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Opening Extract from...

Arcadia

Written by James Treadwell

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ARCADIA

James Treadwell



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If this be magic, let it be an art
Lawful as eating.

The Winter's Tale

I

UTOPIA

One

From the top of Briar Hill he can see the whole world.

Once upon a time there was a stone plaque up here. Rory remembers it, mostly. There was a map on it which told you what you were looking at, which island in which direction. Why you'd need a map when you can see all the islands just by turning around – Home lying right next to Briar, blackened Martin peeking over its shoulder, Maries and far-off Aggies across the Gap and then the two bleak mounds of Sansen where no one but the gulls ever lived, even before – he can't now imagine. Anyway, the plaque's gone. Or it's still there but buried for ever under the gorse, so it might as well be gone. Everyone's been telling him how fast he's growing but the gorse is growing faster.

He perches on tiptoes at the highest point of the clearing and surveys the world.

As always, he looks for the Mainland first. On very clear days, if you face the north end of neighbouring Home and then stare over it and way, way across the sea, there's a smudge on the horizon. That smudge is the Mainland. It's the only sign of anything beyond the world: another world. It's not much even on a clear day. It looks like smoke, or something you could blink out of your eye.

He remembers bits of it, but the memories are also turning into smoke. A year and a half's a long time when you're ten. He remembers the helicopter most vividly, the noise it made and the

smell of it, and the grass buffeting underneath. Other things come in flashes. Big square signs beside wide roads, glittering when lights hit them. The red and green people who told you when it was safe to cross. A paper cup full of stripy straws.

You can't see it this afternoon. There are no clouds at all, but an autumn haze blurs the horizon despite the breeze. Everything there is in the world is arranged in a ring around him, islands and rocks. The rest, in every direction, is just the sea.

He remembers watching boats from up here, in The Old Days. In the Gap separating Briar and Home from Maries and Aggies where the other people live there used to be boats all the time, little boats, medium-sized boats, sometimes boats as big as islands (which doesn't seem possible but he asked Laurel once and she said yes, there really were).

There isn't a single boat out of harbour.

He's never seen so many birds.

The blackberries are never as good around the top of the hill. He'll have to go back down in a bit and start picking. He's only climbed all the way up because it's such a nice afternoon, and (secretly) for the chance to see what he sometimes sees out amid the foam and spray and rocks on the far side of Briar. A glimpse of a whiteness which stays, instead of dissolving into mist.

Just thinking about it makes him feel guilty. He fingers the plastic bags rolled up in his pocket. He can't go home until he's filled one with blackberries and the other with sloes. He'd better get started. If Laurel and Pink see him standing around on top of the hill not doing anything they'll tell on him, or at least Pink will, though the two of them should be busy at the Farm and it's out of sight from here.

On the other hand, the later he gets back to Home, the less likely it is he'll have to do another job before bedtime.

For some reason this idea makes him remember sitting in the classroom at school staring at the clock.

This memory isn't fuzzy at all, even though it's been summer and winter and now another summer finished since he last set

eyes on that clock. He spent a lot of time staring at it, in The Old Days. He remembers, exactly, which configurations of its thin and thick hands meant happiness (end of lesson, time to go home) and which meant despair (less than halfway through the lesson, less than halfway through the day). Something's missing from the memory, though. The key to it. What the clock was *for*, what it was *about*. Whatever it is, it's like the plaque with the map. It must still be there somewhere but it might as well not be.

Once his mother took him to watch Scarlet's class do an assembly at their school, the big school on Maries, where Scarlet and Jack went by boat across the Gap every day. The assembly was about somewhere called Germany. Scarlet had learned lines about sausages and said them aloud; then the whole class stood in a line – Scarlet was between her friends, who were Tilly and Adam – and sang a song which went *O Christmas tree O Christmas tree*. Scarlet was so nervous about doing it she cried and shouted at their mother for days beforehand when she was supposed to be learning her lines about the sausages; that's why Rory still remembers. But what he can't remember any more is what they meant: *Germany*, *sausages*, *Christmas*, *Tilly*, *Adam*. They're to do with a different world, when there were things other than what you can see from here, on top of Briar Hill. They're gone. Like Scarlet and Jack.

Someone's coming.

He can hear them huffing and rustling up the steep track through the brambles. Laurel or Pink, it must be, though they crossed from Home at the same time he did so they shouldn't nearly be finished getting milk yet. If they find him standing around not working he'll be in trouble. He pulls one of the bags from his pocket and unrolls it hurriedly. There's nothing to pick up here at the top of the hill but he'll have to pretend he thought there was.

But it's not Laurel or Pink. It's Ol.

This, Rory knows straight away, is not good at all.

