

## The Collectors

*Matthew Hooton*

It begins on Deloume Road in August of 1986 when they come looking for the creature lurking beneath your bed. Or so they say. A shadow on the wall that's too dark to blend, and that murky, chewed aluminum voice: *Do not be afraid for we mean you no harm.*

Exactly one year later, three weeks before birthday number nine, running home past curfew, full dark, no stars, neck hair prickling as trees stretch fingers at your scent, this same voice stops you cold at the end of your long driveway, house and porch light waiting warm around the bend, but seemingly miles beyond the frigid and airless words: *Your brother breathes water, yes?*

They could not know this, you think, could not have watched you race your mother up carpeted stairs to his crib to find him sleeping beneath his liquorice-black ventilator, too buoyed to realise then that you were checking to see he was still alive, that he hadn't turned purple, his lungs Saran-wrap crinkled by invisible fists. Little Noah Alexander.

They could not know that his lungs did not collapse, that he outgrew respiratory distress, used all that oxygen to scream blue-murder when you wouldn't share the red plastic Viewfinder and collection of negatives on discs showing Disney stills. Or when you dared him to chew an entire pack of grape Bubblicious and mom caught him with purple lines of saliva dripping down his chin, cheeks chipmunked, eyes watering, and made him spit it all out into her hand right there in the church parking lot.

If you tilt your head just so, the shadow becomes a figure in a dark trench coat, Dick Tracy hat, as if the voice from another world visited a Salvation Army for a disguise before catching you alone at night. You ask if they can read your thoughts, and try not to remember listening to your brother singing alone in the bathtub, the pause and sharp intake of breath and splash, and you counting from the other side of the door. A minute. Two. Three. Your own heart outpacing the second count on your Casio calculator watch. And then the impossible gasp and coughing fit. Times penciled in a notebook. Four and a half minutes. Five.

*We know this. And we know you. Do not be afraid for we mean you no harm.*

You ask if they are here for the malevolent trees and their greedy fingers, to add those sinister specimens to their galactic catalogue, but they say no, ask if you are not perhaps the one who wants something. A sister, you think, without meaning to. Not instead of your brother, but between you. Something for you to agree on.

*You miss her, yes?*

Yes, you think, though you shake your head, knowing full well that you cannot miss what you've never had.

*And you miss them.*

This time you don't respond, but you think of them, even as sweat cools on your skin and the air shifts around your bare ankles. You remember your grandfather telling you why the gravel on the driveway didn't give off heat at night like the asphalt on Deloume. Telling you how his brother-in-law moved to Sydney in '47 and sent home star charts. *Not a letter or even a damned postcard*, he said. *Who knows why? Thought it'd break your grandmother's heart, but she loved it. Crocheted the Southern Cross onto blankets and everydamnthng else she could think of.*

When the memory cools, the shadow and its voice are gone and you walk home trying not to hear the crunch of small feet on gravel next to you.

Halloween in a cloud of fog and hot breath from behind bedsheets, two and a half feet of snow by Christmas morning and your brother red cheeked and rolling through white, blond locks from beneath his toque so that he does not make a snow angel, he becomes one. And months of spelling tests and the ancient Egyptians cleaning their dead with scarab beetles, and somewhere in all of this you forget, until you are lying in bed, sunburned arms peeling from an afternoon watching grasshoppers snapping through wheatgrass, distracting yourself from the pain with secondhand Archie comics, when the reading light flicks off and your eyes can't adjust as the walls fold and unfold into purple shadow.

*We watched them the same way, you know.*

You want to say you know, but instead stare at the shadow until the voice becomes visible again.

