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Opening Extract from...

THE MEMORY WOOD

Written by **Sam Lloyd**

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ELIJAH

DAY 6

I

When they file back into the room, I'm no longer in the chair. Instead I'm sitting on the table, bare legs swinging. A pink square of sticking plaster gleams on my knee. Weird, really, that I don't remember injuring it.

They raise their eyebrows when they see I've moved but nobody comments. The table is bolted to the floor so it can't tip over and hurt me. When I was ten, I broke my leg running in the Memory Wood and nearly died, but that was two years ago. I'm much more careful now.

'Seems like we're all done, Elijah,' one of them says. 'Are you looking forward to going home?'

I glance around the room. For the first time I notice it has no windows. Perhaps that's because of the sort of people it usually contains – bad people, not like these in here with me now. They're police, even if they don't wear the uniforms. Earlier, the one who brought me a Coca-Cola told me they wear *play* clothes. He could have been joking. For a twelve year old I have a pretty high IQ, but I've never really understood teasing.

For a moment I forget they're still watching me, still waiting for an answer. I glance up and nod, swinging my legs harder. Why *wouldn't* I be looking forward to going home?

My face changes. I think I'm smiling.

II

We're in the car. Papa is driving. Magic Annie, who lives on the far side of the Memory Wood, says that these days most kids call their parents Mum and Dad. I'm pretty sure I used to do that too. I don't really know why I switched to Mama and Papa. I read a lot of old books, mainly because we don't have money to waste on the newer stuff. Maybe that's it.

'Did they question you?' Papa asks.

'About what?'

'Oh, about anything really.'

He slows the car at a cross-roads, even though he has right of way. Always careful like that, is Papa. Always worried that he'll hit a cyclist or a dog-walker, or a slow-crossing hedgehog.

'They asked me about you,' I say.

In the front seat, Mama turns to look at him. Papa's attention remains on the road. He holds the steering wheel delicately, wrists angled higher than his knuckles. It makes him look like a begging dog, and suddenly I think of the Arthur Sarnoff print that hangs on our living room wall, of a Beagle playing pool against a couple of rascally, cigar-chomping hounds. The picture's called *Hey! One Leg on the Floor!* because the Beagle is perched on a stepladder, which is cheating. Mama hates it, but I kind of like it. It's the only picture we have.

'What did they ask you?'

'Oh, you know, Papa, just stuff. What kind of job you do, what kind of hobbies you have, that sort of thing.' I decide not to mention their other questions just yet, nor my answers. Not until I've had a bit more time to think. In the last few days a lot's happened, and I need to get it all straight. Sometimes life can be pretty confusing, even for a kid with a high IQ.

'What did you tell them?'

'I said you're a gardener. And that you fix things.' I make a dimple in the pink plaster on my knee and wince. 'I told them about the crow you saved.'

We found the crow outside the back door one morning, flapping a broken wing. Papa nursed it for three days straight, feeding it bread soaked in milk. On the fourth day we came downstairs to find it gone. Crow bones, Papa said, mend much faster than human ones.

III

We're coming to the edge of town. Fewer buildings, fewer people. On the pavement I see two boys wearing uniform: grey trousers, maroon blazers, scuffed black shoes. They look about my age. I wonder what it must be like to have lessons at school instead of home. There's isn't a book in my house I haven't read ten times over, so I'm pretty sure I'd do well. Magic Annie say I have the vocabulary of someone with far bigger shoes. There was a playwright, once, who knew thirty thousand words. I'd like to beat him if I can.

As we speed past, I press my palm against the window. I imagine the boys turning and waving. But they don't, and then they're gone.

'Did you talk about me?' Mama asks.

Her head is still sideways. I'm struck by how pretty she looks today. When the low sun breaks through the clouds, her hair gleams like pirate gold. She looks like an angel, or one of those warrior queens I've read about: Boudicca, perhaps, or Artemisia. I want to climb into the front seat and curl up in her lap. Instead, I roll my eyes in mock exasperation. 'I'm not a *complete* witling. Just because I got lost this one time.'

Witling is my new favourite word. Last week it was *flibbertigibbet*, which is Old English for an excessively chatty person. Everyone's life should contain a couple of flibbertigibbets, preferably with a few witlings to keep them company.

Again, I glance out of the window. This time all I see is fields. 'I hope Gretel's OK.'

'Gretel?' Papa asks.

Immediately, I get a funny feeling in my tummy; a greasy slipperiness, like there's a snake inside me, coiling and uncoiling. Gretel, I remember, is a secret. I look up and meet Papa's eyes in the rear-view mirror. His brow is furrowed. My hands begin to shake.

