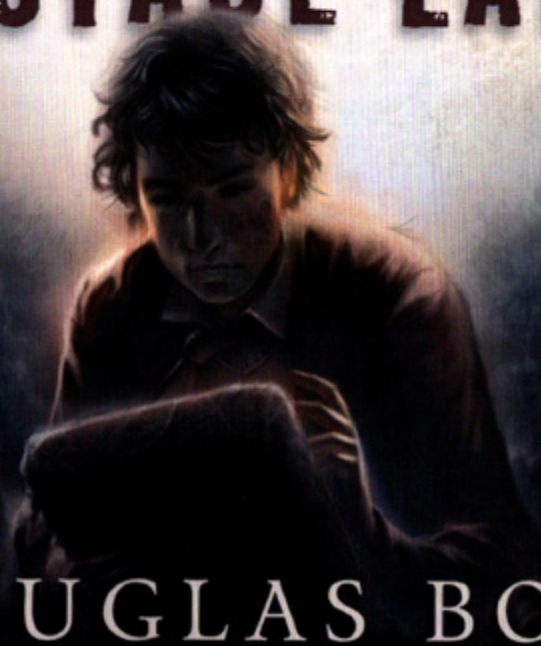




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# HOSTAGE LANDS

DOUGLAS BOND



P U B L I S H I N G

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For Brittany, Rhodri, Cedric,  
Desmond, Giles, and Gillian

*If I have to spend the rest of my life working in dirty, wet trenches, I doubt whether I shall ever again experience the shock and excitement I felt at my first glimpse of ink hieroglyphics on tiny scraps of wood.*

Robin Birley, archeologist, Vindolanda  
Hadrian's Wall, March 1973

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## DEAD WORDS

**O**f arms and the man I sing,” intoned the teacher, red blotches of exhilaration glowing on her cheeks. She lifted her half-closed eyes to the blackened timbers of the classroom ceiling and continued. “That is to say, ‘*Arma virumque cano.*’”

“Arms? Like, well, arms?” said a girl, her nose crinkled in bewilderment as she looked from her copy of Virgil to her own arms.

“Weapons, Sally, dear,” said the teacher, Miss Klitsa, blinking rapidly, her bony knuckles turning white as she steadied herself with a grip on her lectern. “Swords, spears, catapults—you know, the tools of warfare. Now then, if I may recommence. ‘*Troiae qui primus ab oris Italiam fato . . .*’”

“Hey, I’m getting it. I’m really getting it!” said Sally. “That’d be something about a fat Italian, right?”

Snorts of laughter erupted throughout the classroom.

Miss Klitsa blanched, as if someone had slapped her. Her eyes fluttering at the class over her half-rimmed glasses, she blew her nose and began again.

Neil Perkins watched every gesture of the recitation from his desk at the north corner of the classroom. He always sat in the back, in the north corner, because through the leaded panes of a window he had a pretty good view of a stretch of moorland and sky—and of the wall. All things he'd seen before, too many times, but for day-dreaming there was simply no better seat in the classroom. Miss Klitsa's recitation continued, ". . . *multa quoque* . . ."

Neil rolled his eyes with embarrassment as the teacher's voice rose and fell, one hand clenched in anguish over her heart, the bony fingers of the other splayed with twitching fervor, changing gestures from hand to hand as she spoke. He frequently asked himself at times like these: *Why did Haltwhistle Grammar School, crammed up against an old pile of rocks in the north of England, why did the students from this hole-in-the-wall place have to have a teacher like Miss Klitsa?*

Miss Klitsa was not normal. What else was a boy of fifteen to conclude about a sixty-something-year-old spinster with hair so red it made your eyes go bloodshot looking at it? Worse yet, the curly mass seemed to spew from her head like molten lava from a volcano. *Come to think of it, she would have made a great physical science teacher, thought Neil, a living, fire-regurgitating specimen right in the classroom. Or maybe she should have taught ancient history. What could be better than a flesh-and-blood, walking, sneezing fossil for your ancient history teacher?*

Which brings up the matter of her nose. Neil's mother had tried to explain about chronic sinus difficulties and postnasal drip, but never to the effect of producing in her son an ounce of sympathy for the poor woman's condition. Finding a way to steal yet another of Miss Klitsa's lacy pink handkerchiefs, which she habitually stuffed under her

watchband between blowings, was a daily task that Neil assumed with disciplined regularity. Good days he succeeded. Bad days he failed. To date, his collection of pink hankies numbered thirty-four. Thirty-four good days out of forty-five days of school, he had to admit, was decidedly above average.

