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opening extract from

Book of Dead Days

written by

Marcus Sedgwick

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The Book of Dead Days

Marcus Sedgwick

A Dolphin
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The Day of the Clever Contributor

Darkness.

Two hours to midnight. Boy sat crouched in the box.

As usual, his legs were going to sleep under him, tucked up in the tiny dark space hidden inside the cabinet. Above him, he could hear Valerian going through his routine. Boy could only hear his voice as if from far-off, and tried to work out where he had got to. It wouldn't do to miss the cue; it wouldn't do at all. But Boy knew he didn't really need to worry. He used to try to count his way to it, but had always got lost somewhere, and anyway, there was no need – the cue was obvious enough.

Boy tried to shift his weight ever so slightly, attempting to get some feeling back in his legs. It was no good. The box had been designed specifically for him, and Valerian had seen to it that there was no more than half an inch to spare in any direction.

Suddenly there was a solid thump on the top of the box: the first cue, which meant 'Get ready, Boy.'

Boy heard a noise from the audience, faintly. He couldn't see them, but he knew what the noise meant. It was a murmur of expectation. Valerian had just stepped on to the cabinet and was even now whipping the crowd into greater

excitement as he outlined the extraordinary nature of the sight they were about to see.

Boy even caught some of Valerian's words through the hefty oak panels of the cabinet.

'. . . most miraculous . . . feat of obscure . . .'

Oh-ho! thought Boy. *That means we're nearly there.*

'. . . the Man in Two Halves Illusion . . .'

He readied himself, flexing his toes inside the boots, three sizes too big for him. Thump! Thump!

The cue! Boy went to stamp his legs out through the hinged flap at the end of the box, but was suddenly hit by a powerful cramp. His toes curled painfully under him and he instantly felt sick. If he were to ruin it . . .

Desperately he tried to kick again. Still the cramp ate up his legs like a snake, biting, making him unable to move them.

Thump! Thump!

Valerian was getting cross. Boy shuddered as thoughts of what he might do to him passed through his mind. He made one last effort and shoved again. At last his legs responded and he stuck them out of the end of the box, wearing the huge boots identical to the ones Valerian was wearing.

Now, straightened out, Boy waved his legs a little. He knew this would be safe, because he was supposed to wiggle them at this point, to show they were real. They were supposed to be Valerian's, hence the matching boots.

As Valerian had got into the front half of the box, Boy's legs had not appeared where they should have done and the illusion must have been in danger. But Boy seemed to have got away with it. Now his legs were sticking through the flap, the pain began to ease a bit. He got a little more air and could hear better too.

Valerian shouted.

'Behold!'

Boy felt his box start to move stage left. He heard the audience begin to gasp as they understood (at last) what was happening.

'Look!' he heard someone cry. 'He's gone in half!'

It was true. From where the audience sat, they could see Valerian's head and shoulders projecting from one half of the box, while his legs moved away from him in the other part of the contraption. The single cabinet had become two boxes, running on metal tracks. There was a clear space between the two parts of his body, and the crowd went wild.

'It's true!' shouted a woman's voice, somewhere near the front, Boy thought.

Of course it was not true. It was an illusion. Although Boy knew full well what the audience were thinking as the halves of Valerian's body went in opposite directions across the stage, he knew how it was done. He was, after all, *in* on the trick. Boy felt himself smile as the crowd began to applaud wildly. Then he remembered the fiasco with his legs, and the smile faded. What would Valerian say?

Sober again, Boy prepared to pull himself back in at the right time. He could sense the automatic mechanism of the contraption begin to turn the heavy brass cogs in reverse as the two halves of the box drew back together. He felt the boxes bump gently. His cue. He felt himself panicking. He whipped his legs back inside just as Valerian stepped out of the other half of the device. Boy timed it perfectly and now, cramped back in the box, breathed as deep a breath as he could. He felt the machine being trundled off stage. It was being cleared for the finale while Valerian took the applause of the crowd.

Off-stage, Boy pushed the lid of the cabinet up with his head until there was enough space to lift it with his hands.

'Out you come, then,' said a stage hand.

Boy took his hand gratefully, his legs still not working properly. He climbed out and stood for a moment in the wings, rubbing his sore calves and watching as Valerian began his grand finale.

The Fairyland Vanishing Illusion.

Boy was not needed for this part of the act. He watched Valerian from the side of the stage.

How many times has he done this? Boy wondered. He had forgotten how long he had been working for Valerian, but it was years. Boy could only guess at how many thousand times he had hidden in boxes, pulled levers, set off thunder-flashes and opened trapdoors. He helped Valerian with trick after trick, week after week in the Great Theatre, which was as much of a home as anywhere to Boy. In recent years he had probably spent as much time in the theatre as he had in his room in Valerian's house, known as the Yellow House, back in the Old Quarter.

Boy decided to watch the grand finale from the front of the theatre, but not with the audience. He had a special place, and he wanted to be as far away as he could when Valerian came off stage.

He made his way off the stage, past the painted canvas scenery drops and ropes and wires that cluttered the world just beyond the view of the public, pushing past hands and other performers. Briefly, he glanced at Snake-girl, who sat braiding her hair in a corner, then hurried by the actors who'd finished their rowdy routine immediately before Snake-girl's act, rounded a corner and bumped straight into someone.

