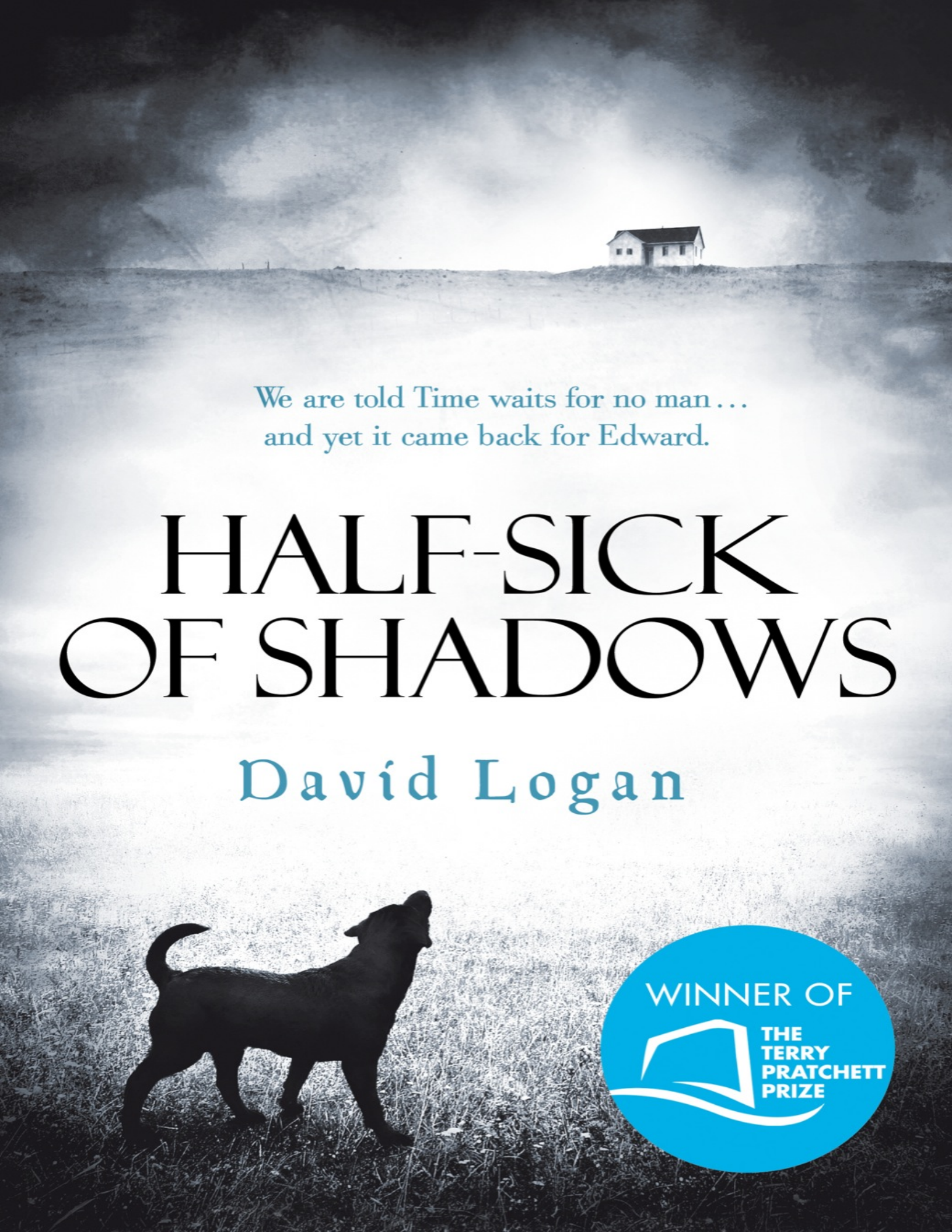




We are told Time waits for no man...
and yet it came back for Edward.

HALF-SICK OF SHADOWS

David Logan



About the Book

On the eve of Granny Hazel's burial in the back garden, a stranger in his time machine - a machine that bears an uncanny resemblance to a Morris Minor - visits five-year-old Edward with a strange request.

And Edward agrees to be his friend.

But Edward is not alone in the world. His twin sister, Sophia, is about to bring future tragedy upon herself through an all-too-literal misunderstanding of a promise she made to their father.