And there were other things about Miss Klitsa, like her tricycle. Neil found it difficult in the extreme to take seriously a teacher who pedaled a giant-sized tricycle, its pink paint chalky with age, its ancient basket huge enough to haul large dressed stones or a month's supply of coal. Every morning, every evening, in nearly all weathers, Miss Klitsa hiked up her skirts and hoisted herself into the driver's seat of that rattletrap piece of junk. She sometimes even rode in the rain, pedaling along with an unfurled umbrella. The thing was so old that Neil imagined that Iron Age Celts probably rode tricycles like Miss Klitsa's. Maybe they'd found some buried in the peat at the digs in Vindolanda. He'd have to ask about it.

Miss Klitsa's voice had switched back to English. She often broke in to explain something she thought was interesting—*she* thought was interesting, though Neil rarely did. "Some say Virgil wrote on papyrus, but he might just as well have written on thin wooden tablets, such as this," she said, holding up what looked like a flat sheet of wood a bit smaller than a sheet of paper. "Then dipping a stylus in ink, such as this—" She held up a tapered bronze pen-like thing. "He would set down his incomparable verse, which we now resume reading, '*. . . hic illius arma . . .*'"

Neil turned from the window and looked hard at the teacher. Odd as she was in nearly every other way, he mused, it was her interest—no, no, *interest* would not do—her obsession with Roman stuff, like tablets and that stylus, that made her the oddest. Of course there was the language—she was, after all, a Latin teacher. But she was obsessed. It was as if she came under its power. Neil



watched her closely. *Here it comes*, he thought: that ecstatic gazing past the students in her classroom, that transported tone in her voice, that relaxed wonder that caused her cheeks to sag. *She's gone*, said Neil to himself. *It's two thousand years ago, and she's in Rome*. He sighed and turned back to his window and to the wall. *Or she's marching around up there*.

Suddenly, he felt a lurching coming from his insides. He often got these overwhelming urges to break out laughing. He could just see Miss Klitsa, her hair groping in the breeze from under her helmet, marching along in lobsterback armor and one of those skimpy red kilt things Roman legionaries used to wear—her knobby knees—oh, and a polka-dotted leopard skin over her bony shoulders. Clamping his fingers over his lips and nose, desperate to smother the laughter, he felt like his eyes might pop out with the pressure.

Though the ridiculous old woman often had this effect on him, Neil did find himself at other times—times of extreme weakness—temporarily arrested by her passion for all things Roman. She would raise a bony fist, throw back her head with a shake that made her hair waggle wildly, then snuffle convulsively, and shout, “Strength and honor!” Though for the most part he couldn’t help thinking of Miss Klitsa as stark-staring, foaming-at-the-mouth, certifiably bonkers, he had to give the old girl this much: she had enthusiasm.

Miss Klitsa paused in her recitation of Virgil and began describing an ancient battle waged on nearby Hadrian’s Wall, painted Caledonians charging madly into the disciplined ranks of a Roman legion. And Neil found himself, firmly against his will, transported with her. *What am I doing?* he thought, with an irritated shake of his head. The fit passed, and he resumed thinking of Miss Klitsa as, well, Miss Klitsa—demented, certifiable, and as obsolete as an old Roman sandal. He turned again to his window.

Neil studied the sharp outline of the ancient stone wall undulating atop the ridge. Of course he didn't share Miss Klitsa's mania for all things Roman; he figured she hadn't had a real rival in that department since sometime before A.D. 476. But he had to admit, there were times when he wondered about who laid those stones and what they were thinking as they did it, or about the great battles Miss Klitsa described, waged right here. He could almost hear one: the clash of swords and shields, the hail of arrows and spears, the thunder of hooves from the cavalry, the cries of anguish and terror, the spilled blood—right there, on those stones. That was all pretty interesting. Again, Miss Klitsa's voice drifted into his thoughts, babbling away in Latin now. He'd had more than enough for today, and suddenly he had an idea.

