

# One

I'm wondering what if.

What if the football hadn't gone over the wall.

What if Hector had never gone looking for it.

What if he hadn't kept the dark secret to himself.

What if . . .

Then I suppose I would be telling myself another story.

You see, the what ifs are as boundless as the stars.



## Two

Miss Connolly, our old teacher, always said start your story at the beginning. Make it a clean window for us to see through. Though I don't really think that's what she meant. No one, not even Miss Connolly, dares write about what we see through that smeared glass. Best not to look out. If you have to, then best to keep quiet. I would never be so daft as to write this down, not on paper.

Even if I could, I couldn't.

You see, I can't spell my own name.

Standish Treadwell.

Can't read, can't write,

Standish Treadwell isn't bright.



Miss Connolly was the only teacher ever to say that what makes Standish stand apart is that he is an original. Hector smiled when I told him that. He said he personally had clocked that one straightaway.

“There are train-track thinkers, then there’s you, Standish, a breeze in the park of imagination.”

I said that again to myself. “Then there is Standish, with an imagination that breezes through the park, doesn’t even see the benches, just notices that there is no dog shit where dog shit should be.”

## Three

I wasn't listening to the lesson when the note arrived from the headmaster's office. Because me and Hector were in the city across the water, in another country where the buildings don't stop rising until they pin the clouds to the sky. Where the sun shines in Technicolor. Life at the end of a rainbow. I don't care what they tell us, I've seen it on the TV. They sing in the streets—they even sing in the rain, sing while dancing round a lamppost.

This is the dark ages. We don't sing.

But this was the best daydream I'd had since Hector and his family vanished. Mostly I tried not to think about Hector. Instead I liked to concentrate on imagining myself on our planet, the one Hector and I had invented. Juniper.

It was better than being worried sick about what had happened to him. Except this was one of the best daydreams I'd had for a long time. It felt as if Hector was near me again. We were driving round in one of those huge, ice-cream-colored Cadillacs. I could almost smell the leather. Bright blue, sky blue, leather seats blue. Hector in the back. Me with my arm resting on the chrome of the wound-down window, my hand on the wheel, driving us home for Croca-Colas in a shiny kitchen with a checked tablecloth and a garden that looks as if the grass was Hoovered.

That's when I became vaguely aware of Mr. Gunnell saying my name.

"Standish Treadwell. You are wanted in the headmaster's office."

Frick-fracking hell! I should have seen that coming. Mr. Gunnell's cane made my eyes smart, hit me so hard on the back of my hand that it left a calling card. Two thin, red weals. Mr. Gunnell wasn't tall but his muscles were made out of old army tanks with well-oiled army-tank arms. He wore a toupee that had a life of its own, battling to stay stuck on the top of his sweaty, shiny head. His other features didn't do him any favors. He

had a small, dark, snot-mark moustache that went down to his mouth. He smiled only when using his cane—that smile curdled the corner of his mouth so that his dried-up leech of a tongue stuck out. Thinking about it, I am not sure the word *smile* is right. Maybe it just twisted that way when he applied his mind to his favorite sport, hurting you. He wasn't that worried where the cane landed as long as it hit flesh, made you jump.

You see, they only sing across the water.

Here the sky fell in long ago.



## Four

But the thing that really scratched at me was this: I must have been so many miles away. I didn't even see Mr. Gunnell approaching, although there was a runway between me and his desk. I mean, I sat at the very back of the class—the blackboard could have been in another country. The words were just circus horses dancing up and down. At least, they never stayed still long enough for me to work out what they were saying.

The only one I could read was the huge red word that was stamped over the picture of the moon. Slapped you in the gob, that word did.

*MOTHERLAND.*

Being stupid, and not being anything that fitted neatly on to lined paper, I'd sat at the back of the class long



enough to know I'd become all but invisible. Only when Mr. Gunnell's army-tank arms were in need of some exercise did I come into focus.

Only then did I see red.

## Five

There was no getting away from it. I'd got lazy. I'd got used to relying on Hector to warn me of oncoming doom. That daydream made me forget Hector had disappeared. I was on my own.

Mr. Gunnell got hold of my ear and pinched it hard, so hard my eyes watered. I didn't cry. I never cry. What's the use of tears? Gramps said that if he were to start crying, he didn't think he would stop—there was too much to cry about.