And so while Sophia stays at home in the Manse, Edward is sent to boarding school. There he encounters the kind and the not-so-kind and befriends the strangest child, Alf - a boy whose very existence seems to hint at universes of unlimited possibilities ... and who might one day help Edward free Sophia.

A comical tragedy, a tale of childhood wonder and dismay, a story of familial dysfunction, of poetry, the imagination and theoretical physics, this novel is all of these and rather more besides.

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About the Author

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HALF-SICK OF SHADOWS

David Logan

For Christopher

Foreword

This novel is not just the joint winner of the inaugural Terry Pratchett Prize, but the joint winner of the inaugural Terry Pratchett *Anywhere But Here, Anywhen But Now* Prize.

Which meant we were after stories set on Earth, but perhaps an Earth that might have been, or might yet be, one that had gone down a different leg of the famous trousers of time (see the illustration in almost every book about quantum theory).

It could, we mused, be one day in the life of an ordinary person. It could be a love story, an old story, a war story, a story set in a world where Leonardo da Vinci turned out to be a lot better at aeronautics (or, indeed, where a Victorian poet laureate developed a deep affection for Morris Minors). But by and large you don't hear stories about being on an alternate Earth because the people on an alternate Earth don't know that they are; after all, you don't.

Imagine the shock, then, of finding out that someone considers your personal patch of reality to be an alternate one – an interesting but ultimately baffling anomaly amongst the strings of sensibly organized universes around it. David Logan's anomalous world, the world of the Manse, is an unsettling place to be, precisely because he springs that shock on his unsuspecting characters – an uncommon trick, which requires the audacity not just to make a new world from scratch, but to unmake it too.

After all, getting a second opinion on the rules of reality can be a dangerous thing - as you'll know if you are familiar with the poem from which *Half-Sick of Shadows* takes its name. Once you start to question the laws and promises that hold your world together, the whole thing can start to come apart. So step inside the world of the Manse, and watch it unravel around you.

Terry Pratchett
March, 2012

Before Alf

The Stranger and his Time Machine

Before the beginning: nothing. Then, faster than a flash ... everything: my universe and my planet in it. All things existed at once with their back-stories ready made – even some humans on my planet to get the species started. Alf said so. Sophia and I came later. We came a fraction short of five years before this particular story began. It began in August, on a morning shivery and brilliant. Or it might have been January? It could have been any morning; mornings were all the same when Sophia and I were a fraction short of five – except this one.

I dressed in clothes stiff with frost and went downstairs to find the fireplace black and speckled with ash. Granny Hazel snored in bed in the middle of the living room. I didn't stay there long. Mother, elbow deep in soapy water, washed dishes in the kitchen.

'Where's breakfast?' I asked.

'Not now, Edward,' she replied in her headachy voice.

She told me to go out and play with Sophia. So I did.

Sophia, by a frightening coincidence the same age as me to within mere seconds, wore her red winter and only coat. Mother said she would grow into it. She also wore white mittens and a white pom-pom hat. We were twins – whatever twins were. I assumed twins were children the

same height and width, with the same blond hair, the same brown eyes, the same brain, the same everything. Twins were brother and sister and best friends. Twins were what we two were: two bodies but a single person – something like that.

Rain threatened. Rain always threatened, except for when it rained. Mother said we lived in a hole in the middle of the world that all the water drained into. Sometimes it snowed.

Sophia had gone around every pothole in the courtyard – and potholes were legion – smashing the ice. She crouched near the toilet. We had a wooden toilet at one end of the courtyard, like a coffin standing on the sole of its foot.

Near the toilet, and the septic tank, was the Hole.

The Hole was full of muddy water, often frozen over, like a lake for midgets. We called it the Hole because it was a hole and the biggest one we knew of. A giant tree once stood on the spot, but Father had taken against it and dug it out roots and all.

Sophia inspected the damage. Seeing me, she stood up, hammer in hand, wearing her worried face – essentially the same as her it-wasn't-me face but not quite so wide-eyed and innocent. She could pull an it-wasn't-me face even when as guilty as Eve with apples.

As I got closer, she felt the weight of the hammer in her mitten. I thought she didn't recognize me. That frightened me. If Sophia didn't recognize me, that meant ... It meant something frightening.

She had translucent skin.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

Then she recognized me, her other half, and smiled.

When Sophia smiled all the ice in the potholes melted.

'Mother has one of her headaches,' I said.

'Which one?'

