A LIGHT FROM ELSEWHERE

Review Copy

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To Oliver and Sophie.

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A group of people spent their lives chained in a cave, unable to move. The only things they could see were shadows cast on the wall by a fire hidden from view. As this was all they knew, they thought this was all the world contained. One day one of them escaped from the cave, went out into the sunlight and saw the wonders of the world. At first, she could not believe it was real, but came to accept the truth of what

she must be mad and preferred to stay in their chains than follow her into the light.

Plato. *The Cave* from *The Republic*: circa 375 BCE

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Following significant trauma or bereavement a fragile mind can create fantasies so detailed they can no longer tell them apart from reality. These fantasies may include whole new worlds and characters, even friends and relatives. It is a coping mechanism as the brain tries to protect itself from further harm. Medication and hospitalisation are almost always necessary to ensure recovery.

Dr Robin Manning. *Caring for our Minds:* Firestorm Books, London 2024

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CHAPTER 1

The voice lingered on the air for a moment before dissolving in the breeze, the words lost, too faint for her to fully make out. She thought she had heard her

again – rock pools and a sea breeze, a smell for a summer's day at the beach, not an autumn evening fifty miles from the coast.

She turned off the path, trying to find the source of the voice, her mind watching as her feet took over. She wondered if she should try and stop, head back to the house, but couldn't find the strength to make the thought matter. Her feet knew what they were doing, she was sure, and they wouldn't lead her to any harm. The evening light faded as she entered the trees. A rock had cut her foot, but she didn't feel any pain, as if it had happened to someone else and they had described the feeling to her. Perhaps she had fallen asleep? *That must be it*, she thought, *I'm dreaming*. The realisation brought comfort and she gave up any attempt to stop. She wasn't walking through the

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forest but lying asleep on the sofa, the TV still on, her dad shuffling through his record collection in the other room.

Robin had talked her through the nightmares she had after her mother died, pointing out symbolism and double meaning. Dreaming about death, for example, meant a new beginning. It's a natural part of the grieving process, he told her, and is healthy and helpful. If you concentrate hard, sometimes you can control your dreams, be an active part of them. Always remember, you are completely safe; nothing can hurt you, even if it seems fantastical. But this dream seemed ordinary somehow, almost too real, everything as it would be if she were awake.

Her feet stopped and she listened as hard as she could, hoping to hear the voice again. A branch creaked as a bird flew out of the tree with a cry and a clatter. Then it came:

Esme.

Her name drifted through her, and she wasn't sure if she had heard it or felt it.

"Yes?" Had she spoken out loud or just in her mind? "Who are you?"

Esme. Curna pes bigang.

The rest of the words meant nothing, but she had heard the voice before, she was certain. In a previous dream, perhaps?

"Where are you?" she called, the last word echoing through the dark, fainter and fainter until silent.

She caught a glimpse of something up ahead, the flick of a tail, before it vanished over a rise, the snort of the horse still lingering. Her feet picked up speed, until she

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was almost running, branches flicking at her face and catching in her hair. She knew she had more cuts on her feet, but she had to catch up with the horse; nothing else mattered.

At the top of the rise, the trees thinned, and she looked across a small meadow, the grass pale in the cloudless evening. She recognised it at once as the meadow behind her house. The real estate agent had spent a long time explaining to her dad how desirable the extra land could be. He could rent it out as pasture, or maybe invest in a horse.

"All the girls ride in the country," said the agent.

"Really?" said Esme, hoping her smile looked as false as his. "I've lived in the country all my life and never been near one."

Her father put a hand on her shoulder and asked the estate agent some question about land maintenance. She turned away, a slight pang of guilt at her rudeness.

So this is where my dream has brought me. Why can't I dream about being in New York or the Maldives, not the bloody back garden?

Some way up ahead, the horse snorted again and she caught the smell of the sea again, but stronger this time, tinged with decay. Another snort and the horse's head emerged slowly from the tree line. She felt her eyes squint in the gloom as she tried to make out its colour, but she could see nothing but a dark outline. *If this is a dream I can control, I should be able to make it come all the way out.* But the horse's head slipped back beyond the trees, its shape merging with the darkness.

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"Come back!" The echo again, bouncing away into silence.

Her feet started to run, covering the ground across the meadow at a sprint. The grass grew wetter, and she could feel the earth underneath it, slimy and cold, but her feet stayed firm and she slid to a stop at the tree line. For the first time, Esme noticed the silence. There had been noises before, she was sure of it; the wind, the cry of a bird, but now she couldn't even hear her own breathing. She took a step forward towards the trees, but her feet seem to have lost their energy.

The light faded under the leaves, but she knew they were just a thin edge, encircling the mounds in the clearing, the ones called the Barrows.

"They are of great historical and archaeological importance." The estate agent had paused, his eyebrows raised slightly, daring them not to want something like that on their own land. "Apparently, they date to pre-historic times. As old as Stonehenge. Historians believe they had a religious function."

"That seems like a lot of responsibility," said her dad. "I'm not sure…"

"Oh, there's no upkeep. And they aren't open to the public, so nothing to do at all. Great conversation pieces, though."

