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Opening extract from

Triskellion

Written by

Will Peterson

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prologue: new york

The creature drove its body again and again into the glass; unable to understand why the air had suddenly become impossible to move through; desperately searching for some way out.

The girl turned away from it and watched her mother opening and closing cupboards on the other side of the breakfast bar. She stared as her mother furiously polished the appliances; buffing up the surfaces of the kettle, the juicer, the coffee-maker that her father had bought the Christmas before.

Rachel opened her mouth to speak, but with a small wave of her hand, her mother silenced her. A gesture that said no, I'm busy and I can't think. No, I can't discuss it right now. No, please, I need to finish telling you these things before the tears come again.

Then, still talking, she was moving across the kitchen to start work on the stainless-steel of the worktop; rubbing and rubbing at the metal, until she could look down into it and see her own drawn and determined expression.

As she went through arrangements for the rest of the summer.

Rachel stared across the table and tried to get the attention of the boy sitting opposite her. He glanced up briefly, looked over at Rachel with eyes that were the same as her own, then let his head drop again. Grunted to himself.

Josh. Forty-three minutes younger than she was. But he was a boy, right? So it felt like it could have been a whole lot more.

Rachel hissed at her brother. His head stayed down. He shook it slowly, and continued to push the cereal around in his bowl.

The two of them jumped simultaneously at the explosion of a door closing

hard upstairs. The boy looked up at his sister, suddenly pale and afraid, and they turned together to watch their mother, her gaze fixed on the doorway, her arms stiff against the worktop. She stood frozen mid-sentence and mid-movement; wincing at the footsteps that thundered down the stairs like a series of rumbling aftershocks. Tensing for the noise that they all knew was coming.

The front door slammed shut, its echo died slowly, and there were just three of them.

Rachel felt as if the seconds were thickening, as if time was slowing down, though it was probably no more than a few moments before she and Josh pushed their chairs away from the table.

The scrape of the metal legs against the floor was terrible,

like a hundred pieces of chalk being dragged down a blackboard.

Rachel's mother rubbed at her eyes and did her best to smile as her children moved towards her. She opened her arms and Josh walked into the embrace. He pressed his head against her chest, sobbing silently as she stroked his hair.

Hearing the buzz and the tap, Rachel glanced across again, oddly disturbed by the small drama at the window.

The bee was still flying headlong into the glass, though a little slower now, with much less enthusiasm as it tired.

Zzzzz...dnk. Zzzzz...dnk. Zzzzz...

She walked quickly across to the window just as the insect spun and dropped, exhausted on to the sill.

The voice in her head was not her own. It was a male voice...a boy's voice, and it spoke in a strange accent she didn't recognise.

Open the window, the voice said.

Rachel did as she was told, and watched as the bee crawled slowly up on to the edge of the window, then waited for a few seconds before taking flight.

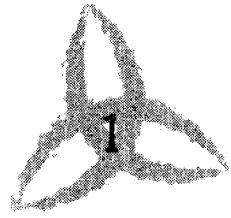
When the bee rose up fast and flew back towards her face, she remained completely still and unafraid of being stung, as though the voice in her head had calmed her. As the bee circled twice around her head she followed its movements: seeing the gold and black fur on its back revealed in astonishing detail; clapping her hands across her ears at the deafening beat of its wings, and watching as it finally veered away out of the

window.

Rachel Newman stared, almost hypnotised as the bee zig-zagged its way into the blue; dancing on the thermals. A whirling speck against the New York skyline.



part one:
the village



1

Rachel came to with a start as the carriage door slammed. The clattering rhythm, the heat, and the plush interior of the old train must have lulled her to sleep for...seconds? Minutes? She didn't know how long.

She'd caught a little sleep on the plane, but now the lag was starting to catch up and she felt strangely floaty. The reassuring bleeps and electronic melodies of Josh's PSP were still there as they had been on the night flight from New York, on the high speed shuttle from Heathrow and on the 9.32 train out of Paddington. It felt odd; such incongruous, modern noises as they rattled along an antiquated branch line, deep into the West Country. Rachel couldn't help but wonder what their next form of transport might be on this seemingly endless journey.

Steam engine? Pony and trap? Donkey?

Rachel smiled wearily at her brother as he looked up briefly from under the peak of his Yankees cap, eyes momentarily off the game, but ears still plugged with his pod's white

ear-buds. Josh seemed happy enough in his self-contained world, alone with his computer game and the thrash metal pounding in his ears.

