

INKHEART

CORNELIA FUNKE

*Translated from the
German by Anthea Bell*

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A STRANGER IN THE NIGHT

The moon shone in the rocking horse's eye, and in the mouse's eye, too, when Tolly fetched it out from under his pillow to see. The clock went tick-tock, and in the stillness he thought he heard little bare feet running across the floor, then laughter and whispering, and a sound like the pages of a big book being turned over.

L. M. Boston, *The Children of Green Knowe*

Rain fell that night, a fine, whispering rain. Many years later, Meggie had only to close her eyes and she could still hear it, like tiny fingers tapping on the windowpane. A dog barked somewhere in the darkness, and however often she tossed and turned Meggie couldn't get to sleep.

The book she had been reading was under her pillow, pressing its cover against her ear as if to lure her back into its printed pages. "I'm sure it must be very comfortable sleeping with a hard, rectangular thing like that under your head," her

father had teased the first time he found a book under her pillow. “Go on, admit it, the book whispers its story to you at night.”

“Sometimes, yes,” Meggie had said. “But it only works for children.” Which made Mo tweak her nose. Mo. Meggie had never called her father anything else.

That night — when so much began and so many things changed forever — Meggie had one of her favorite books under her pillow, and since the rain wouldn’t let her sleep she sat up, rubbed the drowsiness from her eyes, and took it out. Its pages rustled promisingly when she opened it. Meggie thought this first whisper sounded a little different from one book to another, depending on whether or not she already knew the story it was going to tell her. But she needed light. She had a box of matches hidden in the drawer of her bedside table. Mo had forbidden her to light candles at night. He didn’t like fire. “Fire devours books,” he always said, but she was twelve years old, she surely could be trusted to keep an eye on a couple of candle flames. Meggie loved to read by candlelight. She had five candlesticks on the windowsill, and she was just holding the lighted match to one of the black wicks when she heard footsteps outside. She blew out the match in alarm — oh, how well she remembered it, even many years later — and knelt to look out of the window, which was wet with rain. Then she saw him.

The rain cast a kind of pallor on the darkness, and the stranger was little more than a shadow. Only his face gleamed white as he looked up at Meggie. His hair clung to his wet forehead. The rain was falling on him, but he ignored it. He stood there motionless, arms crossed over his chest as if that might at least warm him a little. And he kept on staring at the house.

I must go and wake Mo, thought Meggie. But she stayed put, her heart thudding, and went on gazing out into the night as if the stranger's stillness had infected her. Suddenly, he turned his head, and Meggie felt as if he were looking straight into her eyes. She shot off the bed so fast the open book fell to the floor, and she ran barefoot out into the dark corridor. This was the end of May, but it was chilly in the old house.

There was still a light on in Mo's room. He often stayed up reading late into the night. Meggie had inherited her love of books from her father. When she took refuge from a bad dream with him, nothing could lull her to sleep better than Mo's calm breathing beside her and the sound of the pages turning. Nothing chased nightmares away faster than the rustle of printed paper.

But the figure outside the house was no dream.

The book Mo was reading that night was bound in pale blue linen. Later, Meggie remembered that, too. What unimportant little details stick in the memory.

"Mo, there's someone out in the yard!"

Her father raised his head and looked at her with the usual absent expression he wore when she interrupted his reading. It always took him a few moments to find his way out of that other world, the labyrinth of printed letters.

"Someone out in the yard? Are you sure?"

"Yes. He's staring at our house."

Mo put down his book. "So what were *you* reading before you went to sleep? *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*?"

Meggie frowned. "Please, Mo! Come and look."

He didn't believe her, but he went anyway. Meggie tugged him along the corridor so impatiently that he stubbed his toe on a pile of books, which was hardly surprising. Stacks of

books were piled high all over the house — not just arranged in neat rows on bookshelves, the way other people kept them, oh no! The books in Mo and Meggie's house were stacked under tables, on chairs, in the corners of the rooms. There were books in the kitchen and books in the lavatory. Books on the TV set and in the closet, small piles of books, tall piles of books, books thick and thin, books old and new. They welcomed Meggie down to breakfast with invitingly opened pages; they kept boredom at bay when the weather was bad. And sometimes you fell over them.