The estate agent's voice drifted out of her mind as she stepped through the trees and out into the clearing. The three mounds looked bigger in the dark, lumps of shadow rising fifteen feet in the air. If she hadn't been

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told otherwise, she would have assumed they were just old mounds of earth, long since covered in grass and wild flowers. Somehow she knew that whoever had called to her lay on the other side of them.

Stop there. Stop there now.

The new voice sounded familiar. A girl's, soft but compelling, and she found she had no choice but to listen.

You need to stop now. Don't let him.

"I don't understand. I'm just following the horse. It's important."

Who's riding the horse?

The last words shot fear down her spine, bringing a deep cold, and she heard herself gasp. *Stop, feet*, she thought. *It's my dream and I don't want to go any further, stop now*. But her feet kept running, her legs tightening in strain as she fought them. The fear grew, the smell all around her, an acrid decay she could taste. She concentrated hard, trying to force her feet to stop, and she knew the conflict tore at her muscles. With a final effort, she managed to throw herself backwards, her legs kicking the air as she slid to a halt on the grass.

"*Up now. Run!*" And she realised the voice was hers, coming to her from far away, like a spoken memory.

But before she could obey, the horse burst out of the trees with a noise like a scream, its front legs kicking the air. Its hoofs hit the ground and she felt the earth tremble a little. The horse walked slowly towards her, a man sitting on top, his skin an identical colour to the horse

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in the dim light. She tried to raise herself up from the ground, but she couldn't, her body resisting everything she tried to do. The horse and rider drew slowly closer, the horse's breath condensing like fog, despite the warm night. It stopped, turning slightly to the side as a cloud drew away from the moon, covering the paddock in soft light.

Esme opened her mouth to scream, but her throat wouldn't let her. What she thought had been a horse and rider was a single being, the torso of a man growing out of the top of the horse's back, muscles and veins visible through the skinless body. A tiny crab ran out of the horse's eye and vanished into its flank. The creature turned its human head towards her, its eyes the colour of old snow. It opened its mouth, its jaw moving slowly and stiffly, as if unused to speaking.

"*Wilcume, Egesgríme*."

The words meant nothing to her. *Wake up, oh God, please wake up…*

The horse took a step forward, the human part of it holding out a skin-less hand, its white eyes glowing brighter. A cold wind blew through the trees as they shook, then shimmered, then began to fade from view. Esme heard the crash of waves on a shore, and a clear summer moon lit the clearing in a misty light, bringing with it a sense of calm and inevitability.

"*Curna eac fleoge*," said the creature. And as it spoke she knew what the words meant, as if she had been speaking the language all her life. *Come with me now.*

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The words seemed to give her legs new strength, and she felt herself standing, a gentle acceptance of what was happening trickling into her mind.

Don't give up. Keep going.

Her voice again, pulling her back towards the trees, away from the creature and the sea. This time the horseman seemed to hear it as well, and his human head looked up at the sky as the horse reared its legs into the air. The movement seemed to break whatever hold the creature had, her mind becoming something of her own again, and she turned, willing her legs to run back towards the house.

The pain in her feet became real, shooting up her legs as she stumbled, one hand hitting the ground. Behind her she heard the creature's hoofs getting nearer. She glanced back but couldn't see anything. The sound grew louder, the hoofs beating out a rhythm on the ground, building as it grew closer.

"Help me!" The words formed in her mouth, but she couldn't be sure if they had made any sound.

Run, run. Nearly there.

She could feel the creature behind her, the heat from its breath, sense the hands reaching for her, inches from her neck.

"Dad!"

She ran out of the pasture back onto the lawn behind her house. A light shone in the kitchen.

"Dad!" She screamed the word, forcing it out for as long as she could.

"I'm here, Esme. I'm here!"

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She tripped, her body skidding across the damp grass. She tried to get up, but her feet slipped and she fell back to the ground.

"It's all right! It's all right, I'm here."

She felt her dad's arms around her, pulling her to her feet. She clung to him, her body trembling. "It's coming. It's coming for me!"

"What is? What's wrong?"

Esme turned, pointing back towards the pasture. "The—" She stopped, the next words silenced by the empty lawn and the still silhouettes of trees. Any sign of the creature or the sea had vanished. "There was a… It was…"

Her dad stared at her, shaking his head slightly. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm not sure." Esme struggled to keep her tears away. "I was walking, there was a voice…"

"A voice?" Her father's grip on her arms tightened. "What do you mean? A voice in your head?"

The despair welled up inside her. "Don't say that. Please."

Her father pulled her close, one hand stroking the back of her head.

"I'm not crazy, Dad. Please say I'm not crazy." The temperature seemed to drop, and she shivered as tears slid down her face. Her father's arms tightened around her, his voice breaking as he spoke.

"It's all right, sweetheart. I'll call Dr Manning in the morning.We'll get any help you need. You're going to get better, I promise."

He led her gently back to the house towards the warm lights of the kitchen as the clouds thickened and the air smelt of rain.

