

## Fishing For Stars

Let me tell you how I found this place. I was fishing for stars. You can see them, if you look, just below the surface of the canal, like silver, sharp-edged fish. Mum says they're the souls of the people who built the canal. Dad says they're the dreams of children whose bedrooms overlook the water. Whatever they are, they are as heavy as stone.

I was fishing for stars and I caught one. It pulled me right in – headfirst, surprised. I like fishing. I'll step onto a door one of the boys has stolen from a skip, and push my way to the middle of the canal. But I'm not a swimmer. I hate going underwater

I didn't choke or splutter or drown though, and the water was crystal clear and rubbish-free. I'm telling you, you can breathe as easy as air down here, and if you open your mouth the world tastes sugar-sweet. It took me a while to work out the upside-down thing, because the water makes everything shimmer and shift when you move, like there are a million crushed diamonds floating in front of your eyes. You have to stand absolutely still before things become clear, before you realise that you can walk on the sky, dip your toes into cool white clouds.

I wondered, first off, if I'd died; if this was some kind of Bootle-heaven. But Caib (who's my best friend, even though she's a girl) says there's no use spending your life worrying about stuff you can't do anything about.

That first time, I discovered two things. One, that the razor wire, which hung in great loops over the tall green fence, was flowering. It curled beneath my feet, instead of high above my head, and delicate white flowers blossomed on each sharpened edge. The second thing I discovered in the building whose windows are choked with bricks: I pressed my palm flat against where a window should have been and the space opened like a hinged door. Inside was the biggest, brightest room you've ever seen, stacked with rows of huge bulging bags. On the floor was the thickest carpet I'd ever walked on. When I looked down I saw I had bare feet and could curl my toes into the wool. As soon as I looked around for someone to question, a woman stood in front of me.

'What's in the bags?' I asked.

'Whatever you want there to be,' she said.

'Who do they belong to?' I asked.

'Whoever you want them to belong to,' she said.

I'm used to people talking sideways at me, I wasn't going to stand for it, but when I opened my mouth to ask another question she'd gone. Not in a puff of smoke, not like that, she just wasn't there anymore.

It took me a while to work out how to get back home, but I'm cleverer than they think I am at school. All you have to do is say a bad thing, out loud, about this place. Coming back is like being fired from a catapult, a head-over-heels tumble back to everyday. I saw a sign for a film club, heard laughter coming from the inside of something that looked like an upturned boat. 'I bet it's rubbish,' I said out loud – I'm not sure why – 'Everything in this place is always rubbish.' And that was it, I was spat back onto the towpath, into a world that looked the wrong way up all of a sudden.

I ran all the way to Caib's house. The rule is that we share everything. I could see the laughter in her eyes as I was telling her, she has this look when she doesn't believe stuff, and I almost stormed off, except I wanted to show her.

We went straight back to the canal and I set up my fishing rod.

'You're acting all superior, Rhaw,' she said.

'I just want to get it right,' I told her. 'You have to concentrate.'

I made her hold onto the fishing rod with me. She wriggled and fidgeted like a kid, told me you couldn't catch stars anyway, but she shut up once I'd pointed them out. It took a long time to hook one, but when your dad's a fisherman, you get good at being patient.

This is the strange thing – we caught the star, and I was pulled, head first, not surprised this time, into the canal. But when I'd stood still enough for long enough to let the silver ripples settle, Caib wasn't there. I shouted for her, but there was no answer. On my right, a shoal of fish danced and shimmered in a triangle of space between the bridge and the upturned wall. I walked forwards, the bridge curved into a smile underneath my feet, but I couldn't see her anywhere. I would have to go back, I realised, but as I opened my mouth to say 'it's a wasteland here, no reason to come except to throw stones at the ducks', the woman, who I'd seen the last time, appeared next to me. She had a smile like my mum's, short red hair and green eyes.

'Caib will find her own way here,' she said.

'Who are you?' I asked.

'My name is Aster.' The woman smiled. 'Look, there is another one from your world.'

She pointed and I followed her gaze to a man walking towards me. When I looked back she'd gone.

