Shadow Town

Richard Lambert

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SHADOW TOWN

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For Dad

I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space – were it not that I have bad dreams.

– William Shakespeare, Hamlet

Contents

Shadow

Steady drifts of rain blew in from the sea against roof tiles and window panes, rainwater trickled inside drainpipes and from somewhere in the sleeping city came the howl of a dog. The dog was crying to be let in. The shadow stopped and listened. Unlike the dog, the shadow had no desire to be let in, no desire for a dry place, no desire for sleep. And the city did well to sleep. Or pretend to sleep. Because the shadow was full of hate.

The shadow kept the semblance of a human being. It stopped at a new noise – a rumble. Above, in one of the houses, someone snored. The shadow rose easily through the air. It moved along the sides of the houses, peering in at each upper window that was not curtained or shuttered. Dark room after dark room until – there. The snorer.

On a great bed of white sheets, on his back, lay a large man. His chest swelled as he inhaled and his snore was so loud it buzzed the panes of glass. The man exhaled and his chest sank. A moment of silence then his chest inflated once more and his snore buzzed the glass. At the hinge of the window was a gap where a draft entered the house, and here the shadow slipped inside. The man's eyelids flickered. Dull brass gleamed on a mantelpiece. The shadow approached.

The shadow bowed, and as the man inhaled with one of those gigantic snores, the shadow shrank until it was as thin as a thread and slid up a nostril. The man snorted as if a gnat had got up his nose, and rolled over.

The man was dreaming of his childhood. When he was little, on Friday afternoons after school, he would come home to the smell of pretzels, fresh out of the oven and sprinkled with crystals of sugar. His mouth used to water. His mother would bring the warm pretzels to him at the kitchen table. He would swing his legs, happy. He lifted a pretzel, smelled its delicious aroma, took a bite. It was the tastiest pretzel he'd ever eaten. Then, in his dream, in one moment, sweet pastry turned foul, fresh bread turned mouldy and his mother began to cry. The man felt such a jolt of something nasty, something that hated him and his mother – it was like plunging into a bath of hate – that he sat bolt upright in bed, wide awake. He knew something hateful had got inside him. He leapt out of bed. Still the feeling didn't leave so the man began running round the room, as if he could run away from the feeling.

The shadow left his body. It flowed under the door. It crossed the hallway to a room that smelled of sour breath, where an old woman dreamed, and it fell on her. It leaked into her dream with such hatred that when she woke the next morning she was weighed down as if her body was heavier than a sack of compost. Her low mood did not leave her for three days. The shadow didn't wait around to see that mood pass. It left the old woman and floated downstairs to the

kitchen where, snoozing by the fire, it found a cook happily dreaming that she was flying like an angel. That is, until the shadow brought a cliff into her dream and the cook flew into it with a splat. The cook woke with a shock, convinced that all her bones were broken. She began weeping. The shadow popped out of the house via a keyhole.

If it could have, it would have slammed the door and put a curse on the place.

It made its way through the city. It didn't sense the rain blown in from the sea or the coldness of the air. In the sheds beyond the marketplace, the animals in their pens stirred nervously. Rain drummed on the high tin roof. The animals sensed the shadow. The pigs grunted and the cows bumped against each other. The shadow flew above them. The pigs squealed. The shadow reared, grew larger, seemed to fill the whole space of the windy sheds, and the pigs screamed and the cows bellowed and all the creatures rattled the galvanised metal rails of their fences the way prisoners condemned to death rattle the bars of their cell doors on the night of their execution. But the shadow did not enter the animals' bodies. It passed through the sheds and out the other side and floated on towards the harbour.

There, it climbed the rocks that rose towards the castle and by a pool the last tide had left, it sat. In the harbour water near the rocks stood a heron, waiting to spear a fish. The heron was completely still. It either did not notice or did not mind the shadow. All that moved were the multiple rings

opening on the water from each drop of rain and the waves lapping against the rocks. The shadow seemed almost to cross one leg over the other. It waited. What did the shadow wait for? For its food, like the heron? Perhaps. Or perhaps it did not know why it waited. Perhaps it only knew what it wanted when the thing it wanted arrived.

The rain drifted in from the sea. The shadow turned and scanned the city from the long hill on one side that sloped steeply down through a jumble of tenements and houses to the municipal buildings and warehouses, then across the river and up the hill on the other side to the castle that towered over the harbour. Not a light shone anywhere. Not in any window, not from any streetlamp. Nowhere.

Except above. Right above the shadow a light shone at the end of the castle. Like a challenge.

Seeing that light, emotion stained the shadow, made its substance thicker, as if it was about to shudder into a physical body. Startled, the heron took flight. The shadow shot upwards like a firework, but a dark firework.

Through the rain-spotted window, at a desk, by firelight and the glow of a table-lamp, in a low-ceilinged room so pokey it was more like a ship's cabin than an ordinary room, sat a tall, thin man with black hair. His back was to the window and he was working at papers. The shadow gulped and a deeper darkness spread through it as if it had swallowed a whole tub of ink. The ink of the deepest inkwell, the deepest ink-mine (if ink could be mined), the deepest ocean of the

blackest ink that wrote the blackest messages of hate. The shadow leapt at the window. It didn't even try to find a gap.

