


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Voices in the Dark

Catherine Banner

A decorative flourish consisting of a thin black line that starts with a small loop at the top left, descends diagonally across the word 'DARK', and ends with a larger loop at the bottom right.

VOICES  
IN THE  
DARK  
Catherine Banner

CORGI BOOKS

# Contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Nightfall, The Twenty Ninth of December](#)

[July](#)

[Dawn, The Thirtieth of December](#)

[The Thirtieth of December](#)

[August](#)

[The Night of The First of January](#)

[Evening The Second of January](#)

[September](#)

[Midnight, The Third of January](#)

[Four O'Clock The Fourth of January](#)

[October](#)

[Morning, The Fourth of January](#)

Evening, The Fourth of January

November

The Night of The Sixth of January

Just Before Dawn on The Seventh of January

December

Nightfall The Eighth of January

Christmas

Evening The Tenth of January

Just Before Midnight The Tenth of January

Nightfall, The Last Day of March Arkavitz

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# VOICES IN THE DARK

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**C**atherine Banner began writing her debut novel, *The Eyes of a King*, at the age of fourteen, after school and on summer holidays. In 2006 her portrait was displayed in the Exceptional Youth Exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery, which showcased talented and inspiring young Britons. Catherine was also featured in the *Observer's* 2008 'Cool List'. She is currently in her second year at Cambridge University, studying English. *Voices in the Dark* is the second novel in the trilogy, and Catherine is now working on the third title.

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NIGHTFALL,  
THE TWENTY NINTH  
OF DECEMBER

I want more than anything to tell you the truth about my life. I am a criminal, also a liar. But I swear this will be a true account.

*That was how I began as the coach drew away from the city, south and then west into the darkness of the moors. The woman opposite me was pretending to sleep, one arm around the shoulders of her little boy. The old man next to me kept sighing and shaking his head. He was saying the rosary; the quiet clicking of the beads was the only sound. We were all avoiding each other's glances. The snow and fire behind us made wild patterns on the glass. Every few seconds, the old man glanced back and sighed again, as though he had left a good life behind him. Fires were blazing on the walls of the castle, throwing black smoke over the stars. I imagined that he had some ordered existence in the city, and this ritual was all that he could carry of it with him into the unknown.*

*I owned nothing but the clothes I wore and the contents of the pockets. I kept checking them to see that everything was still there. I had given the driver fifty crowns and my christening bracelet as payment; by the time we set off, it was nearly midnight, and the queues at the harbour stretched a mile. But I still had a pencil and a stack of papers and a box of matches and a candle and the medallion Aldebaran had given me.*

*We did not speak to each other. This would be a long journey, long and cold, but we were still strangers and had nothing to say. The old man beside me had his rosary beads, but ever since I was a young boy, I had put my faith in stories; they came more easily to me than prayers. When we set out on this journey, I had thought that perhaps I could write everything down and explain it. And yet the words did not come easily this time. It was nearly impossible to write with the lurching of the coach, and my heart was heavy. I put the paper back into my pocket and tried to sleep.*

*'Get down from the coach!' someone shouted when we had travelled a few miles. It was only the driver, cursing at a broken wheel and glancing about him with his rifle raised. Ahead were the lights of a village. We would have to stop for the night here, the driver told us. If he fixed the wheel now, the horses would be too cold to continue, and besides, this road was dangerous. We would go on to the next inn and stop there. The woman made some protest about this. A cold wind was sweeping over the snow, driving it in gusts against the windows of the carriage. We stepped down, shivering. The little boy clung to his mother's overcoat. I offered to take one of her cases, but she shook her head. The driver unhitched the horses and led them beside him, and we walked in silence towards the lights.*

*None of us had money for a bed, so we all ended up in the front room of the inn. This was just a windswept village in the middle of nowhere. The little boy and his mother slept in a corner with their heads on the table. The old man got out his rosary again, then put it away and ordered a bottle of spirits and sat there drinking it and watching the snow fall. I listened to the wind growling and thought about what I would write. Then I got out the paper and pencil and*

*began again. But it was no good. I sighed and crossed out the start of it.*

*The inn sign creaked and rattled in the wind outside. I could not write; every time I tried, it was wrong. When this had gone on for some time, the old man got up and came towards my table, holding out the bottle of spirits. 'Here,' he said. 'Maybe it will cure your writer's depression.'*

