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Opening extract from

The Bell Between Worlds

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1

Gabblety Row

"Their voice is clear and true, yet it is not breathed, nor carried upon the air. It echoes like thought inside the skull, speaking words where none are spoken."

Gabblety Row was quite the most peculiar and ramshackle building in town. Its undulating walls, higgledy-piggledy red tiles and winding iron drainpipes all showed an utter disregard for straight lines. The frontage of four shops with three floors above rose in an astonishing disarray of red brick and dark brown beams, leaning here and lurching there until it reached the garret rooms at its top. These chambers teetered outwards on a forest of wooden brackets, such that they loomed over the pavement below in a manner quaint to behold from a distance, but utterly terrifying to those walking beneath.

The long passage of time had added to the chaos, bending beams and bowing walls to form a miraculous collection of angles, bulges and crannies. In recent years the entire structure had slumped sideways and backwards away from the two main roads that crossed at its corner, as if the whole building was shrinking from the incessant noise and pollution of the traffic. And yet,

while it seemed to cower from the twenty-first century, Gabblety Row clung to the slick, hard edges of modern life like a barnacle to a rock. Years came and went, but Gabblety Row remained.

The terrace also had a curious way of settling into the hearts of all of its residents. Sylas Tate, for instance, was often woken by loud, unearthly groans that seemed to issue from every wall, floor and ceiling, as if the tired old structure was easing its great weight one more inch into the earth for a few hours of rest, or perhaps heaving one more straight line into crookedness. Being a boy of extraordinary imagination, Sylas loved these weird sounds. A creak of the building's old joints would transport him to a swaying bough in the highest reaches of an ancient tree; the groan of a beam would take him to a hammock in a storm-weary galleon; and the sharp crack of a splitting timber would have him at the sights of a musket, firing into the massing ranks of some terrifying and brutal foe. And these moments of escape, these tricks of imagination, were now the happiest moments of his young life.

It was not only the noises that Sylas loved about Gabblety Row. He adored the baffling passageways that ran the length of the terrace above the shops, darting left and right and up and down for no apparent reason, leading to some doors that he'd never seen open and others behind which lived his only friends in the world.

And perhaps, most of all, he loved his room.

Like any good sanctuary, it was extremely difficult to reach. The only way to it was a narrow staircase that led upwards from an undersized door on the third-floor passageway to a creaky trapdoor that opened in the furthest, darkest corner of the room. As the old building had heaved and slumped over the years, so the door and the passageway had become both low and narrow, such that they were now almost impossible for an adult to negotiate. This meant that, in his room, he could be sure to be absolutely

alone: a situation that suited him well, for he was not the most sociable boy. He mixed with people perfectly well when it was necessary, at school or on the bus, but kept himself to himself when it was not. Sylas's uncle sometimes said that his mother's death had turned him into a moody and melancholy boy – "far too serious for a twelve-year-old" – but Sylas didn't agree: as far as he was concerned, he simply knew his own mind and found it company enough. Whatever the truth, Sylas was used to filling his life with his own kind of cheer.

This was just what Sylas was doing at four o'clock on that peculiar Friday afternoon. He was lying in his room turning his favourite kite over and over in his hands, imagining it thousands of feet in the air, carving its beautiful path above the distant hills at the edge of town, gliding over caves and waterfalls, forgotten bowers and crevices, great hollowed-out oaks and lakes carpeted with lilies. He pictured it among the great birds that he sometimes saw from his window soaring above the town – eagles, owls, falcons, ospreys – playing with the wind and surveying all the beauty of the world.

Suddenly the grating voice of his uncle brought him crashing back to earth.

"Sylas!" came the voice through the old trapdoor. "Mail!"

Sylas sighed, drawing himself reluctantly out of his daydream. He lowered the kite carefully to the floor and pushed himself up from the mattress.

"Coming!" he shouted.

He took down his tatty old rucksack from the shelf, walked to the corner of his room and, as was his habit, kissed his fingers and touched the smooth, worn edge of a photo frame suspended above the trapdoor before heaving it open and descending into the darkness below. As it fell closed, the old picture rocked on its

nail, briefly animating his mother's faded face, her warm, smiling eyes still bright beneath the glass.

