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HOLLOW CITY

THE SECOND NOVEL OF

MISS PEREGRINE'S

PECULIAR CHILDREN



— BY —

RANSOM
RIGGS





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Acknowledgments

And lo! towards us coming in a boat
An old man, grizzled with the hair of eld,
Moaning: “Woe unto you, debased souls!

Hope nevermore to look upon the heavens.
I come to lead you to the other shore;
Into eternal darkness; into fire and frost.

And thou, that yonder standest, living soul,
Withdraw from these people, who are dead!”
But he saw that I did not withdraw ...

—Dante’s *Inferno*, Canto III

◆ PECULIAR PERSONAE ◆



JACOB PORTMAN

Our hero, who can see and sense hollowgast



ABRAHAM PORTMAN
(DECEASED)

Jacob's grandfather, killed by a hollowgast



EMMA BLOOM

A girl who can make fire with her hands, formerly involved with Jacob's grandfather



BRONWYN BRUNTLEY
An unusually strong girl



MILLARD NULLINGS
An invisible boy, scholar of all things peculiar



HORACE SOMNUSSON

A boy who suffers from premonitory visions and dreams



OLIVE ABROHOLOS ELEPHANTA
A girl who is lighter than air



ENOCH O'CONNOR

A boy who can animate the dead for brief periods of time



HUGH APISTON

A boy who commands and protects the many bees that live in his stomach



FIONA FRAUENFELD

A silent girl with a peculiar talent for making plants grow



CLAIRE DENSMORE

A girl with an extra mouth in the back of her head; the youngest of Miss
Peregrine's peculiar children



ALMA LEFAY PEREGRINE

Ymbryne, shape-shifter, manipulator of time; headmistress of Cairnholm's loop; arrested in bird form



ESMERELDA AVOCET

An ymbryne whose loop was raided by the corrupted; kidnapped by wights

◆ NONPECULIAR PERSONAE ◆

FRANKLIN PORTMAN

Jacob's father; bird hobbyist, wannabe writer

MARYANN PORTMAN

Jacob's mother; heiress to Florida's second-largest drugstore chain

RICKY PICKERING

Jacob's only normal friend

DOCTOR GOLAN

(DECEASED)

A wight who posed as a psychiatrist to deceive Jacob and his family; later
killed by Jacob

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

(DECEASED)

Essayist, lecturer, poet

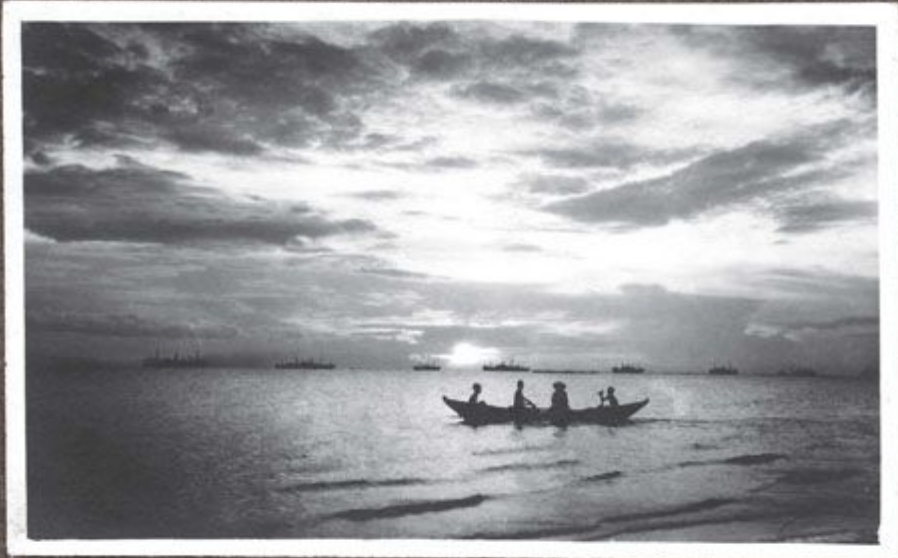


PART
ONE



CHAPTER ONE





We rowed out through the harbor, past bobbing boats weeping rust from their seams, past juries of silent seabirds roosting atop the barnacled remains of sunken docks, past fishermen who lowered their nets to stare frozenly as we slipped by, uncertain whether we were real or imagined; a procession of waterborne ghosts, or ghosts soon to be. We were ten children and one bird in three small and unsteady boats, rowing with quiet intensity straight out to sea, the only safe harbor for miles receding quickly behind us, craggy and magical in the blue-gold light of dawn. Our goal, the rutted coast of mainland Wales, was somewhere before us but only dimly visible, an inky smudge squatting along the far horizon.

