



Ebbs

&

Joseph Blythe
Tom Sewell
Ben Dews
M. E. G.
Jemima Davey
C. Soden
Zay Camomile

Flows



Ebbs & Flows

Joseph Blythe, Tom Sewell, Ben Dews,
M. E. G., Jemima Davey, C. Soden
& Zay Camomile



Library Cats Publishing House
England, United Kingdom



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Ebbs & Flows, first published in July 2025
by Library Cats Publishing House 2025

Formatted and published in the United Kingdom

ISBN: 978-1-7392047-2-3

Cover design by Mayara Zucheli
Layout design by Cristobal Echevarria

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Acknowledgements

I would like to give special thanks to Sabina Aibadullina, Fiona Banham, Alfonso Buhigas, Alessandra Cappuccio, Sukhpreet Chana, Olivia Dean, Beatriz de Castro Pérez, Cristobal Echevarria, Hannah Holmes, Nicholas Iyamabo, Raja Khan, Isla MacFarlane, Chris Millis, Devora Moleman, Sam Morgan, Beth Stears, Rebecca Thomas, Sophia Voukelatos, Anna Yianni, and Mayara Zucheli for their wonderful, freely volunteered efforts that have made this collection a reality.

Marcos Echevarria, *CEO and Founder*

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Cherry Blossom Ave.

Joseph Blythe

As the name suggested, a cherry blossom tree stood at the top of Cherry Blossom Avenue. Not on the street, mind, but over a short wall—about three feet high—in the park at the back of the estate. Win lived alone in the house at the very top of the street. The bathroom window afforded a view of the whole park, obscured when the tree bloomed its huge cloud of pink. But Win didn't mind. Not one bit. In fact, if he left the bathroom window open, sometimes the wind would deposit soft petals right onto his windowsill. To tell the truth, he'd bought the house because of that cherry blossom.

Right now though, the bathroom window was closed and the freezing January chill still permeated the air. Win was dressing quickly, his fingers stumbling over the buttons of a white shirt. In the mirror, he could see his tie hanging on the railing over the bath, and he was praying, just praying that he hadn't forgotten how to tie the damn thing during the Christmas break. He fastened the top button, rammed the shirt into his waistband, and grabbed the tie. He fumbled with it, had to restart a couple of times, then eventually won the battle and felt it tighten around his neck. He checked the taps were off, brushed his hair with his hands, and then bounded down the stairs.

The door slammed closed behind him and he pressed on the handle for a second, then turned. Before him was his car - a battered, white, seventeen-year-old Mitsubishi Colt. Beyond it was the cherry blossom, barren. An idea fluttered into his mind and, without thinking too much about it, he passed his car, leapt over the wall, and stood beneath the tree. He looked up through the bare branches to the dark sky above and shivered. Then, he pulled his phone from his pocket, snapped a picture of himself, the tree perfectly angled in the background, and leapt back over the wall. Sixty seconds later, he was trundling down the street on his way to work. He had fourteen minutes to get there. He was praying that, given that it was January 2, the traffic wouldn't be too bad.

From the very next morning, Win started to set his alarm five minutes earlier to allow enough time for his daily picture with the tree. He found, strangely, that it made him want to get out of bed far more than anything else. That was, until he met his girlfriend, Amy, a friend of a friend. On March 20, the day of their fourth date, they'd made it official. Today, she'd agreed to come to his at eleven o'clock. He'd set his alarm to half past eight. He had to be ready.

He dressed in the bathroom. A few petals from the cherry blossom tumbled through the open window. Spring was shimmering outside. He could feel it in the way the air drifted. No doubt torrential rain and powerful winds would be coming sometime in May, but for now, all was right with the world. He'd opted for a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans. Smart casual. Amy always said she liked how smartly he dressed.

She knocked on the door at dead-on eleven, and Win greeted her with a quick peck on the cheek in view of the street. Then she came into his home for the first time, taking everything in: the sofa, covered with a deep blue blanket; the mantelpiece, empty of family photos, and instead slightly overcrowded with ornaments, mostly with a nature theme; the bookcase over by the far wall, with its books all alphabetised by author surname, each author's works ordered according to their original release date. She sat down on the edge sofa, her legs tightly pressed together. Win headed into the kitchen to pack the picnic: egg mayonnaise sandwiches (her favourite), natural yoghurt, and orange juice. He liked to avoid alcohol until he was a few months into a relationship.

'You ready?' he asked, coming back into the living room with the picnic bag in his hand. She beamed and stood up swiftly. They left the house and, despite the fact they were only eating the food a few feet away, he pressed down on the door handle for a little while. Then he took a blanket from the boot of his car and they clambered over

the wall, settling under the cherry blossom's burgeoning pink cloud, sheltered from a sun that felt much too warm for late April.

'This is one of my favourite spots in the whole world,' he said, unpacking the lunch and placing it on the blanket.

She cocked her head, 'Really? It's so close to home.'

He beamed at her, 'I love my home.'

'There are so many places in the world though, Win.'

'Look up,' he said. She complied. 'It's like a canopy,' he continued, 'look how the flowers, so heavy, face away from the sun, face the earth, hanging there. Notice how they seem to almost tessellate and become a complete whole?'

'It's a very beautiful tree,' she said, still looking up. Her auburn hair was cascading in a sheet down her back and he found himself, for a moment, more transfixed by it than he was by the blooms.

'Look around the park,' he said, and she complied again. 'See how the other blossoms have almost gone away already? But this one is still in full bloom. Notice how some buds are yet to open. It hasn't reached its peak.'

She glanced around, 'That's fascinating,' she said.

He passed her a sandwich, and she unwrapped it and took a small bite. He maintained some self-control and didn't wolf his own sandwich down. He wanted the moment to last, after all.

They kissed for the first time under the tree. She'd always seemed nervous and he wasn't interested in being pushy, but it just seemed to happen there. Perhaps it was the scent of the flowers dowsing them, making them drunk on beauty and fascination with the minutiae of the world.

Before they left, he snapped a quick picture with the tree, trying his hardest to keep the angle the same. He was beaming in this

picture—if he was remembering correctly, this was the first one he’d smiled in. She wanted to be in the picture, but this one was his and his alone, so he had to take it fast. Then he took a few with her, too.

Other than for the daily photograph, Win didn’t spend any considerable length of time under the tree once the bloom had gone. A few of the petals, now browning at their edges, had filtered into his bathroom. The late-May rain had beaten the rest to the ground, where they rotted away and dissipated. One day, the few that had still been clinging on were torn away by a storm.

One day in late July, Win headed over the road to grab a pack of lagers. The heat was tangible, shifting like ghosts all around him. His old friend Joe was coming round, a former colleague. They were planning on having a little barbecue under the shade of the tree, necking a few beers, talking about everything and nothing. Win was excited for it. He needed the distraction.

Joe arrived half an hour later, just as Win had expected. He had the barbecue set up by the time he got there, and the coals were pumping out a ludicrous amount of smoke. He had snapped his picture before the smoke started billowing, but the barbecue was in the background, on the periphery, a minuscule change in the scene. Joe took a beer for himself from the ice box, then tossed one to Win. Win caught the can, then raised his eyebrows.

‘That’ll make a mess when you open it,’ Joe said, smirking.

Win did it anyway, putting his mouth over the opening to slurp up the froth as it overflowed.

‘How you doing?’ Joe asked. He sat himself down at the base of the tree, leaning against the trunk. The light wind, in no way cooling, was carrying the smoke in the opposite direction, across the football field, deeper into the park. Win settled beside him.

‘Not bad,’ Win said.

‘Did she give a reason?’

‘Only that I’m a lovely man, but not what she’s looking for.’

Joe shrugged and took a swig from his can of Cruzcampo.

‘Never had this,’ he said, turning the can in his hands, ‘tastes good.’ He took another swig, savoured it. ‘At the end of the day, man, she’s every right to make the choice that’s best for her. You had a good few months, grew as a person, now you take the heartbreak and move on.’

Win gazed off in the direction the smoke was blowing, ‘I really liked her.’

‘And I really liked cocaine when I was seventeen. Didn’t mean it was right. Doing it casually for a few months was enough.’

Win snorted, ‘Awful analogy.’

‘I’m right, though.’

‘I suppose you are.’

After another swig, Joe asked, ‘What we got for the barbecue?’

‘Burgers and sausages. Figured I’d be wasting my time making a side salad for you.’

Joe adjusted himself, having slipped a little down the trunk of the tree, ‘I’ll eat leaves the day I metamorphose and wake up as a rabbit.’

‘Rabbits can’t eat lettuce.’

‘What?’

‘The only leaf in my salad would be iceberg lettuce. Which rabbits can’t eat.’ Win took a swig, ‘Wow, this does taste good, actually. My dad said it was nice.’

‘Have you ever considered not being such a contrarian, Winfred?’

Win looked up into the tree. The leaves, lush and green and big and heavy, covered the whole sky. Nothing suggested that, just a few months ago, this tree had borne the most fragile and beautiful flower.

‘Get the meat on,’ Joe said. ‘The smoke’s dying back.’

Win stood, placed his can on the grass, and produced his house key from his pocket.

Joe drained his can, ‘And pass me another, would you?’

‘Christ,’ Win said, ‘make it last. I don’t want to have to go back to Tesco.’

‘Ten pack?’ Joe said, ‘It’ll do us for an hour or so.’

As soon as August hit, the summer pretty much disappeared, except for one or two days dotted here and there where the sun drenched the grass and trees, and the delighted shrieks of playing children filled the air. Win went to the coast for a long weekend, but mostly worked. Returning home at the same time each day, he noticed the nights drawing in, the image of the cherry blossom at the top of the road turning darker and darker until, by mid-October, it was just a spectre illuminated by the dim LED streetlights, slowly shedding its golden form. Then the clocks went back, and it was already night-time when he killed the engine of the Colt outside his house and gazed forward at the shadowed tree. Its branches were contorted like broken bones—or so it seemed in the darkness. These days, his photographs, taken before work, were dark, shadowed, haunting. Just as they had been when he first started them.

In November, he noticed the ends of his fingers growing numb as he fastened the buttons of his shirt. He closed the bathroom window. That was it, then, until late February. If he was lucky.

By December, when he locked his door and pressed down on the handle, he had to be cautious of ice on the path and on the slab of stone that functioned as a step into his house. He had to be more careful vaulting the wall, too. And the grass and fallen leaves had started to crunch underfoot. He got to watch the tree emerge through his windscreen as the ice defrosted, though, which he enjoyed, even if the branches appeared entirely lifeless. Nothing about their angular form suggested the buds that would bloom in a few months' time.

Five days before Christmas, he awoke to his usual alarm to find a WhatsApp from his boss telling him not to bother coming in. Everyone else was snowed in, so there was little point in him being in the office. Those who could work from home were asked to, and those who couldn't were given the day off. He acknowledged the message and, for a little while, drifted back to sleep. Then, as though an electric shock had coursed through him, he clambered out of the piles of sheets and blankets and peeked through the blinds.

The bough of the cherry blossom bore four, maybe five inches of snow. The ground was perceptibly higher. A shiver of glee ran through Win and, before he'd processed it, he was standing beside his bed in the freezing air and pulling on whatever clothes he could find. Once dressed, he went hunting for his thick gloves—not his driving ones, but the ones his mother had bought him for his trip to Iceland two years ago. He found them at the back of the bottom drawer of his cabinet. Then he dashed downstairs, excavated his thickest coat from underneath all his jackets and hoodies, and pulled his walking boots from the back and bottom of the shoe rack. Kitted out, he unlocked the door and stepped out into the snow, sank into it, became one with it. It gave under him with a sinking softness.

He locked his door, pressed on the freezing handle, and then padded through the snow. It had been entirely untouched from the top to the bottom of the street until his boot prints left their impressions

on it. But it was still coming down, just a thin dusting for now, but enough in time to wash away all imprints of him. The motherload had been dropped in the night. He stopped at the wall, turned back to look at his prints, and then launched himself over it and into the park. All the snow that had sat atop the bricks tumbled with him.

He trudged now, the snow sinking beneath him, to stand under the tree. He looked up. Every single branch, right down to the tiniest ones, was covered with snow. The sun had risen, if only a little, and sunlight moved sideways in shafts that flickered off the white. Win watched it for a while, then turned to take in the empty park. Some other compulsion overcame him and he reached down, made a snowball in his hands, then rolled it across the field. It had grown to a diameter of around three feet by the time he brought it to rest against the trunk of the cherry blossom, facing toward the buried football field. He began rolling another, smaller ball—the head. He heaved it back to the tree, placed it atop the body, and got to work on the face. There was no hope of finding any stones for its eyes and mouth, so he pushed his thumbs into the snow to make eyeholes, then scratched a smile across its face. He stood back, admired his handiwork and then, taking his usual position, put his glove between his teeth and took a snap of himself, the snow-coated tree, and the armless, smiling snowman standing in the very spot where, earlier that year, his love had kissed him and his best friend had consoled him.

Christmas and the New Year went by in a blur, and Win soon found himself putting on his shirt, working up those buttons, and tying that tie in the bathroom mirror again. He'd mastered it over the past twelve months. Perhaps it was all that smart attire Amy had loved so much.

He wasn't running late, for once, and stepped out of his house whistling a tune. He pressed down the door handle, then turned and faced his car and the tree. He stepped forward, intent on taking

another photograph, then realised he had one for every day of the year already. He got into his car, turned on the engine, and started on his way to work, making a mental note to send all the photographs off to be printed—with an explicit instruction that they must be dated. After all, he wanted to see them in order, a year of his life laid out before him. Though it worried him, as he sat at a red light tapping his steering wheel, that the first picture and the last would look almost identical, as if nothing had changed.

Then the light turned green, and he drove on.

*

Songbird

Tom Sewell

It was a cold August evening when I last saw Sera, the first sign of autumn on the horizon. Rain lashed the windows of The Hope and Anchor, punctuating our every sentence when we couldn't find the words to finish. She wore a plain white dress in what I thought was a cruel joke at my expense. The inn was dark, boarded up and abandoned: without her as a headlining act, the place had quickly fallen to ruin—a cocoon she outgrew on her path to stardom. She had outgrown me too, and I hadn't seen her in years. I heard her most weeks, however, on the radio. Every Thursday night at nine o'clock, Sera dedicated a song or two to the brave British troops fighting for our freedom out there. I wasn't fighting or brave (not since a stray bullet knocked the life out of my left leg on the way out of Dunkirk), but I still tuned in. Her voice was hard to resist, that was for sure. She seemed to awaken something in you that you couldn't remember having: a spirit within you; some fleeting sense of hope. For some soldiers, it was the only thing that kept them alive.

Sera Songbird, we called her—if only because she never gave us a last name. And here I was hoping I'd give her mine one day. I don't think I'm a bad looking lad myself, besides a crooked nose I got on a school trip to Versailles (those yellowbellies pack a punch). But there was something about Sera—no one could put their finger on it, though many tried.

'It's gotta be her eyes'—firstly, no one could agree on the colour of her eyes. Ocean-blue, country-green, coffee-brown, we heard 'em all. Truth be told, even when I was face-to-face with her, I couldn't tell you. Maybe it was the ale, but she never looked the same twice—she seemed to flicker under the halo of the pub's amber light. But you could always tell it was her, something in the way she smiled, I think—otherworldly. I felt it the first time I saw her, with the Packford college boys—most of who are now scattered in Normandy, limbs a mile apart—she stood tall and proud on that cruddy little stage like

a lighthouse, each of us desperate for a look. No one knew where she came from, but no one ever asked—we were just glad to see her day after day. I was sixteen then, and The Hope and Anchor was still the crown jewel of our town—where schoolboys and men laughed together, singing till they turned tomato-red. The dark oak floor was marked with cigarette ash and dog piss, and the walls stained a certain mustard-green over the years, but we didn't care. It was home—there was always a seat and there was always a glass waiting for you. That was enough for us.

The weightlessness of those days was long gone now, and reality had begun to sink into the walls like mould. Dust grew into the carpet and over chairs like wildflowers, and the few oak tables left became lonely relics of a past almost forgotten. It had only been three—maybe four years, but it felt like decades. Sera felt it too, I could tell. Still, she was as beautiful as the day I lost her.

'Hey Danny, long time no see.'

Those words seemed to conjure a hurricane of emotions within me. To hear her without the crackle of radio separating us—to feel young, naïve again, when we could be young and naïve together. I turned towards her, pivoting on my cane to face her.

'You could say that,' I muttered, 'I don't suppose you've invited me to hear out my offer?'

Her lips curdled at the words as she tried to hold back tears. She started to say something but stopped herself. She looked up as she spoke, refusing to meet my stare.

'I loved you, Danny. But I'll tell you the same thing I told you four years ago—I can't marry you, any of you. My father forbids it.'

She spoke like a stranger, or better yet a teacher: as if she knew something I—we - didn't. No matter how hard I tried she'd never let me inside. There was something unnatural about her, but it never

turned me away.

‘Your father, I’ve heard it before. Run away with me, Sera! We can move to Paris like we always said we would. They say the war’s almost over—everything we always wanted could be ours.’ The words left me before I could keep a hold of them. She blushed but skipped right past them.

‘I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a little while now. I need to go, I’m finished here.’

Her tone of voice scared me—I’d never heard her talk like that.

‘What do you mean *finished*? Is someone after you?’

‘Something like that, just promise me you won’t forget me, Danny?’

‘Now don’t start talking nonsense to me, Sera. I won’t have it.’

‘I’m serious, Dan. I need you to look at me, really look hard. Remember me, because when I’m gone—that image is all that’ll be left of me.’

Without even taking a step, she flew into my arms, knocking the cane out of my hand, almost sending me flying. I held her as hard as I could, as if I was the only thing holding her together and the moment I let go, she’d collapse into dust. Dust layered over dust like pages in a book. If we held each other any longer than we did, I thought—hoped even - that we’d become part of the building, sinking into the floorboards like quicksand, immortalised, memorialised in the cellar, a cask for a coffin. After what felt like an eternity, she pulled herself away, but not before giving me one last, delicate kiss on the lips, if only for a moment. I saw her now and still couldn’t tell the colour of her eyes, no matter how hard I tried to commit the image to memory.

She walked backwards, never breaking my gaze—a kindness I think, giving me one last chance to remember her as she was. I refused

to look away from her, but in the corners of my vision, The Hope and Anchor seemed to come to life once more as it was all those years ago. A faint glow surrounded her, and I could've sworn I heard the laughter of my old classmates behind me, in that tiny nook we claimed as our own for so many years. The tobacco air drifted across the room and tickled me one last time. She reached the door on the other side of the hall, shined me a last ivory smile, and left. I found myself in this moment incapable of moving, but the moment she left, the spell had broken. I raced after her, to the door on the other side of the room. I practically ripped the door open but faced only the rain battering an empty alleyway. She was gone. As I turned back around, the past receded from sight, the smoky air drifted away from me, and I was once more in the present, alone.

I picked up the cane on the floor, took one last look around, and left through the front door. As I left the old inn, braving the storm outside, I walked the long way back, for no other reason than I couldn't bear to be at home by myself just yet. As the storm bore on—raining harder and harder still—I sped up, gradually building to a light jog. With every step, I felt myself grow stronger in the rain, even as I tried to escape it. My cane became a phantom limb just outside of my senses—I could feel it in my palm, and I could almost hear it scrape the ground, but I didn't use it once. I didn't need it. By the time the rain stopped, I was sprinting down my street. It was only as I reached my front door that I realised I hadn't been able to run like that since I was ten years old.

The war ended but a week later. Streets grew into wild riots of ecstasy to the soothing sounds of Sera Songbird, even if she wasn't there to share in the celebrations. The soldiers came home, the blackouts came to an end, peace came to Europe. People don't believe me when I tell them the story: everyone remembers Vera Lynn and 'We'll Meet Again', but as the years went by, Sera faded

from memory like an old sailor's tattoo. Her records are increasingly becoming a collector's item—none of them with the sleeve intact, her image seemingly scoured from reality. To my knowledge, there are no surviving photographs of her. But I wouldn't need them anyhow. Every time I close my eyes, I can see her looking as angelic as that night in The Hope and Anchor. The details seem to shift and change, just as they did in life: the length of her hair fluctuates, and I never get the eye colour exactly right, but when I see her smile, I always know it's her.

