

LETTIE. Well, let's get it off before it starts / to stink.

BOY. / What do you mean the farm pushed her?

LETTIE. Nothing's allowed on this land without The Farm's say so.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. It's as bored of Fleas as I am. Oh, that reminds me, your mother said you're to get into the top field and fix that stile.

LETTIE. Again!?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Well, they like scratching their heads on it, don't they.

BOY. The Fleas?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Cows, love.

(GINNIE arrives with a pile of medieval clothes.)

GINNIE. Right, you. Dry clothes here. And your Dad's on his way over.

BOY. My Dad?

LETTIE. Mum, did you call him!?

GINNIE. Parents shouldn't ought to wonder where their children are.

LETTIE. Gran, tell her!

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. "Gran" nothing. She did what she thought best. He's here.

(Car lights swing by the window.)

BOY. He'll be angry, he'll try to bring me back -

LETTIE. We can't let him take the boy!

GINNIE. Then start making things right. I'll show him in.

(GINNIE leaves.)

LETTIE. We have to be away, we could be away when he comes in, pop into a parallel universe when he opens the door?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Nah, comfy here. Why don't we turn him into something?

LETTIE. Gran!?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. What? His Dad wouldn't find him and you wouldn't mind, would you?

BOY. Um -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. See? He doesn't mind. Come on, stand up.

LETTIE. There'd be police, journalists, helicopters, rivers being dragged. They might even drag the Ocean and it won't stand for it. But there is always...

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. What are you thinking?

LETTIE. Snip and stitch.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. You're a good girl, I'm not saying you're not, but Snippage? You couldn't do that, not yet. Besides, that Flea's not in the fabric, she's outside it. Can't snip and stitch her any more than you could a Hempstock. You'd have to snip it so precisely and then stitch it back without the seam showing and all of that quicker'n a stoat up a - you mean me, don't you?

LETTIE. You're the best snipper and stitcher there's ever been.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. My eyesight isn't what it was.

(LETTIE fetches a pair of black scissors.)

LETTIE. Remember with Red Rufus?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Red Rufus.

LETTIE. They sang songs about you after that -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. They did.

LETTIE. Sang 'em for years.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Badly.

LETTIE. It doesn't need to be big.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Don't mean it's any easier.

LETTIE. Just so he's happy for him to stay.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Oooof...

(OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK takes the scissors as GINNIE and DAD can be heard approaching from outside.)

(To BOY.) What do we have to cut out for your Dad to be happy about you staying the night then, hey?

BOY. Don't ask me, I have no idea what's going on.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. "Not hungry", "ruined my tie", off out the window and through the wardrobe - Got it.

(OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK begins to snip as DAD enters - ruined tie, no watch - and immediately sees BOY.)

DAD. There you are! What do you think you're doing? / Running out like that -?

BOY. / I'm not coming, after what you did, I wish you were dead!

(OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK holds a patch of the dressing gown. DAD begins to float and drift outside of time, gravity, space! Everything is warping and changing, BOY is held in position under LETTIE's reassuring hand.)

BOY. Is he -?

LETTIE. He's fine.

BOY. Why is he like that? What's happening?

LETTIE. It's alright.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. (Stitching.) Old eyes... old eyes...

(GINNIE enters, unfazed by DAD floating outside time and gravity.)

GINNIE. Tea, then?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Ooof.

LETTIE. Gran, concentrate.

(During the rest of this scene, GINNIE makes the tea as if nothing out of the ordinary is happening.)

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Don't you worry about me, love. Worry about how I'm supposed to finish this stitch.

LETTIE. Right, um... toothbrush! What's your toothbrush look like? Quickly!

BOY. Um, it's - It's green. Really green. Apple-y green.

LETTIE. Anything other than green?

BOY. It's a green toothbrush! Why is everything floating?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Done.

(OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK picks up the scissors - GINNIE has seemingly effortlessly found her way back into the exact same position as she was when DAD froze - and with one last snip, DAD unfreezes.)

DAD. There you... are. Forgot your toothbrush, mate. Thought you'd want it.

(DAD offers the toothbrush (toilet paper wrapped around the top) to BOY. BOY doesn't move.)

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. That, young man, was a very respectable job of snipping and stitching, if I do say so myself.

(OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK holds up a fully intact dressing gown for BOY'S inspection.)

BOY. There's no - where's - what's this then?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. All that's left of your evening, that is.

BOY. You mean the argument at dinner and - and the bath, when he held me under, none of that ever happened?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. For you it did. But only for you. Your choice to forget it or not.

(BOY chuckles the piece of fabric into the fire and it burns.)

BOY. I don't want to be the only oaaAAAAAAGH!

(BOY collapses in howling pain, clutching his gloved hand and screaming.)

LETTIE. What's wrong?

BOY. It's burning - My hand's burning.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Must've been something outside the fabric. Get him calm.

(LETTIE grabs BOY'S head and shoulders to comfort him as GINNIE rushes back in.)

GINNIE. What now!?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. (To GINNIE.) Hand.

GINNIE. Hold still, let us take a look.

(GINNIE removes the boxing glove, the mark is raw, bloody, infected. She lifts the sleeve of the night-shirt and we see that the mark

Course if you want to come home at any point, just if you wake up in the night or something, any more of those bad dreams -

BOY. I'll be fine.

DAD. Good. Good. Take your toothbrush, then.

(BOY takes it gingerly and ducks away from DAD'S attempt to ruffle his hair.)

What time should I pick him up in the morning?

GINNIE. Oh, Lettie'll bring him back to you. We should give them some time to play.

DAD. Right.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Not staying for a brew, then?

DAD. No, thanks, I've got to -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Cheese?

DAD. I should be... should get back.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Hmm...

(A brief and awkward pause.)

DAD. (To BOY.) Have a nice time with your friend. What was your name, sorry?

LETTIE. Lettie.

DAD. Short for Letitia? I was at school with a girl called Letitia. We called her Lettuce.

(Beat.)

GINNIE. I'll get the gate.

