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An extract from

The Night Itself

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Published by

Walker Books Ltd

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"Yeah, right." Jack gave me a knowing look as she leaned her head against the yellow wall, but didn't say any more. That's one of the reasons why Jack is my best friend. She nearly always knows what I'm thinking, but she doesn't always have to prove it. Plus, anyone who wears their hair in a two-inch-long, bleached-white pixie cut with hot pink and purple streaks in the front is someone with serious guts, and I respect guts. I needed them, growing up in this house.

"Mio!"

I turned round just in time to steady myself on the banister as I received a hug that would otherwise have knocked me flat on my back.

"You managed to get home in time," Mum said. "I thought I was going to have to leave without saying goodbye properly."

She squeezed me until my ribs creaked. Mum might be a puny five-foot tall – three inches shorter than me – but she is strong. Probably from heaving teeth out of people's jaws all day long. Yep, she's a dentist. Looking at her, with her sweet, young face and her soft waves of black hair, you'd never imagine that she was capable of inflicting pain on people for profit. I suppose it's because she doesn't see it that way; she just wants to help people and make them feel better, and she does. It's her thing.

I leaned into her, breathing in her special mum-smell

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as I hugged her back. Just for an eye-blink the words hovered on my lips: *Don't go without me. I don't want to be alone on my birthday…*

"If Mio would just answer her mobile once in a while you wouldn't have had to be in such a panic," a voice said acidly from the top of the stairs.

I sucked the pleading words back down my throat as I straightened up away from Mum. "Hi, Dad."

My father is definitely the dentist type. Either that or a traffic warden. Some profession where you can take pleasure in making other people miserable anyway.

"Hello, Mr Yamato," Jack chimed in cheerfully. "Sorry we didn't phone. The bus was packed, so we went on the Tube, and once we got off it didn't seem worth it."

"It doesn't matter," my mum said, letting me go as Dad stalked down the stairs. "You got home—"

"With a generous three minutes to spare," Dad interrupted. "Perhaps I should mark it on my calendar."

"Takashi, would you stop?" Mum chided.

He sighed, leaning on the newel post. "Fine, go on."

Mum turned back to me. "You're home, which means I can ask you if you're really sure you don't mind being alone on your birthday. Because I've got your passport. We could try to get you a last-minute ticket."

Yes, please! But there was no chance in hell of me saying it. Not with my dad standing right there, broadcasting doom at me. I knew exactly how much he didn't

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want me around. *Who cares? I don't want to be around him either.*

"Um, no offence?" I said. "But trailing behind while your parents make with the kissy-kissy in the world's most romantic city is not a teenage daughter's dream, you know."

"Besides, Mimi's not going to be alone," Jack broke in. "Me and Rachel will make sure she has a great birthday, Mrs Yamato. Promise."

Mum still didn't look convinced. Her scrunched-up expression reminded me of the gerbil we used to look after in nursery school. I know most fifteen-year-old girls fight with their mothers nonstop, but my mum is just too nice to fight with. Seriously, even my father can't manage it. And none of this was her fault. It was all my dad's idea.

I plastered on my best happy face. "Stop this crazy talk, Mum. It's your second honeymoon – the whole point is to be alone with each other. But don't think I'm letting you off easy. You have to buy me amazing presents. Boots. Hats. Coats. Everything. And then we can open them together on Christmas Day and it will be the best ever, all right?"

My dad cracked an actual smile at that. Well, he was getting his own way, wasn't he? I caught his eye and defiantly raked back the short length of my hair. The smile instantly transformed into his

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usual scowl. He'd barely stopped frowning since I'd gone out two weeks before – the same day he broke the news about his wonderful second-honeymoon plan – and got my hair, which had been nearly as long as Mum's, cut into a sleek, graduated bob that just skimmed my chin.

It's not that he's one of those guys who think women need to be able to sit on their hair. Trust me when I say that my father is *not* traditional. We don't celebrate any Japanese holidays or even eat Japanese food, and the only Japanese words I know come from kendo and watching anime. Dad's lack of interest in our heritage used to drive Ojiichan – my grandfather – up the wall, and is probably why Ojiichan was so determined to enrol me in kendo. No, what bothers my dad is that I cut my hair *without asking permission*. He's dead keen on that. Like making me beg for his blessing before I'm allowed to breathe is going to ensure I ask permission before I run off and get pregnant or something.

"Aiko, we really need to leave now," Dad said brusquely, heaving up a couple of bags. "The taxi's here. We're going to be late."

"Nag." Mum's smile was teasing. "Give your daughter a hug and a kiss first. We're not going to see her for a whole week, you know."

