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Opening Extract from...

The Long Shadow

Written by Mark Mills

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The Long Shadow

MARK MILLS



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1

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For Caroline, Gus and Rosie

There are souls more sick of pleasure than you are sick of pain.
G. K. Chesterton

thirty-one years before . . .

Some memories take on a dreamlike quality with time: illusory, yet somehow more real than anything the waking world has to offer.

This is one of those memories.

Jacob and I are trudging up the steep pathway that skirts the abandoned chalk pit, the fresh snow squeaking in protest beneath our rubber-booted feet. He is leading the way – it's a point of honour with him – and I am behind, dragging the old sledge my grandfather built me just before he died, almost his last living act. Overhead, through the bony canopy of branches, the sky is cloudless, enamelled, a preposterous blue.

As the path levels off, the trees fall away and we find ourselves at the lip of the chalk pit. (Someone has since put up a chain-link fence; back then, a lone strand of rusted barbed wire was all that prevented unwary ramblers from plunging to their doom.)

We stand there, peering down into this deep scoop out of

the hills, our eyes narrowed against the blinding glare of the low morning sun, our breath rising like steam from our lips. We come here in the summer to hurtle down the scree slope at the head of the quarry in cardboard boxes, but today that same slope is shrouded in a thick white blanket and the chalk cliff rising above it seems strangely dull, almost dirty against the virgin snow which fell so unexpectedly last night.

'Hey, I've got a great idea!' says Jacob.

I know he's lying, making it up as he goes along. It's a control thing. He's always having 'great ideas', playing the Pied Piper, obliging the rest of us to abandon our best-laid plans.

'Oh, yeah? What?'

'Ah, wait and see.'

The sly look doesn't fool me. He's winging it. I don't mind too much. The shallow, open pasture just to the west of where we're standing – the slope we'd planned to sledge – offers few thrills for a couple of twelve-year-old boys. Besides, before long every Tom, Dick and Harry from the village will be there; not forgetting Darren Hodges, who hates us because we go to private school and have 'our fucking thumbs stuck up our posh arses'.

We trudge on, ever upwards, taking the bridleway which branches off and winds through the woods above the chalk pit. I want to challenge Jacob; I know that everything from here on up is unsledgeable, far too steep or treacherous, and he must know it too. I say nothing, though, curious to see how he will talk himself out of the corner. I can see

his mind at work, especially when we leave the trees and find ourselves in the open.

His eyes scan the blinding white sweep of hillside above us. It's not vertical, but not far off, and the bridleway is obliged to cut a diagonal path across it, climbing sharply as it goes, forming a sort of raised causeway flanked by a deep ditch on the uphill side and a near-sheer drop on the other. I know from my father, who has heard it from others, that it's an ancient droving trail, possibly Neolithic in origin.

As we approach the top, breathing hard now, Jacob turns suddenly and thrusts an arm back down the bridleway. 'Da-da!'

He announces it as though he's had it in mind all along, when in fact he has simply run out of options.

'Are you mad?'

'Are you scared?'

'No,' I lie. 'But I know something you don't.'

Not only is the bridleway too steep, narrow and uneven to hold a speeding sledge, but the slopes plunging away on either side of it are not nearly as innocent as they appear. The National Trust has recently taken over this section of the Downs, and last autumn a band of volunteers spent more than a month felling and burning the young trees colonising the hillside. I know that beneath the deep snow lie hundreds of slender stumps, like sharpened stakes. If we lose control of the sledge and go off the side—

'But we won't,' interrupts Jacob.

'Well, I definitely won't, because I'm not going to do it.'

'Chicken,' he grins.

It's the ultimate insult, but I don't care, because I'm thinking: now that he's said it he's going to have to go through with the thing. And I'm worried for him, really worried.

'I don't care if you kill yourself,' I say. 'But I'm not going to have you smashing up my grandfather's sledge.'

He doesn't take the bait, the face-saving excuse I've just offered him.

'Chick- chick- chick- chick- CHICKEN!' he clucks, his face inches from mine.

