

Whispers on the Wasteland

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To my wife and family,
without whose help this would have remained
no more than a whisper.

A Mark on The Moor

The tinkers left their mark out on the moor.
Whilst wandering in weekend pleasure,
Deep in a green and sighing shade,
You will find it skulking in a hollow:
A kettle or a carpet or the handle of a spade;
Worn out things that no one wanted,
Left to the weather and decay,
Left for the blanket grass to cover,
The bramble's arm to hide away.

Yes! These are signs that someone's been here,
Living where we want to walk,
Weaving dreams of forgotten people,
Threatening our silence with their talk.

So: the council marked a piece of paper;
The surveyor marked a map;
The foreman marked time with his shovel;
The trees bled sap.
The grass groaned with the contemplation of a concrete
overlay.
The council left its mark upon the moor
And there is no moor today.

Chapter One

The old moor was to be wasteland no longer. This small forgotten part of Wattleford, where the brambles grew to hide the debris of a careless world, had rested quietly by the river and watched the tired village lurch itself, before the whip of the local council, into a sprawling, bustling town. Houses spread like a disease along its country roads, with only the river to fend them off. But now even this was in retreat. The reed beds and copses along its bank, refreshed at each spring rain by oozing mud, were to be drained, and houses soon would occupy this land of rabbits and bright blue, summer dragonflies. The rabbit warrens would be sealed beneath concrete slabs and tarmac, watched by their owners from the reed-fringe of the river bank; the badger would slink away at night, following the railway to the west; the fox would have to run to the safety of the forested slopes of the valley edge, from where he would surely creep back to raid the dustbins of the newly settled population.

Part of this wasteland, home of the occasional tinker with his caravan, was to be an experiment, and just before the first houses were due, an adventure playground was being created for the ever growing number of children.

Tim was ten. Ever since he could remember he had been on the move with his father, spending six months in

this town, a year in that, and now he found himself in Wattleford, and a whole new world to make friends with. Not that Tim ever worried about friends; he had moved far too often before to let them concern him now. And anyway, he did not make friends very easily. Who needed friends? He and his dad had looked after each other pretty well so far, and somehow when the schools had opened their gates so readily, the local children had always been too involved with each other to take much notice of him. They had always been kind enough, but kindness was not what Tim needed. He had watched the other children through outsider's eyes. They shared a common trust that each would still be there the next day, and so they romped and quarrelled and fought, and got by with an ease impossible for him. He remembered them all: all the games, all the laughter, all the rivalry and all the pain on leaving, knowing that they were less likely to remember him. And so he had gone on from place to place, putting his trust in no one, but longing for a place to call 'home' and a world that was his own.

It was a nice little cottage that Dad had found this time, rather old, and inclined to be shabby, but when the sun shone, and the honeysuckle sent out its perfume, it took on a charm Tim had never noticed in a house before. The garden was quite large and overgrown, with exciting places to explore where stone ornaments had crept into retirement beneath the overhanging folds of shrub and last year's grass. The cottage came with the job:

'Adventure playground superintendent required...

...Accommodation available'

the advertisement had read. It was this last part that had caught his father's eye.

So here they were, with just a year before the excavators moved in; a year to endure as best he could, before the next move. As he stood on the path beside the gate, he could imagine the crunching sound of a giant excavator, moving steel track on gravel, to demolish the front wall. But somehow the smells, the overall quiet, only interrupted by the occasional rattle of a cricket, or the piping of swallows high in the air above him, made everything seem so permanent. How could they knock it all down? The old cherry tree on the front lawn must have seen many summers and now stood tall and full, spreading its arms in defiance.

"Hello!"

Tim spun round. Behind him on the road stood a girl.

"Do you live here now?" It was a challenge more than a question. Her sharp eyes held on to him, and suddenly he realised that he had been staring at her in bewildered silence.

"Yes. I live here with my dad," he added attempting to cover up his embarrassment, then wished instantly that he had not, because now he knew would come the

inevitable question.

"Where's your mum?" Again the challenge and the searching eyes.

"My Mum's been gone a long time. It's just Dad and me now." He could feel the heat rise around his eyes. How Mum would have loved this little cottage, so close to the shops yet able to boast being in the country. She had always wanted to live in the country, but in some ways was frightened of leaving the security of family and friends. After it happened Dad just had to get away. That very security was killing him.

"Where do you live?" he asked to change the subject.

She pointed to a terrace of cottages near the church.

"I live there with my mum." She was smiling at him as if she found something funny in the conversation.

"What's your name?"

"Timothy."

"Mine's Jo. It's Joanne really but everyone calls me Jo, 'cept Aunt Rhyanon. She's Welsh you know, and she says 'Young ladies should be called young ladies' names.'" Jo gave a rather convincing imitation of a Welsh accent. "And when she says Joanne, she holds on to the last bit too long and makes it sound like 'Joanna'."

Tim could not help laughing at this funny little girl who seemed to be so much at home leaning on the gatepost.

"There's me mum... see you," and she was gone. Tim was alone again with only his thoughts for company.

The evening sun exploded low in the western sky

Whispers on the Wasteland

sending an orange glow to caress the cottage and the old cherry tree. Tim felt the change that he could see, and sensed, with a shudder, a strange feeling of being part of something. This was his house, at least for the moment; it was his tree and the light that touched them both was surrounding him and drawing him in.