Dad heaved a deep sigh, then put the bags down as if the effort was exhausting and walked back towards

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me. He put one arm around my shoulder and tugged me against him in a quick, hard hug. Dad-smell, a blend of whiskers and aftershave and wool – entirely different from Mum's, but somehow still comforting even though my dad isn't – wrapped around me. His lips brushed the top of my head. "Take care, Midget Gem."

"Not a midget," I muttered. But next to him I was, and probably always would be. Dad's tall for an Asian guy, nearly six feet.

Before I could even decide if I was going to hug him back, the taxi's horn honked outside. Dad let go and hustled my mother towards the door, scooping up the bags as he went. Mum dragged the wheelie suitcase with her.

"Emergency numbers in your mobile, spare money in the tin in the kitchen, no loud music, no parties, no late nights, do your homework," Dad chanted as Jack and I followed them to where the taxi was waiting. "Rachel's making you dinner upstairs."

"Bye!" my mum managed to get out before Dad climbed in after her and slammed the car door shut.

Jack and I waved as the taxi pulled out from the kerb, brake lights winking, and then disappeared round the corner. I blew out a long breath, running my hand through my hair. The shorter length still felt strange, and the back of my neck was cold. *Really couldn't wait to get away, could he?*

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Jack let me have a minute and then punched me in the shoulder. "Come on. It's cold out here and we've got a party to get ready for."

I went up the steps to our house, grabbed our bags, snapped off the lights, and then came back outside again, slamming the front door behind me so that the deadbolt snapped home. Then we headed round the side of the building to the entrance of Jack's flat. Jack, her older sister, Rachel, and their mother, Beatrice, live on the top floor of the building that my parents own. It's a three-storey Georgian townhouse, and from the outside it looks like a posh doctor's, solicitor's or dentist's – which it is. A dentist's, I mean. The basement floor is my parents' joint practice, which has a separate entrance round the side with a little brass plate next to it. The two middle floors are where we live. The separate flat that used to be my grandfather's now belongs to Jack and her family. It has its own entrance, leading to the old servants' staircase.

Ojiichan bought the building when he came to London in the mid-seventies to set up his revolutionary hygienic dental surgery. He was actually kind of a celebrity dentist, back in the day. He did a filling for Laurence Olivier once, and that red-headed chick who was in *The King and I*. When Ojiichan died six years ago, Beatrice Luci, who is my parents' head dental nurse and practice manager, was divorcing Rachel and Jack's dad, and was struggling to find somewhere to live. So my parents offered her the top-floor

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flat at a cheap rate. That way they didn't need to worry about renting it to strangers, or losing their best employee. And somehow I gained a best friend in the process.

Not that Jack and me weren't friendly before that. We'd always gone to the same dojo, which was cool. But once she moved in, we went to the same school, too – though not in the same class – and we started hanging out all the time. I suppose, in a weird way, Jack filled the hole that Ojiichan left. Until I gave kendo up a year ago she even used to come to my matches and cheer me on, like Ojiichan did.

"When your parents get back, I'm seriously going to start petitioning for a lift," Jack panted, wrestling with her shopping bags as she went up the stairs ahead of me.

"Stop being a drama queen," I said. I was panting for real, but I knew Jack was putting it on. She still goes to karate twice a week and she has muscles on her muscles. "You run up and down these stairs all the time for training. You like being the fittest girl in school."

Jack wiggled her backside, in its purple denim miniskirt, in my face. "Why, thank you, cutie."

"In your dreams, Luci," I said.

Jack laughed like I knew she would. I'm not her type.

We got to the top of the stairs and Jack pushed open the door to her flat. Immediately the smell of tomato, garlic and melting cheese rushed out and made my mouth water.

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"Hmm. Lasagne…" I said. I shoved my bag into the little cupboard next to the door, then toed my trainers off and put them in too. Both Rachel and her mum are neat freaks and you don't just drop your stuff wherever in their place.

Unless you're Jack. She flung her shoulder bag and shopping bags across the room onto the sofa, kicked off her ankle boots in opposite directions and pointed one of her short, black-polished fingernails at me. "Don't even think about it, Mimi. You are not coming out with me if you have garlic breath."

"But I haven't eaten anything since breakfast. I could brush my teeth twice," I offered.

"No. We don't have time. You haven't even finished your costume yet. We're in and out, OK? Maybe Rachel'll put some in the fridge for you."

"You're heartless."

"Like that's news to anyone. Stop whining."

Rachel poked her head out of the kitchen, a baguette in her hand. She pointed it at Jack. Pointing is a Luci-family thing. Beatrice does it too, only she's usually holding a sharp dental instrument, so it's considerably scarier.