*'It's kind of you.'*

*He poured me a glass, then waited to see if I would let him sit down at the table. I drew out a chair. He settled slowly, flexing each finger so that the joints cracked. I could tell from his face that he had once been handsome, and his eyes were quick and kind. I sipped the spirits and waited for him to say something else.*

*'Where are you going?' he asked eventually.*

*I shrugged. 'I don't really know.'*

*'Neither do I. I am trying to find my family. Maybe they have gone to Holy Island; that's what I am thinking. But there again, they could be somewhere else.'*

*'I'm supposed to be going to Holy Island too,' I said. 'But ...'*

*'But you don't think you will,' he said. 'Now that you have set out.'*

*'How did you know?'*

*'Ah,' he said. 'A lifetime of studying human nature. Now, tell me what you are trying to write.'*

*I thought about this for a long time. 'A letter to my brother,' I said eventually. 'I've done a very bad thing. I don't know if he'll forgive me, but I want to explain. And I want to tell him ...' I hesitated.*

*'Go on,' said the old man kindly.*

*'I want to tell him the truth. He's only a baby now, but I want to record it, for when he grows up. I was never told*

*the truth, you know? And I think if he knows it, he will stand a chance.'*

*He nodded for me to continue.*

*'And I want to tell him about our life in the city,' I said. 'Because that's all gone now. He'll never know it.'*

*'Admirable,' said the old man.*

*'Not really,' I said. 'Not if you knew.'*

*'So tell me,' he said. 'Maybe it will make it easier to write if you tell me first.'*

*'Do you think so?' I said.*

*He shook his head. 'I can't tell. It depends.'*

*'It is a long story,' I said. 'It would take a while to explain.'*

*'This will be a long journey,' said the old man.*

*I folded the paper and drank the rest of the glass of spirits. It burned in my chest like fire and gave me courage and made me melancholy at the same time. He introduced himself at last as Mr Hardy. I told him my name was Anselm. We sat there talking about nothing at all for a long while, and the wind cried like voices in the dark outside. Then, as the darkness drew on, I started to tell him the story. There was nothing else to do on this bleak night. I told him how it started with our shop and with the graveyard and with the old days on Citadel Street, and there I got confused and fell silent, trying to think where it began. 'With Aldebaran's funeral,' I said eventually.*

*'Aldebaran is dead?' he said, and started as though he had been struck in the chest.*

*'Yes,' I said. 'He died in July. Did you not know?'*

*He shook his head. Everyone in the country knew it, but this man had somehow missed the fact. He went on shaking his head and said, 'Aldebaran is dead,' again, but this time*

*it was not a question. 'Tell me this story,' he said. 'I want to hear.'*

JULY

The crowds came from a hundred miles to Aldebaran's funeral. They lined up against the barriers before dawn had yet risen and threw flowers and sang patriotic songs. But a strange hush followed the coffin as it drifted out of the cathedral. We followed it in silence. Leo went first, with his hair cut too short and a cigarette jammed in the corner of his mouth. My mother and Jasmine walked together; my mother kept letting go of Jasmine's hand to brush away her tears. The back of my neck burned under the eyes of the crowd.

Jasmine was pulling away from my mother, trying to get closer to the coffin, but the guards kept her back. The king was just ahead of us. He had insisted on walking beside his chief adviser to the grave. Everyone had argued against it. An assassination, the government believed, was always the start of something. But the king ignored them and went with his hand on the side of the coffin all the way down the main street.

The coffin bore our small wreath, but apart from that, there was nothing of Aldebaran about it. It was mounted on a gun carriage and draped in flags, and soldiers with their bayonets marched on either side of it. Every few yards, someone in the crowd would pitch a flower over the barrier. The blossoms thumped on the wood of the coffin, and the boots of the guards ground them into the dust.

Jasmine was crying; at six years old, the noise and solemnity had got the better of her.

'Here, come here,' said Leo, and tried to pick her up, but she shook her head and shrugged up her coat so that only her eyes showed. Leo reached out helplessly, and his hand found my shoulder instead. Somewhere, a band was playing, and every few seconds, the gun salute in the Royal Gardens shook the foundations of the city. Starlings rose in

drifts from the ruined armaments factory. They circled dizzily over us, making endless patterns against the clouds.

