

MORE
THAN
THIS

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Here is the boy, drowning.

In these last moments, it's not the water that's finally done for him; it's the cold. It has bled all the energy from his body and contracted his muscles into a painful uselessness, no matter how much he fights to keep himself above the surface. He is strong, and young, nearly seventeen, but the wintry waves keep coming, each one seemingly larger than the last. They spin him round, topple him over, force him deeper down and down. Even when he can catch his breath in the few terrified seconds he manages to push his face into the air, he is shaking so badly he can barely get half a lungful before he's under again. It isn't enough, grows less each time, and he feels a terrible yearning in his chest as he aches, fruitlessly, for more.

He is in full panic now. He knows he's drifted just slightly too far from shore to make it back, the icy tide pulling him out farther and farther with every wave, pushing him toward the rocks that make this bit of coast so treacherous. He also knows there is no one who'll notice he's gone in time, no one who'll raise the alarm before the water defeats him. He won't be saved by chance, either. There are no beachcombers

or tourists to dive in from the shoreline to save him, not this time of year, not in these freezing temperatures.

It is too late for him.

He will die.

And he will die alone.

The sudden, gasping horror of knowing this makes him panic even more. He tries again to break the surface, not daring to think that it might be his last time, not daring to think much at all. He forces his legs to kick, forces his arms to heave himself upward, to at least get his body the right way round, to try and grasp another breath just inches away—

But the current is too strong. It allows him tantalizingly near the surface but spins him upside down before he can get there, dragging him closer to the rocks.

The waves toy with him as he tries again.

And fails.

Then, without warning, the game the sea seems to have been playing, the cruel game of keeping him just alive enough to think he might make it, that game seems to be over.

The current surges, slamming him into the killingly hard rocks. His right shoulder blade snaps in two so loudly he can hear the *crack*, even underwater, even in this rush of tide. The mindless intensity of the pain is so great that he calls out, his mouth instantly filling with freezing, briny seawater. He coughs against it, but only drags more into his lungs. He curves into the pain of his shoulder, blinded by it, paralyzed by its intensity. He is unable to even try and swim now, unable to brace himself as the waves turn him over once more.

Please, is all he thinks. Just the one word, echoing through his head.

Please.

The current grips him a final time. It rears back as if to throw him, and it dashes him headfirst into the rocks. He slams into them with the full, furious weight of an angry ocean behind him. He is unable to even raise his hands to try and soften the blow.

The impact is just behind his left ear. It fractures his skull, splintering it into his brain, the force of it also crushing his third and fourth vertebrae, severing both his cerebral artery and his spinal cord, an injury from which there is no return, no recovery. No chance.

He dies.

pArt 1

The first moments after the boy's death pass for him in a confused and weighty blur. He is dimly aware of pain, but mostly of a tremendous *fatigue*, as if he has been covered in layer upon layer of impossibly heavy blankets. He struggles against them, blindly, his thrashing increasing as he panics (again) at the invisible ropes that seem to bind him.

His mind isn't clear. It races and throbs like the worst kind of fever, and he is unaware of even thinking. It's more some kind of wild, dying instinct, a terror of what's to come, a terror of what's happened.

A terror of his death.

As if he can still struggle against it, still outrun it.

He even has a distant sensation of momentum, his body continuing its fight against the waves even though that fight has already been lost. He feels a sudden rushing, a surge of terror hurtling him forward, forward, forward, but he must be free of his body somehow because his shoulder no longer hurts as he struggles blindly through the dark, unable to feel anything, it seems, except a terrified urgency to *move*—

And then there is a coolness on his face. Almost as of a breeze, though such a thing seems impossible for so many

reasons. It's this coolness that causes his consciousness—His soul? His spirit? Who's to say?—to pause in its fevered spin.

For an instant, he is still.

There's a change in the murk before his eyes. A lightness. A lightness he can enter, somehow, and he can feel himself leaning toward it, his body—so weak, so nearly incapable beneath him—reaching for the growing light.

He falls. Falls onto solidity. The coolness rises from it, and he allows himself to sink into it, let it envelop him.

He is still. He gives up his struggle. He lets oblivion overtake him.

Oblivion is purgatorial and gray. He is passably conscious, not asleep but not quite awake either, as if disconnected from everything, unable to move or think or receive input, able only to exist.

An impossible amount of time passes, a day, a year, maybe even an eternity, there is no way he can know. Finally, in the distance, the light begins to slowly, almost imperceptibly change. A grayness emerges, then a lighter grayness, and he starts to come back to himself.

