

PUFFIN BOOKS

THE WHISPERS

GREG HOWARD

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*For Mama and Daddy,
and for Tucker—the greatest dog in the history of dogs*

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.

—DESMOND TUTU

There once was a boy who heard the Whispers.

He heard them late in the day as the lazy sun dipped below the treetops and the woods behind his house came alive with the magic of twilight. The voices came to him so gently he thought it might be the wind, or the first trickle of summer rain. But as time passed, the voices grew louder and the boy was sure they were calling his name. So he followed them.

The Whispers led the boy to a clearing deep in the woods where a rotted old tree stump sat in the center and fallen leaves covered the ground like crunchy brown carpet. The boy stood next to the stump, waited, and listened. He couldn't see the Whispers, but he knew they were there. Their wispy voices surrounded him, tickling the rims of his ears and filling every darkened shadow of the forest.

After waiting patiently for quite some time, the Whispers' garbled words finally began to make sense to the boy, and they told him things. The Whispers knew everything—all the secrets of the universe. They told the boy what color the moon was up close and how many miles of ocean covered the Earth. They even told him how long he would live—26,332 days. The boy was pleased,

because that sounded like a good long time to him. But as they continued to whisper knowledge into his ear, they never showed themselves to the boy. He only caught glimpses from the corner of his eye of their faint bluish glow fading in and out around him. He so badly wanted to see them, to know what kind of creatures they were. How big were they? Or how tiny? Were they thin, or fat, or hairy? Were they made of skin and bones like him, or of tree bark, or leaves, or dirt? Or something else entirely?

The Whispers told the boy that if he brought them tributes, they would give him his heart's desires. The boy wasn't sure what a tribute was and he didn't want very much anyway. He could hardly call them heart's desires. Maybe a new pair of sneakers so the kids at school wouldn't tease him about his raggedy old ones. Maybe a better job for his father so he wouldn't worry so much about money. And he would love to see his mother smile again, something she rarely did anymore. But he guessed what he really wanted was to see the Whispers with his very own eyes.

One day, as the boy's mother made a batch of her special blackberry jam, he asked her what a tribute was. She thought about it a moment and finally told him that a tribute was like a gift to show respect. The boy eyed his mother's handiwork spread over the kitchen table. Everyone loved her jam. When she took it to the local farmers market, she always sold out. And her blackberry jam was his personal favorite. He was sure it would make an excellent tribute for the Whispers. When his mother left the room, the boy took one of the jars from the table and hid it under his bed.

The following afternoon, as the sun was setting, he went back to the clearing in the woods with the jam tucked under his arm.

He left it sitting on the rotted old tree stump for the Whispers. Satisfied with his tribute, the boy spoke his heart's desires aloud and then hurried home as not to scare the Whispers away.

When the boy's father got home from work that evening, his mood was lighter than usual and the lines of worry had completely vanished from his face. He told the family that he'd received a promotion at work and tomorrow the boy's mother should take him shopping to buy him new clothes and shoes for school. This news made his mother smile. The boy was amazed that he'd received three of his heart's desires with only one jar of jam. Surely the Whispers would reveal themselves to him if he took them a tribute even better than a jar of his mother's blackberry jam. And he knew just the thing.

The next day, when the boy returned from shopping with his mother, he snuck out of the house right before sunset and took his new sneakers to the clearing in the woods. He kept them in the box, neatly wrapped in tissue paper so they wouldn't get scuffed or dirty. They were the nicest shoes he'd ever owned, and surely this tribute would persuade the Whispers to show themselves.

When he approached the rotted old tree stump, he saw that the blackberry jam was gone. The boy wasn't surprised. He was sure the Whispers enjoyed his mother's jam just as much as everyone else did. He put the box with his sneakers on top of the rotted old tree stump, stood back, and waited. And waited. And waited. He waited so long, he wasn't sure the Whispers were pleased enough with his tribute.

Finally something tickled the back of his neck with the lightest flutter of breath grazing his skin. It spoke his name and asked him what he wished. The boy froze. The Whispers had never come that

close before. They must be pleased with his tribute after all. He was excited, but afraid if he moved it would scare them away, so he closed his eyes and remained perfectly still.

"I wish to see you," the boy said in barely a whisper of his own. "I want to know what you look like. It's my heart's desire."

At first there was no clear answer, only a garble of Whispers conversation that he couldn't understand. Then the words slowly pieced themselves together like a puzzle in his ear.

"If we reveal ourselves, you can never leave us," the Whispers said, their velvety voices caressing his ear through the warm summer breeze. "You must stay here in the woods with us forever, for you will know everything, and that is a burden too great to bear in your world."

The boy swallowed hard. He closed his eyes even tighter and stood very still as sweat trailed down his neck, the Whispers' words chilling him from head to toe.

"Are you sure this is what you wish?" the Whispers asked. "To see us? To stay with us and become a whisper in the wind?"

The boy began to worry. He thought about all the things he would miss if he stayed in the woods with the Whispers forever. He would never get to ride his bike again, or go swimming in the pond with his friends. And he would never see his mother and father again. It seemed like an awfully high price to pay just to see what the Whispers looked like. Besides, he'd already offered them his brand-new sneakers, and they were the nicest things he owned. Wasn't that enough?

"No," the Whispers said, reading his thoughts. "It is not enough. If you see us, you must become one of us. And then you will

know everything there is to know. You will hear everything. See everything. But the only tribute we can accept for that is your soul.”

The boy stood there with his eyes closed tight, scared he might accidentally see one of the Whispers and then the choice would be made for him. He needed a moment to think. The boy wondered what else there was to know. Because of the Whispers he knew the color of the moon up close, how many miles of ocean covered the Earth, and how long he would live—26,332 days. He knew he had a home to which he could return. He knew his parents loved him and his father worked hard to take care of their family. And the kids at school would tease him a little less now that he had brand-new sneakers.

The boy knew it would be dark soon and if he waited too long he might never find his way out of the woods. Then what would the Whispers do with him? He felt around until he found the box with his sneakers on the tree stump. He grabbed it, turned, and ran as fast as he could. He held the box close to his chest and didn't dare open his eyes. He tripped and fell. Got back up and ran into one tree after another. Branches whacked him across the face and chest, but he kept running blindly through the woods.

Only after he'd gone a good long ways and the tiny voices had faded behind him did the boy dare open his eyes. Even then he was careful not to look around. He stared straight ahead until he got to the tree line and ran the whole way home, never looking back, not even when he reached his house.

After that the boy never heard the Whispers again, but he didn't mind. He already had his heart's desires. He had his mother. And his father. And his friends. And his brand-new sneakers.

Plus he knew what color the moon was up close, how many miles of ocean covered the Earth, and how long he would live—26,332 days. He didn't know all the secrets of the universe and maybe he never would, but he knew plenty.



This was Mama's favorite story. She told me the story every night until the day she disappeared. Then I started hearing the Whispers.

And I followed them.

