

The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree

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First published in Great Britain in 2018 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.hotkeybooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781471407550
also available as an ebook

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This book is typeset using Atomik ePublisher
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre Ltd,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierpublishing.com

Part One

Seventy Metres

The Dark

All children are scared of the dark.

The dark is a room with no door and no windows, where monsters grab you and eat you without making a sound.

I'm not afraid of the dark, though.

But I have something else to worry about. I have my very own dark, the one in my eyes.

I'm not making it up. If I were, Mum wouldn't buy me pastries shaped like peaches filled with cream and she wouldn't let me eat them before dinner. If everything were OK, Dad wouldn't hide in the bathroom when the landlady phones, because it's always bad news when she rings.

'Don't worry,' Mum says when she does the dishes after dinner. 'Go and play in your room and don't worry about a thing.'

I hesitate in the kitchen doorway, trying with the power of my mind to make her turn round, but it never works. So here I am in my room, cuddling Ottimo Turcaret, my

brown-and-grey cat with a kink at the end of his tail. He doesn't mind being lifted, rolled over on the carpet or chased with the toilet brush. He's a cat, Dad says, and cats are opportunists. I suppose that means they like attention. For me, it's enough that he's around when things are going wrong and I need something warm and cuddly to hug. Like now.

I know something's wrong. I might only be in year five, but I notice everything. My cousin's girlfriend says I have a third eye. She's Indian and has a dot painted in the middle of her forehead. I like that she thinks I have an extra eye, although it would be better if the two eyes I already have actually worked.

Sometimes I feel like crying, like now. My glasses steam up when I'm about to cry. I take them off, so at least they can dry and the red mark on my nose will go away. I've worn glasses since I started primary school. I got these yellow-with-sparkly-bits ones in December last year and I love them. I put them back on in front of the mirror. Without my glasses, everything's a bit misty, like when I have a very hot shower with boiling hot water. My mist is called Stargardt mist, or so Mum and Dad told me. They must've heard about it at the hospital. It says on Dad's phone that Mr Stargardt was a German ophthalmologist who lived a hundred years ago: he worked out what's going on with my eyes. He also discovered that people who have the same mist as me, see black spots in front of things or people, and that these spots get bigger and bigger, until they're huge, and people who see them have to get closer to

things to see them properly. The Internet says, *the disease affects one in ten thousand people*. Mum says that special people are chosen by God, but when I think about it, I don't feel that lucky.

2

Things I Care About a Lot (That I Won't Be Able to Do Any More)

Today I can see myself in the mirror from three steps away.

This distance is getting shorter. A year ago, I could see myself from five steps.

I pat Ottimo Turcaret's head in front of the mirror and, while I'm here, smooth my own hair. Mum likes putting pigtails in my hair these days and doesn't like me messing them up. She likes them so much she even has me keep them in at night.

Dad pops his head round the door and tells me to 'pyjamify' and brush my teeth. I say OK but stand at the window for ages before I do what he asks. You can see a huge patch of dark sky from the window in my bedroom. I like leaning out on autumn nights like these; it's not cold and you can see the moon and the North Star shining

bright. Mum says they're Jesus's street lamp and match. I'm more interested in checking they're both still there every night.

Dad comes in to read a story before I go to sleep. We're halfway through *Robin Hood* at the moment, and it's filling my dreams with forests and bows and arrows. Mum usually comes in after to arrange my pigtails on my pillow; she lays them out around my face and says goodnight, mint on her breath.

They come in together tonight and sit either side of my bed. They say they've noticed I'm seeing a little less and have decided to take me to a specialist next week. I don't like being off school because I miss important information (like how long it took to build the pyramids) and gossip (are Chiara and Gianluca in 4C really back together?). But I don't say this to Mum and Dad. I wait for them to leave the room and turn the big light off, then I turn on my bedside lamp. I run my fingers over the edge of the books behind my head, on the shelf above the headboard. I pick up the notebook with the crumpled corner.

