

Word & Note



THE
DREAMHOUSE

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ADAPTED FROM HIS DEBUT NOVEL, *ABOVE THE VOID*

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The house is strangely familiar. I'm standing in a long hall with doors on both sides leading to various rooms – rooms that I'm sure I've been in before. And at the end of the hall is a broad imposing staircase with dark wooden banisters – Victorian I suppose. I suspect that if I go up that staircase I will find an infinite number of halls and doors leading to an infinite number of rooms, and it will take me forever to see them all – in fact, I never will. I'm not ready for that staircase and all that infinity, so I go to the first door on the right, open it, and walk into the room.

I wish I hadn't.

It is a large circular chamber and placed round the walls are dark objects whose shapes are difficult to make out in the gloomy light. In the middle is a spiral staircase which goes up and up and disappears into the darkness above. It descends as well, going down into the depths below.

I am drawn to the objects at the edge of the room. They give off a heavy sense of something I don't want to see, and yet, and yet I'm terribly attracted to them. They are things that have never been forgiven. I don't want to know them any more, but at the same time I'm addicted to them. The pain of that hurt, that slight, that insult, never forgotten, never forgiven – held on to for ever.

That glorious pain, like holding the wrong end of a burning hot poker: 'Hold it, hold it tight Melissa – feel it burn into your flesh.' I love the pain of holding on to unforgiveness. All those precious wounds. I can see them and feel them all at once in this room. I don't ever want to let go of them – can't let go of them.

'He said this, she said that, they must hate me – how can they?'

And from my childhood: 'They made me do this, they never listened, they didn't look after me, they didn't care.'

I wander round this room, horribly enthralled, wanting, yearning to touch each wound as though it's a blessing.

Ah, there's a really powerful one: 'Nobody understands me!'

And right now I want to rend these hurts – to tear them apart. But it's me that I would hurt.

I never get too close to the edge as I wander round the room. The objects are shrouded in a mist, which makes them seem attractive from a distance, but I don't want to see them too clearly. I daren't. I would be lost forever in the fascination of my hurts, never to see another room. Never to move on.

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I'm out of the room before I know it, and I have closed the door with a sudden desire to get on and explore this vast house.

I open the next door on the right and nearly stumble into a huge dark hole, just catching hold of the door frame in time. This room is circular too, and so large that it is hard to see the other side in the sepulchral gloom. There is a bit of floor going right round the circumference of this huge chamber – just enough to get round if I keep my back pressed against the wall. My fear of heights nearly makes me leave the room and carry on with my exploration. Why risk my neck in this seemingly empty and dangerous space when there is so much more to see?

I blink, and in that moment the room is transformed. There is a beautiful oak floor running from the lip on which I'm standing, and reaching right over to the other side. A blue glow lights the room up making it feel fresh, creative, and I can hear the sound of the sea. I am very attracted by this room now, wanting nothing more than to go right to the centre into that blue light, and feel the fresh seaside air on my face. I pause, taking all this in and wondering how it could be safe. Then I take a step onto the oak, ready to jump back if it gives way.

The floor is firm and smooth under my bare feet. I can feel the pulse of old, old wood – warm with its still-retained life. I can see something in the middle of the room, and as I get closer, walking slowly and carefully, I see that it is a small table with a polished top and slim turned legs. The wood has a reddish hue, like cherry, giving it an inviting warmth, and there is a wooden chair by it which looks old and comfortable. I feel invited to sit in this chair, and as I move to do so a sheet of paper appears on the surface of the table, with a pen made of some rare wood. I sit down and start to write. I write whatever comes into my head, and as I look down at the paper in front of me, I realise I am writing a great story. Something I never imagined I would do. Never.

Time passes and I just bask in this lovely room with its peaceful sounds of the sea and its gentle blue light. I have finished the story, and look at it with amazement – where did that come from? Then over my shoulder I feel a presence, a person who knows me. Can I trust them with this new story of mine?

The words I hear are harsh and destructive – no encouragement, and I feel a terrible sinking sensation in my stomach. Simultaneously the table begins to disintegrate. My story falls to the floor now beyond my reach and to my horror the floor itself starts to collapse. The trusty old oak floorboards rot in front of my eyes and I leap up just as my chair gives way and I stagger back, keeping away from the widening circle of darkness in front of me. I must get back to the door and I turn and flee as the rotting boards give way behind me, just making it to the wall in time as the entire floor disappears into the chasm leaving just the lip round the edge of the room. I cling to the wall, I can't see the door and I turn round in the darkness – just me, this lip, and the wall.

I've got to find a way out of here, but the door has disappeared. In the darkness and confusion I must have gone to the wrong side of the room. I can't stand this aloneness on a ledge with a huge fall below me. I wobble, my knees start to give way, I cling to the wall but I'm facing away from it so there is no proper grip. Everything starts to rock, the wall becomes slimy – no grip at all, and I slide away from it and into the void.



I am falling. Am I Alice? But this is no rabbit hole, no certainty that something weird and comforting will happen. I pass something sticking out and grab hold of it. In the gloom I can see it's a knife with writing on it.

'Cut yourself, then you will feel better', it says.

I'm tempted but fortunately my hands are still so slippery from the slimy wall that I drop it and it disappears into the gloom below without a sound. I feel sick – I'm sure I'm going to be sick before I hit the bottom of this pit, and die in a heap of crushed bones and ruptured flesh. I try to scream, but no sound comes out – I'm stuck in this nightmare.

Down, down I fall. It gradually gets lighter and lighter, and then, I see the glint of something coming up fast to meet me.

I hit the water hard – it stings my feet, and feels very cold as I go down deep. I can't breathe. I struggle up through the weight of the water. I can see light above me – blue. Keep going up and up – I will breathe in water at any moment and then I will drown. The light seems overpowering as I reach the surface, gasping and flailing. Exhausted, exuberant – I'm alive!

I'm in a pool surrounded by green banks and trees, in what looks like a garden. I struggle to the bank and haul myself out to flop on the grassy slope and feel the sun on my skin, warming and drying me. As I stretch my arms out to feel the soft grass and the warmth of the sun, my hand comes into contact with something sharp. I feel it prick my skin and I recoil, bringing my hand in front of my eyes to look at the damage. There is a small cut on the back of my hand and blood is coming out of it in tiny droplets. I suck the wound and taste my own blood. Slightly salty. The bleeding stops and I raise myself on my elbow to see what had cut me. There lying on the grass is the knife.

'Cut yourself'.

Once again I feel tempted, but overcoming my urge for self harm I take the knife by the handle and fling it into the pool where it disappears with a plop going down to unknown depths.

Safe at last. Safe from myself, I snuggle down into the luxurious warm grass and look up into the sky. The clear blueness of it and the gentle warmth coming down from it remind me of mornings spent on the beach by the Mediterranean sea, when all I had to think about was where the next meal was coming from. After a while, I realise that I'm hungry. It's a curious kind of hunger – more a restless need to find something to feed me. I get up from my cosy grass-bed and look around. I am in the Night Garden, I am in C.S. Lewis's Garden Between Worlds, I am in the Garden of Eden. Dark and light, mysterious and welcoming, it draws me on into its heart.

As I walk, I realise that it is all very familiar. It is like the garden of my childhood – dreamt or remembered. Wide sweeping lawns and cedar trees giving aromatic shade. High borders of rhododendrons with their bright colours, and old pink roses with such a sweet scent. Every now and then I catch a glimpse of some great tree – a Scots pine looking top

heavy, a glorious copper beech, and a very climbable yew tree. As I wander down the lawns guided on my way by impregnable borders I come upon an apple orchard. Most of the trees are quite small, but all are old. In the centre is a much larger tree with big red and green apples. I want one of these apples but because of the height of the branches I have to reach up to grab hold of one. It comes away from the branch with a sudden movement, sending dry bits of leaf and dead wood floating down on me. I brush the detritus from my face and hair and take a bite. The apple is juicy, refreshing and slightly bitter. When I was young I was told to let the fruit ripen, but I always liked the bitterness of fruit before its time.

‘Is this the tree of life?’ I ponder. ‘Is this the fruit I wasn’t supposed to eat? But if so, where’s the serpent?’

At that moment I am startled by a sudden rush of colour as a large bird glides past me and up into the high trees surrounding the orchard. I follow the direction of its flight, longing to see it more clearly. But it is gone – swallowed up in the verdant forest that I now see is on every side of the garden.

