

Part 1

The poor lads were left wondering if they had ever really known her at all. They didn't speak to each other about any of it; it never seemed necessary nor likely to help. Being together seemed ample respite and refuge. I suppose it's unfair to say who it was harder on, Calum certainly cried more. He was crying now, quietly, bar the fragmented coughs it was forcing up from his shallow breaths.

The house was calmer since she'd left. Frost covered the ground outside. Conor made tea and loaded their Thermos flasks, while Calum finished up the bacon, scrambled eggs, and a few slices of toast. He spooned the remaining eggs into the bacon tray, covered it with foil and left it on the table aside the remaining half bag of Warburtons Toastie. It wouldn't be much longer before the smell of bacon passed its way down the main hall, up the stairs and out from the jutting beams and low ceilings towards the bright annex with its tall windows that they'd had built six years ago. They knew Dad would be thrilled to wake to breakfast, and more so if he'd come to find they weren't there. Not because he didn't love the boys, but because the past weeks had been hard again.

They went into the outhouse, already well wrapped in thermals, hopped quickly on pointed toes to the big chest of winter essentials: puffy jackets, waterproof trousers and socks. Gloves, beanies and buffs from Mum's trail races all followed. Boots on and nearly doubled in size, they looked out at each other from their turrets and nodded. Ready? Nearly. Calum regarded Conor's full hands and turned back to grab his Thermos and breakfast. They stepped outside.

They loved Ella. A sister six years older is practically guaranteed to be worshipped by a pair of younger brothers. They had no interests of their own; they were her shadow. Conor recalled warm mornings when he'd wake and find her sitting at the end of his bed, looking out the window. Her eyes had always been taut, crows-feet at fifteen, taking in far more than you or I. Opportunities. Threats. They could protect you, those eyes. They still saw as much as they ever did, but now they housed a menacing cold.

Their steps were broken glass on the frost as they came to the stream by their oak. They took their seats, resting against the trunk. Calum on the low branch, his own, with the make-shift cup holder - a gnarled and twisting root - which perfectly fit his Thermos. It had been the redeeming feature that allowed him to accept this otherwise shameful bottom bunk with dignity. He had always felt she was above him, a stained-glass window. No longer, now she was lower, and she had his heels. They were no longer tears of sadness, but fear. It's dangerous to try to save someone who's drowning, especially if they want you dead.

Conor was above him, listening to the cough-cry of his brother. He was fully reclined, his left leg draped down, and his hat pulled low over his face. He thought about his eyes. That they weren't really closed, just covered, staring at this funny flap of skin. He felt the texture of them against his eyelids, the smooth roll as he panned slowly from left to right, and back. He turned, as he often did, a little further in, moving away from Ella, his brother, everyone. He left them up top and travelled in.

He stayed there a while before nodding to the passenger who stepped on as he alighted - meeting the man without eyelids.

Conor opened his eyes and lifted his cap. Above him was Ella's branch. She was the only one with a view. There was this gap in the tree from her spot that never fully closed. It looked out in every season across the field belonging to Mr Armitage; he remembered his stories and thought fondly that somewhere in that ground would soon lie the three sisters. July from Ella's branch was perhaps the sweetest place in England. Conor pictured himself then, sitting between her legs, leaning back against her. She held him as he tried to match her breathing; it was always far slower than his.

He realised that he was attempting to match the cadence of her breath as he sat now. He was desperate to climb up and sit in her spot. But he couldn't. They had made their agreement. It was Ella's branch, and she had made it clear that they were not to sit in it without her. Though more recently to their detriment, they had always heeded her words as though they were wisdom from God. She had asked them not to go to her branch in a rare softer moment, and they had agreed. Albeit had she asked amidst some tormented tirade filled with unintelligible requests, they'd have nevertheless obliged.

They seemed to both silently give up hope in that exact moment. No need to speak when you are saying the same thing - *we have lost her*.

Calum called up, "*Do you have any more bacon, Con?*"

"*Na, all gone. I'm bloody freezing - you ready?*"

"*Sure.*"

They had stripped down to their thermals in the outhouse and stepped inside. The foil covering the bacon tray remained undisturbed. Their father's failure to emerge from the annex was strange but not yet concerning. They were certain he'd still appreciate their absence, so they threw their coats and kit back on and wandered back outside. They crossed through the holes in the hedges that led through Mrs Careen's garden, on past Number Seven and into Mr Armitage's. They strolled up past the frosted remnants of a garden that would soon be tended and inevitably return to marvellous bloom.

They passed to the left of the patio pond, opting to hop over a couple of the water features and stepping stones towards the low back door. Conor took a sharp and sudden in-breath.

"*Shit.*"

He'd had that horrible moment when you slip on a sliver of ice and catch yourself.