‘Did you see that woman?’ I asked the man, who looked like a cross between my dad and my science teacher.

‘Do you know the fences here are made of breadsticks?’ the man said. ‘You can just snap a bit off and eat it. Wonderful!’ He held a bread stick in his left hand which he waved at me as he spoke.

‘How did you get in?’ I asked.

‘I’m a gardener,’ he said. ‘I assume you are too?’

I shook my head. ‘Fisherman,’ I said, pulling myself up tall so he’d think I was older than I was.

He frowned. ‘Strange. It was the artichoke, I think. Do you know if you leave them to grow they have this extraordinary bloom – purple, like a thistle. I bent down to smell it, and bang, here I am, upside-down, breathing water. I just saw a sign that read: CCTV – Canal Club Tantalising Vegetables. What do you think that means?’

I shrugged.

‘Maybe it’s because there’s so much food in this place. You’ve seen the allotments?’

I shook my head.

‘Every spare bit of space is a vegetable garden, you must have noticed that. There’s enough food here to feed half of Liverpool. But the thing I want to know is whose place is this? Do you know?’

I shook my head, and then I followed him because I too wanted to know what kind of place it was we had found. We walked further down the canal, towards the building with the bricked up windows. Where he pointed out vegetables, I saw flowers, like the ones in my grandma’s garden before she died, every colour of the rainbow. I snapped a piece of fence off and was relieved to find it wasn’t made out of dry bread, but out of sugar-sweet rock, the green surface hiding sticky white, and my name, Rhaw, written in red letters all the way through.

When we eventually found Caib, in the brick building filled up with bags, she was alight with excitement. The words tumbled out of her. ‘After you left, I waited,’ she said. ‘But you didn’t come back, obviously.’ She rolled her eyes at me, punched me on the arm, but gently so I knew she didn’t really mind. ‘And then I thought I’d go exploring, that maybe I could find a different way into this place. I went down The Hole, Rhaw!’

I admit to being impressed. The Hole is one of the many places we’re told not to go to, a drop out of sight behind a scratched blue fence.

'I just climbed right over and jumped in. It was a slide, Rhaw!' Her eyes were shining black. 'Like the biggest, most enormous, windiest water slide you've ever seen. And then I got here, and I met a woman called Champion and she said I'd find you soon enough, so why didn't I have a look around? And so I went for a walk, and you know that space with the blue shed things behind it, like a car park? There was an outside cinema there, and shops, and a café with multi-coloured tables, and all these people. There was a Post Office, so I thought I'd send mum a postcard, and when I bought the stamp it had a picture of me on it! And then I went to the caravan, you know the one in the fallen down building, that's too high up and far away to get to, but it was easy, just a few steps down, and inside it's like everything mum wouldn't let me have in my bedroom – a massive TV, an enormous snake tank, purple walls. Further down, I saw three girls standing by an old-fashioned wardrobe. They were dressed as fairies, with wings on their shoulder blades, all glittery like stars. And then there was this place where people had hung their pictures on a brick wall, just like it was their living room. And now this place, the windows aren't bricked up at all, are they? It's like the best playground ever. That red thing, the circle, if you spin fast enough, it flies.' As she talked, the room shifted around me, the bags changed into slides, swings, intricately carved castles, a red flying circle. The carpet turned itself into grass.

'Would you look at that?' the man said. We both turned to him. 'I thought this place was a garden when I came in, rows and rows of wheat and strawberries, sweetcorn and potatoes. I could hear people talking as they weeded. I could smell cooking from somewhere over there.' He pointed, and as we looked, the playground gave way to rows of plants, and sure enough the air smelled of hot jam and was filled with the sound of voices.

'And I thought it was a room full of bags,' I said, 'And all of the bags were filled up with dreams.'

Another shift, and the carpet was back, thick and soft beneath my toes.

'This is Bwyell,' I said to Caib. 'I met him by the bridge. We're trying to find out who owns this place, who's in charge.'

Caib tipped back her head and laughed, her teeth flashing white, her eyes dancing. 'Haven't you worked it out yet?' she said.

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