He raised his hand. "*Magistra, magistra,*" he said, using the Latin name for teacher that he knew would arrest Miss Klitsa from her reverie. He'd used it before.

"*Neilus, discipulus,*" she said with a smile.

Pasting on his most earnest languishing-after-knowledge gaze, he asked, "Did I understand you to say once that someone has already translated Virgil?"

"Indeed," she replied. "Many have exerted their prodigious talents in the most worthy endeavor of translating his magisterial works."

"Allow me to translate," whispered Neil's friend John, hunkered behind his notebook in the next desk. "That's Klitsa-speak for yes."

Ignoring his friend, Neil wracked his brain for a suitable reply to Miss Klitsa. "Astonishing," he said.

Snorts of muted laughter rose from the class. Miss Klitsa didn't seem to notice.

"Moreover, one is safe in asserting," she continued, the bony fingers of her hands steeped in contemplation, "that all the known classics of the Roman world, Julius Caesar, Virgil, Horace, Marcus Aurelius, all have made their way—

at times a halting way—nevertheless, they have made their way into—” here she broke off with a frown, her hands fell limp at her sides, and her voice flattened to a monotone, “—into *modern* English.”

“All of them?” asked Neil.

“Indeed,” replied Miss Klitsa.

John leaned closer. “Now for the kill, mate,” he whispered, his lips not moving.

“Yet you still teach us Latin,” observed Neil.

“Naturally,” she replied, recoiling as if to do otherwise was akin to withholding the benefits of good hygiene from her students.

“If you will forgive me for pointing out,” he continued, “the *non sequitur*.”

“*Non sequitur*?” she replied. “I do not follow you.”

“Perhaps I am not making myself very clear,” Neil continued. “Allow me to frame my question using another language—like, English. Does anyone actually speak Latin today, I mean, when they go to the shop—or to the pub?”

“*Getis meum unam beerum*,” said John, under his breath.

More titters from the class.

“’Tis a great loss to civilization,” began Miss Klitsa, with a sniff. “But, alas, I am compelled to reply that no people group today speak in the lofty strains of antiquity. ’Tis an incalculable loss.”

“Am I hearing you say, then, *magistra*,” said Neil, “that Latin is, well—dead?”

Miss Klitsa narrowed her eyes at him, yanked her handkerchief from under her watchband with a snap, and made three delicate blasts on her nose.

“You shall hear me say many things, Neil,” she replied, stuffing the handkerchief back in its place. “But you shall never hear me say *that*.”

“But does the question not inevitably follow, *magistra*, that if everything worth reading is already translated into

English, what possible good can come," he continued, "from any of us learning Latin?"

Miss Klitsa's face took on a color dangerously close to that of her hair.

"Nuances, Neil Perkins," she said, bony knuckles white as she gripped her lectern and leaned closer, her eyes snapping. "The devil is always in the details, and the meaning is always in the nuances. Never forget that."

"Never," he replied with feeling. Then added as an afterthought another, "Never," calculating that a double negative of a negative imperative might actually be saying that he would never remember what she had just told him never to forget.

Drawing in a deep breath, Miss Klitsa clasped her hands together and gazed at the ceiling. "Now then, with Virgil, we continue. ' . . . *altae moenia Romae.*' "

"And—and that bit's something about Rome," squealed Sally. "I really am getting it."

"Very good, dear," said Miss Klitsa, her voice taut with restraint.

"Now, what's the rest say?" asked Sally, her face scrunched in bewilderment at the page.

" 'The lofty walls,' " said Miss Klitsa, "and yes, dear, 'of Rome.' "

"See. I really do get it," said Sally, giggling.

Neil stole a glance out the window at the wall, black clouds gathering above.

"Precisely, Neil," said Miss Klitsa, following his gaze. She fixed her eyes on Neil over her half-rimmed glasses. "Our wall looms in our minds, does it not? Our wall, we say, but by rights it is Hadrian's, really. And as familiarity so often engenders contempt, so we think little of it. Few of you appreciate the overwhelming privilege of living in the stupendous shadow of this 'lofty wall of Rome.' If those stones could only speak; if each mile castle would but give up her dead."



