

THE
NOWHERE
THIEF

ALICE M. ROSS

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To my daughter, Greta



Chapter 1

Elsbeth tiptoed through the empty kitchen as quietly as she could. Crayon drawings of stick men with oversized heads were stuck to the fridge. Plastic alphabet letters spelled out *DOG* and *MUMMY*. Some had fallen on the floor and hadn't been tidied up. A smell of burnt marmalade and roasted coffee wafted along the dusty ray of morning light cast through the window. But whoever lived there seemed to be out. Empty houses were starting to feel familiar to Elsbeth.

She pulled open a drawer. Knives and forks glistened like Christmas tree ornaments. Elsbeth seized a handful and stuffed them in her backpack. The metal alloys from other Somewheres were often unusual and could probably be passed off as rare antiques at home.

The last thing she picked up was a small spoon with a cartoon mouse on the handle. She saw her face reflected upside down in it, like an alien. Elsbeth looked at it for a second, then put it back in the drawer. She paused, pulled two adult knives and forks from her backpack and put those back too.

A clock on the counter with a cat's face struck quarter to nine and let out a mechanical miaow. As if on cue, a real cat padded up to Elsbeth and miaowed too. Was it telling her it hadn't been fed? There was something strange about it, though. Elsbeth frowned, staring at it. She realised with a start that it had two tails.

"I should take *you* back with me," she told it, keeping her voice low. The cat flicked both its tails in annoyance.

There was a rumble outside. Something was moving over gravel. Elsbeth ducked, then raised her head to peek out of the window. A mother and a little boy were getting out of a big black car, singing a song. *One, two, buckle your shoe.*

She had to get out of here. Elsbeth had never been caught before and she wasn't about to start now. She zipped her backpack up and turned round. *Three, four, knock at the door.*

Elsbeth heard the child laughing at the front of the house. Too close. But a nagging feeling that she had

missed something made her pause and look back at the counter. The cat clock also had two tails. She could definitely sell that at the shop. She grabbed it. The front door slammed and the padding of tiny feet grew nearer. *Five, six, pick up sticks.* Elsbeth moved swiftly back to the opening. But she wasn't fast enough.

A little boy stood in the kitchen doorway, looking quizzical. He had a smear of jam on his nose. It hit Elsbeth that while this place wasn't real to her, it was to him. This was his house. *I left your spoon,* Elsbeth thought. The boy gazed back. *I'm just a twelve-year-old girl,* she wanted to tell him. *I'm not really a thief.*

Holding her breath, she put a finger in front of her lips. He mimicked her, smiling, and she felt relieved.

Heels clicked on the hardwood floor behind him. The boy's mother was coming. Elsbeth edged towards the door and hovered at the opening, which felt like tiny pinpricks all over her skin. Just as the mother walked into the room and gasped, Elsbeth stepped into the shimmer.

And suddenly she was somewhere else entirely. A dark and empty place. This was not a Somewhere, but Nowhere. The air was cold and scentless. When she tried to walk, her legs felt heavier than usual, as if she were moving along the bottom of the seabed. It

would have felt a lot scarier in here if it weren't for the silent fireworks show taking place in front of Elsbeth. She was standing in front of a huge sphere, and with every step she took the fireworks rearranged themselves, their colours slightly different. Elsbeth stood outside the sphere, looking in. She'd been in here so much in the past week it almost felt normal. Almost.

She stepped carefully to the left. The colours in front of her shifted. It was like looking at a kaleidoscope. Like the one Mum had given her for her eighth birthday. Mum had said it reminded her of Elsbeth. She knew Mum was talking about her eyes, which changed colour from blue to green to grey depending on what she was wearing. People often commented on it, but it wasn't always a compliment.

So far, Elsbeth hadn't ever walked very far here, in Nowhere. She was too scared of never finding her way home.

She peered at the kaleidoscope. The colours were different depending on where she stood, and she'd worked out that when she found the right mix of colours, she could go forward into her Somewhere – back home. Right now there were two main colours: purple blobs like a bunch of grapes tossed in the air and swirls of green emerald that reminded her of the

engagement rings for sale in her shop. They looked like they belonged to her Somewhere but it was hard to tell for sure. She took a tentative step forward, and winced as the opening sucked her through. She realised too late that she was wrong.

