

The Pack

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Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

FOREWORD

PROLOGUE

PART ONE: THE ZONE

1. The Old Woman
2. Hunger
3. The Wager
4. The Land of Wolves
5. The Attack

PART TWO: THE FORBIDDEN TERRITORIES

6. Capture
7. Red Dog
8. A New Champion
9. Something Rotten
10. The Hound of Hell

PART THREE: THE INVISIBLE CITY

11. Martha
12. The Mount

PART FOUR: NORTH

13. The Storm

14. Chloe

15. The Lake

16. Revenge

17. The Forest

About the Author

Also by Tom Pow

Copyright

About the Book

Floris is all that keeps Victor in the human world, the only tenderness he allows in his heart. He will do all he can to find her and, if he doesn't, yes, he will die as a dog . . .

Bradley, Victor and Floris live with the dogs on the dark, forgotten edge of a segregated city. Haunted by memories and abandoned by society, they have learned to survive on their own. But when Floris is kidnapped the others must venture into the unknown to save their friend. It is a journey fraught with danger - violent gangs stalk the streets, and corrupt warlords viciously guard their territories. But it is also a journey of discovery . . .

The Pack

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RHCP DIGITAL

FOREWORD

'You measure the justice of society by how it treats its children.'

Pérez de Cuéllar, former UN Secretary-General

I first came across the extraordinary story of Ivan Mishukov, in an article concerning Russian street children, in the *Scotsman* in 2002. However, the story was first drawn to the attention of the world's press in 1998. Then, Ivan was a four-year-old boy who had become the leader of a pack of dogs.

Mistreated by his alcoholic father, Ivan had taken to the streets. After feeding stray dogs the surplus food he had begged, he was adopted by them as their leader. A subsequent article explained that, due to its economic meltdown, Russia had over one million homeless children, 50,000 of them in Moscow alone. The article painted a harsh world of broken homes, of curfews, of desperate policing measures, and of teenage Fagins offering protection to the younger children.

A section on *Cruelty and Neglect in Russian Orphanages* on the Human Rights Watch website described the manifest failures of a system to cope with its 'social orphans', the official name for abandoned children. A brutal world was catalogued there, where deprivation and systematic humiliation were commonplace.

But if Russia provided the first impetus for *The Pack*, it was not my sole focus. In recent years, many European countries, in a period of rapid economic change, have similarly failed to protect their children, as have, in different circumstances, governing agencies in Africa: the

proliferation of child soldiers in parts of that continent is also documented at length on the Human Rights Watch website.

Closer to home, a headline in the *Independent*, 'THEY ARE NOT WILD ANIMALS. BUT THEY MUST BE TAMED', opened a discussion on the moral panic associated with the infamous cases of James Bulger, Stephen Lawrence and Damiola Taylor. The horror of each murder was compounded by revelations of an underworld in our cities where children roam unchecked, 'like wild dogs'.

2002 also saw the publication of *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children* by Michael Newton. This book provided a deeper insight into the lives of children 'brought up by animals, growing up in the wilderness, or locked up for long years in solitary confinement'. The book opens with Ivan's story and the assertion that his case is not so extraordinary after all. Certainly, once its shock is absorbed, we can see many of its elements have a rich literary past: the brutality of the world Ivan wished to escape, for example, is prefigured in Maxim Gorky's *My Childhood*; while the fascination with the orphan can be seen throughout Dickens and the gentler nineteenth-century genre of 'waif stories'.

The Pack grew from such a coincidence of material. Its context was a constrained and brutalized world, one element of which, "The Dead Time", owes something to recent European upheavals, but also to Piers Brendon's riveting account of the economic, social and political catastrophes of the 1930's, *The Dark Valley*.

I wrote the first draft at speed while at Hawthornden Castle on a writing fellowship. I was surprised by the story's momentum and at the turns it was taking. When I was writing *Scabbit Isle*, I was not aware that what I was writing was a ghost story. Similarly, I was well through the writing of *The Pack* before I realized that I was writing an adventure story; that is, a story where characters and their

relationships are tested in extreme – and exciting – situations. The writing of every story is a journey – or an adventure; however, I hope *The Pack* is a story that never completely loses contact with its roots in a real world where there are children abandoned by those who should protect them and who therefore must form other relationships to survive.