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Herdwick Sheep

Ben Dews

The first two came out fine. Number one covered in blood, number two covered in shit and blood, but that was no different to the rest of us. A fitting way to come into the world. But the third brought complications. The autumnal winds blew back the fringe of Dad's greying hair to reveal his creased brow; 'the legs are facing backwards, both,' he said. It wouldn't have normally been a problem, he had seen lambs and their mothers die before. He had many a time told me, that when he was just a boy, his father had made him put down injured animals when hopeless situations arose. But this was different. Things had changed.

I looked on helplessly, blowing flailing strands of long auburn hair from my face to briefly catch the insignificant tragedy. I gathered what he was doing from my own experiences in this matter, everything correctly, no one's fault, yet these things happen. He jolted his arm forward to give him space to unfold the legs, blood gushed from Dolly, her bleats became weaker and were subdued into silence by the relentless winds of the hilltop. The blood gushed. The wind blew. Time did not stop. At last, a corpse was pulled out of another and flung to wet soil, its head buried in the earth. A gullet clogged with mud was the closest it would get to breathing in air. Two Herdwick lambs alive and motherless. The other, fortunate to have died with her.

'What happens to the other two,' I said to Dad who remained in the same kneeled position from which he had tried to save Dolly. There was no response, though that was something I had become accustomed to in recent years. I mentally framed the scene, inspiration for my painting had been so sparse of late I couldn't help but note it. He was perfectly aligned and central; his shadow had been imprinted onto the soil by the slim streak of evening sunlight that eluded the two moss-covered mountain ranges that secluded our farm from the rest of the Lake District. He had taken his flat cap off and held it dangling at his side, his head tipped toward the dead animal that had its

surviving children beside it, writhing in their filthy coats of fluids and mud. ‘Dad? The other two,’ I said again, louder this time as to pierce through the wind. He looked up from the scene, his wrinkled face and tired hazel eyes regressed back into youth when he caught my gaze; he stood up, wiped the dirt from his knees and assumed the authoritative manner with which he normally carried himself when occupied with work.

He walked over to the survivors and checked them over, ‘They’ll need some looking after, pick that one up and we’ll bring them inside the barn,’ I did as I was told, and we headed over. He went back into one of his silences and resumed the forlorn look he had beside the dead animal.

‘So, I started a new painting the other day.’

‘You did?’

‘Yeah, it’s a big one, won’t be done for some time. But it’s of the hills up by Alfie’s house.’ There was silence.

‘Y’know the one with the stream that runs straight through to the village... You go through that snicket, the one the tourists haven’t found yet... Dad, are you listening to me?’

‘What? Oh sorry, sounds great Lydia. You’ll have to show me once it’s done.’

‘Jesus. I’d have an easier time getting a conversation out of Dolly over there.’ He shot me a look that said too soon. In hindsight, perhaps five minutes later was too soon, but we’d always joked about that sort of thing. Farm matters were always Mum’s domain, it had been in her family for God knows how long and was something we never took too seriously to her discomfort. Dad had also grown up nearby on a farm; it had done nothing but instil a wanderlust into him rather than a passion for animals. If Mum had agreed to it, we would’ve been long gone.

The battering of the winds stopped as we were shielded by the aged barn. Like the farmhouse, it was a structure long-standing before my parents, their grandparents, and even theirs. It was held up by coarse stones, mostly white though the paint was peeling and those nearest the ground were submerged by mud, its roof tiles overlapped one another and jutted out in places, dislodged by the wind to create the constant tapping of brick on brick once you were inside. I opened the door; a warm yellow light bathed over us from the impractical, intricately designed lights that hung from the stone framework. It wasn't a place we used often, other than for emergencies of this kind, there was no livestock to be kept in there, it had decayed too much for that. Most of the time, it stood solemnly watching over us; a mangled mess of years of different architectural styles and technologies that refused to leave the grounds.

'Put him down in the corner. And bring me the feeding tube. It should be in the drawer,' Dad told me as he repurposed discarded hay into bedding for the lambs, and a seat for himself. I walked over to the drawers; the tapping of the roof followed me, but so did another sound, one I hadn't heard for some time. It was low and gruff, executed too poorly to strike a chord with a stranger but flawed enough for sentimental perfection. There was a tune, too quiet to make out the lyrics, though one that had laid dormant in the memories of my once infant mind somewhere. It was a nursery rhyme I had heard before, that I could be sure of... Though, who was singing I couldn't be. It was something we didn't do anymore. Although, it was just the two of us here. The tune became fragmented, as if an ethereal hand had clamped its fingers round my father's vocal cords shifting the notes from high to low in random succession.

'Lydia! Quickly!'

The singing stopped with that. The tapping of the roof quickened, I grabbed the tube from the drawer and sprinted back

with it in hand. And there was my father in a familiar scene, head in his hands, bearing over another corpse. There was just one left alive now. All alone in the world. I had never seen the farm draw so much as a tear from my Dad, and there was more news for him to deal with. I thought it best to withhold it for now, I didn't want it construed as another bad joke.

'Poor thing,' Dad said as he got up and took the tube from me.

'Perhaps better off than the rest of us though. An easier life than most, isn't that what we've always said.'

'I'm not talking about that one... I mean what are the bloody odds? When was the last time we've seen any of them have twins, let alone triplets? An hour ago... Well, it had a better chance than most.' He placed the corpse on the ground and covered it in the hay, which had been its bedding mere moments ago. Finally, he strode past it as if it were already forgotten. We had done that sometimes, cruel as it may sound, the Herdwicks roamed the lands freely after all, there were no physical boundaries for over the generations they had taught themselves where they could and could not go. For the most part that saved us a lot of time, their mothers did all the work, but it had meant in our recent complacency, that a corpse would be reclaimed by the soil before it was by us. Yet covered as it was by hay, that body lay on stone.

'Do you need any help Dad?'

'No. You should get back home, it's dark out. Get some sleep. Try to at least. I'll deal with all this.'

'Are you sure? I could—'

'Lydia, get some sleep please. There's no reason for you to look as tired as me.'

'There's plenty.' I knelt opposite him and went for the feeding tube. Gently he placed his hand over mine and stopped me, brushed

my wild and wind-battered hair from my face and looked at me once more. He gave the saddest smile I had ever seen which smoothed the wrinkles from his forehead and made him look so young. But when his hardened hands touched my cheek with a long-evaded frailty, I couldn't be deceived.

'Please Lydia, I need to know you've slept tonight. Let me look after you for once.'

I sighed in resignation. 'Call me if you need anything.' The winds threw themselves against the door as I moved toward the exit and howled like spurned spirits forcing their way in. I opened the door and left them with my father.

I walked up the well-trodden driveway back home. The farmhouse must've been built at a similar time to the barn for its design was largely the same. Though, with its constant occupation it had been kept in good standard. I walked up the gravel path and past the half-filled skip, which had become as much of a feature of the home as the heavy white stones with which it was built. Oddly enough, it was when I went inside I noticed how cold it was. Outside there was no respite from the wind, it's hard to take much notice of something when it's all you know. But here, as I took off my jacket a draught nudged its way past my exposed arms. With a slight stumble on the unfinished panelled flooring, I shut the door of the unused nursery and the draught stopped.

The letter was still on the kitchen island as I had left it. A full scholarship and admission letter to the University of the Arts London. In truth, I had forgotten about my application completely, the first rejection after I left sixth form had deterred any hope I had, and with the rest of my world ending it was easy to forget there was a galaxy beyond it. Perhaps it was cliché and naive to go to London, but it seemed to me clichés must come about for a reason, so I'd go see them first and that would be justification for any disillusionment I might

gain along the way. All that really mattered was that it was far away from here. I straightened out the letter and held it over the sink to let the moonlight reveal the words. In my hands was a route out and in my throat, a lump. I could just about see the barn in the distance, and with that I could imagine my father singing alone. This was not a route out but an ode to selfishness. I went to my room, put it safely back in the bedside drawer and tried to forget about it. I lay on my bed staring at the ceiling beam with my initials carved into it. I lay like that for hours, perhaps somewhere along the way I got some sleep, if I did it wasn't long enough to remember. The sun maliciously forced itself into the room and told me it was time to endure another day.

The days to follow were not of much note. Just the usual stuff like burying dead sheep. We had failed to imprint the newly dubbed Dolly Two to an adoptive mother and had to care for her ourselves. At the least it kept us occupied; Dad's stoicism returned, and we both spoke as if all was right with the world whilst unable to make eye contact. Tonight, we even put on theatrics for one another.

It was a rare occasion; we both finished our work with the sun still up and taunting us. Unable to withstand the hours of spare time, I had returned to my room to stare at the ceiling beam. It was a fascinating spectacle, my room hadn't been decorated since I was a child; the walls were an irritatingly bright pink with torn unframed posters strewn across them, depicting bands I no longer had any desire to listen to nor look at. There was even a bay window ahead of me should I wish to complete my wistful demeanour. But in spite of all that, I was drawn to a splintered ceiling beam. After some time, the words 'you're wasting your life' and the image of that beam became intertwined, and I forced myself up to do anything at all.

I found Dad in a similar scenario, sprawled out across the sofa in the living room flicking through channels at such a pace I wondered if it was a game he was playing.

‘Nothing on?’

‘There’s plenty on. It’s just all shit. Crime, crime, crime, soaps, soaps, soaps. Maybe we’re the only two people in the world who hate this stuff. Someone must be watching for them to keep putting the crap on.’ We both gave a stunted exhale in the place of a laugh which brought Dad upright. ‘Show me the painting you were talking about; I haven’t seen your stuff for ages.’

‘It’s half-finished though. It won’t be done for some time.’

‘That’s halfway further than I would’ve gotten… Bring them down, you used to always show me them. They’re all more talented than anything on the telly. How about the one of London, I liked that one.’ He smiled warmly in expectation, and I knew it would be a futile endeavour to tell him no. It took multiple trips, but I retrieved each of my paintings from my room and brought them downstairs to him.

‘Now, don’t tell me how good these first ones are. Because they’re not, or at least I hope I’ve gotten slightly better over the years.’ The first was the same landscape that I was currently reimagining, I held it in-between us and wished that the canvas would consume me. Not because I had captured the endless hills and deep lakes of our home so well they had gripped me into some undeserved Stendhal syndrome, but because they were the paintings of someone else. I passed the others over to Dad one by one; softly he caressed the brushstrokes of the bright landscapes I had created as if they were some deformed pictures of Eden. He placed them carefully upright by Mum’s leather armchair and encouragingly desired the next. On certain ones he shook my arm in disbelief of how I thought they were no good, the Paris skyline, the vineyards of Italy, the crowded New York rush hour, each a place we had vowed to go to see and each I had hoped to capture from our joint idealistic imaginations. At last, he had reached my recent works. My unfinished work.

His eyes traced each stroke intensely, they swerved slowly from left to right following the thick black paint I had used to reimagine my old vibrant landscape. His shifting pupils brought his whole head down with them as he briefly stared at the floor as if the paint had streamed off the canvas and into the floorboards. The strokes were sharp and jagged, cross-hatched so finely there was no room for any light to break through. The lakes were still, the flora dead, and the hills blocked by mountains that had become the cells to any homes within. I sat there and saw the colour drawn from my paintings year by year and the colour drawn from my father as he viewed the dissent.

‘You’ve got really good at this Lydia.’ He said to break the silence. ‘Maybe you should do something with it. I’m sure with how much better you’ve gotten they’d accept you now.’ I ground my teeth to the gums in an attempt to conceal the news a bit longer. Yet, I knew there would be no better opportunity than this.

‘Dad, I’ve got... There’s something I need to show you.’

I retrieved the letter and observed him with my foot tapping erratically. He traced over the words once, then again, and again. ‘This is... it’s...’ he stuttered trying to retain an air of vacancy. ‘Well done. I’m so proud.’ He quickly got up to hug me and adopted the smile of a funeral goer greeting his guests. Somehow congratulations was the last thing I wanted. Somehow it was the worst response he could’ve given me.

‘This is for September?’

‘Yes’

‘This September? That’s a month. When are you going? Where’s your accommodation?’ I shuffled in my chair and hoped my mind would find some words which would make any of this easier. Instead, I thought of no words at all.

‘I can’t.’

He began to try and suppress a quiver from the bottom of his throat. ‘You can’t? You have to. You must.’

‘I can’t’. I said again.

‘But, I don’t understand. You’ve wanted this for, god knows how long now. We’ve wanted you to get this.’ The draught blew in from the nursery. At that point his eyes became too hard to focus on and I chose to search for my paintings on the floor as well. ‘What? Because of me?’ I shrugged at him like I used to as a sullen girl. ‘Lydia, I’m fine, the farm keeps me occupied. And you won’t be gone forever after all.’

‘I’ll be gone long enough for you to notice.’

‘And what? You’ll be back. I’m no cripple y’know? I can rely on myself, I’ve been doing it before you were born.’

‘And everytime I do. Everytime I come back. That’s just another time I’ll have to leave again.’

‘I’ll be fi—’

‘You can’t even get rid of the nursery.’ He rested his head on his knuckles in contemplation and raised it as if to give me a lecture. But all he could manage were a few strained breaths.

‘I’ll keep myself occupied.’

‘And that’s the same thing?’

‘What would you have me do? I want you to go. I want nothing more than you to be happy.’

‘And I want you to leave. Like you’ve always wanted to, like we’ve always wanted to.’

‘I’m too old to start again. And I’ve certainly no desire to.’

‘You’ve no desire for anything anymore, that’s the problem. This is the only option, you’re too old to dither.’

‘She’d be ashamed if I abandoned this place.’

‘She’d be miserable to see you stay.’

‘And I’m not, to see you stay for me?’ He said with a quick thrust of his arm that beckoned towards my unfinished work.

‘I can’t go.’ With that, I stood up and took my unfinished painting. I had no need for the others anymore, they belonged with him.

For a time we went back to our respective ways of willing the sunlight away into darkness; he drank and watched telly, and I continued my paintings and wall watching. If only there was enough alcohol, then I could’ve taken up his hobby too and become a real artist.

In the daytime we taught Dolly Two the lay of the land. In the sunlight she was a different animal to the fluid-covered orphan from a few weeks ago. Her black pelt merged seamlessly with the rocks that jutted out of the mountainside. She looked at home within the lands and disobeyed us regularly. One day, at the turn of the month, as the only words in my letter that seemed to make sense were ‘what’ and ‘if’, she began to roam well beyond her boundaries. Often we found her in other farmers’ fields, and on the roads which would lead me out of this place.

‘She’s gone again’, Dad said on Sunday evening. ‘Go get her would you? I need some rest, I’m near keeling over. She’ll come for you, she likes you and you’re gonna be looking after her for some time yet anyways.’ I rolled my eyes and strode past him up the hilltop. ‘Go to the peak!’ he shouted ‘you’ll be able to see her from there. Did you hear that?’

‘Yes. I’ll be fine, go home Dad!’ I screamed back, never turning to face him.

The walk was no trouble, I knew every outcrop of rock and blade of grass for miles around, it had become no different to walking on tarmac except I had a lower chance of being hit by a car up here.

I knew this peak particularly well, here I had stepped into the centre of my painting. A wanderer above the mist on a clear day. It was a damned thing, to be at the top of it all, the English countryside closing in on me at every turn of the compass. I knew it was beautiful, the sort of thing foreigners dream about when the thought of England arose, I knew it should've been beautiful at least. But here, with the expanse of England at my mercy, I felt the island throttle me, the wind nearly choking me to tears. All these years I felt I could have walked in any direction, but it seems freedom paralysed me. It seemed outside the art, there was no such thing.

I had seen Dolly through the tears that welled in my eyes. She was a child, stood alone in the far distance with no intention of realising the sea would eventually halt her travels. I watched her walk on amongst two rock faces and out of sight. I had no intention of retrieving her. I thought of my dad, how he would be back home by now alone and 'fine'. 'He will be fine. He must be.'

Things were different, things had changed. For the first time in a long while the three of us were divided, out of one another's eyeline for a glorious moment. Able to mourn our freedom.

She would be back. Eventually she would.

She was going to be fine on her own. We were all going to be just fine. There was no alternative.

When the day arrived, there seemed to be no more we could say to one another. We said the usual goodbyes and he walked with Dolly to the roadside so he could see me off. I stood in the cold September air with my hair lashing round my face once more. For a short while I didn't feel foolish for painting these lands in colour. From the bus window I smiled at my father, a figure as hardened as the hills he stood on, he smiled back with his youthful eyes and let Dolly go on without him.

*

Wax and Wane

M. E. G.

URGENT!

Wanted: A private tutor for a ten-year-old boy in Thornton, near Bradford, England. You must be comfortable moving in with the family, as part of the household staff. You must hold the appropriate further education qualifications in English, Maths, and Science. You must have a particularly keen interest in Biology, and you should have pursued this at postgraduate level, or in employment. Previous experience in tutoring is desirable, although not required.

The moon was the sharpest it had been in some time last night. I had felt it ascending like a lover to bed all afternoon. This evening, sitting down to supper with Alfie, I almost drool over the ribeye. Like an ordinary animal. Like a mutt. I make a note to remind the chef that I prefer it medium-rare, not well-done. The staff see Alfie off to bed as I lick the plate clean. What would Mother say if she could see me now?

I always make a half-attempt to resist the change. It is unbecoming, but, in the end, what is the use? One cannot help these things. It is in our nature, like it is in prey's blood to run. As is usual at this time of the month, I decide to take a short stroll around the grounds, feeling the late-summer air tear at my skin. It always happens before the moon has fully risen.

The change is dreadfully uncomfortable. It starts with a rising unease in my core, followed by the incessant need to itch. I become suddenly dizzy before I can satisfy it, rising a few feet higher than my usual gait. I feel famished, so much so that all I can do is call out to the moon, that familiar celestial body, before racing towards the closest stink of food. Of meat. Of blood.

After that, the time wanes away like it does when one is playing a game of solitaire. The next face I see is the one I see every morning. It is Graham. He has come to tell me that breakfast is served at my

convenience. He assists me into my gown, which he has neatly folded across his forearm, and into the Hall.

‘The moon was uncommonly sharp last night, ma’am,’ he says as I take my seat at the head of the table.

‘The night escaped me, Graham,’ I reply hoarsely. I can taste copper, or some other base metal, in my mouth.

Graham tells me that Alfie had his breakfast in his private quarters. The sooner the help arrives, the better, I think, as Graham pours me a large glass of fresh orange juice. The eggs are runnier than I like them to be, so I leave them this morning, with another note to the chef, before retiring to bed. Mother always suffered migraines, too, and I feel one coming on now as I close the drapes. I rinse my face in the rose water Graham has prepared for me. It soon muddies from the dirt I pry from my fingernails. My schedule has been cleared of social engagements, and I slip into the most delightful sleep. That is, until I am woken by a sharp knock at the front door of the house.

Dear Mr Ellis

We are delighted to offer you the position of Private Tutor to the young master of Thornton Hall. We were particularly impressed by your skills and prior experience, and believe you are just whom we have been seeking. You are requested to reply via the return address on this envelope at your earliest convenience.

The mistress of the estate has requested that you be furnished with more details of your charge, and of the nature of the position. The pupil is no longer able to attend public or private school, due to persistent bullying and gossip-mongering among his peers. You will be expected to work thirty-five hours per week. You are free to devote your spare time as you see fit. Visitors to the property are not permitted under any circumstances. The mistress’ steward must review any letters you receive or write. If you have any issues with the position, staff, or pupil, you must pass

them directly to him. The mistress of the house is frequently away on business and at social engagements, so you will be expected to plan, deliver, and review lessons independently. We hope these terms are agreeable to you, and we await your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Graham Poole, Steward of Thornton Hall

There was no possibility of a walk that day. Jamie held the acceptance letter for his position at Thornton Hall between his palms, sweat soaking into the paper, as he remembered his solitary journey all those years ago.