The short, dark stairwell led to a not-quite-straight oblong of light in which Sylas could see the silhouette of his uncle.

Tobias Tate was an exceptionally tall man — a fact that was only made more apparent by his thinness. His legs and arms were so long and slight that one might fear for their safety as he swung them up and down the narrow staircases and passageways of Gabblety Row. Even his face was long and narrow, and his hair stood up on end in a manner that suggested that just as gravity pulled him down, some other invisible force tugged at his upper extremities. And yet, perhaps in an attempt to fight this upward tendency, Tobias Tate had developed a graceless stoop — an arching of the shoulders and a thrusting forward of his head — which gave him an ugly, almost predatory appearance. When he entered a room, it was his sharp nose that appeared first, followed by the black plumes of his eyebrows and his furrowed brow, then his long, sinewy neck. A bookkeeper by trade and passion, he spent most of his days in his study poring over piles of papers and tapping on his many computers, all of which made his stoop more pronounced, his face more pallid and gaunt, and his character more unutterably miserable.

"Tardy!" he barked. "Tardy, Sylas, that's what you are — and if you don't know what it means, look it up, because on account of your tardiness I don't have time to explain."

The voice was dry and expressionless, but Sylas could tell from the unusual length of his uncle's sentence that he was in an especially irritable mood. A large, thin white hand thrust a pile of letters into Sylas's chest.

"Sorry, uncle, I'll post them straight away," he said, pushing them into his rucksack. He stepped around and over his uncle's

stray limbs and into the corridor beyond.

"Tardy! Look it up!" Tobias Tate shouted after him.

Sylas walked quickly down the meandering grey passageway. Someone less experienced in the curious ways of Gabblety Row might trip over an unexpected rise in the floor or bruise themselves against a bulge in the wall, but these corridors were Sylas's domain. Small of stature and deft of foot from his many errands, he moved with an assured ease past the many apartment doors on his left and right, until he turned on to the staircase. He took the stairs in twos – a feat of considerable skill given that each pair varied in height and angle – and soon bounded off the bottom step and through the large oak door.

It opened at the end of the terrace, directly opposite the Church of the Holy Trinity. The majestic spire soared above Gabblety Row as if trying to teach a lesson in uprightness, but that was perhaps the church's last salute to the world: the main roof had fallen in and the grounds were now an overgrown jungle of trees, bushes, ivy and broken stone.

Sylas hesitated – he had not had a chance to lay flowers for his mother this week, and it was already Friday. He looked at his watch. There should be time after the post office.

Suddenly he was assailed by a blast of screeching, honking car horns, and the acrid smell of fumes as the lights on the corner changed to green. The two roads that met at the corner of Gabblety Row were the busiest in town, each four lanes across and jammed with steel and noise and agitated people. These were serious roads, roads that did not like to be interrupted, and they growled irritably at one another each time the traffic lights changed.

Sylas turned the corner and began the familiar walk along the frontage of shops: the sweet, doughy-smelling Buntague's

Bakery, the ominous undertaker's Veeglum & Retch, and finally Sam Clump's, the locksmith. Then something very odd caught his eye. It was a movement somewhere ahead of him, inside the dusty window of the final shop in the row, the one that had been empty for years.

He approached the filthy, arched panes that made up the shopfront. Each dirty section of glass had been set into carved wooden frames as crookedly as the rest of the row and bent the light in a unique way, making it almost impossible to see into the dark room beyond. All Sylas could make out was the usual darkness flecked with dust and cobwebs.

He shrugged and was about to turn away when something unfamiliar made him look up. To his surprise, he saw that there, nailed over the dilapidated nameplate that had always been blank, was a new shop sign. The lettering was like none he had ever seen, a dance of outlandish arcs and curves in reds and purples and blues.

He read out loud in wonderment: "The… Shop… of…" He blinked and frowned, "...Things."

"*Yes, indeed.*"

Sylas jumped and looked about him, trying to find the owner of the voice. There was no one. The voice had sounded so clear and close, even over the drone of the traffic.

"*Do come inside.*"

A shiver ran down Sylas's spine. It was inside his head.

