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Opening extract from

The Double-Edged Sword

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Published by

Gollancz

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THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD



The Nowhere Chronicles
BOOK I

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GOLLANCZ
LONDON

ONE

Finmere Tingewick Smith sat on the second step of the Old Bailey in the exact spot where he'd been abandoned in a small cardboard box sixteen years earlier. He sniffed, the icy November chill making his nose run. As happened every year he found himself wishing that his mother, whoever and wherever she was, had taken the plunge and actually stepped inside the building before walking out of his life forever. At least that way this annual ritual wouldn't be quite so uncomfortable. He shivered.

Watching his breath escape in a cloud of crystal mist, a vague sense of despondency washed over him. His jeans itched from the damp that crept through from the heavy white stone beneath him and he sighed. It would probably leave a wet patch in the denim and the streets weren't quite yet dark enough to cover it. Great. Just what he needed.

Various pairs of feet trudged by, most heeled, a few booted and some very polished, before finally a pair of well-worn but cared-for black lace-ups stopped.

''appy birthday, Fin.' The voice was gruff and warm and familiar, and despite the numbness and potential wet patch that was plaguing him, Finmere smiled.

'Hallo, Ted.' He felt a warm glow of affection in the pit of his stomach. His birthdays, odd as they were, weren't all bad.

''ere,' said Ted, ''old this and I'll light it.'

The cupcake had one blue candle standing proud from the

middle of it, same as every year, but this time the iced sponge seemed smaller – or maybe it was just that Fin had got eight centimetres taller this year. It was hard to tell. Ted sat down beside him, the smell of freshly smoked tobacco and soap cutting through the cold London air. The old man's spotless security guard uniform always made Finmere think of lavender. He wasn't sure why – it wasn't as if it actually smelled of lavender. But maybe it had on that night sixteen years ago.

The candle flickered into life with the crack of the lighter, and Ted grinned. 'Go on then, mate. Blow it out.' His face was thinner and more lined than it had been a year before, which made Finmere's heart tighten a little.

He took a deep breath and blew. The small light extinguished. 'Thanks, Ted. This is great.' The icing stuck to his clumsy fingers. He took a deep breath and started, 'Look, we don't have to keep doing this every year, though – you know, if it's too much bother …'

'Don't be daft, lad! I like seeing you – don't see enough of you as it is, things being what they are. But that's the way of it. I just get to do as I'm told.' He paused, the corners of his eyes wrinkling fondly. 'I think about you all year, though, mate, not just on your birthday – don't you ever doubt that. Now go on, tuck in.'

It was gone five and the passers-by were growing in number as the city offices spat out their workers, done with them for another day. They were all hurrying down to the Tube or running for buses, and no one noticed the odd sight of the old man in uniform and the teenager in a hoodie munching a cake on the steps of the greatest law court in the land. As he chewed, Fin wondered if it was him or Ted, or a combination of both. He thought it was probably him. He'd always been pretty good at not being noticed.

'How are you, Ted?' It was funny how hard it was to find the right words. They got tangled on his tongue. Part of him

wanted to give the old man a hug, but he was too old for that now, especially as they hardly ever saw each other.

'Can't complain, mate, can't complain. I retire this year, you know,' Ted said. He stared down at his shoes for a moment or two. 'Sometimes it's hard to remember where all the years have gone. Time's a funny thing.'

Finmere wasn't sure if he was supposed to say anything. Sixteen wasn't old enough to really have a grip on the complexities of time, even when – or maybe especially when – your life was divided up into such strict chunks of it.

'Seems almost like yesterday I found you on this very step,' Ted continued, 'gurgling away, wrapped up in that funny little blanket of yours. Sixteen years. Blimey.' He looked across at Finmere. 'You still got that blanket?'

'Yeah.'

'Good. It's always good to know where you come from.'

Finmere wiped his nose with his sleeve. 'Is that why we do this every year?'

'Well, yes, p'rhap – and me and the boys in the big 'ouse like to see how you're getting along, of course.'

Finmere thought of the blanket, hidden safely away where it wouldn't get caught up in the confused muddle of his life. He supposed that once it might have smelled of his mother, and sometimes on bad days, even now that he was older, he'd get it out and press it hard against his face, searching for that elusive scent. Mainly, though, it just smelled of damp and the plastic bag it was kept in. He stared at the crowds bustling to get back to their homes and families. 'It's not really much to know, is it?' he said. 'A step and a blanket.'

Ted pulled a tin from his pocket and took a pre-rolled cigarette from it. The lighter flashed and the end burned. 'See this tin?' He held it out. It was battered and burnished with use, and if there'd ever been a picture on the front, it had long since worn away. 'I've 'ad this tin since I was younger than you. It belonged to me dad. I never met 'im, just like

you never met your old man neither. Mine died in the Great War. 'e left this on the mantelpiece, you know, for when 'e got back.'