"Yikes!" said Sally, burying her eyes in the back of her hand and squirming in her seat.

"To you all this is but common," continued Miss Klitsa. "Today your fathers' sheep graze on turf that received the tread of legions, the blood of Celts, the imprint of an emperor's heel. But, oh, if you would hear the wall speak, how differently would you view those ancient stones, how lofty would they then appear to you."

"The stones talk?" said Sally, scrunching up her nose more than usual. "Like, for real?"

"'Tis in figurative language that I speak, my dear," said Miss Klitsa, patiently.

"Is that like Latin?" asked Sally.

"To some, I fear," replied Miss Klitsa, a quaver in her voice.

Neil looked again at the wall. He'd grown up thinking of it as nothing more than a big pile of rocks, the southern boundary of his father's farm, a source of stones to repair the barn, a narrow highway to balance his all-terrain vehicle on while searching for a runaway ewe.

Miss Klitsa lowered her voice ominously. "Hear me, students. Each new artifact uncovered, each sandal and spearhead, each coin and sword hilt, I say, each one does speak! Still more, the letters, the diaries, the dispatches! Oh, make no mistake, my students, if we but had ears to hear, eyes to see what lies beneath our feet the wonders of antiquity would be exposed, the mysteries of the ancients revealed, and the dead made alive."

"Dead people made alive?" said Sally, her eyes screwed shut. "Oh, please, don't. Not for real?"

"Yes, Sally." Miss Klitsa leaned forward and stared hard from face to face at the class, her eyes flashing. Reddened from blowing, her nostrils flared as she drew breath in short pulls and exhaled in shallow wheezes. "For real."

Neil was sitting up. *She means it*, he thought, narrowing his eyes at the teacher.

“And when those once-dead voices come to life and speak,” she continued, her voice teetering on the verge of hysteria, her wide eyes darting from face to face around the classroom. “They will speak—” her eyes locked and seemed to bore in on Neil, “—in Latin!”



## HOLE IN THE TURF

**A**s the school day finally ground to a close, Neil's gaze shifted from the window to the large cowbell on Miss Klitsa's desk. He felt his heart quicken as bony fingers came into his range of view. Then the fingers wrapped themselves around the cracked handle of the bell—and stopped. Her voice droned on. The bell did not move. Neil was about to burst. Then, with a flick of her scrawny wrist, it came: Clang, clang!

*"Surgite, discipuli,"* she said, nodding encouragingly and motioning with her hands. Smiling as the students rose to their feet, she intoned her dismissal like a bishop concluding evensong, *"Bene! Nunc valet, discipuli."*

As the students gathered their books, she spun on a clunky black heel, full skirt swishing dangerously. Humming distractedly and gripping an eraser in each hand, she began erasing the board in time with her humming, her long skinny arms sweeping in wide arcs. It made Neil think of the wings of a windmill—a windmill with a sign on its back.

Tittering rippled across the room. A half sheet of notebook paper taped to Miss Klitsa's back read, "*Sentio ergo sum.*"

"That's Descartes, or something, isn't it?" asked John, once safely out of the building.

Inhaling big gulps of outside air flavored with the tang of burning coal, Neil glanced at his friend. "Sort of," he said, flinging his book bag into the utility box of his mud-spattered all-terrain vehicle.

"What's *sentio*?" asked John. "Didn't the French bloke say, 'I think, therefore, I am,' or something like that?"

"But Klitsa does not think," said Neil, throwing his leg over the machine. Then, with a dramatic flourish, he placed his hand over his heart. "She feels. So, I tampered with things a bit."

"I just don't get how you can be so good at school—at stupid old Latin, no less," continued John, a bewildered wrinkle in his eyebrows, "and never study. How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"The Latin stuff, you know," said John, nodding at the book bag in the ATV box.

"Nothing to it," said Neil, turning the key, the machine roaring to life. "If dumb old Roman kids," he yelled above the engine, "living on this backwater frontier of the empire could blab away in Latin long before there was a Klitsa to teach them—consider our advantages."