I lay it on my pillow. The label on the front of it says: MAFALDA'S LIST

I use this notebook as my personal organiser. There's a date – 14 September – on the first page. That was three years, eleven days ago. Under that, I've written:

*Things I care about a lot
(that I won't be able to do any more)*

It's not a long list. There are only three pages, to tell the truth, and the first one starts with,

Counting the stars in the sky at night

~~Drive a submarine~~

Making goodnight light signals at the window

Code red. My glasses have steamed up.

Grandma used to live across the road from us, in the red house with lace curtains. A young couple lives there now. They never say hello and have even changed the curtains. Grandma was Dad's mum. She had curly hair like mine, only grey, and would always flash her torch to me before going to bed. One flash meant, 'I'm calling you.' Two flashes, 'Goodnight.' Three flashes, 'You too'. But that was before, when I could still see myself in the mirror from nine steps.

I never show the second page to anyone, not even to Ottimo Turcaret, because it's extremely top secret, so secret I only ever write in code.

The third page says:

Playing football with the boys.

Playing my pavement game where if you fall off the lines, you end up in the lava and die.

Having a paper ball in the basket competition

Climbing up the school cherry tree

I've climbed the school cherry tree loads of times, since my first day at primary school. It's my tree. None of the

other children can climb as high as me. When I was little, I would stroke the trunk, hug it – it was my friend. In fact, I found Ottimo Turcaret in the tree. He was terrified, the same brown and grey as he is now, only uglier. He was such a tiny kitten I brought him home in my pocket and it was only when I pulled him out and sat him on the table that Mum and Dad realised he was a little kitten.

He wasn't called Ottimo Turcaret then. He didn't have a name, but after he'd been with us a while and followed me everywhere, even to school, Dad gave me his favourite book, *The Baron in the Trees*, as a present and read it to me at bedtime. That's where I met Cosimo. He's a boy, a bit older than me, not much though, and he lived a long time ago when people wore wigs and tried to force him to do boring homework and eat disgusting food. He had a dachshund with two names and we decided that Ottimo Turcaret definitely looked like an Ottimo Turcaret, even though our cat doesn't have two owners like the dachshund, which was called Ottimo Massimo when it was with Cosimo, and Turcaret when it was with Viola, its real owner.

My favourite person in the book is Cosimo – I love that he goes to live in the trees and never comes back down because he wants to be free. I'd be too scared. I tried to build a treehouse in the cherry tree with toilet paper once, but it rained and the walls dissolved. The thing I liked best, though, was to take a comic book up and read it on a branch that had split in two. I could still see quite well then.

Every year since I started school I've had an eye exam with drops that burn. The doctors call it a 'rue-teen' test. I

think the specialist tests next week might be a bit different because my pilot light, the one in my eyes, seems to be in a hurry to go out. A very big hurry. The ophthalmologist explained it to me. She's not German like Mr Stargardt and hasn't discovered anything, but she always gives me a pencil with a colourful rubber at the end. She told me the light goes out in some people when they're old, a bit earlier in others. Mine will go out completely while I'm still young.

I'll be left in the dark she said.

I don't want to think about it just now. All I want to do is dream about forests and Robin Hood shooting arrows.

I shut my personal organiser and switch off the light.

Cosimo, can you help me?

You can do anything you set your mind to and you're kind. I know you are because, in the book, you read stories to the brigand even though he'd been very bad. You read them through the prison bars until the day he was hung, didn't you? What about me? Who'll read to me? Who'll read me stories when I'm left in the dark and Mum and Dad are at work?

If even you, a friend of the trees like me, can't help, I might stop speaking to you. Worse still, I'll stop thinking about you. Please find a way to help me, even secretly. You don't have to tell me, just find one, or I'll make the branches under your bottom disappear with my mind and you'll fall into the lava with the crocodiles, or to the ground,

which is worse seeing as you swore never to come down from the trees.

Estella always says we can get by on our own, that we don't need anything. Well, I need a really big something. Will you promise, Cosimo? Will you help me?

3

The Amazon Game

Estella gave me the idea for the list three years and eleven days ago, when she came from Romania to be at my school.

I was in the playground, up the cherry tree. The bell had rung and I was stuck.

‘You stuck, no?’