It was Willow, the girl who helped Madame Beauchance, a rather fat singer, into her costumes. Willow was just like her name, thin and wan. Madame had joined the theatre

about a year ago, and Willow had immediately been made her servant. Boy had only spoken to Willow properly once, though. Madame had been screaming for hot water in her dressing room, and Boy had given her a freshly-boiled jug he was taking to Valerian. Afterwards he didn't know why he'd done it, and he'd got in trouble with Valerian over it, too.

'Can't you look where you're going?' Willow said, then saw who it was.

'Oh, it's you,' she added, and rushed past before Boy could say anything. Fetching something for Madame, no doubt. Her mistress was difficult, though nothing like Valerian was to him. No one was like Valerian.

'Sorry,' said Boy, but she had gone.

Boy moved on. He had other things to worry about. He knew something was going on. Something with his master. Valerian had always been erratic, sour-tempered and unpredictable. Violent.

Now he was these things. But something else as well that Boy had never seen before. He couldn't quite put it into words, but if he had really thought about it he might have realised that Valerian was preoccupied. Worried. Maybe even scared. But it would never have occurred to Boy that Valerian could be scared. It was Boy who did the being scared and the worrying – always waiting to get a hiding for any slight mistake he made.

He headed for the stairs. A group of musicians blocked the way.

'You all done for tonight, Boy?' asked the violinist, an oldish man with a bent nose.

Boy didn't answer, but forced a smile and squeezed past.

'Poor monkey,' he heard another of them say as he made his way to the secret gallery in the 'gods' above the highest row of boxes. A tiny staircase led almost up to the roof space

and opened on to a tiny corridor. He wasn't really allowed in the box. No one was. It was a secret that only Korp, the director of the Great Theatre, was supposed to know about, though in fact everyone did.

The door was locked, but Boy took a piece of metal from his pocket and flicked the three tumblers of the lock in no time at all. He had learned one or two things from Valerian in their time together. In fact, apart from what he'd picked up living on the streets, most of what Boy knew about anything had been taught him by Valerian.

He dropped down the couple of feet into the box. There was the little stool covered in red velvet and the small hollow table inside which Boy knew was a bottle of the director's favourite schnapps. In the front of the box was a small window. Boy carefully lifted the blind that covered the glassless hole, and peered forward. The glow from the footlights sparkled in his eyes.

Boy knew a lot about Valerian's tricks. He helped perform many of them and helped assemble others. But the grand finale was something very different. So spectacular was this illusion that Valerian was known throughout the whole City for it. It was probably for this trick alone that the Great Theatre was still in business.

The theatre lay in the heart of what had once been the most glamorous part of the City, the Arts Quarter, now fallen into decadence and ruin. The other acts that performed there were by and large terrible. The crowds would eat and drink and talk and laugh throughout the evening, paying little or no attention to what passed on stage. They had come for one thing. Many came night after night to see the Fairyland Vanishing Illusion. Others, new arrivals in town, travellers from distant parts maybe, were about to see it for the first time.

Boy knew nothing of the workings of this trick. He had seen it a thousand times, maybe more, and still marvelled every time. He supposed that it was too valuable, too extraordinary or too complicated for Valerian to tell anyone how it worked.

By the time Boy got up to the box, Valerian was already well into the piece. Boy craned his neck so that his nose was projecting a little through the view-hole.

The Illusion featured a short play about a drunkard who stumbles across a gathering of pixies dancing on the mountainside. They disappear back to fairyland, but the man overhears their secret words and follows them. He captures one of the little people and brings him back to the human world, determined to make his fortune with the fairy.

Valerian was reaching the climax of the show. He moved to the mouth of a cabinet built into a tree-trunk, stage right. Stage left was an identical affair. He was acting without joy or passion. He knew he didn't even have to try to inject any excitement into the audience. They were already beside themselves with anticipation.

Boy watched him carefully. Something was wrong – Valerian seemed even more uninterested than usual. He seemed impatient, in a rush to get it done with. A note had been delivered to Valerian just before the show, and Boy wondered if his strange mood had anything to do with that. He had grown sombre as he'd read.

On stage, Valerian spoke the lines as he had many times before.

'What did those little people say?' he asked, staring at the ceiling, addressing no one in particular.

'Aha! I have it!'

Valerian stepped into the tree-trunk cabinet.

'Ho! And away to fairyland!'

And he vanished. No more than half a second later there was a wisp of smoke from the second tree-trunk and he reappeared, holding a tiny human-like figure in his hands. The thing was tiny, cupped in his hands, and seemed, at least, to be alive. It wriggled in his hands and you would swear you could hear a little voice coming from it. It appeared to be dressed in leaves and flowers. It could have been male or female, but it was certainly a fairy.

Then, just as Valerian, playing the drunkard, appeared to have achieved his goal, there was a double flash of lightning, the fairy seemed to grow for a split second to the size of a man, and then both it and Valerian vanished again, back to fairyland.

The crowd, knowing this to be the pinnacle of the performance, erupted into huge cheers and shouts of delight.

Boy sat back on the red velvet stool and felt something dig into his back. He looked round and jumped out of his skin. Valerian sat behind him, glowering.

'You, Boy,' he said, 'have let me down.'