"He's just standing there!" whispered Meggie, leading Mo into her room.

"Has he got a hairy face? If so he could be a werewolf."

"Oh, stop it!" Meggie looked at him sternly, although his jokes made her feel less scared. Already, she hardly believed anymore in the figure standing in the rain — until she knelt down again at the window. "There! Do you see him?" she whispered.

Mo looked out through the raindrops running down the pane and said nothing.

"Didn't you promise burglars would never break into our house because there's nothing here to steal?" whispered Meggie.

"He's not a burglar," replied Mo, but as he stepped back from the window his face was so grave that Meggie's heart thudded faster than ever. "Go back to bed, Meggie," he said. "This visitor has come to see me."

He left the room before Meggie could ask what kind of visitor, for goodness sake, turned up in the middle of the night? She followed him anxiously. As she crept down the corridor she heard her father taking the chain off the front door, and

when she reached the hall she saw him standing in the open doorway. The night came in, dark and damp, and the rushing of the rain sounded loud and threatening.

“Dustfinger!” called Mo into the darkness. “Is that you?”

Dustfinger? What kind of a name was that? Meggie couldn’t remember ever hearing it before, yet it sounded familiar, like a distant memory that wouldn’t take shape properly.

At first, all seemed still outside except for the rain falling, murmuring as if the night had found its voice. But then footsteps approached the house, and the man emerged from the darkness of the yard, his long coat so wet with rain that it clung to his legs. For a split second, as the stranger stepped into the light spilling out of the house, Meggie thought she saw a small furry head over his shoulder, snuffling as it looked out of his backpack and then quickly disappearing back into it.

Dustfinger wiped his wet face with his sleeve and offered Mo his hand.

“How are you, Silvertongue?” he asked. “It’s been a long time.”

Hesitantly, Mo took the outstretched hand. “A very long time,” he said, looking past his visitor as if he expected to see another figure emerge from the night. “Come in, you’ll catch your death. Meggie says you’ve been standing out there for some time.”

“Meggie? Ah yes, of course.” Dustfinger let Mo lead him into the house. He scrutinized Meggie so thoroughly she felt quite embarrassed and didn’t know where to look. In the end she just stared back.

“She’s grown.”

“You remember her?”

“Of course.”

Meggie noticed that Mo double-locked the door.

"How old is she now?" Dustfinger smiled at her. It was a strange smile. Meggie couldn't decide whether it was mocking, supercilious, or just awkward. She didn't smile back.

"Twelve," said Mo.

"Twelve? My word!" Dustfinger pushed his dripping hair back from his forehead. It reached almost to his shoulders. Meggie wondered what color it was when it was dry. The stubble around his narrow-lipped mouth was gingery, like the fur of the stray cat Meggie sometimes fed with a saucer of milk outside the door. Ginger hair sprouted on his cheeks, too, sparse as a boy's first beard but not long enough to hide three long, pale scars. They made Dustfinger's face look as if it had been smashed and stuck back together again.

"Twelve," he repeated. "Of course. She was . . . let's see, she was three then, wasn't she?"

Mo nodded. "Come on, I'll find you some dry clothes." Impatiently, as if he were suddenly in a hurry to hide the man from Meggie, he led his visitor across the hall. "And, Meggie," he said over his shoulder, "you go back to sleep." Then, without another word, he closed his workshop door.

Meggie stood there rubbing her cold feet together. Go back to sleep. Sometimes, when they'd stayed up late yet again, Mo would toss her down on her bed like a bag of walnuts. Sometimes he chased her around the house after supper until she escaped into her room, breathless with laughter. And sometimes he was so tired he lay down on the sofa and she made him a cup of coffee before she went to bed. But he had never *ever* sent her off to her room so brusquely.