I glance at Mama. A pulse beats in her throat. ‘There *is* no Gretel, Elijah,’ she says. ‘I thought you understood that.’

In my tummy, more of the snake uncurls. ‘I . . . I mean Magic Annie,’ I stammer, my words rushing out. ‘It’s my play name for her. A thing I invented. Just a silly thing.’

Papa’s eyes float in the mirror. ‘I think *Magic Annie* suits her better than *Gretel*,’ he says. ‘Don’t you, buddy?’

My mouth tastes sour, like I’ve bitten down on a beetle or a toad. I run my tongue over my teeth and swallow. ‘Yes, Papa.’

IV

Our estate isn’t like those I’ve seen on Magic Annie’s TV. There are no high-rise blocks or rows of modern homes – only woods, fields, barns, cowsheds and the mansion called Rufus Hall. Dotted about the land are a few stone-built cottages, including our own. Tied cottages, they’re called.

Beyond the Memory Wood lies Knucklebone Lake. That’s not the lake’s real name – I don’t think it has one. It’s just that once, in the reeds lining the bank, I found a tiny trio of bones connected by rotting ligament. They looked like they might form the index finger of a small child. I put them in my Collection of Keepsakes and Weird Finds, a grand name for what’s really a Tupperware box hidden beneath the loose floorboard in my room.

Not far from the lake is the place I call Wheel Town. It’s more of a camp than anything else, a ragtag collection of trucks and caravans that were driven here long ago and are now too rusted up to leave. I’ve never worked out why the Meuniers tolerate the Wheel Town folk on their land, but they do.

The Meuniers live up at Rufus Hall. Just the two of them, knocking about with all that space. Leon Meunier spends most of his time in London. On the days he’s at the estate, I see him zooming about in his Black Defender with a face like he’s worried the sky’s about to fall. The house and its gardens would be an awesome place to explore, but Papa won’t ever let me go.

Our car jerks to a stop. I realise we're home. In the front seat, Mama bows her head. I wonder if she's praying. Looking down, I see my hands have stopped trembling. I pop my seatbelt and grab the door handle, but of course I can't get out. My parents still use the child locks, even though I'm twelve years old.

I wait for Papa to open the door. Then I worm out of my seat. He lumbers up the garden path, shoulders braced as if he's carrying all the world's troubles. Mama and I follow.

Our cottage windows are dark, offering no hint of what lies within. The front door is a single slab of oak. There's no letterbox. Papa rarely gets mail, and when he does it's delivered straight to Meunier. Mama gets nothing at all. Our door has no number, because we don't live on a street. If anyone ever wrote to me, they'd have to put this on the envelope: *Elijah North, Gamekeeper's Cottage, C/O THE RT HON. THE LORD MEUNIER OF FAMERHYTHE, Rufus Hall, Meunierfields*. That's quite a lot to write, which explains why Mama isn't the only one the postman ignores.

There's an upside-down horseshoe nailed to the lintel, put there to catch us some luck. Passing beneath it, I go inside.

V

I'm in my room, standing at the window. We've been home twenty minutes. I'm itching to escape, but I daren't, not yet.

When I hear the back door clatter open, I step closer to the glass. Down in the garden, Papa looms into view. He tugs a packet of Mayfairs from his chest pocket and lights up. Leaning against the coal shed, he breathes a fog of smoke into the sky. I go to the hall, creep down the stairs and out through the front door.

From our cottage, the Memory Wood is a five-minute walk. I make it in half that time, jogging along the track beside Fallow Field. Overhead, the sky presses down like a steel sheet. The day feels heavy, as if it might crumple under its own weight.

I'm halfway there when I hear the screaming. Twisting around, I see a family of crows squabbling in Fallow Field. Something's got their interest – likely the remains of a rabbit or pheasant that a fox has left. The collective noun for crows, I once read, is *murder*.

Pretty gross.

VI

It's chilly inside the Memory Wood, which is strange because there's barely any wind. There's a steady drip of water, leftovers from this morning's rain. Under my trainers the mulch is soft and wet.

With Fallow Field screened by trees, the screaming of the crows is muted. Ahead I see a flash of movement. All sorts of things it could be, but there's only one that I fear. My parents didn't mention him on the way home, and I made a point of not asking. Sometimes I worry that speaking his name too often will increase his power over me – and with it, his cruelty.

Maybe *cruelty* isn't the best word. Once, on the TV in Magic Annie's caravan, I saw a Great White burst out of the sea and bite a baby seal clean in half. It looked cruel but it wasn't, not really – it was just nature. The shark was hungry and the baby seal was prey. The other youngsters stayed out of the water when they saw the shark's fin cutting the surface, which shows the importance of good instincts. Good instincts are something I worry about quite a lot.

