

Prologue

Margaret Chapel was crouched on the green outside her house, staring into the hedge that separated her garden from the street. Above her head a row of sheets flapped and cracked in the spring breeze, the washing line hummed like an electric wire, and every leaf in the hedge vibrated in the wind as if over-charged with static. She was listening to a rustling among the tightly woven branches of the hedge, vigilant for a bird she knew was soon to appear. James Keir, a boy from the next street, passed by the end of the driveway; as he did so a robin flew out with a shrill chatter and landed on the gatepost by his head. Sighting bird and girl, James stopped dead in his tracks. Together the three watched each other from their individual vantage points – united in an intimate triangle, as a cascade of notes showered about them like mist from a waterfall.

Next, the front door opened and Margaret's mother called out in her flat, harassed, seagull-voice that you could hear all the way to the top of the street:

'Magret! Get back in here!'

The bird flew away as the boy laughed and cried out wildly, 'Maggot! Maggot!'

Margaret looked at him severely and his laughter ceased. They exchanged a long appraisal. Then Margaret turned to her mother to say something and when she looked back the boy had vanished.

A week later she was opening the gate, shouting back into the hallway, 'I hate you! I'm going away!'

Margaret's father was lying on his back on a mat in the driveway smearing firegum into a hole in the car's exhaust; long legs sticking out from beneath the open driver's door; feet scraping back and forth on the gravel as he moved about.

Mrs Chapel appeared at the door with her arms folded. 'Aye, on you go, you wee

bizzum!'

Margaret opened the gate and walked away down the street, her face serious and fearful. She continued to Mitre Hill, past the sycamore tree at the corner and the newsagent where she and her mother went every afternoon. She stopped there, teetered on the pavement's edge and turned to see if she was being followed. It was midday and the wide street was empty. Someone was hammering on a nearby roof, the blows echoing from all the neighbourhood windows, but she saw no one. Far away down the hill the city crept towards her from beneath a heavy sky, and from its right side a grey river slithered away to the west. The breeze was damp and cool, and she regretted leaving without her anorak.

She skipped off the kerb and into the unknown.

Halfway down Mitre Hill James Keir stepped out from behind a tree. 'Maggot,' he said.

'Margaret.'

'Maggot! Maggot!' James insisted. Then he sang in a mocking voice, 'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to play,' Margaret said.

'On your own?'

'Yes.'

'Where's your Mum?'

'She's not coming.'

'You'll get lost,' James said.

'No I won't.'

'I better go with you,' he said. 'Girls always get lost.'

They wandered down into the city, hiding in gardens, or in the cool *wally* closes of the town whenever someone seemed to be taking too much of an interest in them, stopping to

play every now and then, when the idea for a game sprouted in the fertile soil of James' or Maggot's imaginations and blossomed into action. From time to time, when one or either of them became afraid, the other would say something funny about someone on the street, or stop to look in a shop window, or point upwards and say something like, *I can see a camel in the sky.*

They reached the river in the late afternoon. James climbed onto the railing of the ruined dock and leaned over the top rail. Margaret was frightened of the water, hurling by beneath them like a great urgent black wind with its own mind. She pictured the river reaching up suddenly, tearing them from the jetty and carrying them away into the greedy jaws of night.

On the far bank a carnival was in full swing: red, green, yellow, blue lights like jelly beans flared in the dusk, and the hurdy-gurdy echoed over the raw black water.

'Listen.' James beckoned to the girl and helped her up onto the rail, grabbing her by the scruff of her cardigan to help her keep her balance. 'Don't look at the river,' he said. 'Look over there.'

Margaret was mesmerised by the shadows in the water and the dancing rainbow reflections from the far bank. She had already recognised something in the river – a purpose, a duty – although she would have to live another fifteen years before she knew what that was. 'I wish we could go there,' she said.

'We could go anywhere we wanted,' James replied, 'if we didn't have bodies. We could just think it and we'd be there right away.'

Margaret observed his coal-black pupils sharpen with interest at the possibility. She laughed. 'But I like having a body! It's very nice to have a body!'

She put her arm around his shoulders. 'You can call me Maggot, if you like.'

He jumped down from the railing, grasped her around the waist and lifted her up until she was face down over the river. She could hear James's feet slipping on the damp tarmac as the bone-chilling gravity of rushing water tugged at her body and drew her downwards. Although it was the first time in her life she'd been terrified, she didn't struggle or cry out, but dangled there with the cold bar of the railing digging into her stomach, waiting for the boy and the river to conclude their struggle.

The body appeared from upstream, flying over the surging current with the lightness of a dried twig, dipping in and out of the swelling water: a man, fully-dressed – apparently standing to attention but on his back – wearing a hat with a brim, that seemed to have attained some inexplicable purchase on his head – the arms of his overcoat stiff and straight by his sides; his eyes open and gazing up at the sky; a man with two gulls sitting on his chest, looking back and forth at the passing riverbank like day-tourists on an excursion.

'Guy Fawkes!' James blurted out, pointing.

Maggot followed his eye to the rushing corpse.

'That's not Guy Fawkes,' she said, nudging him in the ribs. 'That's a man.'

'It's not a man,' James said. 'It's something that looks like a man.'

'It's a dead man,' Maggot said, more quietly. 'A real man.'

They watched as the corpse hurried by, wrapped in its cold serenity, as if, even in death, the will to reach a destination remained as firmly established as ever.

They spun alone on the roundabout in a nearby playpark, James pushing the girl furiously around and around as the dusk closed in. It was nearly dark when a woman's shadow approached along the road. Maggot threw herself from the roundabout and lay on the

ground, pretending she was dead. As Mrs Chapel reached down, her daughter lost her nerve and simulated a regaining of consciousness. Frank Keir, James's father, was there too. He grabbed his son's hand roughly and dragged him to the bus stop. He and Mrs Chapel laughed conspiratorially behind their children's backs.

'Must be love!' Frank Keir said.

'Aye,' smiled Mrs Chapel, 'no doubt.'

It took half an hour for Mrs Chapel and her daughter to get back to Mitre Hill. As they turned the corner into Caliban Court both woman and girl realised that something was wrong. The reflected flash of blue light in the windows of the houses, the knot of neighbours standing in the road, the expression of palpable distress on Mrs McGregor's face as she peered out at them from her doorway, the police car and the ambulance parked in the Chapels' driveway; all fused into a single impression that accelerated through the air towards them. Suddenly Mrs Chapel released her hand from Maggot's and began to run. Maggot followed her for a few steps, far enough to glimpse the policeman turning toward her mother, the kneeling paramedic looking up from beside the tilted car, beneath which her father's legs were jutting as they had been when Maggot had run off.

The inchoate, distressing certainty of being in the presence of a catastrophe brought cold tears to her eyes, but even though she wanted to run she remained in the road, watching, immobilised, while a terrible silence filled every part of her body and mind. Something shivered up her spine like a worm made from freezing water.

I don't know what this feeling is, she thought.

Mrs McGregor came out, took the girl's hand and led her into her house.

as he hears the solo beginning to wind down, he gets to his feet, bleeding but anaesthetised, cauterised by this pure electricity running through him, and starts into the next verse as if nothing was strange about it at all – and he just looks up for a moment and sees James peering around at everyone with an expression on his face that says;

This is where the world is, and we are alive now.