

LBRIS

We know
books

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The City and Its Uncertain Walls

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L O N D O N

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PART ONE

YOU WERE THE ONE who told me about the town.

On that summer evening we were heading up the river, the sweet fragrance of grass wafting over us. We passed over several little weirs that held back the flowing sand, stopping from time to time to gaze at the delicate silvery fish wriggling in the pools. We had both been barefoot for a while. The cold water washed over our ankles, while the fine sand at the bottom of the river enveloped our feet like the soft clouds in a dream. I was seventeen, and you were a year younger.

You'd stuck your flat red sandals in your yellow plastic shoulder bag and were walking from one sandbank to the next, just ahead of me. Blades of grass were pasted to your wet calves, wonderful green punctuation marks. I was carrying my worn-out white sneakers, one in each hand.

Perhaps tired of walking, you plunked yourself down on the summer grass, wordlessly gazing up at the sky. With a screech a pair of small birds flashed across the sky. In the silence that followed, a hint of bluish twilight began to entwine itself around us. As I sat down beside you, I had an odd feeling, as if thousands of invisible threads were finely tying your body to my heart. The minute movement of your eyelids and the slight flutter of your lips were enough to stir my heart.

At that time neither you nor I had names. The radiant feelings of a seventeen-year-old and a sixteen-year-old on the grass of a riverbank, in the summer twilight, were the only things that mattered. Stars would soon be twinkling above us, and they had no names either. The two of us sat there, side by side, on the riverbank of a nameless world.

"There's a high wall surrounding the whole town," you began, drawing out the words from the deep silence, like a diver scouring the seabed for pearls. "It's not that big a town, but it's not small enough to absorb in a single glance either."

This was the second time you'd talked about the town. And now the town had a high wall around it.

As you spoke, the town revealed a single lovely river and three stone bridges (the East Bridge, Old Bridge, and West Bridge), a library and a watchtower, an abandoned foundry and communal housing. In the faint light as twilight drew near, we sat shoulder to shoulder, gazing at that town. At times we were on a far-off hill, our eyes narrowed; at other times, the town was so close that we could reach out and touch it, with our eyes wide open.

"The *real* me lives there, in that town surrounded by a wall," you said.

"So the you that is sitting here next to me isn't the real you?" I had to ask.

"That's right. The me here with you now isn't the real me. It's only a stand-in. Like a wandering shadow."

I thought it over. *A wandering shadow?* But I kept my opinions to myself.

"Okay, so in that town what is the *real* you doing?"

"Working in a library," you replied in a quiet voice. "I work from around five in the evening until around ten at night."

"Around?"

"All time there is *approximate*. There's a tall clock tower in the square, but the clock doesn't have any hands."

I pictured a clock tower without hands. "So can anyone come into that library?"

"No. Not everyone can enter. You need special qualifications to do that. But *you* can. Since you have those."

"What do you mean by . . . *special qualifications*?"

You smiled gently but didn't answer the question.

"So as long as I go there, I can meet the *real* you?"

"As long as you can find that town. And as long as—"

You fell silent, your cheeks reddening a bit. But I could understand the words that you didn't say.

As long as you really are seeking the real me. These were the words you didn't venture to say.

I gently wrapped an arm around you. You had on a light green

sleeveless dress. Your cheek rested against my shoulder. But on that twilight summer evening, the you I held wasn't the real you. As you said, it was a mere stand-in, a shadow.

The real you was in a town surrounded by a high wall. In a town with willows on lovely sandbanks, with a few small hills, and quiet beasts each with a single horn. People lived in old communal housing, living plain but perfectly adequate lives. The beasts ate the leaves and nuts from the trees, though most of them passed away in the long, snowy winters, the cold and hunger overcoming them.

How I longed to go into the town. Longed to meet the *real* you.

"The town is surrounded by a high wall so it's very hard to enter," you said. "And going out is even harder."

"So how can you go inside?"

"You just need to wish your way in. But truly wishing for something, from the heart, isn't that simple. It might take time. In the meanwhile, you might have to give up all sorts of things. Things that you treasure. But don't give up, no matter how long it takes. The town isn't going anywhere."