I shrugged. They all looked the same but had different names: today's headache, yesterday's headache, Tuesday's

headache.

'Look!' said Sophia, pointing at the cemetery. The big black dog was wandering through the headstones. It had been wandering around the Manse for days. Mother told us not to go near it in case it was rabbit. I thought Rabbit was its name, though it was a mad kind of rabbit because it looked like a dog.

Rabbit disappeared behind an outhouse.

Sophia and I looked in the opposite direction – we must have done, otherwise we wouldn't have seen it coming down the Lane. The Lane was flat, not a hill. Strictly speaking, it had neither up nor down. But, to us, down the Lane meant from the Road along the Lane to the courtyard at the back of the Manse. And up the Lane meant from the courtyard at the back of the Manse and along the Lane to the Road.

The Lane connected us to the Road, and the Road connected us to the rest of the world. The Road weaved and wound this way and that as if the people who made it were drunk. It began somewhere and ended somewhere else. All roads do, and the Road must have too. Between its points of beginning and ending, the Road went past Farmer Barry's farm, past the Manse where we lived, and through the nearest village: Bruagh. I knew no more than that. That, and that the Road had potholes: new ones every winter, like rabbits, said Father. Potholes would turn out to be more important than I knew.

Not yet five years old, I had little idea of roads, beginnings and endings. They were not the sorts of things I thought about. The Road had always been the Road, as the Lane had always been the Lane, as if only one of each existed.

Only one of each did indeed exist, although I became aware, later, that there were many of their class, just as there is only one Edward Pike although there are many boys. Such matters can be confusing when you're not five

yet. I would doubtless have despaired at my confusions if I'd thought about them, but I'd plenty of other confusions to be getting on with.

I didn't know it was a car, then. The light blue metal thing with windows and wheels sort of ... frizzled ... out of existence. It reminded me of Farmer Barry's lorry, but looked nothing like it. Sophia and I looked at each other. When we looked back towards the Lane, the thing sort of frizzled back into existence, but further up the Lane than it had been. Again, it advanced. A dust cloud would have risen behind it had not the ground been wet.

Sophia and I yelled, ran to the back door, darted inside, and clung to Mother's apron. Except we didn't because, first, we were immobilized and silenced with fear, and, second, we were immobilized with fascination. Especially when ...

Frizzle. Vanish. Frizzle. The thing on wheels returned closer than ever to us and still on the Lane but only just. Two wheels bumped and splashed in Laneside mud. The thing slowed down.

... stopped. It stopped. Unintentionally, I thought.

The door opened and a man with a walking stick got out. He reached inside, withdrew a hat, and put it on his head. Obviously, the thing getting stuck in the mud upset him, for he slammed the door shut and hit it a kick with his boot. He did have two boots, having two feet, but he only kicked the door with one. The violence of his action imbued Sophia with the strength to run indoors. And she did. Open-mouthed and shivering, I remained. Powerless but intrigued.

The man approached me, but not in a frightening way. I knew nothing about clothing in those days, but his looked very nice, like Sunday best but better. The cane was ornamental rather than an aid for walking. He had a bushy beard like Father's, and it had dignified streaks of grey. He

said something in a foreign language, which, I realized, after he said something else, was 'young man'.

'Young man,' he said in a funny accent. 'Are you deaf, child?'

'No.'

'No what?' he asked.

I had no idea what.

'No, sir,' said the stranger.

No sir what? It might have been some kind of puzzle.

I liked puzzles. 'What's that?' I asked, pointing at the stuck-in-the-mud thing on wheels.

'That,' he swung at the hips to where I pointed and swung back, 'that, my boy, is what would be on most planets that support organic life a major advance in transportation technology.'

I looked up at him. He looked down at me, and saw a small boy with eyes like marbles and the space between his ears unfurnished.

Said he, 'It's a time machine.'

It didn't look like a clock to me. It had no hands.

'Yes, my boy, a time machine. The intricacies of its workings are far beyond me, I'm afraid. I'm still learning, by trial and error, how to make the blasted thing do what I want it to.'

'What do you want it to do?'

'Work properly would be a start.'

'What does a time machine do?'

'It travels in time, naturally. See those ... headstones?' He satisfied himself that they were indeed headstones. 'See those headstones?' I said I did. 'At top speed, my time machine could zoom to over there before it left here.'

