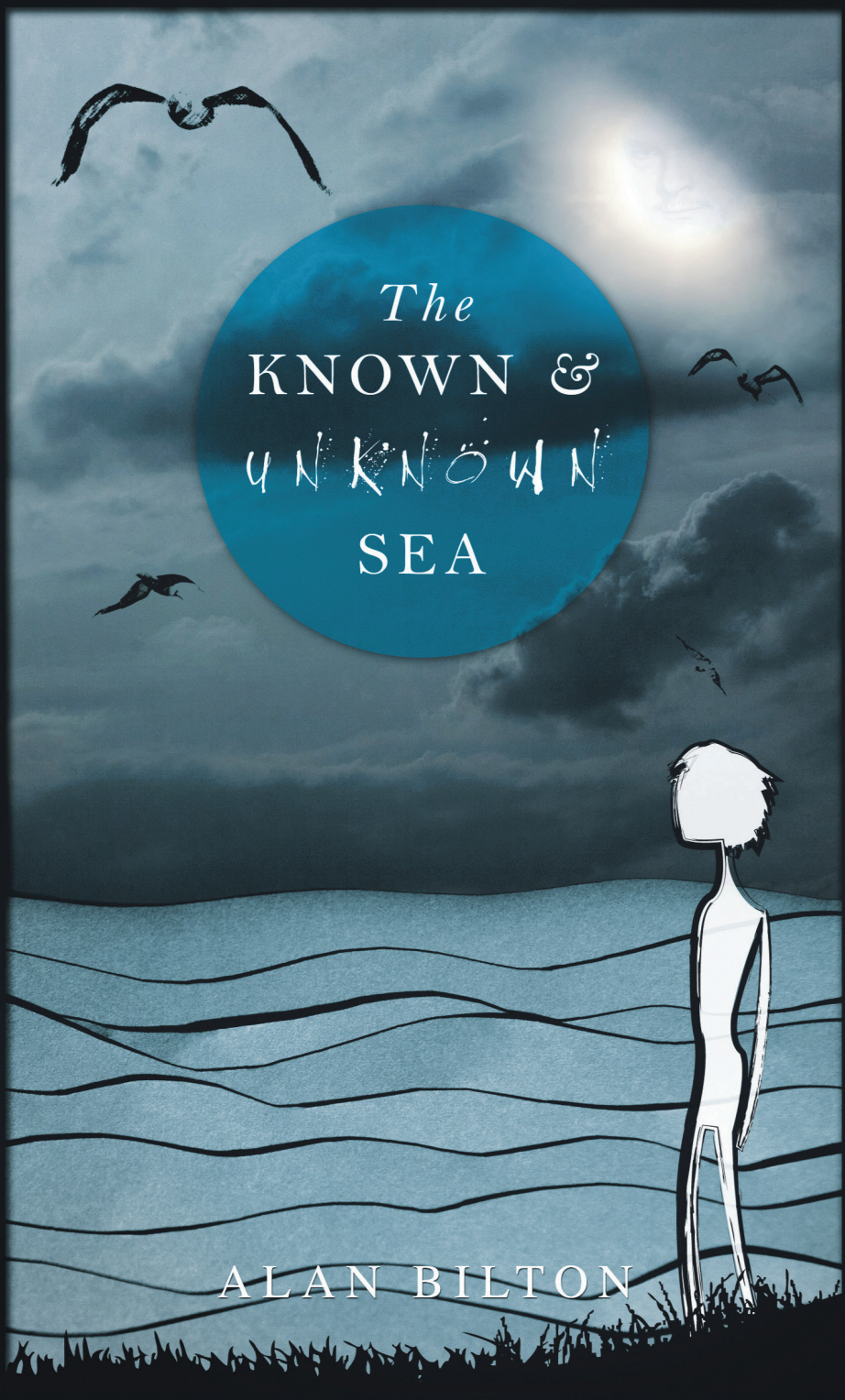
The
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ALAN BILTON

The Known & Unknown Sea

Alan Bilton

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For Pamela and Laurie

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The Bay of Seething

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The day the tickets arrived, our whole family gathered around my grandfather's table to decide *what should be done*. The mood was tense. Mum had already got to work packing, but my three grannies "clucked like chickens near the pot" (Dad). "Why go, why set sail?" asked Granny Mair. "Get on a strange boat, go across the water – but for what?" Granny Dwyn agreed. "The sea is no feather bed!" "And Alex is such a delicate child," said Auntie Glad, shaking her spoon at me. "Just at look at that pup – trust me, that is not a boy who'll float." I had eaten huge amounts of jelly and was bouncing up and down on Uncle Glyn's lap. "Will it be a very big boat?" I asked, flapping my arms like a bird. "Oh very, very big," said Uncle Glyn. "Why if everyone in the town were to go on deck, there would still be room for a friend." "And is it a long way from one end to the other?" I asked. "A long way?" Uncle Glyn poked me in the belly. "Why, if you set off in the morning, you'd have grown a beard before you got half way." Ah, how big and strange the world

was – and how awfully close to boot. "And is it also very high?" I asked. "My child," said Uncle Glyn, patting me on my puffy cheeks, "if you put a ladder on the top you'd scrape the sky with your hat." "Glyn, don't fill his head with nonsense," said my dad. "The lad's as stupid as a goose as it is." Dad stared at the tabletop like it was a trapdoor about to open. He agreed with Granny Dwyn and Auntie Glad: no good could come of this! I closed my eyes and counted to ten but when I opened them again the tickets were still there. They were a lovely sky-blue colour, the same as my bedroom. "You think all that water will keep you up?" said Granny Dwyn. "A fish can't swim in soup..."

