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A Stranger in the Night

The moon shone in the rocking horse's eye, and in the mouse's eye, too, when Tolly fetched it out from under his pillow to see. The clock went tick-tock, and in the stillness he thought he heard little bare feet running across the floor, then laughter and whispering, and a sound like the pages of a big book being turned over.

L.M. Boston, *The Children of Green Knowe*

Rain fell that night, a fine, whispering rain. Many years later, Meggie had only to close her eyes and she could still hear it, like tiny fingers tapping on the windowpane. A dog barked somewhere in the darkness, and however often she tossed and turned Meggie couldn't get to sleep.

The book she had been reading was under her pillow, pressing its cover against her ear as if to lure her back into its printed pages. 'I'm sure it must be very comfortable sleeping with a hard, rectangular thing like that under your head,' her father had teased, the first time he found a book under her pillow. 'Go on, admit it, the book whispers its story to you at night.'

'Sometimes, yes,' Meggie had said. 'But it only works for children.' Which made Mo tweak her nose. Mo. Meggie had never called her father anything else.

That night – when so much began and so many things changed for ever – Meggie had one of her favourite books under her pillow, and since the rain wouldn't let her sleep she sat up, rubbed the drowsiness from her eyes, and took it out. Its pages rustled promisingly when she opened it. Meggie thought this first whisper sounded a little different from one book to another, depending on whether or not she already knew the story it was going to tell her. But she needed light. She had a box of matches hidden in the drawer of her bedside table. Mo had forbidden her to light candles at night. He didn't like fire. 'Fire devours books,' he always said, but she was twelve years old, she could surely be trusted to keep an eye on a couple of candle flames. Meggie loved to read by candlelight. She had five candlesticks on the windowsill, and she was just holding the lighted match to one of the black wicks when she heard footsteps outside. She blew out the match in alarm – oh, how well she remembered it, even many years later – and knelt to look out of the window, which was wet with rain. Then she saw him.

The rain cast a kind of pallor on the darkness, and the stranger was little more than a shadow. Only his face gleamed white as he looked up at Meggie. His hair clung to his wet forehead. The rain was falling on him, but he ignored it. He stood there motionless, arms crossed over his chest as if that might at least warm him a little. And he kept on staring at the house.

I must go and wake Mo, thought Meggie. But she stayed put, her heart thudding, and went on gazing out into the night

as if the stranger's stillness had infected her. Suddenly, he turned his head, and Meggie felt as if he were looking straight into her eyes. She shot off the bed so fast the open book fell to the floor, and she ran barefoot out into the dark corridor. This was the end of May, but it was chilly in the old house.

There was still a light on in Mo's room. He often stayed up reading late into the night. Meggie had inherited her love of books from her father. When she took refuge from a bad dream with him, nothing could lull her to sleep better than Mo's calm breathing beside her and the sound of the pages turning. Nothing chased nightmares away faster than the rustle of printed paper.

But the figure outside the house was no dream.

The book Mo was reading that night was bound in pale blue linen. Later, Meggie remembered that too. What unimportant little details stick in the memory.

'Mo, there's someone out in the yard!'

Her father raised his head and looked at her with the usual absent expression he wore when she interrupted his reading. It always took him a few moments to find his way out of that other world, the labyrinth of printed letters.

'Someone out in the yard? Are you sure?'

'Yes. He's staring at our house.'

Mo put down his book. 'So what were you reading before you went to sleep? *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*?'

Meggie frowned. 'Please, Mo! Come and look.'

He didn't believe her, but he went anyway. Meggie tugged him along the corridor so impatiently that he stubbed his toe on a pile of books, which was hardly surprising. Stacks of books were piled high all over the house – not just arranged in neat rows on bookshelves, the way other people kept them,

oh no! The books in Mo and Meggie's house were stacked under tables, on chairs, in the corners of the rooms. There were books in the kitchen and books in the lavatory. Books on the TV set and in the wardrobe, small piles of books, tall piles of books, books thick and thin, books old and new. They welcomed Meggie down to breakfast with invitingly opened pages, they kept boredom at bay when the weather was bad. And sometimes you fell over them.

'He's just standing there!' whispered Meggie, leading Mo into her room.

'Has he got a hairy face? If so, he could be a werewolf.'