As I looked towards the cemetery - because the man was looking towards it - I noticed Mother at the back door with her hands on Sophia's shoulders. Sophia stood in front of her like a fireguard, or a bearded stranger guard. Gregory's head peered over Mother's shoulder. Edgar's

head peered over her other shoulder. Mother looked like she had three heads.

I hadn't eaten breakfast yet. My tummy rumbled.

'That's a graveyard,' said the stranger.

'Cemetery,' said I.

'Yes. Quite so. Cemetery.'

The cemetery was as old as the Manse, which had existed since the sixteenth century. Mother didn't explain centuries, but we knew there must have been at least twenty of them.

Though closer to my birth than my death – a reasonable assumption – death, nevertheless, never strayed far from my mind ... nor Mother's, Father's or Sophia's. I'm sure Death nurtured a relationship with Gregory too. How else would we be? What other states of mind could we possess? What else would occupy our thoughts with a cemetery for a back garden?

Sections of the Manse, the original building, still stood; they were built into newer sections with thicker walls designed to hide and support them. Sections of wall from the nineteenth century were visible, but all the rest came from the early twentieth. Even when we were tiny children Sophia and I were used to feeling the chills that suddenly were where no chills were before – like the dead passing through. Mother would tell us to close the door and keep the cold out. I thought the Cold was an entity, like the Bogeyman. The Cold, the Dark, and the Bogeyman were a supernatural trinity, like God but less spiteful. Of all the entities in the Manse and the land around it, the Cold filled it least balefully. We had learned to live with the Cold. Only the kitchen remained warm day and night and through the seasons.

'A large black dog,' said the stranger. 'Have you seen one?'

'Is it yours?'

'Yes. In a manner of speaking. You've seen it, then?'

'It was in the cemetery a minute ago.'

'Good! Then I'm in the correct place. And you are, unless I've made an error, Edward.' I neither denied nor confirmed it. He hadn't asked me to. 'I won't take up much of your time, Edward. No doubt you're busy doing whatever small boys do. I need to ask a permission of you. It won't work, at least not with complete success, unless I have your permission. May I ask?'

'Yes.'

'Will you be my friend?'

Gosh! I didn't know what to say. Nor did I see why he shouldn't be my friend if he wanted to. Some years of life and experience were necessary before I would think of such things as what we might have in common. The notion of ulterior motives was unknown to me. I'd never been told not to talk to strangers. I didn't know any strangers. I didn't know many not strangers either.

'Sophia's my friend,' I said. 'She's my sister.'

'Is that her?'

'Yes?'

'My word ... Yes ... Yes indeed ... I wouldn't want to be your very best friend, Edward,' he said. 'I'd never want to replace Sophia as your very best and special friend. If I could be just an ordinary friend, that would do nicely. May we be friends?'

'All right,' I said with a smile.

We shook on it.

'Now, listen to me, Edward, my friend. What I'm about to say may be important, and you need to remember it.' I listened hard with both ears, my eyebrows lowered and my neck stuck out. 'You may, one day, want something from your friend ... from me.'

'What like?'

'I don't know. But something important. When you want it, all you have to do is ask. Is that clear?' Clear as porridge. I didn't know whether to shake my head or nod it.

'Ask and it shall be given unto you, as the good book says. Seek and ye shall find.'

'That's from the bible.'

'Correct! What a clever chap you are, Edward. I'm pleased about that, because our friendship will change this social and cerebral milieu. You shall witness change. Indeed, my intervention necessitates change. Time itself, which you think fixed, may on occasions warp back on itself. But let's hope it doesn't happen too often. Ours is very much a friendship that requires a clever chap ... Is that your mother?' he asked, looking past me again.

'Yes.'

'And are those boys your siblings?'

'No. That's my brother Gregory and my brother Edgar.'

'Gregory looks like a strapping fellow. Do you think he could help me push my time machine? It's rather stuck at the moment.'

I yelled at the back door. 'He wants Gregory to help him push his time machine out of the mud.' Nobody moved. Mother's hands might have tightened fractionally on Sophia's shoulders.

Turning square on to the back door, having taken a step closer to it, I yelled harder. 'He wants Gregory to help him push his time machine out of the mud.'

A vacuum followed my second yell, as though I were in a bubble, like a reindeer in a glass orb that snows when you shake it. Except I existed in my bubble, sensate, alive, a physical entity, and everything outside was plastic, stiff, inanimate. I began to feel very claustrophobic in there, until, just when I couldn't hold my breath any longer, Mother moved. Her head turned towards Gregory and she said something. Gregory hesitated before coming forward, pausing, then approaching me and the stranger.