He had never received a letter of acceptance in the post before. His family had told him that it was strange. They had told him he was making a mistake, going to Thornton. The job was just too good to be true. Private tutor to some wealthy landowner's son. Not to mention that the Lady in question would almost never be around. Jamie didn't think twice. Plus, as he kept reminding his mother, they needed the money now that Father had died.

Jamie thought of his father for most of the journey up north. The last train journey he had ever taken had been with him, almost a decade previously, he remembered. He sat on the train, watching the fields lying flat like bodies beginning to undulate into hills and moors, feeling the scratches on his father's watch as it tick, tick, ticked in the almost-empty carriage. Summer had come late that year, Jamie remembered. It was almost September, and yet the sun beat down on the tracks without any hint of a breeze.

When he finally changed at Leeds, Jamie's shirt was soaked through. He could hardly believe he was in the same country he had

left his mother in a few hours before. Or was it days? Jamie could not remember. More changes at stations piled with litter than Jamie could count and a short but humid taxi ride (with a driver who may as well have been speaking a different language) later, and Jamie was pulling up to the gates of Thornton Hall. He knew that all the acres of dried, unkempt land they had driven over for the past quarter of an hour belonged to his new employer, Lady Chester.

Jamie couldn't recollect what he had imagined Thornton Hall would be like when he had set off from King's Cross earlier that day. The sheer size of the estate was enough to set his foot tapping. He heard his mother's voice in his head. *Stop that tapping. Remember to make eye contact.* Jamie had never been any good at that.

Dark grey spires stretched into the sky, blotting out the sun. Arched windows with stained glass lined every side of the rough stone. The indent of a thousand footsteps had hewn the steps leading up to the entrance into a smooth curve.

Jamie swept his shoulder-length blonde hair, thick with sweat, back over his forehead. He was uncomfortably aware that his shirt no longer fitted his frame; he felt as if his shoulders were about to tear the seams at any moment. Not to mention his shoes, which were in desperate need of shining.

Jamie paid his fare and grabbed his suitcase from the boot. He had assumed someone would come out to greet him. That is what happened at grand places like this, he had thought. At least, that's what he had read. He lingered longer than he should have, feeling the familiar marks on the face of his father's watch, before approaching and knocking on the door. His knock hardly registered through the thick wood. The door was much grander than the one back home, Jamie had thought. It was nearly twice his size, and looked as if, were it locked, an army under orders from Caesar could not pry it from its hinges. No one answered. After Jamie had knocked a third time,

he tried the handle, feeling the cool metal shift in his palm, and let himself inside.

The interior of Thornton Hall was like the inside of a cave. It took a moment for Jamie's eyes to adjust to the gloom. When they did, they were met with a cold stone entrance. The hairs on his arms rose at the change in temperature. Wooden plinths holding antique vases lined both sides, covered with more dust than there should have been, given how much Lady Chester had said she would pay Jamie.

'Hello?' Jamie's voice echoed up the staircase in the distance as he called. Streaks of sunlight sent a rainbow of colour onto the musty carpet. 'Is anybody there?'

Silence, save for the ticking of a grandfather clock paired with that of his father's watch, filled the room. Jamie coughed, feeling the dust fill his lungs.

'Hello? I'm here about the tutoring position. I'm—'

'Hello,' a voice whispered in Jamie's ear.

It belonged to a small man, folded in on himself with age. He was dressed in an immaculate suit, similar to the oversized clothes that Jamie's father had left his son in his will. The small man's voice never rose above a quiet mumble.

'Graham Poole,' he introduced himself. 'Steward of Thornton Hall. You must be Mr Ellis.'

'Yeah,' Jamie replied. He immediately cursed himself for his informality, hearing his mother's voice again. 'I mean, yes. Jamie is fine.'

'I trust your journey was not troublesome, Mr Ellis.'

'Well, you know what trains are like.'

'Your charge awaits you upstairs.'

'My... charge?'

‘The young master’

‘Oh! Yeah, I can... I can start now,’ Jamie stumbled. ‘After you.’

My dearest Mrs Elizabeth Chester,

We have recently been informed that you have returned to your estate in Thornton after your extended visit to France. We would be delighted if you and Master Alfie could attend our son’s thirteenth birthday party. It has been an age since we last corresponded, and I hope your stay in our beautiful county will be more permanent.

Yours faithfully,

Blanche Ingram

P.S. Do let me know how my dear godson is fairing. Bernard does so miss his company between lessons.

Mrs I scoff at the letter. The fools don’t even know that I’ve never been married, let alone that I am a Lady. Since I was rudely awakened, I have retired to my study, where Graham has started a fire in the grate. The perfect restorative after last night’s hysteria. Did the new hire not read my instructions? Possibly, he cannot read at all.

I sit by the fire now, pouring over my letters. This one is dated six months ago. I toss it into the flames and return to my favourite novel of Radcliffe’s. Adeline and her company are about to arrive at the abbey, when there is a knock at the door.

I ignore it. Graham knows I am not to be disturbed. There is another knock. I sigh in frustration, feeling my migraine returning.

‘Enter,’ I say.

A moment later, the door inches open, and Alfie steps in. By the light of the fire, he looks nothing like me. He is tanned from long afternoons in the grounds, and his face is soft. Too much like his father, I think, as he shuffles towards me. He certainly doesn't take after me. He has not even deemed it worth his effort to wear his tie today.

'Yes?' I enquire impatiently, looking down at my book but not reading.

'Jamie says we're done for today,' he responds in far too shrill a voice.

"Jamie?" I wince, squeezing the two syllables between my teeth.

'Mr Ellis, I mean,' Alfie corrects himself.

'I see. And what, precisely, has Mr Ellis been teaching you?'

'I don't know,' he replies, 'Just about the moon and the planets and stuff.'

I make a note to remind the new staff to keep to the approved curriculum, my eyes moving to the volumes of Wallace and Mendel which I always keep close to hand. There is no greater subject than biology, that is what Mother used to say. It is important that the boy learns of his nature before he matures.

'And why are you here?' I persist.

'Jami... I mean, Mr Ellis said I should ask you if I can go outside now.'

'You are free to play outside as you please, on the condition that you never stray from the estate.' Not that there is much chance of that, I think, unless the boy can run for miles.

Alfie doesn't say anything further to me as he runs out of the room. I hear his footsteps descend the stairs, and the front door slams shut. Why did I ever let Graham persuade me to allow more staff into the house?

I try to read again, but can't seem to distinguish my Pierres from my Peters. I decide to take a ride. Ringing for Graham, I tell him to prepare Pilot for the afternoon, and that I will return in time for supper. I don't utter a word to the groundsman as he grumbles a greeting. A Lady shouldn't let her temper show. Besides, for the life of me, I can never remember his name. He is one of the locals. I bound into the chestnut mare's saddle and set her into a trot over the hills as the rising moon wanes.

Dear Mr Jamie Ellis,

We thank you for responding to our acceptance so promptly. We look forward to welcoming you to Thornton Hall. Upon your arrival, you are requested to enter via the servants' door, so as not to disturb the mistress of the house, should she be present. The steward of the house will be there to meet you and show you to your charge. The cost of your journey shall be covered. You are requested to bring no more than is necessary.

Yours sincerely,

Graham Poole, Steward of Thornton Hall

Jamie held the damned paper in his hands like a lead block. There was still no possibility of a walk that afternoon, and he found his mind turning to days gone by as he sat watching the sun's dying light. After all these years, he had kept the paper pressed between the pages of his journal, as if it might somehow take flight like the swallow soaring south for the winter. He pressed his copy of *Bewick's Book of Birds* firmly down on top of it, just in case.

Jamie remembered watching the birds at Thornton Hall all those years ago. He had been at the Hall a fortnight before he met Lady Chester, his employer. Jamie hadn't spoken to anyone besides the steward and Alfie, whom he had immediately taken to, due to the boy's love of learning.

Jamie had yearned to be Alfie's age again. Long expeditions into the woods with his father during summers cooler than those which forced him to seek the gloom of the Hall. The feeling of security, that everything was as it should be. That everything was known.

Graham had reminded Jamie that Lady Chester wanted him to turn to biology with Alfie that day. Jamie thought that Evolution might be a good starting point for the boy. He tried to recall all he could about the theory, but it was no use without his books. What was worse, his room didn't seem to have any electricity at all. Upon arrival, Jamie had searched for a light switch, before realising that there were no lights to switch on. Instead, fresh candles sat in heavy silver holders on the desk, a box of matches beside them. He knew he would have to write to his mother again to get her to send another book to him.

That's how he found himself walking down the long moorland track towards Thornton most evenings during the week. Jamie had almost acclimatised to the heat, which surged towards him like a wave of fire as he stepped out of the Hall. He had grown used to the walk. He found it somewhat relaxing, even though he was still terrified of getting lost.

He was approaching one of the landmarks he always noted to track his pace—a small dip in the path beneath the fields—when he heard it. Distant at first, it was the sound of hooves approaching. As he scanned the horizon, though, Jamie couldn't see anything. He was in one of the lower parts of the grounds, and the noise was getting louder. Closer. Faster.

Jamie ducked as the largest horse he had never seen jumped over him. A few inches closer, and its hoof would have crushed his skull. His first thought, when he regained his breath, was that the animal had escaped from a nearby farm. It was undoubtedly more scared of him than he was of it. As he looked, however, he saw that, upon its back, sat a woman, desperately trying to regain control of the reins.

Despite her age—easily twice that of Jamie—she had considerable strength. Her long grey hair perched, windswept, on her scalp. She had not even bothered to tie it back. Her brows were furrowed with wrinkles. She wore new riding habits and looked down on Jamie from nearly twice his height.

‘Stand to one side,’ she commanded in a voice that echoed across the moors. ‘What are you doing here, stupid boy?’

Boy? Jamie thought. He imagined himself to be about half the woman’s age, but he was a far cry from being a boy, and felt the need to assert himself.

‘I was just going into town,’ he said with as much courage as he could muster. In truth, his mind was busy turning over how close to death he had been. What would his mother have done then, he thought?

‘Into town?’ the woman questioned. Jamie nodded. ‘Do you know whose land this is?’

‘Mrs Chester’s,’ he replied.

‘Lady,’ the woman corrected him. ‘Do you know Lady Chester?’

‘Yeah, well, I suppose you could say she’s my boss.’

‘Your boss?’ the woman spat.

‘Yeah, I’m a tutor. Jamie,’ he held out his hand, which she didn’t take. ‘I didn’t see you coming there. You almost took my—’

‘Be more careful next time,’ the woman interrupted before

gathering the reins and galloping away. Jamie could still hear hooves on the moors now, as he remembered the incident all these years later.

Graham,

Will you please remind the staff to exercise caution when wandering the estate? I almost took a poor creature's head off today. I trust everything is ready for the end of the month? It is already beginning to wax.

Elizabeth

I have just finished penning the note when my thoughts are interrupted by footsteps, my keen hearing noting the break in the comfortable silence of the Hall. After more than a fortnight confined to my room or roaming the moors, I can no longer bear the solitude. I had decided to answer my correspondence in the drawing room tonight, only realising my mistake as I hear the clumsy footsteps wandering over.

'H-Hello,' the boy stutters.

'Hello,' I greet him, remembering his pale face from the moors. The sound of his pulse at his neck.

'I'm sorry, I think I've taken a wrong turn somewhere. I was looking for Alfie.'

'Alfie is out on the moors, where he always is. Shouldn't you know that?' I smile as I turn to meet his eye.

'You're the woman... Mrs Chester, I presume? Yes, yes, I should find him right now. I'll just—'

'My son knows to keep to the estate. There is no danger while I

am here.'

The boy nods. I hear his throat swallow as he tries to ask the question on his mind.

'Mrs Chester?'

'Lady'

'Lady Chester, sorry. I'm sorry I didn't recognise you earlier, I thought—'

'Take a seat by me,' I interrupt as I slide the note I had penned out of sight. The boy doesn't obey immediately. I must soon change that.

'Sit,' I repeat. Now, he complies.

'What is your name?' I ask honestly. I vaguely remember the boy telling me, but I was paying no heed then.

'Jamie, your ladyship,' he replies. 'Jamie Ellis.'

'Please, call me Elizabeth,' I say, meeting his plain, brown eyes. 'I suppose I am your employer, then?'

'I suppose so,' Jamie answers, his face flushing. He must not be used to the heat of the fire.

'Tell me, how do you find your charge?'

'You mean Alfie?' I nod. 'He's great——a fast learner. He struggles with attention sometimes, but that's not surprising. You said that he was bullied, in your letter?'

'He was,' I reply bluntly, my mind flashing to the names they had called my child. Mutt. Bastard. Mongrel. I shudder. I should have known what the other boys would call him; I received similar insults due to the absence of a paternal figure in my own childhood.

'That must have upset him a lot.'

'Children can feel,' I say after a pause. 'But they cannot analyse

their feelings.'

'*Jane Eyre*.' Jamie recognises my quotation immediately.

'One of my mother's favourites. Are you familiar with the Brontës, Jamie?'

'Yeah,' he says without hesitating. I see his eyes widen. 'I mean, I know you requested a biology teacher, but I've always loved reading.'

'There is a library here at Thornton.' The words are out of my mouth before I realise what I am saying. Jamie seems to draw back.

'Thank you, but I shouldn't. I mean, this your home, and I'm—'

'Nonsense,' I interrupt, wishing only to silence his stumbling. 'The library is free to use. We have some rare first editions in there. You are correct that biology is a keen interest of mine. I believe that a boy like Alfie should be aware of the animal inside him before he becomes a man, would you not agree, Mr Ellis?'

He nods his assent.

'I believe I have some rare papers of Darwin's, in fact. I'd be happy to show you some other time, perhaps?'

'Thank you Mrs... Elizabeth... I—'

Just as Jamie begins to speak, he is interrupted by the child crashing into one of the columns.

'Alfie!' I command, making Jamie shoot up in his chair. 'If you cannot control yourself, then go to your room!'

Alfie stops immediately. I hear him quietly shuffling to the kitchens. Jamie mutters some excuse to leave, and my migraine is already returning. No one else disturbs me before I fall asleep in my chair.

Dear Mr Jamie Ellis,

It was a pleasure to meet you yesterday, at last. I shall admit, you caught me off guard. I have enclosed the key to the library, should you ever wish to peruse its contents. I hope we can meet again soon.

Best wishes,

Lady Elizabeth Chester

The rain had worsened, but even if Jamie had wanted to go outside, he couldn't. It had rained just as hard when he first entered the library at Thornton Hall, all those years ago. The sounds of rainstorms past still echoed in his memory.

It had been a few weeks since his first encounter with the elusive Elizabeth Chester. He had told his mother about it the next evening he could journey—cautiously, this time—into town. Autumn was approaching, and Jamie had begun to wear his father's old coat outdoors. It still smelled like him, Jamie thought. He made no mention of his father in the letter in case it upset his mother. She agreed that his employer was eccentric, to put it lightly, a sentiment which had caused Graham to remind Jamie not to discuss the private details of his employer in personal correspondence. Still, Jamie couldn't help but feel charmed by her. By the way she held herself. By her directness.

Jamie had been told that she was away from the Hall that night, her first absence since he had arrived. Perhaps that was why he found himself thinking of her throughout the day as he taught an increasingly inattentive Alfie about the workings of the human heart. He only realised he had been saving the library for a stormy night until he found himself, candle in hand, in front of a large oak door. The

wood was carved with swirling patterns. Wax dripped onto Jamie's fingers, like warm blood quickly drying. The door clicked open. Jamie stepped inside.

The library was impressive. Although not as large as Jamie had imagined, its design was beautiful. Marble columns curved upwards into an arched ceiling. The room was pitch black, but Jamie could still make out the thick bookshelves, which bowed under the weight of leather-bound volumes. As he held his candle up to the spines, he read the titles. He knew that he should be looking for more books on biology, but *The Collected Tales of Charles Perrault* caught his eye down one of the many shelves ending with an open window. Jamie sat by it and started to read.

He had got no further than Little Red Riding Hood exclaiming, '*Grandmother, what big eyes you have!*' when he heard a sound that made him start. It was a low growl, almost as though the wolf had come to life from the pages of the book. Jamie looked around, seeking the source. As his eyes grazed the reflection of the flame in the window, he saw it.

A pair of glowing yellow eyes stared at him from the bushes below. Jamie blinked, thinking it was a trick of the light. As he peered closer, however, he saw the eyes blinking, almost as bright as the moon, if it had been shining. They were staring directly at him.

Jamie swallowed, not knowing what to do. It was likely a fox, he told himself. He had seen an Arctic fox in the zoo with his parents once. Still, a voice in his mind whispered that it was too big to be a fox. A wolf, perhaps? He was likely over-excited by his reading, Jamie told himself. Still, he quickly snuffed out the candle and returned to his room in the dark. All the while, he swore he could hear something pacing and stalking outside. He didn't dare look out of the window to check.

Sleep did not come easily that night, Jamie remembered. When it eventually did, it felt like being swallowed whole. It still does, Jamie thought.

My dearest Ms Elizabeth Chester,

Thank you for the opportunity to visit Thornton Hall. Even despite all of the letters I've sent, I never once dreamed I would get the chance to see your estate. We have been in touch with your steward to arrange our arrival. Does Tuesday afternoon suit you?

Yours faithfully,

Blanche Ingram

I do not know what possessed me to do it. I re-read the letter in my mind as I stroll through the heather. Possibly, I was in a delighted mood. I must remind myself never to respond to letters in that rare state. Perhaps more likely, though, I wanted to see how *he* would react.

Jamie walks before me, instructing the boy about the local wildlife. After Alfie asked whether we were in Yorkshire or Lancashire, I had to educate him on local customs, in the way I had been taught. Jamie tries to keep pace with Alfie, who is shouting about pheasants.

I breathe in the cool autumn air as we rest beneath the old sycamore. Jamie is panting. I can smell his sweat. I fan myself without breaking a sigh as Alfie chases birds through the moorland grass, almost on all fours.

'Graham informed me that you have visited the library,' I say in an attempt to start a conversation. These are the first words I have spoken to him since I agreed to accompany them both yesterday.

‘Yes,’ he replies curtly. Imaginings of him sitting in the window spring to my mind. Impossible imaginings, I tell myself. I was asleep in my bed.

‘Did anything catch your eye?’

‘Just some Perrault,’ Jamie waves me away. ‘Honestly, I didn’t read much of it.’

‘He certainly does not compare to the Brothers Grimm,’ I say slyly.

‘No... I mean, yes, but... something disturbed me.’

‘Something?’ my heart almost starts beating a pace too fast. I quickly calm it.

‘Promise not to fire me, but... I swore I saw a wolf or something outside.’ I pause a moment.

‘Oh, to have your imagination, Mr Ellis.’ He looks away, embarrassed. ‘I trust you have been informed about our company?’

‘Company?’ I know he hasn’t. He seems surprised.

‘Yes. Lady Ingram will be visiting with her son tomorrow. She is sure to bring more guests. I thought you should be made aware. Alfie is to be on his best behaviour, or, better still, he is not to be seen at all.’

‘Of course, I... I mean, we’ll both keep out of your way.’

I hardly see why *you* should, I leave unsaid. I watch as a thousand thoughts race across Jamie’s mind.

‘If you don’t mind me asking,’ he says after a while. How I hate that sentence, and the question that always follows it. ‘Alfie’s father... Where—’

‘He fled to Paris as soon as he heard of the boy’s existence,’ I interrupt. ‘I didn’t have the heart to rid myself of the child. In truth, I had given up hope in him long before.’

'I'm sorry,' Jamie says. Those damned words.

'It was hardly his fault he was French.' Jamie snorts and I walk away, not wanting to remember that time. Upon my return to the house, I ask Graham to draw me a hot bath, and prepare myself for the morrow.

Mr Ellis,

Lady Chester has requested your presence in the drawing room this evening. I have taken the liberty of arranging a more appropriate suit for you. You will find it on your bed. Please dress yourself and see yourself down for nine o'clock sharp.

Graham Poole

It was almost nine o'clock, and the rain was still falling. That night was when the trouble started, Jamie thought.