'Oh, stop it!' Meggie looked at him sternly, although his jokes made her feel less scared. Already, she hardly believed any more in the figure standing in the rain - until she knelt down again at the window. 'There! Do you see him?' she whispered.

Mo looked out through the raindrops running down the pane, and said nothing.

'Didn't you promise burglars would never break into our house because there's nothing here to steal?' whispered Meggie.

'He's not a burglar,' replied Mo, but as he stepped back from the window his face was so grave that Meggie's heart thudded faster than ever. 'Go back to bed, Meggie,' he said. 'This visitor has come to see me.'

He left the room before Meggie could ask what kind of visitor, for goodness' sake, turned up in the middle of the night? She followed him anxiously. As she crept down the corridor she heard her father taking the chain off the front door, and when she reached the hall she saw him standing in the open doorway. The night came in, dark and damp, and the rushing

of the rain sounded loud and threatening.

'Dustfinger!' called Mo into the darkness. 'Is that you?'

Dustfinger? What kind of a name was that? Meggie couldn't remember ever hearing it before, yet it sounded familiar, like a distant memory that wouldn't take shape properly.

At first, all seemed still outside except for the rain falling, murmuring as if the night had found its voice. But then footsteps approached the house, and the man emerged from the darkness of the yard, his long coat so wet with rain that it clung to his legs. For a split second, as the stranger stepped into the light spilling out of the house, Meggie thought she saw a small furry head over his shoulder, snuffling as it looked out of his rucksack and then quickly disappearing back into it.

Dustfinger wiped his wet face with his sleeve and offered Mo his hand.

'How are you, Silvertongue?' he asked. 'It's been a long time.'

Hesitantly, Mo took the outstretched hand. 'A very long time,' he said, looking past his visitor as if he expected to see another figure emerge from the night. 'Come in, you'll catch your death. Meggie says you've been standing out there for some time.'

'Meggie? Ah yes, of course.' Dustfinger let Mo lead him into the house. He scrutinised Meggie so thoroughly that she felt quite embarrassed and didn't know where to look. In the end she just stared back.

'She's grown.'

'You remember her?'

'Of course.'

Meggie noticed that Mo double-locked the door.

'How old is she now?' Dustfinger smiled at her. It was a

strange smile. Meggie couldn't decide whether it was mocking, supercilious, or just awkward. She didn't smile back.

'Twelve,' said Mo.

'Twelve? My word!' Dustfinger pushed his dripping hair back from his forehead. It reached almost to his shoulders. Meggie wondered what colour it was when it was dry. The stubble round his narrow-lipped mouth was gingery, like the fur of the stray cat Meggie sometimes fed with a saucer of milk outside the door. Ginger hair sprouted on his cheeks, too, sparse as a boy's first beard but not long enough to hide three long, pale scars. They made Dustfinger's face look as if it had been smashed and stuck back together again. 'Twelve,' he repeated. 'Of course. She was . . . let's see, she was three then, wasn't she?'

Mo nodded. 'Come on, I'll find you some dry clothes.' Impatiently, as if he were suddenly in a hurry to hide the man from Meggie, he led his visitor across the hall. 'And Meggie,' he said over his shoulder, 'you go back to sleep.' Then, without another word, he closed his workshop door.

Meggie stood there rubbing her cold feet together. Go back to sleep. Sometimes, when they'd stayed up late yet again, Mo would toss her down on her bed like a bag of walnuts. Sometimes he chased her round the house after supper until she escaped into her room, breathless with laughter. And sometimes he was so tired he lay down on the sofa and she made him a cup of coffee before she went to bed. But he had never *ever* sent her off to her room so brusquely.

A foreboding, clammy and fearful, came into her heart as if, along with the visitor whose name was so strange yet somehow familiar, some menace had slipped into her life. And she wished – so hard it frightened her – that she had never fetched

Mo, and Dustfinger had stayed outside until the rain washed him away.

When the door of the workshop opened again she jumped.

'Still there, I see,' said Mo. 'Go to bed, Meggie. Please.' He had that little frown over his nose that appeared only when something was really worrying him, and he seemed to look straight through her as if his thoughts were somewhere else entirely. The foreboding in Meggie's heart grew, spreading black wings.

