





... the bundle of wastepaper from the trash ...

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## INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth century the city of Amsterdam jumped the bounds of its age-old ramparts and began to encroach the surrounding countryside.

The wealthy denizens of the inner city sought their escape from the daily bustle and reeking canals and built their villas along the southern edge of William's Park, a newly laid out greening for strolling and horse riding, later to become the [Vondelpark](#).

Within the span of three decades an area of roughly a square mile crisscrossed with ditches and patched with old industries, lumber yards, windmills and vegetable gardens, was transformed into a spacious square with two musea <sup>1)</sup> and a concert hall <sup>2)</sup> and a grid of adjacent streets, which was bound to grow into a district called 'Amsterdam South'.

In one of the earliest streets, Palestrina<sup>3)</sup> Street <sup>4)</sup>, just behind the concert hall, I lived for several decades. Around the year 2000 it was a century old and one of my neighbours decided it deserved a memorial book, which was published in 2004.

I ran a street blog in those days and in the wake of the book the editor and I kept up a lively exchange of posts on the inhabitants of what seems to be the last house of our little street but, actually, is part of the sidewall of a house around the corner.

Our neighbours enjoyed our 'investigations' knowing them full well for wholly imaginary.

In the course of our correspondence I invented a find of a bundle of scruffy papers in the trash in front of this spurious dwelling. Peeling them apart I happened on a tale of an enigmatic disappearance of two children.

## Notes

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<sup>1)</sup> The Amsterdam [Municipal Museum](#) (1891–1895), in Dutch, '[het Stedelijk Museum](#)', its new wing a.k.a. '[the Tub](#)' (2012).

<sup>2)</sup> [The Concert Building](#) (1883–1888), in Dutch, '[Het Concertgebouw](#)'.

<sup>3)</sup> Named after the Renaissance composer [Giovanni Pierluigi](#) (c. 1525–1594) from [Palestrina](#), Italy, the ancient Praeneste.

<sup>4)</sup> The last house on Palestrina Street as seen with Google [Street View](#).

### *Episode 1 – The Promise*

We were staying with our aunt in Amsterdam. We were seven and nine then, my little sister and I. One day, aunt had to do some shopping and she told us:

*"Li'l brother, li'l sister, come and listen to me. Aunt has to go out this afternoon to fit a new dress. There'll be a gala, shortly, and she's nothing apt to wear. You two must stay home, but promise aunt one thing: you shall not leave the house or you may go astray and never be able to find your way back again."*

We sincerely promised her to remain inside and after serving us tea and cookies aunt kissed us both and left, locking the frontdoor on the outside.

### *2 – Into Darkness*

At first, we played with dolls. We were having tea and made them join us. Then we had a bout of hide-and-seek. We ran up and down the stairs and opened the doors to every room, to aunt's bedroom, as well. This was a marvellous room. The walls were covered with a deep yellow silk. In a corner stood an elaborate dressing table mounted by a triple mirror in gilt frames. On the wall opposite the double bed hung a man-sized painting of an officer in a fancy uniform and standing between the two sash windows was a pedestal with a lavish bouquet of silk flowers and peacock feathers in a turquoise vase.

It was a room out of a fairy tale and our aunt must have been the good fairy herself. We hardly dared breathe. We slid our hand along the satin bedspread and crossed the light blue expanse of carpet to the nearest window. There we pushed aside the heavy lace curtains and looked down on the garden below. The sun was shining, birds were singing and everywhere bloomed flowers so very pretty and gay. And in the midst of it there was a small pond and at its edge a little roe was drinking.

For a brief spell we stood gazing and then, at once, turned from the window, ran down the stairs and to the back of the house, but where ever we sought, nowhere there a door or window was to be found which opened onto the sunlit garden.

*"Maybe the entrance is farther down,"* I offered at last, and in the vastness of the house we went in search of a lower staircase. In a nook of the hall was a door that hadn't occurred to us before and on opening it revealed a dark stairwell from which a musty odour sprang. On the wall was a switch and when I flipped it down below a light came on.



At first, li'l sister durst not proceed, but when I reminded her of the little roe and the floral splendour of the garden she gently followed me down the steps. Once in the basement she took my hand and together we set out for the back of the house where, supposedly, an entrance to the garden was to be found.

The front of the basement was lit by two naked bulbs. Racks with pots and flasks lined the walls and leaning against a pillar stood an old lady's bycicle. Further up it grew darker and more disorganized, all kinds of discarded things and fabrics lying around in random heaps across the floor covered in dust.