His first thought, more vaguely sensed than actually articulated, is that it feels as though he's pressed against a cement block. He's dimly aware of how cool it is under him, how solid it feels, like he's clinging to it lest he fly off into space. He hovers around the thought for an indeterminate

amount of time, letting it clarify, letting it connect to his body, to other thoughts—

The word *morgue* suddenly flashes somewhere deep inside him—for where else are you laid out on cool, solid blocks—and in rising horror, he opens his eyes, unaware they were even closed. He tries to call out that they must not bury him, they must not cut him open, that there's been a terrible, terrible mistake. But his throat rebels against the formation of words, as if it hasn't been used for years, and he's coughing and sitting up in terror, his eyes muddled and foggy, like he's looking at the world from behind many thick layers of dirty glass.

He blinks repeatedly, trying to see. The vague shapes around him slowly fall into place. He sees that he is not on the cold slab of a morgue—

He is—

He is—

Where is he?

Confused, he squints painfully into what now seems to be rising daylight. He looks around, trying to take it in, trying to see it, make sense of it all.

He seems to be lying on a concrete path that runs through the front yard of a house, stretching from the sidewalk to a front door behind him.

The house is not his own.

And there's more wrong than just that.

He breathes for a moment, heavily, almost panting, his mind groggy, his vision slowly becoming a little clearer. He feels himself shaking from the chill and pulls his arms around himself, sensing a dampness covering his—

Not *his* clothes.

He looks down at them, his physical reaction slower than the thought that ordered it. He squints again, trying to see them clearly. They don't seem to really be clothes at all, just strips of white cloth that barely fit the name *trousers* or *shirt*, stuck closely around him more like bandages than things to wear. And all along one side, they're wet with—

He stops.

They're not wet with seawater, not with the soaking, briny cold of the ocean he was just—

(drowning in)

And only half of him is wet anyway. The other half, the half that was against the ground, is cool, but quite dry.

He looks around, more confused than ever. Because he can only be wet with *dew*. The sun is low in the sky, and it seems as if it must be morning. Underneath him, he can even make out a dry outline of where he was lying.

As if he had lain there all night.

But that can't be. He remembers the brutal, winter coldness of the water, the dark freezing gray of the sky overhead that would never have let him survive a night out in it—

But that isn't this sky. He lifts his face to it. This sky isn't even winter. The chill is merely the chill of morning,

of possibly a warm day to come, of possibly a *summer* day. Nothing at all like the bitter wind of the beach. Nothing at all like when he–

When he died.

He takes another moment to breathe, to just do that, if he can. There is only quiet around him, only the sounds he himself is making.

He turns slowly to look at the house again. It resolves itself more and more as his eyes get used to the light, used–it almost seems–to seeing again.

And then, through the fog and confusion, he feels a soft tremor in his blanketed mind.

A brush, a hint, a featherweight of–

Of–

Is it familiarity?

He tries to rise, and the feeling vanishes. Rising is difficult, surprisingly so, and he fails. He feels terrifyingly weak, his muscles resisting even the simple command to stand. Just the effort to sit fully upright leaves him winded, and he has to stop for a moment, panting again.

He reaches out to grab a sturdy-looking plant by the side of the path to try to rise once more—

And pulls his hand back immediately when short spikes prick his fingers.

It's not a regular plant at all. It's a weed, grown staggeringly tall. The flower beds that line the path to the door of the house have all grown extraordinarily wild, much higher than the low stone dividing walls on either side. The shrubberies among them look like they're almost living creatures reaching out to him, poised to do him harm if he moves too close. Other weeds, *enormous* weeds, three, four, even six feet high, have blazed through every inch of dirt and every possible crack in the pavement, one of them crushed underneath him where he lay.

He tries again to rise, finally making it up, though he sways dangerously for a moment. His head is overweighted

with grogginess and he's still shivering. The white bandages around him are in no way warm, nor are they even—he notices with alarm—covering him properly as clothing. His legs and torso are wrapped tightly, his arms, too, and most of the width of his back. Bafflingly, though, the entire area from his belly button to the middle of his thighs is naked to the world, front and back, his most private parts unthinkably out in the morning sun. He frantically tries to pull down the too-scanty fabric to cover himself, but it sticks tightly to his skin.

He covers himself with his hand and looks around to see if anyone has seen him.

But there is no one. No one at all.

Is this a dream? he thinks, the words coming to him slowly, thickly, as if from a great distance. *The last dream before death?*

Every yard is as overgrown as this one. Some that had lawns are now sprouting fields of grass shoulder-high. The pavement in the road is cracked, too, with more weeds almost obscenely tall growing right out of the middle, a few approaching the status of *trees*.