The tickets had arrived the day before, delivered by some little fella in a "suspicious looking" van. The envelope had no stamp and the guy who came to the door "wasn't even a real postman" (my brother) – he was dressed all in white and came to the door with an enormous moustache. When he rang the doorbell, Mum was listening to sad music and sighing, but as soon as she tore open the envelope, the colour raced back to her cheeks. "Go and find your water-wings," she said. "And maybe your sun-hat too." My brother, the legalist, picked up the letter and started to go through the small print, but Mum was already on the phone to Aunt Bea, her "mercury steadily rising" (Dad). Amazingly Aunt Bea had won tickets too – mother's cheeks were hot and wet. "Alex, change the record will you?" Mum cried. "This is no time for tears!" I could hear Aunt Bea bawling and my mother laughing and I joined in by beating the table with a stick. "But we didn't even enter a competition," complained my brother, who, despite the excitement still wanted "proof" and "facts"; he had an awfully angry look on his face and waved the envelope under our noses accusingly. Mum wasn't listening though; instead she gathered clothes from all round the house, piling them up in one enormous heap. "Have we been burgled or is your mother cleaning?" (Dad). When he came home, my father picked up the

tickets, scrunched up his eyes, and carefully inspected the paperwork through his "skepticals". "We've been to no travel agent, filled in no form, entered no raffle…" he said. Mum didn't care. "If someone bakes you a cake, do you ask to check the recipe?" My father and brother looked at each other with the same melancholy expression while I kept hitting the table with a stick.

Meanwhile news of the tickets was spreading fast. Envelopes had been distributed from Windy Harbour Road to Nant Celyn, but not everyone had been so lucky it seemed. Some people had won tickets but others had not, just like the sheep and the goats, or some such thing. To the untrained eye there seemed neither rhyme nor reason. Publicans, council-workers, butchers, estate agents – some had received sky-blue envelopes, others *zip*. "But why haven't I been chosen?" cried Mrs Griffith in the Post Office, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Who gets to decide?" No one had an answer. "This will come to a bad end," said Mr McAuley, who ran the newsagent. "You don't measure your collar size by putting your neck in a noose." Mr and Mrs McAuley hadn't received any tickets and eyed up their customers suspiciously. "There now," said Mrs Crowther, in a vain attempt to cheer Mrs Griffith up. "See! The newsagent will still be open, and the fish shop too." But Mrs Griffith kept on crying. "It hurts here," she said, pointing either to her heart or to her shoulder, it wasn't very clear. Oh, for pity! Oh, for shame! Looking at her made you want to cry too, especially if you didn't have a ticket either.

Of course many considered the tickets to be a hoax; "Nobody gets something for nothing this side of the grave," hissed Mrs Keenan, stroking her cat. And yet, everything *looked* official: accommodation, meals, paid excursions, passage to the other side. My brother and I asked Granny Dwyn about what lay on the other shore of the bay, but she just slapped our arms and snapped, "There is no other side!" and that was that.

Even so, dozens of people (my brother and I amongst them) rushed down to the seafront to see what could be seen. Unfortunately, it was pretty disappointing: drizzle, emptiness, the bay shrouded in mist, "from here to the front steps of eternity" (Uncle Tomos). No matter how hard you looked, you still couldn't see the other shore – only vague shapes and blobs, like the view through Granny Mair's glasses. A fair sized crowd gathered on the front but there wasn't much to get excited about. "Like staring into the inside of a hat!" (Cousin George). My brother and I went there on our bikes after seeing Granny Dwyn, but by the time we got there it was dark and there was even less to see than before. What was fog anyway? Fold after fold of nothingness. Yet somehow we were to go there…