Glass shattered. The wooden muntins that held each individual window pane splintered. The shadow hurtled across the room, bringing with it the sweeping rain, sending the flames in the fire roaring and flapping in fear. It skidded to a halt by the door. Now it turned and expanded, like a balloon filling with air, only it was not air it filled with, but black vengeance. In the firelight, the man's eyes widened, as if with terror. The grey in the man's black hair caught the light. And now the shadow shrank, condensing all its hatred and vengeance until its emotions were contained in something the size of an arrow-head. It aimed itself at the man's heart. It would shoot itself through that heart faster than an arrow, faster than a crossbow bolt, faster than a bullet. Then, at the very moment it was about to hurl itself, something about the man stopped it. His eyes twinkled. The shadow could not believe it. The man's eyes twinkled and the brackets of a smile twitched at the ends of his cruel mouth. The shadow hesitated. Then it understood – this was a trap.

The door was thrown open and stark lights flooded in, hurting the shadow's eyes. A net of light was flung and when it touched the shadow, the shadow felt searing pain. If it could have screamed, it would have done. It made no sound. Figures moved beams of light that stabbed its eyes, and the net of light was drawn tighter and tighter as the men bellowed, shouting instructions, and their boots thudded on

the floorboards of the cramped, cabin-like room. The shadow thrashed. The shadow strained upwards, the men pulled the net, and for a moment the battle between shadow and men hung in the balance. Then one man lost his footing and the shadow was released with tremendous force. It catapulted upwards. A man's skull knocked against the ceiling and made a noise like a bowling ball hitting a skittle. Another man's body thudded into a wall. He grunted and fell like a sack of rocks.

The shadow zipped out of the window.

'Catch it!'

The shadow flew. It glanced backwards, saw lights take off from the roof of the castle and come after it. The lights drew nearer quickly. There were several flying figures, and beneath them they carried nets of painful light.

The shadow faced ahead and, as if taking a deep breath, gathered all its being into its head with the rest of its shape tapering behind it like a tail, and fired itself across the night.

When the shadow looked back several miles later, the figures were still there. But they were lagging. And each time the shadow checked, they were further behind. Except for one figure. Though it grew smaller, it did not give up. Five minutes passed, ten, fifteen, and still that one figure with a net of light pursued the shadow. At last the shadow grew tired. It had been flying for half an hour and the figure behind kept its steady pace, and now the shadow lost its speed, and its pursuer neared. By this time the shadow had reached the

mountains and the great forests there, and still the figure came on steadily, like a wolf hunting a wounded deer.

The shadow descended to the forest.

It moved through the forest. The shadow was travelling slowly now, drifting from side to side with tiredness, almost crying in desperation to escape, but each time it checked behind, the figure with the net of light was there. Growing nearer. They slalomed between the trees. The figure behind was almost upon the shadow. The shadow put on a final burst of speed, weaving between trunks, and when it looked behind, the figure had gone. The shadow slowed, then floated over ferns and bracken. The forest was silent. The shadow was safe. Air rushed and the figure – a teenage boy with blond hair – dropped like a hawk, his net of light opening. The shadow wrenched itself sideways. It fell through ferns and bracken. It would have crashed into the damp ground. It could actually smell the damp ground – wet bark, pine needles, and soil. But, to the shadow's surprise, it did not touch the ground.

It fell through the ground.

There was a hole there.

*

The shadow fell into another world. It knew that it was in another world because the air was warm and dirty and not clear like the air of the mountain and the shadow was not beneath the ground but falling upwards, which was

impossible. It fell upwards through the air, into the sky. By the time it managed to slow itself and hover, it was high above the land of this other world and it was looking down on a city, a metropolis so large it dwarfed the city the shadow knew. The shadow had never seen so many lights. Roadways of light in a vast, endless web, large rectangles of brightly lit grass where people ran around chasing a ball, towers of glass taller than the tallest towers of the castle in the shadow's home city, and in the distance a broad snaking river, crossed by lamp-lit bridges, and beside the river a great wheel of light as tall as the castle in the shadow's city, with people in glass bubbles on the wheel. There was the sound of an earthquake in the sky, the shadow turned, and bearing down upon it was an iron bird the size of a ship. The shadow jumped just in time and the flying-earthquake-bird-ship sailed past, and through its portholes the shadow glimpsed lots of people before the thing left in its wake filthy fumes stinking worse than farts. The shadow coughed several small shadows, and shuddered in disgust.

It moved away, avoiding more of the iron flying machines, and seeing no sign of its pursuer – the young blond man with the burning net of light – it descended.

It searched for an uninhabited place to stop and rest. But the city was endless. Finally the shadow could go no further and it drifted with the warm air along a street of houses. The streetlamps were on but each house was dark, their curtains closed, except for one room which was lit up and the window

open. And the shadow would have passed on beyond this room, too, it was so tired, except that a boy's voice came from the window, uttering a word the shadow recognised. 'Balthasar.' That was the word. So the shadow sank to the small front garden only big enough for a few bushes and a patch of grass, and here it came to rest, under that window on a warm night – it was summer here – and lay down on the ground under a bush and fell asleep.

CHAPTER 1

Bad Dreams

Toby woke from a bad dream. He couldn't remember it but he wondered if his parents had been arguing in the night and their argument had somehow entered his sleep. If they had been arguing, they were quiet this morning. He could only hear the distant wash of rush-hour traffic. He scrambled out of bed and tore back the curtains to dispel the lingering feeling of the dream. Warm sunlight streamed in.