DAD. Right. See you tomorrow, mate. (Indicating the glove.) Keep your guard up, hey?

(GINNIE and DAD leave.)

BOY. What just happened?

BOY's hand.), through here (*Arm to chest.*) off between a couple of quarks in your right ventricle and away.

BOY. Through my -?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Your heart, love.

BOY. But you can take it out. You can take the hole out, can't you?

GINNIE. Only one person can do that. Person who made it.

LETTIE. No, Gran can. Can't you?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Only The Flea can take this out. And only by going back the way she came.

LETTIE. Back to The Edges? She's never gonna want to do that.

(*Beat.*)

GINNIE. I've got a stile to fix.

LETTIE. Mum, I said I'd do it -

GINNIE. You've got enough on your plate.

LETTIE. It's not my fault, I didn't know -

GINNIE. Well, you should have done.

LETTIE. That's not fair -

GINNIE. You're not the one gets to complain, he is. Now, you sort this mess out.

(GINNIE *leaves.*)

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. (*To LETTIE.*) As angry with herself as she is with you, love. Now, let's make this thing a bit easier on the eye at least. Come on you, let's strike while the iron's hot, as the soldier said when he entered the laundry. Arm out.

along his arm to his chest has developed an angry infected colour.)

BOY. It's - It's from The Flea, from before, on The Edges -

LETTIE. When you let go of my hand?

BOY. There was a worm inside it, I pulled it out -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. That's how she got here, then.

GINNIE. Lettie Hempstock, how could you not notice?

(GINNIE *fetches some water from the bath in the bucket.*)

LETTIE. But I did, I asked him -

(GINNIE *douses the fire and all of BOY's pain dissipates.*)

GINNIE. How was he to know he could end up with this? This is why we should never have gotten involved.

LETTIE. You said it was OK to take him with me -

GINNIE. Carefully, I said carefully -

LETTIE. I was careful!

GINNIE. Not enough if he's gone and got himself a bloody Wormhole.

(*Beat.*)

BOY. Is that... bad?

GINNIE. That Flea put a hole right through you.

BOY. What!?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Yup. Two birds with one stone. Got away from Lettie's binding and crossed over at the same time. Left it in you too like a tunnel, so's anytime she might need to she could hop back in here (*Prods*

(OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK is poised with a lit candle, a rag and an ancient-looking bottle of stinky stuff.)

BOY. Will it hurt?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Hurt!?! As if.

(OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK runs the rag through the flame and makes to rub it onto BOY'S bruise but he flinches.)

Can you be brave?

(BOY nods.)

(OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK begins her work.)

Now, your mother's right, love. You'll have to think of something. And before they find her too.

BOY. Before who finds her?

LETTIE. Hunger Birds.

(The lights flicker.)

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Varmints, more like.

BOY. Is this like the Flea again? Little pet-names for some kind of crazy death demons? Can you just tell me what these ones actually are, please?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. That can wait 'til the morrow.

BOY. Oh, whaaaaat?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. You need a good night's sleep, ducks. How's that? Not bad for an evening's work, I'd say.

(BOY looks and realizes that there is no sign whatsoever of the damage to his hand or the bruise.)

BOY. Thank you, Old Mrs. Hempstock.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Thank you!

(OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK leaves with her mug of tea as LETTIE puts a mug of warm milk in front of BOY, begins to fetch a pillow and blanket, finds a candle and lights it.)

BOY. Lettie. I'm sorry. I should have told you.

LETTIE. It's OK.

BOY. It's not, I lied and I'm saying sorry for it cos - well, you were fighting the Flea while I just got scared and let go of your hand and got hurt and I didn't want you to know... what I'm like.

LETTIE. That's why you lied?

BOY. I'm not saying it was a good idea -

LETTIE. It wasn't.

BOY. No, I know now, that's why I'm saying it, cos your Mum's wrong, it wasn't your fault.

LETTIE. I brought you along -

BOY. Yeah, but I let go, it was a good idea until - until I lied and I'm sorry.

LETTIE. I said "it's OK" -

BOY. No, but really though, really... I am sorry.

(Beat.)

LETTIE. Lying cos you didn't want me to know what you're like?

BOY. Yeah, weak and - and a weirdo.

LETTIE. Tell me again how you tricked that Flea?

BOY. I just tried to remember a story -

(**BOY** blows out the candle and the room is illuminated by moonlight.)

There wasn't a moon before. And it was raining -

LETTIE. Gran likes the full-moon to shine on this side of the house. She says it reminds her of when she was little but I think it's cos otherwise she trips up the stairs. Sleep tight, now.

(**LETTIE** pulls on her coat and heads out into the night.)

(The light from the moon is interrupted by the occasional passing cloud.)

(The clouds grow more and more frequent until the light is flickering, the wind becomes whispers.)

(We glimpse **DAD** in the same room watching **BOY**, the whispers become last rites in **DAD**'s voice.)

(For a moment, the dead lodger is stood where **DAD** was and then **DAD** is back.)

(**DAD** tries to get to **BOY** but unseen things pull at him, hold him back, drag him away.)

(**DAD**'s whispered funeral rites build and build in volume until he tries to scream but just spits and coughs black feathers before being dragged away.)

(Suddenly, **BOY** leaps up, it is a bright day and **GINNIE** is sharpening some knives at the sink.)

GINNIE. Morning. Or afternoon, I should say. Fresh clothes on the table there.

LETTIE. To block a highly dangerous being from being able to read your thoughts.

BOY. Yeah.

LETTIE. Whilst you climbed out of your window, into the dark, knowing she'd come after you and no idea any of it'd work... Sound weak to you?

BOY. Well, when you put it like that.

LETTIE. Get some rest.

(**LETTIE** plops a night-cap on him.)

BOY. What are you doing?

LETTIE. No? Not wearing hats to sleep anymore? OK. So you've got warm milk there, candle, chamber pot under the bed.

BOY. What's a chamber pot?