"How do you know that rusty old artifact of a teacher wasn't around back then?" yelled John.

With a grin, Neil saluted and rode off up the hill, mud and turf kicking up from the knobby tires.

He throttled into a rise, all four wheels lifting off the turf and spinning free. His stomach quavered for an instant, then came the bone-jarring concussion as the machine landed with a jolt and fishtailed in the mud. Life didn't get better than this.

Though the Perkins' farm, Hostage Heath, lay a number of miles north by road, following the way the crow flies, Neil could cut across two hundred acres of moorland pasture, cross over the wall, and arrive at the schoolyard in just over a quarter of an hour. But what a quarter of an hour! It was that ride that kept him from skipping.

He surveyed the treeless landscape, steering toward a mob of sheep grazing unsuspectingly between him and one of his favorite jumps. Standing and leaning forward, he cranked the throttle into the red zone, the roar of the engine throbbing through his feet and pulsating power throughout his body. He knew every square inch of this land. Every rise, every hollow was his by right of conquest. Bleating in terror, sheep scattered before his machine like foamy waves before a Roman trireme warship. He threw his head back and yelled until it hurt. Another lift-off, then weightlessness, that sensation of hovering over the world—like flying. That was it; he could fly. This machine could sprout wings when he told it to, and he could fly. With a crunch that made his insides smash together, he hit the turf. He felt a sharp pain on the edge of his tongue and tasted salt. Blinking rapidly as he felt the fresh tear along the edge of his tongue, he rode along more slowly for several minutes.

The stony texture of the wall came into view on his right. His machine tilted hard to the south, Neil throwing his weight to the right to keep from flipping over. Then things leveled out as he hit a stretch of ancient marching road, once used for supplying the mile castles and for the rapid movement of legions to fortify the latest point of attack on the wall. For a mile he followed the undulating course of the ancient wall high atop the moor. Tidy English farms and patches of forest plantations fell away to the south. Through low points in the ruins he caught glimpses of his father's lands, and beyond to the north, Scotland, melancholy, untamed, and mysterious.



The machine jerked to a halt. With a click, Neil shut off the engine. In the brooding silence that followed, he listened to the wind from the north moaning oddly as it passed over the wall. He blinked as the wind tore at his eyes. Nudging a moss-covered loose stone with his foot, he said, "Give it lip. Go on. She said you could. Let's hear it." He flipped it over with his toe. "Can't say a word, can you?"

He sighted down the wall to the west. If he'd been a Roman centurion—better yet, Roman governor of Britain—still better, the emperor Hadrian himself—he'd have crushed the painted people. What was the big deal? Bunch of ill-equipped savages against his armies? Massive stone fortification; thousands of well-trained troops at his command? Bunch of wimps, he thought. He looked east, the wall snaking up and down, growing thin and hazy, seeming in the distance more like a back-garden fence than a fortress wall. It finally disappeared altogether. Seventy-three miles of it, wasn't that what Miss Klitsa had said? Still, those northern tribes were mere unorganized savages, easy pickings for real soldiers.

Neil brought his face down close to the top row of stones and narrowed his eyes at a spider staggering against the wind, its thin legs bowing as it crept over the weather-beaten stone, finally disappearing into the blackness of a narrow gap. Pressing an ear against the cold roughness of the stones, he sighted along the wall and traced with his finger the depressions in the stones. Might have been made nineteen hundred years ago by the splitting wedge of some bottom-of-the-food-chain auxiliary hammering away at the quarry. He didn't really hear anything, but he felt a tickling in his ear and remembered the spider. Pulling away, he straightened and scratched at his ear.

When he turned the key, his machine roared to life, and he steered it through a rock-strewn gap in the wall. Throttling the engine, his teeth grinding as his wheels pounded

over the uneven ground, he plunged down the steep slope toward a mound that formed his favorite jump.

He always had mixed feelings about this mound. Sure, it was one of the best, a broad hump that fell away downhill and just high enough to give him a heart-stopping thrill but with little risk of overturning his machine. But since jumping over it marked the end of his ride home and the beginning of an evening of chores—especially during lambing season—he always felt a bit glum as he approached it.

