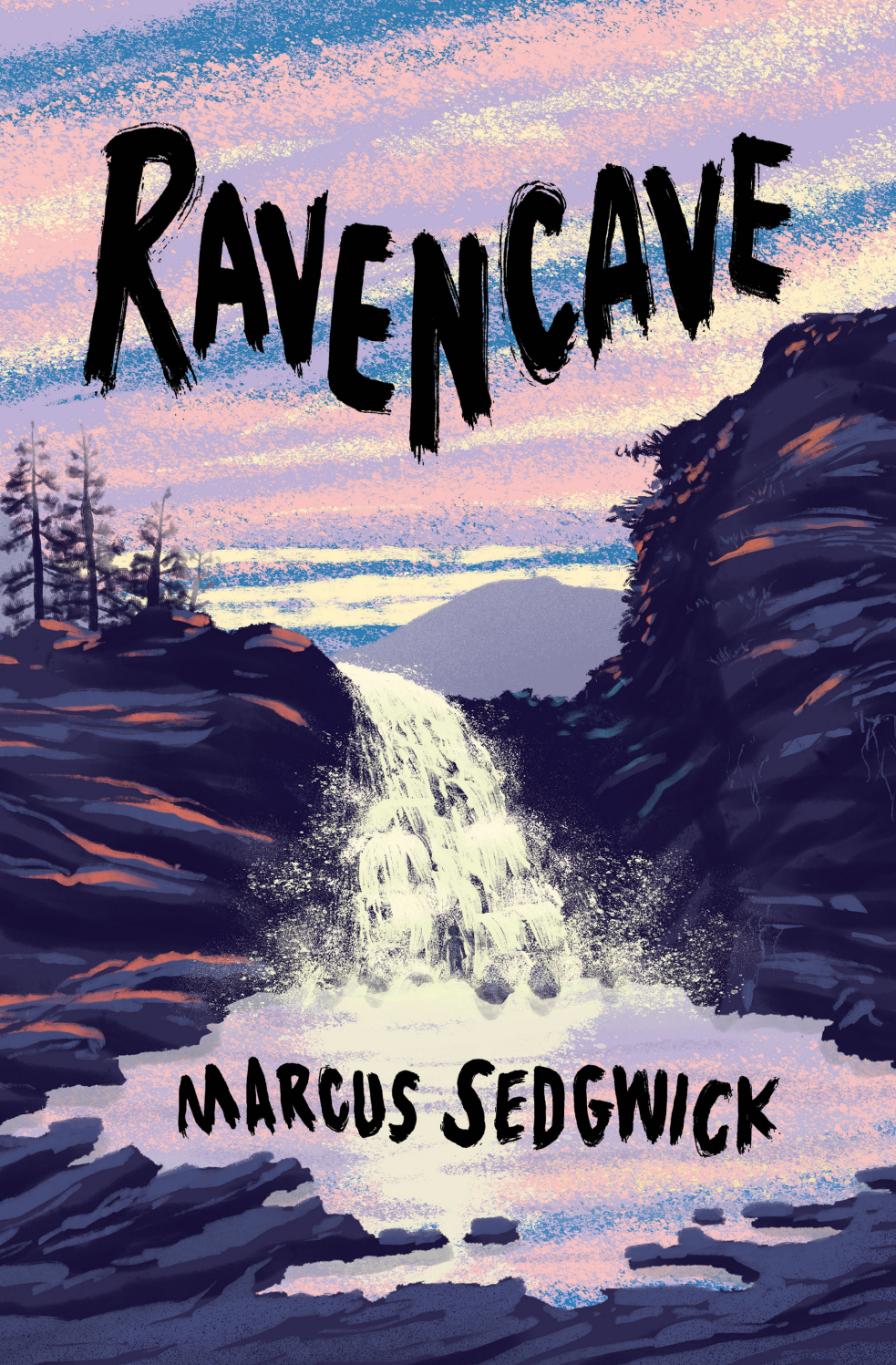

RAVENCAVE
MARCUS SEDGWICK

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MARCUS SEDGWICK

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For our ancestors

ONE

"This place is full of ghosts," says Mum. "This entire landscape."

