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Opening extract from

Waggit's Tale

Written by

Peter Howe

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Roo,
the real-life Waggit who was rescued from the park
to become our loyal companion for fourteen years.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

According to the dictionary, acknowledgements are "an author's statement of indebtedness to others". When the people who wrote the dictionary said *others*, they probably meant the two-legged kind, and indeed there are many of them that I owe big-time. But leading the pack, if you'll excuse the pun, are my four-footed friends – Molly, Bill, Roo, Bobby Blue and Rocco – each of whom, in their own ways, introduced me to the wonderful lives of dogs and showed me that living life on life's terms can be a lot of fun.

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PETER HOWE

Litchfield, Connecticut, 2007

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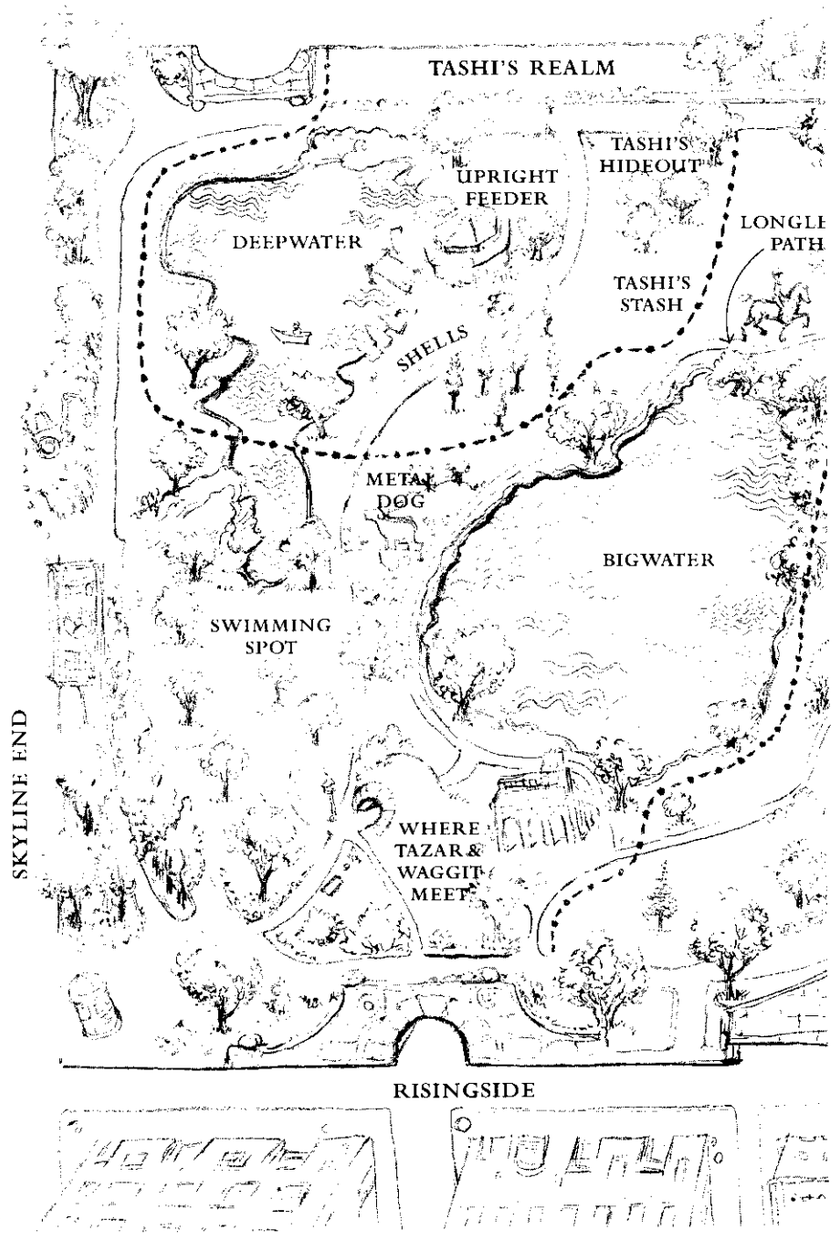
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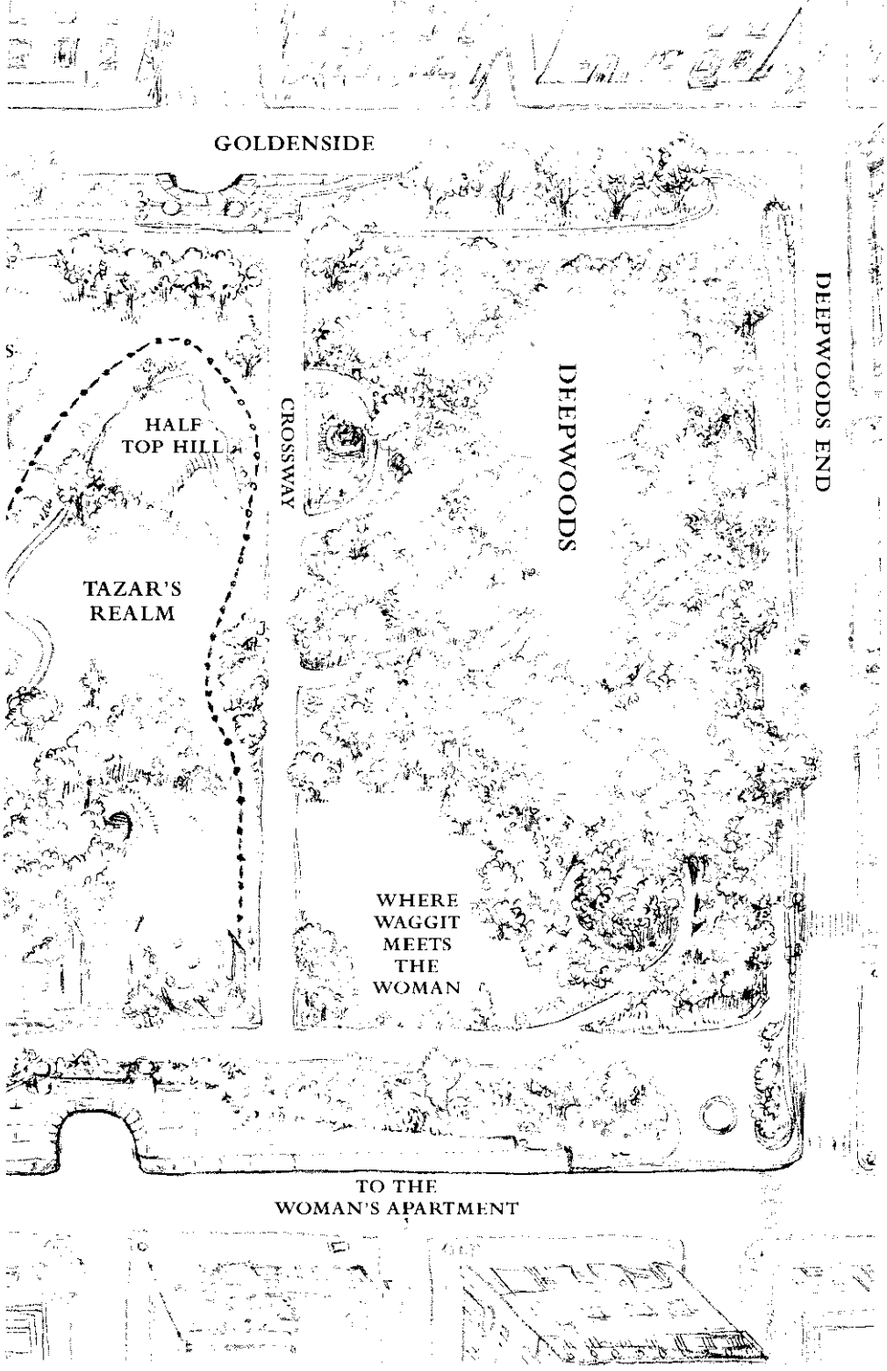
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1

Lost and Found



The white puppy stopped under the bridge. He was panting hard, and his heart pounded so loudly and fast that it seemed it would burst. He could not go on any more. He must have been running for hours because it was quite dark now. The greenish lights of the park made cold, unfriendly shadows, like scary fingers creeping over the ground. Water dripped from a seam in the bridge and plopped into a large puddle that had collected below.

