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Part One

The Thief of You

Skerridge



1

The Boy Who Never Was



in had never liked Wednesdays, but this one took the biscuit. On this Wednesday she woke up to find that it was raining buckets and that her little brother had ceased to exist.

The first thing to hit her was the rain. As she had forgotten to close her window the night before, the heavy drops bouncing off the windowsill got her right in the face. It wasn't the nicest way to wake up.

With a yell, Nin sat up and glared at the window. Then she scrambled on to her knees and leaned over to struggle with the drenched curtain and the stiff catch. It took ages to slam the window shut, with the storm on the outside where it was supposed to be.

She rubbed her wet face with the sleeve of her pyjama top and then peered out of the window at the mass of grey clouds, or at least what she could see of them through the water pouring down the windowpane.

'Great!' she muttered. 'Just brilliant. It's got to be Wednesday!'

She looked at her big, purple clock, which told her

that it was just less than half an hour until breakfast, then flopped back into bed.

And then the second thing hit her. She frowned into her pillow.

Toby should be up by now. He was always up first, even though he didn't have to go to school as early as Nin. She would hear him every morning, padding to the bathroom and then back again to play with his toy of the moment.

She rolled over again and scowled at the clock. It didn't make any difference. Toby should be up and he wasn't. Nin sighed and replayed the Sacks In The Cellar incident in her head.

She had been sitting in the sun the evening before, reading her favourite book, when Toby had appeared at the door of the conservatory with his tattered monkey tucked under one arm as usual. He stood there for a while before he plucked up the courage to come in and hover by the arm of her chair.

'There's something in the cellar,' he said.

With a groan, Nin looked up from her book. 'What?'

'In the cellar,' Toby whispered. 'Something horrid.'

'It's horrible not horrid,' snapped Nin. 'Horrid is a baby word.' She didn't think it was really, but he was being annoying so she made it up.

Toby just stood and looked at her in that way he had when he wanted her to sort something out for him.

'Tell Mum then.' Nin turned over a page in her book. She had just got to a good bit, the one where the heroine

finds her way into another world.

Toby went on looking at her. He had fair hair and eyes that were so blue they were almost purple. Nin on the other hand had ordinary brown hair and ordinary blue eyes. She felt a stab of irritation.

'Look, I'm busy, OK? Tell Mum about it.'

'She's at the shops.'

Tuesday was her mother's shopping day. Nin rolled her eyes.

'Tell Granny about it then. Or Grandad.'

'Granny's in the garden and Grandad's . . .' he paused '. . . asleep.' What he meant was that he was scared of Grandad.

Nin threw her book down on the table and stood up. 'OK!' she said savagely. 'But it'd better be really REALLY worth it.'

It wasn't. There was nothing in the cellar but an old table covered in dusty tools, Grandad's collection of wine bottles, some empty paint cans and a couple of lumpy-looking sacks crouching in the corner.

'So,' snapped Nin, 'where's this *horrid* thing then?' She could feel herself getting into a bad mood. The sort of mood that her grandmother called a 'pet' and her mother called 'growing grumbles'. Personally Nin didn't see why being eleven should make her any more bad-tempered than being ten.

Toby pointed at the sacks. Nin sighed.

'They're sacks, moron-baby. Just empty, mucky old sacks.'

Nin noticed that she didn't feel at all like going over there into the dark corner to shake the sacks and show him just how empty they really were.

'Go on,' she said, 'get back upstairs and stop bothering me.' And that had been the end of that.

Now, lying in bed with the rain pouring down the window, Nin sighed. Perhaps Toby had been having bad dreams all night. Or hadn't been able to go to sleep at all because he was scared of the bogeyman. Or something. Suddenly she was feeling guilty about the beastly Sacks In The Cellar incident. Great. Wonderful.

'I should have been nicer,' groaned Nin out loud. 'I should have thrown the rotten sacks away and gone round the cellar to show him it was empty.'

She got out of bed, pulled on the green dressing gown that she hated and padded up the hall in her bare feet. Toby's room was at the end of the house, past the box room where they kept all of Daddy's old things. She pushed the door open as quietly as she could. She stared.

The room was tidy. In fact it was more than tidy, it was bare.