Wind tore at his face and mud splattered his gritted teeth as he gained speed. He came at the mound at an angle that lifted his left front tire first and launched him with a twist into thin air above the hummock. This one was the best. He felt his stomach hovering weightlessly for an instant, and then that rushing, falling sensation. Then came the usual thud as he came down first on the right rear tire. Ordinarily a shimmying jostle rocked the machine as each tire thudded onto the turf in staggered landings.

This time something went wrong. It may have been a powerful gust of wind that caught him back. He was never quite able to figure out what it was. But when the mind-numbing realization that something had gone desperately wrong came over him, it was far too late to do anything about it. With a squelch, Neil's right rear tire landed far too steeply up the mound. He hadn't cleared. Then came a violent twist as momentum wrenched the seven-hundred-pound four-wheeler into a roll. The machine plunged out of control down the slope. His heart pounded in his throat, and Neil felt like his hands were welded to the handle grips. He was going over. In a flash he remembered reading about this happening—but always to others.

Next thing he knew, he was face down in the turf, his mouth full of grass and earth. He couldn't breathe. Gagging and choking, he clutched at his mouth with his fingers. Wheezing for breath, his lungs felt crushed, as if a

chariot horse were sitting on his chest. He tried to roll over, but his muscles wouldn't respond. *Am I dead?* he thought. *What's that rattling noise?* His lungs felt on fire as he tried to draw in air. He spit more chunks of grit and grass from his mouth. Holding his head with both hands, he struggled to a sitting position, darkness closing in from all sides. Then, like a rumbling wave of cavalry rising over a hillside and descending on an enemy, nausea swept over him. Retching violently, he rolled onto his hands and knees—and was sick.

When the wracking convulsions finally ended, he lay still, blinking into the vast grayness of the sky for several minutes. When his breathing returned to normal he sat up with a groan. His body felt like he'd been tossed around in the arena by a tiger, one that liked to play long and rough with his meal, to tenderize it well before sinking its teeth in for the final kill. Neil decided that he'd better take inventory of what had once been a young, healthy, reasonably strong body. It felt nothing like it at the moment. Wriggling his toes first, he worked his way through the sore joints of his frame. Barring contusions over every square inch of his body, and cuts and scrapes too numerous to count, to his relief, there was no serious damage and nothing seemed broken.

Then he saw his all-terrain vehicle. "My machine!" he moaned out loud, rising stiffly to his feet.

Twenty feet behind him his four-wheeler lay on its side, the engine silent except for the pinging and hissing as it cooled. Neil walked slowly back to the battered machine. He'd have to walk home from here, that much was clear. What would he tell his dad? As many times as his dad had growled, "Too fast," about his driving, Neil knew he'd have to come up with a good one to explain this wreck. It would take heaps of work to hammer that twisted mass of metal back into shape.



Then he saw where the machine had landed. On impact the thing had gouged a crater deep enough to bury a dead horse. He shuddered. He didn't like to think what he'd look like if that machine had landed on him. It'd be more than bruises. He winced as he wiped an arm across his mud-spattered forehead. He couldn't stop looking at that gash in the turf.

Then, though evening was descending and the sky was flat and gray, he thought he saw an odd shape deep in the hole. Falling to his knees, with a hitch in his breath from the pain, he slid down into it, cautiously lifting clods of black peat aside. He was sure he'd seen something.

His fingers closed around the object. Clearing away the dirt, he turned it over in his hand. It was a wide, flame-shaped spearhead as long as his hand, and it felt dense and cold to his touch. Brushing off the final bits of dirt with his fingers, he turned it over and over. The hair rose on his neck as he tilted his find toward the fading light and sighted down its tapered edges.

An eerie sensation as if someone was watching came over him. He gave a low whistle. "I'll bet you've got a story to tell," he said out loud. Then he shook his head angrily. That's what Miss Klitsa had said. Not only was she a certifiable nut case, she must be a witch or something. He didn't like the idea of Miss Klitsa being right about anything. Maybe this spearhead was some kind of strange curse she'd gone and put on him.