LETTIE. It's for your ones and twos if you don't want to risk trying to find the lavvy. Don't forget to blow out the candle, we've only got one fire extinguisher left and it's the kind that squirts all that bubble-fluff that's really hard to clean -

BOY. Lettie? Will anything ever be like it was before?

LETTIE. Will you be like you were before?

BOY. She's ruined it. Ruined everything.

LETTIE. Well... not everything.

BOY. ...

LETTIE. Now, I'm going to work out how to fix all this. Will you be OK in the dark, on your own?

BOY. I'll be fine.

LETTIE. Sure?

BOY. Sure.

(*Beat.*)

BOY. I have to get back there. Have to stop her and – and help him.

GINNIE. Best put some clothes / on first.

BOY. Yeah.

(*BOY goes behind a screen to put on the clothes that GINNIE left out whilst she continues to work.*)

GINNIE. You OK back there?

BOY. Yeah, just... how come there aren't any men here?

GINNIE. Men!? Dunno what good a man would be around here. Nothing a man could do on this farm that I can't do twice as fast and five times as well.

BOY. So, Lettie doesn't have a Dad?

GINNIE. Never went in for that sort of thing. How come?

BOY. Cos where did you get these outfits you lot keep putting me in?

(*GINNIE stops what she's doing.*)

GINNIE. A friend. Long time ago.

(*Beat.*)

Why?

(*BOY comes out from behind the screen in a mish-mash of renaissance farmer-chic and 80's pumps.*)

BOY. Cos I look like Rumpelstiltskin at a disco.

(*They might be about to laugh together but LETTIE crashes in with an over-flowing rucksack.*)

BOY. Thanks.

GINNIE. Sleep well?

BOY. ...

GINNIE. Mind was whirring away, I expect. Imagination like yours...

BOY. Only a dream.

GINNIE. There's no "only" about it. Nightmares are frightening. Even at my age.

BOY. At least you wake up from them. She's still there, that Flea. And last night, I saw her, she was making my Dad kiss her and... why would she do that? Was it so I'd see?

GINNIE. Are you going to talk to your father about it?

BOY. Won't it have been snipped and stitched with the rest?

GINNIE. Nope. Can't snip and stitch her.

BOY. So it happened, she really did do that to him –

GINNIE. Well, might your Dad have wanted to kiss her?

BOY. No. She controls people.

GINNIE. How's she doing that?

BOY. She gave my sister money and food and now she thinks that Flea is *literally* her best friend.

GINNIE. So they're not being forced, just...?

BOY. Just offered stuff and they're taking it.

GINNIE. So, your sister chose to eat the food and take the money –?

BOY. And I didn't. That's what I mean, she's controlling people by giving them stuff they want.

GINNIE. So what do you think she's giving your Dad? What is it that he wants?

LETTIE. Well, if you think I've been off having fun, I wasn't. No fun at all.

BOY. Didn't you sleep?

LETTIE. No time, had to get hold of these, didn't I?

(As she speaks, LETTIE retrieves a pair of gloves, some goggles and a pair of tongs from the kitchen.)

And they are not easy to get hold of specially when you've got to pluck up mandrakes and you've forgotten your ear defenders, still got a squeal in this ear. Traded the mandrakes for Shadow Bottles but then it turns out the only ones I could get had the shadows dissolved in vinegar - talk about stuck in the past! And all that's just so's I could get into The Bazaar in the first place.

BOY. Great, so are the things in your bag gonna get rid of The Flea?

LETTIE. Sort of, yeah.

BOY. Brilliant. Let's go.

GINNIE. No. Lettie, it's not safe.

LETTIE. His home's not safe.

GINNIE. That's as may be, but I said "no".

LETTIE. Mum, I'm making this right -

GINNIE. Just let me think it through.

LETTIE. I already have. Trust me.

GINNIE. Well, he doesn't have to - You don't *have* to go with her.

BOY. I'm not going with her. She's coming with me.

(BOY pulls his boxing glove over (what was) his bad hand and leads the way towards his house.)

LETTIE. *(Stopping.)* Hang on.

BOY. But we're nowhere near my house yet.

LETTIE. First one should go here.

(LETTIE puts the bag down, pulls on a protective glove, and reaches inside.)

BOY. What are these things? What are they gonna do?

(LETTIE carefully pulls a broken toy car (Mini) from the bag and delicately positions it.)

LETTIE. Help.

BOY. How is *that* supposed to help!?

LETTIE. Isn't it obvious?

BOY. No! How's a broken toy supposed to scare that massive monster?

(LETTIE stops, opens the bag, and retrieves a broken doll's head to lay in position.)

LETTIE. What's a monster?

BOY. Don't you -? A monster's something everyone's scared of.

LETTIE. So what are monsters scared of?

BOY. No, they're not scared of anything, that's the point.

LETTIE. That Flea is scared. Terrified, probably. Far as she's concerned, we're trying to kick her out of her lovely new home, we're the monsters.

(Beat.)

BOY. Wait, just explain properly.

LETTIE. These... they're like... bait.

BOY. Bait for what?

(**LETTIE** carefully places a battered *My Little Pony* down.)

Hunger Birds! You're bringing the Hunger Birds!

LETTIE. Shh!

BOY. Are you...? You're scared of them, aren't you?

LETTIE. Everyone is. But they're the only things that can make her leave.

(**LETTIE** gives **BOY** the bag, retrieving and positioning a slightly melted toy lion.)

BOY. (*Looking at the sky.*) What actually are Hunger Birds?

LETTIE. They are what they do. And all they do is... eat. And anything they eat never has or ever will be, won't be spoken of or remembered, just gone. They're the reason there aren't any Fleas in this world, because anything out of place, the Hunger Birds find it and eat it.

(**LETTIE** retrieves a care-worn action figure and places it.)

BOY. And these things are from a different world. So you're leaving them like a trail of breadcrumbs leading all the way to The Flea! Brilliant, Lettie! Amazing! Why was your Mum so worried, this is a great plan!

LETTIE. Cos they'll want to eat *everything* that's out of place. Including... (*Indicates BOY's chest.*)

BOY. The wormhole? They can have it.

