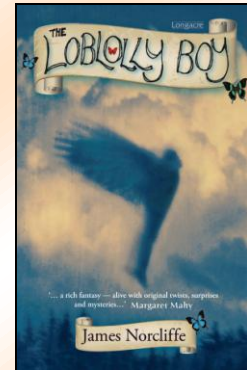


Extract from:



The Loblolly Boy

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Chapter One – Pages 14-17

The Garden was wild and large. There were tall, spreading trees, little lakes with water lilies, and rocky pathways. It would have been a paradise had it not been for the enormous wall that completely surrounded it. I don't know exactly how many of us lived in the Great House; perhaps a hundred. Kids came and went. It seemed, though, that I'd been there forever, at least as long as anybody else. Who were we? We were the unwanted, the not-wanted-on-voyage. The Great House was a place for abandoned kids to be dumped. Some kids were orphans; others were rejects. I'm not sure what I was. Probably a reject.

Most of the others avoided going deep into the Garden. Perhaps it was because they knew that sooner or later they would hit the wall, and didn't want to be reminded of it. Perhaps it was because the Keepers kind of frowned on people going too far from the Great House. But most likely it was because the others all liked to stick together, playing in a tight little clump, and not one of them would venture far from anybody else. So they stayed where they were, on the asphalt playground, all looking the same in their baggy red overalls.

I guess I looked the same, too. I had the same baggy red overalls. The same pudding-basin hair cut.

I knew I was different, though. My hair was red. Not black, or brown or blond. In fact everybody just called me Red, if they

called me anything at all. I had another name: Michael. But the Superintendent was the only one who'd ever called me Michael, and he'd only done it once or twice.

Unlike the others, I preferred to be by myself. I liked exploring the pathways and byways deep in the Garden. Quite often, I even made it all the way to the wall. This far from the Great House the playful shouting and yelling of the other kids was just a faint buzzing like the sound of insects, almost as if they were distant in time as well as space.

In a strange way I even liked the massive wall itself. It didn't frighten me, as it did so many of the others. Somehow it spoke to me of the world outside: told me it was there, was possible, even if I might never see it.

Sometimes, I would come across a Keeper or two. They would always look at me sourly, and demand to know why I wasn't with the others. I never had an answer that could satisfy them. Then they would wave an irritable hand at me as if I were some sort of low-life pest and tell me to get back to the Great House. Immediately.

Not once in my explorations of the Garden did I ever come across anybody but a Keeper.

Until the afternoon I found the loblolly boy.

He was sitting, back against the blotched trunk of an ancient tree that grew by a small lake. I could see straight away that he was just a boy, but in a weird way he looked almost as ancient as the tree. He appeared to be sleeping, but as I stopped in astonishment he turned and looked at me. It was his eyes. They were large and green and seemed filled with all the sadness of the world.

'Hello,' he said.

I was too startled by his presence in the Garden to return his greeting.

'How did you get here?' was all I could manage to whisper.

The figure lolling before me was dressed entirely in green: leaf-green leggings, a loose sage-green shirt, and a darker green cape of some filmy material. He didn't look at all angry.

'I flew across the wall,' he said.

That's, I guess, when I first thought that the loblolly boy was a little odd. Even stupid. I glanced across the little lake to where the great wall towered above the trees.

'I don't like people being sarcastic,' I said.

He nodded, his large green eyes studying me carefully.

'Of course not,' he said.

'Who are you?' I asked.

He shrugged. 'Does it matter?' he asked.

'It might,' I said. 'If they catch you.'

'If who catches me?'

I looked at him again with some surprise.

'The Keepers.' How could he not know about the Keepers? He could only have got there by sneaking past them somehow.

'They won't catch me.'

He said this with such certainty, he almost convinced me. I looked around as if expecting to see the black figures, the barking dogs, already moving determinedly towards us.

'Why not?'

'I'll fly away.'

It was the second time he'd mentioned flying. Stupid. He was so stupid. 'How did you really get here?' I asked again.

He looked at me thoughtfully. 'I've already told you,' he said.

I stared at him, trying to puzzle him out. There was something very unusual in the atmosphere, as though my ears were ringing, but all was still. The boy stood up, and then walked towards me. He was no taller than I was. If anything, he was a little smaller, and he was certainly slighter.

'What is your name?'

At first I thought he was going to fob me off again, but then he said, 'I'm the loblolly boy.'

'The what?'

'The loblolly boy. I'll teach you if you like.'

'Teach me what?'

'How to fly,' he said.