There are cars parked along the road, but they're covered in thick layers of dust and dirt, blinding every window. And nearly every one has sunk under four deflated tires.

Nothing is moving. There are no cars coming down the road, and from the look of the weeds, no car has driven

down here in an impossibly long time. The road to his left carries on until it meets a much wider street, one that looks like it should be a busy, bustling main road. There are no cars driving there either, and he can see a gigantic hole has opened up across it, forty or fifty feet wide. Out of which a whole glade of weeds seems to be growing.

He listens. He can't hear a single motor anywhere. Not on this street or the next. He waits for a long moment. Then a long moment more. He looks down the other end of the road on his right, and through the gap between two apartment buildings, he can see some raised train tracks and feels himself listening for the trains that might run on them.

But there are no trains.

And no people.

If it's the morning that it seems to be, people should be coming out of their houses, getting in their cars, driving to work. Or if not, then walking their dogs, delivering the mail, heading off to school.

The streets should be full. Front doors should be opening and closing.

But there is no one. No cars, no trains, no people.

And this street, now that he can see more of it as his eyes and mind begin to clear a little more, even the geography of it looks strange. These houses are crammed together, all stuck in a line, with no garages or big front yards and only the narrowest of alleys between every fourth or fifth house. Nothing like his own street back home. In fact, this doesn't look like an American street at all. It looks almost—

It looks almost *English*.

The word clangs around his head. It feels important, like it's desperately trying to latch on to something, but his mind is so foggy, so shocked and confused, it only heightens his anxiety.

It's a word that's wrong. That's *very* wrong.

He wavers a little and has to catch his balance on one of the sturdier-looking bushes. He feels a strong urge to go inside, to find something to cover himself with, and this house, this house—

He frowns at it.

What is it about this house?

Surprising himself, without even feeling as if he's decided to, he takes an unsteady step toward it, nearly falling. He still struggles to articulate his thoughts. He cannot say why he's walking toward the house, why it might be anything other than an instinct to get inside, to get out of this weird deserted world, but he's also aware that all of this, whatever it is, feels so much like a dream that only dream logic can possibly apply.

He doesn't know why, but the house draws him.

So he goes.

He reaches the front steps, steps over a crack running along the lowest one, and stops before the door. He waits there a

moment, not quite knowing what to do next, not quite sure how it will open, or what he will do if it's locked, but he reaches for it—

It swings open at his lightest touch.

A long hallway is the first thing he sees. The sun is really shining now, filling the clear blue sky behind him—so warm that it *must* be some kind of summer, so warm he can already feel it burning his exposed skin, too pale, too fair to be under such harsh light—but even in this brightness, the hallway almost disappears in darkness halfway down. He can only just see the staircase at the end, leading up to the floors above. Before the stairs, on the left, is the doorway that leads into the main house.

There are no lights on inside, and no sound.

He looks around again. There's still no drone of machinery or engines from anywhere, but he notices for the first time that there's no buzz of insects either, no calls of birds, not even any wind through the foliage.

Nothing but the sound of his own breathing.

He just stands there for a moment. He feels hideously unwell, and so weak, so *tired*, he could almost lay down on this doorstep right here and sleep forever, just forever, and never wake up—

He steps inside the house instead. Hands on either wall to keep himself steady, he moves slowly forward, every second thinking he's going to be stopped, that he's going to hear a voice demanding to know what he's doing trespassing in a strange house. As he stumbles into the shadows, though, his eyes not adjusting to the change in light as fast

as they should, he can feel dust under his feet so thick it seems inconceivable that anyone has been here in a long, long time.

It gets darker the farther in he goes, and this seems wrong somehow, the blast of the sun through the open door not illuminating anything, just making the shadows heavier and more threatening to his bleary eyes. He fumbles on, seeing less and less, reaching the bottom of the stairs but turning from them, still hearing nothing, no sounds of habitation, no sound of anything at all except himself.

Alone.

He pauses before the doorway to the living room, feeling a fresh thrust of fear. Anything could be there in the darkness, anything could be silently waiting for him, but he forces himself to look in, letting his eyes get used to the light.

When they do, he sees.

Caught in a few beams of dusty sunlight from the closed blinds at the front, he sees a simple, plain living room, merging into an open dining area on his right, leading to a doorway through to the kitchen at the back of the house.