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CHAPTER 2

A fish swam out from behind the treasure chest and made its way to the surface, its tail propelling it in beats of two with the same rhythm as a heartbeat. Esme watched it, counting out the flicks of its tail: *One-two.* Pause. Pause. *One-two.* She found its movements calming, the memories of her nightmare fading with each flick of the yellow tail.

The smell of the sea and the voice of the creature had followed her all week. Her father had put in an urgent request for an appointment with her psychiatrist, but this had been the earliest he could manage and she was glad. The experience had left her very shaken and she had needed time to collect her thoughts.

The sensation of being watched broke her concentration. A few other people sat in the waiting room, but all had their heads bowed, eyes glued to a phone or tablet, presumably as self-conscious as she was, trying to pretend they were really somewhere else.

The watcher sat in the corner, a half-smile on his face.

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"They're platies," he said loudly, as if no one else was in the room. The woman next to him shuffled uncomfortably, her eyes never leaving her phone.

For a moment, Esme didn't know what he was talking about, as surprised that someone had spoken to her as she was by his American-sounding accent.

He jabbed a finger towards the fish tank. "Platies. The fish."

"Oh, right." She kept her own voice to a whisper. She had always thought talking in medical waiting rooms as bad as in libraries or churches.

The boy smiled. He sat slightly slouched, blue jeans finishing in white trainers. He had odd socks on; one black, the other yellow and red striped. He bent down and pulled up the stripy one. "Where—"

"Esme Whitechapel?" The receptionist's voice cut the boy off, and Esme sighed with relief.

"Doctor Manning is free now."

"Thank you."

"Did you come alone today?" The receptionist peered at her through thick glasses, a hint of accusation in her voice.

So what if I did? thought Esme. "My dad is waiting in the car." She hated it if he came in with her. It made her feel small, helpless, a little girl taken by the hand to the shrink. She stood, gave a smile to the receptionist she hoped looked mature, and trod the familiar route to Robin's office.

Dr Manning had insisted on Esme calling him by his first name from the outset, but she had found it hard.

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The teachers at school were 'Sir' or 'Miss', and her GP was Doctor Goodman. Formality was the norm. It hadn't helped that her dad had told her he was quite famous and wrote books and gave lectures at universities. But gradually she had begun to relax in his company, able to open up a bit, tell him about how she was feeling, the fears she faced.

His office reminded her of an IKEA showroom: all pine and straight lines, with lamps emitting a soft yellow glow. No pictures hung on the walls, only framed certificates of his many qualifications. A large window looked out across the car park to the copse beyond, the remains of the morning rain still clinging to the glass. The whole room smelt vaguely of furniture polish.

She sat in her usual seat, the small low coffee table between them. The side of the tabletop was patterned with faint rings, reminders of the mugs of tea and coffee that had rested there. She often wondered what their owners had needed to talk about: did they see things that weren't there? Had they been afraid too?

Robin sat himself down with the sort of half-groan-half-sigh that men of a certain age and weight always seemed to make. It got noisier when he had to get up.

"Welcome, Esme. It's good to see you." He parted his hands, the palms turned slightly upwards, in a gesture that always reminded her of a priest. "Your dad rang me, but I want to hear from you." He smiled and picked up his pen and pad from the table. "It sounds like you had a frightening experience. Take all the time you need."

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Esme went through the events as clearly as she could. A lot of the anxiety had left her, the last taken by the fish in the tank and the flick of its tail. She had a nightmare, she said, one that made her sleepwalk out to the paddock behind her house. Waking up outside had scared her, but she felt much better now. Robin scribbled notes in his pad, nodding encouragement. She told him about her dad finding her and lied about how the fear had quickly left her when he arrived.

After she had finished speaking, Robin watched her for a moment, as if wondering if she would say anything else. He always did that, making sure he let her finish, never interrupting. He put his pad and pen back down on the table.

"Were you aware you were dreaming?"

"I think so. I knew I had to wake up or get out… or something. But I'm fine, really, it was just a dream." The lies came easily, anything to avoid more questions. She had been vividly aware of, had known, what was happening to her and remembered every detail: the smell, the voices, the sight and sounds of the sea, the grass under her feet. But that might mean she had been hallucinating, and the implications of that terrified her more than any horse-creature with no skin.

"I'm not crazy." She hadn't meant to say it out loud, but somehow couldn't help herself.

Robin held up both his hands. "That's not a word we use here, Esme."

I wish you would, she thought. *All this time I've been*

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coming here, and all I want to hear you say is "You're not crazy."

"I think the move from your old house might have been a trigger. It can accentuate the separation anxiety."

"It's only five miles down the road."

"It's a new house. Your mother never lived there."

The pain shot through her, starting in her heart and pumping through her veins. Shutting her eyes, she tried to concentrate on her breathing, getting closer to the pain, letting it flow by her, a meditation technique Robin had taught her during their first session together. The river of pain drifted slowly by, leaving her safe on the bank.

"Well done." Robin's voice brought her back to the room, and she blinked before opening her eyes. "Has it passed?"