They had been alone in the carriage for the last hour, but now they had been joined by someone else. As the old lady perched a large wicker cat-basket on top of the luggage rack, Josh widened his eyes at his sister. The lady turned and nodded at Josh who shifted awkwardly to one side, as she shuffled her expansive bottom into the dusty-red seat next to him and took out her knitting.

The only other person Rachel knew that knitted was Granny Root. Every year a misshapen sweater or cardigan made from scratchy wool would arrive from England. It would be five sizes too big, with one sleeve longer than the other, or tiny, with a neck hole too small to accommodate a human head. When none had arrived last Christmas they were almost disappointed, but by then Rachel and Josh had grown out of Granny's sweaters in every way.

Celia Root was the grandmother they had met only once, when they were babies; Mum's mum, who, in all the twins' fourteen years, had only managed to make a single trip to New York. They'd spoken twice a year on the 'phone; Gran's posh-sounding voice crackling down the transatlantic line on Christmas day and on their birthday, sounding like something from an old radio play. There were photos, too, and Rachel had loved to look at those old black and white shots of a trim, striking woman in lipstick, with smart clothes and

elegantly styled dark hair. The hair was still immaculate, but white in the more recent pictures, and though the clothes were softer, in earthier colours, the bright red lipstick was still in place. It was difficult for Gran to get around these days, though that wasn't the only reason she'd never been to visit. As she'd got older, Granny Root had developed a terrible fear of flying.

Mum, on the other hand, enjoyed flying all over the place, but had never seemed all that keen on getting them to England before now. She had told them that she hated the place, that it was stuffy, class-ridden and strangled by its own sense of history, whatever that was supposed to mean. Even if she'd wanted to go, her work had never seemed to fit in with their holidays anyway, and so summers were mostly spent in Cape Cod, in a regular rented house near the beach.

Now though, with the stuff going on between their parents, a trip to England had finally seemed like a good idea. Naturally reluctant to see them go, but with no other choice, their mother had announced that summer in a quiet little village might be the best place for the twins to cool their heels. Somewhere for them to chill out, while things settled down a bit at home.

Somewhere calm, stable, unchanging...

The old lady smiled at Rachel and Rachel smiled back. She was not the kind of woman Rachel was used to seeing in the street or on the subway. In Manhattan most women were either wearing shabby sweats and jogging pants or else were

decked out in a couple of thousand dollars' worth of DKNY and designer sneakers. This lady was something else entirely. She wore a small straw hat held in place with a long pin, and brown leather shoes that looked as if she hadn't taken them off for fifty years. It was a boiling summer afternoon, but she was dressed in a suit of something thick and dark green (closer to armour plating than clothing) with a dainty lace collar sprouting from her neck, that made her look like she'd stepped out of some historical portrait. Rachel tried not to stare, taking in the details as the old lady concentrated on her knitting, her needles clicking at a ferocious rate.

The cat in the basket mewled and the lady looked up, catching Rachel watching her. They exchanged another prim smile.

"He has been to the veterinary surgeon to have his stitches removed," the lady said. She pronounced every vowel sound and consonant with great care, as though she were practising her English.

"Oh. Right," Rachel replied, really none the wiser.

"I have six cats," the old lady continued. "This is Danny Boy, like the song, then there's Ozymandias, Marmalade, Mr Kipps, Orlando, and Rum Tum Tugger. You know, from the TS Eliot...?"

Rachel smiled and nodded, confused by the list and its mysterious associations.

"We can't have cats. It's against the rules of our block."

The old lady nodded, equally uncertain of Rachel's mean-

ing, and cast her eyes back to her knitting.

The ice had been broken, but the heat in the carriage was becoming almost unbearable. The air blowing in through the open wedge of window felt like a hair dryer. Josh pulled out his earphones and lifted his cap to reveal a mop of thick brown hair plastered to his head with sweat. Rachel smirked, causing him to urgently ruffle his hair into a semblance of its normal, shaggy style - simultaneously pushing out his lower lip with his tongue as a rebuke to Rachel.

"It's terribly close..."

Josh almost jumped. The lady was speaking to him and had turned her pointed nose in his direction, catching him pulling faces.

"Pardon me?"

"It's terribly close," she repeated, dabbing at her cheeks with a tiny lace handkerchief.

Josh was stumped. What was close? Their destination? Christmas? He looked at Rachel, who immediately developed a keen interest in grazing sheep and looked out of the window, containing a smile.

"Is it?" Josh asked the old lady.

"It is." The lady nodded to Josh and returned to her knitting. Josh felt the need to reply. He thought he ought to be polite to this old fashioned person who spoke like the Queen.

"Um. Thank you."