They didn't knock. Just stepped down into the funny low cottage entrance and thought - as they always did watching the thick beam slide above them - of those future versions of themselves that would need to *'Mind Your Head'*.

They walked through the kitchen, Calum moving the kettle onto the AGA as he moved past. It was quiet for a moment then. As soon as the whistle sounded, he called down -

"You here, boys?"

"Yes, Mr Armitage," replied Calum. *"Do you want tea?"*

"Of course I want tea, thank you, my boy," returned Mr Armitage.

They watched his shadow move past the hall away to their left, the rounded shell where his chin slid into his chest as he ducked between light shades and past close shelves. For a man who had lived in the house as long as he had, he never seemed to have grown accustomed to where everything was. He was far too big for it, you see. You got the impression from Mr Armitage that there would never be a house that would make for him a sensible abode.

"Why do we call them 'rooms', hey?" he often asked them, *"There is never enough room inside."*

He turned towards them, a one-man barricade slowly lumbering their way, chuckling at how they were wrapped up. The boys had never seen him need more than jeans, a tattersall shirt and his wax jacket. Conor swore he'd seen him in a fleece one day. Calum felt his great hands by his side and up into his armpits as his feet lifted off the ground. He'd slid the big chest over to the AGA and started to climb up to reach the top shelf where the teas were before Mr Armitage gave him the lift. He reached out. Paused.

"What tea do you want?" he asked.

"Cedar."

Front and centre. He slid the jar towards him as Mr Armitage lowered him to the floor.

They filled the filter with the cedar tea, and Calum filled the pot with water. As it steeped, they sat at the round breakfast table. Mr Armitage's long hair framed him well. His chin remained near his chest, a habit from unsuccessfully attempting to avoid knocking lights, ornaments, door-frames. His head low, he glanced up at them.

"Well, how is she?" he asked.

The boys started to tell him, but they could see that, though he tried, Mr Armitage quickly lost focus, looking out, as he so often did, at the field that housed the three sisters. They knew he wanted to listen. He meant the questions he asked, but his mind was always so saturated. It didn't matter to them; talking to him was, in truth, just a way the boys had to talk to each other. Conor noted how Calum's language had changed concerning Ella. It was no longer simple grief and confusion. He heard it now - he was terrified.

"So then she shot up," he said, "grabbed the poker out of the fire." He paused for effect, not caring that Mr Armitage was elsewhere, "and swung it at his head."

"She meant it too!" Calum continued. "You should have seen her eyes, Mr Armitage, they were wild. She looked like a completely different girl. She didn't even look angry, really. Just violent. No anger, Mr Armitage, I just can't understand it. You know her, I mean - she's mad, right?"

"Mhmm, sounds horrid, lad." He replied without looking back at them, ever onward out to the sisters' field. It was nearly three months to the first planting. He was just waiting.

Calum paused, waiting for more, until eventually he just said;

"Well, she's gone now anyway, thank God."

"Gone?!" replied Mr Armitage, running back up from his inside travels. He came seemingly flying through the window and back into the room. *"Where has she gone?"*

"We don't know, we just heard the door slam last night, and wandered past her room this morning. The door was open, we peered in and - well - she was gone."

Conor spoke, finally, clarifying - *"We mean, we think she's gone, Mr Armitage. We made breakfast today, went out for a while, and when we came back, Dad was still asleep, and there was still no sign of Ella. So, yeah, it seems like she's gone."*

"That's not good, lads, she could be anywhere. What's your plan?"

"Honestly, Mr Armitage, I think we were both just quite excited for a quiet day and some time outside. Should we be doing something?" continued Conor.

At that moment, Mr Armitage got up and turned towards the corner of the room away to his right. With a great creaking groan from both the leather and the man, he sank into his low button-backed chair by the bookshelf. At last, he lifted his head. His legs stretched out across the rug, crumpling and creasing it in uncharted ways. Again, he looked out across the garden. He reached leftwards and down, his great fingers pawing across his books. All variations on a theme. Farming mostly. And Native American History. The great fingers alighted on a small white book, quite unlike the rest, a journal with large spaces between each of the pages. He flicked through the little white journal, the lads noticing no words, no drawings, just pressed flowers.

"Your sister gave me this book."

"What's it say?" asked Calum.

"I'm not sure, lad, a lot, I reckon." Replied Mr Armitage.

Conor reached out his hand, and he passed it across to him. He took it and slid it into the big front pocket of the hoody he was wearing. He told Mr Armitage that they really ought to be leaving and

turned on his heel towards the low back door. Calum, frustrated to be going without the chance to process more of what Ella had done in recent days, shuffle-kicked his feet as he followed.

"Thanks for the tea."

"Most welcome, lads."

They had found it unnerving how quickly Mr Armitage's attention had returned when they said they believed Ella had left. He had, for as long as they'd known him, been a man altogether elsewhere. What about Ella's departure had so gripped him while all the gory details of her conduct and speech had not?