Elsbeth stood in another kitchen. In a different Somewhere. But no little boy was going to disturb her here. The place was abandoned. There were empty sockets and stains on the wall where the fridge used to be. The air felt cold and stale. Elsbeth opened a drawer just to check. Empty. The house stood on a hill again – while the Somewhere was different, the geography was the same. But something was wrong. The sea level was much higher up the hill here. Waves lapped at the bottom of the long garden. She heard glass smashing somewhere in the distance, then a scream that made her jump. Mum said you should take long deep breaths to calm down when you felt nervous and Elsbeth did that now. *You can always get away whenever you need to*, she reminded herself.

She backed into the opening, feeling relieved to be back in Nowhere. She stared at the colours. They were still a mix of purple and green, grapes and rings, but she couldn't tell what the right combination was for *her* Somewhere. Maybe there was too much purple? She

moved slightly to the left and stepped forward.

She sucked her breath in and tried not to cry out. She was standing in ice-cold water up to her knees. This was definitely not right. The kitchen in this Somewhere was in even worse condition than the last one. And there was an overpowering smell of mould. Elsbeth glanced out of the window and was shocked to see that the sea had risen as if it were swallowing the land. Little waves were licking round chimneys of houses lower down the hill that had been above ground in the last Somewhere. The garden, if there was one, was completely covered in water. A small black fish swam past her foot. Just beyond it, a picture frame bobbed up and down in the water. A picture of a boy with glasses and no front teeth grinned up at her. Her acquisitive instinct kicked in and she waded closer to look at it properly. But the frame was wooden and had probably been in the water far too long to be worth anything. She was wasting time.

Then she felt an odd sucking feeling round her legs. She looked down. The water in the kitchen was getting shallower, as if she were in a bath and someone had pulled the plug. Elsbeth turned round, and gasped. A wave like a wall was surging across the rooftops below, gathering strength as it headed straight for the kitchen. Elsbeth stumbled towards the opening. The thick water

and the heavy backpack were slowing her down. She had a moment of panic. What if she *couldn't* always get away? The wave crashed into the glass windows of the kitchen and the water hit her waist with a sharp slap as she threw herself into Nowhere.

It felt just like someone had flicked a switch. The wave was gone, and Elsbeth felt her heart shake her body in the dark silence. That had been close. She shuddered. Too close. She needed to get home. Elsbeth took deep breaths to calm herself down and tried to think. Perhaps she had been going the wrong way. She'd been taking steps to the left, but maybe her Somewhere was back towards the right. She took three large steps the other way and peered back at the kaleidoscope. Third time lucky. She stepped forward.

The dry floor was the first thing she noticed. That was a good sign. Elsbeth looked around the room. This kitchen looked familiar.

She glanced at the wooden table. She had to check. Somewheres close to each other could be so similar. Even people sometimes looked alike – like versions of each other. But, sure enough, the mark she'd carved with her penknife earlier was still there. It had been sunny when she left, and now dark storm clouds were moving in, but she was finally back home. That had

been the closest that Elsbeth had come to getting lost in Nowhere. And it was because she'd gone too far, she realised. She had to be more careful. Take smaller steps. Focus more on the colours in the kaleidoscope. They swirled about so much it was difficult to tell them apart, but she was sure that each Somewhere had its own distinctive pattern. She would get to recognise hers soon enough, she was sure of it.

Elsbeth made another rule for herself. *No more places with kids*. She didn't like the way she'd felt when that toddler had looked at her.

She readjusted the heavy backpack, pulling the straps tighter, and looked around the room. On the wall hung a painting with lots of red lines and blue dots that looked like a child had made it. Elsbeth suspected it was very expensive. A haughty-looking brass horse and a statuette of a naked woman sat on the table. She could definitely sell those at the shop. But Elsbeth knew better than to take anything from her own Somewhere, even if it was from an empty house.

The occupants of this house, whoever they were, had left the door unlocked, making it easy for Elsbeth to get in. Second homers, Mum called them. They loved to tell their Lunden friends how welcoming the seaside villagers were. Such a sense of community, such

a safe neighbourhood. The tourist homes had the best views of the sea, and most people only came to stay in them for the summer. Mum said it was ridiculous and that the town should set them aside for residents. But the real residents couldn't afford to live in houses this nice.