'Send him away, Mo!' she said as he gently propelled her towards her room. 'Please! Send him away. I don't like him.'

Mo leaned in her open doorway. 'He'll be gone when you get up in the morning. Word of honour.'

'Word of honour – no crossed fingers?' Meggie looked him straight in the eye. She could always tell when Mo was lying, however hard he tried to hide it from her.

'No crossed fingers,' he said, holding both hands out to show her.

Then he closed her door, even though he knew she didn't like that. Meggie put her ear to it, listening. She could hear the clink of china. So the man with the sandy beard was getting a nice cup of tea to warm him up. I hope he catches pneumonia, thought Meggie . . . though he needn't necessarily die of it. Meggie heard the kettle whistling in the kitchen, and Mo carrying a tray of clattering crockery back to the workshop. When that door closed she forced herself to wait a few more seconds, just to be on the safe side. Then she crept back out into the passage.

There was a notice hanging on the door of Mo's workshop, a small metal plaque. Meggie knew the words on it by heart. When she was five she had often practised reading the

old-fashioned, spindly lettering:

*Some books should be tasted
some devoured,
but only a few
should be chewed and digested thoroughly.*

Back then, when she still had to climb on a box to read the plaque, she had thought the chewing and digesting were meant literally and wondered, horrified, why Mo had hung on his workshop door the words of someone who vandalised books. Now, she knew what the plaque really meant, but tonight she wasn't interested in written words. Spoken words were what she wanted to hear, the words being exchanged in soft, almost inaudible whispers by the two men on the other side of the door.

'Don't underestimate him!' she heard Dustfinger say. His voice was so different from Mo's. No one else in the world had a voice like her father's. Mo could paint pictures in the empty air with his voice alone.

'He'd do anything to get hold of it.' That was Dustfinger again. 'And when I say anything, I can assure you I mean *anything*.'

'I'll never let him have it.' That was Mo.

'He'll still get his hands on it, one way or another! I tell you, they're on your trail.'

'It wouldn't be the first time. I've always managed to shake them off before.'

'Oh yes? And for how much longer, do you think? What about your daughter? Are you telling me she actually likes moving around the whole time? Believe me, I know what I'm talking about.'

It was so quiet behind the door that Meggie scarcely dared

breathe in case the two men heard her.

Finally her father spoke again, hesitantly, as if his tongue found it difficult to form the words. 'Then what do you think I ought to do?'

'Come with me. I'll take you to them.' A cup clinked. The sound of a spoon against china. How loud small noises sound in a silence. 'You know how much Capricorn thinks of your talents. He'd be glad if you took it to him of your own free will, I'm sure he would. The man he found to replace you is useless.'

Capricorn. Another peculiar name. Dustfinger had uttered it as if the mere sound might scorch his tongue. Meggie wriggled her chilly toes and wrinkled her cold nose. She didn't understand much of what the two men were saying, but she tried to memorise every single word of it.

It was quiet again in the workshop.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Mo at last. He sounded so weary that it tore at Meggie's heart. 'I'll have to think about it. When do you think his men will get here?'

'Soon!'

The word dropped like a stone into the silence.

'Soon,' repeated Mo. 'Very well. I'll have made up my mind by tomorrow. Do you have somewhere to sleep?'

'Oh, I can always find a place,' replied Dustfinger. 'I'm managing quite well these days, although it's still all much too fast for me.' His laugh was not a happy one. 'But I'd like to know what you decide. May I come back tomorrow? About midday?'

'Yes, of course. I'll be picking Meggie up from school at one-thirty. Come after that.'

Meggie heard a chair being pushed back, and scurried back

to her room. When the door of the workshop opened she was just closing her bedroom door behind her. Pulling the covers up to her chin, she lay there listening as her father said good-bye to Dustfinger.

'And thank you for the warning anyway,' she heard him add as Dustfinger's footsteps moved away, slowly and uncertainly as if he were reluctant to leave, as if he hadn't said everything he'd wanted to say. But at last he was gone, and only the rain kept drumming its wet fingers on Meggie's window.

When Mo opened the door of her room she quickly closed her eyes and tried to breathe as slowly as you do in a deep, innocent sleep. But Mo wasn't stupid. In fact, he was sometimes terribly clever.

