

PAOLA PERETTI

*The
Distance
Between Me
and the
Cherry
Tree*

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PART ONE

Seventy metres





1

The Dark

All children are scared of the dark.

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

I'm not afraid of the dark, though.

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

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

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



I hesitate in the kitchen doorway, trying with the power of my mind to make her turn round, but it never works. So here I am in my room, cuddling Ottimo Turcaret, my brown-and-grey cat with a kink at the end of his tail. He doesn't mind being lifted, rolled over on the carpet or chased with the toilet brush. He's a cat, Dad says, and cats are opportunists. I suppose that means they like attention. For me, it's enough that he's around when things are going wrong and I need something warm and cuddly to hug. Like now.

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

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



ago: he worked out what's going on with my eyes. He also discovered that people who have the same mist as me see black spots in front of things or people, and that these spots get bigger and bigger, until they're huge, and people who see them have to get closer to things to see them properly. The Internet says, *the disease affects one in ten thousand people*. Mum says that special people are chosen by God, but when I think about it, I don't feel that lucky.





2

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

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

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

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

Dad pops his head round the door and tells me to 'pyjamify' and brush my teeth. I say OK but stand at the window for ages before I do what he asks. You can see a huge patch of dark sky from the window in my



bedroom. I like leaning out on autumn nights like these; it's not cold and you can see the moon and the North Star shining bright. Mum says they're Jesus's street lamp and match. I'm more interested in checking they're both still there every night.

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

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

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

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



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

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

*Counting the stars in the sky at night
~~Driving a submarine~~
Making goodnight light signals at the window*

Code red. My glasses have steamed up.

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

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

The third page says:

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



Having a paper ball in the basket competition
Climbing up the school cherry tree

I've climbed the school cherry tree loads of times, since my first day at primary school. It's my tree. None of the other children can climb as high as me. When I was little, I would stroke the trunk, hug it – it was my friend. In fact, I found Ottimo Turcaret in the tree. He was terrified, and the same brown and grey as he is now, only uglier. He was such a tiny kitten I brought him home in my pocket and it was only when I pulled him out and sat him on the table that Mum and Dad realised he was a little kitten.

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

My favourite person in the book is Cosimo – I love



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

Every year since I started school I've had an eye exam with drops that burn. The doctors call it a 'rue-teen' test. I think the specialist tests next week might be a bit different because my pilot light, the one in my eyes, seems to be in a hurry to go out. A very big hurry. The ophthalmologist explained it to me. She's not German like Mr Stargardt and hasn't discovered anything, but she always gives me a pencil with a colourful rubber at the end. She told me the light goes out in some people when they're old, a bit earlier in others. Mine will go out completely while I'm still young.

I'll be left in the dark, she said.

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

I shut my personal organiser and switch off the light.

Cosimo, can you help me?

You can do anything you set your mind to and you're kind. I know you are because, in the book, you read stories to the brigand even though he'd been very bad. You read them through the prison



*bars until the day he was hanged, didn't you?
What about me? Who'll read to me? Who'll read
me stories when I'm left in the dark and Mum
and Dad are at work?*

*If even you, a friend of the trees like me, can't
help, I might stop speaking to you. Worse still,
I'll stop thinking about you. Please find a way
to help me, even secretly. You don't have to tell
me, just find one, or I'll make the branches under
your bottom disappear with my mind and you'll
fall into the lava with the crocodiles, or to the
ground, which is worse seeing as you swore never
to come down from the trees.*

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





3

The Amazon Game

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

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

‘You stuck, no?’

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

‘Well, I help. Then you go school.’

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



‘Put foot here.’ The caretaker with the scary eyes was pointing to a piece of trunk jutting out just below me. I was holding on tight to the branch I was sitting on. I tried to lower my foot, but it slipped, and the bark cracked under my weight. I went straight back to my original position.

‘I’m not coming down.’

‘You stay up rest of life?’

‘Yes.’

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

‘What’s this? Is yours?’

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

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

I sniffed and asked what games she played.

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

‘No, what is it?’

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

‘But she doesn’t wear glasses.’

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



‘A piece of her breast?’

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

‘That’s not true.’

‘It is.’

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

‘See? Amazon.’

‘But how will we get down now?’

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

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

‘Wait!’

‘What?’

‘I don’t want to come down.’

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

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

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



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

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

'A list?'

'Of course. List. I make list, too, years ago.'

'Could you not see well either?'

'No. It wasn't that.'

'What was wrong then?'

The lady sighed and set off back down the tree.

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

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

'What was on your list?'

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

'Mafalda. And yours?'

'Estella.'

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

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

I see Estella now every day at school.



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

But first, I stop to greet the cherry tree. I can see it from a long way away (well, quite far away) on the road I take every morning with Dad. In truth, all I actually see is a coloured blob in front of me, but I know it's the tree – I mean, the giant's hair, if the giant is as nice as I imagine him.

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

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

When they chopped it down, I decided that the giant had gone to live in the cherry tree at school and that he'd taken Grandma's spirit with him, and that it would



be fun to count how many steps there are between the tree and when I can see it. That way I'd know how close I am to Grandma's giant. I screw my eyes up and try my best and, finally, yes, there it is – a red, yellow and orange blob, like the wigs clowns wear. It's all blurry, but it's there. The school next to it is a blue blob. I start counting straight away: one, two, three . . .

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

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

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

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

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

Seventy metres.



