

WALKING BACKWARD INTO THE SKY



That summer morning in the Lower Downs began as usual for Reuben Pedley. He rose early to have breakfast with his mom before she left for work, a quiet breakfast because they were both still sleepy. Afterward, also as usual, he cleaned up their tiny kitchen while his mom moved faster and faster in her race against the clock (whose numerals she seemed quite unable to read before she'd had coffee and a shower). Then his mom was hugging him goodbye at the apartment door, where Reuben told her he loved her, which was true—and that she had no reason to worry about him, which was not.

His mom had not even reached the bus stop before Reuben

had brushed his teeth, yanked on his sneakers (a fitting term, he thought, being a sneaker himself), and climbed onto the kitchen counter to retrieve his wallet. He kept it among the mousetraps on top of the cupboard. The traps were never sprung; Reuben never baited them, and so far no thieves had reached up there to see what they might find. Not that the wallet contained much, but for Reuben “not much” was still everything he had.

Next he went into his bedroom and removed the putty from the little hole in the wall behind his bed. He took his key from the hole and smooshed the putty back into place. Then, locking the apartment door behind him, he headed out in search of new places to hide.

Reuben lived in the city of New Umbra, a metropolis that was nonetheless as gloomy and run-down as a city could be. Though it had once enjoyed infinitely hopeful prospects (people used to say that it was born under a promising star), New Umbra had long since ceased to be prosperous, and was not generally well kept. Some might have said the same of Reuben Pedley, who used to have two fine and loving parents, but only briefly, when he was a baby, and who in elementary school had been considered an excellent student, but in middle school had faded into the walls.

Eleven years had passed since the factory accident that left Reuben without a father and his mother a young widow scrambling for work—eleven years, in other words, since his own promising star had begun to fall. And though in reality he was as loved and cared for as any child could hope to be, anyone who followed him through his days might well have believed otherwise. Especially on a day like today.

Reuben exited his shabby high-rise apartment building in the usual manner: he bypassed the elevator and stole down the rarely used stairwell, descending unseen all the way past the lobby to the basement, where he slipped out a storage-room window. The young building manager kept that window slightly

ajar to accommodate the comings and goings of a certain alley cat she hoped to tame, enticing it with bowls of food and water. She wasn't supposed to be doing that, but no one knew about it except Reuben, and he certainly wasn't going to tell anyone. He wasn't supposed to be in the storage room in the first place. Besides, he liked the building manager and wished her luck with the cat, though only in his mind, for she didn't know that he knew about it. She barely even knew he existed.

From his hidden vantage point in the window well, which was slightly below street level and encircled by an iron railing, Reuben confirmed that the alley behind the building was empty. With practiced ease, he climbed out of the window well, monkeyed up the railing, grabbed the lower rungs of the building's rusty fire escape, and swung out over empty space. He hit the ground at a trot. Today he wanted to strike out into new territory, and there was no time to waste. When they'd lived in the northern part of the Lower Downs, Reuben had known the surrounding blocks as well as his own bedroom, but then they'd had to move south, and despite having lived here a year, his mental map remained incomplete.

Of all the city's depressed and depressing neighborhoods, the Lower Downs was considered the worst. Many of its old buildings were abandoned; others seemed permanently under repair. Its backstreets and alleys were marked by missing shutters, tilted light poles, broken gates and railings, fences with gaps in them. The Lower Downs, in other words, was perfect for any boy who wanted to explore and to hide.

Reuben was just such a boy. In fact, exploring and hiding were almost all he ever did. He shinned up the tilted light poles and dropped behind fences; he slipped behind the busted shutters and through the broken windows; he found his way into cramped spaces and high places, into spots where no one would ever think to look. This was how he spent his solitary days.

It never occurred to him to be afraid. Even here in the Lower Downs, there was very little crime on the streets of New Umbra, at least not the sort you could easily see. Vandals and pickpockets were rare, muggers and car thieves unheard of. Everyone knew that. The Directions took care of all that business. Nobody crossed the Directions, not even the police.