He followed the instructions to the letter. He had forgotten how well suits were supposed to fit. He almost looked like his old self, although he was in desperate need of a shave.

When he walked into the drawing room, which had been lit with a log fire, his employer was nowhere to be seen. There were about half a dozen people, all sporting designer watches and tailor-made dresses. He tried not to look at his father's watch as it tick, tick, ticked in his breast pocket. He listened to the obnoxious murmurs of those around him, not knowing who anyone was. When he looked again, not five minutes had passed. How long should he stay, he wondered? Should he stay until Elizabeth arrived?

'Some children simply aren't cut out for it, you know,' Jamie heard the loudest voice exclaim. She was about the same age as his

employer, with bleached blonde hair and a heavily blushed face.
‘When we sent Bernard here to *private* school, he cried so much that first year, didn’t you, Bernie?’

The woman, who Jamie realised must be Lady Ingram, motioned to a boy on her right. He was slightly older than Alfie.

‘Bernie was lucky to have his father, of course. Of course, the staff these days just keep getting worse, too. They don’t know a thing about teaching our children. We should do it ourselves, you know.’

Jamie tried not to feel the sting of the words. The company mumbled their approval. They were soon startled, however, by Graham slamming the door open and striding in. Even Jamie couldn’t help but jump at his haste, fearing something had happened to his employer. What the steward said next confused him even more.

‘Lady Chester begs you to forgive her lateness. In truth, she is occupied with a strange phenomenon upstairs.’

‘A strange phenomenon? What is that supposed to mean?’ Blanche had spoken up, rising to her feet with an infuriating laugh.

‘Ghosts, madam,’ everyone laughed, including Jamie. The way Graham said it made it seem like a grave matter.

‘Ghosts?’ Blanche said through giggles.

‘Yes, madam, Thornton Hall is incredibly haunted. Lady Chester is conducting her experiments now.’

‘Experiments?’ the other woman was crying by this point. “Why then, we simply must join her!”

Jamie had no intention of spending any more time with them. So, as they marched out, following Graham’s candle up the stairs, he took the long way to his room. Before he could get into bed, he swore he heard a loud clatter, followed shortly by screaming and slamming doors. He hoped she’d scared them, he thought. He didn’t have to

wonder for long.

Less than a few minutes later, there was a knock at his door. It was Elizabeth, alone and in her gown.

'I thought I ordered you to the party earlier,' she said, by way of greeting.

'Yes, I was there,' Jamie replied. Annoyance turned to sympathy in Elizabeth's face, if only briefly.

'You missed the best part. It was your idea, really. I convinced them that there was a wolf in the house.' Jamie couldn't help but smile as his employer did the same.

'Won't they talk?' he asked.

'Oh, let them,' she said dismissively. 'What do I care?'

And for a moment, Jamie almost believed her.

Dear Graham,

When you read this letter, I will have returned to Ferndean. After the events of last evening, I deemed it best to return to that isolated country. As always, take care of Thornton for me. Please seek a new tutor for Alfie, in light of Mr Ellis' sudden departure. If he requires a reference, I trust you will provide one. I do not know when I shall return.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Chester

Graham will have read my note by now. I imagine him reading it as I sit alone in a first-class carriage to Ferndean. Some other people came in here earlier and attempted to sit beside me, but the conductor

shooed them away. I am blissfully alone, attempting to recover from my migraine. I was conscious all night, and I seemed to be more present then than I am right now.

Jamie and I had been spending more and more time together. I had started to enjoy his company so much that I almost did not notice when last night's moon arrived. I had retired to my room when Graham interrupted my imaginings by saying he was surprised to find me inside and not on my usual late-night stroll. I had been so busy wondering whether it was too late for me to marry that I did not immediately understand him. Only after I had dismissed him did I feel the change begin.

It was a slow change last night, in mind first before the body. I was still conscious, however, as I half walked, half stalked down the halls to where I knew his room was. I smelt his scent, and found him reading in bed. The light was dim, but he heard me enter. He seemed surprised to see me, but didn't object as I joined him, his handsome eyes glistening. He was as eager as I was. There was no need to tear my own clothes off last night; he did it for me. We were engaged in that beautiful sport even before my skin started to itch.

Slowly at first, but it grew increasingly ravenous. I tore marks down his spine as I sunk my teeth into his neck. He pulled me closer, and I reached ferociously, roaring at him to take me. To marry me. As my claws tore, I knocked the candle from the bedside table. Its flames licked the bedsheets, but neither of us minded. At least, not at first. But the candle caused the silk to light at an alarming speed, casting a full glare onto my face—onto the change that had almost entirely occurred. Jamie stared in horror at my teeth, which were jutting from my mouth, and, as he screamed, I let out a deafening howl.

The remainder of the night only comes to me in flashes. I have a vague recollection of Graham steering me towards the moors. My moors. When I woke, he informed me that Jamie had left. There is

no use crying now, I tell myself, as the train begins to slow. I will be at Ferndean within the hour, and I have no desire to ever return.

Dear Mr Ellis,

Lady Chester was sorry to hear of your sudden departure from Thornton Hall. She wishes me to assure you that you will still receive your wages for the entire year and will be compensated for the loss of your personal belongings in the fire. Should you ever need a reference, I shall be happy to provide one. Alfie wishes me to tell you that he misses you dearly. I have attached a return address to this envelope, should you ever wish to contact anyone at the house.

Yours faithfully,

Graham Poole

Jamie imagined the letter that Graham would have sent as the sun began to set. He'd have to walk soon, he thought. No matter what. Of course, Jamie never received a letter, out there on the moors, all those years ago.

After his night with Elizabeth, he didn't stop to think. He had wanted her. Something had been building between them for weeks. He had no idea what she was, but he knew that she'd meant him harm. As soon as the sun had risen and he could see the path, he had run. Graham had tried to stop him, but he couldn't bear the explanation. With dried blood and soot still on his skin, he ran out onto the moors.

He didn't make it very far before running out of breath. The Hall had vanished somewhere on the horizon. Jamie felt sure he'd arrive in a town soon. He was wrong.

It was three days before anyone found him. He had managed to find a stream to drink from. There was no food on the moors, though. Not one bite. He took shelter in ditches as the rain fell, trying to ignore the cold and the growing feeling in his core that this was how it ended. That, sooner rather than later, someone would find his body on the moors, like they had found his father's, and come to the same conclusion. That, sooner rather than later, he would be another corpse in a mortuary for his mother to cry down on.

By the time the sun had risen on the final day, Jamie was close to collapse. He toppled over, feeling the mud give him yet another coating. He didn't even know if he was off *her* land yet. That thing.

Flashes of bared teeth and dark fur ran through his mind. He felt like he was flying.

'Get him to the hospital,' he heard someone say beside him. Was it Graham? The figure above him was a woman, though, dark-skinned and wearing something on her head. As Jamie watched, he could have sworn it was a top hat. He drifted back out of consciousness soon after.

When he awoke again with a frightening start, he was in a soft, too-white bed. The same woman stood over him, shining a light into his eyes.

'Steady now, Mr Ellis,' she said. 'You've had a fall. Do you know where you are?'

'Thorn...field... No, Thornton?'

'You are in a hospital, Mr Ellis. Do you remember?' she said, her voice becoming clearer. "My name is Dr Rivers."

"Rivers?"

'That's right.'

At that moment, the room became more apparent. He was in a

ward with three other men. His window looked down on an unkempt garden. Dr Rivers took his vitals. She told him that he would have to stay in hospital for at least a week and that he had been asleep for several days. She told him his family had been contacted, but he hardly cared. He slept—or at least pretended to sleep - through their visits.

Weeks went by. Dr Rivers said his extended stay had something to do with his blood. He wondered if she would ask him to marry her, too. Then, one night—a cloudless night, just after the sun had set—Jamie felt something within him change. No one watched him in the evenings, and he slipped out into the garden without anyone noticing. He felt itchy, and every time he looked at the moon, it seemed to stick in his eye.

Before he knew what he was doing, he was leaping away from the hospital and across the moors. He bounded into a deep thicket of trees. The night was dark, but he could see enough. What big eyes he had! He could see the small cottage in the clearing, and he could smell her. The woman he had come here for. Elizabeth.

She stood before him, clothed only as a wolf. She wasn't surprised to find him there, and lowered her head to the ground.

He married her, of course, reader, and every full moon, they change together. He thinks it is time for a walk now, as he steps out into the clear night. The moon is sharp tonight.

*

The Witness

Jemima Davey

The funeral was held on a foggy day to keep the witnesses back. In the churchyard, Father Cain Coligny was bowing on his knees in front of the community. The people's gentle grief heaved the sopping wet air, whispering of the tragic fate. To them, it was an expensive reminder to consider the witnesses with the seriousness they deserved.

Cain's brother by water, Father Anselm, was dead.

The bishop's prayers were spoken with a dragging delay and Cain's thighs ached. Finally, Father Anselm's rosaries were bestowed upon him, with the bishop's trembling hands lingering on the beads in Cain's outstretched palms. Water fell, the grey sky bloating and darkening overhead. The rain spilt over. Stone angels wept on the roof of Saint Bartholomew's church.

Father Anselm was buried under a young yew. Cain took over the responsibility of the church, as expected.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' a townswoman said to him afterwards, the shadows of her face gaunt.

Cain smiled slightly. 'Thank you for your kind words. It's sad for all of us but his soul is resting in heaven.'

'He will watch over you,' she promised.

No one criticised his early departure. After all, Father Anselm raised him—a baby left on the church's doorstep. He'd given Cain Coligny his name; a mischievous man fascinated with history.

The vicarage was cold when Cain entered, his robes dripping onto the floor. It felt different without Father Anselm there. A guilty peace hung over him.

Creaking over floorboards into Father's library, Cain's clear reflection looked back and, in the mirror's corner, a witness. Amongst Father's historical anthologies and dry, crusting papers, a witness had been at home here for as long as Cain remembered. Now, it was facing

the church's treasure—a genuine Renaissance painting of Jephthah's daughter.

At sixteen years old, Cain had once offered to exorcise it for Father. But Father Anselm had chuckled, waving the suggestion off. "This one's not harming anyone. Let's just leave it alone," he'd said.

Nothing had ever indicated this witness wasn't pure; it never wandered, seemingly stuck to a single room, barely moving. But, to Cain, its existence had been a constant blighting intruder in this home.

'I will exorcise you,' Cain promised. It didn't react, of course.

For now, he left it alone, turning in for bed.

Autumn killed everything like a plague in the following weeks. Fallen leaves thinned under feet, pressing into the tarmac, when Cain heard word of potentially defiled witness movement. An older gentleman limped into his church, pallid and his face sheened with sweat. Cain rushed over, guiding the stranger into a pew.

'Sir, are you okay?'

The gentleman took a deep, wheezy breath, holding onto Cain's arm. 'I'm quite alright,' he said. 'Thank you, Father. I just need to sit for a moment.'

It'd been early in the morning with the moon still brooding down. Only dog walkers and the elderly had the habit of lurking around at this time. Except for Cain and his visitor, the church was empty.

'Let me put the heater on.' Cain went to leave, but the gentleman kept hold.

'There's no need to trouble yourself, Father. I will only be here for a moment.'

After a hesitant beat, Cain sat beside the stranger, watching his condition. It was obvious from the familiarity by which the stranger

referred to him that this was a fellow man of faith, but he was not a member of Cain's church.

'Forgive my state,' the man attempted to chuckle, 'but I'm a member of Saint Michael's church. Father Luke Guise isn't there currently and it's a long walk to get here.'

'Please do not apologise.'

'Ghosts have been behaving quite strangely down Agnes Green Way. Believe me, I know it sounds strange, but they've been wandering around and paying attention to cats. Cats, I say! I've seen them look straight at them!'

Cain frowned. 'They're not called ghosts but witnesses. And that's not possible, sir. Witnesses do not see the world around them.'

'Ah, Father Luke calls them ghosts. But I swear to you, Father, I'm not mistaken. Even though it's not your parish, please come see. I'm worried they've been defiled. Children walk through the area to school and back.'

It was concerning, if true. But Cain was doubtful. The man's eyes were pinkened, bulging out of the papery skin stretched over his skull. His mind must've been muddled also, calling witnesses "ghosts" so naturally. He was confused and of poor vision.

There was a slight tremor in the man's bony fingers as he grasped Cain's hands in both of his own, pleading. Even though it was all ridiculous, the man's fear for others had driven him to walk here in the cold. Cain suppressed a sigh.

'I will investigate it,' he promised. The neighbourhood wasn't far away enough to suggest waiting for Brother Luke's return. A simple look was all that was necessary.

'Oh, bless you, young man. Bless you.'

Cain went the next afternoon. Duties having been carried out,

he hadn't any excuses to put it off. At the step of his church's entrance, the air misted before his face. Other than the quiet passing of cars, the yard was cold, peaceful and empty. Frost lipped the shadows of gravestones, the grass greying.

Father's tree was the youngest in the churchyard, shivering in the cold. A murder of crows, their feathers fluffed, sat on its feeble branches, eyeing him. He left.

Agnes Green, a neighbourhood normally swelling with fertile vegetation, was dead this late in the year. Unlike Cain's parish, the witnesses here were a crowd, more frequent than pedestrians. Being translucent, the witnesses were easy to distinguish from physical people. One could walk right through them if distracted but Cain avoided doing so, a difficult task considering their numbers.

He frowned. Brother Luke shouldn't have let it become an infestation.

Children trickled through the streets, school finishing, their uniforms hiding under bin-bag-looking black coats. Their laughter vibrated. One boy sliced his arm through a witness in his path, his friends finding humour in the aggressive gesture. The witness was still, unnoticing.

As Cain had thought, the old man's worries were delusion. Although many, these witnesses were slow and of little movement. None reacted to any of the kids.

A small meow caught his attention.

On a stone cottage's half-wall, a cat regarded him, its affability growing weary. Matted discoloured fur, a sore puffy eye, it was a stray. Except, it appeared well-fed.

It jumped down, escaping, and Cain followed it. Around the corner, it flitted between two lengths of garden fence and reached a small concrete clearing.

He held back. A small school girl, her brown hair in long bunches, squatted down with a bag. It rattled as she poured kibble onto the floor. A few strays swarmed it, tails held high, knocking into one another and feasting.

'You don't need to fight over it,' she admonished with a smile.
'I'll find you again tomorrow.'

A few witnesses were present and Cain frowned. Despite the ridiculousness of the claim, just as the old man had said, it seemed as if the witnesses were looking right at the creatures.

It was said cats could see witnesses too, although superstition. Witnesses, however, weren't conscious. Cain must've been mistaken, their turned heads a coincidence. They weren't sentient. They didn't *see*.

Then, the little girl bounced up, kibble bag in hand. Cain stepped back, hiding. Her school shoes scraped against the floor and, as he looked, he realised she was following one.

He was stunned.

Happily skipping along, she followed the drifting witness, its pace faster than anything good. At the other end of the alley, it stopped, yet another stray cat at its feet.

'Aren't you a cute one,' the girl gushed, crouching. 'I haven't seen you before! Oh, you're so pretty.'

Cain hadn't been mistaken and it wasn't the last instance. When she stood, a witness would leave, and the girl would follow, only to stumble upon more cats. The strays she fed, the domestic she petted. The witnesses seemingly watched each time.

More than calling these witnesses impure, their behaviour, their impact on the real world, it was sacrilegious and grave. It was the most egregious affront to good Cain had witnessed, beyond anything he

could've conceived.

After all, exorcisms were carried out because defiled witnesses defiled people. Their sinful disease was contagious. If left unchecked, it would pollute the town and brew ills.

Cain eyed the girl who so easily associated with them.

Brother Luke's inaction had allowed unholy opportunities to fester, allowing dampness to settle into mould. This neighbourhood needed exorcising.

Eventually, the girl went home and Cain followed her. A short terrace, two stories tall. She went through the front door. Cain waited a few minutes, noting the car in the drive, before walking up and knocking.

The man who answered stumbled over his words. 'Sorry, I'm not interes—'

'This is about your daughter.'

This family wasn't one of faith. The girl's parents' awkwardness and uncertainty as to how to address him was telling, though he was too polite to correct their attempts. Regardless, they let him in, seating him at the kitchen table.

'Would you like some tea, sir?' the mother offered, her concerned gaze lingering.

Cain smiled. 'Please don't trouble yourself.'

Fidgeting and unsure what to do with herself, the mother sat beside her husband. A thud from above lifted Cain's gaze to the ceiling.

'Has our daughter done something wrong?' the father worried.

Footsteps punched from upstairs; the girl, Cain imagined, bouncing around.

'Are you aware that your daughter is feeding stray cats after school instead of coming straight home?'

The father slowly blinked, glancing at his wife. 'Well, yes. We bought her the cat food to do so. It's not stolen.'

'Why does she do it?'

A baffled pause. 'She, uh, wants to?'

'I'm allergic to cats,' the mother explained. 'Sasha wants a pet one but we can't have them in the house so she feeds the ones on the streets instead. May I ask what the problem is? It's not like the church is taking care of them, is it?' she adds, defensive.

Cain tapped his finger against the wood. It was difficult to deal with non-believers; their basic respect for him was suspicious and fragile. He stopped and looked them in the eye.

'Concerned members of the public have told me your daughter has been following witnesses.'

The father's smile was wry. 'That's just superstition, isn't it?'

'Not at all. This is not a matter of religion either. Father Anselm, the man who'd raised me, died only weeks ago. Despite being an exorcist like myself, he followed a witness off a cliff and it killed him. It could happen to anyone.' He levelled them a look. 'Including your daughter.'

The parents' lips twisted downwards, sitting in grave silence.

'We will talk to her,' the mother then promised.

Cain cleared his throat and stood. 'See that you do so. I will start exorcising this area for safety.'

'Thank you for warning us, sir.'

When Cain returned home, the witness in Father's library was in front of the mirror, so his reflection was dulled through its translucent

body. It was facing the overloaded bookshelf Cain hadn't touched since Father Anselm's death. Dust was collecting on the shelves, the spines discoloured.

'What are you looking at?' he bit.

He stepped round to assess the direction of its eyes. It wasn't just that witnesses didn't look at people, people also avoided looking at *them*. Its face, although human, was unrecognisable.

Their appearances were akin to the Frankenstein features of a memory of an acquaintance; to picture the length of their nose, the line of the lips, the asymmetrical distance between their eyes. The longer Cain looked, the more grotesque and unsettling the lumps of sheer inhuman flesh looked. It was uncanny. Not right.

Because its eyes didn't make sense, Cain couldn't gauge a direction. Disturbed by his ill-advised scrutiny, he went to bed.

Sasha Levit died at age twelve, two days after Cain's initial visit. Her body was in the woods, miles away from her usual path.

On the night it happened, Cain trudged home in the dark, exhausted from hours of exorcising the defiled. Clouds spat on his face, depriving him of moonlight, and the blue LED beams of streetlamps glowed pale on the tarmac. The electricity buzzed, moths tapping against the plastic lights in confusion, the ghostly illumination wavering.

Managing to get home, he was tiredly surprised to find the witness in the library missing. He'd stared into the empty room before hauling himself upstairs to sleep.

Cain knew something was wrong that night because he couldn't rest. The windows rattled a little louder than usual. The wind whined lowly through the old roof. The house groaned under the worsening weather, pierced by snapping sounds, as if the vicarage's spine was cracking under the rain's weight.

The missing witness felt strange. Under blankets, it still chilled him.

Absolute silence suddenly came to Cain's attention, his eyes opening from a sleep he hadn't realised he'd fallen into. The air was still. His room was made of vague black shapes.

Unsure what'd woken him, he remained perfectly still, listening for a tense minute, the silence ringing in his ears. He moved, slightly, and it made a noise, his heart jumping.

Turning onto his back, he pulled his head up and his heart lurched, cold punching him squarely in the chest and spiking along his skin as the grey whites of someone's eyes and their teeth contorting into an inhuman grin bore down on him.

He shouted, jumping for his bedside lamp and retreating to his headboard with a panicked cry. Light flooded the space, the rain smashing into his windows, wind humming... and there was nothing there. His house creaked. Cain panted.