Ol stops as soon as he comes into the clearing. 'Whatchyou doing here?'

Instinctively, Rory glances across the narrow Channel towards Home. If anyone was looking across to Briar they'd see the two of them. 'You're not supposed to be here,' he says.

'"You're not supposed to be here,"' Ol mimics, in a whiny voice.

'How'd you get across?'

'Flew.'

Rory stops scanning the shore of Home to look at Ol and immediately wishes he hadn't. Ol is grinning a Got You grin.

'Whatchyou think, stupid? Rowed, didn't I?'

'In a boat?' Rory says. That's how bad he's starting to feel.

'No, in a tractor. "In a boat"? What's wrong with you?'

Rory's never liked Ol much. He's supposed to like Ol because they're the boys so they play together a lot, but Ol arranges the games so he wins every time, and he's always talking like he understands all sorts of things Rory doesn't just because he's three years older. This time, though, Rory doesn't care about Ol being rude. He's much more worried about the fact that he's here at all.

'Who said you could take a boat?'

'No one.'

'You just took one?'

'Don't be such a girl. Whatchyou doing, anyway? Picking? Better get on with it, I bet your mum's gonna want that whole bag full.'

Rory reddens. Ol's mother is Molly and everyone in the world knows that Molly is Nice. She doesn't badger Ol all the time. Rory often sees Ol playing by the pond while he's bicycling past on his way to do whatever boring job his own mother's told him to do. It's always Molly who comes by to ask if Rory can play with Ol for a bit instead of working. His own mother never goes to ask if Ol can play.

'If someone sees—'

'Oh, shut up. I don't care. Anyway they're all over on the far side. Some stuff washed up. They'll be busy with it for ages.' Ol advances up the clearing, gazing around like he's daring anyone to look at him. Rory's hands are beginning to feel clammy. Ol not being allowed on the water isn't like Laurel not being allowed to touch anything after she's been in the chicken coop until she's rinsed her hands or Rory not being allowed to use more than a speck of toothpaste. It's proper not being allowed. It's frightening and serious and to do with the things the women talk about in lowered voices in other rooms. It's to do with Them.

The very moment he has that thought he can't help looking over Ol's shoulder towards the spiky rocks beyond the far side of Briar, and, as if it's his fault for thinking of Them, he sees it: a glimpse of whiteness at rest.

'You're not going to tell, are you?' Ol says. 'You better not. You're not a sneak.'

It's unmistakable. The sea froths and spits where it meets the rocks, but above the turmoil a still white shape has settled.

'If you sneak on me I'll put your head down the toilet. One of the old toilets. I mean it.'

'I won't.' Rory can feel his cheeks going stiff and heavy and hot, like his face knows he's trying to hide something. 'Let's go down,' he says.

'I told you, no one's going to see.'

'Come on. Laurel and Pink are at the Farm.'

'So what.'

'Let's go see what they're doing.' This is desperation. He hates it when he's with Laurel and Pink and then Ol shows up. Ol always tries to act older in front of Laurel and the two of them whisper and giggle and he ends up stuck with Pink. But Rory's bad feeling is getting worse. It's really important that Ol not be here. Really, really important. Ol has to go back to where he's supposed to be. Everything's always got to be where it's supposed to be, that's one of the Rules they live by since What Happened.

'I know what they're doing.' Ol makes squeezing motions with his hands, grinning. 'Sticking their hands under goats. No thanks. I like it up here.' He stretches and makes a show of admiring the view.

'Don't!' Rory squeaks.

'Don't what?'

'You're not supposed to look.'

'I know I'm not supposed to,' Ol says, exaggerating the words and fixing his most contemptuous sneer on Rory, which at least stops him staring around. 'You know what? I'm fed up with it. It's stupid. You're allowed on Briar, why shouldn't I be? I'm fed up with everyone acting like I'm a prisoner.'

Over his shoulder, across the little rocky scoop of bay between Briar and the Western Rocks, the glistening white shape makes itself upright. Rory knows he has to get Ol back down the hill right now, before something very bad happens. But how can he? You can't make someone do something when they're older, that's not how it works.

'I think They're gone anyway,' Ol says. 'No one's seen one of Them for ages. If they ever did. It's all a story old women made up to stop me doing what I want, that's what I reckon.'

'Let's go,' Rory says. 'Please.'

Ol sighs. 'You're such a pussy.'

'I won't tell anyone you were here if we go now.'

'I bet you're scared you'll get in trouble.'

'I'm not.'

'Liar. I know, let's play something. We could have a war for this hill.' Ol turns around quickly, inspecting the lie of the land.

'No!' Rory's head is a fog of panic.