We rowed past the old lighthouse, tranquil in the distance, which only last night had been the scene of so many traumas. It was there that, with bombs exploding around us, we had nearly drowned, nearly been torn apart by bullets; that I had taken a gun and pulled its trigger and killed a man, an act still incomprehensible to me; that we had lost Miss Peregrine and got her back again—snatched from the steel jaws of a submarine—though the Miss Peregrine who was returned to us was damaged, in need of help we didn't know how to give. She perched now on the stern of our boat, watching the sanctuary she'd created slip away, more lost with every oar stroke.

Finally we rowed past the breakwater and into the great blank open, and the glassy surface of the harbor gave way to little waves that chopped at the sides of our boats. I heard a plane threading the clouds high above us and let my oars drag, neck craning up, arrested by a vision of our little armada from such a height: this world I had chosen, and everything I had in it, and all our precious, peculiar lives, contained in three splinters of wood adrift upon the vast, unblinking eye of the sea.

Mercy.



* * *

Our boats slid easily through the waves, three abreast, a friendly current bearing us coastward. We rowed in shifts, taking turns at the oars to stave off exhaustion, though I felt so strong that for nearly an hour I refused to give them up. I lost myself in the rhythm of the strokes, my arms tracing long ellipses in the air as if pulling something toward me that refused to come. Hugh manned the oars opposite me, and behind him, at the bow, sat Emma, her eyes hidden beneath the brim of a sun hat, head bent toward a map spread across her knees. Every so often she'd look up from her map to consult the horizon, and just the sight of her face in the sun gave me energy I didn't know I had.

I felt like I could row forever—until Horace shouted from one of the other boats to ask how much ocean was left between us and the mainland, and Emma squinted back toward the island and then down at her map, measuring with spread fingers, and said, somewhat doubtfully, “Seven kilometers?” But then Millard, who was also in our boat, muttered something in her ear and she frowned and turned the map sideways, and frowned again, then said, “I mean, eight and a half.” As the words left her mouth, I felt myself—and saw everyone else—wilt a little.

Eight and a half kilometers: a journey that would've taken an hour in the stomach-churning ferry that had brought me to Cairnholm weeks ago. A distance easily covered by an engine-powered boat of any size. One and a half kilometers less than my out-of-shape uncles ran on odd weekends for charity, and only a few more than my mother boasted she could manage during rowing-machine classes at her fancy gym. But the ferry between the island and the mainland wouldn't start running for another thirty years, and rowing machines weren't loaded down with passengers and luggage, nor did they require constant course corrections just to stay pointed in the right direction. Worse still, the ditch of water we were crossing was treacherous, a notorious ship-swallower: eight and a half kilometers of moody, changeable sea, its floor fanned with greening wrecks and sailors' bones and, lurking somewhere in the fathoms-deep darkness, our enemies.

Those of us who worried about such things assumed the wights were nearby, somewhere below us in that German submarine, waiting. If they didn't already know we'd fled the island, they'd find out soon enough. They

hadn't gone to such lengths to kidnap Miss Peregrine only to give up after one failed attempt. The warships that inched along like centipedes in the distance and the British planes that kept watch overhead made it too dangerous for the submarine to surface in broad daylight, but come nightfall, we'd be easy prey. They would come for us, and take Miss Peregrine, and sink the rest. So we rowed, our only hope that we could reach the mainland before nightfall reached us.

* * *

We rowed until our arms ached and our shoulders knotted. We rowed until the morning breeze stilled and the sun blazed down as through a magnifying glass and sweat pooled around our collars, and I realized no one had thought to bring fresh water, and that sunblock in 1940 meant standing in the shade. We rowed until the skin wore away from the ridges of our palms and we were certain we absolutely couldn't row another stroke, but then did, and then another, and another.

"You're sweating buckets," Emma said. "Let me have a go at the oars before you melt away."

Her voice startled me out of a daze. I nodded gratefully and let her switch into the oar seat, but twenty minutes later I asked for it back again. I didn't like the thoughts that crept into my head while my body was at rest: imagined scenes of my father waking to find me gone from our rooms on Cairnholm, Emma's baffling letter in my place; the panic that would ensue. Memory-flashes of terrible things I'd witnessed recently: a monster pulling me into its jaws; my former psychiatrist falling to his death; a man buried in a coffin of ice, torn momentarily from the next world to croak into my ear with half a throat. So I rowed despite my exhaustion and a spine that felt like it might never bend straight again and hands rubbed raw from friction, and tried to think of exactly nothing, those leaden oars both a life sentence and a life raft.