She stared at the expanse of floor, which wasn't covered in toys and yesterday's socks. Then she stared at the chest of drawers, which didn't have Toby's giant-sized panda clock, his Winnie-the-Pooh drawing pad and crayons or any number of picture books on it. Next she looked over at the bed. It was empty. On top of that it looked like it had been empty *all night*. The duvet was stretched smoothly over the unrumpled sheets and the

undented pillows. Nin frowned. The duvet didn't have Toby's Spiderman cover on it either.

She ran across the room and pounced on the wardrobe, yanking it open. There were clothes inside, which was what she had expected. But they were Grandad's old jackets, which wasn't.

Her insides did a flip-flop and she felt herself go cold all over. She took a deep breath and looked around, half thinking she would see Toby giggling in a corner. She didn't.

There was nothing for it. Nin pushed the wardrobe door shut again and headed for downstairs.

She hated downstairs before breakfast. She normally didn't go anywhere near it until her mother had got up and started the toast. Before toast, downstairs was empty and dark and smelled of old night-time. After toast it was warm and cheery and smelt of . . . well . . . of toast.

Today, Wednesday (of course), everything was different. Lena wasn't up yet. She wouldn't be up for at least another twenty minutes.

Nin stood at the head of the staircase and looked into the darkness below. She could already see that Toby wasn't in the living room because the door, which was at the foot of the stairs, was standing open on to even more darkness.

She pressed the switch, flooding the hall with light. Then she hurried downstairs, doing a u-turn for the kitchen and taking care not to look at the space under the stairs.

When she was as small as Toby, Nin used to think that

THINGS lurked in the space under the stairs, hiding beneath the coats. It looked like the sort of place where THINGS would lurk. It was something to do with the way shadows hung around even after the light went on. She hardly ever thought about it now, but this morning she was feeling edgy, and the memory came back to her so strongly that she felt her skin prickle. She hurried past and burst into the kitchen.

In the dim, rainy-morning light, Nin could just make out the humps of the toaster and the kettle on the work surface, and the blank faces of the cupboards. No Toby.

'You're up early,' Lena said, appearing in the doorway behind Nin and clicking on the light.

Nin jumped and spun around. 'So're you.'

Lena shook her head and pushed a hand through her tangled hair. She wasn't dressed yet.

'Didn't sleep well,' she sighed. 'You?'

'Rain woke me,' said Nin, which was true.

Lena went over to the work surface, 'Since we're both here, how about I start breakfast?'

Without waiting for an answer she filled the kettle and put it on, then popped four slices of bread in the toaster and went into the cupboard for the teabags. Over her mother's shoulder Nin saw that even the big box of Toby's favourite cereal had disappeared.

'Mum, is Toby OK?' she asked anxiously.

Wednesdays were always bad, but this one was making a bid for the All-Time Most Horrible Day Ever.

'Who?' asked Lena.

After denying all knowledge of her second child, Lena sat at the breakfast table to wait for the kettle to boil.

'You know,' said Nin, wishing her stomach would stop turning somersaults on her. 'Toby? Your son. About so big.' She felt like she had taken a wrong turning into somebody else's life. Bewildered didn't begin to cover it.

Lena laughed. 'I'm hardly in the frame for any more offspring. I've got my hands full enough with you! And in case you hadn't noticed, I'm still single. Is this your way of telling your old mum to go out and get a life?'

Nin winced. Her father had been killed in a horrible accident involving a bull and the Park Road underpass three years ago. It was still hard to think about.

'No, Mum,' she said sympathetically. 'I just . . .'

The moment was broken by the click of the kettle as it boiled itself to a standstill. Lena got up to make the tea just as the toast pinged up in the toaster. Nin hurried to get the marmalade and made a fuss about buttering the toast so that Lena would forget what they were talking about.

By the time Nin was washed and dressed, there was still no sign of Toby. She kept waiting for him to appear from some hiding place and carry on as if nothing had happened. After all, four-year-old kids didn't just cease to exist!

Once she was at school, her brain was so taken up with the problem of Toby that she paid no attention at all in English, which was usually her favourite lesson,

and got told off twice for not listening in geography.

Everything Nin thought of didn't work. He wouldn't be upstairs in the second-floor flat where Granny and Grandad Covey lived because he would have come back down again by breakfast time. He couldn't be with Granny Redstone, who had a house by the sea at Sandy Bay. Toby never stayed at Granny Redstone's on his own. Not to mention that her mother would simply have said, 'He's at Granny's, dear, don't you remember,' instead of wondering who Nin was talking about. And anyway, none of it would explain why all his belongings had vanished. Even his breakfast cereal.

