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opening extract from

Secret Heart

written by

David Almond

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One

All that night, Joe Maloney sweated, twisted and turned. He dreamed that engines roared and lights blazed. Men yelled, children screamed, dogs yelped. Metal hammered on metal. He dreamed that the surface of the earth was lifted and hung from great hooks in the sky. Beneath it, shapeless beasts danced in the dark. Then he lay dead still. Easy breath, easy heart. He smelt sawdust, canvas, animal sweat, animal dung. Gentle noises, creakings and flappings. He felt something fingering his skull, felt someone whispering his name. He was about to wake up in some new place.

'Joe!' yelled his mum. 'Joseph!'

He opened his eyes: just his bedroom, pale sunlight filtering through thin curtains, childhood drawings Sellotaped to the walls, his clothes in a heap on the floor. He sniffed the air, trying to smell the tiger again.

'Joe!' she called. 'Come on, son, will you?'

He slithered from the tangled bed, picked up his clothes and dressed himself. He dragged on his heavy boots. He sniffed, listened, narrowed his eyes.

'Joe!'

In the bathroom, he splashed water on to himself, then leaned close to the mirror, inspected his pale face, his tangled hair, his one green eye, his one brown eye. He touched his skin. He hadn't changed. He was still just Joe Maloney.

'Joseph!'

He went down into the kitchen. She was at the table, pouring orange juice. She shook her head and clicked her tongue. She tugged his shirt square on his shoulders. She fastened the laces of his boots. 'Joe Maloney. What you like?'

He grinned.

'L-like me,' he said.

She cuffed him gently on the shoulder.

'Like you. And you're going to need me to get you up and get you dressed all your life?'

He grinned again.

'Yes.'

He buttered some toast and chewed it. She smiled, and smoothed his hair with her fingers and palms.

'I had a d-dream,' Joe said.

'Now there's a change.'

'There was . . .'

She shook her head, but she leaned towards him, about to listen.

'There was . . .?' she said.

Joe rubbed his eyes and blinked. He looked out of the window and gasped. The summit of a blue tent stood high over the rooftops at the village's edge.

'What's that?'

'Eh?'

'L-look, Mum.'

He jabbed the air. A blue tent, a blue paler than the morning sky. A great blue tent that trembled slightly in the morning breeze.

'What?' she said.

'There, look, Mum.'

She narrowed her eyes and peered.

'Tent,' he said. 'A tent.'

'Oh . . . Aye. Now where might that come from?'

They gazed at it together, the slope of blue rising from the dusty red rooftops.

'Fancy that,' she said. 'A circus or something, eh? Last time a circus came to Helmouth was in . . .' She shrugged. 'Before our time, I reckon.'

Joe shoved a piece of toast into his mouth. She put her arm around him as he prepared to go out.

'Now, then, Joseph Maloney,' she said.

He lowered his eyes then turned them to her.

'You know what I'm going to say, don't you?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'You make sure you get into school today. OK?'

'OK, Mum.'

She kissed him.

'Don't want that rotten Wag Man coming round again, do I?'

'No, Mum.'

'You. What a lad. Sometimes wonder what I brought into the world. How can a lad be so lovely and so much trouble? Can you answer me that?'

'No, Mum.'

'No, Mum. Come on, then, give us a kiss.'

She took him to the door, watched him walk through the garden to the front gate. She raised her finger as he turned to wave. 'Be sure, now,' she said.

'Yes, Mum,' he said, then hurried towards the Cut.

Two

He rocked on his skinny legs. He dragged the heels of his ungainly boots. He hesitated, sighed, and gathered his strength before he moved through the Cut. Some of Cody's lot were already there, where it opened to the wasteland. Mac Bly, Geordie Carr, Jug Matthews, Goldie Wills, cigarettes fuming in their fists. Joe lowered his eyes as he passed through. They elbowed him, stuck out their feet to trip him.

'Only Maloney,' they sang softly, 'lalalalaaaaa!'

'Look. The freaks is come,' hissed Plug. He pointed at the tent.

'You'll feel at home today, Maloney.'

'Only Maloney, lalalalaaaaahahahaha!'

'You've got to try standing up to them,' his mother had said. But he didn't know how to look at them, never mind how to speak to them. He kept his head down as he made his way through.

He wiped the spit off his cheek with his cuff. He moved away from them across the wasteland, towards the great blue tent.

Their voices followed him: directed now at the circus.

'Clear off, scum! Clear off, Gyppo scum! Take your tent somewhere else! Ahhahahaha!'

More kids were on the wasteland, younger kids, singles and little groups, spread out in a broad circle, watching.

A massive poster was draped across the tent:

HACKENSCHMIDT'S CIRCUS
! THE FINAL TOUR !
! YOUR FINAL CHANCE !
! NEVER to be seen AGAIN !

Beyond the tent were ancient cars and trucks and caravans.

He heard his name spoken, turned to find Stanny Mole coming up behind him.

'Heard it coming in the night,' said Stanny. 'Thought there was a war or something starting.'

Joe nodded.

'But it's just a stupid old circus,' said Stanny. 'Come on, let's wag it.'

Joe thought of his mum and he shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'Got to go in today.'

But he didn't move. He looked at the tent and the wasteland beyond it and he knew this would be yet another day he didn't go to school.

A thin pale man in a goatee beard came out of the tent. A bunch of little dogs in silver skirts danced around him. He gave out leaflets that offered half-price tickets for the first night.

'Look at the state of him,' said Stanny. 'Look at the state of it all. Come on, Joe, eh?'

The man came towards the boys. He winked and reached out and poked Joe in the ribs.

'Hello, you,' he said.

He turned his mouth down to make a sad face then turned it up to make a happy face.

'Hello,' he said again.

He reached out to poke him again, but Stanny pulled Joe back.

'Leave him alone,' he said. 'Come *on*, Joe. Stop dreaming.'

They started to move away, but Joe stopped again.

There was a girl in the doorway of the tent. She was small and dark-haired, same age as the boys. She had a grubby mac on, fastened tightly at the waist, and black tights and silver slippers. She held the canvas to one side. Behind her the air in the tent was a dusky blue.

She met Joe's eyes and smiled and held the doorway further open.

Stanny spat.

'Come *on*,' he said. 'Let's wag it before anybody sees.'

'Aye . . . aye.'

'What you staring at?'

'Nothing.'

Joe couldn't take his eyes from her. He'd seen her before. He was sure he'd seen her before.

Stanny tugged his arm.

'She's just a Gyppo circus lass.'

Joe stood his ground.

'H-hang on,' he said.

Stanny tugged him harder.

'Come on, Joe. Come *on*, man.'

And Joe turned his eyes away, and headed downhill with Stanny, across the wasteland, away from Helmouth.