In our house it was decided that we should all meet in Grandfather's front room, as he had the biggest table, albeit not necessarily the cleanest. "To what do I owe this honour?" grumbled Grandy, curved like a teacher's cane. ("Guests are like tacks," he muttered, "easy to get hammered, impossible to get out.") Grandy, Grandy, old and bent/counting the cost/of a life mis-spent! Strangely I had three grandmothers but only one grandfather, and I could never work out which one he belonged too. The three grannies all wore black and sat together like a tea-cosy with three spouts – Granny Dwyn, Granny Mair, and the other one. Grandpa sat on his own, "stewing in his juices" (my mother). He smoked his pipe and watched people traipsing in and out of his kitchen. "The fattest sow is first in line at the trough!" The house was full of cousins and half-cousins and cousins-by second marriage – "magpies in the family tree!" (Granny Dwyn). I had to call anyone higher than the sideboard 'Auntie' or 'Uncle', which was awfully confusing. It was also very busy. Chairs were squeezed into Grandy's front room, and when it was completely full, more chairs were squeezed on top. "Mind the paintwork!" Grandy bellowed but nobody was listening. Instead, everyone stared at the

sky-blue tickets on the table. "Just like the colour of my bedroom," I whispered to my brother, but he just rolled his eyes and rested his saucer of biscuits on my head.

"The important thing," said my father, "is that we consider things sensibly, don't get carried away with a lot of wild talk…" But you know what they say – you might as well try shouting down the gas pipe; the men all wanted to talk about boats and the women all wanted to talk about packing. According to the letter, only two cases per person were permitted, and this was the cause of much consternation. What about hand luggage? Could children be assigned two cases too? And what should be packed: summer dresses, warm coats, a scarf and hat for the sea voyage? Aunt Bea would go nowhere without her navy ball gown. "It's my one chance to wear it out!" Others felt that waterproofs and a stout so-wester were a better bet. "Just look at all that fog," they argued. "You expect to get a tan from *mist*?" There were other things to be considered too: plants to be watered, lawns to be tended, pets to be looked after. "Bury me in my garden," said Granny Dwyn. "At least I'll be able to keep an eye on the beans." Grandpa's larder was pretty much empty by now. "Why not take the furniture and the light fittings too?" he bellyached, hiding his best biscuits. By this stage in proceedings the action had started to move away from Grandfather's enormous table and was beginning to spill out to the front room. Cousins I hardly recognised were chasing each other harum-scarum around the furniture, whilst others formed a line of stepping-stones from Grandpa's cushions. Grandpa's brows knitted together to form one thick continuous line. "Where did these pups grow up, a farm yard?" he yelled. I hid beneath the legs of Grandpa's famous table and emptied jelly out into a shoe.

"The letter doesn't even say how long the trip's for, or how long it will take to get there," said Dad. "How are we supposed to plan for anything?"

"That man!" hissed Mum. "He'd be miserable drowning in ice

cream." Recently my mother had taken to standing in doorways and sighing. My brother blamed this on the books she read, which were Russian and tragic.

Afterwards an argument broke out about visa regulations but then somebody put on some music and Aunt Bea and Mum started to dance.

"Do you think the fog will lift?" asked Uncle Huw, cleaning out his ear. "I don't see how the boat will be able to dock otherwise…"

"Fog," I sang. "Fog, fog, fog…"

"Ah, they know what they're doing," said Uncle Glyn, picking up the envelope. "Just look at that lettering!"

"And the paper – so thick!"

"Pff, boats, tickets, envelopes," said Granny Dwyn, peering through the curtains. "You might as well set sail for the moon…"

Away from Granddad's table the party was getting out of hand. There were cousins everywhere. Cake was trampled underfoot. "Like a herd of elephants!" thundered Grandy. Mum closed her eyes and started to sing along to the music – something about a stranger and love and the moon. My brother looked at me sternly. "It's those books!" he whispered. "That's why she breathes funny too."

Then it was time to go. Nothing had been decided. Nobody knew who was going and who was staying. Auntie Glad burst into tears on the doorstep and Grandy shouted "Women: the world's sorrow!" and went back in to check on his sherry. I was sitting on his famous table, drawing pictures of monsters on a napkin. "Little monkey!" Grandy growled. Father was deep in thought. "Or deep in something!" (Uncle Glyn). There was a brief moment of panic when we all thought that our tickets were missing, but after a short search they turned up safe and sound, under a scrunched-up napkin. "You'd do better to toss them out with the rest of the rubbish," said Granny Dwyn. Her round old face looked like an owl chewing a mouse. The three grannies all left together in a taxi so I still didn't

know which one Grandpa belonged to. Outside it was gloomy and grey. Fog was massing in the west, like a heavy curtain spread across the street. The sky felt very close, like it was just above our heads. "Fog, fog, fog," I yelled. When we got back to our house night fell like an axe.

2

The day after the confab around Grandfather's famous table was a school day, so my brother and I put on our uniforms and cycled there as normal. It was a Tuesday: my brother had a maths exam and I had to paint a picture of fish. But half way through Craft, Miss Evans stood up at the front of the class and announced that any child who has received a ticket could leave straight away. "No reason to stay on now…"

The room went very quiet – "quiet as the Queen's farts" (Cousin Ieuan). Not a child moved whilst Miss Evans' eyes passed over the kids like a searchlight.

"Children?"

I did my best to sink down behind the desk but it was no use.

Alex, did *you* get a ticket?"