Because the Directions worked for The Smoke.

Reuben headed south, moving from alley to alley, keeping close to the buildings and ducking beneath windows. He paused at every corner, first listening, then peering around. He was only a few blocks off the neighborhood's main thoroughfare and could hear some early-morning traffic there, but the alleys and backstreets were dead.

About ten blocks south, Reuben ventured into new territory. He was already well beyond his bounds: his mom had given him permission to walk to the community center and the branch library—both within a few blocks of their apartment—but that was all. And so he kept these wanderings of his a secret.

Despite her excessive caution, his mom was something else, and Reuben knew it. He wouldn't have traded her for half a dozen moms with better jobs and more money, and in fact had told her exactly that just the week before.

"Oh my goodness, Reuben, that is so sweet," she'd said, pretending to wipe tears from her eyes. "I hope you know that I probably wouldn't trade you, either. Not for half a dozen boys, or even a whole dozen."

"Probably?"

"Almost certainly," she'd said, squeezing his hand as if to reassure him.

That was what his mom was like. Their conversations were usually the best part of his day.

Crossing an empty street, Reuben made his habitual, rapid inventory of potential hiding places: a shady corner between a



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building's front steps and street-facing wall; a pile of broken furniture that someone had hauled to the curb; a window well with no protective railing. But none of these places was within easy reach when, just as he attained the far curb, a door opened in a building down the block.

Reuben abruptly sat on the curb and watched the door. He held perfectly still while an old man in pajamas stepped outside and checked the sky, sniffing with evident satisfaction and glancing up and down the street before going back in. The old man never saw the small brown-haired boy watching him from the curb.

Reuben rose and moved on, quietly triumphant. He preferred bona fide hiding places when he could find them, but there was nothing quite like hiding in plain sight. Sometimes people saw you and then instantly forgot you, because you were just a random kid, doing nothing. As long as you didn't look lost, anxious, or interesting, you might as well be a trash can or a stunted tree, part of the city landscape. Reuben considered such encounters successes, too. But to go completely unnoticed on an otherwise empty street was almost impossible, and therefore superior. He was reliving the moment in his mind, exulting in the memory of the old man's eyes passing right over him without registering his presence—not once but twice!—when he came upon the narrowest alley he'd ever seen, and made his big mistake.

It was the narrowness that tempted him. The brick walls of the abandoned buildings were so close to each other that Reuben saw at once how he might scale them. By leaning forward and pressing his palms against one, then lifting his feet behind him and pressing them against the other, he could hold himself up, suspended above the alley floor. Then by moving one hand higher, then the other, and then doing the same with his feet, he could work his way upward. It would be like walking backward into the sky.

No sooner had he imagined it than Reuben knew he had to

try it. Glancing around to ensure that he was unobserved, he moved deeper into the alley. He could see a ledge high above him—probably too high to reach, but it gave him something to shoot for, at any rate.

He started out slowly, then gained momentum as he found his rhythm. Hand over hand, foot over foot, smoothly and steadily. Now he was fifteen feet up, now twenty, and still he climbed. Craning his head around, Reuben saw the ledge not too far above him. Unfortunately, he also saw how difficult it would be to climb onto it—his position was all wrong. He frowned. What had he been thinking? He didn't dare try such a risky maneuver, not at that height. He'd be a fool to chance it.

That was when Reuben felt his arms begin to tremble and realized, with horror, that he had made a terrible mistake.

He hadn't anticipated how drastically his arms would tire, nor how abruptly. It seemed to happen all at once, without warning. Now, looking at the alley floor far below him, Reuben became sickeningly aware of how high he had actually climbed. At least thirty feet, maybe more. The way his arms felt, there was no way he'd make it back to the ground safely. He probably couldn't even get back down to twenty feet.

Thus the action he'd just rejected as being foolishly dangerous suddenly became the only choice left to him, the only hope he had. He had to make the ledge, and by some miracle he had to get himself onto it.