I walk on, munching the apple, and feeling small but protected in this mother of gardens. So it comes as a shock when I round a corner and come across an impenetrable barrier of fallen trees. Six great elms lie prone on the ground in a row, their roots pointing up to the sky, the fresh earth still dangling from their fibrous ends. The trees lie long and straight, the bark ridged and peppery brown. I am tempted to clamber up onto the trunk of the nearest tree and go back to my childhood, playing games – imagining I’m in a space rocket going to Mars. I resist the temptation: I’m an adult now, even if I feel small. I can’t play these games any more, and anyway, I’m sad to see these wonderful trees brought so low to die and rot on the ground.

As I gaze at them wondering what brought them down, and how I am going to get round them, I become aware of a presence behind me. I turn to see a boy of about fifteen. He is looking straight at me with his hands behind his back. His face is covered by a white mask with an ‘O’ shape for a mouth. But looking through the mask his eyes are cold as they survey me. He makes me feel as if I have no clothes on, and I just want to run and hide from him, but I am rooted to the spot – mesmerized. Slowly, he brings his right hand round from behind his back. It is holding a knife – that knife, and I wonder how he managed to get it from the bottom of the pool. I reach forward and take the knife from him. I notice that he has been holding the blade and that blood drips from his hand onto the grass, staining it red. I look at the blade and ‘*Cut yourself*’ is still visible through the blood, then I turn it over to see more writing: ‘*This knife cuts both ways*’. I look up again but the youth has disappeared leaving a small pool of red on the green grass, and an impression of his eyes – still staring. The knife tempts me. I hold out my arm. ‘*Then you will feel better.*’ But I’m in a place before all that. I’m back in a safe world before the happening, before I lost my nerve to live, before all my anger and my rage – my take on the world.

I turn and plunge the knife into the trunk of the great elm next to me. My fury drives it deep, and in that moment I hear the grinding of worlds warping – like the sound of huge trees splitting. The garden changes shape before my eyes – colours pressed together like

flowing paint. Clear at first and then becoming blurred as they come too close to see. I am swallowed up. The massive grating, squealing sound overpowers all else and I give myself up to be ground between dimensions – pummelled into another existence.

All colours make white – all colours make black!

IV

It's dark, and all I can see is a small pool of light coming up from the floor. As my eyes begin to focus, I find myself at the top of a spiral staircase that leads down through a swirling mist towards the light. I am still holding the knife, and it dawns on me that I can't just get rid of it; that until I have mastered it, it will always come back to me, and I will never return to that room where I can write my story. I so want to be there again, with the blue light and the writing table, but it is a dangerous place for me now – at any moment that floor could give way.

These stairs seem solid enough though, so I go down them and into the gloom. At least I've got the knife!

I grasp the rail of the spiral staircase and begin my descent. There is an eerie feeling of being suspended high above nothingness. Through the mist that surrounds me I can see no end to this climb down. The stairs recede below me, turning silver in the cloudy light. There is no visible support for this staircase, just the steps and the rail spiralling down. I grip the rail tightly, scared of falling over the side and into nothingness. After a while my feet start to get sore from the metal steps, my arm aches from the tension of gripping the rail, and I begin to wonder when this will end. Then I hear faint sounds below me. At first they sound like a wind, low and echoing round this cavernous void. But as I get closer I can hear many voices – calling, pleading, moaning, laughing – and I realise that I am ending up back in the room of unforgiveness, and it is a place of madness. These demanding voices – cajoling, mocking, accusing – seen from the outside like this, they now seem very unattractive. Why was I ever taken in by them?

At last I am nearing the floor, which I can now see is stained with tears. Dark streaks and salty deposits all over what was once a beautiful elm floor. And as I walk towards the wall of this circular room, the shapes making these mad sounds come into focus for the first time.

They are dark green plants with huge black flowers, their stems covered in spikes and bristles. Their black petals are hard and shiny, so unlike the soft velvety surface of a natural flower. I get close enough to touch one of these plants and I see how repulsive it is – gleaming in the half-light. It is saying how left out it feels, never included, never accepted, always alone. 'Nobody loves me, nobody cares...' I want to hear no more and I plunge the knife right into the centre of the black flower. There is a shriek, followed by rustling and creaking and the flower starts growing. Before I stabbed it, it came up to my shoulder; now I see it growing up the wall to tower above me, leaning over me, threatening me.

I stagger back and look down at my left arm which is starting to sting. To my horror it is bleeding. I must have cut myself when I stabbed the flower. *'This knife cuts both ways.'*

The other plants all start to lean towards me, mocking me. 'Stab us, cut us,' they say, 'and see what happens.' One revolting creeper sends out a tendril to brush my face. It is prickly and slimy and I lash out at it with the knife. The end of the tendril falls to the floor and starts to grow right by my feet. I feel my left arm sting again and look down to see another cut just below the first one. If I carry on like this I will end up cutting my wrist. I must get out. There is no way I can sort out this unforgiven place. I look round the walls for the door, but all I can see are these shiny black flowers lining the walls. The only way out is in the centre of the room, so I turn and make for the spiral staircase, feeling the brush of hairy tendrils on my back.

I reach the stairs and start to climb, but then it dawns on me that if I go back up I will never get out. I will be stuck with this knife and this horrible resentment for ever. Just going round in circles.

No. I must go down below the room, and into the dark. However frightening it is, it's the only way out. The metal spiral staircase changes into a stone one with no handrail as I descend below floor level. It is wet under my feet, and I can't see anything at all in the gloom below. I half stagger, half slip down the cold stone steps, wondering if I'm just going to fall off the edge and into oblivion. My head is below the floor now, and all is dark down here. The only light is from the the room of unforgiveness above, and it is faint so I can't see far into the gloom below. I wonder how much farther I am going to have to creep down into this dark damp cave, when my feet find no more steps, but just what feels like damp earth. I step cautiously away from the stone stairs and I am blind. I stop to try and get my bearings. There is a smell of damp earth down here, and a faint rustle and creak of something moving in the gentle cool breeze that I can now feel on my face. Amidst all the fear of the unknown that surrounds me I feel my heart leap – there must be a way out down here. That breeze must come from somewhere. Maybe I can get back into that beautiful garden. But I'm still holding the knife, and I don't want to let go of it. I can't let go of it.

With my left arm stretched out in front of me I walk slowly forward in the direction I feel this breeze is coming from. All my senses are heightened by this blindness. I can feel every little lump of mud beneath my feet, hear every noise – and there is noise. What had sounded like a rustle is clearly more like the sound of many damp things rubbing against each other. My mind conjures up horrible images of the limbs of dead people, hanging from the ceiling of this dark cavern, all gently swaying in the wind. So it is almost a relief when I feel something fibrous with my hand. A root. It must be a root! I walk slowly forward and feel another, then another. But after a few steps they are getting thicker and longer and are really starting to block my way. If I'm going to get out of here I'm going to have to hack my way out. I feel the knife in my hand. Will it just cut me as I cut the roots? I'm going to have to try, so I cautiously take hold of the nearest root and take the knife and start to hack at it. It's much tougher than I expected. The knife feels blunt, and I have to make a sawing motion to feel like I'm having any affect. Just when I think that I'm getting nowhere I feel the root come away in my hand and simultaneously I hear a thump and a shriek from the room above.

The surprise makes me drop the knife, and as I grope down in the dark, it dawns on me that these are the roots of the ghastly black flowers in the room of unforgiveness. There's a stinging feeling on my left arm – I must have cut myself. I feel it to see if I'm bleeding and my arm is wet, but I can't be sure whether it's the moisture of this damp place that covers me, or whether it's my blood.

I can't find the knife. I'm blind in this darkness and I'm starting to panic.

'Don't move from this spot,' I say to myself. 'You'll never find it if you move.' So I keep my feet as much in the same place as possible and crouch down, swinging my right arm around in a wide arc. It can't have gone far. My hand brushes against something slimy that moves, and I jerk back, almost falling over. I want to scream but no sound comes out of my mouth. Stuck here in the dark. Alone. I sit down and something sharp against my thigh makes me get up again. I put my hand on it – it's the knife.