I looked down from the tree, eyes screwed up, and pushed aside a branch with lots of yellow leaves on it. Standing near the tree, arms crossed, was a school caretaker I’d never seen at school before. She was tall, had dark hair, and even though I couldn’t see what colour her eyes were, they looked really big and really black and almost scared me.

‘Well, I help. Then you go school.’

She must be foreign. I sat motionless in the tree, frightened I might fall.

‘Put foot here.’ The caretaker with the scary eyes was pointing to a piece of trunk jutting out just below me. I was holding on tight to the branch I was sitting on. I tried

to lower my foot, but it slipped, and the bark cracked under my weight. I went straight back to my original position.

‘I’m not coming down.’

‘You stay up rest of life?’

‘Yes.’

‘Bye then.’ The caretaker took a step towards the school. There was a crunching sound under her feet. She bent down and picked up a pair of red glasses. They’d been hidden in the leaves.

‘What’s this? Is yours?’

‘They’re my glasses. They fell when I was climbing up. And now I can’t get back down!’

‘No cry. Not need.’ The lady with the black in her eyes was back below my branch. ‘You know, in Romania I always climb trees. I liked play at top.’

I sniffed and asked what games she played.

‘I made the game . . . what you call it . . . Amazon. You know what is Amazon?’

‘No, what is it?’

‘Amazon is female warrior on horse, like man. Not afraid to come down tree.’

‘But she doesn’t wear glasses.’

‘No. She very strong. Afraid of nothing. She cut off piece of breast to fire bow and arrow. ‘

‘A piece of her breast?’

‘Yes. The grandmother of the grandmother of my grandmother was from an Amazon family, long time ago.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘It is.’

The lady with the scary black eyes was hurriedly rolling up her shirtsleeves. Then she started climbing up the tree. I clung on to my branch. When she reached me, she sat down beside me like she was riding a horse.

‘See? Amazon.’

‘But how will we get down now?’

She took my glasses out of her shirt pocket and handed them to me. I put them on right away. They were a bit dusty and crooked but at least I could see better.

‘You follow me now,’ the caretaker with the big eyes said. Up close, I could see she also had very bright pink lipstick. She started to descend as quickly as she’d climbed up.

‘Wait!’

‘What?’

‘I don’t want to come down.’

‘Good the God! Come down, I must work!’

I felt bad about wasting her time. She had been nice bringing up my glasses, but I didn’t want to come down because the day before, Doctor Olga had said I had a bad thing in my eyes and I was frightened.

I felt better in the tree. Nothing could happen to me here.

I told the lady this. I also explained that I couldn’t see very well and it was going to get worse. I said that I didn’t want not to be able to climb the tree any more. She had enormous eyes rimmed with black.

‘If there are things you can’t do any more, you must write list. That way you not forget anything.’

‘A list?’

‘Of course. List. I make list too, years ago.’

‘Could you not see well either?’

‘No. It wasn’t that.’

‘What was wrong then?’

The lady sighed and set off back down the tree.

‘I had less problem than now, you pain in neck.’

I followed her gingerly, edging along my branch. I was a bit miffed at what she’d said, but I was also curious.

‘What was on your list?’

‘Come down, I show you. What’s your name?’

‘Mafalda. And yours?’

‘Estella.’

Estella jumped down from the bottom branch of the cherry tree and turned to face me.

I’d reached the lower branches and had also jumped. She caught me mid-air and placed me firmly on the ground. Then she walked over to the main entrance of the school, but not before she held out her hand and called my name. ‘Mafalda. Estella does not tell lies. Only truth. We go see Estella’s list.’

I see Estella now every day at school.

When I get there at ten minutes to eight, she’s at the door waiting for me. She makes our secret signal – a whistle loud enough to burst your eardrums – which everyone hears though. so it’s not really that secret. She does it with two fingers in her mouth. I don’t know anyone else who can whistle like that. I hear it from far, far away and I run to meet her.

But first, I stop to greet the cherry tree. I can see it from a long way away (well, quite far away) on the road I take

every morning with Dad. In truth, all I actually see is a coloured blob in front of me, but I know it's the tree – I mean the giant's hair, if the giant is as nice as I imagine him.