LETTIE. They're not the cleanest of eaters though -

BOY. You mean they'd eat my heart?

LETTIE. Not if she goes through it first.

BOY. What!?

LETTIE. Yeah, she has to go through the wormhole to take it out - Sorry, was that not clear?

BOY. No, wasn't, no, not clear -

LETTIE. She can't hurt you. Not while you're holding my hand.

BOY. I won't let go this time.

LETTIE. Well... that's the thing. She *has* to go through you. So when *they* get here -

BOY. I have to let go of your hand.

LETTIE. Give that man a biscuit!

(**LETTIE** takes off one of her gloves and, with her bare hand, places a muddled Rubick's Cube in position - her touch changes the quality of the toys. They become magical. **LETTIE** watches the sky.)

BOY. You don't want her to get away, do you?

LETTIE. Yeah, that's the whole point -

BOY. After everything she's done to me, my Dad?

LETTIE. Would you rather they killed her? I don't think that's what you really want. Is it?

(*One by one, the toys begin to disappear. BOY and LETTIE notice only the last couple and rush to the door. Hold hands. Then burst through it and into...*)

(*...a warped version of the bedroom. URSULA lying on BOY's bed in her 'frilly' underwear, lipstick smudged, mascara running.*)

You have to go now.

URSULA. Just as I was wondering how I could lure you back, here you are!

LETTIE. Last chance to leave.

URSULA. "Leave"? Your people left me stuck on The Edges for generations of stars - And now I have a home. With pets. I'm not leaving.

LETTIE. Did you hear when I said "last" and then "chance"?

URSULA. I am not afraid of you, little girl.

LETTIE. Not asking you to be.

URSULA. You don't like it when I call you that, do you? Little girl. Is it because that's all you'll ever be? How you must yearn for something more.

LETTIE. We're here to help you -

URSULA. You'd barely set foot outside your own land before you met my boy. And why is that, I wonder? When did this little performance of bravery begin? It can't be for my benefit -

LETTIE. I will you find somewhere else, I promise.

URSULA. Why would I leave? There's nothing like me in this entire world, I've checked. I'm going to stay here and make everyone wonderfully happy. Everyone except you.

LETTIE. I'm gonna let go of his hand and that's when you leave.

URSULA. You found the wormhole. How clever? Who cares? I don't need it. I'm staying. I'm staying to turn you inside out, little girl. So your heart and brains are all on the outside to be gawped at and prodded while your skin's on the inside. Your eyes will stare forever into the darkness inside yourself.

(URSULA attempts to attack LETTIE.)

LETTIE. If you leave now, I will help you.

URSULA. How could you ever help me!?

(URSULA attempts to attack BOY.)

LETTIE. I'm giving you a chance.

URSULA. ENOUGH!

(URSULA attacks LETTIE and BOY.)

BOY. No! No, there's nothing like you here because they eat all the monsters that cross over and you're next!

URSULA. What's he talking about?

BOY. They'll eat you! They're gonna eat you and you'll be gone! Forever!

(URSULA finally becomes aware of the drone.)

URSULA. You brought them here!?! How could you!?

LETTIE. Just go and take your Wormhole with you -

URSULA. Yes, anything, YES!

LETTIE. Let go.

BOY. No. My family is me, my Dad, my sister, / not you.

URSULA. Please - PLEASE!

BOY. You made him do that / to me!

URSULA. / I didn't make him do anything! Please, let me go!

(URSULA wails in fear and frustration, scrambling around the room.)

LETTIE. Don't do this, this isn't who you are, is it? Let go.

(Finally, BOY lets go of LETTIE, with relief
URSULA rushes towards BOY-.)

BOY. Go, then! And never, ever -

(- but is intercepted and ripped to pieces...)

(...and then the drone returns. LETTIE grabs BOY and runs outside.)

LETTIE. Safe places, we need a safe place.

BOY. They killed her.

LETTIE. And now they want you. Is there anywhere safe out here?

BOY. Um, the - There's The Lab - but it's just a shed, the door doesn't lock...

LETTIE. Safe for you, that's all we need -

BOY. Fairy Ring. Here.

LETTIE. Perfect! This is perfect.

(BOY leads LETTIE by the hand but suddenly something swoops, narrowly missing BOY.)

(Another whoosh in front of them stops BOY in his tracks, LETTIE bumps into him and he steps forwards - another whoosh - but BOY steps back just in time.)

(A single, black feather drifts down from above.)

BOY. Lettie, you can - You can snip and stitch all this, can't you? We can go back and - and re-do -

LETTIE. She wasn't in the fabric.

BOY. Stupid! I didn't mean for that to happen. I just wanted her to know how it feels - Just for a moment -

LETTIE. It's done now.

BOY. You hate me now, don't you?

LETTIE. No. I just need you to wait here.

BOY. Wait!? What do you mean?

LETTIE. Until I come back.

BOY. No, no -

LETTIE. We need The Ocean.

BOY. / No no no no no -

LETTIE. / I will come back.

BOY. No you're just leaving cos you've seen / what I'm really like -

LETTIE. / Trust me. I will come back.

BOY. But they're after me now, they're coming for the Wormhole.

LETTIE. They can't get into this circle so they're going to do anything they can to get you out of it. Whatever you see, whatever you hear, do not leave this circle, OK?

BOY. But it's not a real thing, it's just something me and Mum used to say.

LETTIE. It is what it is.

(LETTIE squeezes BOY's hand and silently, BOY promises to stay put just as LETTIE silently then LETTIE rushes out and away into the gathering dark.)

(The sun is setting. Away, in BOY's house, a telephone begins to ring. And ring.)

BOY. Aslan was... looking up at the sky, neither angry nor afraid... Then, just before the white witch gave the blow, she... No. Um... curiouser and curiouser and down the rabbit-hole and off with your... head.

(BOY pulls on the boring glove, trying to look brave.)

BOY. Will you just do it? Will you just be my sister and bring a book, please?

SIS. You can be so weird sometimes.