"Are you bullying Mio again?" Rachel demanded. The warm light from the kitchen made her pale brown skin glow, and her long, toffee-coloured hair – the same colour as Jack's before she bleached it – gleam. Jack and Rachel's grandmother was from Barbados, which means they

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both have an amazing all-year-round golden tan. Unlike me. According to the manga I read, if I lived in Japan, my naturally pale skin would be totally sexy. Shame it only counts as pasty in the UK.

"No," Jack said.

"Yes." I did my pitiful expression. "She won't let me have any dinner."

Behind trendy square glasses, Rachel narrowed her eyes at her sister. "If you're thinking of developing an eating disorder, you'd better know right now that I will intervention your ass off, Jacqueline." Rachel is a graduate psychology student. She likes to work that into the conversation as often as she can.

"Oh, save it," Jack said, yawning for effect. "We're just in a rush, that's all. We've got a party to go to."

Rachel's eyes narrowed even more. "Mr and Mrs Yamato didn't say anything about a party."

"It's all right," I said, playing good cop. "They do know about it. It's an end-of-term, fancy-dress disco thing. And, to be fair, there'll probably be stuff to eat there anyway."

Rachel's suspicious look eased in the face of my smile. I do a very good innocent smile. Beatrice and Rachel love it. They think I'm a Sweet Normal Girl and a Positive Influence on Goth Rebel Jack. Poor naïve ladies.

"But I cooked," Rachel said, gesturing with the bread again.

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"I'm so sorry. I didn't realize," I said. The distress in my voice was real. Rachel's lasagne is not to be sacrificed lightly. "Could we warm it up later? I'd hate it to go to waste."

"We–eell … all right." Rachel shot Jack a sharp look. "But your curfew is still in effect, and if you're even five minutes late, I *will* call Mother."

Jack gulped. Beatrice was taking advantage of my parents' trip to enjoy a relaxing week off herself, in a pampering spa in Cornwall. She'd left that morning. If she had to surface from her hot mud bath to deal with Jack, there would be consequences. The kind that made dental treatment look like jolly good fun.

"I'll make sure we're home before eleven," I said, lying through my teeth.

Rachel was squashing in a part-time job around her studies and Jack had told me that her sister had been up at five-thirty the past three mornings. She would be dead to the world by ten; a nuclear bomb-blast would just make her mutter and pull a pillow over her head.

"Good." Rachel started to go into the kitchen, then turned back. "Hey, what are you going as?"

"I'm a Fairy Gothmother," Jack said, striking a pose.

"Somehow I guessed that one," Rachel drawled. "I meant Mio."

"Oh, I'm going as an anime character," I said. "Rukia from *Bleach*. I'm going to wear my old kendo uniform."

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Rachel frowned. “Doesn’t that character wear a sword?”
“I’ve got my wooden practice one,” I said calmly.
It was true. I did have it.
I just wasn’t going to wear it to the party that night.

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CHAPTER 2

ONE WHO IS HIDDEN

I've been having the Dream for a long, long time. Since I was a kid. It wasn't often in the beginning: once a year, maybe twice. It wasn't my favourite thing, but it wasn't – I didn't let it be – a big deal. Not until this last year. That's when the Dream got really bad.

In the six weeks before my sixteenth birthday I was lucky if I could get through a single night without starting upright in the bed, flinging my duvet and pillows away as if they were on fire – fighting to get up, get away, go, go—

Where?

I'd make it out of the bed, my feet would touch the bedroom carpet – and just like that everything would be gone. Gone, like it had never been in my head to begin with. All I had left to show I'd dreamed at all was a face covered in drying tears and this terrible feeling that someone needed me. Someone needed me to find

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them, hold onto them, hold on tight—

Who?

I never knew, and that was driving me crazy. *I couldn't remember.*

Sleep deprivation does funny things to a person. After nearly two months of this, night after night after night, I was getting desperate to understand why the Dream kept coming back and what it was about. I was sure that if I could just figure out what I was dreaming, if I just knew who I was supposed to find or where I was supposed to go, the Dream would have to leave me in peace. Right?

But the more I thought, the more I picked at it, the more I *needed* to remember … the more I was plagued with another memory. That day with my grandfather. That last day.

I was nearly ten years old, and it was summer. I was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, and my hair – it was long and unruly then – was tied back tightly so it wouldn't fall in my face. The greyish grass in our little postage stamp of a garden crunched and shredded under my bare feet, tickling my nose with that perfect-school holiday smell as I glided forward into the *okuri-ashi*, the most basic kendo movement. The shadow of the big old mulberry bush next to the garage wall fell over me as I shifted across the grass, but the chill was nothing compared to the weight of Ojiichan's eyes. He wouldn't miss anything. He never did.