I must stand up, face the breeze, and cut my way out of here. I might find my left arm hacked to pieces but it's the only way I can get out. Slowly, I move forward, cutting through one root and then another in a seemingly endless process. The satisfaction of hearing the plants above me shriek and fall keeps me going, along with the knowledge that it can't be far to the edge of the room. And then I'll get out. It's merciless, hard work, and each time I cut through another root I wonder if my left arm has another gash in it. I haven't felt anything since it stung the first time, and I am beginning to wonder whether I imagined it. I'm making progress here, the breeze is getting stronger, and I can hear something else mixed in with the rubbery creaking of the roots. It's a rhythmic lulling sound that calls up faint memories. In this dark hell I find it hard to recall anything good in my mind, so fixed am I on survival and escape. The earth is feeling different beneath my feet – softer, dryer, sandier. And then it comes to me. I'm hearing the sea.

But there are still some particularly tough roots to cut through, and my arm's getting very tired. I hack and hack, and two more go, and then it feels as if I have only one root to cut through, but this one is really stubborn, and the knife feels blunter than ever, in fact it feels like it's changing shape. There are still some strands of this root to cut through, but what I'm holding doesn't feel like a knife at all. In desperation I wrench and pull at the root, but it won't break. I feel the knife, careful not to cut myself: most of its length is like a smooth stem, but at one end there's a ring and the other end sticks out proud of the stem and is serrated. I put this against the first strand of root and saw. It comes away. I do the same again, and again until I hear a loud shriek and a thump as the plant in the room above me falls to the floor, and I stumble out into water.

v

It's cool as it laps round my ankles. I can smell the salt, but still I can see nothing. I look up – it's pitch black. Has all sight gone from my world? Am I to be blind for ever? I feel the tears in my eyes, and I just want to give up. But something inside me says otherwise:

'Sing in the dark,' it says. So I start to sing. It's a strange improvised song without words, a sort of lament. A grieving lullaby for the child I never had. It's almost as if someone else were singing it. My love, my child.

As I sing and look up, a tiny light appears above me, then another and another. Stars are lighting up my sky, and I remember a childhood book: big bear carries out little bear, 'I give you the moon'.

And so I sing for the moon in a voice that is deep, rich, and resonant, and out comes a huge harvest moon, low on the horizon. An orange moon that turns to gold and then to silver as it climbs up into the sky. And from this shining moon I can see the rippling waves of a gentle sea. It's warm and I'm standing on the edge of it, revelling in its peacefulness. I look behind me and the root-filled horror has gone. In its stead is a long sandy beach surrounded by pine trees. To my right and left the sand curls forward into the sea, making a protective bay, and I am held in its arms.

My arm! I look down at my left arm, fearing what I might see, but there are no cuts on it, just some abrasions that look like they might be caused by a very blunt saw. It feels bruised but otherwise undamaged. I look at my right hand and instead of holding a knife, I'm grasping a large bronze key, about nine inches long. The sort that would open the door of some ancient castle. The serrations at the lock end must be what caused the scratches on my arm, but they are also what finally hacked through the last root and released me. Is this paradise? This place that I have escaped to? Or is it the edge of my mind? Should I plunge forward and dare to dive down into my depths? Or should I go back up the beach, through the trees and find a lock for this key? The sea invites me with its warm lulling rhythm, but I look at the key and wonder.

Turning round, I scan the beach for an entrance into the wood, and just to the left I can make out a break in the trees. Reluctantly, I walk up the beach away from the inviting waters, and feeling the sand between my toes, I make my way towards the gap. There is a path through the pine wood. The roots stand proud of the sand in places, giving a feeling of children's-book fantasy. In the moonlight the sand looks like snow, and the trees curl in on either side of the path. As I look up at them I feel very small – like I'm a child. Quietly, feeling as though I'm trespassing, I creep up the path trying not make a sound. A fawn appears just ahead of me, looks surprised for a moment and then trots off into the trees. I become aware of a shadow above me, and an owl silently glides up the path in front of me – a mysterious magical creature. The mossy lumps in the banks on either side of me make curious sculptures, their shadows made sharp by the cold light of the moon. And the smell, that resonant aroma of pine, is intoxicating.

I know in my heart that I will come back this way to the beach, but first I must open a door with this heavy bronze key. I hold it tightly, as if my life depended on it.

The path takes me deeper into the wood and it's almost impossible now to imagine that I could be so close to the sea. Slightly uphill all the time, it twists and turns, and the sand is laced with pine needles making the walking slightly prickly. It feels like it will go on for ever, so it's a shock when I come into a large sandy clearing and there before me is a house. Stone built, with flying buttresses and towers, arched windows and decorative doorways, it could

be a grand mansion except it is too small. Like all these ideas were packed into a child's space – a folly.

I walk down the sandy slope towards the front door, and there, sitting in an armchair beside it, is an old woman. As I get closer, I half recognise her but cannot think from where. She is dressed in dark flowing clothes, and has large ornate rings on her crooked fingers. She looks straight at me with piercing eyes – her face is neither smiling nor frowning and her mouth hangs open slightly in the shape of an 'O'. I cannot decide whether she is a witch or a wise woman. I can feel her power, and it makes me frightened. I fear that whatever she says will affect me, and it will be hard to resist her and go my own way. Can I trust her? Well, this is the only way into the house so I will have to go past her.

I hold out my hand with the key in it.

'I have a key,' I say – my voice sounds tremulous and childish.

'Yes,' she says.

'I... I think this is right...'

There is a small low table in front of her with an old-fashioned alarm clock on it. She looks at it, frowns and says,

'Well, it is time to... go.'

Her voice sounds sad, as though she has no wish to hurt me, and she gets up stiffly from her armchair, goes to the front door and opens it.

'Thanks,' I murmur as I pass her and go through the doorway, and beyond the reach of her power.

VI

I am back in the same hallway that I started in. The serried ranks of doors on both sides with the massive staircase at the end leading to infinity. There is a difference though. Everything is much bigger. The doors are more than twice my height, and if I reach up I will just be able to turn the handles. That is why the key is so big, I realise. Then I look down at my hands and I see the hands of a child. Of course, I have become a child. Will I enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Well, I know I want to go back to that beach, and that felt like paradise. So maybe?

I know I don't want to go through the first door on my right. No, I'm not making that mistake again. So I look to the left, and as I look at the high door I read the words '*Growth Room One*' in faded black printed across the old worn wood. I turn the handle, it is hard for my little hand but I grip tight and feel it click. The door doesn't budge. It's locked. So this must be the time to use my key. Using both hands I heft the key up and into the keyhole below the handle. The key won't turn. I pull it out a bit to see if that makes any difference. No good. I push it in harder, the key works this time, and the lock clicks open. I turn the handle and go in.

It is quite a small room – even though I am child-size it feels disappointingly small. It is completely empty. Just blank walls and ceiling. There is no window. The light comes from

the walls which are painted a gentle white. The floor, which is wooden, is also painted white. The door closes behind me and I suddenly feel trapped. Claustrophobia has always been a problem for me. I begin to panic, but somewhere inside there's a voice saying 'Calm down, breathe. Listen.'

To start with all I can hear is my rapid heartbeat pounding in my head, but as I calm down I can hear a faint roar – a river inside me? Quieter still there is a high-pitched whine – the sound of my nervous system working ceaselessly. I wonder what else I will uncover, what other secret sounds I've been carrying around with me. Then I hear it: faint laughter. Is it coming from inside, or from the walls? Gradually the sound grows and I can hear talking. It sounds warm and genial – grown-ups having a gentle time together. The voices sound familiar, taking me back to... about the age I seem to be now. It sounds like my family, all aunts and uncles, cousins, parents, brothers, gathered together for some occasion.

Christmas!

I long to be with them, to see their faces again. I go to press my ear against the wall, and to my amazement the wall feels like it's made of some silky material, and I am able to push straight through it as if it were soft silky jelly.

I'm in the sitting room with them. Our comfy old sitting room just as it was when I was little. The other children are gathered round the fireplace, sitting on the floor and playing Monopoly. The grown-ups are seated in the old tatty armchairs and on the sofa with the arm that won't stay up any more. Talking, laughing, getting on, in a way that only families do when they are at ease with themselves. The curtains are drawn across the French windows that I know will lead to the steps up to the croquet lawn. I look round for the wall I've just come through and there is the ornate framed print of *The Battle of San Romano* by Uccello. I am home.