There is furniture here, like any normal room, except it's all covered in dust so thick it's like an extra cloth draped over everything. The boy, exhausted still, tries to make the shapes match up to words in his head.

His eyes adjust to the light more, the room becoming more of itself, taking shape, revealing details—

Revealing the horse screaming from above the mantelpiece.

A crazed eye, a tongue like a spike, trapped inside a burning world, looking at him from behind a picture frame.

Looking right at him.

The boy cries out at the sight of it because all at once he knows, *knows* beyond a shadow of a doubt, the realization coming like a tidal wave.

He knows where he is.

He runs as fast as his exhausted feet will take him, staggering back down the hall, stirring up clouds of dust, heading toward the sunshine like—

(like a drowning man reaching for air—)

He can vaguely hear himself calling out in distress, still wordless, still unformed.

But he knows.

He knows, he knows, he knows.

He stumbles down the front steps, barely able to stay upright, and then not even barely. He falls to his knees and can't find the strength to rise again, as if the sudden rush of knowledge is a weight on his back.

He looks to the house in panic, thinking that something, *someone* must be coming after him, must be in pursuit—

But there's nothing.

There's still no sound. Not of machines or people or animals or insects or anything at all. There's nothing but a quiet so deep he can hear his heart beating in his chest.

My heart, he thinks. And the words come clearly,

cutting through the fog in his mind.

His heart.

His dead heart. His drowned heart.

He begins to shake, as the terrible knowledge of what he saw, the terrible knowledge of what it *means*, starts to overtake him.

This is the house where he used to live.

The house from all those years ago. The house in *England*. The house his mother swore she never wanted to see again. The house they moved across an ocean and a continent to get away from.

But that's impossible. He hasn't seen this house, this *country*, in years. Not since primary school.

Not since—

Not since his brother got out of the hospital.

Not since the very worst thing that ever happened.

No, he thinks.

Oh, please, no.

He knows where he is now. He knows why it would be this place, knows why he would wake up here, after—

After he died.

This is hell.

A hell built exactly for him.

A hell where he would be alone.

Forever.

He's died, and woken up in his own, personal hell.

He vomits.

He falls forward onto his hands, spitting up the contents of his stomach into the bushes on the side of the path. His eyes water from the effort of it, but he can still see that all he's throwing up is a weird, clear gel that tastes vaguely of sugar. It keeps coming until he exhausts himself, and since his eyes are already watering, it seems only a very short step to weeping. He begins to cry, slumping back down to the concrete face-first.

It feels, for a time, like drowning all over again, the yearning for breath, the struggle against something larger than himself that only wants to take him down with it, and there's no fighting it, nothing that can be done to stop it, as it swallows him up and he disappears. Lying on the path, he gives himself over to it, in the same way that the waves kept demanding that he give himself to them—

(though he did fight the waves, up until the very end, he *did*)

And then the exhaustion that's threatened him since he first opened his eyes overtakes him, and he falls into unconsciousness.

Falls away and away and away—

“How long are we going to sit here?” Monica asked from the backseat. “I’m fucking freezing.”

“Does your girlfriend ever shut up, Harold?” Gudmund teased, looking into the rearview mirror.

“Don’t call me Harold,” H said, his voice low.

Monica slapped him on the shoulder. “That was the part of the sentence you didn’t like?”

“You’re the one who wanted to come along,” H said.

“And what a blast it’s turned out to be,” Monica said. “Parked outside Callen Fletcher’s house waiting for his parents to go to bed so we can steal his Baby Jesus. You sure know how to treat a girl, Harold.”

The backseat lit up as Monica started furiously tapping the screen of her phone.

“Turn that off!” Gudmund said, reaching back from the driver’s seat to cover it with his hand. “They’ll see the light.”

Monica snatched it out of his grasp. “Please, we’re miles away.” She went back to tapping.

Gudmund shook his head and frowned at H in the rear-view mirror. It was weird. They all liked H. They all liked Monica. But it turned out nobody much liked H and

Monica together. Not even, it seemed, H and Monica.

“What are we going to do with it, anyway?” Monica said, still tapping. “I mean, Baby Jesus? Really? Isn’t that just a little blasphemous?”

Gudmund pointed out through the windshield. “Isn’t that?”

They looked out to the vast Christmas scene that blanketed the Fletchers’ front yard like an invasion force. Word was that Mrs. Fletcher was angling not just for Half-market’s local paper, but an actual TV news crew over from Portland, maybe even Seattle.

