
Opening extract from

Follow me Down

Written by

Julie Hearn

Published by

Oxford Children's Books


Follow Me Down

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and in certain other countries

First published 2003
First published in this edition 2009

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-275595-7

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by AFS Image Setters Ltd, Glasgow

Printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

A Changeling Child

NOTICE: To be seen next door to the Black Raven in West Smithfield, during the time of Bartholomew Fair: a Living Skeleton taken by a Venetian Galley from a Turkish vessel in the Archipelago. This is a Fairy Child, supposed to be born of Hungarian Parents, but chang'd in the Nursing. Aged Nine Years or more; not exceeding a Foot and a-half high. The Legs Thighs and Arms so very small that they scarce exceed the bigness of a Man's Thumb, and the face no bigger than the Palm of one's hand; and seems so grave and solid as if it were Threescore Years old. You may see the whole Anatomy of its Body by setting it against the Sun. It never speaks. It has no teeth but is the most voracious and hungry creature in the World, devouring more Victuals than the stoutest Man in England. Gives great satisfaction to all that ever did, or shall, behold it.

1

It was the stench seeping in through the car windows that bothered Tom the most. Rank and beefy, it reminded him of the way dogs smell after a walk in the rain. Smelly dogs made him think of Goldie, left behind in Dorset, and for a moment the page of the London *A to Z* he was supposed to be reading blurred and swam in front of his eyes.

Quickly, he knuckled the wet from his face. Had his mother noticed? If she had, he would say it was sweat. And that he felt sick. It was late morning, the middle of August, and hot enough for even a skinny twelve year old to be melting like a lolly. Add the stink of Smithfield meat market, leaching through traffic fumes, and anyone with nostrils and a stomach in working order was bound to feel bad.

His mother, in profile, looked surprisingly fit considering she was driving in circles, unable to remember where her own mother lived, and had more reason than most people to feel like throwing up, with or without a pong in the air.

'You all right, Mum?' His voice was gruff. A 'yes' or 'no' answer would do him.

'Tired. Just tired. I'll be glad to stop.'

They came to a roundabout. It was somewhere Tom recognized. 'We've done this one,' he said. 'Twice.' His mother circled it three times more, looking for signs.

Go round again, thought Tom, and I really will chuck. The smell was getting worse. He tried breathing through his mouth. Tasted offal on his tongue. Liver without the

onions. His mother, he knew, had a brilliant sense of smell; could recognize anything from gas to a bunch of flowers through several closed doors. How come she wasn't complaining?

'Can't stand much more of this stink,' he muttered.

'What stink?' She seemed genuinely surprised. 'I can't smell anything. Oh! Hang in there, Tom-bola. This is it, I think.'

She took a sudden left, sending a training shoe, a tangle of wire coat-hangers, and the book *Living With Cancer: A Family Guide* slithering from a badly-packed wodge of their stuff on the back seat.

'MU-um!'

The book had whacked against the back of Tom's head. He turned and shoved it, hard, out of sight beneath a pile of brightly-coloured towels. The coat-hangers jangled on his lap.

'What's the point of bringing these?' he grumbled. 'Gran'll have loads.'

His mother wasn't listening. She had pulled over, stopped the car, and flung off her seatbelt.

'Give me that *A to Z*,' she said. 'This isn't right.'

They were in a wide cobbled street. One way. No exit. There were no houses, and no other cars; just the flank of the meat market, rearing to their left, and a large white van parked up ahead, its engine thrumming. Two men were trundling what looked like a clothes rack across the bumpy road. Pig carcasses hung upside down from its hooks, their trotters clicking like castanets, their snouts grazing on air. Tom watched the whole contraption go jouncing and clattering along. The smell was so thick here that he feared for his lungs.

One of the meat men, catching sight of the boy's face, pale as a cheese through the car windscreen, winked at him.

Tom flinched. 'Hurry up, Mum,' he snapped. 'This is gross.'

His mother looked up. There were dark smudges under her eyes and the bright yellow hat she had put on that morning, to cover the stubble of her hair, no longer looked fresh as a daisy.