Where could his master have gone? One minute he

was there, and the next there was no sign of him. The young dog had been let off the lead – something the man had never done before, but the puppy had loved it. He'd been concentrating on a particularly interesting smell around the roots of a tree and when he looked up, the man had disappeared. There wasn't even a trace of his scent left. The pup had looked everywhere for him, criss-crossing the open ground in his panic to find the man. The dog had raced under tunnels and over bridges, but after a while each area began to look the same, and he could not remember if he had been there before. He was lost. He was cold, lonely and frightened.

Suddenly he heard a can being kicked, and a shadow fell across the puddle. He sprang up, his tail wagging in anticipation – his master had found him! But no, for there in front of him was a large black dog, its head tilted to one side. The puppy stood still, feeling the hair on his back and neck prickling with fear, carefully watching each movement of the dog as it walked around him, carelessly splashing through the water to complete its inspection. The young dog let out a low growl.

"Hey, friend, hackle down. I mean you no harm."

The big dog's tone was friendly, but the puppy was old enough to know that a dog's mood can change in an instant, and that under the bridge he was trapped.

"Relax, I won't hurt you. My name is Tazar, and I come out every night at this time to see if there are any brothers or sisters who are lost and need help."

"I'm not lost," the puppy said defiantly, trying to control the fear in his voice.

"You're not?"

"No. I've been running, and I'm resting here before going home."

"Oh, excuse me. I only thought -- well, you sure looked lost. My mistake. I'm sorry," said Tazar.

"S'OK. I'll just be going home now."

"You know, you shouldn't be out so late; it's not safe here after dark. Tell you what, why don't I walk you to the edge of the park? I don't have anything special to do right now. Which way's your home?" Tazar asked.

The puppy nodded his head in a direction. Which direction didn't matter, since he had no idea where he was anyway. He just wanted to get to open ground where he could run if he had to.

"OK, friend, let's go," said Tazar.

The two dogs set off, the big one easy and strutting, his plumed black tail bobbing as he walked; the young one was nervous, wary, flinching at the noises of the small animals that skittered in the dark bushes.

"It's just a curlytail; pay it no mind."

The path wound beside a big stretch of water where a cold wind blew. They crossed a bridge, beneath which cars and buses rumbled. Finally they came to a place with a wire fence and dusty yellow patches; the puppy had seen men and women chasing balls there earlier in the day. They had walked in silence up to this point, the older dog slightly ahead, sniffing the breeze carefully. Suddenly he stopped and turned to the puppy.

"Listen, some friends of mine live near here. I'd like you to meet them."

"Thank you. That's very kind of you and I'm sure they're very nice." The puppy did not want to offend. "But I really must get home. There are people waiting for me, and they'll be worried."

The big black dog sat down and gave him a look full of kindness and sorrow.

"My little brother," he said slowly and quietly, "I have been watching you since before the sun went down. I've

seen you running across the ground as if your life depended upon it. You are lost. You know that. But now you are found, and that you don't know. You must trust me. Come, let's go and meet the friends. They're near by."

He brushed against the white puppy so that the little fellow felt the reassuring warmth of his long black coat. He *was* lost, and he didn't know what to do next. What choice did he have other than to trust this stranger who was offering him help?

They had walked on no more than a few steps when the big dog stopped, gave two short howls and then waited. Three howls answered them.

"OK, let's go," said Tazar.

They ran quickly past a lamp post, off the path, down a gully and straight into the mouth of a black tunnel. It was so dark that the puppy didn't know Tazar had stopped until he crashed into the other dog's back legs and fell over.

There was a flurry of movement and a scattering of assorted growls as he picked himself up. In the darkness he heard the big black dog say, "Brothers and sisters, we have a guest."

As the puppy's eyes got used to the darkness, he looked around and saw dogs. Lots of dogs. Dogs of all shapes and sizes. Spotty dogs and shiny dogs; thin dogs and fat dogs; timid dogs and dogs with bent ears and crooked tails who had obviously seen some rough times. They were all looking at him curiously. As he stood there, the fear returned. What if he was trapped and these were bad dogs who would hurt him? There was no escape from the corner into which he had let himself be led. His tail wagged in terror.