'Sir, you have my warmest gratitude,' said the stranger. 'Our combined weight should get it over the rut.' He led the way to the rear of his machine. Gregory followed. I

followed too, but only halfway. Silver letters on the front of the machine spelled MORRIS MINOR.

At first, the rut looked too deep for them to succeed. I couldn't see the stranger at the far side. Gregory's face turned red. But they got the machine rocking, and eventually it rocked over the rut.

'We did it!' exclaimed the stranger, and shook Gregory by the hand. 'Thank you, sir. Thank you.' As he wiped his hands with a handkerchief, Gregory ran back to Mother.

The stranger got into the machine and it came alive with a roar. I watched as it circled the courtyard and slowed to walking speed before stopping where I stood too much in awe to do other than stand and watch. A window in the machine sank, allowing the stranger inside to speak to me.

'Thank you for being my friend.'

I wanted to ask him something, many things, but didn't know what any of them were. The window went up again, separating him from me, and the machine took off. 'What's transportation technology?' I thought, too late.

The machine diminished in size as it went up the Lane.
Frizzle. Vanish.

The Night of Our Final Flight

It was darker than night but warm and giggly where we were. 'Who's the man that came here today?' asked Sophia. Before I had a chance to ask 'What man?' our bedroom door opened and we shushed.

'Oh my goodness! Where could they be? The Bogeyman must have stolen Edward and Sophia. There's nothing here, in their bedroom, but a hump in the bed, underneath the blankets.'

The hump was us and Mother didn't know. We put our hands over our mouths and giggled while trying not to.

'They'll miss dinner if the Bogeyman doesn't bring them back and they're not downstairs in five minutes.' (Tee-hee-hee!) 'It's strawberry jam on toast and hot, sweet tea ... when you're done.'

Our bedroom door closed.

'Five minutes,' said Sophia.

'Strawberry jam on toast.'

'Who is he?' asked Sophia, one half of the blanket-hump.

'Who?'

'The man that Gregory pushed his machine out of the mud.'

I'd forgotten about him. 'I don't know.'

'What did he want?'

'I don't know ... To be my friend.'

‘Why did he want to be your friend?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I’m your friend.’

‘You’re allowed more than one.’ I hadn’t known you’re allowed to have more than one friend until the stranger told me. ‘You’re my best friend.’

‘I’m your best friend,’ she repeated, with a giggle in her voice.

The mystery of the stranger and his time machine puzzled me for as long as the memory of it lasted, which, when you’re stupidly young, isn’t long. I’d more or less forgotten about it again by strawberry jam on toast and sweet tea time.

After strawberry jam on toast and sweet tea, after our trips outside with our bowels – which seldom moved as regularly as they should have, according to Mother – and after warming ourselves by the fire only to leave the living room and get cold again ten minutes later, Sophia and me had nothing left to do but look out of the window of our bedroom.

Getting sleepy as the sky darkened between day and night, Sophia and I looked through rain bubbles at nothing in particular: the Lane to our right, outbuildings in the middle, and the cemetery to the left. Sophia pointed at the Lane. ‘Look!’ I looked, and saw Farmer Barry’s lorry, squiggly in a rain bubble.

Farmer Barry’s lorry turned round in the courtyard so its back faced us. Farmer Barry had brought Father home from work. Father normally came home from work as he set out: on his bicycle. The bicycle was on the back of the lorry.

Also on the back of the lorry: a shining black coffin.

‘Is that for us?’ asked Sophia.

I told her I didn’t think so.

‘How do you know?’ she enquired.

‘We need two. They’d be small and white.’

Four eyes – ours – shifted from the lorry past the outhouses to the cemetery, or, as we sometimes called it, the back garden.

‘Who’s it for, then?’

‘I don’t know. Somebody dead.’

‘But nobody’s dead.’

‘Granny Hazel nearly is.’

‘Who’s it for, then?’

‘Granny Hazel, probably.’

We couldn’t sleep. Tough luck. Mother – who was cross with herself for having forgotten our hot water bottles – made us get our nightshirts on, tucked us in and kissed us. When she left, we got up and looked out of the window again.