The display started with Santa and all his reindeer in bright fiberglass, lit up from the inside and strung from a tree near the Fletcher house out to their roof so it looked like the over-burdened sleigh was coming in for a landing. Things got worse from there. Lights sprang from every conceivable crevice and outcropping on the house to every tree branch and telephone pole within reach. Ten-foot-tall candy canes made a forest through which mechanical elves waved onlookers slowly into eternity. Off to one side, there was a live, twenty-foot Christmas tree decked out like a cathedral next to a lawn full of prancing Christmas-related animals (including, inexplicably, a rhinoceros in a Santa cap).

In pride of place was a Nativity that made it look as if God had been born in Las Vegas: Mary and Joseph, complete with manger, hay, lowing cattle, bowing shepherds, and rejoicing angels who looked like they’d stopped mid-dance routine.

Right in the center, surrounded by them all, was the spotlit, golden-haloed infant, lifting his hands beatifically

toward the peace of all mankind. It was rumored he was carved from imported Venetian marble. This would turn out to be tragically false.

“Well, he’s small enough to be portable, is your Baby Jesus,” H explained to Monica, who wasn’t really listening.

“Easy to grab in one swoop,” Gudmund said. “Easier than that rhinoceros anyway. What the hell’s up with that?”

“And then you bury him waist deep in someone else’s lawn,” H continued, raising his hands like the Baby Jesus statue as if he were sticking halfway out of the ground.

“And voilà,” Gudmund finished, smiling. “A Christmas miracle.”

Monica rolled her eyes. “Can’t we just do meth like everybody else?”

The whole car laughed. Yep, everyone was going to be a lot happier when she and H broke up and it could all be normal again.

“It’s almost eleven,” Monica said, reading her phone. “I thought you said—”

Before she could finish, they were plunged into darkness as the entire Fletcher display shut off in obedience to the county-ordered curfew the neighbors had gone to court to obtain. Even from where they were parked down the gravel road from the house, they could hear shouts of disappointment from the last of the chain of cars that had spent the evening driving leisurely by.

(Callen Fletcher, a tall, awkward boy, spent the time from Thanksgiving to New Year desperately trying not to be noticed in any way at school. He was usually unsuccessful.)

“All right, then,” Gudmund said, rubbing his hands together. “We just wait for the cars to clear, and then we make our move.”

“This is theft, you know,” Monica said. “They’re bonkers over that display, and if Baby Jesus suddenly goes missing—”

“They’ll go apeshit,” H laughed.

“They’ll press charges,” Monica said.

“We’re not going to take him far,” Gudmund said, and then he added, mischievously, “I thought Summer Blaydon’s house could use a holy visitation.”

Monica looked shocked for a moment, then seemingly couldn’t stop herself from grinning back. “We’ll have to be careful that we don’t interrupt some late-night cheer-leading practice or something.”

“I thought you said it was theft,” Gudmund said.

“I did,” Monica shrugged, still grinning. “I didn’t say I minded.”

“Hey!” H snapped at her. “You gonna flirt with him all night or what?”

“Everyone shut up anyway,” Gudmund said, turning back. “It’s almost time.”

There was a silence then, as they waited. The only sound was the squeak of H rubbing his sleeve on the window to clear it of condensation. Gudmund’s leg bounced up and down in anticipation. The cars thinned out to nothing on the road, and still the silence ruled as they held their breath without knowing they were doing it.

At last, the street was empty. The Fletchers’ porch light clicked off.

Gudmund let out a long exhalation and turned to the backseat with a serious look. H nodded back to him. "Let's do it," he said.

"I'm coming, too," Monica said, putting her phone away.

"Never thought you wouldn't," Gudmund said, smiling. He turned to the person sitting in the passenger's seat.

"You ready, Seth?" he asked.

Seth opens his eyes.

He's still lying on the concrete path, curled up into himself, feeling cramped and stiff against the hard surface. For a moment, he doesn't move.

Seth, he thinks. *Seth is my name.*

It seems a surprise, as if he'd forgotten it until the dream or the memory or whatever the hell it was that just happened. It had been so clear it's almost painful to recall it. And the sudden rush of information that comes with it is painful, too. Not just his name. No, not just that.

He had been *right there*, so much more vividly than any memory or dream would have been. He had actually been there, *with* them. With H and Monica. With Gudmund, who had a car so always drove. His friends. On the night they stole the Baby Jesus out of Callen Fletcher's front yard.

Not two months ago.

Seth, he thinks again. The name slips from his brain strangely, like sand held in an open palm. *I am Seth Wearing.*

I was Seth Wearing.