Then there was a spluttering sound behind him.

"Hey, make with less of the tail, will ya!" a voice complained. He turned to see a small, wiry brown dog whose head was covered in hairs from the puppy's tail.

"Oh, excuse me," said the puppy.

The big black dog laughed a long, growling laugh. "These are my brothers and sisters, my family, my team," he said with pride.

The small brown dog came up to the puppy and sniffed his face.

"Hi. Glad to have you with us," he said. "What's your name?"

The puppy thought for a moment, puzzled.

"I don't know." He paused. "My master used to call me pooch."

"Master!?" the black dog roared. *"Pooch!?"*

The other dogs cowered in the face of Tazar's rage. His eyes blazed and his lips snarled, showing huge teeth, one of which was broken halfway down, making him look even more frightening.

"These words do not exist! Not here! Not ever!"

There was total silence. Not a dog moved; each waited, fearful, scarcely breathing, for Tazar's anger to subside. Then the big black dog spoke:

"We have no masters here. We are our own masters; we owe obedience to no one. No one can take our freedom from us. As for that other word, it is so vile that no one should ever say it. It is a lie invented by Uprights so that they can feel superior to us. They know nothing of freedom. They think they are free because they cannot see the leads that ensnare them, but the leads are there. You and I, my brothers and sisters, proud animals of the earth, live together in true freedom and love. Our very existence pours contempt on the Uprights, on the evil Uprights."

As he finished speaking, a great bellow broke from the dogs as they howled their approval. They banged

their paws on the ground and their tails on the empty cardboard boxes that lay around the tunnel. Even the puppy wagged his tail ferociously and panted with enthusiasm. When the commotion died down, he looked with admiration at his new friend, Tazar.

"What *is* an Upright?" he inquired innocently.

Groans and laughter greeted this simple question, but Tazar answered him.

"Uprights, my little friend, are humans, people, owners, whatever word you have used to describe those things that strut around unnaturally on two legs. And whichever word it was, promise me you will use it no more."

"I promise," said the puppy. "I promise, I promise."

"One promise is enough." The black dog chuckled. "Keep some promises for yourself."

"So what do we call him?" the brown dog asked.

"We will give him a name," Tazar said. "It will be our present to welcome him to the team. Now what shall it be?"

A murmur passed through the group. The puppy was sniffed. One dog gnawed noisily on an old bone to speed his thoughts along, then said between chews, "He's very white."

"His ears are awful big," said one of the lady dogs.

"He sure has a powerful tail," said the scruffy brown dog.

The puppy turned his head to look at his tail. It certainly did seem too big for his body, and kind of ugly. He flattened his ears against his head in shame. Tazar looked sternly at the scruffy brown dog, whose own name was Lowdown.

"It's nobody's fault if he or she has a large tail, or even" – he looked meaningfully at Lowdown – "short legs."

"It's not the size of his tail that's the problem," the brown dog said. "It's just that when you're my height and standing behind him, it's better if he doesn't wag it."

The bone-chewing dog paused and looked up for a moment.

"Waggit? Did you say his name was Waggit?"

"No, I didn't." Lowdown thought for a moment. "But it could be, and maybe it should be. Waggit."

Tazar rolled the name around his mouth as if tasting it.

"Waggit. Mmmm, I like it. Waggit. It pleases me. It suits. Waggit it is then."

"Waggit." "Waggit." "Waggit." Each of the friends said it, trying it out. "Waggit." "Waggit." They began to dance round him, barking out his name, over and over again. One by one they came to him, licked him, nuzzled him, and some even bit him playfully. They whispered his name in his ear, and the puppy felt happier and prouder than he ever had in his life. These were his new friends. This was his new name. His tail wagged so hard it seemed ready to come off. Even when it hit Lowdown in the face again, the little dog didn't complain.

Then Tazar cleared his throat.

"Now that we know your name, you should know all of ours," he said, and stretched out his front legs as if to bow. This caused a big ruff to stand up behind his head, making him appear noble and warlike. "Come, friends, let's introduce ourselves."

Each dog went up to Waggit, and their names came tumbling out: "Raz" and "Cal" and "Lady Magica". Lowdown told Waggit that he didn't really like his name, but the others found it cute so he put up with it. Then there was "Gruff", who seemed bad-tempered and muttered something about there being yet another mouth to feed, and "Gordo" who was funny and fat.

