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Opening extract from

The Midnight Zoo

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1 THE VILLAGE

If the old bell had been hanging in the steeple it would have rung to announce midnight, twelve solemn iron *klongs* which would have woken the villagers from their sleep and startled any small creature new to the village and unaccustomed to the noise. But the bell had fallen from its height weeks ago, and now lay buried in silence beneath rubble; no small creature foraged in corners, because every scrap had already been carried away in beak and mouth and paw; and no woken villagers lay grumbling, for the people, like their bell, were gone. Their homes stood ruined, their beds

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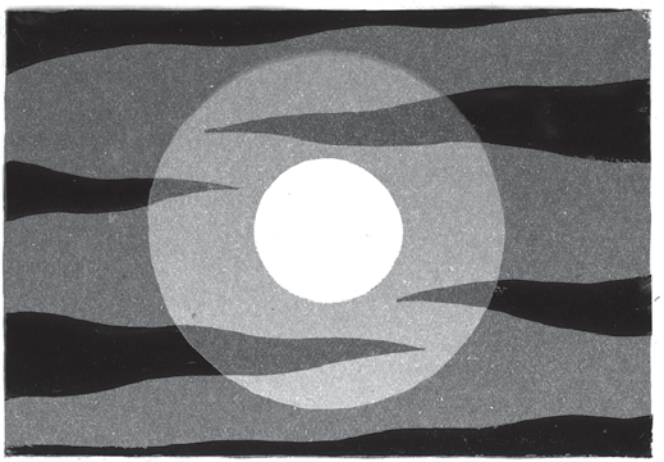
broken into pieces, the bedroom walls slumped across the streets. Even the steeple, where the bell had hung for centuries, had had its pinnacle torn away, so the tower now stood against the sky like a blunt unfinished question.



In the clouds above the village, the legendary black-clad horseman who is Night noticed the silence and reined in his steed, which is also black as coal. Taking his vast and circular lantern, the moon, Night brushed aside a constellation of stars and came closer, curious to discover why no bell klonged, no creature paused, and no newborn baby, woken by midnight's arrival, opened its pink mouth and wailed.

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Along the cobbled streets of the hamlet, no tabby cat ran. No glass shone in the rows of shopfronts. Pots filled with geraniums had once sat beneath the streetlamps, making the village pretty; now the pots lay destroyed, and soil had spilled onto the road, and the lampposts, which had been stately, stood in the awkward angles of shipwreck masts, glass scattered at their feet. Chiselled stones which had once made houses for people and halls for officials and pillars for the market and, in the square, a pagoda to frame the town band, now lay about in ugly piles, clogging the streets and heaped against those walls that were still standing. Here and there, lazy fires burned, feeding on window-frames and spilled fuel.

Bringing his great, whitely burning lantern close to the ground, Night saw a spider wandering across the stones, seeking, from amid the countless crannies, the best place to string a web; and when a cloud had passed and the light of the moon draped once more across the village, Night saw, to his surprise, two boys walking the ravaged streets. The children stepped carefully around the rubble, their footfalls making no noise, the taller walking ahead of the smaller and deciding their path. They were younger than Night

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had ever been, two scraps of life with scanty limbs clad in worn jackets and boots. Their eyes in their young faces were dark, like raven eyes, and their black hair was straggly, as unkempt as raven nests; they were clearly brothers, as kittens from the same litter are brothers and remain brothers for as long as they can. Both boys carried sacks on their backs, the older bearing the weightier load, the younger charged with the more delicate. As he picked his way through the debris the small boy dared to glance up occasionally and look around himself unhappily: "Andrej," he said, but his brother ignored him and did not turn back, intent on navigating the shattered tiles and sagging awnings, the splintered timbers and toppled walls. Night watched the small boy struggle to contain himself, and fail: "Andrej!" he whispered, but still Andrej said nothing and took no notice. Something had rolled beneath his feet, tinking as it went, and he crouched to search the cobbles with cautious open palms. His fingers closed around a corkscrew: holding the find up to the white lamp of the moon, Andrej saw, silhouetted against the light, a sharp tip of iron, the snaky curves of the screw.

Tomas murmured, "Andrej," for a third, stubborn

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time. Andrej sighed. He knew his brother was tired, that the bag he carried was heavy, and that the desolate streets would seem haunted to him. Andrej was twelve, but he had looked after Tomas all his life, and he thought of his nine-year-old brother as a child, but not of himself as one. He strove to understand Tomas the way his uncle, Marin, had understood the rugged ponies he'd bought and trained and sold. "A horse wants to please you," Uncle Marin had said, "but it can't do so unless you tend its needs. Feed, rest, shelter, and courage!" Courage was important: Uncle Marin said, "Horses aren't fools. They like a quiet life. But if bravery is asked of them, they can be brave as gods. All it takes is someone courageous to show them what courage looks like. If you want a horse to put its faith in you, you must convince it you are fearless – Andrej the hero! – even if your courage is only make-believe." So although fear beat inside Andrej like a dark, angry bird, although every corner might conceal a soldier watching and waiting for children like them, although Marin was gone and the boys were almost alone, Andrej tried always to appear calm and undaunted for Tomas, as if the precarious life they lived was

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unexceptional, and held no terrors at all. He tucked the corkscrew away and said, "Come on. It's all right. We'll stop soon."