Bronwyn, seemingly inexhaustible, rowed one of the boats all by herself. Olive sat opposite but was no help; the tiny girl couldn't pull the oars without pushing herself up into the air, where a stray gust of wind might send her flying away like a kite. So Olive shouted encouragement while Bronwyn did the work of two—or three or four, if you took into account all

the suitcases and boxes weighing down their boat, stuffed with clothes and food and maps and books and a lot of less practical things, too, like several jars of pickled reptile hearts sloshing in Enoch's duffel bag; or the blown-off front doorknob to Miss Peregrine's house, a memento Hugh had found in the grass on our way to the boats and decided he couldn't live without; or the bulky pillow Horace had rescued from the house's flaming shell—it was his lucky pillow, he said, and the only thing that kept his paralyzing nightmares at bay.

Other items were so precious that the children clung to them even as they rowed. Fiona kept a pot of wormy garden dirt pressed between her knees. Millard had striped his face with a handful of bomb-pulverized brick dust, an odd gesture that seemed part mourning ritual. If what they kept and clung to seemed strange, part of me sympathized: it was all they had left of their home. Just because they knew it was lost didn't mean they knew how to let it go.

After three hours of rowing like galley slaves, distance had shrunk the island to the size of an open hand. It looked nothing like the foreboding, cliff-ringed fortress I had first laid eyes upon a few weeks ago; now it seemed fragile, a shard of rock in danger of being washed away by the waves.

“Look!” Enoch shouted, standing up in the boat next to ours. “It's disappearing!” A spectral fog enshrouded the island, blanking it from view, and we broke from rowing to watch it fade.

“Say goodbye to our island,” Emma said, standing and removing her big hat. “We may never see it again.”

“Farewell, island,” said Hugh. “You were so good to us.”

Horace set his oar down and waved. “Goodbye, house. I shall miss all your rooms and gardens, but most of all I shall miss my bed.”

“So long, loop,” Olive sniffled. “Thank you for keeping us safe all these years.”

“Good years,” said Bronwyn. “The best I've known.”

I, too, said a silent goodbye, to a place that had changed me forever—and the place that, more than any graveyard, would forever contain the memory, and the mystery, of my grandfather. They were linked inextricably, he and that island, and I wondered, now that both were gone, if I would ever really understand what had happened to me: what I had become; was becoming. I

had come to the island to solve my grandfather's mystery, and in doing so I had discovered my own. Watching Cairnholm disappear felt like watching the only remaining key to that mystery sink beneath the dark waves.

And then the island was simply gone, swallowed up by a mountain of fog.

As if it had never existed.

* * *

Before long the fog caught up to us. By increments we were blinded, the mainland dimming and the sun fading to a pale white bloom, and we turned circles in the eddying tide until we'd lost all sense of direction. Finally we stopped and put our oars down and waited in the doldrummy quiet, hoping it would pass; there was no use going any farther until it did.

"I don't like this," Bronwyn said. "If we wait too long it'll be night, and we'll have worse things to reckon with than bad weather."

Then, as if the weather had heard Bronwyn and decided to put us in our place, it turned *really* bad. A strong wind blew up, and within moments our world was transformed. The sea around us whipped into white-capped waves that slapped at our hulls and broke into our boats, sloshing cold water around our feet. Next came rain, hard as little bullets on our skin. Soon we were being tossed around like rubber toys in a bathtub.

"Turn into the waves!" Bronwyn shouted, slicing at the water with her oars. "If they broadside us we'll flip for sure!" But most of us were too spent to row in calm water, let alone a boiling sea, and the rest were too scared even to reach for the oars, so instead we grabbed for the gunwales and held on for dear life.

A wall of water plowed straight toward us. We climbed the massive wave, our boats turning nearly vertical beneath us. Emma clung to me and I clung to the oarlock; behind us Hugh held on to the seat with his arms. We crested the wave like a roller coaster, my stomach dropping into my legs, and as we raced down the far side, everything in our boat that wasn't nailed down—Emma's map, Hugh's bag, the red roller suitcase I'd lugged with me since Florida—went flying out over our heads and into the water.

There was no time to worry about what had been lost, because initially we couldn't even see the other boats. When we'd resumed an even keel, we

squinted into the maelstrom and screamed our friends' names. There was a terrible moment of silence before we heard voices call back to us, and Enoch's boat appeared out of the mist, all four passengers aboard, waving their arms at us.

"Are you all right?" I shouted.

"Over there!" they called back. "Look over there!"

I saw that they weren't waving hello, but directing our attention to something in the water, some thirty yards away—the hull of an overturned boat.

"That's Bronwyn and Olive's boat!" Emma said.

It was upside down, its rusty bottom to the sky. There was no sign of either girl around it.

"We have to get closer!" Hugh shouted, and forgetting our exhaustion we grabbed the oars and paddled toward it, calling their names into the wind.

We rowed through a tide of clothes ejected from split-open suitcases, every swirling dress we passed resembling a drowning girl. My heart hammered in my chest, and though I was soaked and shivering I hardly felt the cold. We met Enoch's boat at the overturned hull of Bronwyn's and searched the water together.

