

My
Brother's
Shadow

TOM AVERY

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My
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The text "My Brother's Shadow" is rendered in a black, cursive-style font. The letters are interconnected and integrated with a stylized tree branch design. The branch starts at the top left, curves around the 'M', goes up and right through the 'y', then down and left through the 'B', then up and right through the 'r', then down and left through the 'o', then up and right through the 't', then down and left through the 'h', then up and right through the 'e', then down and left through the 'r', then up and right through the 's', then down and left through the 'S', then up and right through the 'h', then down and left through the 'a', then up and right through the 'd', then down and left through the 'o', and finally up and right through the 'w'. Small, simple leaves are attached to the branches at various points.

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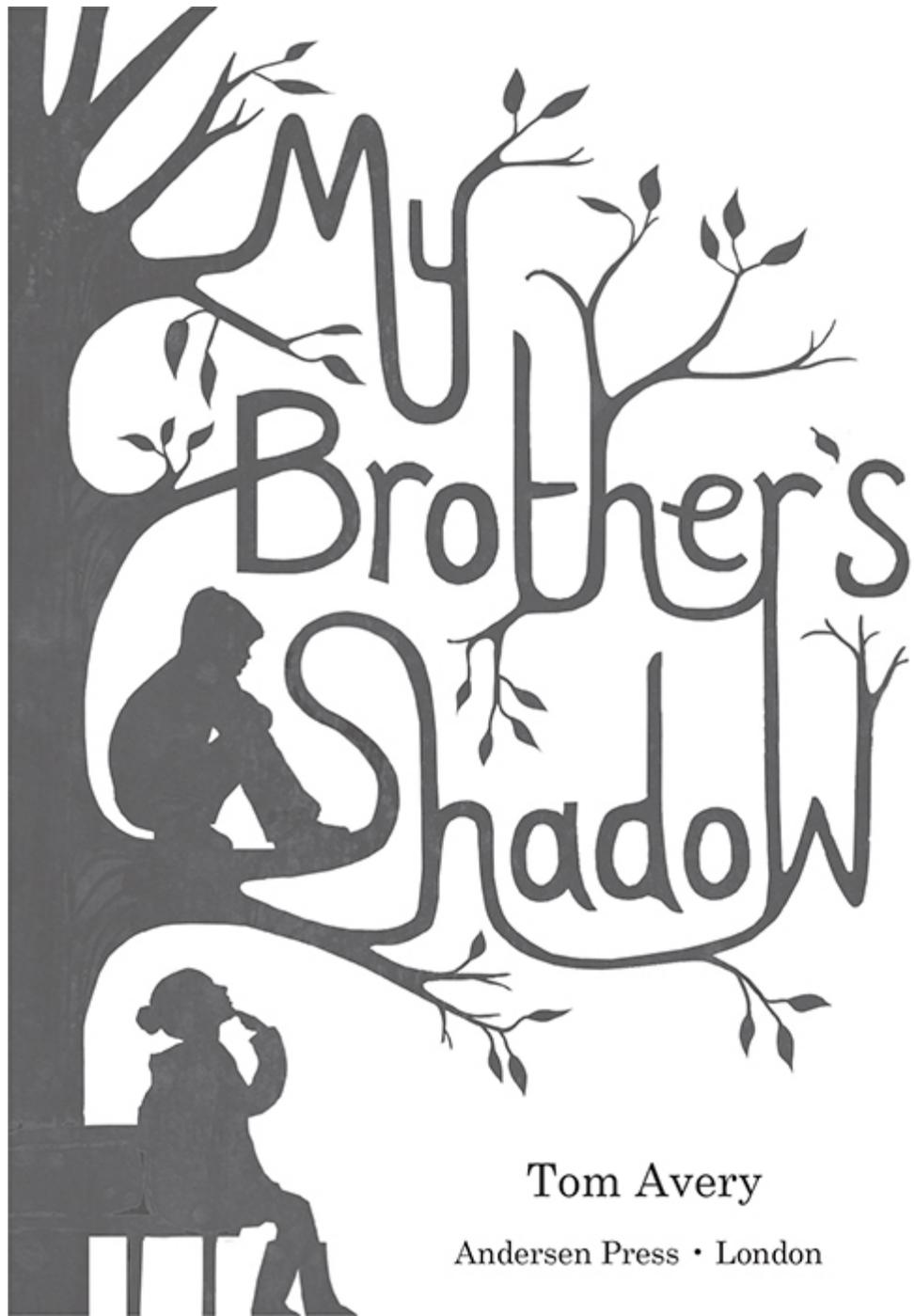
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Tom Avery