Not long after that, a fine drizzle began. 'Oh, have some mercy!' said my mother, struggling with her new black umbrella and swiping at the tears on her face. It sounded like a stupid thing to say - as if the clouds would hear her and keep the rain from falling. But everything this morning had sounded stupid. The river hissed and seethed as the rain fell harder; the raindrops thundered on the wood of the coffin. We stood beside the open grave while the priest, a bishop from the south who none of us recognized, drifted over and opened his prayer book. 'Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life,"' read the bishop. "'He who believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.'"

I did not know if Aldebaran had believed in God. He had never spoken about it. The bishop had a thin and cracked voice, and the rain made it feebler. He kept stopping to wipe the rain from his spectacles. It came down like arrows. The regimental uniforms of the foreign heads of state were spattered with mud up to the knees. Jasmine broke free and knelt down on the side of the grave. She watched the coffin descend, not caring that the dirt and rain covered her Sunday clothes.

'Jasmine, come back,' murmured my mother.

'Let her,' said Leo. 'It's all right.'

"'We brought nothing into the world, and we take nothing out,'" said the bishop. "'The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away: blessed be the name of the Lord.'"

As the coffin descended into the earth, the drums and the cannons fell silent. We each threw a handful of wet mud into the grave, and the foreign dignitaries and government ministers stepped forward and did the same, staining the sleeves of their uniforms. The king was so close on the

other side of the grave that I could make out the tears standing in his eyes. He gave Leo a quick nod. They had met each other once, years ago. But the king was already turning now, and the guards ushered him towards the graveyard gate. The band took up their dirge again.

We listened to the procession fading. Then we could hear only the drum, and afterwards not even that. The rain dripped from the spokes of my mother's umbrella and gusted across the graveyard. Crows flapped, buffeted one way, then the other in the driving wind that howled in the dead branches of the trees. Someone had cut the grass around Aldebaran's grave, but beyond that, the graveyard had lost all appearance of order years ago.

'Come on,' said my mother. 'Let's go. There's no point staying here.'

Leo shook his head. Out of the rain, two figures were appearing: my grandmother, in her neat mourning clothes and with a black scarf over her head, frowning because of the rain, and Father Dunstan, our own priest, after her.

'Will you say another prayer, Father?' asked Jasmine, sniffing, as he came up beside us. 'Uncle didn't know that old man.'

Father Dunstan stood on the end of the new grave and made the sign of the cross. His prayer book was awash; the pages buckled under the rain's assault. "'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his compassion never fails,'" Father Dunstan read. "'Every morning they are renewed.'" "

'Amen,' said Jasmine, sniffing. 'Say another.'

Father Dunstan went on reading. He read all the funeral prayers in his book. Then the graveyard fell silent, and the rain dwindled, and there was nothing to do but go home.

In several of the houses, Malonian flags were still draped from the windows or clinging wetly to the washing lines.

Beggars moved among the listless crowds with their hands outstretched. Two war veterans on the corner of the street called out as we passed, 'Spare a coin, sir! In the Lord's name have mercy on a poor man!' Leo gave them each a shilling. Our own street, Trader's Row, was a mass of flags; they blazed orange from every window. 'Look!' said Jasmine, startled out of her tears.

'Everyone liked Uncle,' I said. 'See? The whole city has come out to pay their respects to him.'

'So why haven't they found the bad man who shot him?'

'I don't know.'

'But I don't understand—'

'Shh,' said my mother, and put a hand on Jasmine's shoulder to quiet her.

Leo had not heard. He was walking ahead of us with his hands in his overcoat pockets.

Our closest neighbours were standing out on their steps: the pharmacist and her two sons, Mr Pascal the secondhand clothes dealer, and the Barones from next door. Michael caught my glance as we passed. He was my oldest friend, and to see him there was some consolation. We went inside; then my mother shut the door, and the noise of the crowded city vanished. Leo sat down at the table in the back room. My mother put the kettle on the stove. We all stood around and could think of nothing to say.

'It's so unfair,' my mother said eventually.

'I know,' said Leo.

'He would never have wanted to go like that.'

'I know.'