Cain saw the little girl's death on the news the next morning, her parents sobbing. The witness in Father's library was still missing and the witnesses in Cain's parish behaved strangely afterwards. They wandered around erratically but no member had reported the odd behaviour.

On a gloomy morning, Cain went to open his church, a heavy chill pushing the mist down to the grass, when a tall figure lingered by the door. With a black suit and a clerical collar, dark hair glowing auburn under the porch light, it was Brother Luke Guise.

'Brother,' Cain greeted.

'Father,' Luke replied, with a wry edge.

Brother Luke stretched as he yawned, rubbing his nape and partly covering the tattoo that crawled up his neck, snapping Cain's

attention to it. Inky roses and a human skull that hadn't been there the last time they'd met tarnished his tanned skin. Cain was sure his lips were downturned.

He waited but Luke didn't offer an explanation for his presence, so Cain brushed past him and fumbled with the keys. Luke followed him inside.

'Oh, it's bloody freezing in here,' he complained.

'It's a church,' was Cain's bland response.

'Yours is bigger than mine.'

Cain hummed noncommittally, strolling up to the pulpit.

'Overcompensating I imagine,' Luke went on. 'I don't need a big church.'

'Are you here for a reason or did you forget how to conduct a morning prayer yourself?'

Luke chuckled. 'I didn't forget. No, I'm here to talk witnesses with you. I've been away.'

'Apparently, you call them ghosts.' He couldn't keep the contempt from his voice.

'Ah, that. That's what the ancient Greeks thought they were, did you know? It's a little habit of mine.'

'From Ancient Greece?' Cain snorted. He went up the steps, putting himself higher than Luke.

Luke grinned, holding the elevated pulpit's edge, chin on his hands. 'I look young for my age.'

Cain narrowed his eyes before slamming his bible onto the surface and forcing Luke to step back. The man's little cough from the dust mildly satisfied him. 'The Bible made it quite clear what to call them. I'm starting to doubt you've read it.'

‘You’ve got no faith for a faithful man.’

What to do with this annoyance? Cain didn’t appreciate him making light of their role as the Lord’s helpers or exorcists. Brother Luke Guise lacked every proper and dignified requirement to be a priest. His humour was uncouth and his behaviour was carefree and without dignity.

He was a smear on Christianity.

‘I suggest you leave now if you don’t want to be late for your own service.’

‘I could do,’ Luke supposed. ‘But then you wouldn’t get to hear about the weird witness movements in both our parishes.’

Cain paused. His piqued interest must’ve been obvious as Luke’s lips snaked into a grin.

He sniffed. ‘Might have something to do with how you neglected your own.’

‘I’d heard you *fixed* that little problem for me. I won’t thank you. But then, why would that make them act up in yours?’

More than anything, Cain was relieved he wasn’t going insane. The fact none of his gossipy members had whispered a word of the abnormalities stressed him.

‘Ah,’ Luke looked at his imaginary watch. ‘Looks like this is it for now. I don’t want to be late for my own service! A handsome young man warned me that others might think I neglect my job if I am.’

Cain hadn’t said exactly that, but he didn’t utter a word of refusal.

Crows squawked at Cain on his way home that evening; Father’s yew was bending under the weight, plumed by the birds like its foliage was black, heavy and pointed. Father’s witness was still missing and Cain didn’t sleep.

Because Luke didn't come again, Cain instead went to him. Watching Cain's approach, Luke's slight smirk was wound with heavy smugness. He was in his churchyard at Saint Michael's, lingering by a gravestone.

'Brother Cain,' he greeted.

'Luke.'

The snub didn't dent Luke's easy mood.

Something brushed past Cain's feet, a ginger cat rubbing its chin against the gravestone, purring. It was then Cain noticed the name engraved into the crisp marble. Sasha Levit.

'It's a terrible injustice,' Luke said, noticing his gaze. 'Twelve years old. Did you hear about it?'

'It was on the news.'

'It was. Her body was found miles from her usual path home, in the woods. The parents are distraught, as you'd expect.'

Cain had nothing to say about that. The cat vanished behind the stone and Cain noticed Luke was openly staring at him, unblinking even when noticed.

'What happened?'

'Her parents reckon she followed a witness off a cliff,' Luke replied, his gaze unwavering. 'So that's the current consensus.'

'How terribly sad.'

'It is.'

'Do you know her parents?'

Luke's eyes finally drifted as he cocked his head in thought. 'Ah, well, they're not particularly religious people. But I saw little Sasha around a lot. She was a little celebrity—very popular.'

A snap of something spiteful sharpened Cain's tongue. 'And

that's why it's so important to watch and exorcise those witnesses that are defiled.'

Luke's eyebrows raised in surprise at the tone. There was no remorse. "Do you blame me?"

Cain ground his jaw. 'No.'

Luke smiled. 'You're not a very good liar, Brother Cain.'

It was their job to maintain purity and cut corruption at the roots to stop the spread of staining evils. The weird behaviour in Luke's overrun parish had now spread to Cain's because the other priest hadn't dealt with his sooner. It was for that irresponsible reason that Sasha died.

'Well, I'm back now,' Luke said. 'Shall we go inspect those witnesses of yours?'

It was too little too late. Cain wanted to spit in his face but Luke had been the only other person to notice the degradation. Luke's parish had since calmed down and Cain was too jumpy to sleep at night as it was.

'It's late.' The sun fell by four in the afternoon these days, they had mere hours of light left.

Luke wasn't concerned. 'There's no rest for the wicked.'

'There is no *peace*,' Cain corrected.

'There certainly isn't. So, what do you say?'

An agreement ultimately scraped off his tongue.

They started on the streets, catching school children returning home, their uniforms black like they'd attended a funeral. Their glum, weary faces convinced Cain they thought they had.

Luke watched them. 'I dropped out of school at fourteen.'

'I'm shocked.'

Some children walked straight through the stationary and unresponsive witnesses; disturbingly to him, without an iota of disgust. The witnesses themselves were idle, plain, normal... The longer the two priests strolled, the more panicked Cain became. Before, their erratic heads would twitch and their steps would stutter. Witnesses in the distance would immediately snap behind Cain as he peered over his shoulder, mere hair-lengths away. Each time, ice would cut through his pulse. Not today. Their new-found purity in Luke's presence was a betrayal.

'It's interesting we call them witnesses, isn't it?' Luke mused. They were approaching Cain's church, cars of commuters squeezing past one another on the narrow road. The low rumble of engines tried to hush Cain's ears.

'Witnesses,' Luke tasted the word. 'It makes it sound as if we're biding judgement—like we're on trial.'

Very slightly, Cain looked over his shoulder, but nothing was behind him. A few witnesses lingered in the distance, still as if undefiled, but *too* still—like a crowd of trees frozen within a rustling windy forest, leaves unmoving in the face of the weather. It stood out.

'What nonsense,' he muttered.

Luke was undeterred. 'Do you think witnesses are conscious? That they have will?'

'That's an outdated notion. Even for me.'

'Would The Bible not be outdated by your own logic, then? It was the Romans who reckoned witnesses were lingering souls of the dead. And not even necessarily from the past, they believed you could see the dead from the future.'

'What are you trying to achieve, saying these things?' Cain snapped. "You sound like Father Anselm."

Luke chuckled. ‘Brother Anselm did like his history books.’

At the bottom of the steps up into the churchyard, Cain’s feet stopped, a thought snagging like cotton. It took a moment to recover. Slowly, he faced Luke.

‘How did you know that?’

Luke’s brows furrowed like the question was a weird one. Another car passed. Luke’s hair tousled from the breeze. But in the corner of Cain’s eye, a smear of orange. Coming out from behind the lychgate, a small roofed archway guarding Cain’s sacred churchyard, was a ginger cat.

Heart pattering, Cain once again looked behind him from where they came.

‘Doesn’t this cat look familiar to you?’ Cain asked.

‘Not really. There’s so many around here.’

It couldn’t have been the same cat; it’d got here before them, the coincidence would’ve been too deliberate. Yet, as Cain scrutinised it, it was identical.

The distraction stumbled him as he followed Luke through the lychgate. The cat startled at the sudden movement and lumbered away a short distance. It looked back, tail twitching.

‘Is this where Brother Anselm was buried?’

The yew. Luke stood at its foot, sharp needles for leaves stabbing out of its arms and twigs, its trunk thin and crooked, turning, like a twisted neck. Its branches were completely bare. There were no crows, yet it still sagged as if burdened by some sort of weight.

‘That’s right.’

Luke hummed sadly, patting its bark. ‘This is a very sad-looking tree. You shouldn’t plant them in autumn. You should’ve waited.’

Cain boggled at him. Father Anselm had died—that was why the tree had been planted.

‘Well, I’m not seeing anything out of the ordinary,’ Luke decided. ‘There’s nothing defiled here. That’s lucky, isn’t it?’

‘But, isn’t that suspicious in itself? Look how still they are!’

Luke frowned. ‘Don’t you like them still? It doesn’t look like there’s a problem, Cain. Isn’t that good news?’

Cain looked back towards the gate, spotting a witness lingering on the other side. They didn’t enter sacred spaces so there was nothing strange about it.

But he knew something was severely wrong.

‘If you’re still unsure, I’ll look again with you tomorrow.’

Cain swallowed the dry lump in his throat. ‘Please. Thank you.’

Luke smiled kindly at him, nodding his head in farewell, before trotting down the steps, bypassing the witness on the other side of the gate, nodding to it too.

Cain didn’t move for a moment, listening. The air was still, roads empty. Not even a bird’s song soothed him, so the unexpected voice was startling.

‘Oh my, was that little Luke Guise?’

One of Cain’s members, a middle-aged woman, was smiling in delight, watching from the church’s door. Her daughter, a girl no older than six, clung to her mother’s arm. The cat placed itself between her and Cain, its swaying tail entertaining the child.

‘Do you know him?’

‘Oh, I’ve known him since he was as tall as Daisy here. He’s grown up so much since then, mind. He looks happy today. Is he your friend, Father?’

‘One of my closest,’ Cain said, curiosity pricked. ‘How do you know him?’

‘I was his teacher. Such a sweet boy.’ Her mood dampened a little. ‘Troubled, he was, though. So, it’s good to see him doing well now. Interesting that he’s become a priest. His family weren’t much for religion if I remember correctly. It’s a bit of a shame, though, because he wanted to be a police officer...’

‘A police officer?’ Cain couldn’t imagine it.

Thankfully, the townspeople gossiped like turkeys. ‘You must keep this in confidence, Father. He wanted to become an officer but he dropped out of school because of his health.’

‘Health?’

‘Luke Guise was severely schizophrenic.’

Cain’s brows shot up, surprise fizzing under his skin. An attempt to school his reaction hadn’t been quick enough.

‘Luke is schizophrenic?’

‘Doesn’t seem like it so much these days, does it? But he was a very scared little boy; saw people that weren’t there and couldn’t tell a witness from a person.’ She patted her daughter’s head. ‘Ah, I’ve said too much. This was all in the past anyway and gossiping isn’t kind.’

‘I’ll take it in confidence,’ Cain swore.

He hadn’t time to ponder the news. Rain tore at the roof of the church that night, echoing into hazy crackles inside. Father Cain sat on a pew, stationary, as he’d done for an hour. He’d watched the stained-glass windows, disciples looking down at him, turn black, their watchful eyes inked. Now, he was alone.

The timber beams, hundreds of years old, groaned with a gust of wind. Cain shivered, the cold assault biting. The church no longer welcomed him.

Cain hated the vicarage but he'd run out of time to avoid the inevitable consequence any longer. He walked through the central aisle, the stones uneven from a century of feet wearing down on them. The air was stabbed with each step.

Pushed by a breeze, the heavy door swung open easily. The dim porchlight swayed, swallowed by the dark. Clouds blocked the moon and the porch did little to stop the wind from pelting the water at him.

Cain couldn't see easily. His heart tapped in his throat, the dim light carving shadows from graves that tricked his frightened brain. Cain thought he heard familiar laughter vibrating under the wind. It sounded real.

It wasn't until a car passed, the headlights illuminating the witness by the lychgate, that Cain noticed the being now stood *inside* the boundary. His heart sank.

It got through. The churchyard was unsafe.

Another bark of laughter and Cain's head snapped round, seeing nothing but shadows. His breath was quick and shallow, fogging in front of his face. His feet were frozen to the floor.

A stick snapped. Over his shoulder, Cain glanced. In his face, the witness stared at him with its black eyes, its ethereal brow frowning. The porch lamp flickered then—went out.

Cain screamed. He ran, his legs tangling and tripping him over, his stomach lurching as the path hit his face. Somehow in the dark, he still saw it. He fought backwards, feet kicking and slipping past muddied grass when a sudden light descended upon him.

‘Cain?’

The glare of Luke's phone torch blinded him.

‘Y-your rosaries! Exorcise it!’

Luke lowered his phone, his face still a black void. ‘Exorcise

what? Cain, you're covered in mud.'

'That!' Cain cried, pointing at the creature, but Luke was still.

'Cain, there's nothing there.'

'What?'

The torch lifted in the direction of the witness but its two eyes glinted into the reflection of two iron nails hammered into the porch, as if it'd been an illusion. Cain stared unblinkingly, slowly coming to feel the cold soaking into his skin, clumps of wet hair falling into his face.

Cain had seen it. He swore it had been real.

Luke laughed with a strikingly familiar tone, the sound quivering in Cain's ears. 'I'll help you up.'

Cain slapped his hand away and weakly pushed himself to his feet. His legs shook, feeling uncertain.

'What on Earth are you doing here?'

'Helping,' Luke replied. 'You wanted me to help you exorcise evil, right? I've found something. Follow me.'

Exorcism. The only way for all of this to end was to strip the putrid grease of evil from these lands and return sacred rule. Only by killing this defilement could Cain return to peace.

'I don't have my rosaries.'

'I have mine,' Luke pointed out, swinging them around his finger once. He then grasped them tightly, beads clacking together. Thunder rumbled beyond, growling in Cain's chest.

'Okay,' Cain decided. 'Show me.'

Luke's face was mostly obscured but his smile was obvious.

'Follow me, Cain.'

Past Father's yew, through an archway in the brick wall, Cain

left the compromised safety of the church's boundary and followed Luke to the other side. They entered dense woods, leaves rotting and muddying into a paste, the skeletons of trees contorting into jagged stakes. A sudden flap of wings startled Cain, his pulse fluttering. He couldn't see anything.

'Stay close to me,' Luke said. His light shone onto the ground.

Releasing a shaky breath, Cain nodded. The trees at least muffled the sound of the storm.

'How did you know I'd be in the church?' Cain asked. Luke's timing had been a beat off perfect.

'You seemed down,' Luke replied. 'I assumed you might've decided to seek guidance from our Lord. Praying is important.'

'Yes, it is.'

'Did you?'

'Did I do what?'

'Pray,' Luke said. 'Did you pray?' His head turned slightly, still shadowed.

'Yes, of course,' Cain replied, baffled.

An amused hum followed by a beat of silence. A whip of cold wind struck him and he hugged his arms around himself.

'Maybe you should have,' Luke reckoned.

'What?'

Luke stopped and faced him. He huffed very slightly in dry amusement.

'You're not a very good liar, Cain.'

A sharp flash of lightning cut around the edges of Luke's dead-straight face, the brief glare alerting him to a hundred eyes following them from within the trees. Cain took a small step back, the weight of

their watching pressing down on him, the air thickening as if flooded.

Stress boiled over the edges. Cain was coming undone. ‘Can’t you see them?’

‘See who?’

‘Them! All around us!’

‘Cain,’ Luke said, his voice low, slow and bland. ‘I am really not sure what you’re talking about.’

Cain threaded his filthy hands through his hair, pulling on his scalp. Something heavy slowly descended from his heart to his gut, his stomach churning, and the blood sinking from his face. He dropped his arms, his gaze pulling to Luke. The dawning realisation haunted him.

‘You said you were going to help me exorcise evil...’ His tongue went numb. “Where is this evil, Luke?”

The rumble of thunder never came. The rain that had been so loud now fell soundlessly. Only the throbbing in Cain’s ears roared, pulsing with each thud of his heart.

Luke’s rosaries clacked. ‘You look worried.’

‘I am,’ Cain admitted, creeping backwards. In the middle of nowhere, the two of them were entirely disconnected from potential witnesses if something happened. Cain was scared.

Something rustled under his foot, crisp, unlike the floppy leaves. Underneath, bright yellow police tape glared under Luke’s light. Eyes widening, his gaze slowly returned to Luke. Bile salted his tongue.

‘You recognise where we are now?’ Luke turned the phone up to blind Cain.

Cain tried to shield against it with his arms, unable to see. ‘What are you talking about?’

Luke took a step forward. ‘Sasha Levit followed a witness off a

cliff and died. It's interesting her parents thought that considering they weren't superstitious or religious. Fascinating still, you talked to them only days before. What did you talk about, Cain?"

'The witnesses were behaving strangely; I spoke to many people that day!' He stepped back, again.

Luke advanced. 'Yet she'd been fine until your visit. She was an intelligent child, but she followed a witness all the way out to this very spot here?'

'I don't know!' A retreat.

'Brother Anselm.'

Cain flinched.

'Brother Anselm died following a witness off a cliff, despite the exorcist he was.' Luke closed the distance, his smile pitying. 'So many deaths... Something truly evil and defiled has taken over this place. It's like you said, this area needs exorcising, Cain.'

No words came out, not a single protest.

And Luke took one more step.

Cain's gut lifted with a dizzying breath, his feet slipping into the air. Pain jabbed in his chest from where he'd been struck. He belatedly realised where he'd stood. The cliff that'd once taken the little girl opened its jaw wide for him, biding its catch. In the dark, Cain hadn't realised it'd been there. He was falling.

He reached out, stretching his arm, but Luke didn't move to save him. Despair ached. Death was too quickly racing up to meet him. It was too fast for Cain to process, his heart frozen in shock.

The world turned, the heavens in front of him, a void. Cain was going to die. The moon hid behind Luke's light, its artificial piercing glint the only star in the sky. And in the black, it was the purest white Cain had ever seen.

*

Death's Day

C. Soden

There is a mansion that stands upon the hill. It is painted black, though some of the paint has chipped off over the years of neglect it has faced. Half the windows are boarded up, and the locals will swear they've never seen the door open during the day. There seems to be a permanent cloud that hovers above it, casting long shadows down the hill, filling all those who see it with a great sense of dread. The only birds that will sit upon its roof are crows. They caw if someone walks past, and fly off as a murder. If you were to look closely, though no one does, you would see spider-webs in every unbroken window. And you'd hear the whistle of the draught, which always seems to blow through it. But above all else, you would sense the gloom. The absolute hopelessness of the place.

Death lived next door. It was a quaint little cottage, painted a sandy colour, with a thatched roof and honeysuckle that grew in the garden.

Today was a Monday. And Death's alarm clock was ringing. He groaned. Never been much of a morning person, had Death. And today was no exception. He hit the snooze button, and buried his head in the teddy bear of a boy he'd once guided, back before the job had become so tiresome. But before long, he rolled over and reluctantly swung his legs out of the bed, sliding them into his fluffy slippers. As Death trudged towards his bathroom, he watched as the ears of his slippers flopped with every footfall. They were new, and the bunny-likeness still pleased him greatly.

When Death opened the door to his living room, he was rushed by eight yowling felines. They sharked around him as he made his way through to the kitchen where he poured out food into each of the cats' named bowls. Then he frowned down at them. Eight? He counted again. Definitely eight. Brow still furrowed, he opened the door, and began calling out for Wrath. Right little devil was that one—always going missing. But at last, she ran inside, rubbing her head against

Death's leg as she made her way to her own bowl.

Death smiled at the cats and then went about making his own breakfast, nothing special, just toast. He munched away on it, reading his current trashy love story. He blamed Life for his addiction—she'd always been pushing book recommendations on him, until he'd eventually caved and had bought himself one. Since then, he'd been hooked.