A foreboding, clammy and fearful, came into her heart as if, along with the visitor whose name was so strange yet

somehow familiar, some menace had slipped into her life. And she wished — so hard it frightened her — that she had never gone to get Mo and Dustfinger had stayed outside until the rain washed him away.

When the door of the workshop opened again she jumped.

“Still there, I see,” said Mo. “Go to bed, Meggie. Please.” He had that little frown over his nose that appeared only when something was really worrying him, and he seemed to look straight through her as if his thoughts were somewhere else entirely. The foreboding in Meggie’s heart grew, spreading black wings.

“Send him away, Mo!” she said as he gently propelled her toward her room. “Please! Send him away. I don’t like him.”

Mo leaned in her open doorway. “He’ll be gone when you get up in the morning. Word of honor.”

“Word of honor — no crossed fingers?” Meggie looked him straight in the eye. She could always tell when Mo was lying, however hard he tried to hide it from her.

“No crossed fingers,” he said, holding both hands out to show her.

Then he closed her door, even though he knew she didn’t like that. Meggie put her ear to it, listening. She could hear the clink of china. So the man with the sandy beard was getting a nice cup of tea to warm him up. I hope he catches pneumonia, thought Meggie . . . though he needn’t necessarily die of it. Meggie heard the kettle whistling in the kitchen and Mo carrying a tray of clattering crockery back to the workshop. When that door closed she forced herself to wait a few more seconds, just to be on the safe side. Then she crept back out into the hallway.

There was a sign hanging on the door of Mo’s workshop, a

small metal plaque. Meggie knew the words on it by heart. When she was five she had often practiced reading the old-fashioned, spindly lettering:

*Some books should be tasted
some devoured,
but only a few
should be chewed and digested thoroughly.*

Back then, when she still had to climb on a box to read the plaque, she had thought the chewing and digesting were meant literally and wondered, horrified, why Mo had hung on his workshop door the words of someone who vandalized books. Now she knew what the plaque really meant, but tonight, she wasn't interested in written words. Spoken words were what she wanted to hear, the words being exchanged in soft, almost inaudible whispers by the two men on the other side of the door.

"Don't underestimate him!" she heard Dustfinger say. His voice was so different from Mo's. No one else in the world had a voice like her father's. Mo could paint pictures in the empty air with his voice alone.

"He'd do anything to get hold of it." That was Dustfinger again. "And when I say 'anything,' I can assure you I mean *anything*."

"I'll never let him have it." That was Mo.

"He'll still get his hands on it, one way or another! I tell you, they're on your trail."

"It wouldn't be the first time. I've always managed to shake them off before."

"Oh yes? And for how much longer, do you think? What

about your daughter? Are you telling me she actually likes moving around the whole time? Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

It was so quiet behind the door that Meggie scarcely dared breathe in case the two men heard her.

Finally, her father spoke again, hesitantly, as if his tongue found it difficult to form the words. "Then what do you think I ought to do?"

"Come with me. I'll take you to them." A cup clinked. The sound of a spoon against china. How loud small noises sound in a silence. "You know how much Capricorn thinks of your talents. He'd be glad if you took it to him of your own free will, I'm sure he would. The man he found to replace you is useless."

Capricorn. Another peculiar name. Dustfinger had uttered it as if the mere sound might scorch his tongue. Meggie wriggled her chilly toes and wrinkled her cold nose. She didn't understand much of what the two men were saying, but she tried to memorize every single word of it.

It was quiet again in the workshop.

"Oh, I don't know," said Mo at last. He sounded so weary it tore at Meggie's heart. "I'll have to think about it. When do you think his men will get here?"

"Soon!"

The word dropped like a stone into the silence.

"Soon," repeated Mo. "Very well. I'll have made up my mind by tomorrow. Do you have somewhere to sleep?"

"Oh, I can always find a place," replied Dustfinger. "I'm managing quite well these days, although it's still all much too fast for me." His laugh was not a happy one. "But I'd like to know what you decide. May I come back tomorrow? About midday?"