(A pause develops as SIS starts nonchalantly kicking things at random, aimlessly "hanging about".)

BOY. Why are you still here?

SIS. Haven't got anyone to play with. Can't even find Ursula. She's not in her room or Dad's room or the loo-lahs or the kitchen -

BOY. She was ripped to shreds by alien pterodactyl-monsters and honestly I think you're either one of them wearing my sister's skin as a disguise or you're being controlled by them.

SIS. What?

BOY. I don't know where she is.

SIS. Can you just come back to the house with me, please?

BOY. Why?

SIS. *(Quiet.)* Scared.

BOY. What?

SIS. Bit scared.

BOY. What of?

(A short pause develops.)

SIS. What if something's happened to Dad?

BOY. ...

SIS. What if he never comes back?

BOY. ...

SIS. That'll happen one day, have you thought about that?

(The phone stops ringing. Has someone answered it? Have the Hunger Birds changed tack?)

Peter! Peter was not like other boys but he was afraid. Standing on the rock, saying "To die will be..."

(BOY realises that someone somewhere is laughing at him. It's URSULA's infectious giggle.)

...an awfully big..."

SIS. What are you doing?

BOY. ...

SIS. Were you talking to yourself?

BOY. No.

SIS. Who are you supposed to be? Hobo Baggins?

BOY. ...

SIS. I am so bored!! Can you just chase me around or something?

BOY. No.

SIS. Why?

BOY. I have to stay here.

SIS. How long for?

(BOY shrugs.)

But you're not even reading or anything, you're just standing about.

BOY. Bring me one of my books, then.

SIS. Get it yourself.

BOY. I can't. Please?

SIS. What's it worth?

BOY. ...

SIS. Why aren't you saying anything? You're scaring me, stop it.

BOY. You're not even scared when the bedroom door's closed.

SIS. Cos you're there.

(This moves BOY a bit but then...)

BOY. You would never say that.

SIS. What?

BOY. My sister would never say that.

SIS. ...

BOY. Go away! GO!

(SIS leaves, quietly.)

(Something skitters around the edge of the circle behind BOY. He checks where his feet are, terrified that he might have strayed outside the circle. Mosquitoes and deep, twilight dusk.)

(Friendly, inviting electric lights come on in the house. Bats or Hunger Birds flying above.)

LETTIE. Sorry that took me so long, but Gran's fixed it.

BOY. ...?!

LETTIE. Yeah, everything's taken care of. Come on.

(BOY doesn't move.)

Come on, silly. I told you. They've gone.

BOY. ...

LETTIE. What do you want, proof? You let go of my hand and that's how she got her wormhole into your heart and why you'll live the rest of your life with a little shard of nothing inside you. Right? Happy now? Come on, Gran's been working on a crumble and...

(BOY stands and makes towards LETTIE but stops.)

What is it?

BOY. ...

LETTIE. Is this how we're gonna get old? Me visiting you in your garden? Come on.

BOY. If you're really Lettie Hempstock, can you come here?

LETTIE. For serious?

BOY. ...yeah.

LETTIE. *(Upset.)* Don't you know your best friend?

BOY. Sorry, but... you're not though, are you?

(LETTIE laughs a bit as if this is silly.)

(But then the laugh turns into a cry.)

(And then she yells with frustration, pain and fury at BOY.)

(BOY holds his ground as LETTIE composes herself.)

(LETTIE leaves.)

(BOY is suddenly illuminated by a flashlight that is growing nearer as DAD carries it:)

DAD. What are you doing out here?

BOY. I ... I'm just out here.

DAD. Yeah. Your sister said. Well, come on, back to the house. Dinner's on the table.

BOY. No.

DAD. Don't be silly, come on.

BOY. I'm not being silly. I'm staying here.

DAD. Want me to give you a piggy-back or something? Come on, mate.

BOY. What was the nickname you used to have for me?

DAD. I'm not doing this now -

BOY. You had a nickname for me, you used it all the time -

DAD. Not me.

BOY. No, you and Mum, did. What was it?

DAD. I'm not doing this.

BOY. You don't know it.

(*Beat.*)

DAD. Alright... this is about me finding another lodger, isn't it?

BOY. No -

DAD. I was fixing it, I fixed it.

BOY. No -

DAD. Just come inside, we'll stay up, watch some telly, hey?

BOY. No, no -

DAD. What do you mean "no"?

BOY. I'm asking about the nickname.

(*Beat.*)

DAD. I know I wasn't the one you wanted. I'm sorry you got me instead of her. You deserved her. But you can

see I'm trying, right? This is me really, really trying, mate. Can you see that?

BOY. ...you're not you.

DAD. What?

BOY. You'd keep pretending you know what you're doing, pretending you're a grown up.

(*Beat.*)

DAD. I just want you to come in, mate. It's dark, it's getting cold -

BOY. Ursula's gone.

DAD. What? What do you mean she's gone? What do you mean?

BOY. I mean she's gone and she's never coming back. Not ever.

DAD. What did you do?

BOY. Made her go.

DAD. What did you do?

(*When BOY does not respond, DAD shines his torch in BOY's face.*)

I don't believe this. The one good thing / to happen to us in -

BOY. / She was controlling you and you didn't / even notice -

DAD. Controlling me?

BOY. That's what Fleas do, they lie / and manipulate -

DAD. / Will you stop telling stories -

BOY. You talked to her about Mum, you never talk about Mum - Didn't even let us come to the hospital / or see her -

DAD. / I'm asking you a question!

BOY. You're not! You never ask me anything, / not really -

DAD. / WHAT DID YOU DO?

BOY. I don't like it when you shout / at me.

DAD. / I don't like that you've become... this!

(BOY really tries not to cry but can't help it.)

You know what my Dad would have done if I'd -

BOY. And this is better / is it?

DAD. / YES!

(BOY takes off his boxing glove and tosses it at DAD's feet.)

BOY. Does it feel good? Making me cry?

(DAD aims the torch at the boxing glove.)

DAD. It was book-moth. Your nickname. Book-moth.