Esme nodded, gripping the chair to hide the trembling in her fingers.

Robin waited, his eyes never leaving her, then nodded, apparently happy she was OK. "Now, what about your memories. Are they clearer?"

Esme's hand instinctively went to her pocket, to the picture of her mum she kept there. Her struggle to recall her mum and their times together was still the hardest part of her grief. She still had the memories, but they seemed too distant for her to reach, blurred images she couldn't bring into focus. One day she had woken up to find she couldn't remember what her mum had looked like, suddenly lost in a world where even the smallest memory of her mother's love had been taken from her. The photograph made sure that could never happen again.

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"Not really. I get glimpses sometimes. Fragments."

"Your memories will return, Esme. The brain is an incredibly complicated thing that we are only just beginning to understand, but I've seen this before. It's another symptom of shock and pain and will pass in time as you heal." He jotted a note down in the file. "Now, tell me about friends…"

Esme hated this part. The struggle of friendships, of never quite making that connection. She had never been bullied or actively ignored, just alone. "Nothing's changed," she said, her voice not much more than a whisper.

Robin nodded, his eyes studying her. "You've been coming to see me for some time now, Esme, and you should be really proud of the progress you've made. But your depression and anxiety are still real, although far less acute. I know you've suffered hallucinations in the past, but I don't think that's the case here, so please don't be scared. You had a vivid, frightening dream with sleepwalking, and it's just a little setback." He turned a page over in his folder. "Let's see: you're taking 20mg of Escitalopram and .50mg of Alprazolam, much less than even a month ago. I don't see any reason to increase that, so don't worry. You are taking them regularly?"

"Yes, of course," she lied, picturing her daily dose as it flushed down the toilet. Pills made her choke.

"Then, perhaps it's time to go back to school…?"

Esme groaned, letting her body slump, not even trying to hide it.

"You've been learning online for a long time now. It's been great for you, but personal connections are very important. You need to get away from screens and be back interacting with your peers."

Esme nodded. She knew she couldn't stay at home for ever, but dreaded the contact with others, the questions, the whispers as she passed in the corridors: *isn't that the girl whose mum died…?*

"Talk it over with your dad." Robin smiled as he put both hands on the arms of the chair and pushed himself up, somehow managing to keep silent. "I think we can stop there. But I'll want to see you again next week, confirm a date for going back to school and check on how you're getting on. OK?"

"OK."

Outside in the car park she leant against the wall and enjoyed the rush of euphoria she got after every appointment. Leaving the psychiatrist always felt like a victory. The cold from the bricks seeped through her thin jacket, but she relished the contact with reality, pushing her back in closer. She pulled out her phone and scrolled through her media.

"You know most of that is fake, hey."

The boy from the waiting room stood under a tree just across the path. He wore a red baseball cap the wrong way round that pushed his brown shoulder-length hair out at the sides.

"Sorry…?" said Esme, not sure if he had been talking to her or not.

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"Social Media. Most of it is fake. Some stuff's just stupid, but a lot is just lies."

For a moment, Esme didn't know how to respond. She wasn't used to strangers talking to her, especially not in waiting rooms or car parks. "I was just checking my…" She let her words drift away, staring at her phone as hard as she could, hoping to give the impression she couldn't be busier.

"So, what they put you on?"

"Excuse me?"

The boy shook a prescription slip in his hand. "Fluoxetine. My favourite. I keep hoping they'll bring out a cherry flavour."

She couldn't believe anyone would want to wave prescriptions for depression medication around.

"I'm just waiting for my dad."

There must have been a look of panic on her face because he took half a step back, slipping the prescription back in his pocket. "I was just kidding around. Sorry, I didn't mean to…" His voice trailed off and he leant back against the tree, staring out towards the road.

The battery on her phone died, the screen fading to black. Pretending to keep looking at it seemed stupid, and the boy looked a little hurt, embarrassed. "They didn't give me any more pills today."

His smile was instant. "That's great. It's my first time here, but I have to come back in two weeks. I guess they want to get their money's worth."

Esme smiled, despite herself. There was something about him that put her at ease.

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"Look, I'm sorry about what I said earlier," he said.

"It's fine."

"You sure? I don't want to upset anyone." He gestured towards the clinic. "Especially not here."

"That could be easy to do."

"Exactly!" He kicked at a stone at his feet. "I'm Perkin."

"You're what?"

"That's my name: Perkin."

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean…" She blushed. "I've just never heard that name before."

"Ain't you the lucky one."

"My name's Esme."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Are you American?"

"Canadian. West Van."

Esme held up her hands in incomprehension.

"West Vancouver. Where I'm from."

"Really? Wow. I'm from Guildford. It doesn't sound quite so… exotic."

"Sounds pretty cool to me."

"What are you doing here?"

"Depression, acute anxiety disorder. At least that's what they tell me. I've had it for a couple of years."

"Oh no, I didn't mean…" She couldn't decide what shocked her more, that he had misunderstood her or that he seemed to have no problem in telling a total stranger why he was at the clinic. "I just meant, why are you in the UK?"