Suddenly Elsbeth felt a prickle at the back of her neck. She whipped round. The opening shimmered behind her like a thousand tiny diamonds sewn on to the air. For a second she thought she glimpsed a dark figure, standing motionless. Was it just her, or was the figure holding out its hand to her? But of course it couldn't be. *Don't be so stupid*, she told herself. As she looked at it, the figure faded away and the opening sealed up like a pool of water righting itself after a stone was thrown in. It must have been her reflection. But it left her feeling odd, as if an insect was between her shoulder blades.

The church bells on top of the hill began to bong. Seven, eight, nine. She was later than she thought. Elsbeth dashed out of the unlocked back door and into the dark, thickening storm outside.



Elsbeth slammed the shop door against the howling sea air at her back. The silence was sudden. She was

drenched, though the rain had been warm, and she squinted for a minute as she caught her breath. Then the room she knew as well as Mum's wide smile revealed itself. Most of the lights had been switched on, casting an amber glow. Copper plates with old engravings shone down from the walls, and teak furniture soaked up what little daylight fought its way through the shutters. Silver candlesticks, opal necklaces and gilded picture frames cluttered every surface. It was like a hundred families had piled their living rooms together, with everything overlapping. It was probably what all the Somewheres would look like, if you could see them all at once. Customers were sometimes a little overwhelmed by the amount of stuff, but Elsbeth knew where everything was like the back of her hand.

The incense stick that Elsbeth's mum lit every morning was already filling the shop with its musky smell. In the middle of the room at the counter sat Mum, doing her crossword, wrapped in a thick woolly jumper even though it was August.

"Sorry I'm late," Elsbeth panted. She slung the backpack off and it clunked on to the floor. It was the summer holidays and she'd promised to help Mum in the shop in the mornings. It was supposed to be tourist season, and they were supposed to be busier

than usual. So far, Elsbeth hadn't seen much sign of it.

Mum sighed. "Don't worry, darling. It seems quiet today. Again."

Last summer, tourists had potted into the shop first thing, on their way to or from breakfast. This year, the mornings had been deadly quiet.

The shop windows rattled suddenly, as if tiny pebbles were being thrown at them. "And a freak summer hailstorm is all we need to scare the tourists off," Mum added. A hairpin was already making its way out of Mum's hair towards the countertop. It was remarkable, thought Elsbeth, how early in the day the hairpins seemed to want to escape.

Mum tugged at her hair and the hairpin took advantage of the moment to break free, tinkling down to the floor. She read aloud from her crossword. "*Star sign commonly associated with a goat. Nine letters.*"

"Capricorn," said Elsbeth. She looked at Mum. Her hair seemed greyer. Mum used to always say her hair was mouse brown like Elsbeth's. But that had never made any sense. All the mice Elsbeth had ever seen were grey. Now Mum joked that she really did have mouse hair.

"Maybe we should do a summer sale. Get rid of some of the stuff that's been here for years." Mum laughed,

but it wasn't a real laugh.

Elsbeth looked at the eighteenth-century sideboard that Mum said she held on to when she took her first steps. She could trace every scratch on the wood with her eyes shut. If someone ever actually wanted to buy it, Mum would be horrified. Most of the antiques had been there for years. Turnover in their sleepy shop wasn't particularly high. In the winter months, when tourists stayed away, a whole day could go past without a single customer.

But this week it looked a little different. Elsbeth could see new things she'd brought back from other Somewheres. There was the oval picture frame with metal brambles woven round the edges that she'd swiped from an empty house yesterday. The metal was unusually soft. So soft that Elsbeth had been able to push the brambles away from the frame to make it look less messy. Looking at it again, she could have sworn the brambles had moved back a bit, like tentacles wrapping round a creature. Next to the frame sat a rock she'd found smashed open on a beach in another Somewhere. The light caught the green stones inside it, little stalagmites pulsating with their own quiet energy.

Behind that was the art deco dressing table with metal peacocks emerging either side of the mirror

where she used to play dressing-up and pretend to be a pirate. Faded light from the street hit the mirror and Elsbeth saw herself looking gloomy in it. Her straggly curls were coming loose from her ponytail – she was determined not to go down the hairpin route. Even so, for a second she could see Mum’s face in hers. But she thought she looked more like her dad, who had died before she was born. The only picture that Mum had of him stood on the dressing table: Mum, barely out of her teens, and Dad, squinting into the sun, on holiday in Greece, a white archway behind them. The peacocks stared at her dispassionately. She never wanted anyone to buy them either.