I think he was right. Salty water wasted in muddy puddles. Tears flood everything, put a lump in the throat, tears do. Make me want to scream, tears do. Tell you this, it was hard, what with all that ear pulling. I did my best to keep my mind on planet Juniper, the one

Hector and I alone had discovered. We were going to launch our very own space mission, the two of us, then the world would wake up to the fact it was not alone. We would make contact with the Juniparians, who knew right from wrong, who could zap Greenflies, leather-coat men, and Mr. Gunnell into the dark arse of oblivion.

We had agreed we would bypass the moon. Who wanted to go there when the Motherland was about to put her red-and-black flag in its unsoiled silver surface?



## Six

Mr. Gunnell didn't like me. I think it was personal. Everything is personal with Mr. Gunnell. I was a personal affront to his intelligence. I was an affront to his sense of order and decency. Just to make sure everyone got the message about the affront that was me, he pulled my tie undone. He had that smile on his face, the tongue-sticking-out one, as he closed the classroom door behind me.

I didn't have a problem with the caning. Or with the fact that my hands still smarted. I had a small problem with the ear pulling. I was only a tiny bit worried about the headmaster. I didn't know then about the trouble, or how deep it went.

But maybe I got an inkling of it the moment Mr. Gunnell pulled my tie undone, the git. You see, I can't do up my tie, and he knew it.

That tie had not been untied for a personal record of one year. That was the longest time I had ever managed to keep the knot intact. In fact the fabric had become so shiny that it moved with no problem just wide enough for my head to slip through and then close up as neat as a whistle at the top, so I looked spick-and-span. I mean, that was the idea. It had stayed this way because of Hector. He wouldn't let any boy mess with me. The days of torment I had believed to be behind me. That fricking, undone, hangman's rope of a tie made me feel like sliding down the wall onto the floor and giving up, letting the tears for once get some exercise. For there was one thing I couldn't do: go to the headmaster's office without a tie. I might just as well throw myself from the window headfirst. Say it came undone on the way down. Say due to concussion from the fall I had forgotten how to tie a tie.

I think I knew, if I was honest, then and there, that this was not just about the tie and the loss of a knot. It

was the loss of Hector I couldn't stand. If only I knew where they had taken him. If only I knew he was all right, then maybe the knot in my stomach—the knot which got tighter every day—would go away.





## Seven

Hector said the tie stood for something different. It was just the same as a collar round a dog's neck. It said you were a part of something more than you alone would ever be. Hector said a uniform was a way of making us all the same, neat boy-shaped numbers to be entered in a book. Hector wasn't a neat number and I think they might have rubbed him out, but I can't be sure of that. What I knew was that Hector was right. The knotted tie represented survival.

Now I was stuck, tie undone, my shirt buttoned wrong, my shoelaces a dead loss. I was a mess.





## **Eight**

The corridor smelled of disinfectant, milk, boys' pee, and polish. The striplights looked to me like loneliness. They were too bright; they revealed everything. They made the emptiness ten times worse, showed me there was no Hector. A glass door banged and Miss Phillips, one of the school wardens, came out of her office carrying a cup.

“What are you doing, Treadwell?”

She had a hard, no-nonsense voice but I'd seen her in the queues like everyone else, getting a little extra on the side. She looked down the corridor and up at the camera that went round like clockwork. She waited until the all-seeing eye was turned elsewhere, then without a word she tied my tie, re-buttoned my shirt. She checked the

camera, put her finger to her lips, and waited for it to turn back on us before saying in the same, no-nonsense voice, “Good, Treadwell. Now that is how I expect you to arrive at school every day.”

Never would I have thought that the hard-boiled Miss Phillips had such a soft, sweet center.



## Nine

The headmaster's office had a seat outside, a long bench, wood hard, bum sore, and just a bit too high. I reckon that was the genius of the seat because you ended up sitting there looking small and less of anything, with your feet dangling and your knobbly knees blushing red. And all you heard was the sound of your classmates hardly daring to breathe. I sat there waiting for the bell to ring, which meant Mr. Hellman will see you now. I sat and waited, time drip-ticking away.

Before Hector came to this school, I hated it. I believed it was invented just so the bullies, with brains the size of dried-up dog turds, could beat the shit out of kids like me. A kid with different-colored eyes: one blue eye, one brown, and the dubious honor of being the only

boy in the whole of his class of fifteen-year-olds who couldn't spell, couldn't write.