The voice was accented and strange, like none he could remember. Surely, if he was imagining it, it would seem more familiar. He found himself stepping backwards towards the edge of the pavement.

"*Careful!*"

A horn screamed wildly and Sylas felt the wind of a passing

car tearing at his clothes. He threw himself forward, gasping with fright, and steadied himself against a window frame. When he had gathered his wits, he found himself standing right next to the doorway.

"*You have nothing to fear.*"

He peered again through the dirty glass, but could see nothing but darkness. For some time he stayed rooted to the spot, glancing nervously from side to side. Finally his nerves got the better of him and he turned and started to walk away.

In a few steps he had reached the corner of Clump's locksmith's and he heard the sound of Sam Clump chatting cheerfully to a customer as he prodded a screwdriver into a misbehaving lock. Sylas paused and looked out at the busy road and the endless throng of faces peering over steering wheels, then across to the harsh lights of the supermarket, and finally he looked back at the mysterious dark window.

What harm could come to him so close to Sam and to all these people? Surely he had just imagined the voice – after all, he had imagined stranger things before.

He felt the sting of a raindrop against the side of his face and looked up to see the sky darkening. As the heavens rumbled, he drew himself up and walked briskly across the pavement to the Shop of Things.

S

The rain fell in sheets that moved like silvery curtains across the town. A warm wind caught the drops and hurled them this way and that, so that there was nowhere they did not reach. They swirled into bus shelters and blasted into doorways; they curled beneath umbrellas and danced between the leaves of trees. Soon the town had become a world of shabby greyness, its dull buildings

framed by pendulous, smoky clouds above, and murky pools and rivulets below.

The stranger turned out of a lane on to the main road, gathering his loose-fitting coat about him and drawing down the hood so that his face could not be seen. He cursed as a gust threw up spray from a passing car and he quickly slid the black holdall off his shoulder, tucking it under his coat. Even with this awkward burden he moved quickly, pausing only once or twice to look at road signs and to wait for cars as they turned into side roads. He seemed agitated, casting his dark eyes left and right and sometimes muttering under his breath, but his strides were sure and powerful and he moved swiftly past other pedestrians.

As he neared the traffic lights, his attention was drawn to a strange, ramshackle building on the opposite corner of the junction. He put the holdall down and leaned against one of the traffic lights, peering out from under his hood at the peculiar arrangement of beams, drainpipes and brickwork that lay before him.

"And thus at this our journey's end," he said in a weathered voice, "is another, just beginning."

Then he stepped out in the direction of Gabblety Row.

2
The Shop of Things

"When the sun sets, it merely sleeps, to rise another day; a path that ends, ends not, but leads back from whence it came; and thus at this our journey's end is another, just beginning."

THE DOOR CREAKED ON its old, dry hinges, but opened easily. Sylas heard the half-hearted ring of the rusty shop bell above his head as he stepped into the gloom.

He was immediately aware of the strong odour of decaying wood and damp walls, which hung heavily in the air and caught the back of his throat. The front of the shop was relatively clear, containing a few empty cabinets whose doors hung off their hinges and vast grey spiders' webs that hung wall to ceiling like drapes. But within, all he could see were stacks of crates and parcels that ascended from floor to ceiling like weird postal sculptures, arranged in long lines stretching the full length of the shop. He glanced at one stack and saw that each parcel and crate carried a shipping label stamped with the city of origin: *Beijing… Addis Ababa… Rio de Janeiro… Alexandria… Khartoum…*

"Welcome."

It was the same strange accent, the same deep, gentle voice,

but this time it was not inside his head, it was in the room. Sylas became aware of a dull glow in the dark interior of the shop, at the end of one of the stacks.

"Thank you," he blurted, his heart pounding.

"It is said that the greatest endeavours have modest beginnings," said the voice, this time with some humour. "So I must ask you to use your imagination."

Suddenly Sylas saw the sparse light in the shop shift slightly, and a shadow moved. His eyes darted from left to right trying to find the owner of the voice, but there were so many dark corners and strange objects that he was at a loss where to look. He was about to turn and retreat back to the door when the silhouette of a small stooped man appeared against the dusty light at the far end of one of the stacks.