"My mom's job." He pulled out a pack of gum from

his pocket and offered her one. She shook her head. "She works at the university. We only arrived last month."

He told her about the trip over and finding a house, how he hadn't started school yet, so he hadn't met anyone. You could get Butterfinger candy in the supermarket, which was a relief, but somehow the Kraft Mac and Cheese didn't quite taste the same. He could kill for a Nanaimo bar and a decent-sized mall, but overall it seemed pretty cool here.

Esme listened to him in amazement. She had never met anyone who talked so freely and effortlessly about anything, let alone themselves and how they felt. She began to feel more relaxed than she had in months.

"So, what about you?"

A car horn cut off her reply and she silently thanked it. She had no idea what to say.

"Hi, Mom."

A blonde woman leant out of a car window, her face breaking a smile as she saw Esme. She looked younger than a lot of parents Esme knew, wearing lipstick and make-up that wouldn't look out of place in a magazine. If Perkin hadn't told her, she never would have guessed she taught at a university.

"Sorry I'm late. I got held up." She flicked off her seat belt and got out, leaving the car abandoned in the driveway, the door still open. "Looks like you made a friend, though. Awesome."

"This is Esme. This is my mom."

"Pleased to meet you," said Esme.

"Call me Toni." She smiled, her hands on her hips, looking between the two of them as if trying to decide which one to talk to. "So: who wants ice cream?"

Perkin held up a hand. "Easy, Mom…" He turned to Esme. "You'll have to forgive her. She can come on pretty strong."

"Stop… This is the first person you've met in England, Perky. It's *super* exciting."

"It's very kind of you," said Esme. "My dad will be here soon, though."

A glimpse of disappointment dulled Toni's eyes for a second, but it vanished in an instant, her smile returning as if it had never left. "Of course. I understand. Make sure you guys exchange numbers, though…"

Perkin shrugged. "Sure."

"We don't want to lose contact with this one…"

They swapped phone numbers and Esme watched them go, Perkin turning in his seat and raising his hand in goodbye. She half raised hers in reply as her dad pulled up next to her.

"Who are you waving to?"

Perkin and Toni's car had driven out of sight. "Just someone from the clinic."

"Really?" he said, not even trying to hide his surprise. "Do you mean a friend?"

She shrugged.

"That's good news, Esme. Now, jump in and tell me what Robin said and what we need to do to get you well." He pulled away in the wrong gear, the car spluttering

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towards the exit as the wind sent fallen leaves swirling across the road.

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That evening, as she walked down the garden towards the barrows, Esme glanced back at her house. The lights shining in the windows brought some comfort and, pulling her hoodie tighter around her, she walked on.

Leaving her dad dozing on the sofa with the TV on, she had slipped out quietly into the twilight. Robin's reassurances that she had been dreaming hadn't been enough, the fear still squatting at the back of her mind. "I'm not crazy." She repeated the words over and over, adding emphasis with each step. But the fear grew, ready to pounce, and she almost turned and ran back to the house.

"I need you, Mum." Closing her eyes, a blurred image of her mum slowly brightened in her mind. She clung to it, trying to give it definition, hearing the words she often spoke: *I'll always be with you, Esme. No matter where you wander off to…*

She reached out her hand, imagining it caught her mum's arm, and took a deep breath. If it hadn't been a dream and she was crazy, surely she would see something again: you couldn't be crazy one minute and sane the next. A glimpse of the sunset still rested on the horizon, and she willed it to remain as she forced herself to step through the trees and out towards the barrows.

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They stood as they always had, for hundreds, maybe thousands of years, soft and still – just mounds of earth, no sight of the sea or a skinless horse-man galloping out from behind the sunset. The relief flooded through her, and she almost laughed out loud. Raising her arms in the air, she spun around. "It was just a dream!"

Something caught her eye and she stopped, squinting in the twilight. She bent down and picked up a shell, the sort a hermit crab might carry on its back. It must be a toy, she thought, some part of a child's game. There couldn't be any real shells lying around this far from the coast. She rubbed her finger over the top, feeling the sand that still clung to it, catching the faintest scent of saltwater and a sea breeze. "How did you get here?"

A twig snapped, a gunshot in the silence, and she spun around. Just inside the treeline, a shadow moved; a blurred silhouette of a figure.

"Who's there?" she tried to shout, but the words caught in her throat. The figure didn't move, and she sensed its gaze on her face. She turned and ran, sprinting back across the grass towards the safety shining through the kitchen windows.

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CHAPTER 3

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The house stood at the end of a gravel driveway, only the roof and a couple of windows visible from the road. Two barred metal gates, at least six feet tall, blocked the way and didn't budge when Esme pushed at them. A red light blinked from a camera set on the wall, the lens staring at her accusingly. She pulled out her phone to check the address and, satisfied she was at the right place, called Perkin.

"Bell-oh."

"It's Esme. I think I'm outside your house, but the gates are locked."

"Cool. I'll buzz you in."