Yes, I know.

Standish Treadwell isn't bright . . .

How many times did the jerk-off bully boys sing that to me, egged on by the glory-arsed leader of the torture lounge, Hans Fielder. He knew he was important. Head Perfect, the teacher's pet. He wore long trousers, as did the rest of his gang. Tell you this for a bucketful of tar: there weren't many in our school who wore long trousers. Those that did thought themselves up there with the greats. Little Eric Owen wore shorts like the rest of us but he made his shorts longer by doing everything Hans Fielder required of the runt. If Little Eric was a dog he would have been a terrier.

His main duty was to see which way I was heading home every day and give the signal to Hans Fielder and his merry men. The boys needed something to get their teeth into. The chase would be on. I ended up being caught and beaten every frick-fracking time. Don't think I didn't give as good as I got, because I did. But I didn't stand much of a chance when there were seven of them.

It was the day I first met Hector. They had me cornered

under the old railway tunnel near the school. Hans Fielder thought he'd caught me good and proper, that there was no escape unless I wanted to risk being killed, for at the end of the tunnel was a sign. You didn't have to be able to read it to know what it said. It had a cross and skull-bones on it, which meant keep out or you're dead.

That day, down there in the stinking tunnel with Hans Fielder and his gang of nasties jeering and throwing stones at me, I came to the rapid conclusion that it might be safer to run into the long grass behind the sign and take my chance with the devil. There was no barbed wire or anything like that to fence it off. That notice alone had the power of a thousand scarecrows.

I ran down the tunnel for all I was worth, past the sign into what I was certain would be a firing range. At least it would be over quickly. Mum and Dad were gone and Gramps . . . well, I didn't let myself think about Gramps, not right then. Because Gramps was the only person that still pulled at the gravity in me. I glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see Hans Fielder and his frickwits following me. What I saw was a murky group of lads drifting away.

I stopped by a huge oak tree, out of breath, dizzy. It

was only when my breathing became more steady that I realized what I'd done. I waited some time. If the Greenflies turned up I would put my hands up and give myself in.

I sat down, my heart an egg bumping against the side of a pan of boiling water. It was then that I spotted it. A red football. Deflated, yes, but whole. I stuffed it in my school bag, a reward for my bravery. Not only that, but as I went further along the disused railway track I found raspberry bushes groaning with fruit. I took off my shirt, tied the sleeves together, and filled it up until it couldn't take another raspberry. All the time I was expecting to feel a Greenfly's hand on my shoulder.

By now I was near the wall that runs along the side of the railway track. A word to describe that wall would be *impenetrable*. See. I might not be able to spell but I have a huge vocabulary. I collect words—they are sweets in the mouth of sound.

The wall was built so high that Gramps and me, whose garden backed up to it, couldn't see over the fricking thing. You wouldn't know there was a wild meadow hidden behind it filled with flowers. Butterflies were doing the fandango like nature was having a ball and keeping

the VIP list all to herself. I was seeing it for the first time and, cripes, it was eye-bending in its beauty. Well, I thought, if all mankind disappeared down a hole I knew who would be holding the celebration party.

Why stop now, Standish? You have the raspberries, the football—why not the flowers?

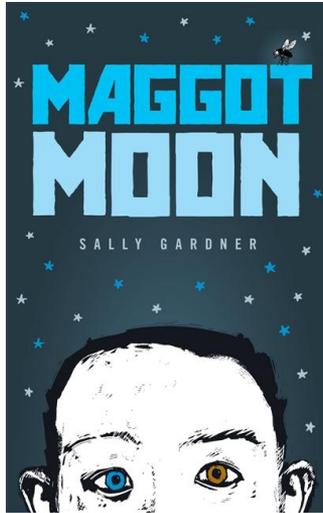
Twerp. Only then did it dawn in my daydreaming head that I hadn't the foggiest idea how I was going to get over the wall. I was up shit river with a hole in the boat and sinking fast. I mean, I couldn't climb the wall. It wasn't the height that concerned me, it was the glass at the top, the artery-cutting kind. You wouldn't be able to get over that wall and still claim to have hands.

Frick-fracking hell. There were two choices: I would have to go back the way I came, which I wasn't doing; and the other . . .

Standish, go on, tell me the other.

# Maggot Moon

Sally Gardner



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