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Opening extract from
Maggot Moon

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*For you the dreamers
Overlooked at school
Never won prizes*

You who will own tomorrow.

One

I'm wondering what if.

What if the football hadn't gone over the wall.

What if Hector had never gone looking for it.

What if he hadn't kept the dark secret to himself.

What if . . .

Then I suppose I would be telling myself another story.

You see, the what ifs are as boundless as the stars.

Two

Miss Connolly, our old teacher, always said start your story at the beginning. Make it a clean window for us to see through. Though I don't really think that's what she meant. No one, not even Miss Connolly, dares write about what we see through that smeared glass. Best not to look out. If you have to, then best to keep quiet. I would never be so daft as to write this down, not on paper.

Even if I could, I couldn't.

You see, I can't spell my own name.

Standish Treadwell.

Can't read, can't write,

Standish Treadwell isn't bright.

Miss Connolly was the only teacher ever to say that



what makes Standish stand apart is that he is an original. Hector smiled when I told him that. He said he personally had clocked that one straight away.

‘There are train-track thinkers, then there’s you, Standish, a breeze in the park of imagination.’

I said that again to myself. ‘Then there is Standish, with an imagination that breezes through the park, doesn’t even see the benches, just notices that there is no dog shit where dog shit should be.’

Three

I wasn't listening to the lesson when the note arrived from the headmaster's office. Because me and Hector were in the city across the water, in another country where the buildings don't stop rising until they pin the clouds to the sky. Where the sun shines in Technicolor. Life at the end of a rainbow. I don't care what they tell us, I've seen it on the TV. They sing in the streets – they even sing in the rain, sing while dancing round a lamp post.

This is the dark ages. We don't sing.

But this was the best daydream I'd had since Hector and his family vanished. Mostly I tried not to think about Hector. Instead I liked to concentrate on imagining myself on our planet, the one Hector and I had invented. Juniper.

It was better than being worried sick about what had happened to him. Except this was one of the best daydreams I'd had for a long time. It felt as if Hector was near me again. We were driving round in one of those huge, ice-cream-coloured Cadillacs. I could almost smell the leather. Bright blue, sky blue, leather seats blue. Hector in the back. Me with my arm resting on the chrome of the wound-down window, my hand on the wheel, driving us home for Croca-Colas in a shiny kitchen with a checked tablecloth and a garden that looks as if the grass was Hoovered.

That's when I became vaguely aware of Mr Gunnell saying my name.

'Standish Treadwell. You are wanted in the headmaster's office.'

Frick-fracking hell! I should have seen that coming. Mr Gunnell's cane made my eyes smart, hit me so hard on the back of my hand that it left a calling card. Two thin, red weals. Mr Gunnell wasn't tall but his muscles were made out of old army tanks with well-oiled army-tank arms. He wore a toupee that had a life of its own, battling to stay stuck on the top of his sweaty, shiny head. His other features didn't do him any favours. He

had a small, dark, snot-mark moustache that went down to his mouth. He smiled only when using his cane – that smile curdled the corner of his mouth so that his dried-up leech of a tongue stuck out. Thinking about it, I am not sure the word smile is right. Maybe it just twisted that way when he applied his mind to his favourite sport, hurting you. He wasn't that worried where the cane landed as long as it hit flesh, made you jump.

You see, they only sing across the water.

Here the sky fell in long ago.

Four

But the thing that really scratched at me was this: I must have been so many miles away. I didn't even see Mr Gunnell approaching, although there was a runway between me and his desk. I mean, I sat at the very back of the class – the blackboard could have been in another country. The words were just circus horses dancing up and down. At least, they never stayed still long enough for me to work out what they were saying.

The only one I could read was the huge red word that was stamped over the picture of the moon. Slapped you in the gob, that word did.

MOTHERLAND.

Being stupid, and not being anything that fitted neatly on to lined paper, I'd sat at the back of the class long



enough to know I'd become all but invisible. Only when Mr Gunnell's army-tank arms were in need of some exercise did I come into focus.

Only then did I see red.