*"Let's go back," li'l sister whispered, "I'm scared."*

I tried to comfort her. It couldn't be that much farther and once at the back wall, perhaps we'd see a crack of light from a door or window frame.

And so, in silence, we still moved on until there was only darkness. We kept close to each other holding hands tightly and I was at the point of giving up and turning back when in the gloom ahead a pale shimmer of light seemed to reach out for us.

*"There, look!"* I cried out of relief, *"there's something over there,"* and my voice rang shrill in the surrounding blackness.

### 3 – The Vial

Quickly now, we made for the light. On coming closer we saw sunbeams had no part in it, but candles, huge candles, and in their midst, in front of a stone wall, a woman stood attired in fantastic robes that glittered in the wavering candlelight. She beckoned us and smiled. Li'l sister trailed behind me, but I felt as if enchanted and stepped forward pulling her with me until we came before the woman and looked up to her in awe. She didn't speak.

"Who are you?" I uttered at last.

Her face brightened and she lifted her arms so as to spread her robes like the wings of a butterfly, the gauzy fabrics fanning wide sparkling in the tricky light.

*"I have come, the Mistress of Dreams. I am the way between Darkness and Light."*

"Look," she said and at a gracious sweep of her arm part of the wall behind her receded and through the crack we caught a glimpse of the lustrous garden we had seen from aunt's bedroom window.

*"Do you wish to step outside?"*

Li'l sister didn't answer, but I replied *"We do!"* and pressed her hand for encouragement.

*"Some boys are dreamers,"* the Mistress of Dreams mused, *"girls not so much. However, any girl will consummate a dream more naturally than the dreamiest of boys."*

I was only half listening, stretching myself to see past her through the narrow opening and to the glorious flowers beyond.



The Mistress of Dreams stepped aside and on impulse we followed, right up to the crack. *"Just proceed,"* she said, *"and have a pleasant look around; and when you're satisfied, here, take a sip of this potion. It will bring you back inside"* and she showed li'l sister a tiny vial containing a liquid of rainbow colours. It was a pendant on a string and she arranged it around her neck.



"*Keep it well,*" she added and then she helped us through the opening, one by one, and was gone.

#### 4 – *The Roe*

And there we were. We looked around in wonder and sniffed the wafts of sweet scents which came drifting from the garden. After the stuffy, dark basement the open sky and balmy air felt like a treat.

Li'l sister took my hand and pulled me toward the pond which lay glittering amidst a sea of flowers. It seemed much larger now than we'd ever guessed and at its verge was the roe.

"*Li'l roe dear,*" li'l sister called. She let go of my hand and went straight for the little fellow, who raised its ears and stood watching her for a moment. Then it made a startled leap and trotted to a patch of shrubs a short distance away.

"*Dear li'l roe, please, don't run away,*" li'l sister called anew, "*please, stay for me,*" and she started to walk from the edge of the pond to where the roe had halted.

Afraid to lose her from sight I fell into a trot, which didn't fail to upset the roe and put it to flight again. In a few quick bounds it reached the edge of a wood where it paused to look back.



Li'l sister kept quietly approaching, her hands stretched before her in a pleading gesture, but when, almost, she might have touched its muzzle the roe turned away and fled under the trees and she followed in its train.

As fast I could I rushed to where she'd vanished between the tree trunks, but neither of her, nor of the roe there was any trace.

"*Li'l sister*," I shouted with all my might, "*li'l sister, turn back!*" but there was no answer and for all my calling and yelling she never came back.

### *5 – Finding L'il Sister*

At first, I didn't know what to do. Aunt! What might she have to say on hearing we'd left the house all the same and li'l sister now gone missing? But what of the garden? On entering it, had we been trespassing against aunt's word? In a sense, the garden belonged to the house, or didn't it? If anything, it seemed a bit strange that it was so large and that there was a roe in it, not to speak of a wood. Where we lived this was nothing special, but for a house on a city street? Extraordinary indeed. While watching it from the bedroom window nothing had seemed out of shape, though, nothing at all.

Once my panic had somehow subsided, I realized there was no point in trying to find li'l sister. The wood was dense and forbidding. Entering it on spec seemed a sure way to get myself hopelessly lost. So I gave a last, desperate shout and when nothing happened I returned to the pond looking back every now and then in the vain hope of seeing her yet materialize from under the canopy.