As Sylas walked to the back of the shop, the figure paused and seemed to bow slightly before reaching for something from a shelf. A sudden flare of orange light made Sylas squint and look away, but when he turned back, he saw the room gradually coming to life. The dark figure was lighting a row of candles on what had once been the shop counter, but was now a broken expanse of rotten wood.

The man stepped forward and leaned on the counter, bringing his face into the halo of light.

It was a fascinating face, quite unlike any Sylas had seen before. The pale skin was wrinkled around the mouth, eyes and the wide brow, showing him to be a man of great expression and animation. His bright, oriental eyes were calming and gentle, like nothing could surprise them, as if they had seen much of most things. His white beard was flecked with bluish-grey hairs around the edges, which lent him a distinguished but outlandish appearance, an effect that was only heightened by the way in which it drew

to a point below his chin. He wore a grey, foreign-looking velvet cap upon his head, like a crumpled pot that had slumped to one side, and a dishevelled grey suit made of some coarse material that showed the myriad creases of too much wear. Even his shirt, which had apparently once been white, was now turning grey in sympathy with everything else. His tie, which was a rich dark green, provided the only colour.

His most distinctive feature was his warm, welcoming smile, for his eyes twinkled and his features creased into a pleasing, amiable expression of kindness. Sylas found himself smiling back – a broad, bold smile that brightened his spirits and dispelled his nerves.

The old man lit the last of seven candles and sighed, making the flames dance slightly.

"I believe in a certain amount of gloom," he said, and with a wink he blew out the match. "What your eyes cannot see your imagination must discover. And your imagination is very important, young man."

Sylas looked at him quizzically. "Important?"

"Yes, for a great many things… and you will put it to very good use in my shop," said the shopkeeper. "Now, let us dispense with the formalities. They call me Mr Zhi."

He stepped around the counter and held out his hand. It was covered in a beautifully embroidered velvet glove of the same dark green as his tie. Sylas only had a moment to look at it, but he saw that the stitching on the back of the hand glittered slightly in the candlelight.

As they shook hands, the old man straightened and looked at him expectantly.

"And how should I address my very first customer?"

"Oh... Sylas. Sylas Tate, sir – Mr Zhi, I mean."

He felt flustered, but almost at once he felt Mr Zhi's eyes soothing and reassuring him, as though telling him in some silent language that all was as it should be.

"You are very welcome, Sylas Tate," he said, pronouncing the name with care. He raised himself up. "Now, where shall we start?" He looked into the darkness and seemed to ponder for a moment, then he tapped the side of his nose and his eyes twinkled. "Follow me," he said.

He grabbed a candle from the counter and set off with surprising speed between some of the stacks. Sylas had to run to catch up. They turned left, then right, then left again, passing opened parcels of what looked like peculiar musical instruments.

"What *are* all these things?" asked Sylas.

"Ah well, that is a very good question to which there can be no good answer," said the old man, without turning. "But you have found the right word. I collect and sell *Things*. *Things*, by definition, are objects we find hard to explain. Were I to explain them, I think I might have to close up shop!"

At that moment they arrived at a wall of crates. Some had been taken down and opened and the floor was strewn with straw and shredded paper. Mr Zhi turned to Sylas and smiled.

"As you can see, I have many thousands of Things in my shop," he said, his eyes now peering into one of the crates, "but I consider it my particular talent to know which Things will interest which people. That is why I have never taken to having my wonderful Things displayed on shelves and in cabinets. That would take away all of the mystery, which is the greater part of any good Thing, and a good deal of the discovery, which is much of what is left!"

The shopkeeper bent low over the crate and very gently lowered his gloved hand into the straw.

"This you will like," he said.

He rummaged for a moment and then, with great care, he raised his hand. He was holding a fragile wheel, made of some kind of metal, from which hung a number of silvery strings. Sylas half expected to see a puppet dangling below but, as Mr Zhi lifted the wheel still further, he saw that each string was tied to a tiny silvery bar, from which were suspended three more strings: one at the centre and one at each end. Each of these additional strings was connected to a further bar and thereby to three more strings, and so on, and so on, until Sylas could see a vast and wonderful structure of silvery twine emerging from the crate. Just as he began to wonder how such a complicated thing could have remained untangled in the straw, Mr Zhi drew himself to his full height and raised the wheel above his head.

