

## ***The Missing World***

By Margot Livesey

The outside door was open. Rushing up the stairs, he pictured Hazel unconscious on the floor, clutching the phone. He would carry her into the bedroom and hold a cool cloth to her forehead until she opened her eyes and begged him to lie down beside her. As soon as he unlocked the door of her flat, Jonathan knew this was the easy version. Sounds he could not parse into sense came from the living-room. "Hello," he said, not loud enough to be heard.

He stopped to pick up the phone, beeping on the hall floor, and went slowly into the living-room. Hazel was lurching away from him across the carpet, as if her legs were of different lengths or different substances, one wax, one lead. A table lamp, directly in her passage, fell to the floor. She was wearing a black pullover and, surprisingly, a blue skirt he had given her.

"Hazel," he said.

She reached the wall but still she did not stop. She kept walking until she was pressed right up against it, her toes nudging the skirting board, her thighs moving in a parody of an exercise machine. She raised her hands and began to claw at the plaster, her fingers scraping the magnolia paint, over and over.

When at last she turned around, he would not have recognised her. The whole shape of her face had changed. Her cheeks were puffy; her eyes, always so large and luminous, were rolling back in their sockets; saliva frothed her lips, and even her jaw seemed to undulate oddly. Only her fine, feathery hair was the same. "Barasingha," she said in an unnaturally deep voice.

Jonathan fled. In the hall he seized the phone and dialled Emergency.

"Which service do you require: police, fire, or ambulance?"

"Ambulance," he shouted. And then he was speaking to a calm-voiced woman. Next to the phone was a bookcase, and as he recited the address he caught sight of the faded binding of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, his second gift to her, squeezed between *The Poems of Rumi* and *A Guide to Seashore Birds*; at least she hadn't thrown it away.

"How long will it be?" he asked, but the operator was gone.

At the prospect of returning to the living-room, dread washed over him. Whoever was staggering back and forth, that person, that creature, was not Hazel. Barasingha? It sounded exotic: a small monkey, perhaps, or a complicated curry. He touched the spine of *Metamorphoses*, the gold lettering almost gone.

"Anything," he vowed, "I'll do anything to get her back again." His fingertips came away flecked with gold.

Hazel had sunk to her knees and was scrabbling at the wall, a desperate prisoner. Cautiously he knelt beside her and reached his arms around her, then almost let go. Deep, uneven zigzags were leaping through her, not like the vibrations of cold or grief but rather as if she were plugged into some wayward generator. He tightened his grip against the shocks. She continued to claw the paint. "Hazel," he pleaded, "stop it. Please, stop!"