"Yes Miss…"

"Well, off you go then. And don't forget your coat…"

All the kids were staring at me, their little round faces as pale as mushrooms. No one said a word. Above me the strip light buzzed like a wasp.

"Alex? Come on Alex, let's go…"

As soon as I went out into the corridor I smelt a strong chemically-smell – maybe bleach, maybe something else. The corridor was silent. As I passed each classroom I could hear various lessons going on, but out in the hallway: nothing. How strange it all was – like I'd fallen through the cracks into someplace else entirely.

Luckily Michael was waiting for me over by the bike shed. Oh Mikey! We should have been really happy but we both looked kind of dazed. "I didn't even do my test," he sighed, throwing his school bag up on his back. As we pushed our bikes out, the school felt very small, like something you could pick up and carry home in your pocket. No bell tolled. There weren't any other kids around *anywhere.*

"Mikey?" I said. "How come nobody else has got a ticket?"

Mikey looked at me sadly and shook his head.

"Mikey?"

"Come on Alex," he said. "Let's get on our bikes and go…"

The road down from our school ran alongside the park and the play-area where I'd once got lost despite the fact that it was *mathematically impossible* (Mikey), then down the steep hill where I'd almost been squashed flat by a bus ("you might as well put that boy on a bear as a bike" – Auntie Glad), past a line of derelict shops (haunted) to the traffic lights on Cemetery Road, where you could either go left (to the shops), right (to Hell) or straight on (to the sea): that day we went straight on, down past the library with its enormous spiked gates, *the sharpest spikes in the world*, then along the back lane by the short stay car park and out onto the cycle path at the front. Out across the bay it was thick fog, just like every day. It was as if a grey sheet had been hung up to dry, a dense wall of nothingness. We stopped and looked at it for a while but there wasn't much to see. Such a thing! It was hard to imagine that in just a few days we'd be sailing right into it ("through it" – Mikey). "Do you think there is something across the bay?" I said and Michael said yes, otherwise it wouldn't be a bay. I nodded soberly, though geography wasn't really my strong point. How drab it all was! Looking out across the wet sand was like waiting for the TV to warm up, but it never did. "Shall we go up the Knob?" Mikey said and I said yes and we got back on our bikes and peddled along the front, past the crazy-golf (closed),

the amusement arcades (deserted) and the out-doors café (boarded up), and then out along the coast road, leaving our bikes on the gravel beneath Knob Rock, our town's most famous sight, at least for schoolboys. There were crunched up beer-cans and broken glass scattered by the Balls, as well as graffiti that my brother wouldn't let me read, but then the path climbed up amongst the gorse bushes to the electricity substation and the radio transmission tower and a tiny crag where you could look out on the whole bay (our side) and our little seaside town, the houses scattered higgledy-piggledy as if dropped from a great height. "It's funny to think that all this will still be here when our boat's set sail," said my brother. "This crag, the houses, the shops and people – they'll still be here, but we'll be gone." I'd never thought of this before. "Will all my toys be safe?" I asked and he nodded. "And my comics too?" Try as I might I couldn't imagine the little town without me. I mean, what kind of world would it be without me in it? Like a bathtub with the plug pulled out… Our eyes scanned the grey horizon. "Look, is that a seal?" I said and he said, "No, it's a buoy," and I said, "A boy like me?" and he said, "There is no boy like you," but then we started to get a bit hungry so we freewheeled back home.

3

The next night there was an 'extraordinary' town meeting at the community centre, but I was too little to go ("Why would a child want to go anyway? To listen to that flock of geese?" – Granny Dwyn). My dad went, and Uncle Glyn and Uncle Tomos and our neighbours, Mr and Mrs Begham, who didn't have any tickets, but did have a car, which was handy. It didn't sound extraordinary though. There weren't enough seats, the radiators wouldn't work, and nobody from the shipping company remembered to turn up. "I have, however, received a call from head office," said Mr Llewellyn, though, under sustained interrogation, he had to admit that it had been a very bad line and he couldn't be "one hundred percent" sure it was them. After this, questions were invited from the floor. What about those without tickets? When would the boat be returning? How was the selection made in the first place? No one had any answers though – not even Mr Llewellyn and his phone call. When Dad came home he lowered himself down onto our settee as if he was never going to leave it again. "You'd think the ship had sunk!" (Mum). Dad always looked like that though – Uncle Glyn was much jollier. "Quick, quick, outside!" he yelled, coming in the door. "The ship has just sailed into our back garden!" It hadn't though. "Don't pester the boy," said Dad. "He's away with fairies as it is." "Tch, it's just gone," said Uncle Glyn, winking.