Toby liked his room. He knew it was a young sort of room for a boy of thirteen and some of his classmates would have made fun of him if they saw it but no one at school was going to see it, that was for sure. The curtains had pictures of boats and so did his duvet and pillowcase. Propped on a bookshelf was a model yacht, white with

blue trim, which he used to sail at a boating pond on the other side of town until his dad stopped taking him, and beside it a money box in the shape of a red fire engine. The floor was strewn with plastic construction pieces, not from superhero or science-fiction sets but less popular ones, and he was in the middle of making an aqueduct. It ran from a castle he'd designed to the bookshelves stacked with his old toy-boxes, board games and, above them, his books. He had no computer games; they did not interest him. Most of his books had broken or missing spines, they had been read so often; they were about cars, aeroplanes, boats, engines, and DIY. There were also books with shiny unbroken spines. These were the fantasy novels his dad kept giving him, which he couldn't get into. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was the only one he had finished.

Toby sat at his desk where he'd cleared a space for the model aeroplane he'd been working on until late the previous night. It was his first model aircraft. He'd bought the kit after his dad suggested he try making one. It was an early biplane, a Bristol Boxkite, and it looked like its name – a box-shaped kite with a pair of wheels underneath. Its tail had another, smaller box at the end of it. He touched a join. The glue was dry. With whooshing noises he flew the aeroplane towards the landing, sending cardboard planets on his hanging mobile bobbing into orbit, elbowing the door wide so his leather tool-belt that

hung on the back swung away then bumped back, and steered the Boxkite on towards the stairs.

The windows at the half-landing gave a view of the garden. The beech tree at the end was already going gold and yellow and dropping its beech mast on the lawn. On the next floor he passed his parents' small bedroom and his dad's big study and on the ground floor went through the living room to the dining room and down the stairs to the basement kitchen. The tall, narrow house was built on a slope, so the back was lower than the front, the basement kitchen opening onto the back garden. Toby liked the kitchen being half under the ground; it made home feel like a burrow – squished-in and cosy. The house had belonged to his grandparents and he could still vaguely remember them, not their faces, more their shapes, Grandad smelling of cigarette smoke and Grandma having much softer skin than his parents' or his own.

'Look, Dad!' said Toby, landing the Boxkite on the kitchen table. 'I finished it last night.'

His dad, his hair on end, his shirt collar up on one side and tucked under his jumper on the other, tapped at his laptop.

'What's that, love?' said Mum, making sandwiches.

'A Bristol Boxkite,' said Toby, opening the throttle and roaring it off its landing strip.

'Go away, Toby,' his dad murmured.

The Boxkite cut its engine, glided down and the brakes screeched softly.

'You finished it last night?' Mum prompted, putting sandwiches in lunchboxes.

Toby grunted.

'Well, I think it's wonderful.'

'I don't care what you think, I want Dad to like it.'

His mum frowned, hurt. Toby felt unhappy but didn't know why. He stood beside her. He felt the dark shape of the bad dream – a sort of smoke – somewhere inside him. He didn't know what to do about it. Mum started filling flasks.

'I don't need two,' he said quietly.

'One's mine.'

'But aren't you going to work?'

'She's going to that stupid protest afterwards,' said Dad, sitting back and crossing his arms.

Mum was in an environmental action group – she went on marches and campaigned against deforestation, pollution, the sea full of microplastics, the loss of the earth's creatures and plants and trees – she said it hurt her physically, the thought of all that loss.

'It's not stupid, David,' she said, wounded. 'It's important.'

'You're better off putting your energy into your thesis.'

Mum stood very still.

'Look, Dad!' said Toby, taking the opportunity to roar the Boxkite past him.

'Not now, Toby!'

'Is it as good as yours?' Toby said, pushing on regardless. 'Dad? Dad?'

'Hmm?' His dad was pulling at his lip, reading what he'd written.

'You said you made model aeroplanes when you were my age. You told me to make one.'

Dad looked up. 'No I didn't.'

'Yes you did,' insisted Toby. 'You said, "Why don't you make a model aeroplane or something? That's what we did when we were your age and got bored." That's the exact words you said.'

For several seconds Dad gazed at Toby. Then, as if he had a genuine interest in the answer to the question, he said, 'Are you deliberately being stupid, Toby?' and he emphasised 'stupid' with a sneer.

'David!' exclaimed Toby's mum.

Toby blushed. He hated his biplane now, and its jaunty plastic pilot with his stupid goggles.

The bathroom was off the kitchen, partly under the front yard, and its door opened and a large middle-aged woman appeared in a voluminous white kimono stitched with flowers, her hair hidden beneath a towel-turban. She proceeded regally through the kitchen, nodded at Toby's mum, at Toby, and finally and curtly at Toby's dad.

'Morning, Mrs Papadopoulos,' said Toby.

'Morning, Theodora,' said Mum.

'Mrs P,' said Dad as their lodger climbed the stairs. Toby stifled a snigger. Mrs Papadopoulos glared at Dad.

'David,' hissed Mum after she'd gone. 'I wish you wouldn't call her that.'

'It sounds rude,' said Toby, laughing.

'Exactly, Tobes,' said Dad, and winked.

Toby laughed, happy again.

'Right, I have work to do,' said Dad, shutting his laptop and standing up.

'I'll see you when I get back from school, then, Dad?'

'No. I'm going to the ministry this afternoon.'

'But I'm going on this protest,' said Mum. 'Somebody needs to be here when Toby gets home.'

'He's old enough to look after himself. Aren't you, Tobes?'

'Maybe I could come to the ministry with you?'

'No,' said Dad, going upstairs. 'Besides, Mrs P will be here.'

'Don't call her that,' said Mum. 'Anyway, that's not the point. You should be here for him.'

Disappearing from sight, Dad said, 'Don't get arrested, Helen.'

There was a quiet. Mum was looking towards the patio doors, holding her packed lunch. The only thing outside was the great beech tree. He felt the lurking

bad dream. 'You're not going to get arrested are you, Mum?'