He takes a deep breath, and his nostrils fill with a gag-making smell from where he was sick in the bushes. He sits

up. The sun is higher in the sky. He's been out for a while, but it doesn't feel like noon yet.

If there *is* a noon in this place. If time means anything here.

His head is pounding badly, and even in the confusion of memories laying heavily on him, he becomes aware of a powerful new feeling, one he realizes he's felt all along but can now put a description to, a word, now that things are clearing, now that he knows his own name.

Thirst. He's thirsty. More thirsty than he can ever remember. So much so it drives him almost immediately to his feet. Once more, he's shaky as he stands, but he steadies himself and manages to stay upright. He realizes it's what had driven him into the house before, an unnameable, undeniable urge.

Now that it's named, it feels even more undeniable.

He looks again at the strange, silent, empty neighborhood around him, with its layers of dust and mud. The familiarity that had hinted itself before is much firmer, much clearer now.

His street, yes, where he'd lived when he was small, a street that had been his home. To the left it led up to the High Street with all its shops, and he can remember now, too, the commuter trains off to the right. More, he can remember counting them. On those early mornings, just before they moved from this little English suburb all the way across the world to the freezing coast of the Pacific Northwest, when he used to lie awake, unsleeping, counting trains, as if that would help.

His younger brother's bed empty across the room.

He winces at the memory of that summer and pushes it away.

Because it's summer *now*, isn't it?

He turns to the house again.

His old house.

Unmistakably, his old house.

It looks weather-beaten and untended, the paint peeling away from the window frames, the walls stained from leaky gutters, just like every other house on this street. At some point, the chimney has partially collapsed onto the roof, a small rubble of bricks and dust scattered down the slope to the edge, as if no one ever noticed it falling.

Which maybe no one has.

How? he thinks, struggling to organize coherent thoughts against his thirst. *How can this possibly be?*

The need for water is almost like a living creature inside him now. He's never felt anything like it before, his tongue fat and dry in his mouth, his lips cracked and chapped, bleeding as he tries to lick them damp.

The house looms there, as if waiting for him. He doesn't want to go back inside, not even a little bit, but there is nothing else to do. He must drink. He *must*. The front door is still open from where he ran out before, panicked. He remembers the shock of what awaited him above the mantelpiece, like a punch to the gut, telling him just exactly what hell he'd woken up to—

But he also remembers the dining area leading on from the sitting room, and the kitchen beyond that.

The kitchen.

With its taps.

He moves slowly to the doorway again, coming up the three front steps, now recognizing the crack in the bottom one, a crack never quite serious enough to get fixed.

He looks into his house and the memories keep coming. The long hallway, still shrouded in shadow, is one he crossed countless times as a young boy, tumbling down stairs he can now just barely see in the deepness of the house. He remembers that they lead up to the bedrooms on the floor above and continue up farther still, to the attic.

The attic that used to be his old bedroom. The one he shared with Owen. The one he shared with Owen before—

He stops the thought again. The thirst is nearly bending him double.

He must drink.

Seth must drink.

He thinks his name again. *Seth. I am Seth.*

And I will speak.

“Hello?” he says, and the word is sharply painful, the thirst turning his throat into a desert. “Hello?” he tries again, a bit louder. “Is anyone there?”

There’s no answer. And still no sound, nothing but his breathing to let him know he hasn’t gone deaf.

He stands at the doorway, not moving yet. It’s harder this time to go in, much harder, his fear a palpable thing, fear of what else he might find inside, fear of why he’s here, of what it means.

Of what it *will* mean. Forever and ever.

But the thirst is palpable, too, and he forces himself over the threshold, stirring up the dust again. His bandages are no

longer anything approaching white, and his skin is streaked with dark stains. He heads deeper inside, stopping just before the bottom of the stairs. He tries the light switch there, but it flips on and off pointlessly, no lights coming on anywhere. He turns from the stairs, not willing to brave the darkness of them just yet, not even really wanting to look at them, just gathering his courage before entering the living room.

He takes a deep, dry breath, coughing again at the dust.
And steps through the doorway.

It is as he left it. Scattered rays of sunlight are the only illumination, since the light switches don't work in this room either. A room filled, he now fully realizes, with the furniture of his childhood.

There are the stained red settees, one big, one small, that his father wasn't going to replace until the boys got old enough not to mess them up anymore.

Settees that got left behind in England when they moved to America, left behind in *this* house.

But here is a coffee table that didn't get left behind, a coffee table that should be thousands and thousands of miles from here.

I don't understand, he thinks. *I don't understand*.