We didn't know it at the time, but this wasn't to be the only false alarm. The very next day our local paper published pictures of the

"luxury vessel" on its front page, only it turned out to be just a snap of a model, taken in somebody's bath. I stuck it up on my wall anyway. "Do you think we'll have a cabin near the chimneys?" I asked, but my brother wouldn't even look up from his textbook. The boat in the picture was enormous, if you ignored the fact that it fitted in a bathtub. "There must be room for a thousand people," I said, trying to count the portholes, which wasn't easy, particularly on the other side. My brother, ever suspicious, wanted to know why nothing had appeared on the TV or the local news yet, especially if no one had ever crossed the water before. My mother said that of course somebody had been across the water, just not us. "Ask your father!" she snapped. But there was no point. Sorrow sat on my father's head like a large, grey hat. "Why now?" he cried. "Just when I've got all this work on!" My three grannies were worried too. There had been a spate of burglaries since the 'day of the tickets', and they now refused to leave the house. "What if someone goes through my things?" lamented Granny Mair, though I'd been through her things millions of times and never found anything worth stealing. Granny Dwyn slept with a pool-cue under her bed and who could blame her? There were stories of violent break-ins, muggings, aggravated assault. "The whole town is going to the dogs!" (Auntie Glad). According to Dad I was going to the dogs too. As the day crept closer and I got giddier and giddier. "Will it be soon?" I asked my mum, bouncing off the walls. My brother rolled his eyes. "What do you think, Mum? Is the ship sailing towards us even now?" Mum smiled and nodded. Four more sleeps! I looked up at the picture on my wall and made boat noises until everything went black.

All that week there were rumoured sightings of the mysterious cruise-ship. Some kids hanging around by the precinct said that they'd seen an enormous boat of some kind passing the spit of land out by the long-stay car park, though a rival gang contradicted this by claiming

they'd spotted a "strange glowing galleon" docking at what had once been an old chemical plant (when no agreement could be reached, fisticuffs broke out). It was as if the mysterious ferry was everywhere. A cloud shaped *exactly* like a paddle steamer passed over the local off-licence. At night, next-door's garage looked like a tug moored amongst the rhododendrons. Even Aunt Bea admitted to dreaming about a luxury liner sailing up the dual carriageway, its "decks ablaze with lanterns". "Shhh," said Uncle Glyn. "That's its whistle blowing out to sea." But where, my brother wanted to know, was such a huge craft going to dock anyway? Our little town had neither harbour nor docks nor jetty. The 'beach' was thick brown mud, sticky as tar (I had once kicked my football in and the mud had swallowed it up like a pill). How would the boat even reach us? But that didn't stop everyone from gazing longingly (or fearfully) at the horizon. Someone even put ten pence in the telescope, though there wasn't much to see: just blobs and squiggles and marks, and beyond that, nothingness. If anything the fog actually seemed a little bit thicker. "Unless it clears, it'll never reach us," said Dad, but that didn't stop Mother from packing her summer dresses.

Then, two days before the date indicated on the tickets, a strange shape appeared out in the bay, like a heavy cloud fallen to earth. Was that smoke coming from a series of smokestacks, or (*mam bach*) just another bank of fog, merely a little heavier than the rest? "Feh, you might as well stare at tea-leaves," said Granny Dwyn, for whom the sky was half-empty, not half-full. No one could even agree as to what shape it was – straight line, oblong, blob. One smart-arse even said it was just a smear on the lens of the telescope, though everyone knew you could see it with your own two eyes, at least if you squinted the right way. Even though the bay was a long way from our house, I couldn't stop myself peeping through the curtains, hoping to catch the boat just waiting outside. "See what you've done,"

my father grumbled, but Uncle Glyn just grinned and yelled, "Two more days till we walk the plank!" At night I squirmed helplessly in my bed, dreaming of the "glorious dawn" to come, but in the morning the ship stayed stubbornly frozen on the horizon, more of a stain than a ship…

Indeed that morning, as I remember it, everybody seemed a little subdued. All the talk was of travel sickness and vaccinations and injections but the whole room went quiet when I rounded the kitchen table. "What about the sickness…" asked Michael, but Mum said, "Shh – little ears," and eyed me up suspiciously: I'd forgotten to put any trousers on and my hair was sticking out at a funny angle. "The poor dove!" (Auntie Glad). And there was another reason for the pall hanging over our kitchen table: some "wee boy" had drowned out in the bay, seemingly trying to swim out to the phantom ship. The story of his disappearance passed swiftly from house to house, though no one seemed to be able to say where he'd come from, what school he went to, or even how old he was – even his name seemed to have sunk down into the depths. For some reason the story of the boy had a great impact on my family. Granny Dwyn argued that I should be locked in my bedroom "until the whole thing blows over", but after a long argument this was vetoed, two to one. Nevertheless, everyone looked at me strangely. I had a funny glint in my eye and also seemed a little feverish. "You need to keep an eye on that boy," said Aunt Glad. "He looks like a firecracker about to go off." But who wouldn't be a little over-heated? The passenger-ship seemed to be sailing up and down the kitchen, puffs of smoke floating up from its chimneys, forming little speech bubbles as they went.