The names flew into Waggit's head, spun round a couple of times and flew straight out again.

Not all the dogs came up to him however. One lay at the far end of the tunnel and hadn't moved the entire time that Waggit had been there. She was long, thin and elegant, the most beautiful dog he had ever seen. Her delicate face was fringed with tufts of soft, wispy hair. She wore a jewelled collar round her neck, from which some of the stones were missing.

Tazar pushed Waggit towards her.

"May I present," he said, very formally, "the Lady Alicia."

Lady Alicia regarded the puppy with a cold, haughty look.

"Howdja know he ain't from Tashi's team? Eh? I mean howdja know he ain't a spy?"

Waggit cocked his head to one side. He could not understand how that screeching voice could come from such a beautiful dog.

"Do you really think that Tashi is clever enough to send a frightened little creature like this to spy on us? That would require a level of intelligence that he just doesn't have. Don't you think we could tell one of Tashi's spies before he got to the Bigwater? He's just

not that clever and never will be."

The Lady Alicia sulked. "Well, I don't think you should pull in every dumb dog what gets lost and bring 'em back here. It's too crowded already. There just ain't no privacy."

"We can't leave him out there," Tazar replied. "He's your brother as well as mine."

"From the look of him he's just about everybody's brother *except* mine," she said scornfully.

Lady Alicia had obviously gone too far, for Tazar fixed her with his blazing eyes.

"Well, we don't all have the benefit of a pedigree so kindly given to us by Uprights!" he said, and then walked away from her. Waggit followed him, nervously looking over his shoulder. He seemed to have made an enemy in the Lady Alicia, but he didn't know how or why.

During this exchange the other dogs had retreated to the mouth of the tunnel. Tazar strode up to them, his mood the same colour as his coat.

"Get the food," he said curtly.

There was a flurry of movement as each dog dragged the items he or she had collected during the day into the middle of the floor. There was some old

bread that was hard and had a green edge to it, half a bag of crisps, most of an apple, three pieces of hot dog, a whole pretzel, two pieces of fried chicken and a slice of pizza with little spaces where the sausage had been. A young, agile-looking dog called Raz waited until all of this had been assembled and then, with a proud swagger, placed three large slices of good ham on top of it all.

"Had to fight a Skurdie for them," he said, as nonchalantly as he could.

The growls of admiration for this achievement stopped when Cal revealed that there had been four slices, and that the Skurdie had been so frightened by the two dogs that he had run away immediately. Raz scowled at his friend and pointed out that when all was said and done there were still three good slices of ham, which was true.

Tazar looked at the pile of goodies in front of him. With one paw he pulled out the whole pretzel and examined it carefully.

"Whose is this?" he asked.

"Mine, boss. I got it," said Gordo.

"How?"

"It fell off the back of a cart."

Tazar said nothing, but raised one eyebrow and one ear.

"Honest, I swear to you," Gordo whined, "the Upright was getting out a whole bunch to put over the heat and he dropped this one. I mean, it almost rolled into my mouth."

"You'd better be right, Gordo. There's nothing that gets the Ruzelas out quicker than dogs attacking food vendors."

"Me, attack! I don't attack. I'm a retriever, not an attacker," Gordo said, outraged.

"That's true enough," said Gruff. "He won't even attack his own fleas."

The mere mention of the word caused Lowdown to go into a spasm of scratching. Tazar laughed and then nodded to Gordo.

"OK, divide it up."

Gordo very carefully and delicately separated the food into little piles, neatly biting the bigger pieces of ham and pizza into smaller segments.

Waggit sidled up to Cal. "What is a Skurdie?" he asked.

"Skurdies? They're sort of halfway between Uprights and us. I mean they are upright, all right, but they don't

live in buildings. They live in the park and sleep under bushes. They get their food out of rubbish bins just like we do. I think they'd like to be the same as us, but they just don't know how."

"Is Tashi a Skurdie?" asked Waggit.

All the dogs who heard this question howled with laughter and nudged the ones who hadn't. "Tashi, a Skurdie!" they said, causing more laughter.