I want to press my palm to the leering mask and push him away. I don't, though; I calmly hand him the orange nylon baler twine attached to the sledge and say, 'Go ahead. Just as long as I can have your watch.'

The watch is a Seiko diver's watch: day, date, rotating bezel, not just water-resistant but waterproof, the works. It's a gift – well, more of a bribe – from his hopeless, absent parents, and Jacob knows I've always coveted it.

He smiles, amused. 'Sure. It's yours. And I promise not to haunt you when I'm dead.'

He decides that sitting astride the sledge is best. Then he changes his mind and lies on his front, his chest flat against the wooden struts. He can use the toes of his wellington boots to guide him and slow his descent.

'What do you think?' he asks, and in the quick glance he throws me over his shoulder I see the first signs of fear in his face.

'I think it's too steep. I think once you're moving nothing's going to slow you down.'

'There's only one way to find out.'

And with that, he pushes off.

My first reaction is to look away, down to my right, where the Sussex Weald rolls off into the far distance, a frosted winter wonderland. But my eyes are drawn swiftly back to the bridleway.

It has only been a matter of moments, but the sledge is already travelling at eye-watering speed, its wide runners enjoying the dry, crisp snow. Surely it can't go any faster? But it does, picking up even more speed.

Jacob is using his feet to hold his line, and he's making a fine fist of it. My God, I realise with a surge of relief, he's going to do it! Just another hundred yards or so before the bridleway levels out at the woods. Yes, he's going to make it, and I am never going to hear the last of it, not that this stops me emitting a triumphant 'Yeehaaa!' on his behalf.

As I do so, the sledge suddenly lurches to the left – the runners must have caught a rut beneath the snow – and although Jacob recovers, he overcompensates. I look on in impotent horror as the sledge slews back across the bridleway and over the edge, into the wide white void.

He seems to hang in the air for an eternity before gravity finally seizes him, claiming him. He drops more than twenty feet in the blink of an eye and is swallowed up by the snow.

He couldn't have lost control at a worse spot. A year ago there was a dense copse of saplings right where he has just landed, and I find myself running like I've never run before.

Twice, my legs fail to keep up with the gradient and I tumble forward into the snow. Twice, when I scrabble to my feet, there is still no sign of Jacob. Only when I reach

the spot where the sledge left the track and took to the air do I see him.

He's lying far below me, spreadeagled on his back, as if frozen in the act of performing a star jump. The impact of his fall has disturbed the snow around him and I can see a sapling stump cut off at a cruel angle and pointing heavenwards right beside his neck. I see another one pushing through the snow near his left hip. And two more between his legs, one at the very fork of his thighs.

They're everywhere, and I know instinctively what this means. It's the reason he isn't moving; it's the reason his eyes are closed.

I'm not sobbing as I slide down the slope towards him; it's more of a low moan, a sound I've never made before. Where it comes from, I don't know, don't care. To my shame, I'm already thinking that I'm going to get the blame for this: 'He did it to impress you . . . You must have known what he was like . . . You should never have let him do it . . . Why on earth didn't you stop him?'

With my father's words burning in my ears, I scrabble my way on all fours towards Jacob's body, feeling a path through the dwarf forest of hidden stumps. My bare hands are immune to the cold, but a strange numbness is spreading through my chest. It tells me that the world as I know it has changed forever.

He looks so peaceful lying there that for a fleeting moment I dare to imagine that the God he doesn't believe in has spared him. He could almost be smiling.

My heart lurches.

He *is* smiling.

And now his right eye is open, fixing me with an amused light.

He sits up – not transfixed on a stump – and slowly takes in his good fortune. He's like a knife-thrower's assistant at the end of the act. Death bristles all around him. A few inches either way would have done for him.

'Well, holy shit.'

His father is American, and he has always had an impressive range of expletives to prove it. My personal favourite is 'Fuck me sideways'.

Jacob's wild laughter is ringing off the hillside now.

'No!' I shout in anger, silencing him. 'No!'

I wade through the snow to recover the sledge, which has sunk almost out of sight.