Now, in the Memory Wood, I slow my pace. I've seen deer among these trees, but their coats match the woodland so perfectly that often I only notice their eyes. The flash of movement I spotted a moment ago was no deer.

I think about running back to Fallow Field, and from there all the way home. But there's no way I can. I came here for a reason, one far too important to ignore.

Bad instincts.

Even though my heart's beating faster than it should, I allow myself an eye-roll. Three weeks ago my favourite word was *melodramatic*. Right now, it's pretty apt. I don't *really*

know if I have bad instincts. One thing I've learned, growing up by these woods, is to think twice about trusting what I see.

Steeling myself, I take a forward step. No startled fawn or badger crashes out of the undergrowth. No owl or hawk swoops from the overhead canopy. I take a second step, then a third, twisting my head to check nothing's creeping up behind.

Minutes later I arrive in the clearing, and suddenly my mouth is as dry as the knucklebones in my Collection of Keepsakes and Weird Finds.

VII

It's a mopey-looking spot: not the best place for a cottage, which is probably why it was left to rot. Papa once told me that the estate's head gardener lived here, back when Meunier's ancestors needed one. What makes it so creepy is that it's an exact replica of our own cottage, right down to the horseshoe nailed upon the lintel. This one is rusty, though. And it certainly hasn't brought the place much luck.

Not a bit of glass is left in the windows. The branches of an ash tree poke out of what would have been the sitting room. Some of the tiles have vanished from the roof, plundered to repair other buildings on the estate. Papa's work, no doubt – he hates to see useful things go to waste. Those that remain are streaked with bird mess and felted with moss, making the cottage look less like it was built by human hands and more as if it was raised from the soil by an evil wizard's spell. There's a toilety smell about the place, mingling with the stench of something even fouler.

I wish I'd worn my coat. It's chilly in the Memory Wood, but where I'm going it'll be filthy, cold and dark. Screwing up my eyes, I check the clearing one last time. I see dripping trees, tangled bracken, a metallic sky hanging like a guillotine's blade.

Near the cottage's front door there's a lighter patch in the mulch, as if the dead leaves have recently been disturbed. Last time I was here, I'm pretty sure I saw a pallet box outside the entrance, filled with old tools. It's not there now, but there's no dink in the ground, marking where it lay. Perhaps I don't remember right. Perhaps it didn't leave a trace.

A cry pierces the silence. From a tree across the clearing, a magpie fixes me with a glossy eye. I think of the old rhyme: *One for sorrow*. When I clap my hands, the magpie flaps its wings but it doesn't fly off. Moments later I hear an answering shriek. I look up at the cottage's sagging roof and see two more birds perched there.

One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl.

Claws of ice climb my spine. I've never liked magpies. Once, I saw an adult bird drag three baby blue tits from their nest. It killed them all before I could frighten it off. I buried the chicks near our laurel bush, making a cross from two lolly sticks and a piece of wire. The worst thing wasn't watching the chicks die, or having to pick their bodies from the grass. It was watching the parents return to an empty nest, hopping around in confusion as they searched for their babies. One of them even flew down and perched on the cross. I cried and I cried, and when Papa came home and wanted to know what was up, I couldn't even look at him.

Some stuff just isn't meant to be shared.

Besides, Papa wouldn't ever understand a thing like that.

Turning my back on the memory, I edge towards the cottage, avoiding its blank-eyed stare. Soon, I reach the patch of disturbed mulch a few metres from the entrance. The kicked-over leaves glisten like the whitish bellies of slugs. Has someone, I wonder, dug a trap to capture peeping Toms like me? Perhaps, under this shallow carpet of litter, a pegged sackcloth hides a steep-sided pit. Deadfall traps, they're called, in the survival books I've read. Sometimes, their floors are fitted with sharpened stakes to skewer anything that falls in. Sometimes they're empty, forcing those inside to wait for the trapper's return before discovering their fate. The worst option, I always think, would be for the trapper never to return at all, leaving the victims to die of hunger or thirst, knowing all the while that safety lay only a few metres away.

Magic Annie told me a horrible story, once, about a Daddy Fox who fell into a deadfall trap while hunting for his family's supper. Mummy Fox tried to rescue him by throwing down a rope, but while she was hauling him up, her feet slipped and she tumbled in too. The five children, when they learned what had happened, made a fox-chain to rescue their parents. The oldest son locked his jaws onto a tree trunk while his brothers and sisters lowered themselves into the hole. Mummy Fox began to climb, and she was halfway to the

top when Daddy Fox began to follow her. All that weight was too much for the oldest son, and when his jaws loosened on the tree, his entire family tumbled into the hole. He waited at the edge for five days, watching his parents and siblings die, and then he died too – not of hunger or thirst but of heartbreak.