The bogeyman must've run off with him, she thought, and laughed to herself. It was a grim laugh.

By mid-morning break the rain had finally stopped, so she dragged Linette over to a quiet corner of the school grounds. Linette was moaning on about her dad and how he wouldn't let her do anything fun these days. Nin cut across a story about how he had made Linette eat nothing but cabbage for a week because she had spent her lunch money on crisps.

'Never mind that,' Nin said impatiently, 'the weirdest thing happened this morning.'

Linette scowled at her. 'Do you mind?' she snapped. 'I was talking!'

'This is important,' said Nin firmly.

'Oh yeah? And my being starved to death isn't?'

Nin shook her head. 'Will you listen! Toby's disappeared!'

Linette stared at her as if she'd gone off her head. There was a long pause.

And then it happened all over again.

'Who?' snapped Linette. 'Am I supposed to know who you're talking about?'

'Yes!' Nin wailed. 'He's my brother!'

Linette gave an impatient snort. 'Honestly, Ninevah Redstone,' she said over her shoulder as she stomped off, 'sometimes I think you're soft in the head.'

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Nin got through the afternoon somehow. When the bell finally rang for the end of the day she snatched up her things and ran. She kept going, out of the school and past the bus stop. She didn't think she could face hanging about with the others; she just wanted to go home. And she knew that, on foot, the quickest way home was to walk across the park and through the underpass.

Normally, Nin avoided the underpass like the plague. But today she was going to take the risk.

Someone shouted at her as she charged through the fifth years hanging about at the park entrance, but she ignored them. She ran on through the park, over the ornamental bridge and the ducks, past the Juniper Café and around the flowerbeds.

Then, suddenly, the underpass was there. It loomed like a great dark hole ready to swallow her up. She slammed to a halt, nearly stumbling because she was going so fast the rest of her tried to carry on after her

legs had stopped. For a moment she thought she was going to be horribly sick in the geraniums.

Taking huge gulps of fresh air, she looked it over.

On the one hand it was a dark hole that ran on forever and hid such dreadful ghosts that she felt her eyes sting with tears of fright.

On the other hand it was a concrete tunnel under the road that would get her home quickly.

'OK, Toby Redstone,' she said out loud. 'If you're home when I get there and I have gone through this for nothing, I'll put that monkey of yours in the washing machine and make you eat cereal without sugar for a week.'

The underpass didn't get any less awful, but the firm sound of her voice did make her feel less sick. She balled up her fists, unstuck her feet from the path and stepped into the tunnel.

It was nearly as bad as she had imagined.

For a start it was darker inside and smelled far worse than it should, an animal smell, almost like the zoo. And it seemed bigger too, but Nin knew that this was only because she was afraid. The echo made the sound of her own feet follow her and up ahead she could see the corner.

A few yards along, the underpass turned sharply to the right making a blank wall that looked like a dead end. This meant that you never knew exactly what was around the corner. It wouldn't bother most people, but it bothered Nin because it was the corner her father had died around.

Nin knew that what had happened to him was so strange it would probably never happen again to anyone else. Which made the chances of the same thing happening to *her* – his daughter – very slim indeed.

She knew that around the corner was just another stretch of underpass and some steps up to the road. It was just that in her head, the long stretch was extra long and extra dark, and almost anything – like a mad bull for example – could be lurking there.

Today there was nothing but a horrible-looking boy dressed like a tramp with a ragged black coat and a frayed red scarf. He was a few years older than Nin and she had seen him hanging around the town a lot lately. She strode past him, making sure she didn't catch his eye.

At last she was at the steps and then she was out in the street again. Her spirits lifted and she hurried on up Dunforth Hill as fast as she could. It wasn't easy.

To say that Dunforth Hill was steep was like saying that water was damp. On the plus side, the view was amazing. It had turned into a bright, sunny afternoon and if Nin had been in the mood to look she would have been able to see all the way across the patchwork of fields and the spangly strip of the river to Midtown.

The house loomed into view, sitting under the shade of the Christmas tree that Dad had planted when Nin was five and that had grown to be enormous. It all looked very ordinary and peaceful. For a moment she almost forgot that anything was wrong.