'There you are Mel, come on, come and join us. Have you been hiding behind the curtains again, playing with your dollies?'

My auntie Doris has turned round and seen me. She beckons me over and I half stumble into the circle of parents and children, and plump myself down on my daddy's knee. He gives me a squeeze, and an affectionate kiss on my head and the other adults turn round to look at me. Love fills their faces, but I can see there is some concern there too.

'Always playing on your own, such an imagination. Where will you end up?'

My dad hands me over to Mum who gives me another hug, and I can feel tears in my eyes. I am loved. I know it then – gratitude. I am lucky. I may have lost most of my family all those years ago, it may have become dysfunctional and disconnected; but I was loved, I had this family and I will always have it inside me. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

I weep then, letting all my emotion pour out, and as I do so the picture fades and I find myself back in the white room. Back with myself. But I'm feeling a bit different – warmer inside. The tears may have regret in them, but there's a large portion of gratitude, and a feeling of having been so lucky.

I long to be back there. It was such a fleeting visit, just a taste of things past. The room is silent again, just the sounds of my alive body. But there is a smell, faint to start with, but getting stronger. Pencil shavings. It brings back memories of school. I shiver. School, that

ghastly place, that prison where I was forced to waste so much of my early life. And I can hear something new now, the faint sound of crying. It pulls me, tugs at my heart, and it's coming from the wall straight ahead. I have to go and comfort that poor soul, so I walk to the wall expecting to go straight through, but I nearly bash my nose on its solid surface. My hands sting where I slap them on the plaster. The crying goes on. Louder now. Sobbing, lonely crying. I can't bear it. I have to get to the poor soul who is so sad, so alone. I look round the room, but the only way out is the door in the opposite wall. If I go out, will I lose track of the crying? I couldn't bear that – I must go and comfort whoever it is. I go to the door and open it. Outside is the long hallway with its rows of doors.

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As I close the door to '*Growth Room One*' there is a faint tinkle at my feet, and I look down to see the key. I am surprised at how much smaller it is. It must have shrunk inside the lock and fallen out as I closed the door. I pick it up and try it in the lock and it's true – it doesn't fit at all now so I won't be able to lock the door. Experimentally, I try to open it again and it swings open easily. As I do so I notice that the sound of crying, which had got softer, gets louder again. I think of going back into the room and trying to get through the wall, but something tells me it will be a waste of time. So, reluctantly, I close the door and go to the next one along.

The black writing on it says '*Growth Room Two*', but half scrubbed out underneath is another word in red – I can just make out '*SED*', but the rest is illegible. The door looks smaller, and as I look down at the smaller key wondering if it will fit I see that my hand has changed size and is no longer the hand of a child but of a young adult. I put the key in the lock which is now at a sensible height for me, and it turns smoothly as though it has been well oiled. Silently the door opens on well-engineered hinges, and I go in half dreaming – half forgetting the crying that I am seeking.

I walk by saffron drapes on a carpet of silver fur. A huge painting of a lion fighting a tiger greets me on the opposite wall. Rending flesh. Who will win? The tiger ripping open the lion's belly or the lion throttling the tiger with his huge claws and mouth?

I turn away from this disturbing image to see a row of bottles on a polished table. A thought comes to me – insistent, compulsive:

'Drink and forget the pain, enjoy yourself. Go on, life's too short.'

I go over to the table and pour amber liquid into a crystal glass. As I raise it to my lips I notice a mirror on the wall behind the table. I see my face in it, not as I would like to see it, but a red face with bulging veins, broken capillaries – blood-shot eyes, stained teeth. The face of an alcoholic. I jump back, spilling my drink, and look down in horror as the liquid burns a hole in the silver fur. The glass falls from my hand and disintegrates into tiny fragments sending up a cloud of sparkling dust.

Frozen to the spot, I cautiously look around to see if anyone has noticed, but I am alone in this luxurious room. There's another full-length mirror further down the wall and I go to

it to see if I look any different from the drunkard I so don't want to be. I see myself naked. A beautiful curvy body, luxuriant hair, young fresh face. The body of a flowering young woman. How gorgeous I am. How I just want to look and admire myself, turn this way and that to admire my lines. I turn and see behind me a table stacked with all sorts of colourful clothing in soft expensive material. I would like to put it on. Try this or that outfit. Make myself feel better in all this lovely clothing. I deserve it after all. I've worked so hard. I pick up a long purple dress, the material is so soft, and yet it sparkles as though made of expensive gems. As I press it in front of my body and turn to see how it looks in the mirror, I hear the distant crying again. I drop the dress, distracted, remembering why I am here. I look down and see the dress writhing on the fur, its smooth surface gradually changing to scales. A darting tongue, two yellow eyes. I'm looking at a snake. I leap back involuntarily and knock the table over. As I look round I see all the colourful clothes begin to wriggle and writhe on the silver fur. I must escape from this room of snakes and acid, but it's become so big now that I can't see a way out.

Objects spring up into my vision, as though I am thinking them into existence. I seem to be in a large department store, and I'm very tired having walked around it for so long.

I see a large soft bed and the thought comes to me that I could just take a rest. I'm so tired, I just want to lie down on this bed and close my...

There's that crying again. I'm not going to go to sleep, I'm going to find the poor soul who is crying. I must find her, it's the most important thing in my life at this moment.

The room has regained its original shape again, the silver fur, the saffron drapes. But the painting has changed: the tiger lies dead beneath the victorious lion – its throat ripped open, and its glazed eyes staring at the door. The door! I must get out! Even as I start towards it I notice a movement in the corner of my eye, and there are the snakes coming from every corner of the room to stop me, coming to poison me. I run for it and manage to get hold of the handle before a snake reaches me and bites my heel. The pain is unbelievable as I stagger out of the door and slam it, catching the snake in it and chopping its head off. After a moment of writhing the head turns into a piece of purple silk, just like the dress I wanted to try on, and even though I feel sick and giddy with the pain of the poisonous bite, I want to pick it up and feel it again. The crying is louder now and seems more urgent. I am caught between the twin desires of gratification and exploration. I can feel the poison in my veins working its way up to blur my sight and muddle my mind. I must move or I will never get away from this room. Painfully and slowly, with tremendous effort I reach for the key in the door and try to pull it out. It takes all my strength and as it comes out I see that it has gone rusty as if I had only just removed it in time to stop it rusting into the lock completely.

VIII

I turn and hobble down the hallway – the pain in my heel subsiding bit by bit as I get further away from that hellish room. The crying is still audible, indeed it seems to get louder as I reach the next door. The door is old and rough. More like a shed door, weathered and discoloured. The writing on it is scarcely legible: *‘Leading to Growth Rooms ...’* The rest has disappeared, washed away by time. Instead of a neat lock in the door there is a rusty old padlock holding a hinged clasp, and I take the key and put it in the keyhole and try to turn it. It is stuck, rusted by age. And to my horror I see my hands have aged too. No longer youthful, they are gnarled and wrinkly. The hands of an old woman, the joints swollen with arthritis, the nails ridged and discoloured. Was it the poison from the snake? The pain has subsided now, although my heel still feels tender. I try the lock again in anguish and frustration. The key turns and then comes away in my hand, the end broken off. I feel tears of impotence in my eyes. Am I going to die of old age before I discover the crying child? Rage gives me strength as I tug at the clasp and it breaks away from the door frame. I pull at the door on its rusty hinges and it bends back, one hinge breaking off. I squeeze through the gap and find myself in an old brick-lined corridor. It is very narrow and the mouldering walls are wet and slimy. Lurid green moss and small ferns grow out of the rotting brickwork, and the floor is slippery – half mud, half flagstone. Light comes from the end of the corridor, and as I hobble down it, the crying gets louder.

I reach the end and find old sacking hanging down making a makeshift door. Light filters through the strands of filthy cloth, and now I brush through them to see the room I have been trying to reach.

It is a Victorian classroom – rank upon rank of old-fashioned desks with benches attached. Battered and ink-stained, they have those lids that you can raise to find your books. No doubt the teacher would inspect them every day and mete out punishment for any untidiness. As I look to my right, I see the blackboard and the teacher’s desk, complete with ruler no doubt used for rapping an unfortunate pupil’s knuckles. The windows are high to prevent looking out, but the sun streams in enticingly, bringing thoughts of break-time freedom in the fields outside. The crying is coming from a lone figure right up the other end of the classroom, far away from the blackboard and shrouded in darkness – the corner that the sunlight never reaches.