With a whimper of panic, Reuben resumed his climbing. The trembling in his arms grew worse. He could no longer see the grimy, broken pavement of the alley floor below. His vision was blurred by sweat, which had trickled into his eyes and couldn't be wiped away. He was burning up on the inside but weirdly cold on the outside, like a furnace encased in ice; the alley's quirky cross breezes were cooling his sweat-slick skin. Beads of perspiration dripped from his nose.

In desperate silence he pressed upward. He heard the wind fluttering in his ears, the scrape of his shoe soles against brick, his own labored breath, and that was all. He was so high up, and so quietly intent on climbing, that had any passersby glanced down that narrow alley, they'd have noticed nothing unusual. Certainly none would have guessed that an eleven-year-old boy was stretched out high above them, fearing for his life.

As it happened, there were no passersby to see Reuben finally come to the ledge, or to note the terrible moment when he made his fateful lunge, or to watch him struggle for an agonizingly long time to heave himself up, his shoes slipping and scraping, his face purple with strain. No one was around to hear Reuben's gasps of exhaustion and relief when at last he lay on that narrow ledge—heedless, for the moment, of his bruised arms and raw fingertips. If any passersby had been near enough to hear anything, it would have been only the clatter of startled pigeons rising away above the rooftops. But in the city this was no unusual sound, and without a thought they would have gone on with their lives, reflecting upon their own problems and wondering what to do.



Reuben lay with his face pressed against the concrete ledge as if kissing it, which indeed he felt like doing. He had such immense gratitude for its existence, for its solidity beneath him. After his pulse settled and his breath returned, he rose very cautiously to a sitting position, his back against brick, his legs dangling at the knees. With his shirt, he dried his eyes as best he could, wincing a little from the smarting of his scraped fingertips. His every movement was calculated and slow. He was still in a dangerous predicament.

The ledge was keeping Reuben safe for the time being, but it was only a ledge, spattered here and there with pigeon droppings.

When he tried to look up, the wind whipped his hair into his eyes; to keep them clear, he had to cup his hands like pretend binoculars. The rooftop seemed miles above him, and might as well have been. Beyond it the early-morning sky was blue as a robin's egg. A perfect summer morning to have gotten stuck on a ledge in a deserted alley.

"Well done, Reuben," he muttered. "Brilliant."

He knew he couldn't get back down the same way he'd come up. He would have to edge around to the back of the building and hope for a fire escape. Otherwise his only option was to follow the ledge around to the street side, try to get in through one of the windows there. If he was lucky, perhaps no one would spot him. But if he couldn't get in, he would have to shout for help. Reuben imagined the fire truck's siren, the fierce disapproval on the firefighters' faces, the gathering crowd—all of it terrible to contemplate, and none of it even half as bad as facing his mom would be.

His mom, who thought he was safe at home in their apartment, reading a book or watching TV or maybe even back in bed. His mom, who even now was on her way to slice and weigh fish at the market, her first and least favorite work shift of the day. His mom, who had never remarried, who had no family, no boyfriend, no time to make friends—meaning Reuben was all she had, Reuben the reason she worked two jobs, Reuben the person for whom she did everything in her life.

His mom, who would not be pleased.

"Oh, let there be a fire escape," Reuben breathed. "Oh, please." Swiveling his eyes to his left, he studied the precious, narrow strip of concrete keeping him aloft and alive. It appeared sound enough; there was no obvious deterioration. A brown

crust of bread lay nearby (probably some pigeon's breakfast that he'd rudely interrupted), but that was all—no broken glass or other hazards. His path looked clear.

Reuben began shifting himself sideways, moving left, toward the back of the building. He kept his shoulder blades pressed against the brick wall behind him, his eyes fixed straight ahead on the featureless wall of the building opposite him, just a couple of yards away. He tried very hard not to imagine the dizzying drop below him.