The bacon was still in its place, untouched. Calum put it on the top shelf of the AGA to warm up while he waited for two new slices of toast. The eggs were no longer any good, so he chucked a pan on the stovetop and, a minute later, quickly fried two eggs. Ketchup and brown sauce on the plate, and a veritable '*breakfast of champions*' was ready for Dad, though it was now well past midday.

They went up together with the breakfast and a tea Conor had made on a tray for him. Down the low hall with the beams, up the stairs out of the dark tradition of the old cottage, up into ever-brightening spaces and on to the annex where the ceiling moved further away, and the rooms were more glass than brickwork. The light shone in on them from a million telescopic sights, lensed through every shard of ice outside, beaming up at them. They were in the heart of a bloody diamond. They reached for the rods that pulled the tall curtains shut, and a moment later, they could see. Dad was there, eyes open, there were long black tracks down both his arms from the shoulder, right down through the hand. His head was wrong, the chin pointed too high and surrounded by too many pillows even for this ridiculous oversized bed. All the wet red that had vacated his arms had long since blackened and hardened. Ella was on the floor beside the bed, upright, gazing out the westward window toward their oak. Her hands were black too, tightly gripping a leather purse. Not quite. Conor looked more closely at her hands and back at his father. She was holding his scalp.

Calum dropped the tray and threw up. Ella didn't move. Conor stayed put - still looking at her hands. He went inward again - an immediate and automatic evacuation from this grim reality. The bus carried him as it always did, further and further from home. It was a short ride, and when he was ready to once again alight, the patient passenger entered, paid both fares, and he came flying back through the roof and onto the floor beside his dead father, attempting to rip his scalp out of his sister's hands. Her grip was tight, and it was slippery; a mess of blood, nerves and hair gel. He screamed at her to *give it back*. She wouldn't. She stayed still. He could hear himself screaming now at the top of his lungs. It was like listening to someone who had fallen down a well. His hands slid again, and he fell to the floor. He got up and ran at her. Punched her. He'd never done that to anyone before. Some politeness of his had resisted and thrown sand in his eyes, disoriented, he hit her on the left side of her forehead. Just then - a laugh - loud, low and painful, it was coming from far away within her.

"Come in," said Ella then. She locked those wicked eyes on him. Still holding the scalp in her right hand, she grabbed his wrist with her left and started to pull. He felt his hand slipping through the skin of hers. He looked at her, terror filling him. She let go and wrapped her arms around him. He felt his fear ease then. Until every point of connection started to move closer to her. She had him tight. He was moving into her, through her. He was a river flowing into the sea. He took a deep breath, matching hers. He slowed, then everything went white.

"Where the fuck are we, Ella? What the fuck is happening?"

"Trust me, Con."

Conor started crying now, but he was already in the river. The world was water now. The world was paint. The world was mud.

"No." His tone betrayed his boyhood, his righteous confusion.

Ella was everywhere.

"Am I in your mouth?" he asked.

"What?"

"Never mind."

Few things sober the grief-stricken mind like feeling stupid. Conor realised then that he could not see himself. He held out his hands, but there was nothing there, just blank white. He thought he turned to look behind him, then he bent over and looked backwards through his legs. But he had no way of telling whether he had really moved at all. His body was missing. All sensations of movement were present without any feedback. He drew the only sensible conclusion; the horror he'd just witnessed had sent him blind.

Ella leant over and asked from everywhere -

"Ah, you made it! Are you ready?"

He wasn't ready to reply. She continued regardless.

"You're here to help me find the three sisters".

All of time passed for Calum as he stood there looking at his father. Years drained away. Years and miles. He was looking at him from binoculars, coming into focus, he saw the marks of black etched and crusted against the white of his skull. He adjusted them again and looked closer at his face. You could see where the blood had been wiped clean, or relocated; it had all darkened around his ears and jawline. Looking back at his father's eyes, he saw the jagged and imprecise mark where they should have been. Calum had never met the man without eyelids before.

He turned and ran to the bathroom and locked the door. He was screaming. He had never practiced the turn inwards as Conor was accustomed to. So he was left here, in the horrific reality of the world in front of him. He begged to be silent but couldn't. He wailed and waited. For her. Huge footsteps echoed in the corridor outside the bathroom - great pounding on the door. The bath started bubbling up, the toilet too. She was in the drains. All the sewage of the world, in here, with him. She was an ancient sea-snake. She was as large as the centre of the earth. The floorboards bulged and creaked, the windows blew out, and the walls crumbled as the earthquake started. Then the boiler blew up the house and the street. All England was burning and so was he.