No one answers her. They're walking ahead of me anyway – Mum, Dad, Robbie. I only hear Mum's voice because the wind picks it up and brings it down the path to me. I've stopped by the ruin – the ruin of Crackpot Hall.

The abandoned, derelict buildings stand over the wide valley below, but I don't see any ghosts. I don't see anyone at all – not a thing moving, not a person, not even a bird in the sky.

I've stopped because I can't go on. This often happens – my family have left me behind. They forget I can't keep up. Robbie is two years older than me, nearly three, in fact. And Mum and Dad are the types who march over mountains without a moment's thought.

They move on. I watch them go, leaving me further behind. I know we have to hurry. Dad explained that when we set out this morning.

"There's bad weather coming in later," he said. "I know it looks nice now, but we have to be back before mid-afternoon."

"We'll be fine," Mum replied, and Robbie said nothing. And then we set out later than we meant to. Which means no one is waiting for me. And I know we have to hurry. I know we do, because we came here to do this important thing for Dad. For his mum.

We leave tomorrow, after our week's holiday, and the weather hasn't been great. There hasn't been the chance to get up here. We've just been stuck in our rooms in the pub or visiting places. Mum and Dad have been getting cross with each other. It's rained a lot – not like last year, when it was sunny the whole time. That was the first time we came here, a year ago, around Easter too.

*

On that last visit, it was really hot, like summer. And one day we did the same walk as today, up past Crackpot Hall and beyond.

Exactly the same thing happened then. I remember stopping on this very same spot on this very same bend in the footpath. After this, the bend climbs up to the Hall and then snakes around the back of it, before running on, flatter again, to the east.

I stood here then, almost exactly a year ago, out of breath, while the others had gone ahead of me. I remember looking at the view of the valley, basking in hot spring sunshine. It felt too hot for the time of year. This seemed to be a place that was normally wet and grey and windy. But that day it was really hot. I wanted to go and swim in the waterfalls to cool off, but Mum and Dad wanted to walk, so that was what we did.

I stood and panted and looked down the valley, and I tried to connect with it. I tried to feel something for it. I tried to feel *anything*, just to please Dad, because that was mostly why we were here, that time a year ago. It was why we'd chosen the Yorkshire Dales for our holiday, so that Dad could poke around the villages where his grandparents and great-grandparents had lived. It had become so important to him, for some reason. He seemed to be upset that I felt nothing for the place, and neither did Mum or Robbie.

Dad would look at Robbie and me and say, "My grandfather was born here," or, "My great-grandmother was born there." We'd stand looking blankly at Dad, and he'd say, "They're your ancestors too, you know!" And still we'd look blankly at him, and he'd go quiet for hours.

Dad never used to be interested in his family history. Mum said it was his age – suddenly he wanted a sense of where he came from, or something.

Maybe she was right – that if Dad knows where he came from, he will know who he is. Whatever the reason, he's been obsessed with his family history now for a couple of years.

I also remember, a year ago, how I stopped just short of the Hall. Robbie came bounding back down the path to get me, full of excitement.

"You have to see this place!" Robbie said. "You won't guess what it's called."

So I made myself move again and followed Robbie into the ruin, panting in the heat.

The name Crackpot Hall makes it sound like it's some huge stately home, but it isn't that kind of place. It's a farmhouse, that's all. Or it

was. It must have been one or maybe two large buildings with some outbuildings attached. But the roofs have all gone now, fallen in.

It's still a great place to play in, but Mum shouted at Robbie and me as we started climbing over walls, saying it wasn't safe. She said one day one of us would have a proper accident and then we'd learn to be more careful. Mum was probably right, but we ignored her for a bit until she got really cross, and then she went to go and look at the view.