I hobble down the aisle between the rows of desks and find the sobbing child sitting at her desk holding an old dipping pen poised above a stained inkwell. She is about twelve years old, and as she looks up I see myself in her tear-stained face.

‘I c... I cah... I can’t,’ she sobs. ‘I doe... I don’t uh... understand.’

The lined exercise book in front of her is dotted here and there with tear stains, and there is a grubby thumb mark at the top corner where she has opened the book. Apart from that there is nothing on the page. It is the first page of her exercise book and she has written nothing at all. How long has she been here, crying with her hand poised above the inkwell? Stuck.

I gently grip her upper arms with my old wrinkled hands and try to look into her eyes.

'What is it? What is it you don't understand?'

She won't look at me but hangs her head, drooping over her exercise book.

'This.' She thrusts her left arm in front of me pulling away from my hands, and there, in the half-light, I see the scars.

'W... why do I do it? I don't want to do it... b... but everything hurts.' She gasps out the last word with such a force that it makes me jump. The sudden inexplicable fury. She is trapped in her pain, anguish, anger. I knew that once, but I buried it with time, and so lost sight of it, leading my life in what I thought was a happy positive way. Now this. I have to understand, I have to help her understand, or we will be stuck in this gloomy classroom for ever. The key. Where's the key? It broke, but I didn't let go of it. I must have dropped it when I reached out to the child. I look down at the dark stained wooden floor at my feet, and there it is, the rusty key with the end broken off. But even as I reach down to pick it up it changes, and I find I'm holding a rusty penknife. The blade is so rusty that it could never cut anything ever again.

'Where's your mother?' I ask.

'Gone. They've all gone and left me here. Alone.'

'What are you trying to write?'

'She, she explained everything. Then I was to go away and write it down, but when I got here I couldn't remember it. I never understood her anyway.' She was sobbing less now and the words came out more easily.

'Who is she?'

'The old woman with the 'O' mouth.'

That was the woman who let me into the house. Was she a wise-woman or a witch?

'Perhaps you will never understand,' I say gently. 'Maybe you just have to forgive yourself.'

She turns to look me full in the face, her eyes dark with anger. 'Then I would have to forgive everyone!' she shouts. 'I can't do that. I won't, I won't!'

I step back, shocked by the sudden outburst - the change from grief to rage. 'Why, what did they do?' I know the answer before she tells me.

'They took everything away. My home, my freedom, my toys, my trees, my mind. They made me who I am and I don't want to be me. I want to be... a boy.' She says this last part quietly, and I can see her looking back in time, into her imagination, to the 'boy' that she would have liked to have been.

'Who are *they*?'

'I don't know. God but there is no God, all those people who made me what I am. Life, but I don't want life.'

'What do you want?'

'Mummy, I want Mummy. But she's gone... The 'O' woman said I could find a Mummy inside me, but I can't.' She bursts into a fresh spasm of sobbing, and I reach forward and hug her. I take her in my arms and give her all the love I have. It's the only way. She must have love in this love-starved place or she will never grow. We must leave here, I realise. She

must come with me and we must find that room with the writing table, and we must write our story.

I take her hand and gently pull her away from the desk. Fear suddenly fills her face, her body goes rigid. 'But I'll be...', she whispers.

'What will you be?'

'Lost.'

'No, come with me. You will understand. I promise.'

'Promise?' So many broken promises in her eyes.

I can't say it again so I just nod, and pull her down the aisle between the desks, past the ruler, past the blackboard which has 'I MUST NOT HARM MYSELF' chalked on it in big blunt capitals, out into the damp corridor and down to the broken door.

IX

We make an odd couple, old and young. Both worn down with life. Standing in the hallway looking for the door into the writing room. It was the second door that I tried right back at the beginning of this strange journey, so I lead her down the hall towards the front of the house, looking at the doors on my left. But nothing looks the same as I remembered it – no longer Victorian, it looks cold and modern. With a sick feeling I look at the grey featureless doors which now have no handles, just Yale locks. I have no key, just a rusty penknife. Break in. That's what we must do. I look at my companion holding my hand, and in her other hand is a credit card.

'My mummy's. I stole it when I ran away.' She flinches, expecting me to be angry. But I'm not really listening. I'm thinking. Is this the house where I started? Or do I have to go back through all the horrors that I have experienced to find the writing room? Is this why it all looks so different? I look at the right-hand doors, and they have changed too. No locks, no handles, just those rectangular steel plates you push against to get the door to open on its spring. But I don't want that side, I want the locked side, so I lead us to the door on the left that I think must be the writing room. Remembering breaking in to my own home when locked out by a careless mother once, I take the credit card and slip it into the gap in the doorframe pushing the Yale lock back. I push the door open and we go in. Thieves.

I must have miscounted. We are back in the room with those horrible black shiny flowers. But there is a big difference: nearly all the plants lie dead round the walls. I can only see one plant still living and it is half hiding a door on the other side of the room. Intrigued, I walk across the big room holding my girl's hand with a firm grip – I don't want her running away; is that for my sake or hers, I wonder? As we near the plant with its tendrils creeping up the wall, I see a label hanging from its upper branches: '*How Can I Trust Anyone Again?*'

Trust. Yes, that's what we are both looking for.

I need it to get across that floor in the writing room next door, and she needs it to start forgiving all the wrongs she feels have been done to her. Trust – the most wonderful thing

to have in life. But always hanging around in dark corners there is the fear of betrayal. I can feel my companion tense up as we near the plant.

‘So true,’ she whispers, already in the thrall of this herbal monster.

‘Don’t look at it. It will stop you getting to where you want. You will never escape,’ I say through gritted teeth.

I can already imagine the other plants round the wall beginning to grow roots again. All that work for nothing. I grip her hand more firmly and run at the door. The creeper’s tentacles have gripped onto it, but I hit it with my shoulder with so much force that they break off with a shriek and the door opens on its spring, letting us through. It springs back firmly into place, leaving the memory of that horrible room behind us.

X

I pause to get my breath back and become aware of the smell of books. How I love that smell – the smell of adventure and discovery, mingled with the warm comforting scent of paper and cloth. We are safe here. We are in a private library. It is a large and elegant room with a long dark stained oak table in the middle. The fragrance of beeswax polish mingles with the deep strong aroma of the books. At one end of the room there are tall French windows looking out onto a garden. I look up at the vaulted ceiling and the old painted beams, then back along the room to the large dark polished door at the other end guarded by two empty suits of armour that glint dully in the light from the windows. On each side the walls are lined with books, and as I look closer, I can see that some of the spines are coloured while the others are a dull grey. At this point my companion tugs me in the direction of the French windows – she wants to go into the garden and play in the sun. But I know we need to look at these books. They are our way through. She doesn’t know this yet. She hasn’t got the reading bug, but she soon will – and then this whole world will open up to her.

I take her to the end of the wall nearest to the windows and crouch down to look at the spines. The coloured ones stand out. *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *A Bear Called Paddington*, *The Wind in the Willows*, C.S. Lewis and Nigel Tranter make odd company, and I begin to realise that these books are ordered according to when I discovered them throughout my life. The coloured spines showing which ones I actually read, and the grey spines the ones I failed to finish or even start. I pull out *The House at Pooh Corner* and sit down with my companion to share the precious atmosphere and humour of A.A. Milne’s wonderful world. But I can see that she’s distracted. The outside pulls her, the sunny garden after all her imprisonment is too much of a temptation. So I let her go, and she opens the French windows and walks out onto a fresh green lawn. The scent of old roses comes into the library, and I’m almost tempted to follow her and leave my books. But I am so fascinated to see my progression from child to adolescent to young adult. Books about animals, both real and fictional, seem to grab me early on. Then the *Lord of the Rings* period. But getting out of that, and feeling a bit lonely as not many girls that I knew read Tolkien, I launched myself into the classics. Almost as if I had to prove something. But I loved them: Greek, Roman, Italian, German,

Russian, French. All in translation of course – I was no good at foreign languages. I read so much. How much did I understand? I wonder now. Then I discovered Hardy and his grief-driven stories of countryside and old England. No grey spines in that area. *Jude the Obscure* affected me so much in my twenties. God knows why – I must have been naturally depressed. Dickens – a few grey spines here, and I begin to realise that as I get older I become less and less capable of reading long tracts of description. I am hungry for plot. Hesse seems to satisfy this – his writing so succinct. Wonderful short novels so clear and to the point. But I have got a long way round the room, and realise that I have read comparatively little in my thirties.