From where I joined the pond, obviously, I'd expected to see the rear wall of aunt's house not far off, but there was no trace of it, or of any other house on the street where she lived.



All frantic now, I started to run in the direction from where we had come, right through the flowers to the wall where the Mistress of Dreams had shown us out, only to find it was no longer there, either.

Dropping to my knees I burst into tears, for then it dawned on me I was lost in a strange world without a clue of how to find the way back to aunt in Amsterdam and also to our father and mother.

After a while, I came to think of the vial the Mistress of Dreams had presented to li'l sister.

*"A sip of this potion will bring you back inside," she'd said.*

Of course, a mere sip would suffice to escape from this enchanted place, but li'l sister had the vial and if she drank the potion she'd be safe, but me...? I'd be left behind here to stay, perhaps forever!

For a moment I was engulfed by anger. How could she've been so careless as to follow the roe without thinking of me! But OK, she was barely seven.

My rage now ebbing away, I saw my only hope of escape lay in finding li'l sister so together we could share the drink.

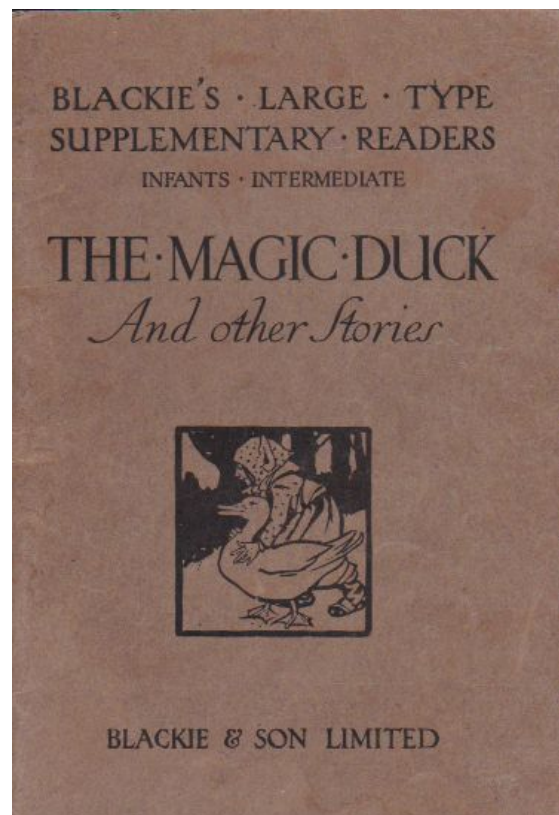
If only she wouldn't lose the vial...

## INTERLUDE

Here the tale came to an end, but some weeks later I happened on its sequel. At first, I'd missed it, because it wasn't written on loose sheets of paper like the former story. In the bundle I'd saved from the garbage there were also several booklets with children's tales which, at first, I ignored in favour of notes, letters and the odd postcard. Their content proved disappointing, a desultory correspondence between relatives about their everyday affairs without the slightest reference to the disappearance of the two children.

One night, I was half-heartedly flipping through the pile of booklets, when, suddenly, I stopped short. On the inside cover of one of Blackie's Large Type Supplementary Infant Readers someone had pencilled a longish note in a hand I easily recognized.

Here's what I came to read.



## 6 – Sorrow

Last night, I was dreaming of aunt Ann. She came in from the street and called:



*"Li'l brother, li'l sister, I'm home!"* and she walked through the hall and put down a big parcel and two much smaller ones on the high chest against the wall.

Unbuttoning the top of her suit she called to us again.

*"Ooh-hoo, where are you?"* and she clapped her hands and laughed.

*"Come, children, I've brought you a treat."*

Then she noticed the open door to the basement and the light still on. She descended the stairs and looked around intently. Of course, there was no one there.

She rushed through the house, inspecting every room and closet and, at last, she ran out into the street and circled around the blocks of houses behind the concert hall. When she failed to find us, she went back home and sat down at the kitchen table for a heartrending sob. In the end, she rang our father and mother, who came rushing headlong to Amsterdam.

## 7 – Visions in Dreams

I've had this same dream before, several times already, and I'm sure that's exactly how it went. What I dream are reflexions of the real world and I, myself, am living only in dreams.