There was another silence. A few raindrops crackled on the window. I added more coals to the stove and tried to turn them over without interrupting the silence that had settled over us.

'I must say,' my grandmother ventured, 'I thought it was a lovely ceremony. And he was old, Maria. He was eighty-six. I'm sure I'd be glad to die at such an age.'

'He was shot,' said Leo. 'No one would be glad—'

'Why haven't they caught the man—' began Jasmine.

'Shh,' said my mother. 'I don't know. They will.'

She went to the stove and took the kettle off it and put it back on again. Still it would not boil.

In a box on the table was all that Aldebaran had bequeathed to us. I took out the things carefully and replaced them again; it was something to do. He had not left much. The chief advisers took a vow of poverty when they were sworn into office, and after they died, all their papers were burned. There was a wooden box for Jasmine, his christening medallion for me, and a ring for my mother. For Leo there was a book in a paper wrapping that still lay unopened. There was also a parcel with *To the baby* written across it in red ink. My mother's baby was not due for several months, but it seemed Aldebaran had thought of everything.

Jasmine lay down under the table and began to cry in earnest. Aldebaran had been her teacher, and his death left her the last in the family with powers. Although they had argued bitterly in all their lessons, she had really been the one he loved the most.

'Hush,' said my mother. She knelt down beside the table and stroked Jasmine's hair. 'Come on, Jas. He wouldn't want you to make yourself so unhappy. And it is not for ever. You know that.'

'Dead is for ever,' said Jasmine. 'Dead means dead, and you can never be not dead again.'

'He will still watch over you.'

'He won't.'

Someone tapped at the door. The neighbours were out in the street waiting to pay their respects. 'Anselm, go and let them in,' said my mother.

The neighbours' chatter drowned out the silence of our house, and by the time they began to leave, darkness was falling. The Barones stayed a while longer than the rest. My grandmother was still here, and Mr Pascal, who could never be made to leave any funeral. We stood around the table in the back room and listened to the guns fire yet another salute from the Royal Gardens. Leo and Mr Pascal lit cigarettes, and the smoke rose and made strange patterns under the ceiling.

'Tell me,' said Mr Pascal when the silence had drawn out for several minutes, 'who succeeds Aldebaran as chief adviser?'

'I believe it is Joseph Marcus Sawyer,' said my grandmother.

'Sawyer?' said Mr Pascal.

Mr Barone shook his head and ran his hands over his thinning hair as though he wanted to fix it in place. 'I don't know why the king has chosen a man like that,' he said.

'He is not so bad,' said Mr Pascal. 'He may be the best we can hope for, under the circumstances. At least they say he has powers, and it has to be someone with powers. In these days, it is a miracle they found anyone at all.'

'As far as I heard, those powers left him when he was a child,' said Mr Barone. 'And all the world knows he was a collaborator.'

'There are worse things.'

'Are there?' said Mr Barone with a sharpness I had never heard in his voice before. 'Are there really worse things?'

Mr Pascal breathed out and held his cheeks there. He was a large man, and it made his face look round and shapeless like a baby's.

'What's a collaborator?' said Jasmine.

'Come on, Jas,' said Michael, ruffling her hair. 'I'll teach you a card game.'

I caught his glance and followed him out of the room, and Jasmine came after us. We sat on the floorboards of the shop, between the counter and a rack of old clothes, and Michael dealt out his stained playing cards and occupied Jasmine with a list of rules. She was still close to tears, but the distraction worked. In the back room, some argument was rising between Mr Pascal and Mr Barone. I tried to listen, but the rain obscured their voices. It was coming down hard again. Trader's Row was deserted, except for the old newspapers that circled in the rising gale.

'Your turn, Anselm,' Michael said, making me start. I had been thinking of other things. He handed me two crumpled cards, and I played my turn without knowing what numbers I put down. The storm rattled the windows and howled in the chimney. It made the side gate crash and shudder against the wall.

'I should go out and lock that,' I said.

I got up and went out. In the yard, the wind was ferocious. I wrestled the gate back into place. Then, as I turned to close it, there was a quick movement in the shadows on the other side of the street. Someone was standing there, in the dead space between the two gas lamps, watching me.