My thirties? But I'm an old woman now. Where are all the later books in my life? This library is not showing me anything past the most recent novels that I read in my thirties. Interestingly, they are all contemporary. McCall Smith, Atkinson, Gaiman, Trapido, Winterson. Good quality writing but easy to read compared to the old classics. So that's it. The books I will read in later life have not been written yet, so of course I can't see them on the shelves. I look back along my discovered books, searching for more clues of what is to come, and the sunlight catches a grey spine with red writing on the back. I walk over to look more closely: *Crime and Punishment*, the book I tried to read three times. I never managed to get past the mare being flogged to death. It was all too cruel, I couldn't live with it. As I look round I realise there are an awful lot of grey spines with coloured lettering – books I started but never finished. And they get more and more numerous as I get older. Frustrating – those worlds that I couldn't get into. Treasures promised but never revealed to me.

I look out into the garden – suddenly alert – waking from my world of books. I have no idea how much time has passed, but the girl is nowhere to be seen. I go to the open French windows and look down the garden. No sign of her. I begin to feel panic – I now know that we need to do the rest of this journey together. I try to run but am too old and stiff, so I totter as fast as I can down a long lawn to the trees that border the garden. I call my name out “Mel, Mel!” My voice sounds strange after all this silence. Muffled by the garden world, oddly loud to my own ears but getting lost in all this green space. I round a bend between the trees, and there below me is a lake with a tiny island in the middle. Lawns border both sides of it, but all is hemmed in by a forest. If she has gone in there I will never find her. I go down to the lake half expecting to find her there, and as I reach it I see a ride between the trees leading off to the right. There is something familiar about this place, and as I turn down the ride, there in front of me are the fallen elms. I must be coming to them from the other side, and I see that they block the ride completely. As I get closer I see a small figure scrambling over the fallen trunks. It's her and I call. She turns and looks at me, but there is something taking her interest on the other side of the elms. As I get closer, to my horror, I see the boy with the mask. She is drawn towards him, attracted by his strange charm. He is holding a knife. I have a knife too, but mine is useless and rusty.

“No!” I shout, but my voice is swallowed up in this world. I know what will happen if she takes that knife. I must stop her – I throw my rusty penknife at the fallen trees in frustration. What on earth can I offer her that will distract her from this destructive boy? As I stumble towards the great fallen boles, something small and red catches my eye, and there

on the ground by the first elm lies a ball. I pick it up and it fits in my hand as though it wants to be there. It has writing on it 'Catch me', in black and gold.

An instinct makes me shout "Catch!" to the girl, as she nears the other side of the fallen elms. She turns and I throw the ball to her. By some strange miracle she catches it. I see the amazement in her face – she didn't expect to catch the ball. She looks back at me with a smile of pure joy, and for the first time I get a glimpse of the happy girl that lived in a secure and loving home. She throws it back to me and it is my turn to be surprised. It seems to home in on my hand and I cannot help but catch it. I look up to see her scrambling back across the trunks towards me, the deathly boy forgotten in our game of catch. We need this, this game of connection, and I throw the ball back to her. She catches it with one hand as she balances on a log, and she makes her way back to me with an easy grace that belies her long incarceration in that gloomy classroom. How long was she there? Most of my life, I suspect.

We play catch all the way back up to the lake, and stop there to look at our reflections in the still waters. One old, one young, but the same. Connected by a ball, by a game, by fun. We turn to each other and laugh, and we play with our ball as the sun goes down behind the trees. Gradually we make our way up to the house in the dusk. We will have to stop soon, and it will be hard to go back into the house and on with our journey. I am worried that I will lose the girl at the last minute, and that she will be stuck here forever with the constant threat of the boy. But as we near the house, a change comes over the ball. It gets heavier, and begins to glow. She has it in her hand now, and she looks down, marvelling at this beautiful thing. She is holding a golden globe. 'A light to guide us home' comes into my mind. It must have come into hers as well, because she makes straight for the French windows and leads the way into the library, lighting it up with the globe in her hand. We walk down the long dark room, past the polished table with the light of our globe reflecting on it, to the door at the other end, and we open it.

XI

The golden globe slips from her fingers and we are plunged into darkness. At first I can see nothing, then as my eyes become accustomed to the dark, I see ashes, ashes everywhere. My feet are walking on soft ash, and I look down at shades of black and grey wondering why this makes me so sad. No, I don't want to be here. I turn to find the door but all I can see in the dim light is burnt peeling wallpaper. A charred wedding photo still hanging on the wall where the door used to be. I try to make out the couple in the picture – they are very familiar. It's all horribly familiar. Then I hear her crying, heart-rending sobs, and I realise we are in the burnt-out ruins of our old home. She stands still, crying, keening, for her lost family, her lost home. She falls to her knees and starts rummaging in the ashes as though she will find something – bring something back. But there is no return, no bringing back. All those people, all that love. Gone.

We must get through this ruin. Grief hits me in a huge wave, and I can't move for the ache inside my body. Slowly my knees give way and I join the stricken girl on the floor feeling through the ashes for something. Searching to find our lost world. But it is useless, useless, useless.

Then my hand comes across a small hard object. A ring. I carefully pick it out of the ashes, blowing away the grey dust from it. It is my auntie Doris's wedding ring. I know it. She used to take it off when she was baking, and sometimes she would sit me on her knee and let me try it on – large and loose on my little-child finger.

I can hear her say, 'One day you'll be married, and you can wear a ring like this. Won't that be lovely.'

I put it on my bare ring finger now and it fits. A slim simple band of gold. A piece of her, a bit of the past to carry with me. I take the girl's hands and pull her gently to her feet. We have to get through this, we can't search through the ashes for ever. My auntie's ring has given me strength – she was a strong woman.

Was.

I feel grief rising in my throat again.

Walk.

We must walk through this and bear the sadness.

The smoke-blackened walls hold the darkness in, as we shuffle along the old ruined hallway. Memories come back to me, of family feasts held here at Christmas or other special occasions. The staircase at the end is gone – just a pile of charred wood and ashes. Their way out that they never had a chance to use. We turn and take a narrow corridor to the right. We should go under the stairs and into the servants' quarters at this point, but that has all burnt away, and all I can see is an old blackened toilet – the Bakelite seat melted into a bizarre shape on the cracked and blackened bowl. Light floods in from the bathroom window next door, and the bath is full of plaster and burnt lathes. We walk down what used to be a corridor, past the larder to the dining room and I get a shock: the back-end wall of the house has fallen out and I am looking straight down into the courtyard twenty feet below. These memories of a past world that I thought I'd long forgotten are broken into by this devastation. I can see the floor is likely to give way if we go any further so I grab her hand and pull her back down the corridor to the relative safety of the hall. I look up and see the moon shining through a huge hole in the roof two floors above us, and in the pool of light it sends down onto the floor, I notice a little arm. The girl's on it quick as a flash, and pulls a blackened doll out of the ashes. My doll. The doll that kept me company when I was alone because the boys went off and did boy things. She hugs it to herself – I want to hug it too but I am old now and the memory will have to do. Instead I turn and look into what was once our sitting room where we sat round the fire chatting and playing games. It looks much smaller than I expected. So dark in there – just a pile of burnt rubble. The old sofa would have gone up like a firelighter, but there are still a couple of rusty springs sticking out of the ashes – all that remains of a comfortable family resting place. I look for the Uccello, it has fallen off the wall, the half-burnt frame and shattered glass revealing the brave nobleman still brandishing his useless baton, his magnificent headdress blackened by fire. One French

window remains, the other has burnt out leaving a pile of broken glass for us to step through.