'Meggie, put one of your feet out of bed,' he told her. Reluctantly, she stuck her toes out from under the blanket and laid them in Mo's warm hand. They were still cold.

'I knew it!' he said. 'You've been spying. Can't you do as I tell you, just for once?' Sighing, he tucked her foot back underneath the nice warm blankets. Then he sat down on her bed, passed his hands over his tired face and looked out of the window. His hair was as dark as moleskin. Meggie had fair hair like her mother, who she knew only from a few faded photographs. 'You should be glad you look more like her than me,' Mo always said. 'My head wouldn't look at all good on a girl's neck.' But Meggie wished she did look more like him. There wasn't a face in the world she loved more.

'I didn't hear what you were saying anyway,' she murmured.

'Good.' Mo stared out of the window as if Dustfinger were still standing in the yard. Then he rose and went to the door.

'Try to get some sleep,' he said.

But Meggie didn't want to sleep. 'Dustfinger! What sort of a name is that?' she asked. 'And why does he call you Silvertongue?'

Mo did not reply.

'And this person who's looking for you - I heard what Dustfinger called him. Capricorn. Who is he?'

'No one you want to meet.' Her father didn't turn round. 'I thought you didn't hear anything. Goodnight, Meggie.'

This time he left her door open. The light from the passage fell on her bed, mingling with the darkness of the night that seeped in through the window, and Meggie lay there waiting for the dark to disappear and take her fear of some evil menace away with it. Only later did she understand that the evil had not appeared for the first time that night. It had just slunk back in again.





Secrets

'What do these children do without storybooks?' Naftali asked.

And Reb Zebulun replied: 'They have to make do. Storybooks aren't bread. You can live without them.'

'I couldn't live without them,' Naftali said.

Isaac Bashevis Singer,
Naftali the Storyteller and his Horse Sus

It was early dawn when Meggie woke up. Night was fading over the fields as if the rain had washed the darkness out of the hem of its garment. The alarm clock said just before five, and Meggie was going to turn over and go back to sleep when she suddenly sensed someone else in the room. Startled, she sat up and saw Mo standing by her open wardrobe.

'Hello,' he said, putting her favourite sweater in a case. 'I'm sorry, I know it's very early, but we have to leave. How about cocoa for breakfast?'

Still drowsy with sleep, Meggie nodded. Outside, the birds were twittering loudly as if they'd been awake for hours. Mo

put two more pairs of jeans in her case, closed it and carried it to the door. 'Wear something warm,' he said. 'It's chilly outside.'

'Where are we going?' asked Meggie, but he had already disappeared. She looked out of the window, feeling confused. She almost expected to see Dustfinger, but there was only a blackbird in the yard hopping over the stones, which were wet after the rain. Meggie put on her jeans and stumbled into the kitchen. Two suitcases, a travelling bag and Mo's toolbox stood out in the hall.

Her father was sitting at the kitchen table making sandwiches for the journey. When she came into the kitchen he looked up briefly and smiled at her, but Meggie could see he was worried about something. 'Mo, we can't go away now!' she said. 'The school holidays don't start for another week!'

'Well, it won't be the first time I've had to go away on business in your term-time.'

He was right about that. In fact, he went away quite often, whenever an antique dealer, a book collector or a library needed a bookbinder and commissioned Mo to restore a few valuable old books, freeing them of dust and mould or dressing them in new clothes, as he put it. Meggie didn't think the word 'bookbinder' described Mo's work particularly well, and a few years ago she had made him a notice to hang on his workshop door saying 'Mortimer Folchart, Book Doctor'. And the book doctor never called on his patients without taking his daughter too. They had always done that and they always would, never mind what Meggie's teachers said.

'How about chicken-pox? Have I used that excuse already?'

'Yes, last time. When we had to go and see that dreary man with the Bibles.' Meggie scrutinised her father's face.

'Mo. Is it . . . is it because of last night we have to leave?'

For a moment she thought he was going to tell her everything – whatever there was to tell. But then he shook his head. 'No, of course not,' he said, putting the sandwiches he had made in a plastic bag. 'Your mother has an aunt called Elinor. We visited her once, when you were very small. She's been wanting me to come and put her books in order for a long time. She lives beside a lake in the north of Italy, I always forget which lake, but it's a lovely place, a day's drive away.' He did not look at her as he spoke.