The man's silhouette was strange; there was something unearthly about it. I looked at him, and he stared back at me. Then he turned and walked away. The breeze made the lamps gutter, and in that jumping light, I could not make out his face. But as he vanished, I saw what it was that

made his outline strange. Across his back was a rifle. It gleamed as the darkness overtook him. The rain was driving down hard now out of a dull grey sky. I shivered and bolted the gate and went in.

At first I thought I would mention it to the others. But the Barones and Mr Pascal and my grandmother were all getting up to leave. After they had gone, a cold silence fell on the house, and I did not dare to raise the subject. Leo sat down at the table and rested his head against his arms.

‘Are you all right?’ said my mother.

‘I will be all right tomorrow.’ She put her hand on his shoulder. ‘At least he is buried now,’ said Leo. ‘That’s the worst thing, not knowing. All that ceremony makes things better. I don’t know why, but it does.’

None of us answered. He was speaking from experience. His parents, the famous Harold and Amelie North, had been missing for more than two decades. I knew that he still lay awake at night because he did not know where they were. It seemed Leo’s family was condemned to suffer every time our country rose and fell.

‘Come on,’ said my mother, picking up the box of Aldebaran’s things. ‘Let’s go to bed. Nothing is right this evening.’

We followed her upstairs to the living room and watched while she lit the lamps and Leo turned over the fire.

‘Here,’ she said, setting the box down on the mantelpiece. She put on the ring. I took the medallion and Jasmine the box. ‘Are you not even going to open this book, Leo?’ my mother asked.

Leo shook his head. ‘What’s the use?’

‘What’s the use? Uncle must have meant something by it. Don’t you want to know what it is?’ He shook his head again and closed the bedroom door behind him. My mother

left the book lying on the mantelpiece. It was still there when we put out the lamps.

It was half past eleven, but from the square of light falling below the window next to mine, I could tell Michael was still awake next door. On nights when neither of us could sleep, we opened the windows and leaned out and spoke to each other. We had done that since I was a little boy and our family first came to the shop on Trader's Row. 'Michael?' I said, and pushed the window up. After a few seconds, I heard him raise the window on his side.

'Are you all right?' he said. 'It must have been a long day.'

'Yes.'

'Here. Take this.'

His skinny arm appeared with a bottle of spirits. I took it and drank some, out of politeness more than anything. A gale blew through my room, troubling the pages of the books on the table and making the faded picture on the wall swing wildly. 'What was the service like?' Michael asked.

'Grand. Like you would expect. But it was just us, those foreign heads of state, and a few famous people. He should have had more family there. I could tell it troubled Leo.'

'And I'll tell you someone who wasn't there,' said Michael. 'The Alcyrian president.'

'Wasn't he?'

Michael leaned precariously out of the window and handed me a newspaper. It was tomorrow's edition; Michael's father always walked to the end of the street to get it from the printers' at ten o'clock. The first seven pages were taken up with Aldebaran's funeral. Michael had underlined a single paragraph: 'The new president of Alcyria, the self-styled Commander General Marlan of the New Imperial Order, was conspicuous by his absence.'

Many saw this as a sign of the new Alcyrian government's growing hostility towards its neighbours.'

'General Marlan?' I said. 'Aldebaran hated him; he wouldn't have wanted him there.'

'But he should have been there. Everyone else was. Even a few of the presidents from the west and the Crown Prince of Marcovy.'

'I know.'

'And now that Aldebaran is gone, what's to stop Marlan from invading every other country on the continent?' said Michael. 'That's what I want to know.'

'It won't happen,' I said, because Aldebaran had always said it. But the newspaper thought otherwise. Several pages were taken up with a discussion of the chances of war with Alcyria and the chances of civil unrest from the New Imperial Order here. They had groups in every nation on the continent. They marched about in mock uniforms, and held rallies, and stood for government at every election under the banner 'Liberty and Justice'.

'I think it was them,' I said. 'I think the Order were the ones who did it.'

'It's why my father got so angry,' said Michael. 'At least, that's part of it. Joseph Marcus Sawyer has been linked with General Marlan. Everyone knows Sawyer was part of Lucien's government. He's no choice for chief adviser. What was the king thinking?'

'I have never seen your father angry like that,' I said.

'No,' said Michael. 'He was talking tonight about getting out of the country.'

'Does he really mean that?'