'All right, love? Need any 'elp?' The man who had winked at Tom came swaggering across to the car, wiping his hands on his belly. There were smears of red all down his aproned front, as if he had just performed open-heart surgery or painted a field of poppies. The rack of pigs was in the back of the white van now. Refrigerated.

Tom wanted a drink very badly. Something ice cold, sharp, and clear like a Seven Up or mineral water with lime. His gran, when they finally found her, would probably offer him Ribena from the same bottle she had got in for his last visit.

It was hard for him to picture his gran, or her house. How long had it been? Ten years, at least. Almost his whole lifetime. Let's see. Railings. He remembered those. Wrought-iron railings, tall and sharp as spears. He had wanted one to play knights of old with; hadn't understood that you couldn't just pull one up and put it back after slaying a few imaginary dragons. He remembered lots of steps and stairs, a hug that had too many bones in it, and a lunch with too much cheese. He remembered a room, dark as a goblin's yawn; a room where someone . . .

'That's great. Brilliant. Can't think how I missed it.' Tom's mother tossed the *A to Z* on to the dashboard, eased her seatbelt across her chest, and turned the key in the ignition. 'Thank you,' she said through the window to the meat man. Her voice had an edge to it. She was off men. All men. Even helpful ones.

'No problem. You take care, darlin'. Nice old pub next door to yer mum's place. Not too rowdy. Get yerself in there

for a bottle of stout and a nice beef sarnie. That'll put the colour back in yer cheeks.' He straightened up, slapped the side of the car, and sauntered back to his van.

'Knucklehead,' muttered Tom. 'Cack for brains. Bilge-artist.'

'At least we know where we're going,' said his mother. 'At least we'll be there in a minute.'

The car kangaroo-hopped as it joined the main road. The animal smell appeared to be fading. Good job, thought Tom. *Good job*.

'A nice beef sarnie indeed,' his mother sighed. 'If only it was that simple, eh?'

Tom had no answer to that. No answer at all. He let his head fall back against the passenger seat; closing his eyes against the traffic, the heat, and the brave yellow hat. Let his mother look out for the right landmarks—the railings, the tall house, the pub sign with the bird on it. This was her journey. Her thing. He hadn't wanted to come.

He felt the car slow then stop, heard the click of his mother's seatbelt coming off, sensed exhaustion and discomfort in the slow exhalation of her breath. 'We're here,' she said. 'Pile out, Tom Thumb.'

It was a relief to get out of the car, to stretch his legs after the long journey. The railings in front of the house looked shabbier than he remembered. Not at all like the spears of a valiant knight. The pub next door looked pretty dingy too. The Black Raven.

'Hello, darlings! Did you have to fight your way through traffic? It's so appalling here now, with those beastly great lorries. I was just beginning to worry . . . '

Tom's grandmother stood in her doorway, several steps up from the street. Tall and slim, her white hair cut in a geometric bob, she wore a pale trouser suit and enough silver chains to anchor a ship. Her smile was a sickle of

lipstick; her eyes a mystery behind a pair of shades. There was a glass in her left hand with something fizzy and a slice of lemon in it.

His mother took hold of his arm. He wanted to comfort her and shake her off about equally. Why hadn't his grandmother come down the steps to greet them properly? They were family, weren't they? The only family she had left? And one of them was lucky to be standing here at all! OK, so the old bat had gone ballistic when his mum and dad split up. But that was ancient history now. It was stupid to carry on minding about your precious daughter being a single parent—particularly when your precious daughter had a lot more to worry about, nowadays, than being minus a husband.

As for his mother, she wasn't usually lost for words, however sick, or tired, she was feeling. Why didn't she say something to make this easier?

His mother's voice, when it finally came, was croaky but calm. 'Hello, Mummy,' she said. 'Fab hairdo. Smarter than mine.'

Nice one, thought Tom, and laughed. His grandmother's smile slipped, but only for a second. 'Get yourself in out of the sun, Catherine,' she said. 'Tom will bring the luggage up. Such a tall chap now. I'll make a pot of coffee. You must be gasping.'