Meggie wanted to ask: but why do we have to go now? But she didn't. Nor did she ask if he had forgotten that he was meeting someone at midday. She was too afraid of the answers – and she didn't want Mo to lie to her again.

'Is this aunt as peculiar as the others?' was all she said. Mo had already taken her to visit various relations. Both he and Meggie's mother had large families whose homes, so far as Meggie could see, were scattered over half of Europe.

Mo smiled. 'Yes, she is a bit peculiar, but you'll get on with her all right. She has some really wonderful books.'

'So how long are we going to be away?'

'It could be quite some time.'

Meggie sipped her cocoa. It was so hot that she burned her lips, and had to quickly press the cold blade of a knife to her mouth.

Mo pushed his chair back. 'I have to pack a few more things from the workshop,' he said. 'It won't take long. You must be very tired, but you can sleep once we're in the van.'

Meggie just nodded and looked out of the kitchen window. It was a grey morning. Mist drifted over the fields at the foot of the nearby hills, and Meggie felt as if the shadows of the

night were still hiding among the trees.

'Pack up the food and take plenty to read!' Mo called from the hall. As if she didn't always! Years ago he had made her a box to hold her favourite books on all their journeys, short and long, near and far. 'It's a good idea to have your own books with you in a strange place,' Mo always said. He himself always took at least a dozen.

Mo had painted the box poppy-red. Poppies were Meggie's favourite flower. They pressed well between the pages of a book, and you could stamp a star-shaped pattern on your skin with their pepper-pot seed capsules. He had decorated the box and painted *Meggie's Treasure Chest* in lovely curly lettering on the lid. The box was lined with shiny black taffeta, but you could hardly see any of the fabric because Meggie had a great many favourite books, and she always added another whenever they travelled anywhere. 'If you take a book with you on a journey,' Mo had said when he put the first one in her box, 'an odd thing happens: the book begins collecting your memories. And forever after you have only to open that book to be back where you first read it. It will all come into your mind with the very first words: the sights you saw in that place, what it smelled like, the ice-cream you ate while you were reading it . . . yes, books are like flypapers. Memories cling to the printed page better than anything else.'

He was probably right, but there was another reason why Meggie took her books whenever they went away. They were her home when she was somewhere strange – familiar voices, friends that never quarrelled with her, clever, powerful friends, daring and knowledgeable, tried and tested adventurers who had travelled far and wide. Her books cheered her up when she was sad, and kept her from being bored while Mo cut

leather and fabric to the right size, and re-stitched old pages that over countless years had grown fragile from the many fingers leafing through them.

Some of her books always went away with Meggie. Others were left at home because they weren't right for where she was going, or to make room for new, unknown stories that she hadn't yet read.

Meggie stroked their curved spines. Which books should she take this time? Which stories would help to drive away the fear that had crept into the house last night? I know, thought Meggie, why not a story about telling lies? Mo told her lies. He told terrible lies, even though he knew that every time he told one she looked hard at his nose. *Pinocchio*, thought Meggie. No, too sinister. And too sad. But she wanted something exciting, a story to drive all other thoughts out of her head, even the darkest. *The Witches*, yes. She'd take the bald-headed witches who turn children into mice – and *The Odyssey*, with the Cyclops and the enchantress who transforms his warriors into pigs. Her journey could hardly be more dangerous than his, could it?

On the left-hand side of the box there were two picture books that Meggie had used when she was teaching herself to read – five years old, she'd been, and you could still see where her tiny forefinger had moved over the pages – and right at the bottom, hidden under all the others, were the books Meggie had made herself. She had spent days sticking them together and cutting up the paper, she had painted picture after picture, and Mo had to write what they were underneath them. *An Angel With a Happy Face, from Meggi for Mo*. She had written her name herself, although back then she always left the 'e' off the end. Meggie looked at the clumsy lettering

and put the little book back in the box. Mo had helped her with the binding, of course. He had bound all her home-made books in brightly patterned paper, and he had given her a stamp for the others so that she could print her name and the head of a unicorn on the title page, sometimes in black ink and sometimes in red, depending how she felt. But Mo had never read aloud to her from her books. Not once.