'Hmm?' said Mum, turning from the window. 'No, Toby, I won't get arrested.'

'Oh! Dad didn't finish his coffee. I'll make him a new one.'

'You'll be late for school.'

'Nah. Plenty of time.'

*

Taking the cup of coffee upstairs proved a more difficult job than Toby expected. He had filled the cup to the brim and had to go up three flights with several turns. At the half-landing, light flickered on the wall through the leaves of the beech tree. One good thing – the sunlight banished the bad dream. He went on without spilling a drop, entering his dad's study where he began the riskiest moment of his journey, lowering the cup to the desk. He spilled it and a big splatter of coffee hit the spread papers.

'Oh for – !' yelled his dad. 'Toby!'

'Sorry, Dad.'

'Are you deliberately being stupid? Why'd you fill it to the top?'

'I was trying to –'

'Go away!'

Toby stared at the brown liquid sitting on the surface

of the paper, some seeping in. 'That's not your novel, is it, Dad?'

His dad was searching for something to mop the spill.

Toby's dad was a writer who specialised in curses and put-downs, which he supplied to TV and radio programmes. He also wrote sarcastic newspaper articles, and recently he'd become a speechwriter for the government. Toby liked telling people about his dad working for the government. And he liked visiting his dad at the government ministry. He noticed how all the other workers admired his dad, called him 'Mr Porter', told him how great he was. What his dad was really interested in, though, was his novel. He was always working on it. He worked on it in the early mornings, evenings, and weekends; every spare minute lately, and he didn't have time to take Toby to the boating pond the way he used to. Or anywhere else. He had been working on the novel for as long as Toby could remember. Mum said he'd been working on it since before Toby was born. It took up an entire bookshelf and every day a little more was added. Toby wondered if it was the longest book in the history of books. Much of it was printed on variously coloured paper but most was handwritten – on regular paper, and on sheets that had been crumpled and binned before being rescued, on old envelopes, and even, Toby once noticed with a mixture of annoyance and pride, in one of Toby's old exercise books. The novel was set in

a world named Balthasar and it was supposed to be a fairy tale but Dad couldn't bring himself to give it a fairy-tale ending. As far as Toby could see, Dad couldn't bring himself to give it any ending at all.

Toby's chest tightened as he stared at the coffee seeping into the paper. He had ruined his dad's life's work. 'That's not *The Kingdom above the Sea* is it, Dad?'

'Are you still here?'

*

Actually there was another reason why Toby had wanted to bring his dad a cup of coffee, beyond trying to please him. It meant he could delay getting ready for school. Toby hated school. It wasn't so much the schoolwork, which he sometimes liked and generally didn't mind, or the teachers, whom he generally liked and sometimes didn't mind – it was his classmates. They loathed Toby.

As he left the house, the feeling of the bad dream returned, and he felt its weight physically across his shoulders. It seemed to follow him down Arnold Street like a heavy cloud until a light sensation climbed the back of his neck and tickled over his scalp, transforming into a feeling of being observed. It was such a strong feeling that Toby glanced behind him but there were only the usual morning shadows of the trees.

The nearer Toby came to school, the slower he walked,

regularly stopping to inspect something that caught his eye. At the entrance to the park, he stopped to investigate new roadworks. Red-and-white barriers surrounded a trench. A sign required that PEDESTRIANS GO ROUND. Toby peered into the trench.

It was deep, there were no pipes or cables, and only one workman. He had white hair and silvery stubble and was staring into space, the end of a roll-up cigarette sticking out of the corner of his mouth. Gradually he became aware of Toby. 'All right, Chief?'

'That's deep,' said Toby. 'What's it for?'

'Mending.'

'Mending what?'

'Never you mind. Aren't you going to be late for school?'

Toby took a deep breath, sighed loudly and walked on, kicking tiny stones along the pavement and annoying several people coming the other way, who had to avoid him.

*

School was as bad as he expected it to be. It was as if the bad dream (which he still could not remember, though he tried) had followed him right into the building. Late for registration, he received a warning that next time it happened his parents would be contacted. In the first lesson, one of his classmates gave the wrong answer to an

easy question and Toby, seeing an opportunity for what he considered an excellent joke, said, 'Are you deliberately being stupid?' which made several people tell him to shut up. After morning break, while waiting for the teacher to arrive, Toby told the people sitting round him how his dad had a meeting with a government minister that afternoon. When no one showed any interest, Toby added that his dad was friends with the Prime Minister (this wasn't true). Toby was always going on about his dad. After the lesson, as they were filing out, one of the big boys thumped him on the arm.

'What was that for?' said Toby.

'Shut up, you self-important little –'

Toby was pulled away by the flow of his classmates so didn't hear the final word but he could guess what it was.

After break their science homework was returned. He'd enjoyed doing it and was confident of a good mark. But when he opened his exercise book the page was littered with thick red crosses in felt-tip. His shoulders slumped. The lesson started while he was still reading the comments. He'd misunderstood the problem that had been set. The teacher asked him a question and because he'd been reading the homework comments he didn't have a clue to the answer.

'Focus, Mr Porter! Focus!'

In the last lesson before lunch, the English teacher

was in a grouchy mood (perhaps she'd had a bad dream like him). Others in the class had noticed too and were deliberately trying to wind her up.

'If I hear another word out of you lot, I'll keep you back five minutes. Then you'll be at the back of the lunch queue and there'll only be pizza crusts left. Which are as hard as volcanic rock.' She said this with a smile of vengeful satisfaction.