The line went dead and a buzzer sounded, the gates jerking once before opening slowly inwards, the base skimming the tarmac. She walked through and turned to watch as they swung closed behind her. Perhaps it was their silence, or the driveway that stretched out of sight, but she started to doubt her decision to come.

Explaining the seashell had been easy: someone had taken a shortcut home and dropped it after a visit to the beach. The figure she thought she had seen had only been a bush or young tree, her imagination filling in the rest. But it had shaken her, and she had still been torn about taking Perkin up on his invitation. He seemed nice and she hadn't had any company of her own age for longer than she could remember. If she was going back to school, she better start practising getting on with people.

"It'll be all right," she whispered to herself. "You're much better; you won't have a panic attack. You can do this." And she slowly made her way up the drive.

The house sat hidden behind a row of trees. It reminded Esme of the houses you saw in films set in the countryside, with lattice windows and timbered walls, none of which looked quite straight. Moss had started to patch the thatched roof a dirty green. Perkin waited just outside the front door and raised his hand when he saw her.

"Awesome you could make it." The smile on his face relaxed her a little, and she smiled back. He was wearing the same baseball cap he had at the clinic and a yellow and red tie-dye T-shirt. She glanced down to see if he was still wearing odd socks, but his jeans hid them from view. "Come on in," he said.

If the outside had reminded her of a country cottage, the inside looked like a New York apartment. The front

blue glass chandelier hanging from the ceiling. A wooden staircase filled the centre, parting halfway up so people

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could turn either left or right. She wouldn't have believed it could fit from the outside.

"This place is amazing," said Esme. "I thought you said your mum was a teacher…"

Perkin tugged at his baseball cap. "She wrote a book that loads of people bought, hey. It's how she can afford this place."

"What book?"

"It's called *The Dimensions Around Us*."

Esme shrugged.

"That's cool. I don't think it's really aimed at people our age. It's a science-nerd thing."

"Hi!" His mum's greeting echoed for a moment in the hall, and she half walked, half ran over to Esme, grabbing her in a hug. "It's so great you could come. You're our first guest!"

Before Esme had a chance to recover from the shock of being hugged by a stranger, Toni took her by the hand and pulled her towards the end of the hall. "Let me show you the house."

A door at the back opened up to the biggest living room Esme had ever set foot in. The clouds had faded and sunlight lit the room through windows that stretched from floor to ceiling. Rugs dotted the white marble floor, and Esme instinctively stepped off one, conscious of her wet shoes. A joss stick burned on a wooden coffee table, scenting the room with jasmine.

"What do you think?" asked Toni. She was wearing a light-blue playsuit that caught the colour of her eyes, her thick blonde hair tied into a ponytail.

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A LIGHT FROM ELSEWHERE

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"It's incredible," said Esme. "From the outside you wouldn't imagine this was here."

"Right? The architect who designed the extension is a genius. All you can see from the front is this teeny tiny English country cottage. But inside…" She spread her arms wide, her smile reaching the width of her face. "Come to the kitchen. We've got the best ice cream."

Perkin looked at her and gave an apologetic shrug. Esme smiled, turning back to Toni. "Thanks. I love ice cream."

They didn't just have ice cream; they seemed to have every flavour ever made. Esme sat next to Perkin on stools at the marble-topped workstation in the middle of the kitchen. Toni spooned ice cream into bowls. "You gotta try this one: salted caramel cookie dough. You will *die*…"

Toni talked almost constantly and about everything: the weather, what was on TV, her new shoes, the government, and why can't people smile at each other more? Perkin seemed totally relaxed with her; none of the usual child-parent awkwardness she saw so often. *He appreciates her*, she thought. *He knows what he has, how lucky he is*. And she could see why: there was something quite intoxicating about Toni's enthusiasm for what seemed like everything.

When they couldn't eat any more, Toni opened the French windows at the bottom of the kitchen and they sat on chairs on the veranda, enjoying the rare afternoon sun. The leaves had begun to fall, and there probably

wouldn't be many more opportunities to sit outside. They continued to chat about everyday things but talked more about their own experiences. Perkin had been to visit the international school he would be joining soon, and it seemed OK. Toni still had to concentrate when she pulled out of the driveway or she ended up driving on the wrong side of the road. Esme said little, comfortable to let them speak, to just sit back and enjoy the company of others. She suddenly realised how much she had missed it.

"So," said Toni, leaning back in her chair. "You go to the same clinic as Perkin?"

Esme froze, not quite believing that Toni had brought it up.

"Perkin has had some mental health issues for a couple of years now. He probably told you, right? It's so healthy to be open about these things."

Esme felt the colour drain from her face. Perkin must have noticed, because he looked at Toni, a warning in his voice. "Mom… Not everyone feels that comfortable…"

"Take physical health," said Toni. "If someone has the flu or a headache or a pain in the stomach, they aren't afraid to talk about it. Why should it be any different with mental health?" She leant in towards Esme. "You're in a safe space here, honey."

Esme turned away, feeling the panic rising in her, wanting to do anything but talk about that, her mind scrambling to find a way out. "Perkin said you wrote a book?"