"The way Tazar tells it, Tashi ain't good enough to be a Skurdie," said Cal, panting with amusement. "He's actually a dog who's the boss of another team that lives on the Goldenside of the park and he's bad. We won't have nothing to do with him. He wants our realm to add to his, so when he comes over here, we have to tussle."

This sounded frightening and dangerous to Waggit, so he didn't ask what tussling involved. Besides that, Gordo had finished dividing the food into a circle of nine piles.

"Brothers and sisters, on your places," Tazar commanded.

The dogs scuttled around, bumping into one another in their eagerness to get to their meal. Waggit watched, not quite sure what to do. Every dog had a

spot in the circle. When they got there, they sat and turned towards Tazar. Just to the left of the leader was one pile without any dog beside it.

"Come, little brother," Tazar said. "This is your place, and this is your food. Come sit."

"But I didn't find any food like the others did," Waggit protested, although he could feel the hunger rumbling around his stomach. "Why should you give me any of yours?"

"That's the way we do things around here. Each one helps the other. Maybe tomorrow Raz won't find a thing, and you'll go out hunting and come back with a fat scurry, or maybe a curlytail. I've got a feeling that you're going to be a fine hunter!"

Gruff was hungry and getting impatient with all this chatter. "Go sit down. I want to eat."

So the puppy went to his place and sat. The food looked so delicious he could hardly wait. He was about to wolf it all down when he felt Tazar's paw on his. The black dog lifted his head and in a soft howl said:

"Remember as you eat, you eat your brother's food; remember as you sleep, you take your sister's space; remember as you live, your life belongs to them.

You are the team; the team is you. The two are one; the one is two."

As the last words were spoken, the hungry dogs attacked the little mounds. The only sounds were the chomping of jaws and the smacking of lips. The Lady Magica bit into a piece of hot dog.

"Ugh. Sauerkraut. It's always covered in sauerkraut. Doesn't anyone have onions and mustard any more?" she asked.

"No," said Lowdown, "they were all sauerkraut. It's probably why they were thrown away in the first place."

"I hope," Gruff said gloomily, "that Tazar's right about Waggit's hunting potential. We haven't had fresh meat in an age."

The Lady Alicia delicately ran an elegant tongue around her elegant nose.

"I wouldn't betcha collar on it," she squawked. "That dog's so scared the curlytails'll probably end up eating him."

"Curlytails don't eat meat. They only eat tree nuts and bread. It's a well-known fact," Gruff replied.

Gruff's remark came as a relief to the puppy, who had been listening to the group's expectations of him

with alarm. He had no idea what a curlytail was, but he was glad they were vegetarians. He had never hunted. In fact the only thing he'd ever chased had been the ball his master, the Upright, had thrown for him. But the food had given him a warm and sleepy feeling. He didn't want to think about tomorrow until tomorrow. He lay down, gave a soft belch and looked around. Along the sides of the tunnel there was an assortment of boxes, mostly filled with newspapers and bits of rags. The back entrance was covered over in trees and bushes that protected the dogs from weather and intruders.

At the front end there was a lamp post, whose light would reveal any interloper before he could get too close. Whoever had chosen this as the team's home had known exactly what to look for and had found it. This gave the puppy a good, safe feeling. Not that he intended to spend the rest of his life here. Everyone was very nice, except for the Lady Alicia and Gruff, but in his heart he felt he belonged to his master. *Yes,* he thought, *he is my master. I'm sure he'll come back to the park tomorrow, and find me and take me back to the mistress and their baby, and I won't ever have to worry if I can hunt or not.* This thought was so comforting that he

stretched, yawned and let his eyes slowly close.

Tazar came over to the sleeping puppy.

"Who's doing eyes and ears tonight?" he asked the group.

"Me, boss," said Lowdown. "It's my turn."

"No, you stay with the kid," Tazar said, nodding towards Waggit. "I'll take the watch. He'll need some warmth before the morning. Don't wake him up to move him to your box; just pull some paper over you both. And Lowdown..."

"Yes, boss?"

"Just remember how you felt the day that you were abandoned."

"Yes, boss, I ain't never going to forget it," the little dog said sadly and settled down beside the young, thin body already twitching with terrible dreams.