She let herself in with her key and stood in the doorway listening anxiously. Normally her mother would be there with Toby. Today the house was silent. They weren't back yet, was all, she told herself. And then her heart plunged as the truth hit her like a falling brick.

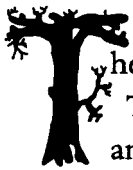
Her mother wasn't there because she was still at work.

And she was still at work because she didn't have to leave early to pick up Toby any more.

And she didn't have to pick up Toby any more because Toby had ceased to exist.

2

Monkey



The evening had all the usual things in it except one. There was homework, which was supposed to be an essay on an historical figure of her choice, but which turned out to be the name 'Toby' doodled over and over again on the page. Then there was dinner, which Nin ate but barely noticed. And TV, where she got to choose what they watched and had absolutely no interruptions while she watched it.

It was quiet and peaceful and very, very empty. It was amazing how much she missed him. Far more than she would have guessed, considering the kid was mostly just a nuisance.

By bedtime Nin was numb with helplessness and worry, and on Thursday morning she told her mother that she felt sick. She had a plan and school didn't come into it. Fortunately, having spent the night going round and round things in her head until she felt dizzy, she looked pale and drawn and Lena sent her straight back to bed. As soon as she heard the front door bang shut behind her mother, Nin got up. She reckoned that

Grandad and Granny would be down at intervals to check on her, but she could work around that. Then, apart from pauses to have a drink (brought by Grandad), eat lunch (brought by Granny), go to the bathroom and so on, she searched the house from top to bottom.

Still in her pyjamas she even searched her grandparents' flat, watched over by Grandad with his usual strong cup of tea and a newspaper. Fortunately Granny had popped to the shops, which was good because she would have asked too many questions. Grandad rarely asked questions, although when he did they were often difficult ones. He might be more ancient than the ark, but Nin had figured out long ago that Grandad wasn't daft. His pale eyes watched her from behind bushy, grey eyebrows.

'Looking for anything particular, kid?'

'Just something I thought I had.' Nin hesitated. 'Do you think that you can be absolutely sure of something and yet . . .' She stopped, not sure how to go on.

'The brain's a funny thing,' said Grandad after a moment, when he could see she wasn't going to finish her sentence. 'People think that memory is a fact,' he went on, tapping his head with his finger, 'that a thing is unchangeable once it's in there. If they remember it then it must be right. But that's just people wanting to feel safe.'

Kneeling by the cupboard she had been rooting through, Nin stared at him thoughtfully. She didn't know what Grandad was going on about half the time,

but if you listened long enough it usually made sense.

'Truth is, kid, memory is something you can shape any way you want. Tell yourself a lie often enough and you'll end up believing it, just you keep that in mind.'

Nin sighed, giving up any idea of telling him more. When you got right down to it, Grandad was saying the same as Linette. Ninevah Redstone was bonkers. It was all in her head.

Grandad watched for a moment or so longer. 'Still looking, then?'

'Yep.'

He nodded. 'That's the spirit. Give up and you're certainly done for, I say.'

Nin looked up at him. Her ordinary blue eyes met his watery grey ones.

'I thought you said . . .'

'You don't *have* to do things my way, kid.' He smiled at her sadly and went back to his paper.

When she had done the house, Nin pulled on her dressing gown to go outside.

Right at the bottom of the garden, past the lawn and the flowerbeds and down a couple of broken brick steps, was the patch her mother called 'the Rough'. The Rough was all long, coarse grass over lumpy ground. At the end was a wild, overgrown wall of shrubs and trees. And at the farthest point of the Rough, under the farthest tree just before the garden ran out altogether, Nin finally found what she was looking for.

Evidence of Toby.

In the conservatory, Nin dropped Monkey on to the floor, sat down next to it and began to look it over. Monkey had been fluffy once, but years of being hugged, washed and dragged about had worn him half-bald. Because he had been out in the rain, lost all night in the ragged grass, what was left of his ginger fur had turned a murky mud-colour. If she had any doubts about her sanity, they vanished instantly. It was Toby's, all right, she would know it anywhere. And it proved without a doubt that Toby was real. He had been there. Now he was gone. Something had stolen her brother.

Nin put the grubby toy in for a wash. She was going to keep it so that she wouldn't lose sight of the truth. With everyone around her acting like nothing had happened she was afraid that somehow their forgetfulness would infect her, make her forget too. Rub Toby out in her head so that he faded slowly into nothing.