'Go on. You start at the bottom and I'll be the defenders.' Ol's studying the clumps of gorse, eyes down. 'We can use pebbles for ammo. Ten hits and you're dead.'

By some miracle Rory spots his one chance through the fog. 'You go down,' he says. 'I want to be defenders.'

'You're crap at it.' Ol crouches and scratches up a handful of pebbles. 'You always give up.'

'I won't this time.'

'Yes you will.'

'I swear I won't.'

Ol's not really listening. He's thinking about places for ambushes. 'And no saying I missed you when I didn't.' It'll be all right as long as he concentrates on the earth and the gorse and the crannies he can hide in, as long as he doesn't look out across the bay. 'There's more than one way up here, isn't there?' he says, straightening, shading his eyes against the bright water beyond Briar, looking out across the bay.

'Ol,' Rory says, but that's all he says. He's not Molly. He's not an adult. He doesn't know how to tell someone to do something so they have to. He's the youngest person in the world apart from Pink, and he can't even order Pink around because she only listens to Laurel. 'Ol,' he says again. 'Let's go.'

Ol's stopped looking around. He's standing there, both hands shading his eyes now, squinting into the distance, where the white shape is.

None of this is actually happening. It's not allowed. It can't be.

'What's that?' Ol says. He sounds funny.

'Nothing,' Rory says. 'Come on.' He tries to tug Ol around.

Ol almost loses his balance before he notices what Rory's doing. 'Oi!' He smacks Rory's hand away. 'Leave off.'

'You mustn't look,' Rory says. 'You can't.'

But Ol's looking. He's looking with his eyes and his mouth and his whole chest. He's sort of swallowing. His mouth's hanging open and the top of his sweater's going up and down, up and down.

'Is that . . .' he says. He sounds a bit confused.

'No,' Rory says. 'It's just waves.'

Ol looks down at him, then back towards the scattered jagged islands in the bay. He spots the place where the other path descends the hill, down its far side. He pushes Rory away and sets off in that direction.

'Ol?' Rory trails after him. Any moment now an adult's going

to appear out of the bushes and fix all this. Any moment now. 'Ol? Where're you going?'

'There's something over there,' Ol says. Fingers of gorse scratch at his heels.

'We've got to go home. It's getting late.' Everything Rory says just bounces off Ol's back. Something bad is now actually happening, and all he's doing is following it, watching it skid and slip down the path, telling it to stop though it won't listen. The path's suddenly steep. He tries to grab Ol's coat but he can't, or he doesn't try hard enough. 'If you don't go back now everyone'll know you're gone. They'll kill you.'

They'll kill you. He's said it aloud. He meant something else, but the words came out. Rory loses his footing, drops to the ground in shock.

'Only be a minute,' Ol says, vaguely, going on ahead.

Rory looks at his scuffed and dirtied hands. That's when he realises he's not holding the plastic bag. He must have let go of it at the top of the hill when he tried to grab Ol. He's got to go back and get it. He can't go home without filling it up, both of them. It might have blown away by now or got caught in the gorse and been torn. He remembers his mother saying: *Whatever you do, don't let the bags get torn. Understand?* His mother's not Nice like Molly.

Ol slips around a spray of bramble ahead and goes out of sight, just like that. The bramble's thick with purple fruit. Rory stares at the space where Ol used to be, breathing hard.

'Stop,' he says, not very loudly.

He can hear Ol slipping his way down the hill. Now he's on his own again. No one's in sight. He's got two bags to fill before he rows back across the narrow Channel between Briar and Home, and he might even have lost one of them. You can't lose anything useful, that's another Rule. You just can't. In The Old Days you could buy another one but now if you lose something, that's it, it's gone for ever.

He stands up. Below him he can see rooftops of houses where people used to live, mostly covered in ivy. Beyond them, hidden

behind trees, is the Farm, where Laurel and Pink are busy doing the things they have to do. Everyone's got to do the jobs they're given, or none of them will survive.

Nothing else is to do with him. It's not his fault.

He scampers back to the top of the hill. The plastic bag's impaled on a fist of gorse. A pair of dunnocks are flitting around it; they dive away as he approaches. It's been punctured below the handle but it's still usable.

Rory doesn't want to look over towards the Western Rocks but he does anyway. The slender white shape has moved. For a moment he thinks it's gone, but then he sees a wave with a white crest coming towards the Briar shore, a white crest which never breaks. Something about the shape of the crest makes his palms tingle and his mouth feel dry.

The gulls on Sansen are screeching by the hundred.

All the best berries are around the foot of the hill, and the sloes are on the shoreline near the church. He hasn't even started picking and the light's already thinking about turning yellow. He sets his face away from the west and concentrates only on where he's putting his feet.