The Pack is dedicated to Ivan Mishukov – the one representing the many – and to Kilda and Talisker, German Shepherd and Golden Labrador, the dogs I knew best when I was writing the book. I'd also like to acknowledge the help of *The Hidden Life of Dogs* by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, which of the dog books I read gave me most pleasure and helped me to understand Kilda and Talisker better.

I would like to acknowledge the support of a Hawthornden International Writing Fellowship. As I said, while at Hawthornden Castle, I wrote the first draft of *The Pack* at speed. To make a book of it has required a much longer process. For helping me to make the book what it is and for being, at all times, sympathetic to my ambitions, I'd like to thank my editors at Random House, Delia Huddy and Harriet Wilson.

Thank you to Greg, Rosa and David for a true experience of the wild no words can match. And lastly, if writing a book is a journey, thank you again Julie, Cameron and Jenny for taking it with me.

Tom Pow
Dumfries, January 2004

PROLOGUE

THE ENGINE SCREAMED as the driver, both hands round the gear stick, forced the transport lorry up into third. Thick black smoke from his cigarette washed over one eye and he cursed.

Still, they did the job, these old monsters. Their wheels were almost as tall as a man and the capacity of each was like the hold of a small ship – all stacked with sacks of potatoes, onions, carrots; trays of oranges, peaches, limes, star fruit, artichokes, asparagus and fresh herbs: the finest the Compounds could grow.

The driver smiled – at least the jerking would have woken Stringer. Usually, when they arrived at the depot in the Invisible City, he found him moulded to a sack of potatoes, his machine gun pointing harmlessly at the empty sky.

He drew the last inhalation from his cigarette, unwound the window and threw out the butt. The rush of cold air chilled the sweat that had formed on his forehead and chest as he laboured in the giant greenhouses of Compound 16, helping to load the lorry.

He leaned his forearms over the wheel. No more changing gear from now till the depot: Route 3 stretched out before him, one of the five limbs of the star that held the city together. He had made so many trips, now he could almost drive it blindfold. Of course, they were still given warnings; particularly the new drivers – ‘Be vigilant, your cargo is gold’ and all that – but really there was no need. Not these days. Even at night – and the first flecks of darkness were already in the sky – the route was floodlit, clear as a runway.

Careering down the route, feeling that surge of power, still gave him pleasure. It had been so different in the Dead Time. For what, in your tiny world, did you have power over then? Perhaps only those you could terrorize into giving up some of their food for your own brats; while in the great world – the one you had put all your faith in – there was chaos.

Overnight, everything you had worked for and saved for had become worthless: all the gilt-edged documents you had signed with such a flourish became fit only for lighting fires. And they had been promises. Yes, promises! Route maps of your life – *Futures Guaranteed*. Not only yours, but your parents' and your children's as well. But in the Dead Time, there was someone else writing everyone's script. Someone or something – a vague but ruinous power, indifferent to anyone's dreams. And there was no road back that you or anyone else could see, for your mind and your body were on the scrapheap too.

So, after the chaos of rioting and looting, had come a despair that couldn't be plumbed. The uprooted world entered a time when nothing improved, nothing seemed to grow, nothing was worth learning. Only the warlords prospered, as people aged, grew sick, died – and, while they were able, fought their corner.

Was it any surprise that they yearned for order? And that, when it came, with the Invisible City shining at its heart, the design felt God-given, natural, right? It had been soon after the Zones were established and the first Compounds started to produce that the driver had begun making deliveries to the Invisible City itself.

It had still been the Time of Reconstruction and he remembered the hollow-cheeked, shambling migrants who had lined the road as he drove into the city. The Compounds had taken the best land and turned most of them into farmers of dirt and of stone. Only a few could get by. Occasionally, one of the migrants had glanced up at his

cabin and their eyes had met and he had seen, in spite of the hunger and the tiredness, a faint hope shining there, for what the city might deliver to them and to their scrawny children. And foolish though he thought it, hope then had its reasons. For in each of the crowded Zones, once or twice a week, one of these capacious lorries would stop and sacks of potatoes and rice be broken open and distributed. Oh, they had needed a gun then, all right. But just to calm the excitement down.

There, there, the gun said, this handful of potatoes isn't worth your life.

What amazed the driver was how accepting the Zones-folk became. Like the best-trained dogs, they would stand back in a talkative queue till the sacks were opened, the scales in place, and they were bidden forward. But those who came to rely on the handouts to get by were soon to get a rude awakening.