I imagined meeting the real you in that town. I pictured it all: the beautiful expanse of apple trees outside the town, the three stone bridges spanning the river, the cries of the invisible night birds. The small old library where the *real* you worked.

"There's always a place ready for you there," you said.

"A place for me?"

"Yes. There's only one position open in the town. And you are to fill it."

What position could that be?

"You'll become a *Dream Reader*," you say in a low voice. As if revealing a crucial secret.

I couldn't help but laugh. "You know, I can't even remember my own dreams. It would be hard for someone like that to become a *Dream Reader*."

"No, a *Dream Reader* doesn't need to have his own dreams. All you need to do is read all the old dreams collected on the shelves of the library."

"Do you think I can?"

You nod. "Yes, you can do it. You have the qualifications. And the *me that's there* will help you do the work. I'll be right beside you, every night."

"So I'd be a Dream Reader, and every night I'd read old dreams on the shelves of the library. And you would always be with me. The *real* you," I said, repeating aloud the facts given me.

Your bare, slender shoulders under the straps of the green dress trembled under my arm. And then stiffened.

"That's right. But there's one thing I want you to remember. That even if I do meet you in that town, I won't remember anything about you."

Why?

"You really don't know why?"

I know. The person whose shoulder my arm is gently around here is a mere stand-in. The *real* you lives in that town. That mysterious, far-off town surrounded by a high wall.

Your shoulder under my arm was so soft and warm that it was hard to think of it as anything other than that of the *real* you.

IN THIS REAL WORLD, you and I lived not so far from each other. Not far away, but not so close that we could drop by whenever we wanted. To get to your place took me an hour and a half, changing trains twice along the way. Neither of the towns we lived in was surrounded by a high wall, so of course we could come and go freely.

I lived in a quiet residential area near the sea, while you lived downtown in a much larger, livelier city. That summer I was in my third and final year of high school, and you were in your second year. I went to a local public high school, and you attended a private girls' school in your city. For various reasons, we couldn't see each other more than once or twice a month. We'd take turns—I'd visit your town, then next time, you would come to the town where I lived. We'd walk to a small park near your home, or to a public botanical garden. The botanical garden charged an admissions fee, but next to the greenhouses was a nice little café that was never crowded and it became our favorite spot. We'd order coffee and apple tarts (a bit of a luxury for us) and lose ourselves in quiet conversation.

Whenever you came to my town, we'd walk along the riverside or the sea. There was no river near the downtown area where you lived, and no sea either, of course, and when you came to my town, it was the first thing you wanted to see. You were drawn to all that natural water.

"Somehow seeing water always soothes me," you said. "I love the sound it makes."

I'd met you the previous fall, and we had been going out for eight months. Whenever we saw each other, we'd find some out-of-the-way place to hug and kiss. We never went beyond that, though. We didn't have enough time to spare, first of all, nor a private place to take our relationship to the next level. But more than that, we were so wrapped up in talking that we were reluc-

tant to take any time away from our conversations. Neither of us had ever met anyone we could talk to so freely about our feelings, our thoughts. It was close to a miracle to run across someone like that. So once or twice a month, we'd talk on and on, oblivious of the time. We never ran out of things to say, and when we said good-bye at the station, I always felt there was something else, something vital, that we'd forgotten to discuss.

I'm not saying I didn't have any physical desire for you. Take a healthy seventeen-year-old boy being with a sixteen-year-old girl whose chest was swelling out beautifully, and put his arms around her lithe young body—how could sexual desire not be part of the mix? But instinctively I knew it was better to put those feelings on hold. What I needed now was to see you once or twice a month, take long walks together, and open up to each other about all kinds of things. An intimate exchange of information, getting to know each other more deeply. Then, in the shade of a tree, hugging and kissing—this was so wonderful that I didn't want to rush into anything else. If we did, something crucial about our relationship might be lost forever, something we might never regain. The physical could come later, down the road. That's what I thought. Or maybe intuition told me.