My worried parents examined me thoroughly: I was "peaky" and "hollow-eyed". There were rumours of people falling ill right across town but people seemed too busy with their packing to pay them much attention. Even when Mr Muller was found dead in his bed, "stiff as an ironing board", all that people talked about was whether

he'd received his tickets or not and whether that would mean an extra space, a refund, maybe even some kind of delay? Ah, poor Mr Muller! All anybody could think about was "the other shore", passage across that "deathly span" (Uncle Tomos). But was there really any such thing? The 'ship' itself was still no more than a spill or a mark – as my brother pointed out, it actually looked a little *less* ship-like if anything. Still, fewer and fewer people now seemed to doubt its almost unbearable presence. The less there was to see, the more it seemed to fill people's heads – right up to the brim…

And then, on the very last day, "the dread hand of disaster" (Cousin Alwyn) reached out for our family too. Grandy had been standing atop a footstool, trying to get his suitcase down from his wardrobe, when his famous steamer trunk (it was rumoured to have survived at least one war and maybe two) fell down and brained him. Later on, it turned out that the case was full of pictures of pretty ladies who looked very nice but were, in fact, indecent. Grandpa lay on the floor for a full seven hours before my three grannies found him lying prone and covered in bare bosoms. "Women: the world's sorrow!" The doctor wrapped his head in bandages and confirmed what we all knew: Grandfather wouldn't be able to go. Not even if his head suddenly got better. "I didn't know you *wanted* to go," said Mother and Grandy said, "When did anyone think to ask?" Poor Grandy: even under all those bandages you could tell his brow was furrowed.

We all gathered by his bedside and I accidentally sat on his knee. "With this amount of care, you could kill someone!" But after this we all went quiet: were we going to go on the boat or not? It was "time to poop or get off the pot" (Uncle Glyn). All three grannies, even the one who never said anything, agreed that they were going to stay to look after Grandy. Auntie Glad told everyone that in that case, they weren't going to get her on board that "floating casket" (her words) either. In the end only Mum and Dad and Aunt Bea and Uncle Glyn said they were still going, though my dad said this through gritted

teeth (it was hard to tell what my cousins were doing – there were so many of them and they all kept moving around).

But for everybody else though, it was as if a kind of line had been crossed: on the one side was Grandpa's bed, on the other the gangplank leading to the great boat. Tears were shed. Cheeks were kissed. But I wasn't feeling too well either. The room wobbled like it was being cooked in a frying pan. After filling my face with Newbury Fruits I went and threw up in Grandy's hallway. And then it was time to go.

4

By the time we got home, I felt terribly dizzy. My skin crawled and the room swayed from side to side as if I were already onboard ship. Mum put me straight to bed and I lay there sweating and shivering under the covers, all sorts of strange things racing through my head: the suitcase landing on Grandpa's head, Mr Muller stiff as an ironing board, the flickering lanterns of the passenger-ship moored in the bay – it was as if I couldn't make sense of anything. But the main thing I thought about, the thing that stuck in my head more than anything, was the drowned boy. I imagined the water pressing down on his head, his limbs growing heavier and stranger, the seaweed dragging him down to the bottom as it got more and more dark. Ah me, such weight, such darkness! Only Mum pulling the covers back woke me up.

For a second I didn't know which was my blankets and which was the sea – my bed seemed very big and very strong. But even as I kicked and wrestled with my bedding I could hear something telling me I had to get up and go and fetch Dad: our boat was leaving in only a few hours and we all had to make sure we were on board. Buttoning my coat up over my pyjamas I felt heavy and full of sleep. Ah, why couldn't my brother go? He was much bigger and stronger than me. But some shape (Mum?) pulled on my wellies and led me down the stairs – shh, she said, I was a big boy and not to make such fuss. Her hands seemed enormous and she picked me up and carried me over to the door with hardly any effort at all. Such a strange thing! The

boat was leaving on the morning tide and we have to be there to meet it. "Mustn't let it leave without us!" Mum (Mum?) wrapped a little red scarf around my neck and kissed the top of my head but it was so dark I couldn't tell whether it was Mam or not. "Mummy, your hands are awful big," I said, but by that point I was out of the door and standing in the street, the bottom of my pyjamas sticking out from under my coat. It was very, very quiet out there: no cars, no passers-by, no cats, no nothing. The only thing I could see was the fog. A sodden bank of mist obscured the streetlights, the houses, even the other side of the road. Our house seemed to exist on a tiny island of solid ground in an enormous sea of grey. It was like somebody had rubbed away at our town with an eraser. "Mummy?" I whispered, but she seemed to have disappeared too.

Outside the fog turned the streetlights into pale, watery circles and everything felt terribly damp: my coat, my scarf, even my pyjamas underneath. Tiny droplets clung to every surface, every inch, little pinpricks of moisture which dribbled down my neck. It seemed impossible to distinguish between the clouds, the fog and the puddles; all was turned into the same murky gloop. If only they had sent my brother Michael instead! After all, he was so much older and smarter than me… But what could I do? Our house had already disappeared into nothingness, replaced by a wall of wet, grey gloom. What a "predicament" (Mikey), what a mess! I mean, what was my dad doing out here in the middle of the night anyway? Was he at the workingmen's club, the leisure centre, the shops? Not knowing what else to do I walked down our road, past the take-away and the post office, all the way into town.