There was great discussion in the Compound canteen when the change in the original directive was announced. It had come, they were told in hushed tones, from the highest level. And it was clear that it had to do with the restructuring of the Zones beyond the Invisible City. The most powerful warlords – Red Dog, Black Fist, Jumplead, Footrot and Screel – were to be given control over a territory each. These territories were to be known as the Forbidden Territories and their purpose was to act as buffer zones between the Zones themselves and the Invisible City. It was merely a ‘precautionary measure’. There was no cause for offence – simply a recognition that envy could have a corrosive effect and it needed to be guarded against.

‘Drive on,’ they were told now. ‘No matter what, drive on . . .’

He recalled those first trips – how, seeing the crowd gathered as usual, he had put his foot down on the pedal and his fist on the horn. They had scattered like pigeons. Sure, there were casualties at the start. How else would

they learn? The massive treads of the tyres took a couple; the gun stuttered a few times to warn off the others. But again, it was remarkable how quickly the Zones-folk came to accept that this was the new arrangement; that their inventiveness and resilience were now going to be tested in different ways.

There was no getting away from it though – people were stupid. They must know by now that he was never going to stop; yet there they were in the cold, clustering at the ends of the roads which led into their Zone, staring up at his speeding lorry. What were they doing but underlining the misery of their lot? Though some faces seemed to shine with a threadbare awe at the vision of plenty rushing by.

‘Crazies,’ he said out loud and stepped on the accelerator harder.

He glanced at his watch. He’d made good time. Stringer and he might get a chance to spend some time in the Invisible City before heading back to the Compound. It was now that he realized what the others were always telling him: that it was a privilege, in such a time, to be a driver. Precious few people could move between the worlds of the Compounds, the Zones and the Invisible City. There were even inhabitants of the Invisible City who had sidled up to him in a bar and asked him what it was like in the world beyond its boundaries. Some of them even looked at him with longing in their eyes. *They* were really the stupid ones, those who couldn’t seem to accept when they were well off.

And his wife – huh! It was like facing the Grand Inquisitor. What are they wearing? Do couples walk hand in hand? Are there children in the streets? And it was amazing, for while in the Zones the city seemed to be dying – rusting, putrefying, belching steam from broken vents – the Invisible City was constantly changing: new shops, coffee bars, businesses.

He felt his excitement growing. There might almost be time to go to that bar they went to last time; the one with

all that steel and glass and the girls. He glanced in the mirror. Luckily, he'd shaved.

Up ahead, he noticed an old man had stepped out from the huddle of people at a road end. He appeared to be walking towards the middle of the route. The driver frowned. Once or twice he'd had a young man testing himself, showing off as if he were in a bull run, then flinging himself clear at the last possible moment. Love and how to win it survived the most desperate situations. But this was an old man; his reactions would be slow. Better, the driver had long ago decided, not to meet the person's eyes. Why give yourself nightmares, after all?

The old man never made it to the centre of the road, which was some kind of relief. It was the huge mudguard that caught him and knocked him under. It was a blind spot for the driver, so all he felt was the gentlest of jolts - too satisfying in its way, like stepping on dog shit.

The driver smiled to himself - ahead the lights of the Invisible City burned brightly, and he knew the depot had a powerful hose.

PART ONE

THE ZONE

CHAPTER 1

THE OLD WOMAN

BRADLEY KNEW WHAT he had to do. He had to listen. The Old Woman had said often enough, 'If you're not willing to sit and listen, be off with you, for I'm not going to waste my breath on ears that aren't open to a story.'

He saw Floris and Victor jerk their heads to attention, tired as they were from their day's begging, always having to look into people's cold faces with interest and despair, for no one gave anything to a blank or careless glance. Bradley himself squeezed and rubbed sleep from eyes that had spent the day squinting in the winter light through piles of rubbish - old shoes, broken computers, clocks, lamps, hairdryers - for anything of value or of use.

If you could latch onto the thread of a story, it would pull you into its world, which was another world, though it might also be your world, but not quite, and you could for a time forget the hunger that was always working in the pit of your stomach, the cold at your back, the distant siren . . .