'I don't know. He doesn't want to see another war.'

'But what about you? What do you think?'

‘Maybe it isn’t so crazy to think of going, now that Aldebaran is gone. My father was in the resistance, and everyone knows it. And people are leaving Alcyria.’

‘I know,’ I said. We had seen them arrive in the city with their belongings piled up in carts and a dazed look in their eyes, as though they hoped they were about to wake up from something. ‘I know,’ I said again. ‘But where would you go if you left? Michael, you are not really serious?’

He did not answer, just sighed and changed the subject. The wind was growling so fiercely now that I could hardly hear my own voice, and we were both shivering. ‘We should go inside,’ he said. ‘My father is in no mood to catch me leaning out of the window.’

‘Listen,’ I said. ‘I have to know – you are not really serious about leaving?’

He sighed and I saw his shadow on the pavement shrug its shoulders.

‘I’ll talk to you tomorrow,’ I said.

‘Goodnight, Anselm.’

‘Goodnight.’

I heard him push the window down. The rain began to fall again, but I remained where I was. As I stood there, the lamp came on in the shop below. Leo must be down there. I had known he would not sleep tonight. The light threw the letters from the front window backwards onto the pavement: L. NORTH & SON, DEALERS IN SECONDHAND GOODS. I stared at those words for a while, and thought of Aldebaran in the graveyard in the dark and of his assassin, alive somewhere, awake or sleeping or drinking at some inn. Then I tried not to think about it any more. The rain was falling hard again. I ducked to go inside.

As I pushed the window down, I started. Just for a second, I thought I saw that man in the alley opposite again. But the street was deserted. I must have imagined it.

A newspaper was spiralling under the streetlight; that was all. I pulled the curtains closed and turned up the lamp. The bedroom grew close and safe in the yellow glow. The narrow bed, the rickety desk piled with books, the rug worn through in the middle, and the saint's picture that hung on the wall - all of them were so familiar that they drove out the darkness of the city. I kept my eyes on that picture as I undressed. The saint stood at the prow of a ship in the darkness, holding forth a crucifix. We had never been able to work out who he was; even Father Dunstan, when we asked him, could not be sure. But when I was a little boy, I called the figure St Anselm and asked him to protect me from danger. Until I was ten or eleven years old, I had a hopeless fear of the dark. Perhaps it was childish, but when I whispered, 'Defend us from all perils and dangers of this night,' on the evening of Aldebaran's funeral, it was still the saint I was praying to.

The clocks were sounding twelve. The largest bell, in the new cathedral, went on chiming with a steady note. The guns fired a final salute, and the city echoed. Then there was no sound at all, except the wind growling in the alleys and driving the rain hard against the windowpane. After a while, it died away too, and left the city in silence.

I suppose I should go back to the start and tell you the history of our family. I told myself the story that night as I lay in bed listening to the wind fighting in the streets and sleep seemed a thousand miles away.

It started with two families. The Andros family were the richest bankers in Malonia. The North family was famous because the Norths were Aldebaran's descendants. After the revolution, when half the royalists in the country were exiled or missing, the last remaining members of these two families were left stranded in the city. My mother and my grandmother moved from place to place before I was born.

From my earliest years, I knew the names of the streets where they had lived: Slaughterhouse Lane, Greyfriars Square, Paradise Way. And the last - the place they finally settled - Citadel Street. That was where my mother and Leo met.

Of course, I had a father. I asked about him sometimes, when I was still very young, but I had my mother and Leo, and my grandparents, and Leo's grandmother Margaret for the first six years of my life, and to wish for anyone else seemed heartless somehow. Even Aldebaran treated me as a relative from the start. After Sunday dinner, he would stand in the light of the fire and show me magic tricks, and I wished I had powers so earnestly that I used to cry sometimes over it. Can you become part of a family by wanting to be? I don't know. You can get so far with lying that you convince yourself that it's true and genuinely feel a kind of outrage when anyone questions it. That is the closest thing that I can think of. And if you could measure, Leo was the one who loved me best from the start.