He sees a vase of his mother's that made the trip. He sees an ugly end table that didn't. And there, above the mantelpiece –

He feels the same stabbing in his gut despite knowing what to expect.

It's the painting made by his uncle, the painting that came to America, too, with some of this furniture. It's of a shrieking, wrongly proportioned horse with terror in its

eyes and that awful spike for its tongue. His uncle had patterned it after Picasso's *Guernica*, surrounding the horse with broken skies and broken, bombed-out bodies.

Seth had long since been told about the real *Guernica* by his father, long since understood the story behind it, but even though his uncle's version was the palest of pale imitations, it was the first painting Seth had ever properly seen, the first real painting his then-five-year-old mind had tried to figure out. For that reason, it loomed larger for him than any classic ever would.

It is something out of a nightmare, something horrible and hysterical, something unable to listen to reason or understand mercy.

And it is a painting he last saw *yesterday*, if yesterday still means anything. If time passed at all in hell. Whatever the answer, it was a painting he saw on his way out of his own house on the other side of the world, the last thing his eyes had glanced over as he shut his front door.

His actual front door. Not this. Not this nightmare version out of a past he'd prefer not to remember.

He watches the painting as long as he can bear, long enough to try and turn it into just a painting, nothing more than that, but he can feel his heart thudding as he looks away from it, his eyes avoiding a dining-room table he also recognizes, and the bookcases full of books, some of whose titles he's read in another country than this. He shuffles as quickly as his weak body will carry him into the kitchen, keeping his thoughts only on his thirst. He heads straight to the sink, almost whimpering with anticipated relief.

When he turns on the taps and nothing happens, he lets out an involuntary cry of despair. He tries them again. One won't move at all, and the other just spins in his hand, producing nothing, no matter how often he twists it.

He can feel a weeping rising in him again, his eyes burning at how salty the tears are in his dehydrated body. He feels so weak, so unsteady that he has to lean forward and put his forehead against the counter, feeling its dusty coolness on his brow and hoping he won't faint.

Of course this is what hell would be like, he thinks. Of course it is. To always be thirsty but have nothing to drink. Of course.

It's probably punishment for the Baby Jesus thing. Monica had even said so. He feels a rueful flutter in his stomach, remembering that night again, remembering his friends, how relaxed and easy everything usually was, how they liked that he was the quiet one, how it hadn't mattered that the differences in English and American curriculum meant that he was nearly a year younger than them all despite being in the same grade, how they—but especially Gudmund—included him in everything as only friends could. Even the theft of a deity.

They'd stolen it, almost shamefully easily, their stifled laughter the only real threat to getting caught. They'd lifted the infant out of the manger, surprised at its lightness, and carried it, barely able to contain their hysteria, back to Gudmund's car. They'd been so nervous in the getaway that a light had come on in the Fletcher house as they peeled down the road.

But they'd done it. And then they'd driven out to the head

cheerleader's house as planned, shushing each other vigorously as they snuck Baby Jesus out of the backseat into the middle of the night.

Where H dropped him.

It turned out that Baby Jesus wasn't, in fact, made from Venetian marble, but from some kind of cheap ceramic that broke with astonishing thoroughness when it came into swift contact with the pavement. There had been a hushed, horrified silence as they stood over the bits and pieces.

"We are so going to hell," Monica had finally said, and it sure hadn't sounded like she was joking.

Seth hears a sound in his chest and realizes with surprise that it's laughter. He opens his mouth and it comes out in a horrible, painful honk, but he can't stop it. He laughs and laughs some more, no matter how light-headed it makes him, no matter how he still can't quite stand up from the countertop.

Yes. Hell. That'd be about right.

But before he starts to cry again, a feeling that has threatened behind every second of his laughter, he realizes he's been hearing another sound this whole time. A creaking and groaning, like a baying cow lost somewhere in the house.

He looks up.

The groaning is from the pipes. Dirty, rust-colored water is starting to dribble from the kitchen tap.

Seth practically leaps forward in his desperate rush to drink and drink and drink.

The water tastes awful, unbelievably so, like metal and mud, but he can't stop himself. He gulps it down as it comes, faster through the tap now. After ten or twelve swallows, he feels a churning in his stomach, leans back, and throws up all the water he just drank into the sink in great, rust-colored cataracts.

He pants heavily for a minute.

Then he sees that the water is running a little clearer, though still not exactly drinkable looking. He waits for as long as he can bear, letting it clear some more, then he drinks again, more slowly, this time taking breaks to breathe and wait.