So when the Old Woman called for it, Bradley and the others looked up from their split trainers into her lined face with her bright amber eyes, and they gave themselves to whatever story she had. Seven feet tall she was now - it was the first of her miracles - and sometimes, telling a story, she would rise from the box she sat on and spread her arms out and, with the brazier glowing behind her, cast a shadow on the broken wall like some huge prehistoric bird, her fingers

splayed like pinion feathers and her voice sounding hoarse as the *kraak-kraak* of the crows, which were one of the few birds Bradley knew. But then she would settle herself down like an old hen cooing down on her eggs. Her eyes would return from the great landscapes she had created, and fix on their upturned faces. There was a silence you could almost touch; before she'd lift a few strands of thick grey hair from her face and begin again.

'So, Thomas, oh, Thomas, what was he thinking of? He ignored all the good advice he'd been given, for he thought it wasn't for him. He crossed the little stream by its two stepping stones and took the path into the forest. It was the smell of cooking that talked to his stomach and he could see the smoke rising in the sky above the treetops' - and here the Old Woman's hand spiralled gently upwards - 'for this smell, oh, this smell was so delicious, it was the most delicious smell you could ever imagine, it was—'

'Sausages,' said Bradley.

'It was sausages indeed,' said the Old Woman, 'and the smell of the sausages drew Thomas on, till in the clearing he saw it, laid out on the grass, a cloth with plates of sausages, toasted marshmallows and nuts. Thomas looked about himself. He'd been told often enough never to cross the stream, never to touch the fairy food, but he was so hungry and there was no one about. He was so sure of that . . .'

Bradley looked across and saw Floris's blond head falling onto her shoulder, her eyes flickering open and shut, open and shut, and at Victor nodding slightly, his square face earnest and pale, willing the Old Woman to carry on, not to finish, though he sensed the end in sight; willing her not to bring them back to where they were, squatting on the hard earth round a rusting brazier. Three dogs dozed among them; one of them, black as coal with a silver chest, was so large no stranger would have dared to rouse it.

'Thomas bent down and reached out a hand' - to a plate that seemed to sit just before where the children sat - 'and

he picked up one of the sausages; it was a lovely golden brown. He raised it to his lips – oh, it smelled so good – and he took one bite. One bite and his fate was sealed. They came at him from everywhere! They jumped on him from trees, out of rabbit holes, from behind rocks. They were so small and so quick he couldn't make out their faces or their forms, but they squealed with delight, their sharp teeth flashing, and they held Thomas and bound him and they took him under the green mound where they lived and where he would never ever be found.'

The Old Woman swept her eyes from one child to the other to make sure the lesson had been learned: stay within the world you know; to be inquisitive about another will lead you only to your death.

'*Never ever?*' said Floris.

'*Never ever,*' said the Old Woman, whose performance was not quite finished.

'What is the world made of?' she asked.

'Ashes,' the children replied.

'Ashes and dust,' she said and held out her hands to let one or the other blow from her huge flat palms, till there was no sign of it.

'All worlds,' she said. 'All worlds . . . But what cannot crumble, what cannot burn or be broken?'

'Stories,' the children replied.

'Stories,' she said. 'Now be gone and let an old woman get some sleep.'

From time to time, Bradley had watched bats go to sleep, pulling a long thin wing over themselves, and so it was with the Old Woman, who pulled a wing of her black cloak across herself and closed her eyes. The children rose then and left her without a word, the dogs – Hunger, Fearless and Shelter – padding behind them. Where the Old Woman finally stretched out herself – or if she ever did so – Bradley never found out, but if ever he passed her brazier at dawn, the only sign of her was the story turning in his own head; the

next he'd see of her was on the street, pulling off another of her daily miracles.

In the basement where they lived, Victor and Floris curled into each other on their nest of blankets like dogs and were soon fast asleep. The dogs themselves settled around Bradley, their breathing chests lightly pushing into him.

A story, said Hunger.

'You've just had a story,' said Bradley and gave one of Hunger's ears a playful pull.

A story, said Hunger.

The dogs looked at him expectantly. They liked to hear the rising and the falling of his voice, not crisp with an order, but unwinding at the end of the day.

'All right,' said Bradley, 'you win,' and he told them one of the Old Woman's stories, one of their favourites.

As the dogs settled to listen, he imagined a time when they would take this story into the forests and into the mountains the Old Woman had told of. The tale then would seem as distant to them as the shards of his own memories. But every so often, he thought, an image or a simple rhythm, lodged in the creases of a pink ear, might return and connect them again with the Old Woman and with the boy Hunger had saved to become their leader.