That's where I found li'l sister. In the first weeks of my wanderings I knew naught of her, but one day she appeared to me in a dream. Only in our dreams can we be together, when we're dreaming of each other, but having a conversation, like one does in the real world, is impossible. We read each other's mind and are aware of the flow of thoughts and images that pass through our heads, at least, I have the feeling we are.

In this way I've learnt that she's become a woman now, living somewhere in a forest which borders on an ocean. By day she's roaming with her herd of roe and in the

afternoon she'll go to the shore to play with dolphins until sundown. She seems perfectly happy in a childlike way. A woman she may be, but still has the mind of a girl of seven.



At times, I can't help alluding to the vial with the rainbow potion, but she's always dodging the subject. It is as if she's forgotten everything past, our father, our mother and aunt Ann. Apparently, she never dreams of them.

But I do! Everything that happened after our disappearance I've passed through. The despair of mamma and dad, the tears of aunt Ann, who could never forgive herself for leaving us alone that afternoon.

In the beginning she all but locked herself in, never leaving the house except out of sheer necessity. Every nook and cranny she's inspected thoroughly hoping against hope that she'd find a trace of us, in the basement and in the garden, also.

One day, when the sun was shining, she put out a chair and sat staring into the shrubbery for hours. She must have been half-asleep and dreaming, for, all of a sudden, she rose and called: "*Li'l brother, is that you?*"

She faltered toward the pond and stared in my direction in total bewilderment. She may have sensed my presence as I was standing at less than three feet away from her, but she could no longer see me, her dream gone.

Hesitantly, she walked to the end of the garden where – in my world – the wood begins.

"*Li'l brother,*" she called in a broken voice. Then she shook her head and went back inside.

## *8 – Last Hope*

From then on aunt became more and more restless. The house was suffocating her and she started to travel abroad. She's been everywhere since, and I know she's still cherishing hope that some day she'll find us, li'l sister and me. She's often dreaming of us as we were then. If I were still like I was then, I might have let her know I'm still alive and well, but I'm no longer the boy I was and whenever I mingle with her dream characters she doesn't recognize me.

I've become an adventurer. As a young knight errant I've crossed a thousand forests and scores of damsels, formerly in distress, owe me their gratitude. Many of them had the looks of Louise, once queen of Prussia, whom, as a little boy, I adored for her beauty.



I've been a warrior in many a battle. I was a hoplite among the Ten Thousand, among the Six Hundred I rode into the Valley of Death, Arthur has been my commander, Charlemagne, Alexander, I was among the last to flee Jerusalem.

Once I took sail on the Beagle, had a short stay on the Bounty, too, just out of curiosity, but my most treasured experience was on board Nautilus, captain Nemo's famous vessel. I even sojourned on the moon! Not with the ill-fated trio that manned the Columbiad, but in the company of the distinguished Baron Munchausen. What a remarkable fellow! Hard to keep up with, and sooo witty!

Sometimes, however, I find myself landed in scenes that frighten me. Hansel and Gretel is anything but funny and Tom Thumb is a horrible experience outright. Suchlike events keep occurring all the time. It's beyond one's powers and each time you're glad if, afterwards, you're able to tell the tale.

I was too young to understand much about it, but these stories seem to sprout from a subconscious layer of the mind, a reservoir of basic ideas and instincts that we share with all humanity, where monsters dwell of the most horrific kind. They rove the woods you're bound to travel across and, on a whim, jump you from behind and tear you apart.

It is my last hope that if I'd die here I may wake up in the real world and see my father and mother again, if, by then, they be still alive, for how much time has elapsed since our disappearance, I've no idea.



## 9 – *With Hindsight*

Once I read a story of someone falling asleep under a tree who slept for a hundred years, like Sleeping Beauty. Could the same have befallen li'l sister and me?

If so, what I've never been able to figure out is where that left us. This man under the tree and Sleeping Beauty in her tower, they both stayed in the physical world, but we stepped through this crack in the wall and seem to have vanished from the face of the earth ever since.

Aunt has been going over the house for months, every inch of it, the basement in particular; in the garden she's been down on her knees without finding the slightest trace of us. Did we enter the domain of the Mistress of Dreams physically? How could that be? The tissue that dreams are made of consists of different yarns than beings of flesh and blood.

The police called in by my father made a serious effort, too, but they only came up with questions. In the end they decided we must have left the house one way or another and been taken by a stranger, which wasn't wide of the mark by much.