The class fell silent. But only until Toby spotted the ideal moment to improve his popularity by making a joke: 'It's all right, Miss, the lunches here are awful whatever time you turn up. You go right ahead. My mum made me a packed lunch.'

'Right, you lot! I'm keeping you in.'

There was a collective groan. After the lesson, Toby pretended he couldn't feel hatred directed at him like lasers.

Toby didn't have any friends so he wandered the playground during lunch break, smiling as if he was quite happy on his own. Actually, he longed for a friend, but whenever he tried to make one it seemed to go wrong. He kept rubbing the back of his neck, feeling someone was watching him or even following him but when he looked round, there was no one there. Except there was. A girl from his class was smiling at him. Toby couldn't work out why. She wasn't one of the people who were usually mean to him so it wasn't a trick. He tried smiling back.

She blushed and broke into a grin. Toby felt giddy and his thoughts turned cloudy. He'd experienced this before. He would get a feeling for someone, like a cloud or a deep sea, and he didn't know what it was. And he didn't know what words to say that would fit with this feeling. When he tried to use some words they came out wrong. This happened now. He went over to her. She had a straight fringe above her eyebrows and without thinking he said, 'God, that's a weird haircut', and the expression on the girl's face dropped like a curtain. Her eyes filming with tears, she strode away.

And that was his school day.

*

'Hello, Mrs P,' called Toby, then remembered she didn't like being called that and changed the word so it came out sounding like *Pee-apadopoulos*. Toby had always had problems with their lodger's name. When she first arrived, years ago when he was small, he had heard it as *Hippopotamus*. It had taken him months to realise it was not.

She was an opera singer and had a house back in Greece but kept her room at Arnold Street even though she spent a lot of time touring and recording in other countries. London was the best place to be for her work, she said. It was a hub for other places. Toby had grown to love the woman, and liked to listen to her sing. But

that afternoon, her attic room was silent. Toby went to his own room where he was confronted by the Bristol Boxkite. It was a stupid idea, building a model aeroplane. The pilot was still jolly about something, hunched over his controls like he was going on a great adventure. Toby pressed the end of the wing with his forefinger so the biplane tilted off its wheels. He increased the pressure through his forefinger. Something crumpled and cables broke and the top wing slumped, like the wing of an injured bird.

'Well, that was pointless,' said a voice.

Toby turned. Mrs Papadopoulos stood on the stairs with a glass of water.

A feeling surged through Toby. He couldn't have named it but it overcame him and he began to cry. Not just to cry, but to sob. Mrs Papadopoulos came in and Toby hung his head so she wouldn't see his tears. Her perfume smelled of lily of the valley. He felt her fingers comb through his hair until her hand cupped the top of his skull.

'It must be a difficult business, I think, being a young man,' she said. 'Why don't you go and make yourself a hot drink and have a biscuit. Alfred's in the kitchen.'

'Is he?'

'Don't worry about the aeroplane. You'll fix it. You're good at fixing things.'

Toby nodded, not daring to look up in case he'd cry again.

She was right, he decided as he went downstairs. He was good at fixing things. He had once attempted to fit a pane of glass that had popped out of the window in Mrs Papadopoulos's room. He couldn't do it and Mum had to get a handyman because she was too clumsy to do it herself while Dad was scared of heights and didn't want to lean out of the window. Toby observed the handyman carefully, who showed Toby how to warm the putty in his palms then knead it along the edge of the glass, and together they refitted the pane.

In the kitchen, Toby sat beside Alfred on the back step. Alfred had a round face with sickly yellow eyes. He had a notch between his sickly eyes like he was continually considering deep matters. He also had bags under them as if he'd been considering these matters until the early hours. He had long, soft white fur and he was the fattest, laziest cat in Arnold Street, possibly London. Possibly the world. He belonged to Mrs Papadopoulos and was Toby's best friend.

With Alfred, it didn't matter what Toby said, it wasn't going to be wrong. And if Toby didn't want to speak, Alfred didn't mind. Toby didn't want to speak that afternoon so for a while they sat together in the warm September sun, listening to Mrs Papadopoulos. She had her window open (the one with the pane that Toby and

the handyman had fixed) and her singing was very clear and very lovely. Toby didn't understand the words; they were in a different language. Down the long garden, at the end, Toby could see people in the block of flats at the back. There was something odd about that as usually he couldn't see them. There was something odd about the garden, too. It felt emptier, barer. It brought back the feeling from the bad dream of the previous night. A sort of desolation. There was a fine blond dust everywhere. On the grass, on the plants, on the patio paving stones, even drifting in the air.

Alfred sensed something odd too because he kept turning his head and staring at a spot in the air above the lawn.

'What is it?'

Alfred rose stiffly and padded over the grass until he was right beneath it. Mum said he needed to diet. Dad hated him and took every opportunity to shoot at him with a water pistol. Now Alfred regarded a spot in the air. Toby wondered if he could see a subtle shade hovering there but he wasn't sure.

'What do you think it is, Alfred?'

Alfred peered but after a time he gave up and returned to Toby, and Toby lost interest in the shadow too and told Alfred about his bad dream and how everything had gone wrong since then. How Dad thought he was stupid for making an aeroplane. How Dad got cross when

Toby spilled the coffee. How bad school was. Alfred listened, and Toby told him – for the umpteenth time – about the novel that Dad had been working on for all of Toby's life; about cruel kings and queens, and people with supernatural powers, only Toby inserted into it the tale of a boy named Toby and his white cat Alfred, who had to escape the forces of evil and rescue the people of Balthasar from tyranny.