There is one night I remember more than anything. It was the winter when I was six years old, and all through the dark months, I had been troubled by nightmares. On this night, something woke me suddenly and drove out all hopes of sleep. It was past three o'clock and the building was silent. The last embers of the fire threw strange shadows over the walls. I lay shivering, tracing pictures in the uneven plaster of the ceiling. I imagined the largest mass was the land of England, and the smaller ones were ships sailing round its coast. Sleep seemed as far off as another world. And while I lay there, I began to be afraid that there were spirits in the room around me. I was sure that if I moved or made a sound, they would awaken and get my soul.

I stopped breathing. I thought that if I breathed too loudly, they would find me. I was scaring myself, and I knew

it, but I could not help it. I counted as long as I could without taking a breath, and then breathed out carefully so as not to make a sound, and went on like that, minute by minute. I began to pray for Leo to wake up.

The minutes passed, and the clock chimed the hour, and then the quarter. I waited and heard it chime again. 'Leo?' I whispered.

Then, at last, an oil lamp brightened in the next room, and I heard his footsteps. He appeared out of the dark and stood beside me. 'Are you all right, Anselm?' he said.

'I can't sleep.'

He sat down on the edge of my bed and leaned over to build up the fire. The coal caught and started to drive the chill from the room. In the sudden light of the lamp, I could make out every grey strand in his hair. Leo was twenty-two, and his hair was already greying, but at the time I did not think much about it. 'Was it a nightmare?' said Leo. 'I thought I heard you call out.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Papa, don't go away.'

He brushed the tears from my face with his jacket sleeve. 'No. I'll sit with you for a while until you fall back to sleep.'

Leo could always sense my thoughts without asking, and I could usually tell his. He had not spoken for the first few years of my life, and I had learned to tell what he was thinking from the very air that surrounded him.

'Will you read to me?' I said.

He went to the mantelpiece and took down Harold North's second-to-last book, *The Sins of Judas*. He had read it to me twice already. But tonight he did not open it. He just sat there frowning. 'When I was a boy, I used to dream too,' he said after a while had passed.

'You still do,' I said, thinking of the way he cried out sometimes in the dark and startled us all awake.

'Not nightmares,' he said. 'I used to go away from here. Far away. They were like visions, these dreams. I used to dream about England.'

'England?' I said.

'Yes. All the time.' He said it with an air of surprise, as though he was talking of someone else.

'Tell me about it,' I said.

'All right,' he said. 'All right, I could tell you what I remember.'

He began softly. His outline was very black against the fire. He told me stories of another place, where there lived a girl who wanted more than anything to dance and a boy who would become King Cassius. And Aldebaran was there, just a wanderer on a journey, a man who disguised himself as a servant to hide from the law.

'And then what happened?' I asked when Leo paused.

'I don't know.'

Sleep was dragging me down now like the waves of the ocean. The story had settled my heart. 'Was it all true?' I whispered.

'There is no way of telling.'

'But couldn't you ask Aldebaran about it himself?'

'He doesn't speak about England. Not any more. Sometimes I think he doesn't remember it. Or doesn't even believe it exists.'

'Then how do you know that story?'

Leo answered so calmly that I thought I had heard him wrong: 'Because I used to have powers.'

I sat up. He turned and gave me a quick, sad smile. 'You had powers?' I said.

'Yes.'

'Real powers like Aldebaran? You could make things move and tell the future?'

'Yes. A bit, anyway. I never bothered much with them.'

'Why didn't I ever know?'

Leo shrugged. 'They have gone now. I gave them up the year you were born, and it didn't seem worth telling you.'

'Why did you give them up?'

'All these questions ...' He shook his head and gave that same sad smile again. 'I decided they weren't any use. I mean, for anything that mattered.'

'Is that true? Powers aren't any use?'

'It's just what I thought at the time. Anyway, I would never have made a great one. And that's all in the past now.'

I lay still, trying to see him as a great one, a man initiated into an ancient line of heroes. I could not do it. He was just Leo, my papa, who stood at a market stall all day and spent the evenings sweeping the floor and carrying up the water and reading me stories. 'Papa?' I whispered. 'Did you ever dream about England again?'

'No,' he said. 'No, I never did.'

'But how could you stop having powers just like that?'

'I didn't. They keep their hold on you, Anselm. But I never dreamed about England again.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

But there was something very final about the way he said it, something that made me remember it long after that evening, long after he had left me and turned out the light. There was always a kind of darkness about Leo, a