(DAD hands the torch across the ring to BOY, picks up the boxing glove and then leaves.)

(All the lights in the house go out. Mist, smoke or carbon monoxide gathers.)

(BOY shines the torchlight into the darkness, but can't find anyone in its light. He hears the voices of the HUNGER BIRDS - a myriad of remembered voices - URSULA, DAD, SIS...)

HUNGER BIRDS. You are hungry

You are tired

Your family hates you

You have no friends

Lettie Hempstock is never coming back

Step outside the circle and we will erase your pain forever

You have a hole inside your heart

A void in your core

There can never be a time when you feel complete

You will always want for something you cannot have, something you cannot even properly imagine, the lack of which will spoil your sleep and each of your days until you close your eyes for the final time and even then you will wail and curse at a life ill-lived

BOY. P'raps it'll be like that. P'raps it won't. I don't care! I'm waiting here for Lettie Hempstock. And if I die waiting then that's still a better way to go than giving you the satisfaction!!

(Everything suddenly seems calmer and quieter.)

(BOY moves the beam of his flashlight around, catches a figure: the DEAD LODGER.)

...you're... you're dead. You're gone, I'm not scared of someone who's -

(DEAD LODGER suddenly runs towards BOY - he screams and drops the torch and scabbles for it, desperately, shining it wildly around.)

Where is he? WHERE IS HE!?

(BOY picks out LETTIE with the torch, she's struggling with a heavy bucket full of water.)

LETTIE. Well, that took me longer than expected, didn't it? Didn't want to cooperate neither. Took me and Gran to do it in the end. I say me and Gran, really Gran did all the heavy lifting. It wasn't going to argue with her.

Wasn't gonna help neither. Gave Gran such a struggle that she's gone for a lie-down. Still, done now. Hullo.

(LETTIE indicates the bucket she has been struggling with and the glowing water within it.)

Couldn't get you to The Ocean, so we brought The Ocean to you.

BOY. Lettie?

LETTIE. Yep? Oh. Silly me.

(LETTIE walks confidently towards BOY - BOY is frightened to begin with but she walks straight into the fairy ring to hug BOY deeply. The first real hug of our play, deeply needed, full of love and relief.)

You didn't leave the circle. Well done. That's quality, that is. Hey?

(BOY cries a bit into LETTIE's shoulder.)

Now, we're gonna get you away from here and safe. It's the best I can do for now but when Gran wakes up, she'll think of something. OK?

BOY. OK.

LETTIE. Good. Now, in you get.

BOY. ...in?

LETTIE. How else we gonna get you back to the farm with them things about?

BOY. I'm hungry, Lettie. And I don't like this.

LETTIE. Mum's made dinner. Now, in you get.

BOY. Oh, sure, just step into this rip in Forever that you've stuffed into a bucket -

LETTIE. Oh, get on with it, you big wallop.

(BOY, almost angrily, takes off his shoes and places one foot into the bucket.)

(It's cold and he scowls at LETTIE who giggles a little and offers a hand.)

(BOY takes LETTIE's hand, lifts his other foot and...)

BOY. If this is you messing, Lettie Hempstock, then -

(...sinks, suddenly, into the bucket.)

(Underwater, BOY struggles to hold his breath, thrashes ineffectually.)

(But then LETTIE swims to BOY.)

LETTIE. Breathe. Just breathe.

(BOY breathes. The space begins to fill with stars and magic, the thudding pulse of waves crashing as heard from underwater. Or might it be stars forming and exploding?)

(LETTIE helps BOY experiment and play, until BOY gains enough confidence to delight in The Ocean. Performing amazing acrobatics, seeing incredible things, learning everything there is to learn before.)

I'm really sorry.

(LETTIE pulls BOY's out of The Ocean and back to...)

(...reality beside the Ocean on Hempstock Farm. BOY is holding LETTIE's hand, elated.)

BOY. AAAGHHAHA!! It's so much more than you said! It's like - It's like everything that people know must be out there but nobody can - Like dark matter! Like - cos in there - In there it just made sense, everything spoke to everything, no more questions just answers answers answers - Every idea and story and - and - You! I even saw you! What you look like on the inside and you were amazing and free and let's just get back in there -?

LETTIE. (*Stopping him.*) Too long in there would pull you to pieces.

BOY. Yeah, but I think I'm actually OK with that -

LETTIE. Stop!

BOY. This, all of this, Lettie, it's just the thin layer of icing on a birthday cake made of worms and grubs and - and nightmares - cos now I know that underneath it all is... underneath is...

LETTIE. You have to forget. Boring, having all the answers anyway.

BOY. For you maybe -

LETTIE. No. If you lived knowing all of that then there'd be no more stories, inventions, nothing left to discover -

BOY. Is that what it's like for you?

LETTIE. Not when I'm out here.

BOY. Why do you ever come out here?

LETTIE. Cos I want to play.

BOY. Play what?

LETTIE. This. Have to give all of that up if you want to muck about here. Only I can't. Not properly.

BOY. Can't not know amazing magic - Why would you ever want to give up being magical and amazing?

LETTIE. To live. The way you do.

GINNIE. Lettie Hempstock! Bringing them things to this farm!?

(**GINNIE tucks BOY into a warm coat (without his say so). The drone of the HUNGER BIRDS returns.)**

LETTIE. He'll be safe here 'til Gran wakes up.

GINNIE. She could sleep a day or a decade - Did she tell you no one knows how to wake her up?

LETTIE. Mum, I'm trying to make it right -

GINNIE. That's what you said when you made things worse.

LETTIE. I'm just - I'm buying us time, OK?

GINNIE. For what?

LETTIE. I don't know, / to - to -

GINNIE. / Don't know is right. How could we ever have been any good for him?

LETTIE. I don't - I just wanted -

GINNIE. *You just wanted.* Poor boy's got a hole in his heart that he'll never be rid of, cos *you just wanted.*

LETTIE. (*Breaking.*) I'm sorry.

