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opening extract from

Floodland

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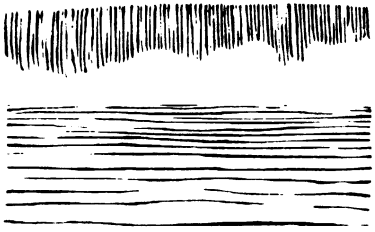
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Floodland

Marcus Sedgwick

Wood engravings by the author



Dolphin Paperbacks



before



one

Zoe ran. Harder than she had ever run in her life. Her feet pounded through the deserted streets of derelict buildings. Somewhere, not far behind, she could hear the gang coming after her. It felt as if her heart would burst, but she didn't slow down. She'd been planning to leave the island for a long time, but had been putting it off. It was a big decision to set out to sea in a tiny rowing boat. Now she had no choice.

Before, no one had bothered her. Zoe was a loner. Most of the people left on Norwich hung around together in groups, but she preferred to be on her own. It was safer that way, because you never knew whom you could trust.

Somehow, someone had found out about the boat she'd been hiding. A boat was an escape route, a way to get away from Norwich, which got smaller every year, as the sea kept on rising. It didn't matter that there could only be room for two people at most in her boat. Others had joined in the chase, and now a mob of about fifteen people was hot on her heels. There was only one way out; to get to her boat before

they got to her. So she ran on, while her body screamed for her to stop.

''Get back here!'' someone yelled angrily at her, though they couldn't see her.

It wasn't far to the little shed where she'd hidden *Lyca*, her boat. A couple more streets of derelict shops to where what was left of the city fell away into the sea. If the sea hadn't come she might have been shopping here herself, with her parents perhaps. From much practice she squashed the thought of her parents as soon as it started, and kept on running.

Just before she rounded a corner, she heard more shouts from behind. They had seen her.

''There!''

''Come on!'' shouted another voice. ''Get her!''

Scared, she made the corner, but her feet slipped from under her on the wet ground. She went sprawling, and slid clumsily in the mud. She started to panic badly, and made a mess of getting up again. She had dropped her pack as she fell, but there was no time to pick it up.

The sound of running feet came closer. Another two seconds and they would be round the corner. She got up and practically threw herself over a wall. She landed awkwardly, but she'd won a little more time. She was in a graveyard. It led away down a hill to where a small brick shed stood near the water's edge. Once it had contained all the equipment for looking after the graveyard, but now it contained Zoe's boat. The previous night she had rowed around from the warehouse where she had found the boat and fixed it. The old building had been unsafe when she'd discovered it, and had been getting worse. She had decided to find a new place to keep her boat, and the shed seemed ideal.

In the dark she had dragged the boat the short distance from the water to the shed. It had been very hard work. At night she hadn't noticed the deep ruts the boat's keel had made in the sodden grass. In daylight, even in her mad rush, they were obvious. She would be lucky if no one had already found it.

''*Lyca*,'' Zoe panted as she opened the shed door, ''please be here, *Lyca*.''

It was all right. The boat was still there waiting for her.

Pulling it across the grass, and then into the water, she dared to look behind her for the first time. Her stomach twisted with fear. The gang were storming down the hill, weaving in and out of the crumbling gravestones. Zoe moved faster. She clambered aboard and put the oars out, then started to pull. They were at the water now, and though one or two stopped, the rest came splashing madly after her.

''Take me with you!''

''Come back! We won't hurt you. Just take us with you!''

Zoe could see their eyes, clearly. She saw fear. But she couldn't trust them. Since she'd lost her parents, she'd made it a rule not to trust anyone. Zoe had heard people say they'd lost someone, when really they meant they had died. In Zoe's case, 'lost' meant exactly that. It was still unbelievable, and so stupid.

She looked at the crowd in the water again. If she went back, there'd be a fight over her boat, and she wouldn't get a look in. She rowed on, pulling harder, even though she was safely away.

Slowly, she watched as the people dragged themselves out of the water and waded back to the shore. Natasha was there too. That hurt most of all. Natasha was the closest thing she

had to a friend. Zoe used to see her when the supply ships came, before they stopped coming. After that she saw her sometimes at the allotments, when she went to put some work in to earn food. They would only have a little chat, but it was enough to keep Zoe from cracking up. But now the allotments had sunk into chaos, too.

Zoe suddenly remembered their conversation the last time they'd met. She had been about to tell Natasha about her boat, and her plans to escape, but had decided not to. Maybe Natasha had guessed? From something Zoe had let slip? It didn't matter now. The crowd stood quietly, watching her as she rowed away.

Zoe didn't feel scared of them any more.

''Sorry,'' she said to herself, quietly. She began to cry, but she didn't stop rowing. Her uncut hair fell across her eyes, but she didn't stop to push it away. Still she rowed on, her thin hunched frame working the oars until finally she had to pause for breath.

Feeling around in her pocket she fished out her compass. It was the last thing she owned that had belonged to her parents. For that reason she'd kept it in a pocket. If she hadn't she'd have lost it when she dropped her pack. It was a little dented from her leap over the cemetery wall, but it was still working.

She pointed herself south-west, and rowed. She couldn't remember the name of the place the supply ship used to come from, but she knew the big bit of Britain was somewhere in that direction.

She was rowing away from all she had ever known. It was a strange thing. Before the previous night, she had only ever pretended to row. Her dad had taught her, in the same methodical way he did everything.

''You'll need to know how to do this one day,'' he told her.

He'd taught her how to use the compass, as well as a lot of stuff about survival. Just in case the time came when she was on her own.

And so every now and then, when they weren't busy just trying to get by, they'd sit in an old bathtub and pretend to row.

Even though it had seemed like a game to Zoe at the time, he'd made sure she was doing it right anyway. And she knew just how to do it, the only thing that surprised her was how hard it was to pull the oars through the water.

''Why don't you look where you're going?'' she'd asked her dad.

''When you're rowing, you mean?'' he said.

''Yes. Why do you sit looking backwards?''

''It's just the way it's done,'' he said. ''You couldn't row half as well facing forwards.''

It had always seemed strange to her, but now it was even worse. There before her was Norwich getting smaller and smaller with each stroke. She was heading into the unknown, without even looking where she was going.

She rowed and rowed, until her small supply of food had gone. She had put the compass on the floor of the boat in front of her, and every few seconds she checked her direction against it. There was no sign of land now, and a creeping fear began to seep into her. She looked at the compass almost every stroke; it was her only chance now. Like magic, its tiny hand kept pointing in the same direction. It knew where she was going, even if *she* didn't. She lost all sense of time. The sun was somewhere way overhead, and beat on the back of

her neck, making her feel dizzy. She pushed her hair out of her eyes, but the sea wind blew it back across her face. She felt faint. She was in trouble. She had just enough awareness to pull in her oars. Then she slumped over them.

In her stupor she replayed the nightmare where she had lost her parents.