I wanted to go to the hot sun, but Sophia wanted to go to the cool moon. We went to the cool moon, and built sandcastles with moon-dust and played the same games we played in the courtyard.

Coming home from the moon, we saw a dot of murky light: the Manse. We flew over black trees and black hills of green. The Manse grew as we flew closer; the dot of murky light became our bedroom window.

‘There’s us,’ said Sophia.

Our heads were two pale orbs behind rain-bubbled glass. Then our heads were two pale orbs with eyes. Sophia and I were two sad faces looking out at ourselves as we flew home from the moon.

Then we were up close through the window and back inside us.

‘The moon’s cold,’ I said.

Sophia said we could go to the sun tomorrow.

As far as our eyes could see through the window, they saw nothing but night. Out there, past the clouds where night met the sky, there were stars. There were hundreds and hundreds of stars. Thousands. Millions – and whatever’s bigger than millions – of stars.

Beautiful Mother, soot on her cheeks – her smiles would have been no less treasures had there been more of them – Mother must have floated upstairs, as she sometimes did, because we didn't hear the stairs creaking. Normally, the stairs creaked louder than the walls and roof. We heard the door, though. On each of our bedside tables, beside each of our lumpy beds, a dim candle burned in a glass bowl. Between the candles, in the space between our beds, our bottoms in nightshirts were side by side, and the backs of our fine blond heads.

We turned round to see Mother's candle entering the bedroom, then Mother with our forgotten hot water bottles. 'Get into bed,' she whispered, cross because we were freezing to death in our nightshirts without enough sense to get back under the blankets. 'What are you looking at out there? There's nothing to see. You've nothing on your feet. Honestly!'

She pulled back the blankets on Sophia's bed and inserted a hot water bottle. Sophia got in. Mother folded the blankets over her like sealing an envelope. I got into my bed, and my hot water bottle joined me seconds later. 'Go straight to sleep, and no talking.' She blew out our candles and closed our bedroom door tight, leaving us alone with the Dark, the Cold and the Night Noises.

'Why did she whisper?' whispered Sophia.

My shrug was lost on my twin without candlelight, unless, with bigger earholes than me, she heard a shrug in the rusty bedsprings or frozen sheets.

'Are you awake?' I pretended to be asleep. 'Edward! Edward, wake up. Are you asleep?'

'Not yet.'

'Why did Mother whisper?'

'It's been a whispery day.'

'Why's it been a whispery day?'

'Some days just are.'

My answer satisfied her. It satisfied me too.

Some days were whispery the way some days were sad. Some days were noisy the way some days were happy. Whispery sad days and noisy happy days went together in a satisfying way, the way toast and jam go together although toast is hard and jam is runny.

I had a hot water bottle, which satisfied me too, because it meant my feet would soon defrost. In the absence of knitted bed hats, we pulled our blankets up to our eyes. We were snug although our exposed foreheads were chilly. Cold that ruled the day gone by, at night turned our faces straight like icicles.

Sophia and I had agreed, long before candles-out, and without need for words, that we should be quiet and sad too, although we felt happy – which was probably a sin. We were quiet and happy, but happy in a sad way because of Father's sadness at Granny Hazel's illness, which we thought we should share. We needed no one to tell us. We did not need to tell each other. Sophia and I just knew, the way we knew how to fly: tomorrow would be different.

Tomorrow, we would begin to forget how to fly.

'Edward,' said Sophia.

'I'm asleep.'

'I saw the White Lady with the fuzzy face. Did you see her too?'

'Yes.'

The White Lady with the fuzzy face was our ghost. When someone saw her, it meant somebody was going to die. I hadn't really seen her; I told Sophia a lie because I didn't want my twin to be all alone and afraid when she saw the White Lady with the fuzzy face.

Later ... we should have been asleep, and maybe we were until the stairs creaked and the stairs creaked and the stairs creaked again. The landing floorboards at the top of the stairs creaked. The handle of our door grated and the

door groaned open. We were four wide eyes, watching. A candle. A hand. An arm. Mother. Mother returned to our bedroom with the candle making her face look like the sun in night-time.

Sophia rose on her elbows in her bed and I rose on mine in mine.

‘Granny Hazel has passed on,’ said Mother, with neither sorrow nor a smile. I felt odd in a tingly way down my spine. ‘I just thought I’d let you know. There’s nothing you need to do. There’s nothing anyone can do. Go to sleep now, it’s late. Be brave.’