Ted stared at the tin for a moment longer before slipping it back into his jacket. 'It made me mum feel like 'e'd just popped down the pub for a milk stout or two with the lads.' He paused. 'But 'e never came home. When she thought I was old enough, she let me 'ave it.' He grinned, revealing crooked teeth stained from a lifetime of tobacco, and leaned in and nudged the teenager. 'Maybe I'll give it to you, Fin, eh? When, you know … it's my time – 'ow'd you like that?'

Finmere smiled and nodded, though the thought added to the hollow ache that had been growing inside him as this birthday slowly rolled round. He couldn't help wonder why Ted didn't have any family of his own to give it to, why he'd want to pass something so special onto a kid he only saw once a year. Something he didn't really understand twisted inside for the old man. Ted's life was like a black hole in Fin's head – he didn't know if he was married, or whether he'd ever had children or grandchildren of his own, and if he had, what had happened to them.

Fin wiped his hands on his trousers. He wondered about a lot of things these days. Right now, for example, he was wondering whether Ted was losing the plot a little. They'd done the Great War in History, and it had finished in 1918. It was now 2010. And although the one constant in his life – whether he was at Eastfields Comprehensive or St Martin's School for Boys – was that Maths was the most boring subject in the world and he'd rather eat rats' heads than study it, Finmere was adept enough at subtraction to see that would make Ted just over ninety years old.

He glanced sideways at the old man. With his thinning silver hair and wrinkled face Ted could be anywhere over fifty, maybe even as old as seventy – but that didn't make sense. If Ted was retiring this year, then he had to be in his

sixties. Mr Carr regularly snarled at Jordan Brewster, 'I have only one more year of looking at your surly face, boy, and then the golden age of sixty-five will force our good-byes.' As far as Fin was concerned, anything over thirty was old, but he'd never heard of anyone working until they were ninety. Maybe Ted had just got his wars mixed up. Maybe he'd meant the Second World War. He must have.

He sighed again, then tried to look cheerful, despite the fact his toes were going numb in his trainers. Ted was watching him thoughtfully and Fin could feel the pressure of his gaze.

'You all right, son? You're ever so quiet tonight.'

Was he all right? He supposed he was fine – in fact, he supposed he was quite lucky, compared to some. He should be more grateful, he really should. To be anything else was just bad manners. It was just— Well, he was getting a little tired of not having a clue about his life, and why it had to be lived in such a convoluted way.

He shrugged. 'I'm fine, Ted, honest. And thanks for the cake.' He smiled. 'I'll never be too old for cake – and it's good seeing you every birthday, it really is.'

The old man flushed a little, making his face glow in the gloom.

'It's just …' Finmere continued, 'It's just sometimes I wish …' He searched for the right words. 'I wish I had some answers.'

Ted got up and stretched. He took a last drag of his cigarette and ground it out on the pavement. 'Sometimes, Fin, answers is overrated. You can trust old Ted on that.' He pulled Finmere to his feet. 'You ready to go see the old boys?'

Finmere supposed he was. He checked the back pockets of his jeans: they felt wet. Perfect. A wet arse was just what he needed while strolling through town. He twisted around, trying to see how bad it was, but his head wouldn't turn that far. Feeling horribly self-conscious, he forced his numb feet to push forward. His eyes followed the cracks in the pavement.

Somewhere in the distance a police siren wailed and white vans and black cabs beeped angry horns at each other, as if that would somehow make the capital's traffic move faster. The cold air burned his chest.

He felt Ted's arm, heavy and comforting, around his almost-level shoulder. 'Don't you worry, son,' the old man said. 'You're sixteen now.'

Finmere let his shoes scuff on the paving stones. 'How does that make a difference?'

'Stands to reason, don't it? Sixteen's an interesting age. Not quite a fully grown man, but not a kid any more, neither. It's like you're in the middle of two things and don't really belong in either. Anything is possible when you're sixteen.'

'I guess so.' Finmere's brain strained to wrap itself around Ted's answer.

'Sixteen: you – imagine that.' Ted chuckled a little. 'And then there's your birthday itself: the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Always been a funny date, that one. You can't quite trust it. It's a date things *happen* on. And you know what time I found you?'

Finmere nodded. 'Eleven minutes past eleven.'

'Yep, that's right. Just coming out for me first smoke of the shift, and there you was, just laying there. You didn't cry or nothing.' He let out a sound that was somewhere between a cough and a laugh. 'Amazing little thing, you was then.' He squeezed Fin's shoulder. 'And look at you now! Come on, then, pick up your feet and let's get to Charterhouse Square. They'll be waiting for us.'