“I’ll work harder, I promise,” she told Mum, trying to sound confident.

“Oh, Elsbeth. You’re working hard enough already. But we can practise again today. When the next customer comes in, you can do the selling. You know as much about everything in here as I do. Perhaps more.”

Elsbeth sighed. Mum said she should be more confident with customers. But Elsbeth hated selling things. It felt so fake. Still, it had to be done; she knew that.

As if on cue, there was a tinkle at the front door. They both looked round hopefully. But it wasn’t a customer.

In strode Mr Lennox, the landlord who owned half the high street. He had to lower his head to get through the doorway, then shook the water off it roughly, like a dog.

“Ah, Mrs Tawney. You’re finally in. You’ve been rather hard to get hold of,” he barked. The dainty sherry glasses in the glass cabinet shivered as he spoke.

Mum raised an eyebrow. “We are always here during opening hours, Mr Lennox. And I don’t appreciate the suggestion I might be hiding from you.”

“I might hide from myself too, if I owed me as much money as you do,” Mr Lennox said. He was very tall and always stood with his feet a little too far apart, as if he were about to burst into song. The shop seemed a lot smaller with him in it. The belt he was wearing was fake leather, Elsbeth noted with a critical eye. She wondered what the point was of having so much money and wearing a belt that she could have picked up at a car boot sale for less than a crown.

“You’ll know why I’m here, Mrs Tawney,” Mr Lennox continued. He tapped his wrist exaggeratedly. “Rent for August is due. *Overdue*, as I’m sure you are aware.”

For a man so rich he was remarkably attentive to small bills like theirs, Elsbeth thought. Perhaps that was why he was rich.

“As I said to you on the phone, Mr Lennox, I just need a little more time,” said Mum. “The tourist season has been slow, and your constant rent increases for no apparent reason are not helping.”

Mr Lennox cut Mum off. “I just passed Giselle’s Glassware on the way here. That new place, selling the fancy handmade vases and whatnot. Bustling with the Lunden crowd, it was. Didn’t seem slow at all. No, I’m not buying that, Mrs Tawney.” He looked around the shop critically, and Elsbeth saw for the first time that there was a faint layer of dust over most of the items. “The problem is this shop, not the customers. Same old dull inventory. Why, I’m not sure there’s been anything new in here for years!”

Elsbeth moved a little to position herself in front of the bramble picture frame. She didn’t want Mum’s attention drawn to it right now.

Mum paused, then said, “I will have the rent for you by the end of the week, Mr Lennox.”

“And how do you propose to do that then?”

“How I get the money, Mr Lennox, is none of your business. Suffice to say you will have it. Now, I suggest you leave us in peace so that we might get on with our business.”

Mr Lennox made a sort of *psst* sound that suggested

what his feelings were about that, and walked away. As if he couldn't resist, though, he turned back at the door and added, "The law is on my side, Mrs Tawney. If I don't get that money, I'll serve you with an eviction notice."

Mr Lennox slammed the door as he left and Elsbeth looked at Mum. Her lips were pursed, and she was staring at a point on the floor somewhere behind Elsbeth.

"Mum?"

"Can you mind the shop for a little while, darling? I'm going to go through some bits and bobs in the attic and see what I can do."

"Bits and bobs?"

"Savings," said Mum vaguely. "We have some old policies here and there. I just need to find the details." She headed towards the stairs at the back of the shop.

"Mum," Elsbeth said, more firmly this time.

Mum turned round. "Don't worry, darling. I'm going to sort this out. That Mr Lennox is an old bully. He's not evicting us. He's all talk and bluster. OK?"

Elsbeth gave Mum a smile, because she felt she expected her to. "OK."

Mum went upstairs, and Elsbeth's smile faded. Neither of them had been saying how they really felt.

They'd just been trying to make each other feel better. Mr Lennox's words hung in her head. The high street had been full of tourists, he'd said. So why weren't they coming into their shop? Her eye fell on the green rock she had picked up in the Somewhere by the beach. If the tourists knew they had things like this in here, they'd flock in, she was sure of it. Elsbeth just had to work out how to let them know.