Aunt, however, wouldn't hear of it. She was absolutely sure the frontdoor had still been locked when she returned, as we had had no key. She was right. How was she to know we had left by the basement, instead.

That gloomy basement! There must have been something uncanny with it. It was too deep to be true, or so I think with hindsight. Maybe, it was in the pitch-dark that we walked into a dream, unwittingly, and in that dream we met the Mistress who made us dream that we passed through the wall into her garden of dreams.

In that case, our bodies must be still in the basement, somewhere, in a part aunt and the police, for some reason, had no access to. There we're lying asleep only to wake up after a hundred years, just like Sleeping Beauty.



## 10 – The Inner Garden

A month or so after posting the last part of this tale on my blog I received a letter from a notary, retired to the country.

My story had raised old memories he'd rather seen left undisturbed but, by a strange coincidence, he'd felt obliged to impart a personal experience that might shine a new light on the unknown fate of both these lost children.

A law student in the mid-Sixties, he was living in a sub-let, a single room on the top floor of the house where once the 'aunt' of this story had been living downstairs. The current occupant of her spacious apartment was a young lady who did as she pleased. It earned her a nickname from the unseasoned country lad that he was, '*Madame Sans-Gêne*', after a popular movie of the period, starring Sophia Loren. If she had known, she'd have laughed at him, if she'd cared.

His room had French windows and a balcony which overlooked the tree-shielded inner gardens. From his eyrie, glimpses of her taking sunbaths for a seamless tan and a dip in the pond afterwards had often aroused him, which conflicted with certain principles of his religious upbringing and troubled him mightily in his sleep. He felt deeply ashamed of himself, but couldn't abstain from spying on her.

On Saturday nights, there were house parties, which often spilled into the garden.

Unkempt youths and older men bearing the unmistakable mark of existentialism, clad in black, chain-smoking and swilling wine, endlessly debated on questions of political philosophy, while the young birds who clung to their arms, eyes vacant, ringed with black eyeliner, passively awaited the moment their dark knights would be ripe for being coaxed inside for a quickie in one of the closets, newly vacated.



Now and then the hostess appeared from the house. She used to be draped in flimsy gauzes of different hues. Waving her arms so as to make the tissues undulate behind her in the semidarkness she seemed to float through the garden circling around her guests until she found some one to her liking and, after the briefest of mating rituals, led him or her inside. Behind them discussions, which had dimmed only slightly, resumed at full tilt.



## 11 – The Altar

One such moonlit night, the student had been watching the goings-on from his balcony. He was in a frantic mood, pacing from his desk to the balcony and back again. He had to prepare for an exam on Monday and was behind schedule, but he couldn't concentrate. His excited phantasies, even more than the din of the party below, proved too hard to endure and before he knew he had bounded down the stairs and rung the doorbell of the ground-floor apartment. He had intended to complain about the noise, but when a black answered the door and waved him inside without further ado, he was too flustered to refuse and entered on a scene the aged notary in his letter describes as "*a subsidiary to Sodom and Gomorrah.*"

Pushing himself through throngs of people talking, laughing, smoking, drinking and fondling in the candle-lit rooms and passageways he was wondering about the sweet scent that saturated the air. All the while, people were smiling at him and offered him drinks or a puff of their fags, which tasted queer but not particularly unpleasant. He began to feel more relaxed, even giddy, and when some pretty pushed her fag between his lips and, afterwards, sealed them with a kiss, he wasn't even shocked by realizing she was a young man with heavy makeup. Instead, it made him laugh out loud, uncontrollably.

"Then," as the notary writes in his letter, "*the hostess cut through the crowd and took me by the hand.*"

"*She was wearing a diaphanous garment and a fantastic wig which made her all but look otherworldly. Her face half grey, half white, eyes and brows enhanced, her mouth a black heart, she led me into the garden and made me lay down upon a stone table. There she started to make love to me. She performed with flair and part of the guests who'd closed in around us sighed in sympathy.*"



"*While she was bent over me, I sensed she might be more than a mere mortal, perhaps a moon goddess, and a sensation of intimate affection overwhelmed me and made me gasp in rapture.*"

*I reached out for her, but the moon hid behind a cloud and I was on my own.*

*Then I had a dream."*

## *12 – The Dream*

I was floating in a world of green. It seemed to last for an eternity. Almost imperceptibly, I was beginning to rise very, very slowly and, gradually, faster and faster in the direction of light. I was a dolphin. I leapt free from the surface of an ocean and played with other dolphins in waves which broke on a silvery shore.

