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Chris Westwood

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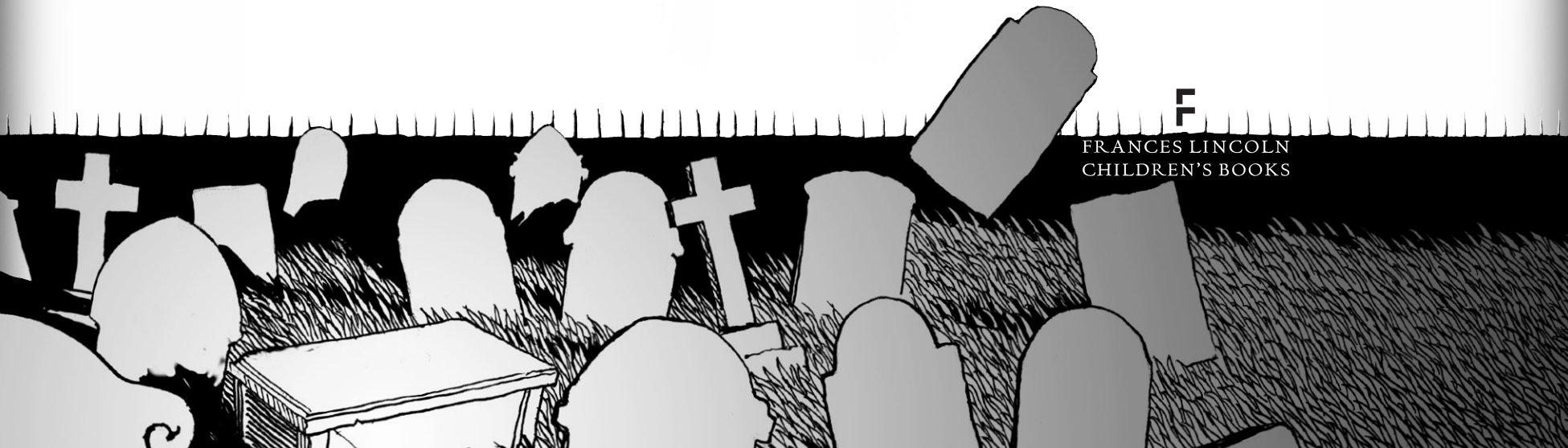
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MINISTRY OF PANDEMONIUM

CHRIS WESTWOOD



FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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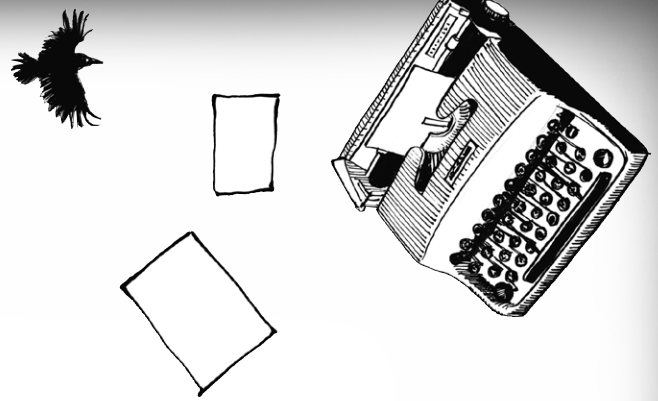
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for Gill



1
Mr October



The first time I set eyes on Mr October he didn't look like anything special. He didn't look like a man who'd stand out in a crowd, let alone a man who could change anyone's life, turning everything inside out. But that's what he did to me, and that's why I have to explain what I did and how it all came about.

It wasn't my fault, that's all. It wasn't his fault either, but sometimes I think it would have been better if we'd never met, if my life had turned out to be normal like everyone else's.

I was wandering through Highgate Cemetery at the time. It was a late Saturday morning with low clouds and a thick muggy atmosphere. By the time I arrived, visitors were flocking through the north gate and following tour guides down the paths, but I'd found another, cheaper, way in, over the fence down the hill.

Inside, the place was a maze, and without a map I hadn't a clue where anyone was. Karl Marx was

here somewhere, and George Eliot and Henry Moore, but I was more interested in the stones themselves, the way they leaned at strange angles as if they'd fallen from the sky and landed just so. I liked the way bright shiny new monuments rubbed shoulders with chipped and broken tombs overgrown by ivy and moss.

I found a stone with no name on it and sat to eat a chicken salad sandwich and sip bottled water from my packed lunch. The clouds parted and patterns of light and shade played on the paths between the headstones. I wished I had a camera to capture the scene, but I still had my sketch pad and pencil.

Art had always been my best subject; I'd been told I had a good eye. On a clean page of the book I outlined the path where it forked in two directions with the stones either side of it and the trees running alongside.

A group of four girls with Liverpool accents strolled past, heading down the path to the right. I paused until they moved out of frame before going on. It was hotter now and a bead of sweat fell from the tip of my nose and hit the page, creating a smeared shape in front of one tomb. It looked

like a blurred ghostly figure.

When I looked up again, a shape like the one I'd made on the page was standing in the near distance, twenty metres or so up the slope. The tomb behind him was a creamy off-white, nearly the same colour as his suit, so I didn't see him clearly until he began to move.

He seemed to be waving or gesturing to someone and mopping his face with a handkerchief. It took a moment before I realised he was in trouble. Wobbling on his feet, he stopped near the edge of the path, falling side-on against a marble cross. He looked about ready to keel all the way over.

'Mister?' I said, but he didn't hear. 'Mister, are you all right?'

Dropping my sketch pad, I started up the path.

He didn't see me coming. He gripped the cross with one hand, wafting the other for balance.

'My,' he gasped. 'Oh my, sometimes it's all too much.'