And the shadow drifted in the air above the garden as if it was listening too.

*

Dad came home.

'Where's your mum?'

'Climate protest.'

'Shouldn't she be back by now?'

'Don't be stupid, Dad. Protests aren't timetabled.'

'What have we got to eat?' His dad went to the fridge, looked inside then swung it shut, only to discover that Alfred had snuck up behind the door while it was open.

'Agh!' cried Dad, jumping. Toby laughed. Dad lunged at Alfred, who shot into the garden.

When Mum hadn't returned by seven, Toby texted her. Dad cooked beans on toast for them, and afterwards Toby phoned his mum. She didn't answer. He kept trying and by nine, he was worried. His dad had the television on. The news was showing footage of the protest. Some

protestors had pushed against the police and the police had struck them with their batons and plastic shields. People had blood on their faces. His dad thought the protestors got what they deserved. Toby thought his mum might have been hurt and made his dad phone the local hospitals. There was no news of Helen Porter. Then it was past Toby's bedtime but he couldn't go to bed without knowing if Mum was all right. He lay on the sofa in front of riot footage, eyelids flickering, head nodding, and half-dreamed Mum being trampled by police horses so he sat up, forcing his eyes wide. He opened the sash window for some air to wake himself up. The night was cool. The flats behind were all lit up. That was when Toby realised what was different about the garden, and he was so surprised he said out loud, 'But the beech tree has gone.'

'Hmm?' said his dad.

'The beech tree in the back garden has gone.'

'They came and cut it down.'

'Who did?'

'Tree surgeons. While you were at school.'

'They can't do that, can they?'

'We asked them to. It had a disease. It had to be cut down.'

'But that was our tree,' said Toby.

His eyes gummy with sleep, Toby stuck his head out to see exactly what had happened. The beech tree was gone. It had left a physical emptiness in the space it used

to occupy. All that remained was a blond, freshly cut tree-stump. The lawn was sprinkled with that strange pale dust he'd noticed earlier. And there was a dark spot in the air half-way between him and the lawn. The place that Alfred had noticed earlier. Toby could definitely see it now. It was weird. It was as if the air was thicker there. It had a physical density. The spot blocked what lay beyond it. Toby moved his head from side to side, to see if he was mistaken, but he wasn't. If he moved his head enough, he could cause the patch to hang between him and the beech-tree stump so that the stump was completely blotted out.

It moved.

The shape was about five metres from Toby, and it moved towards him. It moved with steady slowness. There was something about this steadiness, this slowness, that Toby didn't like. The blot had the quality of a fast slug. Toby took a step back from the window. The tar-coloured shadow kept travelling towards him. Toby had no doubt when it reached the window it would come in, close around him, enter him. It would thicken inside him with its alien darkness. It was now less than two metres from the window. Its substance seemed the consistency of treacle. Up and down Toby's skin ran a prickling sensation and he stepped forward quickly and slammed down the sash window.

'Don't bang the windows!' yelled Dad.

Toby flicked the catch and backed away.

Dad's mobile rang.

The big panes of the sash window reflected Toby and, behind him, his dad with his computer open on his lap, talking on the phone, running one hand through his thin, wild hair. Beyond the glass was the darkness of the garden, the lights from the flats opposite. No floating blot. No shadow.

'Toby,' said Dad.

Toby waited.

'Toby,' said Dad.

'What?' whispered Toby, unable to move.

'Your mum's been arrested.'

CHAPTER 2

On Margate Sands

When Toby's mum came home in the morning, Toby jumped up and hugged her then stepped back and studied her carefully. He had seen the protestors on the news – their faces hideous with shouting, scruffy and shoving, screaming when they were carried away by the police. It seemed impossible for Mum to be one of them. Mum was her usual placid self. She wore the white shirt and brown shoes she always did for her part-time work at the GP's reception, with jeans and a light summer jacket. She put down her small red rucksack and, while she stood dazed, Toby searched inside for criminal evidence. He found her work skirt, her empty lunchbox, a bottle of water, an apple, and a flask. Her brown, straight

shoulder-length hair was a bit messy and she seemed distracted, but that was all that was different.

Mum was hungry so they went downstairs and Dad, who had gone to collect her from the police station, clattered angrily, preparing food. Mum sat at the kitchen table, put her head in her hands and massaged her temples.

'Have you got a headache?' said Toby.

'A slight one, yes.'

Toby raced to fetch a painkiller then poured her a glass of water. While she drank, he eyed her wrist for handcuff marks – there weren't any. Although, she did have bright red palms, as if she'd been scrubbing her hands.

'What happened, then, Mum?'

'In a minute, Toby.'

Toby sat. Alfred slinked round Mum's leg then jumped into Toby's lap and together they waited for the story of her arrest. Toby had never known her to raise her voice, let alone get into an argument with anyone, except with Dad, and even then she didn't get angry; she just seemed to be in pain when the arguments happened and they usually ended up with her crying. How could she have got into trouble with the police?

'What happened, Mum?'

'Shh. After I've had some food.'

So, after boiled eggs and toast, with her small, criminal hands wrapped around a mug of jasmine tea, Mum told them the tale of her arrest.

The protest was in the City of London. It was a march that had not been authorised by the police, so she was already in trouble before she began. The march was against the companies based in the City, ones that damaged the planet through emissions and the dumping of waste, and also against the banks that lent money to these companies. The march wound its way between steel and glass towers. At one point, several protestors broke away and glued themselves to the big glass doors of a bank, and Mum joined them.

'Oh, for God's sake!' interrupted Dad.