He had progressed a few feet when his hand came down on the crust of bread. Without thinking, he attempted to brush it away. It seemed to be stuck. Glancing down now, Reuben discovered that the bread crust was actually a scrap of leather and that in fact it was not resting on the ledge but poking out of the bricks just above it. What in the world? Why would this scrap of leather have been mortared into the wall where no one would ever see it? Was it some kind of secret sign?

Reuben pinched the scrap awkwardly between two knuckles and tugged. It yielded slightly, revealing more leather, and through his fingers he felt an unseen shifting of stubborn dirt or debris, like when he pulled weeds from sidewalk cracks. He tugged again, and a few loose bits of broken brick fell onto the ledge, revealing a small hole in the wall. The brick pieces appeared to have been packed into it.

Reuben took a firmer grip on the leather and gave another tug. More bits of brick came loose. The scrap of leather turned out to be the end of a short strap, which in turn was connected to a dusty leather pouch. Carefully he drew the pouch from the hole and up into his lap.

Not a secret sign. A secret *thing*.

He should wait to open it, he knew. It would be far easier, far wiser to do it after he was safely on the ground.



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Reuben stared at the pouch in his lap. “Or you could just be extra careful,” he whispered.

With slow, deliberate movements, Reuben brushed away some of the brick dust. The pouch was obviously old, its leather worn and scarred. It was fastened with a rusted buckle that came right off in his hand, along with a rotted bit of strap. He set these aside and opened the pouch. Inside was a small, surprisingly heavy object wrapped in a plastic bread sack. It was bundled up in yet another wrapping, this one of stiff canvas. Whatever it was, its owner had taken great pains to keep it safe and dry.

Reuben unbundled the wrappings to reveal a handsome wooden case, dark brown with streaks of black. Its hinged lid was held closed by a gray metal clasp, the sort that could be secured with a little padlock. There was no lock, though; all Reuben had to do was turn it. He hesitated, wondering what he was about to find. Then he turned the clasp and felt something give. The lid opened with a squeak.

Inside the case were two velvet-lined compartments, both shaped to fit exactly the objects they contained. One of the objects was a small, delicate key with an ornate bow; the other appeared to be a simple metal sphere. Both had the dark coppery color of an old penny and yet, at the same time, the bright sheen of a brand-new one. They were made of a metal Reuben had never seen before. Something like copper or brass, but not exactly either.

Reuben very carefully lifted the sphere from its velvet compartment. It felt as heavy as a billiard ball, though it was not quite as large as one. He turned it in his hands, gazing at it in wonder. What was it? He’d expected that the key would be needed to open it, but there was no keyhole. Looking more closely, he noticed a seam, scarcely wider than a thread, circling the middle of the sphere like the equator on a globe, dividing it into two hemispheres.

“So you *can* open it,” he murmured.

Holding the sphere in his left hand, Reuben tried, gently, to open it with the other. He used the same gesture he had seen in countless silly old movies he'd watched with his mom, in which hopeful men drop to a knee and open tiny velvet-covered boxes, proposing marriage with a ring. He imagined he felt every bit as hopeful and excited as those men were supposed to be.

The two hemispheres parted easily, smoothly, without a sound, as if their hidden hinge had been carefully oiled not a minute before. The interior of one hemisphere was hollow, like an empty bowl. It served as the cover for the other hemisphere, which contained the face of a clock. What Reuben had found, evidently, was a pocket watch.

And yet it was a pocket watch of a kind he'd never seen, to say nothing of its quality. Its face was made of a lustrous white material, perhaps ivory, and the hour hand and the Roman numerals around the dial gleamed black. It was missing a minute hand, but otherwise the parts were all in such fine condition the watch might have been constructed that very morning, though Reuben felt sure it was an antique.

A wild fluttering started up in his belly. His pulse boomed in his ears. How much, Reuben wondered, might such an exquisite device be worth? Indeed, the watch seemed so perfect—so perfect, so unusual, so beautiful—that he almost expected it to show the correct time. But the hour hand was frozen at just before twelve, and when he held the watch to his ear, he heard no tell-tale ticking.