"Where are they?" Horace moaned. "Oh, if we've lost them ..."

"Underneath!" Emma said, pointing at the hull. "Maybe they're trapped underneath it!"

I pulled one of my oars from its lock and banged it against the overturned hull. "If you're in there, swim out!" I shouted. "We'll rescue you!"

For a terrible moment there was no response, and I could feel any hope of recovering them slipping away. But then, from the underside of the overturned boat, there was a knock in reply—and then a fist smashed through the hull, wood chips flying, and we all jumped in surprise.

"It's Bronwyn!" Emma cried. "They're alive!"

With a few more strikes Bronwyn was able to knock a person-sized hole in the hull. I extended my oar to her and she grabbed it, and with Hugh and Emma and me all pulling, we managed to drag her through the churning water and into our boat just as hers sank, vanishing beneath the waves. She was panicked, hysterical, shouting with breath she didn't have to spare. Shouting for Olive, who hadn't been under the hull with her. She was still missing.

“Olive—got to get Olive,” Bronwyn sputtered once she’d tumbled into the boat. She was shivering, coughing up seawater. She stood up in the pitching boat and pointed into the storm. “There!” she cried. “See it?”

I shielded my eyes from the stinging rain and looked, but all I could see were waves and fog. “I don’t see anything!”

“She’s there!” Bronwyn insisted. “The rope!”

Then I saw what she was pointing at: not a flailing girl in the water but a fat thread of woven hemp trailing up from it, barely visible in all the chaos. A strand of taut brown rope extended up from the water and disappeared into the fog. Olive must’ve been attached to the other end, unseen.

We paddled to the rope and Bronwyn reeled it down, and after a minute Olive appeared from the fog above our heads, one end of the rope knotted around her waist. Her shoes had fallen off when her boat flipped, but Bronwyn had already tied Olive to the anchor line, the other end of which was resting on the seafloor. If not for that, she surely would’ve been lost in the clouds by now.

Olive threw her arms around Bronwyn’s neck and crowed, “You saved me, you saved me!”

They embraced. The sight of them put a lump in my throat.

“We ain’t out of danger yet,” said Bronwyn. “We still got to reach shore before nightfall, or our troubles have only just begun.”

* * *

The storm had weakened some and the sea’s violent chop died down, but the idea of rowing another stroke, even in a perfectly calm sea, was unimaginable now. We hadn’t made it even halfway to the mainland and already I was hopelessly exhausted. My hands throbbed. My arms felt heavy as tree trunks. Not only that, but the endless diagonal rocking of the boat was having an undeniable effect on my stomach—and judging from the greenish color of the faces around me, I wasn’t alone.

“We’ll rest awhile,” Emma said, trying to sound encouraging. “We’ll rest and bail out the boats until the fog clears ...”

“Fog like this has a mind of its own,” said Enoch. “It can go days without breaking. It’ll be dark in a few hours, and then we’ll have to hope we can

last until morning without the wights finding us. We'll be utterly defenseless."

"And without water," said Hugh.

"Or food," added Millard.

Olive raised both hands in the air and said, "*I know where it is!*"

"Where what is?" said Emma.

"Land. I saw it when I was up at the end of that rope." Olive had risen above the fog, she explained, and briefly caught a clear view of the mainland.

"Fat lot of good that does," grumbled Enoch. "We've circled back on ourselves a half-dozen times since you were dangling up there."

"Then let me up again."

"Are you certain?" Emma asked her. "It's dangerous. What if a wind catches you, or the rope snaps?"

Olive's face went steely. "Reel me up," she repeated.

"When she gets like this, there's no arguing," said Emma. "Fetch the rope, Bronwyn."

"You're the bravest little girl I ever knew," Bronwyn said, then set to working. She pulled the anchor out of the water and up into our boat, and with the extra length of rope it gave us we lashed together our two remaining boats so they couldn't be separated again, then reeled Olive back up through the fog and into the sky.

There was an odd quiet moment when we were all staring at a rope in the clouds, heads thrown back—waiting for a sign from heaven.

Enoch broke the silence. "Well?" he called, impatient.

"I can see it!" came the reply, Olive's voice barely a squeak over the white noise of waves. "Straight ahead!"

"Good enough for me!" Bronwyn said, and while the rest of us clutched our stomachs and slumped uselessly in our seats, she clambered into the lead boat and took the oars and began to row, guided only by Olive's tiny voice, an unseen angel in the sky.

"Left ... more left ... not that much!"

And like that we slowly made our way toward land, the fog pursuing us always, its long, gray tendrils like the ghostly fingers of some phantom hand, ever trying to draw us back.

As if the island couldn't quite let us go, either.