Mum had put glue on the palms of both hands and fixed herself to the main door. No one could get in or out without Mum shuffling forward or backward. The march moved on, and soon the only people remaining were the handful of protestors stuck to the glass, and a security guard, who was very nice, Mum said – he took the bottle of water from her rucksack and held it to Mum's mouth when she was thirsty.

'His son's very good at piano, apparently,' said Mum. 'Grade Seven.'

'We're not interested in the security guard's son,' snapped Dad.

'Well, I was, David.'

'Were any press there?' said Dad.

'There was a TV cameraman and reporter. And someone from the papers.'

'You didn't give your details did you?'

'Tell us about the arrest, Mum!'

What happened was that a specialist police team arrived with some soapy water and chemicals and spent a couple of hours unsticking the protestors from the glass. They had to do it very slowly so they didn't pull the skin off the protestors' palms.

'And they arrested you?' said Toby.

'Um, well, er, no.'

This group of specialist police had been drafted in from Wales to help with the spate of climate protests taking place across London, as the London police couldn't cope. By the time they had unstuck everyone it was near the end of their shift and they didn't want to spend time arresting people and taking them to the police station. They had tickets for *Les Mis* and didn't want to be late, so they let her go with a warning.

'Oh,' said Toby, vaguely disappointed, as he was starting to like the idea of Mum as an outlaw.

'Well, how did you get arrested, then?' said Dad.

'I went up the road and stuck myself to another bank.'

'You did it again? Who'd you think you are, Greta Thunberg?'

Toby couldn't believe that this quietly spoken, even-tempered woman was so determined. It was amazing really. He looked at her with admiration.

The Met police were not as forgiving as the nice Welsh police. After they'd unstuck her (roughly), they were only too pleased to arrest her. Put in a police van, she was driven to a police station where she was locked in a cell for the night. In the morning they brought her out, told her the date she had to be in court, and released her.

Toby's heart gave a terrified thud. 'You're going to prison?'

'No.'

'She might,' said Dad.

'They'll fine me.'

'You don't know that, Helen.'

'Can't you be a bit more supportive?'

'You've got a TV reporter and newspaper journalist watching you break the law and I've just started this new job with the government. Were you deliberately being stupid?'

Mum slumped in her chair the way Toby had slumped in his when he'd got the bad mark in Science.

'David,' she breathed.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Princess,' said Dad. 'But did you stop to think what your arrest might mean for the rest of us?'

Toby gnawed his lip. He thought it was pretty great getting arrested by the police for doing something you believed in, even if it was against the law, but he didn't think now was the moment to make his view known.

Mum rose and went over to the patio doors and stared out at the pale, dewy morning.

'It'll be all right, Dad,' said Toby.

'What do you know about the laws of the land?' snapped Dad.

Alfred, who had sat patiently in Toby's lap during Mum's story, now got onto all fours as if he was personally affronted by Dad's tone, but it turned out he was just stretching. He dropped onto the kitchen floor and went over to Mum.

'It can't go on like this, David,' she said.

'What's that?' said Dad, eyeing the white cat then glancing around, possibly for his water pistol.

'We can't go on like this. I can't take it any more.'

'Well, in that case you shouldn't –'

But he didn't finish the sentence because Mum let out a cry of dismay, opened the patio door and stepped outside.

'The beech tree,' she said. 'The beech tree is gone.'

'It got cut down,' said Toby.

'But we didn't agree –'

'Yes we did,' said Dad.

'No, we didn't.'

Mum walked across the lawn through the dew and the fine dust that Toby realised now was sawdust. Mum stood at the blond stump, and Toby and Alfred joined her. The presence of the tree seemed to remain, like a ghost,

rising thickly and strongly into the air and spreading over them all.

'That tree has been here since I was a baby,' said Mum.

'Sorry, Mum,' said Toby, not knowing what to do. He gave her arm a squeeze and she and Toby and Alfred looked up at all that emptiness.

*

The bad dream came again that night. He didn't want it to. It seemed to get hold of him physically and throw him around. He was trying to wake up but he was so tired he couldn't. He stayed in an in-between state, as if he had been drugged by his own tiredness. The dream: running through a mountain forest along dusty, pine-needled paths then falling from a great height which morphed into descending a stone staircase in a city. And someone at the bottom of this staircase – or was it a well? – was asking for help. When he finally did wake, he was so hot he had to throw back his duvet. His T-shirt was soaking. He pulled it off and scrambled out of bed, the thickness of the dream still on him. He stood in the middle of his bedroom, swaying. He didn't want to be in the bed, near his sleep. Because there was a bad dream there. The shadow caused it. That dark, treacly blot.

There was a warm strip of light beneath his bedroom door, which comforted him. He went onto the landing.

He could hear the murmur of voices downstairs. He wanted to go down and see his parents but he didn't want to show Dad his fear. He shivered in the cold that came now his sweat had cooled, and from his chest of drawers searched out an old velveteen pyjama top that was too small for him. He wanted his mum to come up and sing to him like she used to do when he was small. She liked musicals, and he liked it when she sang. She couldn't sing as well as Mrs Papadopoulos but she had a nice voice. Songs from *The Wizard of Oz* and *Annie*. 'Tomorrow' and 'Over the Rainbow' and 'We're Off to See the Wizard.' He went down to the half-landing. And now he could hear them in their room. They were arguing. And Mum was crying.