Sylas gasped in amazement.

There, on the end of each of the hundreds of strings, were tiny, delicate, beautiful birds, each with its wings outstretched in some attitude of flight. Their feathers shimmered like rainbows in the candlelight and, as each bird turned on its string, they seemed to throw out more light than they received, so that the surrounding walls of crates moved with colour.

"It's wonderful, just wonderful," said Sylas, letting his rucksack fall to the floor.

"It is, is it not?" said Mr Zhi, with evident pleasure. "Of course, such wonders are created in part by your very own imagination," he said, moving the great flock of birds slightly closer to Sylas. "To some, this is a beautiful object that must have taken several years for many careful hands to create. To others, to those with true imagination, it is a marvellous flock of magical birds carried by a wind we cannot feel, calling a cry we cannot hear, united by a purpose we cannot know. To them, each bird is as alive as you

or I, because in their imagination they see them soaring, climbing, swooping, turning…"

Sylas found himself staring ever more intently at the delicately balanced parts of the mobile, watching closely as they moved around each other on the gentle currents of air in the room. He saw how each bird was finished with astonishing detail, showing the individual feathers, the tail fan, the precise angle of the wing as it manoeuvred in flight. He marvelled as they glided past each other without ever colliding, as if aware of one other.

And then, perhaps in a trick of light, he thought he saw one of them twitch.

A wing lifted slightly and a long neck turned. Then a crooked wing seemed to straighten as one of the birds turned in a wide arc around another. He blinked in disbelief as he saw another bird beat its wings, change its path in the air and then resume its endless circling. He let his eyes drift from place to place within the multitude, watching as every one of them seemed to take on a life of its own.

At first they beat their wings at random, but soon every bird was flapping in time with the others. And then, without warning, they broke from the circle below Mr Zhi's hand and moved in one great flock, banking left then right, their wings catching the light in unison, forming a breathtaking display of colour. The gossamer strings seemed to have disappeared altogether. Moments later the birds turned their heads upwards and rose as if carried by an updraught of air. Sylas gazed in astonishment as he watched them soar over the top of Mr Zhi's hand in a beautiful arc of light and colour, before swooping downwards to the floor. At the very last moment they turned upwards and sped through the air towards him, their wings beating rapidly now, their feathers ruffling and shimmering. As they circled round his head, Sylas laughed out

loud, wanting to reach out and touch them. His heart thumped – not from fear, but from a wild, intoxicating excitement.

"So now you see it!" came Mr Zhi's voice from the dark.

Sylas caught his breath. "I see it!"

Then, abruptly, the flock of birds wheeled sharply above his head and streamed towards Mr Zhi's gloved hand. As they reached the glove, they turned again, so tightly this time that the leading birds met those at the rear of the flock, forming a circle. As the last joined formation, Sylas could again see the occasional glint of the silvery strings in the darkness, and then he saw that the tiny bars were supporting their weight once more, as though they had never been gone. The birds circled more and more slowly until they were drifting gently on the air currents. Their wings moved no more.

Mr Zhi began lowering them back down into the straw. Sylas wanted to ask him to let them fly some more, but had the feeling that they had done all that was intended.

He cleared his dry throat. "What *was* that?" he asked.

Mr Zhi simply patted Sylas cheerfully on the shoulder, picked up the candle and started back along the passageway of parcels. Sylas paused for a moment, glancing down at the pile of straw, but then picked up his rucksack and scrambled after him.

"There's much to see!" he heard Mr Zhi say up ahead. "Please keep up!"

He moved so swiftly that, as Sylas turned one corner, the shopkeeper had already turned the next and the only way to keep pace was by following the dying traces of candlelight that flickered against the walls of parcels ahead.

"But what *was* it?" asked Sylas breathlessly.

"Ah well, the most wondrous Things show themselves only to those who are supposed to see!" shouted Mr Zhi ahead of him,

without turning. "So it was with you and the mobile. When you saw it, at first you saw just a beautiful object, a thing of gossamer strings and silver bars and bright-painted feathers. But then you brought it to life. It stirred without any draught to carry it, the wings moved without any plan or design. You made the birds *fly*," said Mr Zhi, turning to Sylas excitedly, "fly like I've never seen before!"