After breakfast, Death got dressed. Given it was a work day, he should really be wearing his uniform. *But really*, he thought to himself, *no one can actually see what I have on underneath my cloak*. And hadn't his therapist been going on about making himself feel more comfortable in his day-to-day schedule? With this in mind, he put on pink tennis shorts and a white crop top. Life would've high-fived him for that, grinning ear to ear—he smiled at the thought.

Then he pulled on his cloak and picked up his scythe, sighing heavily. Maybe one day he'd be able to ditch them.

When he walked downstairs, he found Gluttony pawing at the door. He scooped him up, gave him a fuss, then plonked him down on a chair. Gluttony, somewhat perturbed at this, jumped off the seat, and stalked off back to the living room. *Probably about to pick a fight with Lust*, Death thought, as had been Gluttony's hobby of late. Death shook his head at them.

As he was leaving his garden, through his little flower-adorned gate, Death was joined by Heresy. She was a pretty little thing, and currently his only tabby. She went to rub her head against his leg, but found that the cloak was in the way. She hissed at it, then led the way out, guiding Death diligently down the path, towards his first appointment in the village below.

* * *

Death wasn't a fan of his cloak. For one thing, it was built for winter, and in the summer heat, it made him rather toasty. For another, the constant chattering had been driving him crazy of late. He wasn't sure why—he'd put up with the vague murmur for millennia now, finding it comforting in his early days even. But now... the sound just grated on him. It was just so *loud*. He couldn't hear himself think.

But what could he do? Defy tradition? Rebel against his own vision he'd spent so long building up? He supposed he could. But not today. He was too busy today.

* * *

The first appointment was at Mr Jones' house.

Mrs Jones answered the door when he knocked. 'Oh, hello, deary,' she said warmly. 'Come on in, I've just put the kettle on. Do you prefer green tea or lemon?' she asked as she ushered him into the little wooden hall that had a meticulously organised row of coats on hangers going all the way down its entire length.

Death's personal favourite tea was a mix of cherry and apple. But no one ever seemed to have it, which was a real shame. He supposed he'd have to settle for lemon.

'And can I take your scythe and cloak, eh deary? You must be sweltering in this heat, you poor thing.' Mrs Jones made to snatch for them (*probably just to add to that long coat row*) but Death clung to his cloak. Imagine her dismay if she saw how unprofessionally he was dressed! *The respect would be gone*. The thought sent a chill right down his spine.

'The cloak's got all my documents, I'm afraid, Mrs Jones.' But he let her take the scythe. Most people didn't really like it inside

their homes, for a reason Death had never quite understood. *Probably superstition.*

She propped it up against the wall in her porchway, and nodded briskly at it. ‘Right, in you come then,’ she said to Death. ‘John’s just through the hall, down the corridor, first door to your right. If he’s asleep, just poke him with a pencil, won’t you love? Honestly, he won’t mind.’ She ushered him in, watching him go for a moment, before remembering, ‘Right! The tea!’ and hurrying off towards what Death presumed to be the kitchen.

Death knocked on the door thrice before entering. Mr Jones sat behind a desk, paperwork piled high on either side. He was about middle-aged for a human (*though that seems a little odd to say in this profession*) and smelt vaguely of ginger biscuits. *Not my favourite.* He smiled at Death and gestured towards a piano stool he’d placed opposite his desk. ‘Please,’ he said.

Death smiled back and took the offered seat, (*only the best for Death, it seems*) only feeling slightly perturbed at the quality. He laced his long fingers and looked up at Mr Jones. ‘So, what can I offer you today then, Sir?’ *Please make this quick. I have yoga in an hour and a half. And it’s all the way across town.*

Mr Jones heaved a sigh. ‘I was hoping to pick an afterlife.’

Death’s lips quirked up into a smile. ‘Oh really? Well, you came to the right man.’ *Or summoned him to you.* Death began rummaging in his cloak for leaflets. ‘Right, here’s Heaven. Classic, honestly. Absolute paradise. Downside is,’ Death put a hand on the leaflet he’d just placed on the desk. ‘You do have to be a good person. Or else there’s a long wait in purgatory... or potentially hell. And, I won’t lie to you Mr Jones, that’s really not a vibe.’ He pulled out another. ‘Oooh! Here’s rebirth. Now here you could be anything—plant, animal—you name it! I’m... not entirely sure you get to pick.’ Death flicked through one

of the leaflets. ‘Ah,’ he said once he’d found the right page. ‘No, you don’t. But I do like to believe there’s beauty to every living thing, don’t you, Mr Jones?’ Death had his salesman smile plastered to his face. *Too much? Maybe just a tad.* ‘Ooh! Here’s an afterlife where they weigh your soul against a feather—oh! And here’s the three fields!’

Death piled leaflet upon leaflet onto Mr Jones’ desk as the poor man just stared at him in mounting horror.

Eventually he interrupted one of Death’s spiels on joining the stars of the night’s sky. ‘Look, Death. I’ll be honest with you here. I’m a simple man. I don’t need any of—’ he gestured at the mountain of flyers ‘—this. Isn’t there an option for just nothing?’

Death’s face fell. He appreciated that others may struggle to see the art of his craft at times—but this was a whole other level of misunderstanding. ‘Just... nothing? You don’t—you—you want nothing?’ Death couldn’t help but feel this was like visiting a travel agent just to tell them you would rather stay at home. *Utterly pointless.* *Still... I should make it to yoga...*

‘Or just whatever’s simplest. I don’t care,’ he said with a shrug. ‘I’ll be dead, won’t I?’

Now I’ve heard some stupid things in my time. But this? What is this man on? ‘Well... I can’t just leave you here...’ Then an idea struck him. ‘Unless of course you’d like to be a ghost. Haunting is *very* popular. We’ve even added a special feature of being able to move on after your unfinished business has been... well, finished.’ Death smiled across at Mr Jones, feeling thankful to be back on familiar footing once more. *Perhaps this is salvageable after all...*

Mr Jones just sighed. ‘Can’t you just decide for me? If I really must have one, that is.’

Death supposed he could. It really did go against protocol... but he could. He was filling out the paperwork regardless... *But then the*

pressure is really on me, isn't it? What if something I think is delightful is your thought of torture?

'Um... well, you could ask your family what they've chosen, if you'd like to be with them? I'm not actually allowed to pick for you.' Death attempted a smile. It came out as more of a wince, if he were honest. *I can't lie believably. Not ideal for a salesman...*

'Can't you just tell me what they've picked? I mean, surely you have them on record, right?

Death gave an uncomfortable laugh. 'Confidentiality breach, I'm afraid.' He sighed. *Everything seems to be a confidentiality breach nowadays. Why did I ever invent them?* 'How about we benchmark this for now and get onto the how and the when,' he suggested. 'That's always a fun bit.' *Though I always think the afterlife itself is the best part...*

Mr Jones nodded, 'Sounds good to me, Death.'

Death slapped on his salesman smile once more. *Round 2, here we come.* 'Well, there's some pretty basic options, if you're into that—cancer, heart attack, that sort of thing. Or if you fancy going a bit outside your comfort zone, we could arrange something simply spectacular. There could be bombs, explosions, fireworks even, if that takes your fancy. How well do you cope with the heat?"

'Er...' said Mr Jones, nudging his glasses up his nose a tad. 'Not very well?"

'Ah... maybe not then. I'll rule out the volcano too, in that case.' Death looked up from the checklist he was marking off. '...Yes?"

'Yes!' Mr Jones' eyes were rather wide, Death noted.

'Right... um... are you into weapons? Swords are making a comeback, you know. I'm not sure where we'd get a bludgeon from... but I'm sure it *could* be arranged.'

Mr Jones just mutely shook his head, mouth hanging slightly

open.

‘No? Pity. I was already brainstorming for that. Not that I’m biased of course.’ Death was quick to reassure him. ‘I think all deaths are wonderful.’ He was waffling. Life was always telling him off for this. Perhaps he should try a different tactic. But then... he couldn’t really think of one.

‘Hmm... there’s always drowning. Could do it in the bath if you didn’t feel like leaving home. Ah, but there is the slight issue of who would find you then. And you probably wouldn’t be in the best attire... But it’s been done before. *Definitely* a contestant.’ Death scribbled away on his list, underlining it a couple of times. *Are we making progress at long last? Dare I hope?*

‘Or you could have something heavy fall on you... if that’s more your taste. A bookshelf, perhaps?’ Death gestured behind Mr Jones, to where an ornately carved one stood. ‘That very one if you’d like.’

Mr Jones spun to look behind him in alarm. ‘No. No bookshelves. Nothing heavy falling on me.’

‘Rightio.’ Death added that to the criteria list. ‘How about a scandal? I haven’t had any of those in a little while. Oh... actually you’re not famous. Never mind. Ignore me. Oh! But you could be involved with people who are... that’s worth a thought.’

Mr Jones heaved a great sigh. ‘Death,’ he said. ‘Nothing... extreme. Isn’t there anything simple and painless? Just go to sleep and not wake up kind of thing?’

Death considered this for a moment. He didn’t realise he’d be dealing with a suicide today, but he could take it in his stride... hopefully. ‘There’s always sleeping pills. Take a few too many.’ Death shrugged nonchalantly. ‘Not wake up.’

‘Perfect,’ said Mr Jones. ‘That sounds nice and simple. Let’s do that.’

Death pulled out a different form. Lots of afterlives wouldn't accept a suicide, you see. So he'd been forced to use different paperwork. 'Right... and would you like to be alone or—'

'Oh no. Definitely surrounded by loved ones.' Mr Jones settled back in his chair a little. He seemed to be on more familiar footing now. Perhaps he had thought about this part before the appointment. That was handy... *seems to be the only thing he had considered before it*, Death thought miserably.

Death flicked onto the group projects page. He'd drawn a few stick figures at the top all holding hands. He'd thought it had lightened the mood a little... seeing it now, he wasn't so sure. 'Right... so I'm presuming you were thinking some sort of suicide pact? You could be murdered... but you said pills... and that's not particularly interesting as murder weapons go... So anyway, suicide pacts. They're terribly common nowadays... especially amongst students during the exam period... You *do* need everyone to consent to it though, I'm afraid. Some people are a little hesitant in that respect—they're not all a fan of the downsides you see. Some afterlife restrictions and whatnot. Don't worry—we'll get back to that in a moment. Now, who exactly were you thinking of joining you? Your family? Perhaps it will be a bit of a scandal after all...'

'What?' Mr Jones' brow had furrowed and he had leaned forward in his chair once again. 'No, no, no. You're not listening!' Death would beg to differ in this respect. He was, in fact, doing lots of listening. It wasn't his fault that Mr Jones wasn't being particularly forthcoming with his preferences. 'I don't want any suicide nonsense. And I'm not taking my family with me. What's wrong with you? I meant I wanted them to be around me when I died. Not that I wanted them to die *with* me!'

'Ah...' Death leant away from the desk, and frowned at his papers. 'So, no suicide at all?' Mr Jones gave him a long, hard stare.

‘Right... I’ll just...’ Death crumpled up the current document he’d been working on and threw it in the bin in the corner of the room. He hoped it would be recycled. ‘I think the pills might be off in that case. Or at least what I was picturing. Perhaps if you were to just describe your vision, that would really help. Then we can go from there, and I’ll see what I can do for you. How does that sound?’

Mr Jones shook his head and sighed. ‘I haven’t really thought much about it, you know. Sometimes it can be a little depressing, you know?’

Death nodded solemnly. In reality, no, he did not know. This was his job. It was just like every other 9 to 5. Only he was always working overtime because so many people seemed to die during the night. Point was, it didn’t depress him. Ah, so maybe not quite like your average 9 to 5 then... He supposed he viewed dying as just a doorway to the next great adventure. His job was to give people the package they were after. He didn’t see why they would be sad about that. He was only trying to help them.

‘But... I suppose I’d like to be at home, with my wife or children holding my hand. And to just... slip away painlessly. And that be it. No grand fanfare. No heaven or hell, weighing of the soul, or whatever else you were suggesting. I’m happy to just die.’

Death wasn’t sure whether he was joking or not. That wasn’t helpful! It was like telling a travel agent, ah yes, I’d like to go somewhere that involves no hassle. Absolutely no plane delays or traffic on the way. And where would I like to go? Oh I’d like to just stop existing. That’s it. Nice and simple. What?? How on earth was Death supposed to do anything with that?

‘Failing that, I’ll just have the default. Whatever’s easiest for you to give me.’ He nodded at Death like he was doing him a great favour. Being “easy”. Didn’t he see that every option was easy for Death? It

was just a form to fill out either way. It didn't matter what he chose. *So long as he just chooses something*

Death smiled broadly. 'Mr Jones,' he said through the beginnings of gritted teeth. 'There is no default option.' His smile got yet wider, and he could feel anger in his fingers as he crumpled up another form. '*You just have to pick one.*' Death felt his eye beginning to twitch. This is why he needed therapy. The dead weren't what got to him. It was the living.

Mr Jones gave a hearty shrug. 'Well, what are you doing? I'll just do that.'

'What am I... Mr Jones, I will exist in this universe until there is no more Life. Then, having held the door open for her, I shall follow her into oblivion. You cannot do this, because if you were still alive, we would have to be. So *please* for the love of all things natural, will you just pick something?'

It was at this moment that Mrs Jones appeared at the door with a couple of mugs. 'Hello, deary. Here's your tea, love. He's not being too difficult now is he?'

Death suppressed a sob with a hearty chuckle. He took the tea from her and took a sip. It really did hit the spot. 'Thank you, Mrs Jones. It's lovely.'

'And him?' She gave her husband a flat stare as though she knew how difficult he was being. Then again, Death reasoned, she did live with him. She probably did know.

He gave her a tired smile, trying his best to put more energy in it. Perhaps customer service really wasn't for him. 'We'll get there in the end, I daresay. We sort of have to.'

Mr Jones frowned at this. 'What exactly happens if I don't choose anything? Do I just live forever?'

Still facing Mrs Jones, Death heaved a great sigh. ‘No, John,’ he said, swivelling on his chair to face his client. ‘If you do not pick an option then you’ll be tortured to death and end up in my cloak. I doubt you’d want that.’

Mr Jones considered this. Death half feared he’d just agree to that for the sake of it, leaving Death with a terrible lot of arrangements to make. *That’s really not the plan...* Then Mr Jones shook his head. ‘No, that doesn’t have much appeal to me. What about becoming a vampire? Is that an option?’

Before Death could stop himself, he asked, ‘Why would you make an appointment with *Death* if you had no intention of *dying*? If you want to be a vampire, you have to contact the local governing board and they’ll run an assessment and see whether they want you in their ranks. The trials alone can take decades of training to prepare for!’ Death put his head in his hands. What a mess this was! *Have humans no consideration these days?*

‘So... that’s a no? Right, right, that’s fine. Are you... crying?’ Mr and Mrs Jones exchanged a worried glance.

Death looked up. ‘No,’ he sniffled. ‘I am not. But I would *really* appreciate it if you could pick an option, or else arrange another meeting because at this rate, I’m going to be very late for—my next appointment.’ Yoga. He was going to be late for yoga. He didn’t really want to admit this though. It didn’t look terribly professional to have a yoga session in the middle of the working day. He was going to need it after this though...

‘Right...’ said Mr Jones. ‘I’ll just go for a nice old-fashioned heart attack then? How does that sound?’

Mrs Jones nodded encouragingly. ‘It does run in the family, dear. You’re lucky there.’ She set another mug down in front of her husband. ‘I’ll just be in the lounge if either of you need anything. I’ve

just started a new book, you know Death. It's a murder mystery—right up your alley! Though I suppose you could just consult your documents if you were there.'

Death gave a hearty chuckle. In reality, no he could not. There were confidentiality clauses for a reason. He couldn't very well go around snitching, now, could he? His reputation would be in tatters before the day was out! *It's not worth explaining that though...*

'So... heart attack.' Death began filling out the fresh form.

In the end, it took them another hour to work out all the details, but Mr Jones seemed satisfied with the end result, so that was all that really mattered. He would die peacefully in his sleep at eighty-eight years old. His wife wouldn't be by his side because she was going to die next Thursday on her way back from her book club. But they wouldn't be apart for long. She'd chosen to come back as a ghost until her husband's death. At which point, they would take a walk across a bridge in a world quite different from the one they knew. They would pause there, and then they would jump in together, and join the flow of the eternal current that wove the fabric of the universe.

Death was quite pleased with that ending. It was a rather romantic one, he thought as he was saying goodbye to the couple. Or perhaps he was just making it so in his head. He did have a habit of that.

* * *

Death had to skip yoga that day, which he wasn't best pleased about. But his next session was one he always looked forward to—an author.

'Hiya Death,' said Laura, beckoning him in. Her house, as always, was a terrible mess. Character sheets were scattered every-

where, books lined her walls and stood in wonky piles where she couldn't fit in any more on her shelves. On the floor was an unfinished character design. Paint stained the wooden floor around it, though Laura didn't seem the least bit bothered.

She was in her paint splattered dungarees and had her mass of curls held in place by a paintbrush. Death couldn't quite decide if she'd been using it and had just got it caught in her hair, or whether it was fully intentional. He supposed it didn't really matter.

'Feel free to leave your stuff by the door... might get a bit... green if you don't.'

This time Death did lose the cloak. He knew Laura wasn't one for professionalism. In fact, when she did see his outfit, she just nodded. 'Nice get up.' And then flopped down onto the coach. 'So anyway, I've been thinking... if you were to pierce someone through the eye with a needle, and it went right the way through, could they live? Or is that like a definite no-no? 'Cause I kinda wanted him to be kind of stuck to the wall, but not dead. So... too much?'

Death settled next to her. He thought for a moment. 'Well... that does sound rather unpleasant. The most likely outcome would be death... I can't really see you surviving that, honestly. But pinning him to a wall? With the needle? Are you... quite sure?'

She tossed her hands up in the air. 'Well, obviously not! That's why you're here!' She jumped up then. 'I almost forgot! Biscuits! Can't have a planning session without biscuits!' She returned a moment later with Death's favourite (pink wafers). 'Oh, and I'd also like to pick your brain about some afterlives. Wanna know what's legit and whatnot.'

Death nodded understandingly. He was sure he'd explained before that if she could fathom it, then no matter if it had never existed before, it would now. Afterlives *came from* the mind, after all.

This appointment flew by, as these ones always did.

Brainstorming new ways to kill people was such a fun pastime, Death thought. Almost as good as the afterlife creation. That was just spectacular. And it was nice to work with someone just as passionate as he was.

* * *

Death had two more appointments that day. The first was just a simple planning session. This guy wanted to get run over by a bus “for the lols”. Death was expecting a call back in a year or so to adjust that one slightly. But who was to say? *Humans are strange creatures.*

The second was more of a practical job. He had to travel out of town for it.

He knocked on the door and waited patiently as the beaming father opened the door. ‘Come in, come in, we’re just celeb—’ He paused when he took in who was at his door. ‘Death? How can I help?’

And this was when the guilt hit. Sometimes Death really hated this job. Those accusatory stares. The hard swallows. The slight shakes of their heads. And then the begging. Always the begging.

‘Death, please.’ He was trying to reason with him. Didn’t he realise this wasn’t Death’s doing? ‘Please, she’s just given birth. You can’t take my wife. Please, no. Don’t make my daughter lose her mother. Please. I’ll give you anything. Death, please, anything you want.’

There were tears in his eyes. His voice was cracking. He stared at the cloaked figure before him, and he sank to his knees. ‘Death, please.’

Death didn’t say anything. He never did in times like this. Instead, with his hood still up, Death walked into the house,

leaving the grieving man in his wake. *Ha—wake*—this wasn’t the time for laughing at puns though, Death was well aware.

He walked up the stairs and into the largest bedroom. On the bed sat a weary looking woman in her late twenties. Her mother was sitting beside her, and they were idly chatting. Life stood beside the cradle in the corner.

The gentle hubbub silenced the second Death entered.

‘But she’s already given birth! She’s over the bad bit! You can’t come now!’ The older woman was trying to reach across to get to Death. He wasn’t sure why. Perhaps she intended to beg him the way her son-in-law had. Or perhaps she’d heard stories of how he’d been held hostage under a bed for some time. Myth though it was, perhaps she figured it would be worth a try.