She and her candle left the room, closed the door tight again, and left us inside on our elbows with the Dark and the Cold. We had each other, and Mother had been brave. Sophia and I borrowed some of her bravery, although we didn’t know for sure what to do with it.

Granny Hazel took ill a week before Farmer Barry brought Father, his bicycle and the coffin home in his lorry. We saw her taking ill as it happened, Sophia and me, and Mother and Gregory and Edgar too. All of us children were born in the Manse and had lived there all our short lives. Granny Hazel was born in the Manse too, and had lived there all her very long life.

On the day she took ill, Father worked late on the farm. The Manse’s kitchen was hot and thick with the aroma of beef, potatoes, carrots and onions. Sophia, me, Edgar, Gregory, Granny Hazel and Mother had enjoyed stew and crusty bread for dinner when the first sign happened. Our empty bowls were stacked and ready for washing. Tea steamed from six mugs.

‘I feel sick,’ said Granny Hazel.

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Mother. ‘The way you down it.’

Granny Hazel moaned. ‘It wasn’t the stew.’

She moaned again and toppled sideways off her chair.

Surprised but unfazed, Edgar and Sophia stared at the place where she had been. Gregory stared too, before turning to Mother, who pretended not to have noticed. I looked under the table to see where Granny Hazel had gone. Her eyes gazed at me unseeing.

‘She’s collapsed,’ said Gregory.

Mother said it looked like it.

I emerged from under the table to see what would happen next.

‘I hope she didn’t bang her head,’ said Mother, pouring herself another cup of tea. After blowing on it, she sent Gregory on the spare bicycle to tell Father at Farmer Barry’s farm.

By the time Gregory returned – with Father pedalling twenty-four to the dozen behind him – Granny Hazel had come back to life. She had drunk a cup of tea and retired to bed, colliding with more walls than usual on the way. When she came downstairs the following day, she couldn’t get back up. Father took her bed apart, carted the whole thing down to the living room and rebuilt it. He and Mother talked about getting a doctor for Granny Hazel, but nothing came of it.

Father didn’t trust doctors. He said if the Lord makes you sick it’s because you’re supposed to be sick, and if the Lord wants to heal you He’ll heal you. He said doctors suffered from having had an education. Education blinded people with false knowledge and fancy words from the facts of sin, the Saviour, and salvation.

Sophia and I remained quiet in bed after Mother left because Sophia had nothing to say and I was preoccupied with puzzling out passing on.

Whenever I tried to puzzle something out, Mother called me precocious. So I took to puzzling out in private. I wanted to puzzle out what Granny Hazel had passed on,

and thought about asking Mother in the morning. Knowing it would be a silly question, I decided against it, and satisfied myself with the knowledge that when people die they pass something on.

But what?

I knew people passed on information. Sometimes Father told Mother Farmer Barry had asked him to pass something on – usually something about his wife's health. I used to think Mrs Farmer Barry suffered from halitosis. It kept her indoors. I knew about halitosis because Mother said Edgar had it. Mother corrected me when I made a fool of myself one day by saying the wrong word. Mrs Farmer Barry might have had halitosis too, but she definitely had tuberous sclerosis. When I asked Mother about tuberous sclerosis she told me to go to bed.

Noises like moving furniture came upstairs from downstairs. Father must have been shifting Granny Hazel's coffin into the house from the outhouse. How would he get her in? She was bigger than him and fat. He would have to roll her on to the floor first. I listened for a bump that never came. My brain fogged over trying to fathom the mechanics of it. The kitchen table was about the right size; the coffin would best go on it. Maybe Granny Hazel had enough life in her to walk to the kitchen. Father could give her a leg up.

I gazed at where the ceiling would be if I could see it in the Dark, and wondered if it was there even though I couldn't.

Lying there, I wondered if I could invent something better to do with a dead body than bury it. Use it as a scarecrow or something. We ate meat. A dead body had meat. Just today Mother said we were out of sausages. But we couldn't eat Granny Hazel if Father put her in a coffin and buried her – not that I'd want to eat Granny Hazel; she would probably make me ill.

In the Quiet, Dark and Cold, Sophia pulled me back from the rim of sleep. 'Who'll sleep in Granny Hazel's room

now?’

‘I don’t know,’ I replied, because I didn’t know. Until then, I hadn’t thought about it. I thought about it. I thought about it for longer than I thought. ‘Gregory, probably.’