As I came up beside him, catching him by the elbow, his feet buckled and he fell against me with his full weight, which didn't feel like much at all. When I was sure he wouldn't fall, I walked him to the path and sat him down on a square flat stone.

He looked around as if he didn't know where he was.

'Should I bring help?' I asked.

He looked up at me with misty grey eyes and a weary smile, the look of a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

'No, I'll be fine in a minute. It's only a spell.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, young man, I'm sure.'

I ran for the water bottle, uncapping it on my way back and handing it to him. He took it and sipped slowly, staring into space. Looking at the brown liver spots on the backs of his hands and his white-whiskered jaw, I wondered how old he might be. Seventy perhaps. Probably older. Sunlight flared off his bald head like a halo.

He swallowed more water and settled a little, breathing more easily.

'Thank you,' he said at last.

'That's OK. I didn't do anything.'

'Oh, you did more than you know.' He offered his hand, which felt clammy and cold when we shook. 'I'm Dudley October. And you are?'

'Ben. Ben Harvester.'

'Ah, one of the Harvesters. An interesting name.'

'Not as interesting as October, I'd say.'

His grey eyes held mine until I had to glance away.

'I think I met your father once,' he said. 'Long time ago, but I remember him mentioning you, saying how proud he was. Jim Harvester, isn't it?'

It was a shock to hear Dad's name on this stranger's lips. 'I'm not sure I did anything to make him proud, though,' I said.

'Whoever said you had to *do* anything to make your dad proud?'

Mr October drained the rest of the water. I waited until he looked ready to move, then helped him to his feet and walked him along the path to where I'd left my belongings.

'Did you meet my mum too?' I asked.

'Not that I recall, but I've known many Harvesters in my time. In my line of business you get to meet all kinds.'

'What line of business is that?'

'Oh, mostly clerical work, filing and so forth, which I'm sure sounds to you like the dullest job in the world.'

We stopped while I put away the sketch pad and shouldered my backpack, then I steadied him

past the queues at the exit gate. As we reached the road outside he turned to me with a sadness in his eyes and said, 'It's been good to meet you, Ben Harvester.'

'You too. Can you manage from here by yourself?'

'Yes. I may be fragile but I'm very resilient. I'll cope.' He cleared his throat, watching the traffic. Then he said, 'Hope it's not inappropriate of me to say, but I'd like to pass on my best wishes and deepest condolences to your family. Regarding your Aunt Carrie, I mean.'

We hadn't seen or heard from Aunt Carrie for years, and I had to think twice who he meant. For one reason or another she and Mum had been off each other's Christmas card list for as long as I could remember.

'Thanks,' I said. I didn't know what else to say.

'Well, I'd better be off,' Mr October said. 'Lots to do. And thanks again for your trouble.'

'No trouble.'

The last I saw of him as I set off down the hill, he was waiting at the roadside to cross. I walked to Gospel Oak from there and caught a train to Hackney Central.

We'd moved last month into a maisonette on Middleton Road where we had the top two floors. We'd been told we would have a view of the park from there, which was true if you stood out on the balcony and leaned over as far as you could, craning your neck.

It wasn't the quietest place. The neighbours downstairs liked their drum and bass music loud, sometimes cranking it up late at night and all weekend. But it was cheaper here and we had to cut costs now, Mum kept reminding me. We'd had to struggle ever since Dad left home.

To get to our place you had to enter via a security door and take two flights of stone steps up a stairwell. Then you had to sidestep the mess of plant pots and hanging flower baskets Mum had placed everywhere on the balcony. The old house in Swanley had a garden and greenhouse, and less than half of our things would fit into the new place. The rest was in storage now.

The front door was wedged open, the way Mum had kept it since the hot spell began, but indoors felt warmer than out. In the kitchen I pulled a Coke from the fridge and stared out the window, wondering if Mr October had got home safely. What he'd said

about Dad had started to bother me for some reason. Had he seen Dad since I last saw him? I should've asked about that.

'That you, darlin'?' Mum called from the living room. Her voice sounded sleepy and slow and she was rubbing her eyes and stretching on the sofa when I went through. 'Ah, there you are. Finished your graveyard shift, have you?'

Mum thought there were better places for a boy to spend his time. Idling around cemeteries seemed somehow morbid and unhealthy to her. I didn't want to get into it now so I just nodded, sipping the Coke.

'I thought we might go to the park this afternoon,' she said. 'Get acquainted with our new surroundings. Unless there's something else you'd rather do.'

'Can you give me an hour? There's some work I'd like to finish first.'

'Whatever you like, hon.' She yawned and settled again. 'Give me a shout when you're ready.'

It wasn't exactly work and it wasn't that important, but I was thinking of the sketch I'd started at the cemetery but left unfinished. Upstairs in my room, a much smaller space than I'd had at the other house, I sat on the bed and opened the pad, touching

a finger to the smeared shape in front of the tomb.

The bead of sweat had dried in the shape of a man, but a man without any clear features. I could still picture Mr October's face, so I added a line here and a squiggle there to make the figure complete. After roughing in a few wisps of cloud, I was adding a Celtic cross to the background when I heard the telephone ringing downstairs.

At first I didn't pay it much attention. Mum answered, her voice the softest murmur. I couldn't make out a word. Then a long silence, broken by the sound of sobbing, a sound I'd only heard from her once or twice before.

When I ran down to the living room she was still clutching the phone, staring at it aghast, and her eyes and cheeks were dark with tears.

'Mum!' I said. 'What's up, Mum?'

She shook her head, straining to catch her breath, and it took a long time before she could force out the words.

'It's OK, darlin'. Everything's OK. It's just a shock after all this time. I don't suppose you even remember Aunt Carrie, do you? She passed away an hour ago.'