BOY. No, no - She's brilliant, Lettie's brilliant -

GINNIE. When they get to us, you stay inside the bounds.

BOY. You're not listening, she's given me more / than whatever's happened to my heart.

GINNIE. / Those things are never gonna leave you alone, understand?

BOY. It's worth it, even if I die now /

LETTIE. / You won't die - /

BOY. / then it's been worth it to get to know Lettie and all of you cos you've ever been trying to help - You can't be like this to her because we're all just trying, aren't we? We're all just -

/ then it's been worth it to get to know Lettie and all of you cos you've ever been trying to help - You can't be like this to her because we're all just trying, aren't we? We're all just -

(Out of nowhere, A HUNGER BIRD crashes into the barrier.)

(Another HUNGER BIRD tests the barrier.)

(More HUNGER BIRD barrier tests.)

LETTIE. You're safe here.

GINNIE. There's no way they'll ever get onto this farm and THEY KNOW IT!

(BOY reaches toward the barrier with his hand, the HUNGER BIRDS snatch for it.)

He's on our land, he's under our protection.

LETTIE. *(Stamping.)* GERROFF WITH YA!

(The HUNGER BIRDS fly off.)

(One of them begins to attack BOY's world, ripping and tearing at something.)

(Then all the HUNGER BIRDS follow suit, rapidly attacking, gobbling and swallowing all they can.)

(But then they stop and turn to face BOY: a challenge.)

BOY. What are they doing?

LETTIE. Pay 'em no mind, they're just trying to get you to leave.

(Furious, the HUNGER BIRDS redouble their efforts to erase BOY's world.)

BOY. But everything out there - They're destroying it!

LETTIE. Mum, stop them!

GINNIE. I don't know how.

BOY. The fairy ring, my house, school, library, London, the museums, my family - That's my world!

(BOY pulls away from LETTIE and towards the HUNGER BIRDS.)

LETTIE. Don't you dare!

BOY. Lettie, I'm sorry.

(BOY yanks his hand free of LETTIE's and runs across the boundary.)

GINNIE. Get back - NO!

(The HUNGER BIRDS scatter for a moment but then attack - eating the heart from his chest.)

(We hear the sounds of fabric being roughly torn or cut.)

(With immense effort, LETTIE rearranges reality, placing herself between BOY and the deadly attack.)

BOY. Lettie, I'm -

LETTIE. Don't be.

GINNIE. Get back - NO!

(The HUNGER BIRDS smother LETTIE, ripping and tearing at her as they try to get to BOY.)

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. (*Off - epic*) This is unacceptable!

(*Suddenly, everything stops.*)

(*The HUNGER BIRDS cower and edge away from LETTIE and BOY as OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK arrives.*)

(*GINNIE runs to LETTIE as the HUNGER BIRDS whimper.*)

Scavengers, eaters of offal - I'll bind you in the heart of a dark star, shall I? Have you feel your pain in a place where every fragment of a moment lasts a thousand years?

(*The HUNGER BIRDS pathetic now, shiver and quake.*)

Get you gone. I'll deal with you in my own time and in my own way.

(*The HUNGER BIRDS scatter and disappear. GINNIE is cradling LETTIE's body, rocking.*)

GINNIE. Overstepped the bounds! Could have eaten this entire world, it's only a world, a grain of sand in a desert - But Lettie, she's a Hempstock! My little one... Mum, they hurt her.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. This is unacceptable!

(*Suddenly, everything stops.*)

(*The HUNGER BIRDS cower and edge away from LETTIE and BOY as OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK arrives.*)

I know they did, love.

(*GINNIE lets herself sob. But then her crying becomes reminiscent of a song.*)

(*She lifts LETTIE and wades with her out into The Ocean. At the climax of her song, a huge wave washes over GINNIE and LETTIE and when it passes, LETTIE is gone. GINNIE is holding no one.*)

BOY. Is she -? She can't be -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. She's gone home. It's where we came from, isn't it?

BOY. You mean she's dead.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Dead? As if. As if an Hempstock would ever do anything so common as die. No, she's changed is all. As changed as anything can be whilst still being.

BOY. No, that's - that's just the kind of thing adults say, it's not true -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Truer than any hard fact in this universe. She asked you once, 'What makes you who you are?' What do you think she was, hey? That body? Matter? Particles? She's changed and she'll go on changing same as all energy changes always - Oh, she'll be back. Whether you're here to see it or not is a different story.

BOY. Can I wait for her? I'll wait for her.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. You'd be waiting an eternity.

BOY. I can do that, I'll stay and work and fix things, lift stuff -

GINNIE. No.

BOY. They were meant to get me, not her. I'm the one with the hole in my heart.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. They'd never dare come back for you, not now, not ever.

BOY. But I should be the one who's gone, not her, you deserve her.

GINNIE. Let's get you home.

BOY. I'm so sorry.

GINNIE. Let's make all of this a bit easier, shall we?

BOY. Easier? What do you -?

(*Suddenly we are in BOY's family kitchen.*
OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK remains sitting on the bench, observing.)

GINNIE. (*Suddenly jovial.*) Here he is! Safe and sound.

(**DAD** - dressed for work / a funeral - is caught between laying the breakfast things out and tying his tie. **SIS** is trying to play [**MONEY, MONEY, MONEY**] by Abba on the piano but failing in another room.)

DAD. Oh, you didn't have to bring him back, I could've picked him up.

GINNIE. No problem.

DAD. What do you say, mate?

BOY. (*Automatically.*) Thank you for having me.

DAD. Was he good?

GINNIE. He's been very brave, losing a friend like this.

DAD. Ah, yeah, the going away party. Where's Letitia's off to then? Somewhere nice?

GINNIE. Australia.

DAD. Australia! Alright for some. (*Shouting.*) Come on! Toast's ready!

GINNIE. We'll miss having this little one over. First proper friend our Lettie ever had.

DAD. That's great. Go on then, mate, give that fancy dress stuff back, school shirt's on the chair. (*Shouting.*) Before your bus gets here, please! (*To GINNIE.*) Sorry, mad house!