We make our way gingerly into the garden, careful to avoid cutting our bare feet. The gravel on the path feels hard and prickly after all that soft ash, and in the moonlight we see our once beautiful garden transformed into a jungle of weeds. Cow parsley grows six feet high. There are brambles and nettles everywhere, and the grass that remains has grown into rough browning hummocks. No sign of the lovely flat lawn where we played croquet with an old battered set handed down from god-knows-where. As I peer into the mass of foliage I can just make out a rusty hoop and a rotten mallet. The boys in my family were always being told off for forgetting to put the croquet things away – they pretended the mallets were guns in their games round the garden. I hold the hand of the girl beside me as we stand there in the silver light, lost in our memories.

A movement catches my eye. There is some creature out there in the bushes that border the lawn-that-was. A flash of white, the crack of a broken twig. We are both attracted towards the movement, and the moonlight picks out a narrow track between the nettles and brambles. We go in single file, the girl leading, and I can feel her fear – this garden was always full of ghosts at night. The path takes us to the bushes, and we enter a tunnel of rhododendrons grown so high we can easily make our way through without stooping. We see a flash of white at the end of the tunnel, and it spurs us on. We come out into the old orchard. Pear and apple trees surround us and suddenly we are hungry.

We each pick a ripe-looking apple from the biggest tree right in the middle of the orchard, and as we eat we change. I feel better, younger. The pain in my heel, which I have been stoically ignoring, goes, and a warm feeling fills my limbs. I look at the girl and she has grown slightly taller. She has lost that sad look that dogged her pretty features, and has a look of contentedness that is unusual in a girl in her early teens. The sadness of our lost home is seeping away. Even the orchard is looking tidier and less neglected, and now I notice a green wooden door set into the fence on the other side of the orchard. There is no sign now of the creature that led us here, but the door beckons, and we both walk through the trees as though pulled by an invisible thread.

XII

The door has a rounded top which fits neatly into a hoop of climbing roses. The latch is freshly painted black and clicks in a satisfying way as I press my thumb on it. It opens easily, and we find ourselves in a yard outside a rambling Victorian house. I am sure this is the house I started in, but I'm just viewing it from the back. It has the same arched windows and eccentric architectural features. There is a driveway round the side which might take us to the front, but something makes me unwilling to meet the 'O' woman again. Anyway, my companion has already run to the back door and disappeared inside. She leaves the green door ajar and I wander in; the mixed smells of overcooked cabbage and polish greet me.

School!

A long dark corridor with polished wooden floor and painted brick walls – two-tone cream and red leads me into the bowels of the house. School. The last place I want to be, and for her a terrible place that I have just freed her from. If she gets back into that classroom she could be stuck there forever. I see her turn right at the end of the corridor and I run after her, my limbs younger and more willing now. As I get to the end I am just in time to see her turn right again a shorter distance ahead. I am catching up with her. She turns right again, and again. We must be going round in a circle. Finally I catch up with her. We have ended up in a tall dark room, a bit like a prison cell. The two-tone paint is still on the walls. Institutional. There is a bit of light coming from a window set high up in the wall. This room makes me feel very claustrophobic and I turn to go back out the way we came in. I make a grab at the girl's hand but she's too fast for me and has run to a door on the other side of the room and disappeared again.

More cautiously this time, I follow her and almost stumble on stone steps that spiral up into the dark. I climb the steps and hear her ahead of me but can see nothing. It is pitch black now and I'm using my hands to guide me, feeling the stone stairs in front of me – almost going up on all fours. I nearly collide with her in the dark – she has stopped in front of me. She is grunting with effort as she pushes up against something above her head. I get alongside her and reach up to feel wooden boards. A trapdoor?

We both push upwards and our combined efforts cause the boards to move upwards with a reluctant creak. Light and warmth stream down on us and we push the trapdoor as far as it will go, and peer up over the rim into what appears to be a large comfortable old room. We climb up and out onto an old red Persian rug which covers the floor. At the other end is a cheerful log fire in a large inglenook fireplace. A very comfortable sofa is set at an angle to the fireplace, and beyond it a corridor leads into darkness again. All I want to do is to sit down on the sofa and rest and I feel an overpowering urge to just go to sleep in this warm comforting room. Journey's end. Job done. No more struggle. No more pain. The temptation is too great. I sit down on the sofa and feel myself nodding off.

I jerk awake. Where is the girl? What am I doing? I want to go back to the writing room. I haven't finished. I don't want to finish here. I want to live. I struggle up off the sofa, it feels as if a magnetic force is keeping me there. With a huge effort I get to my feet and stagger out of the room. Another dark spiral staircase greets me at the end of the corridor and I climb up into the darkness again.

It's not long before I find her pushing up against yet another trapdoor. This one is much heavier, and we need all her growing strength and my increasingly youthful body to make it budge. As we push hard, it begins to move, sending bits of damp soil down onto the steps and onto our arms. The trapdoor has evidently been covered in earth, and when we eventually manage to heave it open, more soil falls on us and into our eyes and hair.

As we clamber up and out onto the muddy floor, I realise that I've been here before. It's not so dark as it was. The roots have gone and I can hear the sea. We could easily walk out to the beach. I feel a wrench inside me – I want to go to that paradise, and swim in the warm bay, but also I feel the urgent need to get to that writing room before I leave the

house. Once again my companion makes my decision for me and continues on up the steps. I follow her, and we come into the middle of the Unforgiven room.

All the plants are dead. They lie in rotting piles around the walls. The floor is slimy with their rancid sap, and the stench is overpowering. The girl wants to escape up the spiral staircase, but I grab hold of her hand and pull her with me, half sliding across the slippery floor. We must get to the door. We must not fall over – I can feel the acidity of this sludge eating into my feet. I wouldn't like this all over me. I retch, and am almost sick, as I stagger across to the door. How could I ever have been attracted to this room? We pull on the door and it opens towards us, pushing a wave of nauseating sludge over our feet and back into the room. We are out.

The hall has regained its original Victorian appearance – locked doors opposite us and no need to use a key, or even a credit card, on this side. I look down at my feet and am dismayed to see red raw blisters developing where the skin is visible beneath the green slime. There must be a bathroom. Something tells me I must wash my feet before attempting the writing room again. My poor feet are beginning to itch and sting as I hobble down the hall looking for a sign. We reach the grand stairs at the end, and I gaze up wondering if they really go on into infinity. The girl tugs at me and points down a short corridor on our right to a small door with the word '*Bathroom*' painted on it in dark green.

XIII

We enter the bathroom cautiously. A large white bath on legs is in the centre of the room. Towels are hung on golden painted chairs around the bath, and a small marble table is set with lotions and soaps. The bath already has clean water in it and we step in holding hands to support each other. The water is warm, and although it stings to start with, it soon soothes our poor blistered feet. The water smells sweet and aromatic, taking away the rancid smell of decay. We both perch on the edge of the bath and I reach for some soap to wash my companion's feet. It's a beautiful thing to do, and I feel her relax as I massage and soothe her blistered soles. I stoop down to wash my own feet, but she tugs at my arm and takes the soap from me to do it for me. What a blissful sensation after all that walking on my bare feet, and then being infected by the acidic sap of bitterness. She soothes it all away with her young hands, and I feel so clean and warm.

We both help each other out of the bath, and dry our feet with soft white towels. I try some lotion from a purple bottle on one foot, and feel the energy rush up through my body. I carry on rubbing it into the other foot and then onto hers. As I stand up I feel inches taller, and I take her hand and walk out of the bathroom and up the hall, carefully avoiding the puddles of green bile that we left on the way down.

As we near the end of the hall, I can hear the murmur of voices. It is coming from the room that I have wanted to get back to for so long. The writing room. It sounds like the large round room is full of people, and the tone of their voices has a gentle quality – almost reverential, as though the 'other' in person is in that room. We pause in front of the door,

reluctant to go in and spoil the joy of the gathering. I feel suddenly shy, wondering what all these people will make of us – two strays lost in this mysterious world. We gently open the door and look in. A hush falls, and at first I can't see any people. The table is in the middle of the room on a little platform. The blue light reflects on the circular wall. Then I look down and see... hands. The floor which was once so treacherous is now made up of hands. Palms upwards, they make a human carpet to the centre of the room. We stand on the lip, unsure what to do. The hands move slightly. There are people down there beneath those hands. People who will let us walk on their outstretched hands to get to the writing table. As we pause uncertainly, a murmur starts up.

'Come on, come in,
Walk on our hands and we'll support you,
Walk on our palms and we'll support you,
Soles on our palms and we'll support you,
Come on, come in.'