Her daughter was silent. She was just staring at the cot. The silent cot.

Life sighed, and moved aside to let Death stand beside the cot. Inside was the baby, about to draw her last breath. Death smiled down at her. Gently, he reached into the cot and withdrew the soul of the child. ‘Hey there, little one.’ He rocked her softly in his arms. ‘Hush hush, it’s all alright.’

Death took her from the room, heedless of the adults’ cries. Now was not about them. It was about the little one. He carried her out of the house, walking slowly down the street until it felt about right. Then he drew up his scythe and struck it through the air, creating a divide. Slowly, it grew and became a doorway, just big enough for the soul.

‘I know you didn’t have long in this life, but I promise that the next will be *wonderful*.’ He smiled at her. ‘You just wait and see.’ He felt his eyes welling. It had always hurt to see them go. He knew she’d be alright, but he would miss her. He missed all of the souls he’d helped guide. And over the millennia, there had been so many.

She nodded once then floated from his arms through the doorway he had made for her. She didn't look back, determined as she was in the journey before her.

The doorway closed behind her, leaving Death standing in the middle of the road, quite alone. He nodded once towards where the doorway had been, then turned on his heel and began to walk back towards his home.

* * *

Along the way, a figure cloaked in a rainbow of colours joined him. She took Death's arm and walked a few steps in silence before turning to him and asking, 'Where did you send her?' Her eyes were panged with worry. He knew she felt the loss of one of her children, perhaps even more than he did. 'Please tell me it was nice.'

Death smiled at his old friend. 'I'm afraid confidentiality clauses—'

'Death.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I sent her somewhere beautiful.'

And then, arm in arm, the friends walked home. Death to his quaint little cottage, and Life right next door, to the caravan round the back of her gloomy old mansion with the flaking paint and the perpetual draught.

*

Afterlife

M. E. G.

Turn On

‘—yourself!’ the woman shouts through the darkness of the cellar.

Her long nightgown flows behind her as she walks briskly into another corridor. She holds a candle to her face, its flames licking dangerously close to the sharp edges of her cheekbones. Her pupils are chasms of terror as they dart from one corner to another.

‘Who’s there?’ she questions again, to no response.

The woman seems to sense the thing beside her. Just over her shoulder, beyond the edges of her vision, is a large figure cloaked in black. The figure of a nun, her pale face stark against her full habit, stares at the pale woman before stepping back into the darkness.

In the blink of the woman’s eyes, she is sat in a well-lit parlour. She seems overwhelmed to be there, but not entirely surprised. She sits in the corner by a window in a dull grey gown, reading from a book without words.

Her head jolts up at the sound of horses. She watches through the frosty glass as a carriage pulls up outside, and a handsome man steps out. It doesn’t take long for him to find the woman upstairs. She is pacing nervously by now, her cheeks flushed.

‘I came as soon as I received your letter,’ the man says as he charges through the door. ‘Are you well, Lucy?’

The woman looks at her feet, shuffling uncomfortably under the man’s blue eyes. ‘Yes, I am quite well, sir,’ she replies.

‘Quite well? Lucy, your note gave me the fright of my life. You say someone was in the house last night. Tell me, was it not simply Monsieur Heger?’

‘No. No, sir.’ the woman replies. ‘I was awoken by a night terror,

that is all. I am sorry to say that I regretted sending that note as soon as I had sent Joseph to the Parsonage. Still, I thank you for coming.'

Silence, save for the ticking of the grandfather clock between them.

'Perhaps Joseph can offer you some tea, sir?' the woman adds after some time.

'Please, Lucy, how many times must I say, call me Edward.' The concern doesn't leave his eyes as he adds, 'Unfortunately, I have my parish to attend to, and if you do not require my assistance—'

'I do not,' the woman interrupts.

'Then I will see myself out.'

The slamming of a door.

The woman sighs as she holds a hand to her chest, before quickly following him out.

Darkness.

Light. Thousands of electric lights flicker on with an ethereal glow. Some hang from the ceiling. Others are mounted on the wall.

'It is now the half-price sale at—'

* * *

'—have reached new heights recently, as President Zamorna has declared that if the UN sends aid to the civilians caught in the conflict, he will retaliate with nuclear force.'

Silent images of children and their mothers playing in the gore-soaked mud pass by meaninglessly. In one, a man clutches his bleeding arm in a torn shirt, which simply reads *Burberry*. In another, a child picks through the trash at the side of train tracks while men in

camouflage gear watch closely on the other side. There is no greenery on the flat horizon.

‘The Prime Minister has yet to comment on the growing tensions in the region, yet many in the country are calling for a ceasefire.’

More familiar images. A sea of skins of every colour march towards Trafalgar Square. Music is blaring, but their shouts are still audible. Men in bright green vests watch lazily from the sidelines. The image zooms in on a woman in a purple headscarf. She holds a fitted sheet with the words ‘Ashamed to be British’ spray painted on in assorted colours.

‘For more on this story, you can watch an interview with our war correspondent, John Rivers, by pressing the red button,’ the woman says. She sits in a studio, her blood-red dress soaking into the chair behind her as people run back and forth.

‘In other news,’ she says, ‘The World Health Organisation has recently called for what it has termed the “last attack on global warming”. This follows reports that temperatures at the polar ice caps have risen by 1.5 degrees in the past decade.’

The colours change from red to white. Images appear of ice as sharp as glass floating across the ocean before collapsing. A polar bear tries desperately to pick up its cubs as ice cracks under its feet.

‘WHO Spokesman Robert Moore has declared this to be a national emergency. He has called for governments around the world to submit long-term, sustainable plans to combat rising temperatures.’

From white to red again. A man with dark bags under his eyes stands in front of a crimson background. He looks down at a heavy document, his eyes trailing across its contents.

‘If we do not do something to combat this crisis now,’ he says, ‘There will be nothing left for the next generation to inherit.’

He is blinded by the occasional blast of a camera as lines begin to emerge around him.

‘Census data shows that sea levels have risen rapidly around Britain in the past five years, although many continue to deny the effects of carbon emissions.’”

A thin line rises from blue to a red peak, like a knife tipped with blood.

‘Whether or not Britain does act on these fears, the heat is certainly rising.’ The woman smiles as she returns. ‘And now for the news where you are. I have been Caroline Helstone, reporting for—’

* * *

‘—wants me, I’ll be in my room.’

The sound of laughter. Disembodied voices cackle as two men walk through a well-lit bar. They sit around a table in the centre, three seats too big for them.

‘I’m telling you, Artie,’ one of the men says. He speaks with an American accent, sporting heavily oiled hair and a three-piece suit. ‘Bridesmaids.’ He gestures around his chest with his hands, earning more laughter from the unseen audience.

‘I don’t know, Grant,’ Artie replies. He wears a loose shirt from some kind of American sport. His blonde hair is a mess of curls. ‘Hannah and I have been fine until now. Plus, I don’t even know this Fred guy.’

‘That’s the beauty of The Friend of the Groom trick, Artie. You don’t have to!’ Grant tries his best to wink as the audience laughs. Artie is smiling, too.

‘Come on,’ Grant eggs. ‘Don’t make me double dare you.’

‘You wouldn’t,’ his friend replies, his smile widening.

‘Oh, I would.’

‘You wouldn’t.’

‘I would.’

‘You wouldn’t!’

‘I would!’

‘You wouldn’t!’

‘I would!’

Both men are standing now, their grins almost touching. Without another word, they jump over the tables and out of the door. They are in a pristine white room before they can be out of breath. Men in shirts and women in tuxedos pretend to make small talk around them.

‘That must be the mother-in-law,’ Grant says, pointing at an elderly lady in a floral dress.

‘How can you tell?’

‘She hasn’t stopped talking in nearly twenty minutes. Remind—,’ Grant can’t finish his sentence as the laughter roars around him. ‘Remind me never to marry, Artie. Especially if her mother looks like that!’

Artie sighs. ‘I thought you’d said there’d be young bridesmaids, Grant. These lot look like they’ve just met Queen Victoria.’

Suddenly, the image changes. Both men now wear top hats and waistcoats. They are standing in the bar they were in earlier, but it is different. It has no colour, save a murky yellow.

‘Good day, m’lady,’ not-Grant says in what could almost be a cockney accent. ‘Do’y mind if I call you Mrs Brontë with Eyre like that.’ Only a few voices chuckle at his comment.

‘Oh my,’ the woman replies as she turns. Her teeth are blackened, and her face is riddled with pockmarks, much to not-Grant’s disgust.

‘Aren’t you a fine gentleman?’

Grant shudders as he awakes from his daydream.

‘Come on,’ he says. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘All rise for the bride!’

As Artie and Grant are forced to stop, the scene changes. A woman is crying on a new leather sofa. Ice cream drips in slow drops from around her mouth.

‘Oh sweetie,’ another woman says, walking towards her. ‘Is it that time of the month again? You remember what happened last time, with the—’

‘It’s Grant!’ the crying woman interrupts ‘He—’

* * *

‘—do you get your ideas from?’ another woman’s voice interrupts. She is sitting, hand on her chin, on a green sofa, looking across a strangely shaped coffee table. She wears a parchment dress, patterned with various barely visible images.

‘Well, that’s the thing,’ the other woman responds. She runs her hand through her cropped brown hair as she talks. ‘I’m not sure. I think a lot comes from the stories I grew up with.’

‘In Haworth, you mean?’ the parchment woman probes.

‘Near enough. I was sixteen when I first read *Jane Eyre* and was captivated by Mr Rochester.’ Members of the audience, now visible, nod their heads in unison. ‘I wanted to marry him. I wanted to be him. Only as I grew older did I realise how much of a villain he actually was.’

The parchment woman hums in agreement. ‘Yes,’ she says. ‘And

that is something you explore a few times in this book, isn't it?' She holds up a small volume with a black cover. The only word visible in stunning red is *Haunted*.

'Yes, I do.'

'Did you ever worry about how readers would react to seeing stories they are also familiar with presented in this horrific way?'

'I did,' the author confesses. 'I used to have nightmares that the sisters were chasing me. They were going to bury me in my manuscript.' The audience laughs while the author forces a smile.

'Well,' the parchment woman interjects. 'I think you have done a wonderful job, and those strange sisters would be proud.' The author looks like she is biting back tears.

'And just to remind the viewers at home,' the host continues. 'They can pick up *Haunted* at any local bookstore. That's *Haunted* by Gemma Matthews. Two weeks in a row on *The New York Times* Bestseller List, isn't that right?'

'Yes,' Gemma gulps.

'And that's not all, book lovers,' the parchment woman announces. 'We have a special treat for you. For your chance to win a free literary tour around Britain, visiting such sites as Hardy Country, Shakespeare's Globe, and, yes, even the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, answer this question: When the Brontë sisters published their first novels, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, what names did they publish under? Was it:

A. Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell.

B: Caroline, Edward, and Arthur Bell.

Or C. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Bell?

Text your answers to the phone number on screen now or visit our website for more details.

‘Now, before you go, Gemma, tell me, what’s next?’ The author’s face has reset itself into a straight line. ‘Well, I’ve actually been working on a longer piece. It is about a father and son who were murdered up on the—’

* * *

‘—continue to pursue the suspect.’

Running.

Someone is running.

It is night, and the distant streetlights blur like watery lines. The running man’s face is not visible, but he pants audibly.

‘Stop!’ he shouts, his words flashing in front of him.

The hooded figure he is chasing does not slow down. He is like a shadow passing into the trees. A few seconds later, the man follows. He is slashed by twigs and branches as he runs. His breathing is laborious as the leaves crunch underfoot. Beyond the narrow beam of his torchlight, the hooded figure still runs, weaving between the trunks.

‘Officer Poole continues to pursue the suspect on foot,’ a voice says. ‘Little does the suspect know that more officers are waiting for him on the other side of the trail.’

Flashes between the darkness. Well-worn boots running through a small stream. A pair of glowing white eyes in the bushes. Empty crisp packets and cans of energy drink on the muddy ground. Officer Poole is beginning to slow now, but so is his prey. From the other side of the trees, flashes of red and white shine apocalyptically through the barren canopy. His prey hesitates. Officer Poole strikes.

‘Don’t move!’ he shouts as he leaps onto the hooded figure’s back. ‘Stay where you are!’

The hooded figure attempts to escape, but it is too late. Movement in the treeline. Reinforcements have arrived. Officer Poole clasps a sliver pair of handcuffs tightly around the hooded figure's wrists. The forest fades to black.

'Back at the station,' the unseen voice continues, darkness turning into a brightly lit room with a table and chair. 'Eddie has been placed in the interrogation room, where Officers Poole and Fairfax question him about Ann's whereabouts.'

'Why did you run from us, Eddie?' one of the officers asks. Eddie's hood has been pulled back, revealing nothing but a blur.

'Dun't know,' he replies.

'You don't know? Do you know what we found in your house, Eddie?'

'No.'

'We found this in the attic,' the officer holds up a large plastic bag of what looks like hair, although chunks of red are stuck to the side.

'Where's Ann, Eddie?' the other officer asks.

'I dun't know.'

'So you know who Ann Mason is, then?'

Eddie hesitates before replying.

"No."

'Do you know what else we found in your attic, Eddie?' the officer presses. 'Chains. With your fingerprints on.'

Eddie looks away.

'Where is Ann, Eddie?'

'Crazy bitch,' Eddie mutters.

'What did you say?'

'I said she were a crazy bitch. Always fuckin' bitin' me. She got what were comin' to 'er.'

'Where is she, Eddie?'

'Killed 'erself.'

'Ann Mason committed suicide?'

'Yeah.'

'Why didn't you call the police if you knew?'

Eddie doesn't reply.

Silence in the room, save for heavy breathing and the ticking of a clock.

'Why didn't you call the police if you knew?' the officer repeats.

'Because—'

* * *

—Bell, Curator of the Museum, says that he hopes the new exhibit will encourage visitors to brave the weather and learn more about this piece of local history.'

The red chair again. A man sits in it this time. His dark head is bald and he is sweating in his suit. He forces a smile as the scene changes.

The man changes into a woman, made of already rusted iron. Two other women stand beside her. All three of them look up to the sky in agonised ecstasy. Leaves writhe in the background as petals are torn from thin stems. They are like the animals when Adam and Eve fell.

'Well, we were very grateful t' work wi' Cartwright's, a local company, on this, our new exhibition.' A man, soaked from the rain,

shouts over the wind. The women's eyes seem to follow him as he speaks. 'It's been long in t' making, but I'm very pleased wi' how it turned out.'

One of the women sneaks into sight. She is the smallest of the three, with large spectacles welded to the sides of her head. Her dress, like her sisters', reaches all the way to the floor, where it is secured in the soil with heavy rivets. She does not speak. Still, her eyes seem to cry, *Free me!*

'We've 'ad a lot of interest in it already, actually,' the man continues, replacing the woman's endless stare. 'And not just in the sisters here, but in t' house as well. We sold out of tickets today as people came t' see not just these new, impressive exhibits, but t' old ones, too.'

Rows of everyday items, worn by time, drift into view. A torn scrap of paper with words scribbled on it. A pair of battered boots. A four-poster bed with a dress suspended next to it.

'The Museum holds many items once owned by the family,' a voice speaks over the objects. 'Every year, thousands of visitors, or, as they like to call themselves, "pilgrims", journey to this shrine to worship their favourite authors.'

A child, wrapped tightly in a yellow raincoat, replaces the sea of objects.

'I really enjoyed it,' she says as a hand presses her back. 'I thought it were really fun and I learned a lot.'

'Although it is a long drive from any motorway, the Museum has much to offer families, being a place to bring the kids this summer,' the voiceover continues. It seems to come from the three iron women as they approach with an uncomfortable familiarity again. 'These sculptures could well be on their way to transforming the Museum from Wuthering Heights into Wuthering Sights.'

The bald man is still smiling as the sisters fade into him.

‘And now it’s time for the weather,’ he says. ‘How is it looking, Paul?’

‘Not good, I’m afraid,’ Paul says. He is a thin man in a suit which doesn’t quite fit him.

‘Storm Emily is showing no signs of relenting any time soon, bad news if you were planning on getting the washing out. You can see here that on Monday—’

* * *

‘—do with the money?’ A grinning man in a golden waistcoat and top hat looks expectantly at a family in red overalls.

They look at each other with mischievous smiles as the older man, the father and husband, replies. ‘A new car would be nice, Pat, honestly. But no. We’d really like to take the kids on holiday again. We haven’t been abroad in a few years now.’

‘And where would you go?’ the man in the golden suit asks.

‘The last time we went on holiday,’ the father begins. His name tag says Fred.

‘We went to Belgium, and we really enjoyed it, so there again probably, or somewhere similar.’

‘Brilliant,’ Pat exclaims. ‘Well, the Reed family, you’ve made it this far. Now, you’re only a few steps away from that £10,000 jackpot. Here’s what you have to do.’ As he speaks, the ground beneath his feet begins to glow with a fake golden hue.

‘In a few moments, I’m going to ask you three questions. On the ground below you there are three answers. You have to choose the

correct answer to progress to the next stage. Is that clear?’

The family nod their blonde heads in unison.

‘Great! Only one of you can play this game, but the other three can help from the sidelines, so who will it be?’ Fred pushes a young boy forward. His name tag says Bran.

‘I’ll go,’ he says in a voice just beginning to break.

‘Good man. Are you ready to play The Crossing?’ As he asks the question, the floor flashes and loud music blares. He doesn’t wait for the family’s response before continuing.

‘Question One: Which planet is called the blue planet? Is it A. Earth, B. Mars, or C. Venus?’ The child, Bran, smiles confidently at this question.

‘Earth,’ he says.

‘You think it is A. Earth?’ Bran nods. ‘Family, what do you think?’

‘That’s what I’d have gone with,’ Fred replies.

‘Well, let’s see if you’re right. Is the answer A. Earth?’ A pause, almost long enough to make Bran lose his confidence. Before he can, however, gold turns to emerald beneath his feet. He is correct.

‘Well done, man. Now, there are only two questions left before you reach £10,000. Are you ready for your next question?’ Bran nods. ‘Here it is. Question Two: When is the last wolf thought to have been killed in Britain? Is it A. 1580, B. 1680, or C. 1780?’

The boy is less confident on this one. He looks over his shoulder at his family, desperate for a hint.

‘What do we think, guys?’ Pat asks them. ‘I’m pretty sure it’s B,’ the father says, fat fingers on his chin.

‘Are you locking in B?’ Pat pushes.

‘Yeah, go for it, Bran.’ He does.

Another pause.

Another flash of green.

The excitement is palpable in the room as Pat again asks, ‘Are you ready for the final question?’ The whole family shouts ‘yes!’ this time. ‘Question Three: Which of these is not a poem by Emily Brontë. Is it A. “The Prisoner”, B. “The Night is Darkening Round Me” or C. “Life”?’

Silence.

They don’t know the answer. Each of them stands there, looking at the writing on the ground with mouths open.

‘I think—’

* * *

‘—probably around the nineteenth century.’

An old man holds a small locket delicately between his fingers. It is made of a rough black material, like a jet. Its oily colour makes it look like it has just been dragged up from the sea on a stormy night, contrasting sharply with the midsummer sun which shines on the freshly mown grass below it. A grand, off-white house stands behind, sentry-like, casting no shadows.

‘Of course,’ the old man continues. He wears a monocle rimmed with sweat and a brown tweed suit. ‘Objects like this were all the fashion back then, as you know, because... what’s inside?’

The old man addresses a sour, middle-aged woman. Her hair is pulled tightly behind her, and she is nodding expectantly.

‘A lock of hair,’ she replies. As the old man opens the locket on a white tablecloth, a significant strand of orange hair bursts out like air

from a coffin.

'A lock of hair,' the man repeats. 'Tell me, do you know whose hair this is, Shirley?'

'No,' Shirley replies.

'Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing,' the old man explains. 'Although I've never seen an item quite like it before. You're probably wondering how much it is worth, is that right?'

Shirley nods even more eagerly.

'I would expect that if this were to go on auction today to the avid collector, it would fetch somewhere in the region of one to two thousand pounds.'