The lady nodded and her needles clicked on in time to the

clatter of the train wheels over the track. Sensing the conversation to be over, Josh plugged his ears back in, back to his world where a thrashing guitar quickly lulled him to sleep in the afternoon heat.

For the second time, Rachel was shaken awake by the crash of the carriage door. Looking across, she saw that Josh had dropped off too, but knew it would take something a lot louder than that to wake her brother.

The old lady and her cat had gone. This must have been her stop.

Rachel looked out of the window at an empty platform and craned her neck to see the name of the station. A little way down the platform a red, enamelled sign announced itself:

TRISKELLION

Rachel's heart lurched. The name had so much resonance. A place their mother had spoken of since they were old enough to understand. The place where their mother was born, the place she had left, but a place that Rachel and Josh had never seen.

She leaned across and began to shake her brother awake.



Josh heaved his rucksack onto his shoulder and stood blinking in the afternoon sun, eyes still puffy from sleep. Rachel watched the small train rattle off into the distance, then turned and took in the length of the empty platform. There was no sign of the old lady with the cat, or anyone else for that matter. Someone must have been there to pick the old lady up. So, would anyone be...?

"No-one meeting us?" grunted Josh, reading Rachel's thoughts, as he often did.

"Let's try the car park," Rachel said. "Gran must have arranged something." She shouldered her bag and they walked along the platform towards the sign that said Way Out.

"Way Out," Josh read, putting on a drawling Californian accent, extracting as much meaning from the two words as possible.

They walked past a red brick waiting room with clapboard walls and thick, burgundy and cream paintwork. The etched

glass windows and doors were detailed with an odd-looking symbol of some sort. Rachel thought it was an unlikely logo for a rail company. She decided it was probably a crest, or whatever one of those things was called; maybe the coat of arms for some local aristocratic family. She knew that kind of thing still went on in England, with whole estates, towns even, belonging to a single Duke or Lord or Sir whatever.

"Everything's so clean..." Rachel looked at the spotless platform and the gleaming brass of the unoccupied ticket desk.

"Could always tag it." Josh took a thick, black marker from the pocket of his rucksack and waved it at Rachel.

"Don't even—"

"Joke." Josh waggled his pen between finger and thumb like a cigar. "It's a joke..."

They turned the corner into a gravel car park with enough parking spaces for three cars, all vacant. They dropped their bags and stood there, silent in the heat, neither keen to admit their disappointment, their confusion, and the fact that they hadn't the faintest idea what they should do next. Rachel stared out beyond the car park at the lane, at the canopy of trees that hung over it and the lush hill beyond, still green despite the months of sun. She stood on tip toe, willing a taxi, or a tractor, or anything to come.

"You got Gran's number?" Josh said. "Let's call her."

Rachel took her cell phone from her rucksack and switched it on. Waited. "No signal," she said.

"Great." Josh studied the scuffed toe of his Vans, wishing he'd brought his skateboard after all. He kicked the gravel, scuffing the toe a little more and felt a fraction better.

He looked at his sister staring into the middle distance, chewing her lower lip as she always did when she was nervous. Rachel's slight overbite stopped short of making her look goofy - of course, she'd worn braces, but her teeth were still not completely regular. In fact, Josh thought they made her look pretty, though he'd never tell her that. With her heavy ringlets of dark chestnut hair and freckles, Josh thought how old-fashioned his sister looked. She didn't seem out of place in this environment, and although, as her twin, he shared some of the same characteristics, he imagined that somehow they conspired in him to look more...well, modern.

Rachel sensed her brother's gaze and turned to face him, looking into his eyes, reading his thoughts which, despite their inevitable rows, was always a great comfort to her. As one, they turned and walked back toward the station house, then immediately stopped in their tracks again. Propped against the front of the station wall was a pair of old-fashioned bicycles, and pinned to the notice board above them was a large, brown envelope.

On it was written: Rachel and Josh Newman.

Rachel tore down the envelope. "At least we're expected. And the good news is we have transport."

"Bad news is...this is it," Josh said. "Check out the dorky

baskets on the front," he moaned, testing the rusty handlebars of the old bike.

Rachel unfolded a piece of paper from the envelope. "We've got a map. Everything's going to be OK. "

Rachel studied the hand-drawn directions. In large letters across the bottom was written 'Triskellion'. Above it, along with various other landmarks, a simple route was drawn from the station to their Grandmother's house which had been marked on the map with a bold, red 'X'.

Rachel and Josh's spirits lifted. Things were definitely looking up.