Grandma always said that there are giants living inside the trunks of trees, giant tree spirits that move away to another tree when theirs gets chopped down. There used to be a cherry tree in grandma's garden. I climbed it all the time when I was small. I'd help Grandma pick the ripened cherries. I didn't even need glasses.

Straight away, we'd make a cake with the cherries, or maybe jam to eat in winter. Grandma's tree got infected with a sort of tree lice though, and we had to cut it down. I thought cutting the leaves off would have been enough. When we get head lice at school, they don't kill us, do they. They just cut our hair.

When they chopped it down, I decided that the giant had gone to live in the cherry tree at school and that he'd taken Grandma's spirit with him, and that it would be fun to count how many steps there are between the tree and when I can see it. That way I'd know how close I am to Grandma's giant. I screw my eyes up and try my best and, finally, yes, there it is – a red, yellow and orange blob, like the wigs clowns wear. It's all blurry, but it's there. The school next to it is a blue blob. I start counting straight away: one, two, three . . .

'Come on, Mafalda, we'll be late if you walk like that,' Dad says, gently tugging my hand.

'Dad, how long is one of my steps?'

'Hmm, I'm not sure. It must be about fifty centimetres. You're quite tall for your age.'

I keep counting. I count thirty steps before I hear Estella whistle. Thirty-five, thirty-six . . . forty, fifty, one hundred. We reach the school gates. Estella comes to meet me, says hello to Dad and takes me inside. I pick up a leaf near the tree. It's wet and yellow on the front, brown on the back. It is perfectly shaped and smells earthy. It reminds me of working in the garden with Grandma. I slip it into my pocket.

It took me one hundred and forty steps to reach the cherry tree from where I started to see it.

Seventy metres.

Part Two

Sixty Metres

The Bit in the Middle of the Eye

The second page of my list is the most important, to me anyway, and because it's super-secret, I put it between two pages. That way, if anyone steals my personal organiser and reads the first page, they'll think there's nothing special in it.

To tell the truth, the first and third pages are important too, it's just that the second one is the most important. I've written things on it that I would never tell anyone. I write them in my special code, just like Sherlock Holmes did for his secret things. I'm going to see Doctor Olga in a bit and am waiting for Mum to finish putting her make-up on while I pretend to cuddle Ottimo Turcaret on the balcony. What I'm really doing is peeking at the second page of my list. Estella said I shouldn't do this because once I've written these things down I should let them go or keep them to myself. I don't really understand what this means so I've decided that I'll read the second page when I feel up to it. Until it's a bit clearer what she means.

I hear Mum's heels approaching. She always wears heels when we go to the doctor. I snap my personal organiser shut and hide it under the chair.

'Are you ready? Let's go.'

I'll think about it later, that thing Estella said. She says so many things that I'll be in the dark before I understand what any of them mean.

Doctor Olga has green eyes, I think.

She sits at her desk and gives me a pencil with a dinosaur rubber on the end.

'Don't you have one with Egyptian gods?' I ask. Mum, sitting beside me, elbows me. Dad is here too, with a smart jacket over his boiler suit. He's on his lunch hour but today he has to be with us at the hospital because the results of my tests have arrived. The doctor says she'll get some pencils with Egyptian gods, in case other children ask for them. Then she gets serious.

'I'm sorry to say that things are not great. Mafalda's retina has thinned very quickly over the past few months. The tissue won't be able to hold out much longer. The macula –'

'That's the bit in the middle of my eye,' I interject, to help Mum and Dad understand. 'We studied it at school.'

'The very one. Mafalda's macula has been severely compromised, as the test results show.'

I'm not sure I understand what she's saying, although it occurs to me that maybe I could have tried harder in the tests. I didn't stand completely still when they put the wires in my eyes and I even nodded off during the red dot test! I'm

about to say this to the doctor but she keeps speaking, in tones so hushed I have to point my ear to her mouth to hear.

‘The speed with which the disease has advanced doesn’t leave us much hope. Optimistically . . .’

‘How long?’ Dad asks, his voice even quieter, something that never happens.

‘Optimistically . . . six months.’

Mum and Dad crumple in their seats like burst balloons. I, on the other hand, lean towards the desk and ask the doctor, ‘Six months before what?’