He stood up, scowling at the spearhead as he weighed it in his hand. Then, winding up his arm, he thought he might as well chuck the thing as far as he could. Let some other sap find it. Maybe Klitsa herself. Then he thought of his mangled machine.

*How much would an old artifact like this be worth?* he wondered. A villa and a life of leisure on the French Riviera? Fat chance if he'd get half enough for it to fix his four-wheeler.

With a shrug, Neil crammed the spearhead into his pocket, clenched his teeth, and started to rise to his feet. Then he stopped. There was something else in that hole. A hard, square edge of something was sticking out of the dirt.

"What have we here?" he said softly, falling again to his knees. Running his index finger along the corner, he tried to make out what it was. *Probably just some old rubbish.* He often wondered later how he did see it, so blackened with age, so close in color to the peaty soil.

His bruises forgotten, Neil slowly began scratching away at the dirt that encrusted the object. For more than half an hour he dug. The object grew larger. *Maybe it's some kind of package,* he thought. With his pocketknife he cut away the more stubborn chunks of peat, and as he did his hands trembled, and his heart raced. He tried telling himself that it was nothing to get excited about, not for him. Miss Klitsa, on the other hand, she would get excited about some old rubbish found in his father's pasture, but not him.

Still he dug, and still his heart beat faster.



## WHAT TO DO WITH IT?

**I**t's pitch dark, Neil." His mother stated the obvious later that evening when he finally arrived at home.

It had taken him another hour to finish his digging, then half an hour to make his way home.

"And yer covered, head to toe," she continued, "with foul-smelling stuff. Whatever have ye been up to, lad?"

"Aye?" his father said from behind his newspaper.

"Supper's long over, now then, isn't it?" his mother persisted. "And ye've gone and missed it, haven't ye?"

"Aye," another grunt from behind the newspaper.

Neil had only rarely heard his father put more than one word together at a time. His father was a firm believer in brevity. And he practiced what he believed. Only after a person with whom he needed to communicate had proven himself too dull to comprehend the clear meaning of the grunts, flicks of the hand, and tossings of the head would

he resort to words. And he had long ago settled in his mind that in the odd event words were needed, the best words were monosyllables. It was not uncommon for Neil to work all day alongside his father and exchange not a single word. He remembered during lambing season three years ago when his father had been suddenly struck with the paternal obligation to explain what was going on. With a toss of his head at one old sheep, his father had said, "Ram." Nodding at another, he had said, "Ewe." Handing Neil a moist newborn bundle, he had concluded the lesson with the word "lamb." The copious details his father had left out Neil was picking up from his friends and television.

Breaking in on his thoughts, his mother said, "And there's the matter of yer chores." She was nodding meaningfully toward the open newspaper, her forehead lined in a series of wary arcs.

Neil shifted his book bag, bulging and heavy with what he had found.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I'll just get to them."

"Done," erupted shortly from behind the newspaper.

Neil looked questioningly at his mother. She rubbed her hands together wordlessly and motioned toward the kitchen sink. He lowered his book bag gently onto the floor in the corner and washed his hands in the sink. As hungry as he was, he could hardly contain his eagerness to investigate the package he'd found. His mother opened the oven and placed a warm plate heaped with roast mutton, peas, and boiled potatoes onto the table. She nodded for Neil to sit. His discovery would have to wait. Eagerly he pulled his chair up to the table and grabbed up his fork and knife. Just as he brought the first heaping forkful to his mouth, his father's voice from behind the newspaper broke the silence.

"Don't work," came the voice, "don't eat."

Neil's hand shook slightly as he looked at the hunk of mutton, roasted until it nearly fell apart, just the way he



liked it. His mouth was open and ready, the fork halted. Savory smells tormented him from that fork, and for an instant he was tempted to cram it into his mouth and pretend he hadn't heard. But he knew better.

Neil swallowed hard. Mouth watering, he looked at his mother and let his fork clatter back onto the plate. She didn't meet his eye as she took the plate away. He looked longingly after the meal as she covered it with foil and set it on the counter next to the breadbox. She glanced at him and patted the counter next to the plate, then turned to finish her washing up.