So what did we talk about, huddled together? I can't remember now. We spoke of so many things that I can no longer recall each one. But I do know this—once you began talking about that odd town surrounded by a high wall, it became our main topic of conversation.

Mainly you talked about how the town was laid out. I would ask practical questions and you would answer them, and as we did, the details of the town began to form and were transcribed. You were the one who created the town. Or maybe it was there, inside you, already. But when it came to putting the pieces together so you could visualize it, so you could describe it in words, I do think I played a role as well. You talked about it, and I wrote it all down. Like ancient philosophers and religious figures who had a faithful, meticulous scribe, or disciples, per-

haps, at their side taking down their every word. I noted it all down in a special little notebook just for that purpose, the ever-competent secretary, or faithful disciple. That summer, the two of us were completely engrossed in this collaborative project of ours.

IN AUTUMN, in anticipation of the oncoming cold season, the beasts' bodies were covered with a shiny, golden coat of fur. The single horns in their foreheads were sharp and white. They washed their hooves in the waters of the icy river, gently lifting their heads to enjoy the red nuts on the trees, and chew on the leaves of the Scotch broom.

That was a lovely time of year.

Standing on the watchtower built alongside the wall, I waited for the instrument—fashioned from a unicorn horn—to blow at twilight. Moments before the sun set the horn would sound—one long note, followed by three short ones. That was the rule. In the gathering dusk, the gentle sound of the horn slipped over the cobbled road, seemingly unchanged for over hundreds of years (or maybe even longer). And that sound had seeped into the gaps in the stone walls around the houses, and into the stone statues along the hedge in the plaza.

When the horn sounded out in the town, the beasts lifted their heads up toward ancient memories. Some stopped chewing leaves, some stopped pawing the road with their hooves, others awoke from naps in the last sunny spots of the day, all of them with heads raised at the same angle.

For a moment they all were frozen, like statues. Only their soft golden fur swayed in the breeze. But what were they gazing at? Their heads tilted in one direction, their eyes stared into space, but the beasts remained motionless, listening intently to the sounding of the horn.

When the final blow of the horn had faded away into the air, some scrambled to their feet, lining up their front legs, while others stretched and straightened up, and they all began walking at nearly the same moment. It was as if they had been released from a spell. Soon, the streets of the town clattered with the hooves of the beasts.

The line of beasts continued down the winding cobblestone street, with no obvious leader, with no one guiding them along.

Eyes downcast, shoulders swaying slightly, they continued down to the silent river. Despite the silence, each beast was obviously connected by an undeniable bond.

As I watched this scene many times, I came to understand how precisely they kept to the same path and speed. Picking up other beasts along the way, they continued over the arched Old Bridge, to the plaza with its sharp steeple (where the clock in the clock tower, as you had said, was missing both hands). A small group that had gone down to the sandbank by the river to eat green grass now joined them. They continued upstream on the path beside the river, through the factory district alongside the dried-up canal that stretched out toward the north, and added another group that had been in the woods in search of nuts on trees. They next turned to the west, along the covered passageway of the foundry, climbing the long staircase traversing a hill on the north.

There was but one gate in the wall surrounding the town. Opening and closing it was the job of the Gatekeeper. The gate, heavy and solid, was reinforced with thick iron slabs nailed vertically and horizontally to it. Despite the gate's formidable appearance, the Gatekeeper was able to easily open and close it. No one else was allowed to lay a finger on it.

The Gatekeeper was a large, sturdy man, devoted to his work. His pointy head was shaved clean, as was his face. Every morning he'd boil water in a large cauldron and carefully shave his head and face with a large, sharp razor. His age was unclear. He was also responsible for blowing the horn every morning and evening to assemble the beasts. He would climb up a six-and-a-half-foot-tall tower in front of his Gatekeeper's cabin, aim the horn at the sky, and blow. How could such a crude, coarse-looking man produce such a soft, charming sound? I found this strange every time I heard it.

At twilight, once he'd shepherded every last beast outside the wall, he would close the heavy gate and lock it with a huge padlock. It clanged shut with a cold, metallic sound.

There was a place for the beasts just outside the north gate. There they would sleep, mate, give birth. This place had a forest and