She looks at me through glasses with thin lenses. ‘Before you can’t see any more, Mafalda.’

‘So, I’m really going to end up in the dark?’

She hesitates. ‘I’m sorry,’ is all she says.

My glasses steam up.

Some kinds of news should only be given if you have a cat on hand to hug.

5

Have a Best Friend

When we get home from the doctor's, I pick up Ottimo Turcaret and use him as a blanket for my dream nap.

I had my first dream nap last year, when my cousin Andrea started going out with Ravina. She taught me something called meditation, which means a way to have lovely dreams even if you're sad or angry or not very sleepy. You have to be as quiet as a mouse and imagine you're inside your body, which is not that nice at first, but you get used to it and after a bit you stop thinking about the blood pulsing in your veins and to your brain, and find yourself thinking about nothing at all. Well, that's what happens to me. Noises around the house caress my face in waves, like bells chiming in the distance, and I end up falling asleep. That's when the dreams come.

Today's nap brings a lovely dream.

I dream that I climb up the cherry tree at school, to the

highest branch, up, up, at the top. I can see the whole town, no, the whole world, from up here. I open my arms and start to fly. I fly up to the roof of the school, then higher still. In the end I fly away. To the moon and the North Star, although I can see all the stars clearly, too. I play football with Grandma who is in goal.

Chiara has come around to play, but not at football. Mum called her although I'd rather be by myself. I'm learning to read with Braille dots and the book Estella gave me to practise with is really good and also a bit strange. It's called *The Little Prince* and she bought it on Amazon. Chiara's my friend from nursery school and I can't just pretend she's not here. To be honest, she hasn't been over to play at my house, or invited me to hers, for ages. The last time was her birthday in June and we both went away on holiday after that.

I put the dot alphabet away when she arrives. She sees it all the same and asks me right away what I'm doing. 'Nothing,' I reply. I don't know why, but I'd rather she didn't see me reading with Braille dots. I feel stupid. I suggest we go into my bedroom to play restaurants because I know she likes to cook and always watches *MasterChef*.

We set a table with plastic plates and cutlery. I can no longer find the fake glasses so we fill up two real glasses with water. Chiara plays the waiter and chef, I'm the customer. I pretend to look at the menu and pick all the complicated dishes. Chiara has fun writing them on her hand and repeating them (incorrectly) to the chef in the kitchen, which is my open wardrobe, then she pretends to start cooking.

The restaurant game's OK, though I'm not mad about it, so after we've done the same scene three times, I suggest we play husband and wife who go out for dinner, to mix it up a bit. We say goodbye to Ottimo Turcaret who's staying at home with the babysitter – that's my doll Maggie – and sit down at our table. Right away we both have the same idea (it's like that with best friends) to experiment with the ingredients in our drinks. We run around the house looking for disgusting things to put in them: earth from the plant pots, salt and pepper, a spray of Dad's aftershave, even a bit of dried glue stick that looks like snail slime. We mix them together with a fork and go back to our table.

'I propose a toast,' Chiara says. She raises her glass full of yellowy gunk and pretends to drink. I reach out a hand to pick up mine – it's right there on my left, I think. But my eye goes dark and instead of picking it up, my fingers bump the glass and knock it over Chiara who starts screaming because the disgusting gunk is all over her leggings. The dark fills with glimmering spiders. I can't see a thing, I only hear the glass roll away then the sound of it breaking by my feet. Mum rushes in wanting to know what's happened.

Chiara demands to go home even though it's not four o'clock yet. I hear her mum, who came in for a coffee, speak to her in the hallway. The black blob in my left eye is gradually fading but Chiara and her mum are already by the front door, car keys in hand.

'See you at school tomorrow,' I say, sticking my head out into the hallway. Chiara just replies with a short 'Bye' and

leaves. Mum shuts the door and walks over to me, a wet cloth in her hand. ‘Do you fancy a sandwich with chocolate spread?’

Grandma would have made it with jam.

I go back into my room and pick up *The Little Prince* again. I pretend to read. Mum goes slowly back into the kitchen and I pull out my personal organiser. I open it at the second page, the super-secret one, and with a black pen score out the words, *Have a best friend*.