(**BOY** pulls on his school shirt and hands **GINNIE** the shirt he has been wearing.)

BOY. Thanks, Mrs. Hempstock.

GINNIE. Bye, then.

(**GINNIE** backs away to watch with **OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK** from afar.)

DAD. Yep, cheers. Where does that bloody tie get to, it's like it's got legs. (*Shouting.*) WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP THERE, IT'LL BE HERE ANY MINUTE!

SIS. (*Off.*) WHY ALL THE SHOUTING?!

DAD. Nice time then, mate? Fun messing about around that duckpond?

BOY. Yeah. Fun duckpond.

DAD. Hey, I was thinking, to make up for your birthday, could go to London on Saturday? Museum or something?

BOY. ...

DAD. Just if you want to.

(**SIS** enters, ready for school.)

SIS. Why does it smell like the house is on fire?

DAD. GAH! (*Saving the toast.*) Lovely! Love toast when it's well done. Just scrape some of that -

SIS. Did he tell you Ursula's gone?

BOY. Um -

SIS. Yeah, I'm not actually ready to talk about it, so...

DAD. Well, now that school's back on, / we don't really -

SIS. / School's not back on.

DAD. Yeah, it is.

SIS. Er, no. It's not. Not properly. It's a half-day, Dad! They sent letters, I put them on the fridge. We're not allowed to stay at school after lunch -

DAD. Oh, no, I don't believe this -

BOY. I can help.

SIS. What?

DAD. You sure? It wouldn't be for long -

BOY. Yeah, we could go to the shed, do some experiments?

SIS. In the Lab?

BOY. Yeah, I've got some magnesium left over -

DAD. Now, you remember what happened last time.

SIS. (*Touching her eyebrows.*) They grew back.

(*The sound of a bus arriving outside.*)

DAD. Right take your toast, go, go, go!

SIS. (*Leaving.*) BYE DAD!

DAD. Bye, bye.

(*BOY makes to leave but stops to watch DAD look at himself in the mirror.*)

Looking goo-

(*DAD's joke is interrupted by BOY suddenly hugging him, tightly.*)

What's this, hey?

(*DAD's clearly a little awkward about this prolonged hug. But then he relaxes into it.*)

Little book-moth.

(*The sound of the horn as the bus grows impatient, DAD and BOY begin to turn together.*)

(*They spin together through time and space as the kitchen dissolves and the sound and noise of every major event in BOY's life resolves into static and then into...*)

EPILOGUE

(... MAN, older now (*played by the same actor portraying DAD*), is left holding no one, breathless and dizzy beside the pond in Sussex, today-ish. OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK watches him recover.)

MAN. Is it true?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Probably. More or less. See, remembering is no different from imagining. Not really. So memories change along with the people remembering 'em and people... People roil and shift as much as oceans. No such thing as a true memory.

MAN. But I didn't know, I only came here on a kind of impulse -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Told you.

GINNIE. (*Appearing.*) You did.

(GINNIE sits on the bench beside MAN.)

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Every time, I said.

MAN. "Every time"?

GINNIE. Every time, you say 'a kind of impulse'.

MAN. But I haven't been here since -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. First time you came back, you were twenty-four. Had two young children to think of and all that future ahead of you. All at sea, you were.

GINNIE. Thirty next time.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Thirty and your girls were old enough to understand words like 'divorce'. You came here instead of going home, avoiding having the talk with 'em. Fed you a good meal then.

GINNIE. Shepherd's / pie.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. / Shepherd's pie. You told us about the class you were teaching. The stories you told your pupils in their science lessons, all about black holes, dark matter... electrons. Not what you thought you'd be doing, not what you'd hoped at some point, but so special you will never know.

MAN. She died for a no-one, a nobody -

GINNIE. For her friend. Her best friend.

MAN. But she must've thought I'd become someone more important or better -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. She did what she did for you. So's you could live. Now when you're lost, you've her story of when you were saved.

MAN. But I'd forgotten.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Details maybe. You just need a feeling, something in your bones, don't need details.

GINNIE. Specially not when they involve having your heart torn out by Hunger Birds.

MAN. But that didn't happen.

GINNIE. Cos Lettie snipped and stitched it.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. With neither scissors nor thread. Never, in all time, have I seen the like.

GINNIE. Brilliant, she was.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. As new-born stars. 'Spect she's happy to see you're growing a new heart anyway. Or the hole's healing, depending on how you remember it.

MAN. Has she been here all along? Watching?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. In a manner of speaking.

MAN. Can I speak with her?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. "To", maybe, not "with".

MAN. Let her look at me, then. I want to know if I've passed or not.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. You don't pass or fail at being a person, love.

(*Beat.*)

Now, let's make all this a little easier, shall we?

MAN. No, no, I want to remember, I should remember all of this -

GINNIE. Well, now that's not what she'd want, is it? Ready?

MAN. Wait, wait. Will I ever come back here?

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Not for you to know, ducks.

(*MAN goes to the pond's edge.*)

MAN. Lettie... thank you for saving me.

(*GINNIE and everything magical about this place disappears.*)

(*MAN is a bit embarrassed to find himself here. Discovers he is holding a cup of tea. Sips it, it's hot.*)

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Got some scones fresh out of the oven, go well with that.

MAN. Yeah, no, actually I should be -

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Cheese?

MAN. No, thanks.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Can't give it away.

MAN. It's just I'm supposed to be at the thing with the sandwiches, tea... They'll want me to say things, I think.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. You just speak from that broken heart of yours and you'll be fine.

MAN. P'raps, yeah. P'raps. It's funny, for a moment there I thought there were more you.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. It's just me. It's only ever just me.

MAN. Course. Next time Lettie writes from where was it? America? Australia! Yes, send her my regards. And thank you, Mrs. Hempstock. You've been very kind.

OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK. Nothing kind about it.

(*MAN leaves.*)

(*OLD MRS. HEMPSTOCK lifts her arms as if conjuring something incredible...*)

(*...but then it turns into a yawn.*)

The End