The key! he thought. Reuben's mom had a music box that his father had given her before Reuben was born. You had to wind it up with a key. It must be the same with this watch. A closer inspection revealed a tiny, star-shaped hole in the center of the watch face. Could that be a keyhole?

A glance confirmed his suspicion. The key lacked the large rectangular teeth of normal old keys, but rather tapered to a

narrow, star-shaped end, small enough to insert into the hole. This was the watch's winding key, no question.

Reuben was tempted. He even laid a finger on the key in its snug compartment. But once again a warning voice was sounding in his head, and this time he listened to it. He might fumble the key, drop it, lose it. Better to wait until he was in a safe place. Better, for once, to resist his impulses. This was far too important.

Reluctantly he closed the watch cover and put the watch back inside the case. He was about to close the lid when he noticed an inscription on its interior: *Property of P. Wm. Light.*

"P. William Light," Reuben muttered, gazing at the name. "So this once belonged to you, whoever you were." He closed the lid, fastened the clasp. "*Whenever* you were." For whoever P. William Light was, Reuben felt sure he'd stopped walking the earth long ago.

Reuben rebundled the case and tucked it back inside the pouch, then stuffed the pouch into the waist of his shorts—no small feat in such an awkward, precarious position. Now he was ready to move.

He took a last look at the hole in the wall, wondering how long the watch had been in there. It had been put there by someone like him, someone who found places that were secret to others. It could only have been *found* by someone like him, as well, which made its discovery feel very much like fate.

Just don't blow it by falling, Reuben thought. *Boy finds treasure, plummets to his death. Great story.*

It was with exceeding caution, therefore, that he began to inch sideways along the ledge. A wearisome half hour later he reached the back of the building, only to find that there was no fire escape. No windows, either, and no more ledge.

"Seriously?" Reuben muttered. He felt like banging his head against the brick.

His bottom and the backs of his thighs were aching and tingling. Another hour on this ledge and he'd be in agony. Yet it would take at least that long, and possibly longer, to reach the front of the building.

There was, however, a rusty old drainpipe plunging down along the building's corner. Reuben eyed it, then grabbed it with his left hand and tried to shake it. The pipe seemed firmly secured to the wall, and there was enough room between metal and brick for him to get his hands behind it. He peered down the length of the pipe; it seemed to be intact. He had climbed drainpipes before. Never at anywhere near this height, but if he didn't *think* about the height...

It was as if someone else made the decision for him. Suddenly gathering himself, Reuben reached across his body with his right hand, grabbed the pipe, and swung off the ledge. His stomach wanted to stay behind; he felt it climbing up inside him. Now that he'd acted, the fear was back in full force.

Clenching his jaw, breathing fiercely through his nose, Reuben ignored the lurching sensation and got his feet set. Then, hand under hand, step after step, he began his descent. He went as quickly as he could, knowing he would soon tire. The pipe uttered an initial groan of protest against his weight, then fell silent.

Flakes of rust broke off beneath his fingers and scattered in the wind. Sweat trickled into his eyes again, then into his mouth. He blew it from his nose. Every single part of him seemed to hurt. He didn't dare look down. He concentrated on his hands and his feet and nothing else.

And then the heel of his right foot struck something beneath him, and Reuben looked down to discover that it was the ground. Slowly, almost disbelieving, he set his other foot down. He let go of the pipe. His fingers automatically curled up like claws. He flexed them painfully, wiped his face with his shirt, and looked

up at the ledge, so high above him. Had he actually climbed all the way up *there*? He felt dazed, as if in a dream.

Reuben withdrew the pouch from the waistband of his shorts and gazed at it. This was no dream. He began to walk stiffly along the narrow alley, heading for the street. One step, three steps, a dozen—and then he felt the thrill begin to surge through him. He'd made it! He was alive! He'd taken a terrible risk, but he'd come back with treasure. It seemed like the end of an adventure, and yet somehow Reuben knew—he just *knew*—it was only the beginning.