From the woods behind the beach a woman came. She crossed the strip of sand, disrobed and swam toward me. For hours we played together and when the sun set I escorted her back to the shore. At the boundary of land and sea she spread out her garment of iridescent cloth and draped it on my head, covering both my eyes. She then embraced me. I felt a strange urge to stand upright and when she pulled away the cloth, I was standing beside her. I had become a roe and as a roe I followed her into the woods.

In the woods we were living for ages and I felt happy. I grazed with the herd but was always following her and when she slept it was me who watched over her. Less and less like a woman she looked and more and more like a girl. In the end, she was only a child. This made her uneasy and she started to roam farther and farther afield. At first, the whole herd was following, but ever more of them went astray and, finally, there were only the two of us left together.

One day, we heard a far-off voice calling, "*Li'l sister, li'l sister, where are you?*" and, at once, she ran off, with me following behind. Sometimes close, sometimes from afar, the call was repeated and, at last, we burst into an open space where sunlight playing upon a lake had conjured up the shimmering arc of a rainbow.

By the lake's edge was a boy walking away from us. Once she saw him she called: "*Li'l brother, don't leave me. Please, stay!*" and as he turned around she ran for him.

On reaching him they embraced and remained still for a long time, hugging each other and crying. I had followed her, hesitantly, to the lakefront and there I stood and watched.

Now they were talking and hugging again and after a long while they joined hands and went up a slope covered with flowers to a ruin which rose from shrubs not far off. In its centre gaped a dark gate with steps leading down to what might be a tomb or an entrance to the underworld. They went in, hand in hand, and once they had stepped out of sight the front vanished before my eyes and the gate with it.



For a long time I stood at the edge of the lake mournfully staring into the water. Then, on impulse, I began to move forward over the gently sloping bottom until the surface closed over my head. Slowly, I was sinking deeper and deeper. It seemed to last for an eternity and, eventually, I was floating in a world of green.

### *The Notary's Letter*

After so many years, these memories came back to me while I was reading the print-outs of your blog. I do not own a computer myself, but my daughter-in-law, who is what they call a lurker, sent them to me by regular mail as she realized your story regards the house where I lived as a law student. She's not aware of my 'downstairs adventure', though, and we'd better leave it that way. I've always kept it close to my chest.

This dream has stayed with me over the years. I've tried to write it down several times in the past but, each time, the result I deemed unsatisfactory. Its substance always knew how to trick me into fruitless digressions. The above rendition is as good as it gets.

Did you ever try to picture a dream in writing? In the preamble the words already fail you. Everything seems equally important and nothing is what it seems. On describing a flight of geese, what flows from the tip of your quill may be an image of floundering fish.

Details, more details and tangled webs of sidetracks, they make you decide the only way forward in telling must be by a main road, cutting corners, filling in blanks, but there lies your problem. A dream is a dream. It's not a story. It's not rational, and by rationalizing you'll effectively brutalize it beyond recognition.



Ironically, it is this distorted narrative, a mere shadow of a ghost, which lingers in your memory and if, after half a lifetime, it resurfaces it does so in a different setting. You have changed, your values have changed and the old pictures are painted in different colours with a different brush as they are revived in your mind's eye in a different light.

Even so, I was quite appalled at reading the letters of this poor boy. His story seems to mirror my dream to perfection, the similarities between them being too close for comfort indeed. To me, it appears little short of a miracle that two people, decades apart from each other, would share parts of the same dream, and yet, he and I did, no doubt about it.

How can it be that two young children live through, be it in reverse, the exact scenes I saw in a dream forty-odd years ago, and in that selfsame garden!

The whole case has been nagging me for days now and I can't see my way to a satisfactory answer. That is what stirred me to write to you.

I hope you'll excuse me, but I had to share this with somebody, anybody, bar relatives and neighbours, of course.

This morning, I was reading the story for the umpteenth time, and it occurred to me the boy could have spared himself and his family a lot of pain and sorrow, if only he had figured it out. But OK, he was barely nine years old.

He's living in a dream, he tells. In dreams, anything is possible. There are no restrictions of space and time. As he wishes so badly to break the spell, why not dream it up? Perhaps, eventually, he did, or his little sister did, for in my dream they were reunited and went back inside together.

Did they, actually, return to their own world by then, or might the images of my dream lie still into their future? Who can tell?