Sophia didn’t answer. She’d gone to sleep.

Next thing I knew, the bedroom door creaked and candlelight came in with Mother – and Father too this time. I must have been asleep because no creaks came from the stairs.

Father had shaken Gregory and Edgar awake, and brought them in dressing gowns and bare feet to speak to all of us together. We were all there: Sophia and me in bed, Mother, Gregory and Edgar shivering, and Father, the white of his face glowing between his head hair and his beard. How could anyone say, as Mother did, that Gregory had inherited Father’s square chin and strong looks? How did anyone know what Father’s chin looked like? In Gregory, I could see only Father’s ugly disposition, which, up to that point, Mother had never mentioned.

None of Father’s strong looks or ugly disposition remained when my and Sophia’s turn came to be born. Our birth called upon Mother’s substantial resources. Even as a child, I saw shards of her in us: the splinters of solemn mood, the sharp edges of delicate features, and the jigsaw piece of sallow pallor. I was less a handsome boy than a pretty one. Sophia reflected Mother in every way. Mother depleted herself when she produced us. I came out of our birth best. Neither Mother nor Sophia came out of it whole. As Sophia gained strength through infancy and grew into childhood, Mother’s remaining strength shrank in equal measure. They were ghosts of each other.

Father’s voice crackled with emotion as he gave us our instructions for tomorrow: no dawdling, no talking, no laughing and no horseplay. We were to get up promptly, wash, and get dressed in our Sunday best. We were to be respectful at all times. Were we to step out of line there

would be consequences. 'Justified consequences,' he said. I wondered how justified consequences differed from ordinary ones.

Our Sunday best should have been for church. We only attended at Christmas. The nearest church was two hours away and two hours back if the horse hurried and the cart kept all its wheels.

While Father talked, Gregory's and Edgar's feet turned blue.

Blue feet were common; we all had them.

But we didn't mind blue feet. We didn't mind groaning, crooked rafters. We were deaf to creaking walls and joints. We made peace with the wind that penetrated brickwork gaps like the breath of ghosts. We were accustomed to straining noises at night like the noise our gums made when Farmer Barry pulled a rotten tooth. Commonly, a whine somehow different from the usual whines awakened one or other of us - me, Sophia, Edgar, Gregory, Mother or Father - and sometimes a whine woke all of us together, and we would be twelve eyeballs in the dark. One of us might frighten another downstairs, or in the corridor, with or without our candles, as, unable to return to sleep, we prowled in search of dawn.

When Father had done talking, he left our bedroom without saying goodnight. He never said goodnight. Gregory and Edgar never said goodnight either. They limped out behind him and went to their room. Mother kissed me and Sophia, and muttered as she tucked the sheets in that we would catch our deaths, which made me aware, for the first time, of death's existence as my future possession, waiting for me to claim it, drumming its fingers, bored, because I had two left feet - according to Mother - and took ages at everything.

Sophia went to sleep before our parents went down the creaky stairs. I decided to stay awake and listen in case she

woke. On that night, as on most others, I was useless at staying awake.

Granny Hazel, dead on the kitchen table, and only a floor or ceiling between us! She looked up at me with her eyes closed. I feared looking over the side of my bed in case she opened them.

Sophia's Promise

Poor Mother.

Mother rose before dawn even in summer when dawn came early, and we ate breakfast with sunlight streaming through the kitchen window and making the marmalade glow like orange jellyfish.

Every pre-dawn, Mother hurried downstairs in her high-neck blouse, V-neck pullover, cardigan, woollen socks, long skirt, and invisible green Wellington boots. She had ballet feet and a ballerina body. Either I saw her hurrying downstairs in my dreams or I've muddied her haste with images from books and movies: Jane Eyre, Blanche DuBois, Tank Girl, and the blind daughter in *Little House on the Prairie* whose name never made as much impact as her hair – which was like Mother's after she washed and dried it.

Sophia had similar hair. They were great, troubled women – not Mother and Sophia; they were just troubled – Jane Eyre, Blanche DuBois, Tank Girl and the blind daughter in *Little House on the Prairie* whose name never made as much impact as her hair. I became familiar with television years later. The Manse had no aerial in those days, nor television to connect it to.

Every day, Mother built up scrunched newspaper, firelighters, sticks and coals, and put a match to protruding paper ends. She watched the firelighters catch and flames