He had tossed Meggie up in the air, he had carried her round the house on his shoulders, he had taught her how to make a bookmark of blackbird's feathers. But he had never read aloud to her. Never once, not a single word, however often she put books on his lap. Meggie just had to teach herself how to decipher the black marks and open the treasure chest.

She straightened up. There was still a little room in the box. Perhaps Mo had a new book she could take, a specially big, fat, wonderful book . . .

The door to his workshop was closed.

'Mo?' Meggie pressed the handle down. The long table where he worked had been swept clean, with not a stamp, nor a knife in sight. Mo had packed everything. Had he been lying after all?

Meggie went into the workshop and looked around. The door to the Treasury was open. The Treasury was really just a lumber-room, but Meggie had given the little cubby-hole that name because it was where her father stored his most precious materials: the finest leather, the most beautiful fabrics, marbled paper, stamps to print patterns in gold on soft leather . . . Meggie put her head round the open door and saw Mo covering a book with brown paper. It was not a particularly large book, and not especially fat. The green linen binding

looked worn, but that was all Meggie could see, because Mo quickly hid the book behind his back as soon as he noticed her.

'What are you doing here?' he snapped.

'I—' For a moment Meggie was speechless with shock, Mo's face was so dark. 'I only wanted to ask if you had a new book for me. I've read all the ones in my room, and . . .'

Mo passed his hand over his face. 'Yes, of course. I'm sure I can find something,' he said, but his eyes were still saying: go away, go away, Meggie. And the brown paper crackled behind his back. 'I'll be with you in a moment,' he said. 'I have a few more things to pack. OK?'

A little later he brought her three books, but the one he had been covering with brown paper wasn't one of them.

An hour later, they were taking everything out into the yard. Meggie shivered when she stepped out of doors. It was a chilly morning after the night's rain, and the sun hung in the sky like a pale coin lost by someone high up in the clouds.

They had been living in the old farmhouse for just under a year. Meggie liked the view of the surrounding hills, the swallows' nests under the roof, the dried-up well that yawned darkly as if it went straight down to the Earth's core. The house itself had always been too big and draughty for her liking, with all those empty rooms full of fat spiders, but the rent was low and Mo had enough space for his books and his workshop. There was a hen-house outside, and the barn, which now housed only their old camper van, would have been perfect for a couple of cows or a horse. 'Cows have to be milked, Meggie,' Mo had said when she suggested keeping a couple. 'Very, very early in the morning. Every day.'

'Well, what about a horse?' she had asked. 'Even Pippi Longstocking has a horse, and she doesn't have a stable.'

She'd have been happy with a few chickens or a goat, but they too had to be fed every day, and she and Mo went away too often for that. So Meggie had only the ginger cat who sometimes came visiting when it couldn't be bothered to compete with the dogs on the farm next door. The grumpy old farmer who lived there was their only neighbour. Sometimes his dogs howled so pitifully that Meggie put her hands over her ears. It was twenty minutes by bike to the nearest village, where she went to school and where two of her friends lived, but Mo usually took her in the van because it was a lonely ride along a narrow road that wound past nothing but fields and dark trees.

'What on earth have you packed in here? Bricks?' asked Mo as he carried Meggie's book-box out of the house.

'You're the one who says books have to be heavy because the whole world's inside them,' said Meggie, making him laugh for the first time that morning.

The camper van, standing in the abandoned barn like a solid, multicoloured animal, was more familiar to Meggie than any of the houses where she and Mo had lived. She never slept more deeply and soundly than in the bed he had made in it for her. There was a table too, of course, a kitchen tucked into a corner and a bench to sit on. When you lifted the seat of the bench there were travel guides, road maps and well-worn paperbacks under it.

Yes, Meggie was fond of the van, but this morning she hesitated to get in. When Mo finally went back to the house to lock the door, she suddenly felt that they would never come

back here, that this journey was going to be different from any other, that they would drive further and further away, in flight from something that had no name. Or at least none that Mo was about to tell her.

'Very well, off we go south,' was all he said as he got behind the steering wheel. And so they set off, without saying goodbye to anyone, on a morning that still seemed much too early and smelled of rain.

But Dustfinger was waiting for them at the gate.