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I concentrated on keeping the line of my shinai – a light wooden practice sword – perfectly straight as I repeated the graceful, slow movement again, again, again… The last one had to be as perfect as the first, even if Ojiichan made me do it twenty times, a hundred times. That was the whole point.

"*Yame!*" my grandfather said. It meant "Stop."

I lowered the shinai and brought my feet back together, turning to look at him anxiously. He tapped his chin with one finger – he was thinking. "Good. Light on your feet, controlled, graceful… Better than your father was at your age."

I wrinkled my nose. I was pretty sure Winnie-the-Pooh would be better at kendo than my dad. Ojiichan saw my expression and his laughter spilled over, rich and golden and sweet, like the honey that my mum drizzled in porridge on cold days. His eyes crinkled at the corners, their darkness bright with smiling light. He leapt forward in a lightning-fast pounce – not like other granddads, with bent backs and wobbly knees – careful to fold the shinai out of the way so that it didn't hurt either of us as he lifted me up and hugged me.

"Good girl," he whispered into my hair.

"There you are, Mio!" My father's deep voice broke into the moment. "I've been looking all over the place for you."

I felt the sigh heave through Ojiichan's chest as he let

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me slide back down to the ground. Tension rumbled in the air above my head, like low thunderclouds waiting to burst.

Don't fight. Please don't fight.

Before I could say anything, Ojiichan answered. "She woke up early, so I made her breakfast and brought her out for a little practice. You had only to look through the window to find us."

"It's nine o'clock on a Saturday morning. Most kids would be watching cartoons or, I don't know, spending time with their parents." My dad's voice had that funny, rough note it only got when he was talking to my grandfather. Like one of the boys from school trying to sound all grown-up.

"Daddy, you were still in bed. I wanted to practise." I meant my voice to come out strong and calm, like Ojiichan's, but instead it was small and wobbly.

My father sighed. "Wouldn't you like a day off once in a while? What if we go to see Auntie Fumi today, how about that?"

Auntie Fumi made cakes and let me lick the spoon, and she had a silly, fluffy dog that loved to chase sticks in her big garden. Guilt squirmed in my belly. "But I promised Ojiichan."

"Father…" That rough, angry note in Daddy's voice was back, louder than before.

"What?" My grandfather cut him off, a little too

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sharply, a little too loudly. It was starting again.

I wanted to put both hands over my ears. Instead I stood still and squeezed my eyes shut, wishing I had the shinai back in my hands. If I had my practice blade I would chop and slash at the air, slicing up imaginary monsters until I felt tired and calm and peaceful inside.

Why are they always fighting? What am I doing wrong? Why do I make them both so angry all the time?

Stop fighting! Stop! STOP IT!

"She is my daughter, not yours," my father growled. "If you keep pushing, we'll leave. Then you won't see Mio at all. Think about that."

The kitchen door slamming made me jump. My father was gone and Ojiichan's head was bent as if he was upset, but his eyes were burning. He looked the way I'd felt when I scored my first kendo hit – as if he didn't know whether to yell or laugh or maybe even cry. He lifted the shinai and tossed it to me.

My hand shot up to catch it.

"Zenshin Kotai Okuri-Ashi!"

I responded automatically to the command, my body melting into the forms I had practised every day since Ojiichan had signed me up for kendo when I was five.

A while later we heard the garage door go up on the other side of the garden wall and then the deep roar of the car's engine. I waited for the next instruction to come from Ojiichan, but he stood perfectly still, his head held

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slightly to one side as if he was listening. I tried to hear what he could, but all I could make out were the normal, dull London sounds and Mum and Dad's car getting quieter and quieter.

When the sound of the engine had faded completely, Ojiichan sprang to life. "Quickly, Mio. Come with me."

As I tagged along faithfully behind him, my grandfather nipped into the empty garage, taking a metal prybar out of the box of tools there. Then we went back into the house and climbed the stairs to the attic.

I'd never been in there before, because Dad said it was dangerous. It didn't look dangerous. But it was dark, and cobwebby, and unpleasantly cold after the bright sunshine outside. Ojiichan left me by the door while he waded through piles of boxes and broken furniture. I stood very still, worried about what creepy-crawlies might be on the floorboards – I was still barefoot – and rubbed goose-pimply arms.

"Got it!" he whispered.

He'd found a tatty old metal box, covered in peeling white paint. The paint was streaked with dark, bubbling marks, like burns. Long and thin, probably taller than me if it was stood on its end, the box had been shoved out of the way in the space under the sloping attic window.

That? That's what we came all the way up here for?

Ojiichan heaved it out, sending up clouds of dust that made him cough and sputter, but didn't stop him

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