The chair legs scraped on the floor as Neil rose from the table. Without a word, he collected his book bag and climbed the stairs to his room.

His hands trembled slightly as he lifted the package out of his book bag and lowered it gently onto his bed. *Where do I begin?* He wondered. For a while he simply looked at it. It was obvious that someone had wrapped it carefully in leather, soft leather folded and neatly stitched on the ends, now black and hard with age. What would he find inside? Part of him wanted to tear into it, ripping it open like it was a Christmas present. He hesitated. Another part of him was almost afraid to open it, to find out what was inside. He weighed it in his hands. It was longer and skinnier than a concrete block but not nearly as heavy.

Though he'd cleared most of the soil away back at the hole, a thin layer of drying dirt still covered much of the package. With a toothbrush he began clearing it away. Dust fell in fine little heaps onto the bedspread.

When he was satisfied, he held it closer to his bedside lamp and studied every fold of leather, running his fingers along as he did. Almost imperceptibly at first, he saw a pattern of impressions worn and rounded with age. They seemed to run in two lines cut into the leather. He held it still closer to the light.

Writing. It had to be writing, and suddenly he knew: it was Latin. And if it was Latin then it was Roman. And if it was Roman this block of leather was at least fifteen hundred years old—unless someone was having him on. But how could someone be playing a joke on him? How would they have known where he was going to crash his machine? What was this thing, and what on earth should he do with it now?

He ran a finger along the faint letters. What did it say? Unaccountably, he shuddered. Some old dead Roman soldier wrote this. What does it say? He squinted at it for several minutes.

“Bugger Latin,” he murmured. Open it. That’s what he’d do. He’d get it over with and open it. Unclasping his knife, he turned the package end for end. Sweat broke on his forehead, and his heart pounded in his temples like someone was hammering away on a kettledrum. One stitch at a time, he sliced away until he’d cut through them all. Prying with his knife blade, he lifted a triangular fold of hard crusty leather. Now pulling up with his fingers, he cautiously peered inside.

Snap! The brittle leather broke off in his hand. For an instant his heart seemed to stop. What was he doing? Now he’d gone and broken the thing. He felt like a grave robber, like he was peering into someone’s private life, into dark secrets that maybe he was not supposed to peer into. The hair on the back of his neck rose with a tingling. He shuddered. Was this stealing? How could it be stealing? After all, it was on his father’s property.

He set the thing back onto the bed, and plopped down in his desk chair. Brooding, he stared at the leather package. Maybe Miss Klitsa had been right all along. The past was about to speak to him, and it was about to do it from whatever was inside that package. Maybe all this was happening to him because he’d given Miss Klitsa such a hard time, notes on her back and things like that.

Suddenly, he sat bolt upright. He'd heard something, a voice. Faint at first but now distinct and clear, and it was calling his name.

"Neil? Neil?"

Sweat broke from his forehead and trickled into his eyes. He wiped at it with the back of his sleeve. He had to hide the package. But where? He could hardly breathe. There it was again.

"Neil I've brought ye some supper." His mother's voice from the other side of his door came in a husky whisper, so his father would not hear.

The knob began to turn. Neil grabbed the bolster folded at the foot of his bed and threw it over the box. It made an awkward mound in the middle of the bed. He positioned himself between the mound and the door.

"There, now, Neil," she said, smiling but not meeting his eye. "Ye'll be hungry, then. I'm afraid it's none so hot anymore, but it'll fill yer belly just the same."

He thanked her and hoped that this would not be one of the evenings that she'd want to stay and have one of her chats with him.

"Rough times at school today, then?" she said, scowling at his bruised face.

It suddenly occurred to him that the truth would more likely divert further questions than any story. He brightened. He didn't really like lying to his mother, anyway, though he often did.

"Flipped my machine on the way home. But I'm all right," he added quickly. "Machine's a bit mangled. But I'll manage to bang it back in shape soon enough."

"Let me have a look at those scrapes on yer forehead, lad," she said, moving closer.

"No, Mother, really, I'm fine. A bit tired, really, and I think I'd best turn in for the night. Nothing like a good sleep after rolling yer machine, so I've always said." He tried to make his voice sound unconcerned, even cheerful.

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