*We can show you why.*

But you know this too, know that you are different, that they are watching to decide what to collect. *It started in the North, didn't it?* you ask. *Dad told me.* You may not have spoken

these last words aloud, because you see them now, see your grandmother quarantined in the asylum outside of Calgary after failing her X-ray. She is smooth-skinned and thin, but her hair and eyebrows are already white, and she remains there for months during the outbreak, even though her test results were wrong, helps tend to a mix of new patients and old, the newcomers drowning slowly in air, the old hands skittish from electroshock therapy and dreams of prairie fires, wild roses, two-story piles of buffalo bones.

You see the lonely building on lockdown, its stone walls housing aging pipes that tick and groan, carry secrets from floor to floor. And your grandmother lying on her cot, ear pressed to stone so she can scare the hell out of the nurses the next morning by guessing who died in the night, who woke in fits, who tore off fingernails trying to escape.

She wanted to go to her brother in Australia after that. Your grandfather told you this too. Had a trunk ready for the steamer. Then she met him. *Hell*, he said, *who'd'a guessed it now, eh? But your grandpa was a real looker*. Had a truck so the TB clinic asked him to take a mobile X-ray unit up north, help out on reservations and oil fields. *Needed a nurse though, don't you know?* he said. You remember him winking.

There they are, all golden skinned in the prairie sun, living in camps, radiating nomads and gophers. At night the earth beneath their feet gives off an electromagnetic hum, the glowing dust a gorgeous poison shuddering its way into their bloodstreams, changing the roots of your family tree forever. You want to ask how you are seeing this, but the voice tells you to *hush, be still*. A trailer hooked to a pickup. The last of the buffalo in a loose herd through the badlands, a straggle of shaggy beasts grazing through the fossilized ribcage of a giant, fallen lizard.

*I watched them die*, you say, and you do not mean the dinosaurs or the buffalo, and this time it is the voice who says they know.

She died at sixty, her outstretched arms and yellow skin your earliest memory, just months after your brother came gasping blue-lipped and tiny into the world. Nana never did see the Southern Cross. Your mother and father moved the family as far west as they could after that. *To be near the ocean*, they said. *Won't that be something? All that water*.

Your grandfather was younger, made it a few more years before the crab-like growth filled his skull. Your own memory first: green gowns, his eyes glassy with morphine, the leather-smelling aftershave he smuggled into his room – *to disguise all this goddamned bleach*, he said.

Now you see that you were not alone, that your brother stood next to you, and another. A child, long hair, freckled skin like your own.

*You took her, didn't you? you ask. My sister?*

*We collect, they say. To remember.*

And you do. Her still body swaddled and unmoving. Her own blue lips and skin. Your mother weeping so hard the doctor sedated her while the nurses removed the body. Not lifeless after all. But still gone.

*Does she miss us?*

*Your sister weeps oceans, they say. Now that it is nearly time.*

You see what comes next as though it is the memory of a projected film, a slip-flicker of light on the bedroom wall. The flood does not come from the coast, but from the cracked earth of the prairie as the continent sinks in melting ice caps. Tectonic plates release their knuckle holds and the Rockies collapse to sea level, the entire firmament swallowed, bones and all.

*Your sister is waiting, they say. Come.*

*But my mom and dad.*

*Do not be afraid. You will remember.*

You do not need to ask about your brother, know full well that he will wake to water and, perhaps for the first time, feel at *home*. But you creep into his bedroom to whisper goodbye, whisper memories of road hockey with ice-cream pail helmets, the slap-clatter of wooden sticks on asphalt, the Great One versus Mikey Vernon. Snow angels and frozen toes, cushion forts in the basement. He lies on his back with his arms straight at his sides, his breathing slow and rasping, and you feel the rough carpet of the stairs on your palms as you race your mother to his cribside. An air purifier hums in the corner of the room. The earth trembles, shakes the house.

*Come, they say. It is time.*

**Matthew Hooton** is the author of the novels *Deloume Road* and *Typhoon Kingdom*, and has written fiction and non-fiction for a number of venues internationally. He teaches at the University of Adelaide, where his research ranges from Korean history through Jim Henson's *Muppets* and the stunts of Evel Knievel.