I've never found that story in a book, which makes me wonder if Magic Annie made it up. Often, I've tried to imagine what would happen if I fell into a trap like that. Papa could hold onto the tree, but with only Mama to help him, how would they reach down far enough to rescue me?

It's not something to ponder right now. There's no deadfall trap beneath these leaves. I'm *procrastinating*, which is a word for putting off something you don't want to do but must. Closing my eyes to calm myself, I count to ten, then backwards to one. I empty my lungs and take a long breath. Finally my eyelids spring open.

Strangely, the cottage seems closer now, as if it slunk a tiny bit nearer while my eyes were shut.

Disgusted, I shake my head. 'Witling,' I mutter. 'Melodramatic witling.'

Up on the roof, one of the magpies caws and shakes its wings.

I creep towards the entrance. The door, swollen in its frame, has stuck half-way open, revealing a narrow rectangle of dark. I mouse around outside for a bit, building my courage. Then I go in.

VIII

In here I use my nose more than my eyes, as if by crossing the threshold I've transformed into some kind of bloodhound. The cottage reveals itself in a jumble of different scents: mildew and rust, damp mortar and wet ashes; mouldered curtains, weeping plaster, rotten wood. Overlaying that are the smells from an earlier time that my imagination fools me into sensing: woodsmoke, hanging bacon, the yeastiness of fresh bread.

This far into the woods, there was never any possibility of electricity or gas. Water was fetched from the well near Knucklebone Lake. Light was provided by tallow candles and

the burning of lamp oil refined from fish or kerosene or mustard. At least that's what Papa says.

Now, my nose tickled by old ghosts, I step deeper into the ruin. Its lay-out, identical to my parents' cottage, is unsettling. It feels like I've catapulted myself forwards to some future date, seeing our home as it'll look after a cataclysmic event: an alien invasion, a zombie plague or a worldwide nuclear exchange.

Paper has peeled from the walls like old skin, exposing plaster blotched with black fungi. A dresser of scarred hardwood stands beside the stairs, flanked by a row of rusted petrol cans. Tucked into one of its alcoves is a parcel of sticks that looks vaguely like a broken wicker doll, but is most likely the nest of some departed bird.

On my left looms the sitting room. Inside I see the ash tree, so strange and out of place that it hardly seems real. The uppermost branches press against the ceiling. It's only a matter of time before they punch through.

As I move along the passage towards the kitchen, the thud of my trainers sounds disconnected, as if this is playing out on an old cinema screen and there's a lag between the images and sound. For a moment I wonder if I'm really here at all, but I'd have to be pretty crazy to dream up a situation like this and place myself at the heart of it.

Are you looking forward to going home, Elijah?

That's what one of the policemen asked me in the interview room, earlier today. But this isn't my home, just a dirty reflection of it. I step into the kitchen, and tell myself that again.

This isn't my home.

IX

This isn't my kitchen. There's no hum of a fridge, no tick of a wall clock. Ivy has invaded from outside, creeping across the ceiling like a rash.

Despite the broken windows and freely moving air, I notice a vague scent, of something that wasn't here before. It's not unpleasant but it gives me major jitters. When a breeze stirs the ivy leaves and sets them whispering, the scent is flushed away.

To my right is the pantry door. There's no horror-movie squeak when I turn the handle, no squeal of unoiled hinges when I swing it open. The darkness inside is that of a cave.

I take out my torch and switch it on. The beam – weak and yellow, flickering at the slightest movement – illuminates a chequerboard tile floor and cobwebs that hang like rags. Towards the back, past shelving that holds a few forgotten jars of preserves, lies a square of purest black that swallows my light completely, because it's the entrance to the cellar where I found her, and where I hope she'll still be.

X

This is the point where I *do* need my courage. Police stations and deadfall traps are nothing in comparison. For as long as I can remember I've had a fear of small spaces, a recurring dream of being trapped underground. These walls are solid enough, but the ash tree in the front room has deformed the ceiling above it. If the building collapses while I'm down in the cellar, who knows if I'll survive long enough to be dug out? Papa would come looking, so I'm not worried about dying from hunger or thirst, but how much air would I need? And how would I cope once the batteries in my torch failed?

Shuffling to the cellar entrance, I begin to descend. The steps are stone blocks, slippery with damp. Halfway down they double back and the greyness behind me winks out. That aroma of something not-quite-right grows stronger, a cleaner smell amid all the decay.