Shirley's pupils go as wide as the jet before her. It hangs heavily around the man's fingers like an anchor.

'Wow,' Shirley says. 'And to think it's been in our family all this time.'

'It is really quite extraordinary,' the old man agrees. 'I must admit, I'd be keen to own it myself.' As they chuckle, the midsummer garden fades to black.

Blackness fades back to a Victorian parlour. Two women stand around a handkerchief. It is embroidered with faded pink flowers, less vibrant now than the vivid marks of reddish brown spattered across its surface.

'Now, we have a special treat for viewers at home today,' one of the women says. 'Dr Kildair, would you like to explain?'

'Indeed, I would,' the other woman replies. 'This is a handkerchief which we know once belonged to one of the ladies of the house. You can see on the side here.' The woman points at a pair of letters in a thin thread.

'The letters AB,' she explains. 'And the marks on it here?' she

points at those omnipresent stains. “Any guesses as to what they are?”

‘I rather fear it is blood,’ the other woman says between clenched teeth.

‘And you’d be right. These are the marks of tuberculosis, which unfortunately killed the previous owner of this handkerchief. Now, we have a few theories as to whose handkerchief this might have been. The first is that it belonged to Anne—’

* * *

‘—Victorians!’ someone with a faux cockney accent blurts. There is no time to see them before they change.

‘Hello,’ a man dressed as a Victorian maid smiles uncomfortably into the camera. ‘I’m an average Victorian maid, and today, I will show you my tips and tricks for keeping my master’s home spick and span!’

The average Victorian maid sits in a bed two sizes too small for him. He stretches and speaks again.

‘My day begins at 4.30am every morning. My master likes his breakfast prepared as soon as he wakes up, and it is my job to light all the stoves and fireplaces in the house.’ The average Victorian maid scrubs soot from a fireplace that hasn’t been lit in decades.

‘Once I’ve done that,’ he says, ‘It’s time to wash the dishes. Don’t worry. I’ve got just the thing to get all those tricky stains out. It’s arsenic!’

As the average Victorian maid speaks, he holds a black bottle before his face. It is painted with a large image of a skull and crossbones.

‘My friend Charlotte recommended this to me... before she

died!' the average Victorian maid chuckles. "It's perfect for my master's fine china!"

The average Victorian maid's teeth flash white alongside the plates before she moves to a bed next to the kitchen sink.

'My next job is to change the master's bed sheets. It looks like they've got lice again. Don't worry, I've got just the thing!' The average Victorian maid holds up the same bottle again. 'That's right, we Victorians use arsenic for all sorts of things!' The average Victorian maid throws the white powder over the bed. It mists in the air like a spectre.

'Oh my,' the average Victorian maid fanes. 'All this hard work does have me sweating... and dizzy. Luckily, I've got my makeup to make me look as good as new.' He pulls out a smaller bottle with the same skull and crossbones printed on it. 'What's my secret? Go on then, since you asked so nicely. It's arsenic.'

As the average Victorian maid begins to apply the same white powder. He begins to cough, sputtering until he collapses too quickly into a stiff, still-breathing corpse. The image fades.

'That's right,' the faux cockney accent resumes. 'The Victorians really did use arsenic for everything. Arsenic can be really poisonous even in the smallest doses, so don't try this at home. Here is something you can make yourself!'

The average Victorian maid appears again. This time, he is wearing a top hat and a large waistcoat. 'Do you want t' know how t' make your own authentic Victorian chimney sweeper? Here's what you'll need. First of all, find yourself a nice thin—'

* * *

—of drama and mystery in this all-new episode of Southcoat Abbey'

The woman again. Lucy. She wears the same dull grey gown as she stares at a large Gothic Abbey, complete with oak doors and the faded colours of stained-glass windows.

‘Previously,’ she says as she steps inside.

‘Reverend Bell, meet Arthur’s new Governess, Ms Lucy Grey.’ A sour old man with a vaguely European accent introduces the woman to the man she spoke to earlier.

‘Pleasure to meet you, sir,’ she answers, her eyes glistening.

‘That’s her, there,’ another woman says, her lips the colour of blood as she bites them.

‘Is it true you have a room at Southcoat?’ she asks. ‘They say Monsieur Heger is... an odd fellow.’

Before Lucy can reply, the other woman continues.

‘They say he still keeps his wife locked up in there. They say that it is haunted by the ghosts of the nuns who used to worship there.’

‘I’m afraid I am needed on the continent, Madam Lucy,’ the old man interrupts, dragging Lucy to the parlour again.

‘But, Monsieur,’ she says. ‘What about the noises I heard? What about Arth—’

‘Be honest with me, Lucy,’ Edward interrupts. ‘What is happening at Southcoat Abbey?’

Darkness.

Candlelight.

Lucy strikes a match and lights the wick of a candle at a bedside table. She sits writing in silence, the snow beating at her windows. The scene does not change for several moments.

Lucy is deep in thought when she is startled by a loud rapping on the door. She sighs and rolls her eyes before straightening her

nightgown and opening it. There is no one on the other side, however. Not even a whisper.

‘Hello?’ she shouts into the dark passage. ‘Arthur? Did you have a nightmare again?’

The boy, if he is really there, does not respond. Only the snow answers as Lucy sighs again, shutting the door with a loud click. She barely makes it to her desk before someone knocks again, harder this time. Lucy clutches her chest tightly, staring wide-eyed at the warped wooden frame.

‘Hello?’ she questions, quieter now. ‘This isn’t funny,’

She swings the door open again.

Again, there is no one there.

Movement.

In her peripheral vision, Lucy sees the end of a black habit that is just trailing around a corner.

‘Who’s there?’ Lucy gasps.

Silence.

She grabs the candle and follows whoever she just saw down the corridor. In the blink of an eye, Lucy finds herself at the entrance to a spiral staircase. The stones descend into the darkness like something described by Dante. Lucy takes a deep breath, before walking down them. The stairs lead into a familiar cellar. She looks around as though she has never been there before.

‘Show—’

Turn Off

*

The Preparation of Astronaut 52199

Zay Camomile

Armitage Pierce sat behind a triple-paned, aluminosilicate glass window. On the other side was everything, a beautiful collection of shining stars like polished pearls in an ocean of black. The sight was his only relief. In his hand sagged a burger, a bite of which scraped down his throat. The collar of his grey jumpsuit choked him, and the metal seat hurt his back. Worse yet were the four white walls that surrounded him. Brown lines slid around them like streaks from countless invisible paintbrushes, creating impressions of an ever-shifting sepia-toned forest. Like cave paintings, the outlines of creatures like birds and deer were rendered mid-motion, surrounded by plants and clouds. They were gorgeous to look at, for the first ten days. Eighty-nine days later, all they did was hurt his eyes. His only company, save the fox plush tucked into his uncomfortable bed in the corner, was a grating electronic buzz.

‘I can’t wait until I don’t have to hear that noise anymore,’ Armitage groaned. His voice was gruff—a friend once said he could make a compliment sound like a threat. He picked up his plastic cup. Printed onto it were two words in formal grey text: *Dolusim Incorporated*. He finished his water and placed the cup down. The moment it touched the table, some of the brown lines on the walls started racing towards him. They sped down the wall, across the floor, up the table and straight towards the food tray before converging to make a brown rectangle around the tray. It sank into the table. Once the tray was out of sight, the hole in the table sealed itself and the lines ran back to the walls.

‘Uh, thank you,’ he said to the air.

‘You are welcome, Armitage Pierce.’ The voice was as omnipresent as the buzz. It sounded like a young woman, but her voice was emotionless. Hidden under her monotonous syllables was a garbled, whine-like echo, as if the loudspeaker was malfunctioning.

‘Oh! Uh, how are you?’ Armitage asked. ‘You don’t speak very

often...’

‘I am an artificial intelligence,’ the voice replied. ‘I am always doing fine.’

‘Ah. Well.’ He scratched his bald head and sat in now awkward silence. ‘So... how long do I have left until I finish this isolation training?’

‘5 minutes and 4 seconds.’

That brought a small smile to his stoic face, and he started stroking his bushy beard. *Just a couple more minutes and this will all have been worth it.* He thought back to his first steps aboard the ship, his heart pounding with fearful excitement as he watched stratosphere turn to exosphere turn to limitless space. The sight of Earth humbled him every time he saw it. *Ninety-nine days of isolation down, minutes to go.*

He pulled down his sleeve. The numbers 2190 were tattooed on his wrist, and the sight of them gave him courage. He let his memory take him back several years to the time where a very important woman visited his school. She had pale skin, fierce grey eyes and short blonde hair. She wore an armoured white suit with an angular helmet in her hand and a rifle strapped to her back. Printed onto the side of her helmet was the number 2190.

‘You have... 1 minute until you finish your isolation training. Also, is that a Bridget Louise Brooks tattoo?’

Armitage jumped to his feet and looked around him frantically. *How did you...* ‘Yes. Yes it is. She came to my school when I was a kid and gave a speech. I think she went to a lot of different schools before her voyage. I got to wear her visor, I got to see the heat-signatures of all my friends! It was so inspiring. How is her voyage to—’

‘Jupiter? She and her squadron are scheduled to return in several years. She was remarkable, and she is missed every day.’

A new door opened up from the wall, revealing a long hallway with a white door at the end. The brown lines had created dense foliage along the walls.

‘Congratulations, Trainee 52199. You have finished your isolation training and will now receive crucial information. So, walk down the hallway.’

Thoughts of his idol, Bridget Louise Brooks, hung on the peripheries of his mind, but they were overshadowed by the excitement and nervousness he felt. He clenched his fists.

‘Start walking, Armitage Pierce.’

His blood ran cold. He started walking. With every step, his anxiety started to outweigh his excitement. The ceiling was low. The space was tight. The electronic hum was deafening. Then he was at the door, gritting his teeth at the noise. *No time like the present.* He pressed the circular button next to it and it opened with a whoosh, revealing pure darkness and stark silence. He stepped inside.

For a couple of moments, there was nothing. Then, in an instant, a bright light and a deafening hum overwhelmed him. He shut his eyes and covered his ears, waiting until they both calmed. When he opened his eyes, he could hardly believe what he saw. He was stood in a massive octagonal room with stairs on all sides. The stairs led down to a circular floor with a single chair. *The spaceship I boarded was not big enough to house this.* On each of the eight white walls were eight writhing machines. They were limbless, their bodies made out of thick copper-like wires, which protruded from the wall. All the wires coalesced into the shape of a vaguely humanoid worm. They had no face. Instead, there was only a large camera lens. Covering the lens were spindly hands made of wire, giving the machines the vaguest impression of a child covering their face. They looked around with an almost desperate energy. One was right above Armitage, and he could hear its

rattling clicks. Not knowing what else to do, he started walking down. With every step, the heads of the eight robots would snap towards him. For the first time since starting his training, he missed Earth. *At least this chair has a back*, Armitage thought to himself once he got to it. Then he sat down.

‘Congratulations.’

It was the same female voice as the one from the canteen. The robots continued to thrash, but then that same electronic buzz filled the room, and they froze. Silence. Armitage looked at the robots. *It’s like they’ve been... paused*. There was another buzz, this time for only a moment, but once it was gone the hands retreated from the lenses of the machines. Their heads pointed down for a moment before jerking up in unison, clicking and whirring before releasing beams of yellow light. All of the white walls were suddenly covered in dozens of shifting paintings, with animals and trees forming and vanishing like strobe lights. The lights from the machines converged onto the ceiling like a spotlight and the moment they met, a hand appeared. It was delicate, with long painted nails, and it lurched forwards towards Armitage. He watched with amazement as one of the robot heads pointed itself downward at the same time. *They’re tracking the hand? No... they’re creating it. But how?* Then, in one swift movement, the hologram fell out of the ceiling. Armitage saw folds of fabric, wide grey eyes and outstretched claws plummeting towards him. He closed his eyes in terror and braced himself, but nothing hit him. After a couple of moments, he opened his eyes. What floated in front of him looked like Bridget Louise Brooks, but wrong. The hologram was thrice the size of a regular human. She was dressed in an elegant ball gown decorated with floral patterns. All of her was entirely sepia toned, her grey eyes being the only exception. But even those were off; they were soft, not focused. Her blonde hair was shoulder length, not short. Her build was lithe, not athletic. Despite the differences, Armitage still felt like how

he did as a kid when he looked at Bridget Louise Brooks: starstruck. But unlike the real person, there was an undercurrent of unease when he looked at her simulacrum.

‘Hello, Armitage Pierce.’ Her voice was warm and expressive, as if she was greeting an old friend. ‘Congratulations, once again for making it through your one hundred days of isolation. You have proven yourself worthy of becoming a Dolusim astronaut. How do you feel?’

‘Confused,’ he answered in earnest, causing her to giggle. The robots began whirring, and she flickered for a couple of moments before coming back into focus.

‘That is understandable. Let me explain. I am Ewe. I am the artificial intelligence at the heart of Dolusim Incorporated, and I have chosen this form as I believe that it will be most appealing to you. Apologies for my... dry responses during your isolation. You had to believe that I was a mindless AI. If not, who knows who you could have told about me.’

‘Who knows about you?’

‘Every astronaut and higher-up in Dolusim, and not a soul more. Chaos would break out otherwise.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, first take a deep breath. When you lived on Earth, did you ever gaze upon the night sky and wonder if there was life out there?’

‘Constantly.’

‘Good. Your ability to wonder is our doing. One of the first things you need to know before becoming a Dolusim astronaut is this: your sky is fake. It is an illusion, created by Dolusim Incorporated.’

Armitage got up and looked at Ewe for a long time. Her unblinking grey eyes returned his gaze. He opened his mouth, closed

it, blinked, then opened it again.

‘You can’t be serious.’

Ewe smiled, and he immediately wished that she would stop.
‘But it’s true. We have the ability to simulate lots of things. Just watch.’

She snapped her fingers, and the room vanished. It was just the two of them, blanketed in a starless black. He looked around and a rush of panic flooded through his body. It took all he could to not scream. He expected to start floating, to freeze and choke and die under Ewe’s grey gaze. But instead, he stayed standing. She watched him look around in terror for a couple of moments, then snapped her fingers again. The black was replaced by a sunny field full of strangers. A little girl sailed a kite while her brother watched, envy burning in his eyes. An elderly couple sat on a bench, their hands intertwined, a comfortable silence keeping them company. A group of young people tried and failed to keep a football from touching the ground, laughing off their failures while their peers lounged underneath the shade of a large tree. It looked perfect, so real that Armitage almost couldn’t believe that he wasn’t back on Earth. Another emotion shot through him; a longing so palatable he could almost taste it, a desire so powerful he could pray to it. Then Ewe snapped her fingers again and they were back in the white room, with the limbless robots and the strange paintings. He looked back up to her, his hands shaking.

‘What about... my window? The window looking to space? Was that real?’

‘Ah yes, right. We never left Earth.’

‘I...’ He sank back into his chair. ‘What does the real sky look like? Why are you hiding it? Is anything real?’

She floated down closer to him. ‘Oh dear. Listen, the real sky... is not something you are prepared to see at the moment. But there *are* real things. I am real. Your fellow astronauts will be real. And the

threat you all face is real too. There is a reason why we never sent you up there.'

'Threat? What threat?' Armitage stood up so fast the chair fell on its side. 'I did all this to explore space, to be up at the forefront of science and technology, to improve our understanding of the universe! And now you tell me the sky is fake, and there's a threat I need to face? I'm an astronaut, not a soldier!'

'You will need to be both. The threat is... well, for now, this word will be the easiest for you to grasp: aliens.'

She snapped her fingers again. Colour and form fell away from the world, revealing a brown line grid which Armitage stood on and Ewe floated over. The ceiling had an identical grid, with both stretching into the infinite distance. Everything else was black. A section in front of them began stretching upwards like a pillar until it passed Armitage's height. Another from the ceiling stretched downwards, and when the two pillars met, a mass of shifting colour and shape burst forth. The grid pillars rocketed back into their initial states and the object they created floated down until it touched the floor, settling into one form. It looked like a stereotypical alien; grey skin, massive head, and large black eyes. It swayed as if moved by a breeze.

'This is the enemy?'

'This is how they will appear to you without a visor.' She snapped her fingers and one of the machines stretched towards the two of them, a metal helmet in its hand. *The same one Bridget Louise Brooks uses.*

'Correct. Put it on and look at the alien.'

Armitage did as he was told and started to shake. The stereotypical alien looked identical, but it now stood in the mouth of something terrible. First were the large jaws, which were lined with

translucent needle-like teeth. The smallest tooth was twice the size of Armitage. Behind the jaws were more teeth which stretched all the way down into a cavernous mouth. The mouth was attached to a pale humanoid face which lacked any features except what looked like voluminous hair made of long black feathers. Each strand of the feathered hair independently flowed at regular intervals, leaving the impression of a floating, half-remembered mermaid. It had two large arms, each delicate and pale with seven grasping fingers. The underside of the arms had a long organic gash, from which countless pale orange tentacles peeked out. These arms were attached to a humanoid torso, but any human resemblance ended there. The rest of the body was a pale fleshy cylinder which stretched into forever, countless twisting in the distance. It snapped its mouth shut and its entire jaw lurched backwards until its face looked more humanoid. The only exception were the teeth which were much larger than the jaws which contained them. The jaw lurched forward again, opening to reveal Bridget Louise Brooks stood inside. She looked identical to the way Armitage remembered. As Bridget looked to him and waved, the rest of the alien's body turned so translucent that Armitage could barely see it.

'I...'

Bridget Louise Brooks held her hand out. He looked to her for a long time, then back up to Ewe. She looked down on him with something resembling sympathy.

'Please,' he said, his voice quiet. 'Make it go away.'

Ewe snapped her fingers, and the alien disappeared. He looked down, but it was only the brown grids.

'Take me back. To the room I saw when I opened that door.'

She snapped her fingers and there were white walls, projecting robots, and a chair on its side. He moved it upright, then sat down

speechless. He took off his helmet and stared at it. Printed onto the side was the number 52199.

‘Trust nothing but your helmet visor, Armitage Pierce. This is the life you have chosen. Once you walk out of here, you will be armed and assigned to a squadron of Dolusim astronauts. Get to know them, and get to trust them, for life will be short without them. The exit is at the top of the stairs.’

He looked up. There was a white door waiting for him. Without a word, he stood and walked up the steps until he stood in front of it. He looked back to see Ewe, a floating beauty, surrounded by the shifting paintings of a world he would never see again. Everything flickered for a moment.

‘Ewe. I don’t suppose you’re an alien illusion too?’

She laughed. ‘If you ever have any doubt, check your visor. Now onwards, Dolusim Astronaut 52199. You and your brave team are all that stand in the way between us and... them.’

The abstracted forms of the aliens appeared in the paintings on the walls, their long bodies stretching across most of them. Armitage saw many things in their jaws; money, animals, people. He saw unwitting victims walking towards these creatures, arms outstretched, desperate to pair with what they thought they needed. He knew that once those jaws shut around them, they would never be seen again. The thought of it made him sick.

“Damn it. There’s no real choice, is there?”

He could feel Ewe’s grey eyes burning into his back. Wordless, he pressed the button. The door opened with a whoosh. A part of him told him to put on the visor and look at her, but he decided against it. He did not want to know what else he would see.

The End



How can a single tree come to shape the very rhythms of someone's daily life? Or an unassuming pub harbour the explosive emotions of a lost love story?

Ebbs and Flows is a compilation of moving, life-affirming, and ultimately deeply human short stories written by talented students across the UK. Through the pages of this collection, we see life at both its very beginning—in the form of a lamb who comes to represent the turbulent depths of a father-daughter relationship—and its end, as we're plunged into the supernatural world of witnesses who wreak havoc in the sleepy neighbourhood of Agnes Green, before ultimately meeting Death himself, working diligently from his humble abode on the hill. Boasting a rich diversity of genres, from historical fiction to sci-fi and fantasy, this engaging collection brings to the fore the cycles that govern our lives, from orbiting planets and the waxing and waning of the moon, to the changing channels on our TV screens. In doing so, it exposes ways in which our stories are all inescapably interwoven with the world around us.

Ebbs & Flows