Watching Monkey spin around in the machine, Nin wondered what on earth could sneak a kid away in the middle of the night, without a sound. Then remove all trace of him from his home and wipe all memory of him from the minds of his family and friends. The thought that there might be a person . . . no . . . a *creature* out there that could do all that made her shiver.

Except of course that the whatever-it-was had made a mistake.

Not Monkey, that wasn't a mistake. An old toy lying

about in the garden would not have been a problem if Nin's memory had been stolen too. After all, it could have been dropped there by a fox or just flung in by some passer-by.

Nin was the mistake. Nin had remembered.

She sat there, thinking about it, until the wash cycle was finished. Then she fished out Monkey, still damp but a whole lot cleaner, and headed up to her room. As she hurried down the hall and turned to go up the stairs she realised with a horrible lurch that there was something under the stairs, pretending to be one of the dark shadows that always lingered there.

Nin kept going without so much as a false step. She wasn't going to let the beastly thing know that she was scared.

Because she *was* scared. Bone-deep, jelly-legged petrified.

The thing that had stolen Toby had come back for her.

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Over the next week life went on as normal, but Nin scarcely noticed. The THING became a constant presence. It watched her, with eyes that she could feel rather than see, from anywhere dark and shadowy. Like the back of the wardrobe when she went to get a fresh shirt for school. Or the big cupboard in the hall where the umbrellas were kept. Nobody noticed, although Lena kept feeling her forehead and talking in a worried way about the doctor.

There was nothing the doctor or anybody else could do about it though. Nin was sure that her fate was sealed. At least she would find out what had happened to Toby, all she had to do was wait. She just hoped it wouldn't be too long.

The turning point came on Tuesday, nearly a whole week after Toby had been vanished. Funnily enough, the person who shared the moment with her was the school nerd, Dunk the Chunk.

Normally, Nin would rather have smooched a tarantula than spend longer than a nanosecond within speaking range of Dunk the Chunk, even though he was always trying to be friendly. But when the THING followed her to school and groaned at her from out of the plughole in Domestic Science, she made an exception. Compared to that, talking to Dunk the Chunk was small beans.

'Are you OK?' he asked.

Nin swallowed. She was staring blankly at the sink. Dunk's voice dragged her back from the brink of hysteria and made her blink and manage a half-smile. She was vaguely conscious of her ex-friend Linette sniggering and whispering about her to one of the other girls.

'I'm fine, thanks,' said Nin. 'Just, my brother's been stolen and something horrible is stalking me.'

'Right,' said Dunk. 'I did notice you hadn't been yourself lately.'

'It's all over the place,' she grumbled to him on the

bus on the way home. 'Mostly it hangs out under the stairs, but not always.'

Dunk was staring at her, his eyes wide.

'Once,' Nin went on, 'it was *under the bed.*'

'What!' Dunk's voice came out in a squeak. '*Your* bed!'

'Course, idiot. Wouldn't be anyone else's, would it!'

'What did you do?'

Nin shrugged. 'Ignored it and went to sleep,' she lied, trying to forget about the fit of screaming. 'Next morning, I got a broom, like, in case I had to hit it. Only it was gone. Turned up under the stairs again.' She shrugged.

Dunk stared at her in humble amazement.

'Sometimes,' she said, 'it sniggers when I go past.' She looked away, out of the bus window. 'Thing is, there's nothing I can do. No way I can fight. I wish it would just get on with it and steal me away like Toby. Then everyone would just forget me too and it would be all over.'

'No,' said Dunk quietly. 'I won't forget you. I'll make sure somehow.'

Barely hearing him, Nin stared at the rain-wet street trundling past outside the bus, a feeling growing inside her. Anger. The bus jolted to a halt.

'I just thought,' she said as realisation dawned, 'it doesn't know it's forgotten to make me forget! It doesn't know that *I* know what it's up to.' The anger was growing. She clenched her fists. 'So I *have* got something, haven't I? Something to fight with! If I only knew

when it was going to come for me, I could be READY.'

'But you don't know,' said Dunk anxiously, following her off the bus. 'Do you?'

'I dunno,' she said, 'it's Wednesday tomorrow, isn't it? It's bound to be tonight then.'

And she was right.