Toni looked at her for a moment, as if deciding what to do, before leaning back with a smile on her face. "Did he now…?"

Perkin put his head in his hands. "Oh God. Don't mention that."

"Perkin doesn't usually talk about my book."

"Because once you start talking about that stuff, you don't stop, Mom."

Toni ignored him and leant forward towards Esme. "Would you like to hear about it?"

"I'd love to," she said, trying to hide her relief.

Toni's smile grew even wider. "You have just become my favourite person!" She stood and clapped her hands together. "Let's go."

Perkin laughed, patting Esme on the shoulder. "Remember: you brought this on yourself."

They walked back through the kitchen and across the hall to a room behind a dark wooden door. Toni stopped in the middle and spread her arms wide. "Welcome to my study."

The study looked like it belonged to the front of the house, not the extension at the back. Black wooden beams stretched across the ceiling, illuminated in yellow light from hidden bulbs. A dark green chair sat in front of an oak desk, with three walls crammed floor to ceiling with books, the door creating a break in the line of shelves. The room was warm without being stuffy despite the lack of windows. It smelt of old books and leather.

Toni gently pushed the door shut, the lock catching

with a click. The back of the door held bookshelves that closed the wall up like the missing piece of a jigsaw.

"That's amazing," said Esme. "If I didn't know the door was there, I'd never guess."

"Cool, right. But you *do* know there's a door there. You know there's a whole house just behind it. And how do you know that?"

"Because I just came through it…?" said Esme.

"What if you never had? What if all you knew was this room…?"

Esme glanced over at Perkin, suddenly confused, looking for some hint as to what that meant, but he slumped in his seat pretending to snore.

"What I'm saying is, what if there is a whole part of the world we don't know about, and the reason we don't is simply because we have never seen it?"

Esme took a deep breath, hoping she didn't look as confused as she felt.

"That's what the book I wrote is about. What my whole career has been about." She leant back against the desk, crossing her legs in front of her. "Listen carefully: for decades, scientists have tried to find a theory that explains how the world works. At the moment, we have theories that explain how different parts of it work, but not all of it. For example, things seem to work differently when they are big – planets, stars, even us – and when they are small – atoms and particles. If you try and apply the theories that explain the big world to the tiny world, it just doesn't work. It's almost like there are two types of reality: big and

small, and they have different rules that make them work. You with me so far?"

"I think so…"

"Good. Because this next bit is very important." She cleared her throat. "People started to think that the reason we couldn't find a single theory to explain everything about the world is that we don't really understand what the world is. Or, to be more specific, we don't *see* the world the way it really is. So, when we try and work out how it works, we can't.

"That's crazy," said Esme. "How can we not see what is really there?"

Toni rapped her knuckles against the desk. "Pretty solid, huh?" She rapped it again. "Go ahead and try."

"It's OK. I'm sure it's solid."

"Are you? Then what if I was to tell you that this desk is ninety-nine percent empty space?"

Esme let out a short nervous laugh. "It can't be."

"I assure you it is. It's made of atoms, and atoms are ninety-nine percent empty space. It just *appears* solid to us. Our senses can trick us."

She turned and opened a laptop, a projector humming to life somewhere out of sight. "And it's not just our sense of touch that can trick us, either; we can get confused by what is actually there all the time."

On the white wall above the desk an image slowly came into focus.



Toni sat down next to Esme. "Tell me what you see."

Esme stared at the picture for a moment, struggling to make sense of the image. Then it became clear. "It's an old woman," she said, "with a really big nose."

"Are you sure?" said Toni, leaning forward slightly, as if she couldn't make up her mind.

"Definitely."

"OK," said Toni. "Let's imagine that spot in the middle of the picture, the one you think is an eye. Let's pretend it's an ear. And that dark line you think is a mouth, let's pretend it's a choker. You know, like a thick black necklace."

Esme was looking, trying to picture it that way, when the old woman vanished, replaced by someone much younger, her face turned away, what she had seen as the

old lady's nose becoming an elegant jawline. "That's pretty cool."

"Let's try another one." Toni clicked a remote and the image vanished, replaced by another:



"A black vase." Esme tried to sound confident. "It's right in the middle. You can't miss it."

Toni leant back with a smile on her face. "Look again."

Esme narrowed her eyes, squinting at the picture. She saw them so quickly she couldn't believe she had missed them: two identical white faces, staring at each other across the frame. "Wow. So which is the real one? The vase or the faces?"

"Neither," said Toni. "They aren't pictures of one thing, they are pictures that *could* be one thing or another, and our mind decides which one we see. Scientists have started to realise that the reason we can't find a single

theory to explain everything is that what we are seeing and measuring and trying to work out isn't what's *actually real.* It's just what we are seeing or touching. The world is like the pictures: it's not one thing or another, but could be both, depending on how we see it."

"That's pretty intense. But I still don't understand how what I see isn't there."