And we take our first step off the lip and onto the crowd of hands.

The feel of having my feet held up by these strong hands is strange, ticklish and sensuous. As we step slowly and carefully, each hand we step onto grips each foot gently to support us so we don't stagger or fall on this bizarre surface. I have a vision of atoms, and how curious it is that we don't fall through the gaps between them as we walk on a floor. We trust them without even thinking about it. These hands are huge atoms, and we must trust them. In fact this is all about trust. All those people below us are holding us up, and this is how it is.

Trust.

It feels like a long way to the table in the middle of the room. Our progress is slow and careful – each step is important. It doesn't just involve us, but also each person who holds us up as we go past.

'Come on, come in.'

I hear their chant inside my head, regular and rhythmic. Very stabilising and encouraging, as it comes from beneath me, from the people who are holding me up. But it's inside my head at the same time, as if I'm making it happen. A regular breath-step music, that swells as we get to the middle of the room and then subsides with a gentle sigh as we reach the little platform with the writing table on it.

Silence.

Silence as we sit down on the two chairs provided and pull them up to the table. Silence as we start to write. We write what is in our minds – our stories, and once we start it feels like we will never stop. I glance at my companion. She has a determined look on her face. Concentrated. Not the expression of total despair that she had when she was stuck in the classroom. She writes smoothly and fluently, pausing every now and then to consider the next word or phrase.

I return to my writing and find the words forming in my mind like a flowing river. Ideas I never knew I had, places I'd never seen, people I'd never met. They all come out onto the page, ready formed and real. A story to hold me in its arms, and carry me on through life. An endless undercurrent forming and flowing beneath my surface. Always there, always available, always trustworthy. I write of mysteries, of ideas that were once fleeting shadows in my mind. Now they return fully formed to amaze me with their completeness. Connections, thoughts of wisdom, joy and sadness all flow from my pen, and I cover sheet after sheet. No-one is looking over my shoulder, no-one is telling me when to stop.

I have no idea how long I have been here, writing to save my life – to tell my life. But I look up and see that my companion has stopped and is looking at me expectantly. I have come to an end, for now, so I reluctantly get up and look round the room. The hands, the people, have vanished. And in their place is the old beautiful oak floor, shining with a blue light. I hear the sea again and I am reminded of a place, a beach, a forest. The smell of pines and salt beckon to me and I must go.

I take the girl's hand and we walk across the smooth wooden floor leaving our writings behind us. We may find them another day, but now it is time to leave. No threat of crumbling floor now. We are held above a vast chasm – and this we know – but we will not fall and the floor will not give way. It will carry us to the edge, to the door and out to the hall with all its doors and mysteries. As we reach the door there is a faint murmur, a goodbye, and we leave replenished, hopeful and ready for whatever will come next. We go down the hallway to the front door and leave the house. The woman who opened the door for me is still standing there, facing away from the house. I wonder if I should say something as we pass her, and after a few steps, I turn. She has changed: the woman with the 'O' mouth has gone – taking so much grief and trouble with her. Instead I see a woman who smiles. 'Good bye,' she says. 'Good luck on your journey.'

XIV

We walk up the sandy slope away from the house, our eyes fixed on the trees and the path through them that will take us to the sea. It is night again and the moon is still full. It lights our path with silver. The sand beneath our feet makes no sound, and we seem to glide down a beam of light to our destination. We turn a corner and I notice that the roots of trees have grown above ground in certain places. I don't remember this coming the other way, we will have to go carefully now or we will trip. My companion stumbles and stubs her toe. With a howl she sits down abruptly and clutches her injured foot, rocking backwards and forwards with the pain. I sit down beside her and put my arms round her, to give her comfort. But as I do so, the moon goes behind a cloud and it goes completely dark.

I shiver with the sudden cold. I don't like being with all these roots in the dark. A wind gets up, and it gets even colder. We hug each other in the darkness, frightened now. I was so sure that we would get down to the beach easily, and finish our journey.

But now we are stuck in the dark surrounded by roots, the memories of resentments I thought we had left behind. I reach out blindly and touch a root. I feel its fine bristly hairs. It has lost its way coming above ground, only to be mauled and broken by trampling feet. Useless. And I feel sorry for it. It is frightened, haunted. Not me. I am going to the beach, and I have no intention of getting stuck here. I take her hand in the darkness and get up carefully. Cautiously, we inch our way along the path, feeling each root with our feet and stepping over it. There is a moment when we come across a root that is knee high and I wonder if we have left the path, but we get over it and the smooth sand under my feet tells me we are still going in the right direction. It takes time and patience to get along this last bit of the path to the beach, but I am encouraged by the smell of the sea blown onto our faces by the wind, and by the sound of the surf swelling and receding in a natural lulling rhythm.

This lullaby of nature brings us home, and as the path seems to broaden on both sides, the moon comes out and we see the beach looking almost circular as it curves round the bay. We walk up out of the forest, and onto the sandy bank at the highest part of the beach. From there we can see the dim shapes of islands across the water, and distant mountains shrouded in mist.

But now we begin to dance on this sand beneath a diamond sky, and I hold the hand of my younger self, looking straight into her eyes, my other hand waving free. We circle slowly to start with, finding a rhythm in our bodies that is in time with the surf. The gentle pulse pulls us round and round, and with each circle some more grief falls away. We dance on in bliss, gradually getting faster and faster. We feel light, as though we are flying, and we start to spin, getting so fast that we become a blur. Two bodies no longer separate, but one in this crazy dance. Then we fall over, laughing, and lie back on the soft sand looking up at the moon.

After my head has stopped spinning I reach out to touch my companion, but there is no one there. I ease myself up on my elbow to look for her, but she is gone. That girl that was me, caught in a dark classroom, has joined me now. And I am whole. I scan the beach to make sure, but there is no sign of my girl-self. Something catches my eye at the high end of the beach. It looks like a rucksack, and I slowly get up to investigate. I still feel a bit dizzy, and wobble my way up to have a look. There is something in the rucksack, and as I get closer I see a little face. Eyes closed. It is a baby, fast asleep in a back carrier, propped up facing the sea. I reach out to touch it, but my hand goes straight through it. I long to pick it up – to cuddle it, but I can't. It is a ghost. My baby that I never had, and I long for it now. My baby. Is this where I go next? To create new life? To give my body to another soul, and to nurture it? Will that ever be possible again?

I turn to the sea, and I feel its call. It is time to go now, 'deep beneath the waves'. The sea is warm and inviting. I walk slowly into the gentle ripples. It comes up to my knees, then up to my waist. I walk out further and further until it reaches my shoulders. Then it goes over my head and I am going down into this blue sea-world. The sound of water is in my ears, everything else is muted. But still I can see. Clear light and curving currents. I don't need to breathe, everything is slowing down. This warm sea gives a gentle resistance to every

movement I make. I am gliding in slow motion in this wide empty sea. Blue surrounds me, and water fills my ears, my nose and my mouth. It doesn't matter, I'm finding my destination, my end. My infinity.

Then I look down, and I am at the top of the stairs in the Dreamhouse. Strangely, I am underwater but over air. I can see people walking about. Little dots moving up and down the hallway, going in and out of rooms. Rooms that I never went in, and I wonder what they might be about. Guilt? Obsession? Need to be admired? Gratitude? Oh yes, I feel grateful. Full of gratitude to my dead family, and to all those people who took my weight on their hands, and let me write my story. But the other rooms? Have I got past them? Do I need to visit them some time in the future? Am I quite finished? I shudder suddenly, and the water feels cold. In the distance above me, I can hear a voice saying something about catching. Catching what? Fish?

There it is again, 'Catch her.' But I'm not a fish, and I need to breathe. I look up and begin to panic. I can see light above me. Air. I need to swim up. My lungs are bursting. I can't breathe. I struggle up through the weight of water, arms and legs flailing desperately in my attempt to reach the surface before I drown. The light gets closer, the voices become clearer. I hear his voice. The man I love. He is weeping now, 'I should have caught her.' He sounds heartbroken as I reach the surface. It feels like I am driven up by the buoyancy of the water and I almost jump up in bed, eyes wide open, gasping for breath.

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The Dreamhouse originally appeared in *Above the Void*, Nick Hooper's debut novel released in 2017. It was adapted into this standalone version in 2020.

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