*

Toby went to Margate with his dad that weekend. One of Mum's old friends from university was coming to stay and Dad couldn't stand her so he booked a weekend at a hotel. Toby was surprised his dad was taking him as on the few occasions his dad had gone away for work, he had not let Toby join him, even when Toby begged. Toby was also pleased because he hadn't felt comfortable in the house since the bad dreams. Although Toby hadn't seen the shadow since it had floated towards the window, and in spite of the fact he had managed to convince himself that the shadow was the result of some unknown optical

effect, he felt uncomfortable when he was on his own in the house. He woke uneasily each morning, certain there was another presence somewhere nearby.

Margate was cliffs declining to a sweep of sandy bay and the only things Toby wanted to do were paddle in the sea and visit a steam railway which was a drive away. But the beach was being lashed by a horizontal rain so fierce even the beach donkeys had decided to remain indoors, and the steam railway was shut for repairs.

Toby's dad had booked a twin room in a dilapidated hotel and when they found their door, Toby's dad went straight to the desk by the window, took out his laptop and set to work.

'I thought we were going out,' said Toby.

'What does that look like?' said his dad, pointing.

'The sky?'

'No.'

'The sea, then?'

'No. Rain.'

'No, it's not, it's sky and some seagulls being blown about.'

'And rain.'

Toby sighed and sat down heavily on his bed. The springs creaked.

'Shh!' hissed Dad. 'I'm trying to write.'

'Are you writing your novel, Dad?'

Dad didn't answer.

'Mrs Papadopoulos says you should finish your novel, then you'd be happier.'

His dad stopped tapping, raised his head and stared straight out the window as if he'd just been hit by the most astounding idea in the history of ideas.

'Did you have a new idea about Balthasar, Dad?'

Slowly, Dad turned in his chair. 'Well, you can tell Mrs P that she'd better stick to opera singing or I'll stick her opinions up her *aria*.'

'Oh, all right then, be like that, I don't care. What are we going to do?'

'I'm going to write,' said Dad, turning back to his screen. 'You can go out and explore the hotel or something.'

'Or something,' muttered Toby to himself. 'Come on, Dad,' he wheedled, 'Let's go out.'

'Go away, Toby!'

'She's right,' Toby said, standing up and raising his voice to the level his dad used, 'you are a difficult person.'

His dad seemed to see Toby for the first time. 'Sit down, Toby,' he said, pointing at the bed.

Toby sat, bobbing several times on the ancient, bouncy springs, a little scared because he knew he was going to get told off.

'Listen,' his dad said, 'I was going to tell you later but, well, this is as good a time as any. Your mum and I are getting a divorce.'

His dad had one arm along the back of his chair.

Behind him were acres and acres of rainy sky and seabirds hanging in the heavens then diving, showing off insane acrobatics to one another. They reminded Toby of kids on a skateboard park.

'So until the house is sold,' his dad was saying, 'you and your mum are moving out.'

'What?' said Toby.

His dad frowned in frustration, then repeated the sentence he'd just said, word for word.

'Why can't I stay with you in the house?'

'Because you're going with your mum.'

'But I want to stay with you.'

'Well, you can't. We've discussed it and you're going with your mum.'

'Well, that's not fair, is it?'

'Life isn't fair, Toby.'

'You didn't even ask me.'

His dad sighed a long-suffering sigh, shook his head as if saying to some invisible observer, *See what I have to deal with*? and gently, as if speaking to a total fool, said, 'Well that's the way it is, Tobes.'

Toby, as the seagulls cartwheeled and zoomed behind his dad's head, said, 'What will happen to Alfred?'

'Well, he'll go with Mrs Papadopoulos. He sure as sh – … He's not living with me.'

'Oh.'

There was a silence.

'All right?' said his dad.

Toby stared at the threadbare carpet's swirls.

'All right?'

In the gloom of the room, Toby couldn't see his dad's face properly against the sky. Finally his dad faced his computer and tapped at the keys.

Toby sat there a while. Then he stood up. 'I'm going out for a bit.'

'Hmm?' his dad said, tapping.

'I'm going out for a bit.'

'Oh, all right, Tobes. D'you want some money?'

'No.'

'Here, take some money.' His dad fetched his wallet from his jacket and took out a ten-pound note. 'Go and play on the amusements.'

Toby took the money and went out, crushing the banknote in his fist.

He wandered the hallways for a while, circled a damp-stained ballroom, poked around a conference room of stacked chairs, and in a lounge opened all the drawers. They contained table mats and candles. Then he went down to the lobby and through the revolving door. Instantly the wind turned his jacket into a billowing parachute on his back and the rain soaked him. He walked down from the cliff and plodded the great expanse of Margate Sands.

The shadow, he decided, had come into his life and brought catastrophe.

Toby avoided the amusement park (its sign shouted in huge letters DREAMLAND as if amusement was brilliant) and escaped the rain in a large seafront shelter, not wanting to sit down because his soaking jeans were shrunk so tight on his legs it was unpleasant to bend his knees.

'All right, Chief,' said a voice, and Toby turned to see an old man in overalls, with white hair and unshaved cheeks, with a crooked roll-up cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

Beyond the man stood a small enclosure of tall wire fencing with concrete blocks at the base, to which canvas sheets were tied so that whatever was being done behind them was entirely hidden.

'What are you fixing?' said Toby, nodding at the wire fence.

'The universe,' said the old man, and winked.

It took Toby a long time to realise what the man meant by this, perhaps half a minute. In the meantime, he stared at him blankly, then finally it hit him, and he understood that he was trying to be funny. Toby had had enough of people being sarcastic, so he walked out of the seafront shelter into the furious wind and as he passed the old workman, shouted at him, 'Shut up, you idiot!'