Dad smiled at Robbie and me.

"Some spot, eh?" Dad said.

He stood looking down the valley. He'd forgotten the open guidebook in his hand. The landscape was … I don't know how to describe it. Wide, open, green. Beautiful.

Sad too, somehow. I don't know why I thought that – I just felt it.

"They might have only been farmers who lived here," Dad added, "but they had a view fit for a king."

"Why do kings get the best of everything?" asked Robbie. But before anyone could answer, he ran off. Never stays still for long, does Robbie.

Dad stuck his nose back in the guidebook.

"Ha," he said. "Crackpot doesn't mean what you think it means."

"What do I think it means?" I asked.

"You think it means like a crazy person. A lunatic, right?"

"Maybe," I said, because that's exactly what I had been thinking.

Mum was coming back and heard.

"Crackpot means 'cave of the ravens'," she said.

Dad scowled at her, but in a funny way.

"How did you know that?" Dad asked.

"Read about it over breakfast," Mum said. She looked at me and explained, "Crackpot comes from old words. Norse words. The language that the Vikings spoke. Crack comes from their word for raven, *kraka*, and *pot* meant a cave or a hole. Actually, we still use that word. As in

'potholing' – when people go caving. So its real name is Ravencave."

"But I don't see any caves marked on the map," said Dad. "That's strange."

Mum shivered.

"Why anyone would want to crawl around in holes deep underground is beyond me," she said. "Some people do weird things for pleasure, don't they? Why go underground when you could be looking at all this beauty?"

She waved an arm at the view, but I wasn't seeing what Mum was seeing.

"There were Vikings here?" I asked. It was hard to believe anyone had ever been here, aside from walkers like us. Only the ruins of the farm showed that at some point people had lived here, high up, but I couldn't imagine what they'd been doing.

"Vikings?" Dad said. "Yes, they were here. A thousand years ago last Wednesday. "Give or take."

He chuckled and we set off again, leaving Crackpot Hall behind us.

*

That was all a year ago. And some things are the same and some things have changed.

Robbie is Robbie, but he is a new version of Robbie, one who doesn't seem to like me any more.

Meanwhile, I have a large scar on my knee from where I fell a year ago. I'd been trying to keep up with him, clambering over the rocks at the river fairly near here.

Mum was a writer, but she wasn't writing anything back then and she isn't now. In fact, I only have a vague memory of when she did write. Are you still a writer if you no longer write anything?

Dad tells Mum she still is a writer. He tells her all the time. It doesn't seem to help. In fact, it seems to make things worse. Mum was pretty successful once.

And then there's Dad. Things have changed for him because he lost his job – just a week before we came away. No one knows what's going to happen now. Mum's been working part-time at the local arts centre for about a

year, but without Dad's income, things aren't looking good …

I was amazed we still came on holiday this year, but Dad said, "It's all paid for already. We're going. And when we get back, I'll figure out what to do."

So we came, and here we are, four souls spread across the Yorkshire landscape. I am left wondering how it is that people go on. How do people keep on going, even when everything seems to be against them?

I watch Mum and Dad, twenty metres apart, higher up on the trail. Robbie is nowhere to be seen. He's already out of sight ahead of them, over the crest of the hill.

What makes people go on? I think.

Then I think, *I am too young to be thinking thoughts like this, aren't I?*

Then I decide that thought is weird in itself. I realise what's more important: I had better try to catch up before they lose me entirely.

I skirt around and above the back of the ruin of the place that should be called Ravencave Hall.

As I walk, I realise that I do know what makes Mum go on.

She's chasing ghosts.

People say that sometimes. They say, "Oh, so-and-so, he's chasing a ghost." It means they're doing something hopeless, looking for something that they will never find. But with Mum, it's different. She really is looking for ghosts, and this is not some silly pipe dream, because she has chased them before. And found them. Often.