Soon I'm at the bottom. The floor here is uneven, partly dirt and partly solid rock. In one corner lies a metal barrel so orange with rust that it's started to collapse. Passing it, I come at once to the barrier that separates this half of the cellar from what lies beyond.

XI

It's constructed from the same boarding you see on the windows of abandoned shops – smooth and yellow, flecked with softwood chips. From here, I can't see any of the timber frame to which it's nailed.

Cut into the centre is a door. Two heavy-duty hinges extend in slim triangles across it. The metal glimmers, cold and bright. All around the jamb is a seam of black rubber. Three large deadbolts provide security. The one at chest-height is usually secured with a padlock. I have the key in my pocket, but I won't be needing it today. The padlock has disappeared.

In my dismay I fumble the torch, nearly dropping it. For a crazy second, light bounces around me. Shadows flitter from the walls like bats. I want to flee up the steps to the Memory Wood, but I have a responsibility here. I'm part of this. Whatever happened down in this cellar happened because of me.

A sick taste, now, at the back of my throat. I reach for the top-most deadbolt and slide it back. Pausing, I tilt my head. Did I hear something just then? Down here, in the gloom? Or from somewhere up above? I think of the ash tree's branches pressing at the living-room ceiling, and throw back the second deadbolt before I can change my mind.

XII

No sense in dawdling. Nothing beyond this door can hurt me physically. Of that I am certain. I worry, instead, that I'll see something so awful I'll never scrub it from my memory.

Putting my hand on the last bolt, I draw it back.

Pause.

Listen.

No sound breaks the silence. No whisper of a breeze.

I grip the handle, turn it clockwise and pull. The rubber squeals as the door releases from its frame. I step back, blinking into the revealed darkness.

The smell that wafts out is the same one I caught upstairs, but far stronger, so sharp it makes my eyes water. I recognise it, too: household bleach. Not the citrusy kind you sometimes get but the regular stuff, the sort that gets in your nose and feels like it's stripping away the hairs.

The chamber didn't smell like this before. I fear that during my time away something monstrous has happened. When I step inside and shine my torch around, I know it has.

XIII

Just like the rest of the cellar, the floor here is covered with nubs of sharp rock. They press through my trainers and hurt my feet. Three walls, of rough-cut stone, form part of the cottage's foundations. The fourth, now behind me, is made of the same thick fibreboard I saw on the way in.

A great deal of care has been put into its construction. The open doorway reveals that the false wall is a foot thick, the cavity packed with PVC bags filled with sound-proofing. Someone, at some point, has tried to damage the door from the inside. Deep scratches mark the wood.

I can hardly breathe, but somehow I manage to speak: '*Gretel?*'

The name rebounds off the walls. In here my voice sounds deeper, more throaty, as if the cellar has aged me fifty years.

'Gretel,' I repeat, and now my voice sounds more twisted than ever. The torch blinks furiously. I try to steady it, pointing the beam at the very centre of the chamber. Through the bedrock, a U-shaped bolt has been sunk, trapping an iron ring.

Previously, Gretel's chain was attached to that ring. Now, both the chain and the girl are gone.

The bleach fumes are thick in my throat. My tummy flops and I gag. Aiming my torch around the chamber I see that the pillow, the wash bucket and the makeshift toilet have also disappeared. The floor looks like it's been scrubbed. I don't want to think about what's been scoured away, or the meaning of that antiseptic smell.

This is my fault. All of it.

It's too much. My torch clatters to the floor and winks out. Blackness floods in. I lose all sense of myself, of what is real and what is not. I hear choked cries and can't believe they're mine, convinced, suddenly, that I share this space with something hostile, something with claws and teeth. I turn, run blindly for the door, misjudge its location and shoulder-slam the jamb, knocking myself to the floor. A sharp edge of rock cuts my knee. The pain is a bolt of electricity that races up my leg and explodes inside my skull. Crab-like, I scuttle from the chamber and keep going until my arms knock against the cellar's bottom step. Blackness becomes grey. Shadow becomes light. I see an ivy-clad ceiling, a fungus-blotched wall. Then I'm on my knees again, outside this time, back in the Memory Wood and panting great lungfuls of air. Trees swarm around me like wolves gathered to a kill. There's a shrieking in my ears. The magpies have returned: three on a nearby branch, four on the sagging cottage roof. I remember the old nursery rhyme and it chills my bones: *Seven for a secret, never to be told.*

I don't know what to think.

I don't know what to do.

Gretel has gone. And it's all because of me.