Tom tightened his grip on his mother's elbow. She shook him away. 'I'm fine,' she said. 'You go and get our stuff in.'

Tom will bring the luggage. Such a tall chap now . . . Part of Tom wanted to run ahead; to catch his grandmother before she reached the kitchen. She needed telling that his mother didn't drink coffee any more. That, actually, quite a lot of people who had cancer wouldn't touch caffeine with a ten foot bargepole, and wasn't she a stupid old bag for not *thinking* about that?

He stood beside the car, wishing he could drive. You wouldn't see him for dust. He would be back in Dorset so fast the tyres would smoke. His mates would be hanging out by the war memorial this afternoon, with nothing to worry about except keeping an eye on their mountain bikes and being home in time for tea. He hoped Matthew's family would remember that Goldie loved chips and was allowed one or two, as a treat.

'Are you coming in, Tom darling? I've poured you some Ribena.'

His grandmother was beckoning from a first-floor window. Sunlight flashed on her rings. She was still wearing her shades. Wearily, Tom grabbed a big armful of clothes from the back seat of the car, nudged the door shut with his hip, and went towards the house.

The railings closed ranks on him immediately, the second he set foot on the first step. Fleetingly, irrationally, he saw them as the spears he had once wished them to be. Only they were leaning rather than pointing. Leaning his way and quivering, like vipers about to strike. And the smell. The smell was back. As putrid as before. Worse.

Tom sank to his knees, trying not to gag. Socks, jeans, and T-shirts fell from his grasp, as lightly and naturally as leaves. It's the heat, he told himself. That, and pelting up the steps too quickly after sitting for hours in a car. Even as he thought it, he knew it wasn't true. He could run for miles, or sit around all day, without feeling anything less than normal.

The railings leaned closer . . . closer still . . . and then stopped. Tom waited a second or two, his heart pounding. No. It was all right. They hadn't touched him. He was safe. He just needed to get his act together. Fast.

And what an act, sir, what an act! Is it not the most wonderful phenomenon of nature ever seen? And you may see the whole anatomy of its body, sir, by setting it against the sun . . .

The voice—a man's voice—was coming from the basement. His grandmother must have left a radio playing. That was it. And yet . . .

It never speaks, sir, never a word . . .

Tom peered, tentatively, through the skewed railings towards the basement window. A ray of sunshine, reflected in glass, made him wince.

The man's voice had faded away. But someone else was calling now. A child. A girl. Her cry was as high and thin as birdsong and it touched Tom like a wand.

Help us, it said.

Tom shook his head. 'No,' he replied, the word forming and spilling somewhere deep in his mind. 'Leave me alone. I don't understand.'

He groped for something solid; touched the fallen clothes and began scooping them up in his arms. The railings were straightening, like stalks after rain. Tom bent his face towards the familiar scent of washing powder, and the reassurance of denim and Lycra against his skin.

'Tom! Thomas! Really, darling, there's no need to carry everything in at once. For Heaven's sake, it's like a Turkish bazaar out there. Pick everything up, there's a good chap, and come along in. Your Ribena's getting warm.'

A window slammed.

Tom felt, with relief, the rigidity of the railings as he hauled himself to his feet. The rotting-entrail smell had gone. Completely. And there was nothing unfamiliar now about the sounds in his ears. Just the rasping of pigeons somewhere on the roof, and the distant purr of traffic.

The sooner he did something normal, he told himself, like gulp a glass of tepid squash, the better. He snatched up the rest of the scattered clothes and jumped the remaining steps in a single bound. His grandmother's house smelt of lavender and garlic and he entered it meek

as a lamb, determined to make the best of this visit, and to be gentler towards his mother.

Outside, the sun's rays continued to prod the basement window while, a stone's throw away, above the entrance to the Black Raven, the sign with the dark brooding bird painted on it began to swing violently to and fro, to and fro, without so much as a breath of wind to stir it.