The fog smelt of salt water and petrol, the edge of the shopping area the boundary of the known world. On one side were shops, on the other side the void, "that dark sea into which all things must fall" (Uncle Tomos). Tides without shores, sea without land, nights without end; it was as if the other side had travelled to our little town

to meet me… 'Say good-bye to the day,' I thought. 'Give my regards to the dear green earth…' My feet felt awful cold in my wellies. I paddled past a row of empty window-displays and shuttered shops, listening to my boots squelch along the pavement. How lonely it seemed, how silent! It was as if my wellies were the only sound on the planet. In my pocket was a packet of toffees, so I had one. The fog was getting thicker and thicker – or ficker and ficker as Iestyn in our class would say. There seemed only one path through it – a pale luminous corridor, like walking down a pipe. Everything was dripping and I really needed the loo, but where else could I go? No, there was no going back now…

Listen: the path led down past the empty shell of the market, to the very edge of the sea itself. There were no lights anywhere, the windows in the houses little black holes. Dad, Dad, where are you? Was he out at work, away saying goodbye to his chums, at some kind of farewell party? (What would the guests say – "Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye?") Tiny pearls dotted my bright red scarf, each one a perfect little sphere. Ah, if only I'd brought a hat – my hair was plastered to my head. Our little wet town wobbled and dripped, the air soft and damp, like walking through a sponge. Dark shelters dotted the prom, the occasional bench, wet, rusted railings. On the other side of the road there were a number of pubs, known for their rowdiness and violence, but tonight all was peaceful. The fog seemed to take off the sharp edges of the place, blurring all the lines and blotting out the shapes. No taxis, no cars, no nothing. And over the dark wall, the sea itself…

Aside from the wall, all I could see was fog. There was neither up nor down, top or bottom, above or below. It was as if a great grey hood had been placed over my face. Poor me, I thought: how was I supposed to find my daddy in all this soup? I tried to picture Dad in a paper hat, sitting at a round table surrounded by all his electricians, and then I tried to picture where this table might be,

and how I might be able to get there, but my thoughts kept getting lost along the way. 'Please help, sir,' I thought, 'I'm only wee.' But I couldn't go home without Dad: what would Mum say, or Michael, or even the people in charge of the boat? No, there was nothing for it: I climbed up onto the wall and tottered unsteadily along the top, holding out my arms like a tightrope walker.

I still felt kind of wobbly though. On one side there was something, on the other side nothing, and it was an awfully fine line between them. But when I say 'nothing', I don't really mean that… no, if you stared deeply into the fog you could make out tiny gaps and hills and mounds, little dark dimples and strange floating lines and shapes. It's true! The more you stared at it, the more detailed it seemed to become, the fog opening up to reveal peaks, craters, valleys, a whole other world – like gazing out onto the landscape of the moon.

And so pretty too, glowing with a tender, lunar light. What a feeling, what light! Walking the wall I felt somehow weightless, as if with a single bound I might float free from our town and spin high above the skyline, a tiny rocket-shaped boy. How big was I? No more than the smallest speck of moon dust, a dot on the picture, a smudge on the lens. And down below me were great sea-less seas, huge bays, lakes, inlets, the toothless mouth of the man in the moon. Ho, I could see him now: the long arched eyebrows, black lipsticked lips, mug that looked like a lopsided birthday cake. He felt awful close – like I could reach out and poke him in the eye! Man in the moon, man in the moon, is that you? Oh, I've seen those donkey eyes of yours before… But then the fog started shifting again and his face faded back into that soft silvery landscape. Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye! In front of me were great grey cliffs, enormous ashen clouds, fogbound caves, beaches, rocks. Was this the opposite shore? Oh Mister Moon, who would have guessed that the other side would prove so close? Yes, I was nearly there: the Sea of Clouds, the Bay of Seething, the Sea of Snakes. Close up the moon looked like an enormous trampoline:

who knew how high you could jump?

And that's when I knew it, knew it like I'd known nothing else in my life. It would take only the tiniest slip – no more than a step really, not even a hop or a skip or a jump – and I would be there too, free from this world, passing soundlessly from one sphere to the next. Ah, who wouldn't be tempted? Who wouldn't pause for a moment, standing there teetering on the very edge of – well, something else?

But even as I hovered on the brink I heard a voice behind me and turned to see a figure emerging from the gloom, no more than a silhouette or a cut-out, but no less familiar for all that. The figure swam through the fog towards me, arms outstretched, legs kicking wildly. My father, the astronaut! But how could I know it was really him? He seemed so close and so big! Then enormous hands grabbed me (just like before!) and the next thing I knew I was back on the earth, his eyes as dark as craters, a huge wet dewberry hanging down from his nose.