He keeps the water down. Feels the coolness of it spreading out from his stomach. It feels good, and he notices again how warm it is in this place, but especially in this house. The air is stuffy and oppressive, tasting of the dust that covers everything. His arms are filthy with it just from leaning against the counter.

He begins to feel slightly better, slightly stronger. He drinks again, and then again, until the roaring thirst is finally satisfied. When he stands up fully this time, he does so without feeling dizzy.

The sun through the back window is bright and clear. He

looks around the kitchen. It's definitely his old one, which his mother never stopped complaining about being too small, even after they moved to America, where kitchens tended to be big enough to seat a family of elephants around the breakfast nook. Then again, in his mother's eyes, *everything* in England compared unfavorably to America, and why shouldn't it?

After what England had done to them.

He hasn't thought about it, *really* thought about it, for years. There was no reason to. Why dwell on your worst memory? Not if life had moved on, in a brand-new place, so many new things to learn, so many new people to meet.

And though it had been terrible, his brother had survived, hadn't he? There had been problems, of course, as they watched to see how bad any neurological damage might be as he grew, but his brother had lived and was usually a charming, functional, happy little kid, despite any difficulties.

Though there had been that unthinkable period when they all thought the worst, when they all looked at Seth and while saying over and over that they didn't blame him, still seemed to think—

He pushes it out of his mind, swallowing away the ache in his throat. He looks out toward the darkened sitting room and wonders what he's supposed to *do* here.

Is there a goal? Something to solve?

Or is he just supposed to stay here forever?

Is that what hell is? Trapped forever, alone, in your worst memory?

It makes a kind of sense.

The bandages don't, though, smudged with dark, dusty stains but stuck fast to his body in an arrangement that covers all the wrong parts. And for that matter, the water—now running almost clear—doesn't make sense either. Why satisfy his thirst if this is a punishment?

He still can't hear anything. No machinery, no human voices, no vehicles, nothing. Just the running of the water, the sound of which is so comforting, he can't quite bring himself to turn it off.

He's surprised to feel his stomach rumbling. Emptied twice of all its contents, he realizes that it's hungry, and rather than give in to the fear that this causes—because what do you eat in hell?—he almost automatically opens the nearest cabinet.

The shelves are filled with plates and cups, less dusty because shut away, but still with an air of abandonment. The cabinet next to it has better glasses and the good china, which he recognizes, most but not all of it surviving the shipment to America. He moves quickly on, and in the next cabinet, there is finally food. Bags of desiccated pasta, molding boxes of rice that crumble under his touch, a jar of sugar that's hardened into a single lump that resists the poking of his fingers. Further searching reveals cans of food, some of which are rusted over, others bulging alarmingly, but a few that look okay. He takes out one of chicken noodle soup.

He recognizes the brand. It's one that he and Owen used to be unable to get enough of, used to ask their mother to buy over and over again—

He stops. The memory is a dangerous one. He can feel himself teetering again, an abyss of confusion and despair looking right back up at him, threatening to swallow him if he so much as glances at it.

That can be for later, he tells himself. *You're hungry. Everything else can wait.*

Even thinking it, he doesn't believe it, but he forces himself to read the can again. "Soup," he says, his voice still little more than a croak but better now, after the water. "Soup," he says again, more strongly.

He starts opening drawers. He finds a can opener—rusty and stiff, but usable—in the first one and lets out a small "Ha!" of triumph.

It takes him seventeen tries to get the first cut into the top of the can.

"Goddammit!" he shouts, though his throat isn't quite up to shouting yet and he has to cough it away.

But at last there's an opening, one he can work with. His hands are aching from the simple act of twisting a can opener, and there's a terrible moment when he thinks he's going to be too weak and tired to get any further. But the frustration drives him on and eventually, agonizingly so, there's enough of an opening to drink out of.

He tips the can back into his mouth. The soup has gelatinized and tastes heavily of iron, but it also tastes of chicken noodle, a flavor he's suddenly so grateful for that he starts

laughing as he's slurping down the noodles.

Then he also senses that he's crying a bit more, too.

He finishes the can and sets it down with a firm thud.

Stop this, he thinks. *Pull yourself together. What do you need to do here? What's the next thing to do?* He stands a little straighter. *What would Gudmund do?*

And then, for the first time in this place, Seth smiles, small and fleeting, but a smile.

"Gudmund would have a piss," he croaks.

Because that is indeed what he needs to do next.

More Than This

Patrick Ness

“Ness’s exploration of big questions—specifically Seth’s yearning to find out if life will ever offer more than the rotten hand he’s been dealt—will provide solace...” —

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