"But it is there. It just isn't what you think it is." Toni pulled her phone out of her pocket and switched it on. "Look at all these apps. I open one depending on how I want to use the phone. What I want to see. This one for my social media, another to check messages, another to order groceries. But none of those apps is the phone. The phone is just circuits and electricity and data and takes on a different form depending on which app I use."

"So the world is like the phone?"

"That's right. And our minds are the apps." Toni looked at Esme for a moment, a strange expression on her face.

Esme exhaled in a faint whistle.

"But do you know what it means?"

Esme shook her head.

"That there are different apps than the one we use every day. Other ways of seeing reality. And if there are other apps, there could be huge parts of reality we never see. And if that's true…?"

Esme thought for a moment. "Then we never see all of reality?"

"That's my girl!" Toni gave a little jump and clapped her hands.

On his chair, Perkin seemed to have come back to life. "It's pretty crazy, right?"

"You see. Even Perky can't pretend to be bored for long."

"So where is the rest of the phone, I mean, the world?" asked Esme. "Does it just disappear?"

Toni turned to Perkin. "I love this girl… It hasn't disappeared, Esme. It's still there, and there is so much of it. It's just hidden. Like the rest of the house was hidden when I shut the door."

"But where is it all?" asked Esme, her head beginning to hurt.

"It's here," said Toni. "It exists like other dimensions, but we can't see them or interact with them."

"Because we can't switch the apps," said Perkin.

Toni ruffled his hair. "But perhaps there is an app where the pictures on the wall don't change; you touch the table and your hand goes through it – the door of the study is open and you can walk through to the rest of the house…"

"Is that really possible?" asked Esme.

"I believe so," said Toni. "The brain is such a complicated, powerful thing, and we still don't really understand it. But I think perhaps there are some people who can switch the apps. They probably don't know how to do it. It just happens sometimes, maybe only for an instant." She took a step towards Esme. "Have you ever felt like you were being watched, but you know that no one is there?"

Esme nodded, unable to pull herself away from the intensity that lit Toni's eyes.

Toni smiled, as if that was the answer she had been expecting. "Ever caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of your eye, but when you turn to look it's gone?"

Toni took another step forward and the room seemed to contract around her, squeezing out the air. Esme glanced at the wall where she knew the door was, longing to open it.

"There are so—" Toni's phone rang, cutting her off. She glanced at the number and rolled her eyes. "I'll be right back. Hold that thought, we're going to pick this up in just a second… Hello?" She pulled open the door and strode from the study, her phone pressed to her ear.

"Sorry about that," said Perkin. "She really loves all that stuff."

"It's fine," said Esme, taking a deep breath, a bead of sweat sliding down her temple. "It's quite intense, though."

Perkin laughed. "Try living with it."

A shout came from the kitchen, cutting Perkin off. "I will NOT accept that!"

The rage in Toni's voice sounded so unlike everything Esme knew about her that she thought for a moment that there must be someone else in the house.

"That was *my* work, *my* research, and if that man tries to take one word of it, I will sue him to Toronto and back!"

Perkin winced. "Sorry about this. Could be something to do with her work."

"Do not tell me to calm down. Tell me what you are going to do about it!" shouted Toni, followed by the sound of breaking pottery.

Perkin rolled his eyes. "I better go check on her. When she gets mad, stuff gets broken. I'll be right back." He walked quickly out of the study towards the kitchen.

The sounds of Toni's phone argument faded away, as if she had moved to another room. Whatever it had been about must have been serious. Esme couldn't remember when she had heard anyone so angry.

She stood, looking for distraction, and walked over to the bookshelf. They all seemed to be about science or maths, with titles she didn't understand: *Structural Consciousness and the Hidden World; The Twenty-Four Dimensions of String Theory; Unravelling Reality.* She pulled one out at random and opened it, flicking through the pages of graphs and equations, wondering how Toni could make sense of them – or anyone, for that matter. She snapped the book shut, pushing it back onto the shelf, when another caught her eye. The title, *Creatures of Mythology*, couldn't have looked more out of place. As she looked closer, she saw the whole shelf was filled with similar books about legends and myths and folktales.

She pulled out *Pagan Religions* and opened it up. The first page had a name written in black ink: *Property of Esther Reynolds.* The next showed a creature with the body of a man but the legs and head of a goat sitting cross-legged in a pentagram, one hand held up like a priest blessing their congregation. A chill pricked the back of her neck, running down her spine. She turned the page, and the next picture knocked the air out of her lungs.

The horse-creature she had seen by the barrows stared back at her, both its heads turned as if angry to be disturbed. At the bottom, someone had scribbled a handwritten note: *Crossroads? 48' 16 NNE*

The smell of the sea washed over her and she saw the creature standing by the barrows, its white eyes glowing, holding a seashell between two skinless fingers. The words it had spoken whispered in her ear: *Wilcume Egesgrime*. The book dropped from her hand as she fought for breath, panic gnawing at her heart. She turned and took a step towards the door. Perkin stood in the hallway, his outline blurred and indistinct. She raised her hand, the word *help* screaming in her mind. Then darkness drew in, squeezing the world into a tiny coloured dot, before turning to black.