"Stupid boy," he growled, "stupid little pup…"

Struggling to get my breath back, I stared hard at his gloomy, careworn mug.

"Why didn't you tell me about the party, Daddy? Mum told me to come and get you but I didn't know where to go."

"Idiot boy…"

Dad's arms felt tremendously solid and I thought: how lucky I am to have a Daddy this big and this strong. Even the fog makes way for him…

"What were you doing up there Alex?" he asked, panting. "Where did you think you were going?"

I tried pointing up at the moon but my arms weren't long enough.

"Why did you go to the party, Daddy? I didn't know where you were…"

Other figures were appearing amongst the fog now, Mikey, some unknown grown-ups, possibly a policeman. I felt wrapped up inside

the fog as if inside a soft, wet tissue. There were voices but I couldn't really hear any of them: everything was too muffled and too damp. When I turned my head in one direction there was fog, and when I looked the other way there was more fog too. Ah, who knew how deep it was? It seemed to go on forever, as if that other world were much larger than this one. Such a thing, I thought. Maybe this one is the real world after all…

I looked round for Dad but he was talking to a fella in a funny hat. They were no more than hazy shapes, blurry outlines, shadows in the gloom.

"Mikey?" I said. "Mikey, did you come too?"

The shapes moved and merged and I had the impression of being carried by some irresistible force – maybe Dad, maybe the fella in the funny hat. Strange shapes came and went; it was both our town and not our town, the right things but in the wrong place, everything too big or too small or too broken. It seemed like the town was being carried past me rather than vice versa, the streets some kind of model or display, a carnival float that went on and on and on. The houses rolled by me as if they were on wheels. The sea smelt of glue and balsa wood. Fog clung to everything like an old winter coat.

But then I must have nodded off or something because the next thing I saw was our street and then our garden and then our house and my bedroom and finally Mum herself.

"Mummy, why didn't you send Michael?" I asked. "He's much cleverer than I am and would have known the way for sure…"

Mum's face was very pale, her eyes drawn on with coal.

"Shh," she said, unwrapping my scarf and loosening the buttons on my coat. "You're not well, you've got a fever…"

"I've been across the bay," I said. "It's very nice, Mum, really lovely…"

"Mm…"

"Like sailing to the moon…"

"Hush now," she said, pulling off my boots and wrapping the

bedclothes around me. "It's alright, you're back home now…"

"Home?"

I lay in my bed and let the world rearrange itself around me. There were my toys and over by the cupboard were my board games and there on the chair was floppy dog. Yes, everything was just as it always was. And I felt very safe like that, surrounded by all the things most dear to me. My pictures, my animals, my comics: they'd been there waiting for me all that time. Indeed, it was impossible to imagine being anywhere else.

But then I remembered: tomorrow our boat set sail. Ah, me! My head was throbbing and my arms still felt terribly heavy, as heavy as that drowned boy, as heavy as the bottom of the heaviest ship in the world. What a tired little boy I was – but how was I ever going to get up in the morning? But if I didn't then the ship would set sail without me and I'd be left behind with Grandpa and Auntie Glad and all my old grannies – just imagine that! Ho, what a fool I'd been – bimbling about in the middle of the night just before *the most important day of my life*. Now Michael and my parents and Uncle Glyn and Aunt Bea would all sail away and I'd be as old as Grandpa by the time they came back. No wonder I felt so bereft, so abandoned. Tell me – who wouldn't cry? Who wouldn't weep? My family were sailing away and I lay there anchored to my bed, sealed up in the same little room…

Rubbing my eyes, I turned to stare at the strange whitish glow behind my curtains. How far it seemed to stretch – how strange its light! Was that a fog horn, blowing somewhere out to sea? Or the horn of the boat summoning all its passengers? I tried moving my legs but nothing seemed to work. My eyes started to droop. Slowly, inexorably, the glow started to fade. The light disappeared, and then the fog, and then the window disappeared too. It was very dark and very quiet. Then there was nothing, not even the dot of an 'i'...

★★★★

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About the Author

ALAN BILTON was born in York in 1969. In keeping with the two main sources of employment back then, his family either worked on the railways or in chocolate. Unlike his more practical and mechanically-minded brothers, he became neither a surveyor nor a train-spotter. Rather, he received his undergraduate degree in Literature and Film from Stirling University in 1991, and his PhD (for a study of Don DeLillo, an author with whom he has absolutely nothing in common in any way) from Manchester University in 1995. He then taught American Studies at Liverpool Hope University College and Manchester University before moving to take up a post teaching literature and film at Swansea University in 1996. He is married, with one small child and one hairy dog. His first novel, *The Sleepwalkers' Ball*, described by one critic as 'Kafka meets Mary Poppins', was published by Alcemi in 2009. He is also the author of books on silent film comedy, contemporary fiction, and America in the 1920s, alongside short stories, essays and reviews. He teaches Creative Writing, fiction and film at Swansea.

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