anchor, looked ready for its crew. He had placed little swivel guns along the sides made from matchsticks; each turned on its pivot like the real thing would have done. The cannon on the main deck trundled in and out of the portholes he had cut in the ship's sides. He didn't care if others would think him a bit of a geek making this sort of thing. It was perfect.

'The *Whydah* was a pirate vessel; I thought you must've known that if you copied it so faithfully.'

David shook his head, wondering if he should mention his dreams. But his grandfather was so practical minded, he would probably tease David for admitting to such fanciful ideas. Best to keep them secret.

'I must've seen a picture, I s'pose,' he said with a shrug.

'Well, the *Whydah* sank hundreds of years ago. Why don't you give it a pirate flag?'

'This ship doesn't have a pirate flag,' said David firmly.

'Suit yourself. So, shall we put it in its bottle?'

David nodded and lowered the masts with the cotton rigging he had prepared for this task.

'It's going to be a bit of a squeeze,' he admitted, lifting the glass bottle onto the desk.

'Oh, the ship won't mind. It's always a squeeze on board a sailing vessel, remember?'

'Just space to sling your hammock, no more, no less,' David said with a nod.

'That's how your Jones ancestors used to live when they were at sea. They were packed together like sardines. Unless one of them made it to be captain, of course. Then you got your own cabin.' Grandad pointed to the gaily-painted windows of the stern where David had put his best cabin. 'That's where I'd be. But you, my lad, it's below decks for you!' He pointed at the middle of the ship. 'And if you were disobedient, I'd throw you in the brig.'

David laughed. 'Butt out, Grandad, it's *my* ship: I could throw *you* in the brig for saying that.'

Grandad chuckled. 'Too right, my lad. Don't let any old-timer like me steal your command from under you. Now, shall we let this little lady set sail?'

With heads bent together, David and his grandad pushed the boat into the neck of the bottle. Once it cleared the narrow opening, there would be no fishing inside to pull it back out. The boat, masts still lying flat, slid smoothly into the glass sea.

'Now for the moment of truth!' said the old man, settling his spectacles more firmly on his nose. 'Heave away there, my lad!'

Cautiously, David tugged on the cotton. If the thread snapped, the only way to get the ship out for repair would be to smash the bottle. Trembling slightly, the masts rose together, straightening out their crumpled white sails.

'There she goes!' cried his grandad. 'What are you going to name her?' He held a thimble-full of water ready to throw against the bottle.

David pointed. 'I've put the name on already. She's the *Golden Needle.*'

'The *Golden Needle* then,' said the old man, pouring the water on the glass. 'God bless her and all who sail in her!'