

# SHADOW

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Copyright

*For Juliet, Hugh, Gabriel, Ros and Tommo*

# PREFACE

This story has touched the lives of many people and changed their lives too, forever. It is told by three of these people: Matt, his grandfather and Aman. They were there. They lived it. So it's best they tell it themselves, in their own words.

## WHEN THE STARS BEGIN TO FALL

### *Matt*

None of it would ever have happened if it hadn't been for Grandma's tree. And that's a fact. Ever since Grandma died—that was about three years ago now—Grandpa had always come to spend the summer holidays at home with us up in Manchester. But this summer he said he couldn't come, because he was worried about Grandma's tree.

We'd all planted that tree together, the whole family, in his garden in Cambridge. A cherry tree it was, because Grandma especially loved the white blossoms in the spring. Each of us had passed around the jug and poured a little water on it, to give it a good start.

"It's one of the family now," Grandpa had said, "and that's how I'm going to look after it always, like family."

That was why, a few weeks ago, when Mum rang up and asked him if he was coming to stay this summer, he said he couldn't because of the drought. There had been no rain for a month, and he was worried Grandma's tree would die. He couldn't let that happen. He had to stay at home, he said, to water the tree. Mum did her best to persuade him. "Someone else could do that, surely," she told him. It was no good. Then she let me have a try, to see if I could do any better.

That was when Grandpa said, "I can't come to you, Matt, but you could come to me. Bring your Monopoly. Bring your bike. What about it?"

So that's how I found myself on my first night at Grandpa's house, sitting out in the garden with him beside Grandma's tree, and looking up at

the stars. We'd watered the tree, had supper, fed Dog, who was sitting at my feet, his head heavy on my toes, which I always love.

Dog is Grandpa's little brown-and-white spaniel, with a permanently panting tongue. He dribbles a lot, but he's lovely. It was me that named him Dog, apparently, because when I was very little, Grandpa and Grandma had a cat called Mog. The story goes that I chose the name because I liked the sound of Dog and Mog together. So he never got a proper name, poor Dog.

Anyway, Grandpa and me, we'd had our first game of Monopoly, which I'd won, and we'd talked and talked. But now, for a while, we were silent together, simply stargazing.

Grandpa started to hum, then to sing. "*When the stars begin to fall ...* Can't remember the rest," he said. "It's from a song Grandma used to love. I know she's up there, Matt, right now, looking down on us. On nights like these the stars seem so close you could almost reach out and touch them."

I could hear the tears in his voice. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing for a while. Then I remembered something. It was almost like an echo in my mind.

"Aman said that to me once," I told him, "about the stars being so close, I mean. We were on a school trip down on a farm in Devon, and we snuck out at nighttime, just the two of us, went for a midnight walk, and there were all these stars up there, zillions of them. We lay down in a field and just watched them. We saw Orion, the plow and the Milky Way that goes on forever. He said he had never felt so free as he did at that moment. He told me then, that when he was little, when he first came to live in Manchester, he didn't think we had stars in England at all. And it's true, Grandpa, you can't see them nearly so well at home in Manchester—on account of the streetlights, I suppose. Back in Afghanistan they filled the whole sky, he said, and they felt so close, like a ceiling painted with stars."

"Who's Aman?" Grandpa asked me. I'd told him before about Aman—he'd even met him once or twice—but he was inclined to forget things these

days.

“You know, Grandpa, my best friend,” I said. “We’re both fourteen. We were even born on the same day, April twenty-second, me in Manchester, him in Afghanistan. But they’re sending him back, back to Afghanistan. He’s been to the house when you were there, I know he has.”

“I remember him now,” he said. “Short fellow, big smile. What do you mean, sending him back? Who is?”

So I told him again—I was sure I’d told him it all before—about how Aman had come into the country as an asylum seeker six years before, and how he couldn’t speak a word of English when he first came to school.

“He learned really fast too, Grandpa,” I said. “Aman and me, we were always in the same class in junior school and now at Belmont Academy. And you’re right, Grandpa, he is small. But he can run like the wind, and he plays football like a wizard. He never talks much about Afghanistan, always says it was another life, and not a life he wants to remember. So I don’t ask. But when Grandma died, I found that Aman was the only one I could talk to. Maybe because I knew he was the only one who would understand.”

“Good to have a friend like that,” said Grandpa.

“Anyway,” I went on, “he’s been in this prison place, him and his mum, for over three weeks now. I was there when they came and took him away, like he was a criminal or something. They’re keeping them locked up in there until they send them back to Afghanistan. We’ve written letters from school, to the prime minister, to the queen, to lots of people, asking them to let Aman stay. They don’t even bother to write back. And I’ve written to Aman too, lots of times. He wrote back only once, just after he got there, saying that one of the worst things about being locked up in his prison place is that he can’t go out at night and look at the stars.”

“Prison place? What d’you mean, prison place?” Grandpa asked.

“Yarl’s—something or other,” I said, trying to picture the address I’d written to. Then it came to me. “Yarl’s Wood, that’s it.”