Tomas wiped his eyes with a fist and shambled after his brother. The weeks he'd spent hiding in forests and sleeping in barns and wandering windswept roads had smudged dirt into his skin and dusted the colour from his clothes; probably he was hardly more visible than a shadow, but Tomas felt as brightly lit as a shrine. Andrej was right: Tomas did think the crushed village was haunted. No dog barked, no clock ticked, no tap dripped, no baby yowled, no hands clapped to chase him away from doors through which the fragrance of fresh bread was borne: but in the silence that lay like a cold sheet across the streets, Tomas heard the breathing of ghosts. Ghostly footsteps seemed to follow him, stopping at the exact moment he paused. Ghostly eyes seemed to watch him, and behind these eyes were thoughts about Tomas, about his littleness and helplessness, about what should happen to him. In their weeks of roaming, he and Andrej had passed through many towns, some friendly, some stand-offish, some damaged, some untouched – but none that were eerie, as this one was. None that were so

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punished and abandoned and grey. In another town he would have stopped to warm his backside by one of the low-burning fires, but here even the flames seemed hostile, like jeering poking tongues. Hoisting the pack on his shoulders, Tomas hurried to catch up with his brother. "Andrej," he said, "I'm not tired. We don't need to stop."

Moonlight lay on Andrej like a fairy's suit of armour. His gaze ducked away from the wreckage to give his brother a distracted smile. "Don't be frightened."

"I'm not frightened—"

"We'll find a safe place down the road, where you can sleep."

"And what will you do?" Tomas asked it, although he knew. While Tomas slept, Andrej would return to explore the town, scouring the creaky debris for anything worth keeping. He'd climb walls and crawl into crevices, opening cupboards and upending boxes, and when Tomas woke, it would be to treasure. Once, he'd opened his eyes to a cascade of silver coins tumbling from a bead purse. Once, he'd woken to six cinnamon buns and a jar of tangy pickles; another time, to three shiny bottles of tingling apple cider. Or

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the treasure might be a gentleman's hat or a stuffed waterbird or a set of lead animals or a necklace made of shells, something Tomas could play with and tell stories about and even keep forever, if it wasn't too big or heavy. Tomas hugely admired his brother's courage, which brought home such bounty – but he hated it, too. Having courage, Tomas had learned, didn't mean things would turn out well, and that you would be all right. Sometimes, Tomas knew, being courageous was the least safe thing in the world.

Since the terrible day in the birch clearing two months earlier, Tomas's life had become a challenge of endurance through which he lurched as if crossing, barefooted, a fast-running, sharp-bedded river. It was a life gnawed at every edge by worry, and the very worst worry was that one day he would wake to find that Andrej had not come back to him.

Along the street a shallow breeze blew, gusting newspaper over the cobbles. High in the sky, where the dark rider Night knelt, the wind was much stronger. A flotilla of clouds as dense as battleships was unmoored by the gale, and, when the clouds coasted across the moon, the light of Night's lantern was quenched. Darkness was thrown over the village like a sorcerer's

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cloak: Andrej heard Tomas whimper, and felt him catch at his sleeve.

But Andrej wasn't afraid – darkness was a friend. Uncle Marin had said, "There are housecats who sleep on doormats and sip milk from bowls. There are wildcats who live in forests, cats who can never been tamed. We are wildcat people, Andrej. You will never have a doormat, but the earth and sky belong to you." Grabbing up his brother's hand Andrej

hissed, "Quickly! While it's dark! We can attack!" and the two were off, running along the perilous streets like two deer across a meadow though they had only thin starlight to guide them, dodging potholes and flagpoles and crumpling brick walls, dust-devils rising and swilling black-magically in

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their wake. They ran laughing through the dark, and the street opened up and became an echoing village square; they swung around a corner and raced down a narrowing road where the collapsed buildings gave way to a tall and endless iron fence. Andrej let his hand jounce along the iron bars; Tomas yelled, "I'm an aeroplane, I'm an aeroplane!" and spread his arms like wings. Andrej became an aeroplane too, and flew beside his brother, each iron bar a solid bullet fired from his fingertips. Suddenly there was a gap in the fence, an inviting open gate: the aeroplanes banked, tilting their wings to dive through the gap, and there was lawn instead of broken stone underneath their feet. "Descend!" Andrej shouted, and the aeroplanes swooped in tightening circles before landing, roaring and coughing, on their knees. Andrej, squinting into midnight's gloom, could hardly see a thing: but he smelt leaves above him and fresh soil below, and was reminded of a forest. "We can stop here." He was panting. "I think it's safe."

The moment his words reached the air, something happened. A low rough noise, like a plank dragging through gravel, rose out of the blackness, and immediately became louder, and rougher, and nearer.

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It became a sound that had a word, and the word was *growl*. In the next moment, overhead, the clouds sank slightly, allowing a fringe of moonlight to touch the world. And in the light, the growling took on the shape of a wolf, rangy and tousled, with long teeth showing, standing so close that Andrej, reaching up, could have scratched its chin.

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