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*To the 30 wonderful children of 6TA
2011-12, who met and loved Kaia
before anyone else.*

Arrival

It was winter when he arrived. The chill wind blew through his ragged clothes, turning his skin a raw pink. Chapped lips and bloodied gums, his face pressed against the window.

When I saw him that first time I screamed - a small and silent scream, all inside, in my gut. It was the most terrifying, the most thrilling, the strangest thing to happen in a maths lesson in a long time.

The boy dipped below the frame like a duck. He soon resurfaced.

His eyes - a sharp, cold grey - searched the classroom, passing from face to face. I stared right back.

When his eyes met mine through the frosted glass, and my heart was stilled in my chest, I thought perhaps, for just a moment, a flickering smile parted those cracked lips.

Smiles can be small, tiny even, minute. Smiles can be just in your eyes. Magic, secret smiles that you don't want anyone to see but you can't help. Or magic, secret smiles that you want just one person to see - the one person that you love the most, who knows your face the best.

Later, even when I knew that face, after hours and hours of staring at that furrowed brow and thick, charcoal eyebrows, hours of afternoons shared, I still wasn't sure if in that first glance there'd been a smile.

That face was the biggest mystery of all.

Frozen Girl

Last term Mr Wills gave us each a yellow notebook filled with empty, grey pages.

‘This is your holiday homework,’ he said. ‘You’re to write a diary of everything you do over the break.’

I didn’t write anything. Well, what was I going to write?

Monday:

Mum went to work. I was meant to be going to the holiday club at school. Instead I made a sandwich, went to the big park and sat under an oak tree. (*Quercus robur*)

Tuesday:

Mum was ‘sick’ and didn’t go to work. Heard her boss shouting at her down the phone. Think Mum’s lost her job.

My mum from before would never have acted this way. My mum from before loved her job. My mum from before loved me.

I made a sandwich, went to the park and sat under a different tree, silver birch today. (*Betula pendula* – the best name of any tree.)

Wednesday:

Mum ‘sicker’. I stayed at home so she didn’t hurt herself. Hoped she didn’t hurt me.

No, I didn’t write anything. But then the boy appeared. So I decided to fill these empty pages. I had something in my life to write about and someone in my life to write about.

I think they tried to take the boy away. The police probably, social workers, the teachers. They all tried to get him to leave. He screamed and barked, yelled and growled. I

heard him from the classroom, where I shivered and glanced at the window. Mr Wills set us reading to do.

I used to love books – each one a mystery waiting to be uncovered.

Long, long ago, back when no one called me idiot or freak, I used to read books just like the other girls. Now they read big fat books with thousands and thousands of words, big fat books with big fat mysteries and pretty pink covers. I still read the same books, the same books as a year ago when I was ten, when everything stopped, not just my reading.

I'm frozen in the past. I'm frozen in a day which I'll never forget. Frozen. Frozen. Frozen. How do you defrost yourself from something you cannot see? How can you change what's happened?

I Kaia am forever frozen.

Forever frozen Kaia I am.

I forever Kaia am frozen.

So I'm not reading. I don't want to remember. Instead I'm writing this.

In the end, I don't think they could make the boy go. His wails and wild shouts must have stopped the whole school from working, so they let him stay.

At the end of the day when Mr Wills had given us our homework – yes, more homework – and we'd finished our daily scramble for bags and coats and empty lunchboxes, we lined up as usual outside the library. And there he was, perched like a blackbird, his knees pulled up to his chest and his toes curled around the lip of a chair amongst the bookshelves.

He stared at us again. Dev and his stupid mates made stupid jokes about his dirty, raggedy clothes.

'They're definitely from Oxfam, bruv,' Dev said.

Poppy, Hanaiya and all the other girls giggled. I stared right back at the boy.