Ten minutes later, they were forcing the heavy bikes up the last few feet to the brow of the hill above Triskellion. Panting and pouring with sweat, they stopped for a moment to get their breath and survey the village below. It was exactly as described on the map and, from Rachel and Josh's viewpoint, it appeared on almost the same scale: the church there, above the village green; the big house on the opposite hill; the plain, dotted with scrub and dry-stone walls; the woods, and the moorland stretching into the far distance beyond.

The lane was completely quiet, save for the faint buzzing of bees. Rachel took a swig from what was now a bottle of warm spring water. She screwed up her nose and offered it to her brother who, rather than drink it, poured the remainder over his head, shaking his hair at her like a wet dog.

They looked down at the lane below, where the trees over-

hung the road to such a degree that they almost formed a tunnel down into the village. Shafts of sunlight sliced through the gaps in the foliage and cut through the shade like lasers.

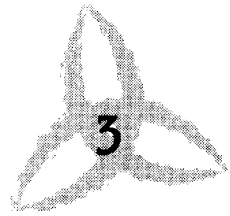
Rachel studied the map for a few seconds then looked up and pointed. "Gran's place is down there on the other side of the village," she said. "You ready?"

Josh, his face dripping with water, stood high on his pedals and edged the bike forward until gravity took over and forced it over the brow of the hill. The old machine gathered speed quickly and Josh freewheeled into the cool, green tunnel.

"Geronimooooo..."

It was exactly what their dad would have said, Rachel thought.

She grabbed tight on to the handlebars, and followed her brother down the hill into the cool darkness.



They cycled slowly past a sign asking drivers to take care, past another that told them to, and a third welcoming them warmly to Triskellion, and announcing that the village was twinned with somewhere unpronounceable in Germany.

"We should come back later with a camera," Josh shouted. "Get someone to take a picture of us under the bit that says 'twinned'."

They came into the village alongside the green, a lush expanse of closely cut grass that must have been five hundred yards across. Geraniums ands pansies crowded the beds at intervals on every side, and hanging-baskets overflowing with flowers hung outside each shop on the narrow High Street, and from every one of the old-fashioned lamp-posts.

"Someone's got green fingers," Rachel said.

They pedalled sedately past a butcher's shop, an ironmonger's and a small general store. They stared into the

window of the Post Office as they went by, and the greengrocer's, before slowing to a virtual stop when they arrived at a dead end at the bottom of the High Street.

They freewheeled in circles for a few seconds, looking at each other, both thinking the same thing; thinking that it was so incredibly weird, and both equally afraid to say it.

It was only ten minutes, but still...in the time since they'd first ridden into the village, they hadn't clapped eyes on anyone. Not one single soul.

Triskellion was deserted.

"Maybe it's lunchtime," Josh suggested.

"Or teatime. Or something."

"Don't they have half-day closing? Maybe that's it."

"You're right." Rachel nodded in an effort to convince herself as much as Josh. "That's probably it."

The day seemed to be growing hotter by the minute and by the time they leaned the bikes up against a bench on the edge of the village green and dumped their rucksacks, the sweat was pouring from both of them.

"I need a drink," Josh said. He pointed towards the butcher's shop and began to walk towards it. "Maybe I can get a Coke in there."

"Duh! They sell meat." Rachel said.

Josh shrugged. "So, you drink Coke with a burger, right?"

As they neared the shop window, Josh pointed back to where they'd left the bikes. "Hey, we don't have locks for those," he said.

Rachel laughed. "Relax, we're not at home now."

The shop was shut, the interior dark, so they could do nothing but stare at the shocking array of dead things displayed in the butcher's window. There wasn't a single piece of raw meat; nothing had been processed or prepared. Instead the animals were strung up, or laid out as if each had been freshly killed. Pigs' carcasses hung in rows from large hooks, while rabbits had been lined up underneath, as though they were chasing each other across the bright green butcher's grass. Each strand of fur looked bright enough. Only the eyes were flat and dead.

"You're right," Josh said.

Rachel looked at him. "About what?"

"We're a long way from home."

"It's so gross. Oh..."

They stepped back together, as a tall figure loomed out of the darkness and moved quickly across a half-lit doorway at the rear of the shop. The face was indistinct, but Rachel and Josh had both seen the knife in the man's hand, and the bloodstains, dark, wet against the white of his apron.

Rachel took a deep breath and put a hand on her brother's arm. "Well, at least we're not alone."

"Why don't I think that's such great news?" Josh said.

They moved away from the shop in unison and fell into step. Rachel laughed, leaning playfully into Josh as they walked. "He's a butcher, right? That's what butchers look like."