Sylas looked puzzled. "But wasn't that just in my imagination?" he asked. "You told me to use my imagination."

"No, I saw everything you saw, but that is not to say that your imagination didn't bring it to life. You made the birds fly as you dreamed they might, and in doing that – in putting your imagination to work – you showed that you are able to use it like few others. You are able to see the world as it is promised to us."

Sylas laughed. "I'm pretty sure I see the world like everyone else."

"Certainly you do, but the mobile is a sensitive Thing. It shows what you are *capable* of seeing, not what you already see." The shopkeeper cocked his head on one side. "A little confusing, isn't it? But don't worry, I have more to show you!"

With that, he turned and set off into the gloom of the shop. Sylas screwed up his face. "*The world as it is promised to us?*" What could *that* mean? He knew he had a good imagination – his uncle was for ever telling him that he lived too much in his head – but there was nothing unusual about *that*. He jogged after the strange shopkeeper, wondering what he was getting himself into.

As he went, he saw that the giant stacks of parcels were packed so tightly that the shop had become a maze of little corridors, which gave the impression of a room much larger than it actually was. Sylas was just starting to become a little worried that he

might not be able to find his way out again when he sped round a corner and almost charged headlong into Mr Zhi.

The proprietor caught him by the shoulders. "I think this shall be our next stop, young man," he said, with a wide smile.

He turned about and stepped on to a small upturned box. He reached up to the topmost shelf and took down a large flat parcel from the top of one of the piles.

"This Thing is at once very different from the mobile, and very similar," he said, grunting as he lowered himself back down. "Like the mobile, it uses your imagination to show what is possible, not what you already know to be true."

Sylas watched with excitement as Mr Zhi carefully tore open one end of the parcel, then pulled out a large flat object, and cast the wrapping on the floor.

"The mobile told us that you can see what *the world* may become," said the old shopkeeper. "With this Thing – this set of mirrors – we will show something else: that you can see all that *you* are able to be."

At first the object looked like a leather-bound book, but as Mr Zhi laid it carefully on the box, Sylas saw that it was not made of leather but of two pieces of wood, joined along one edge by tarnished but ornate brass hinges. The top piece was black and the piece beneath white. As he leaned forward to look more closely, Mr Zhi took gentle hold of the black panel and lifted. The hinges creaked slightly and the black panel swung open.

What was revealed seemed unremarkable. Both panels comprised a simple mirror framed by an ornately carved border. The old man lifted them up and adjusted them carefully in front of Sylas until he was looking at himself in both mirrors, each showing his reflection from a slightly different angle, the white one from the left and the black one from the right. The effect was

interesting at first, but no more so than looking at a reflection in a bedroom dresser.

As he glanced between the mirrors, Mr Zhi peered at him, taking in Sylas's wide brow and small stubby nose; his high arching eyebrows and dark brown eyes that seemed a little sad and old for his age; his thick, dark, wavy hair, cut crudely so that it fell in a tousled mass about his face. The proprietor smiled quietly to himself and shook his head, as if finding something difficult to believe.

"I just see myself," said Sylas with a shrug.

Mr Zhi chuckled. "I'm afraid this will not be easy. You would not need money in my shop, but my Things still come at a price: the struggle to understand." He moved the mirrors a little closer to Sylas. "The trick with these mirrors is not to look—"

Suddenly there was a noise at the back of the shop: the clunk of a door closing, the snap of a latch. Mr Zhi frowned and quickly closed the mirrors, pushing them into the nearest pile of Things.

"Please wait here," he said, then set out quickly towards the back of the shop.

There was something about the way he had hidden the mirrors that alarmed Sylas. It was clear at once that whoever had entered by the back door was not expected. Instinctively he took a few paces after Mr Zhi, but when he saw a large shadow move across the candlelight on the ceiling, he stopped.

Mr Zhi turned. "Stand very still," he said. "I'll be straight back."

A shiver went through Sylas. All of a sudden, Mr Zhi sounded worried. Very worried.