He heard Calum then - a faint but continuing cry. Mr Armitage, aware of their route and accustomed to crouching, ran towards it. Making each hedge-hole far larger as he did so. Mrs Careen had heard it too and stepped outside. She gave him a look as he passed by her garden that seemed to implore him to settle her fears once he'd settled Calum's. He crossed into their garden and looked up at this strange and incongruous home. He'd led the group that had opposed the planning permission to build this hideous modern annex on the westward side of their beautiful cottage. A testament to the total incompatibility of their parents. Their mother, a perfect country woman. The house had been in her family for years. Some 'great' or 'great-great' had built the place. The boys had been Ella's shadow as she had been her mother's. They all seemed to agree with Mr Armitage that - no matter what - there was never enough room inside.

Not so their father. He hated the cottage, hated bumping into door frames, knocking things off shelves. He wanted space. Space indoors. He'd wrestled for years to get planning permission for this annex and eventually managed it. Everyone in town despised it, but none more than they; Mrs Careen, Number 7 and himself; after all, they were the gardens overlooked by him and his 'bloody diamond' as they called it. The boys were seven when they built it. Their father had started it just after their mother's diagnosis. She'd been the one to agree with Mr Armitage on the guardianship of the children with him if anything dreadful would orphan them. He was more than happy to; their father seemed well, and in the event of the worst, he already had three of his own. Their father arranged his annex while their mother arranged the children's future without her. That future arrived quickly, before the scaffolding went up.

The curtains of the bloody diamond were closed as he approached. Calum was evidently in the most horrific terror one could imagine. Mr Armitage ran through the outhouse and into the kitchen. He was bad enough in his own home that as he ran through the cottage, he clattered and smashed a mug from the sideboard, a painting from the corridor and a vase from the side-table near the stairs. He stomped through, his heavy boots thumping. Calum's screams were intensifying, not calming. He tried the handle of the room he was in and shook it. No luck. He spoke softly but firmly -

"It's me, lad, it's Phil."

He remembered then,

"It's Mr Armitage."

Calum heard it all: the mug, the paintings, the vase. He heard Mr Armitage's steps as he thumped up the stairs, slammed against walls, knocked on the door and eventually kicked it in. He heard it all and concluded the only reasonable possibility - a sea-snake as big as the centre of the world was here to eat his brain and eyes. When the hulking Mr Armitage appeared in the doorway, all his fears were validated. At that moment, his screaming stopped. No protest, there was nothing to be done to avoid what came next. This incredible calm overcame him as he accepted everything.

Mr Armitage stepped towards him, relieved that the screaming had stopped. He leant back and slumped to the floor, his legs bunched up between the wall and the bathtub. He leant over and picked up Calum by the armpits, sat him down between his legs and held him close.

Calum was thrilled when he realised that the sea-snake was a relative of the boa constrictor. Thankful that it would first choke the life from him before it swallowed him whole. He felt it slowly wrap itself around him and begin to squeeze as he fell asleep.

Mr Armitage sat there a moment with Calum until he felt his breathing change. He had slumped against him immediately when he held him. He stood up, slowly, cradling the boy. His legs lolled over his left arm, and his head pressed firmly into Mr Armitage's chest. He walked down the hall and entered the bloody diamond. He saw then what the brothers had seen. He saw where the father still lay. All the blood. His orenda stolen. He stared at his lidless eyes, his absent scalp, and thought of The Great Law - Kayanerenk'wa - broken. He moved around the bed. Looking for Conor. He groaned as he crouched down and looked under the bed, finding no one. He approached the walk-in closet and peered in, but still no one. All the while, he gently spoke Conor's name, trying desperately to assure him a friend had come and that it was safe now. Ultimately, he concluded no one was there. He carried Calum downstairs, picking up a blanket from the bench at the foot of the bed with his right arm and throwing it over him. They moved outside. He carried him out to the hedge holes and into Mrs Careen's. She rushed outside as soon as she saw him and told him that the police had been called and would arrive imminently.

"Send them over when they arrive," he replied.

He carried on past Number Seven, looking disdainfully at what had once been the best-kept garden on the street before continuing through to his own. He moved much more gently and carefully, holding the lad than he usually did through the kitchen, down the corridor, upstairs, past his own room and into the room that had belonged to Bethany and Catherine. Two-thirds. The boys had never been upstairs in Mr Armitage's house. He suspected Calum would awake terrified again shortly, but that was a problem to be dealt with when it arrived.

He set the vacant array of limbs down in Bethany's bed, wondering what of him would survive the night, before there was a knock at the door.

"Ella, I can't see anything. What did you do to me? God, my eyes hurt. Seriously, what the fuck did you do? You. You scalped him, Ella. What does - where are - his scalp, Ella? You. Was he alive? When you did that - was he alive? Fuck, my eyes." His hands reached for his pockets. *"I, I need a phone."*

The whiteness he occupied began taking on shape. Ella watched as he began straining to see. Sensation was returning, discomfort the accompaniment. All the agitation of the rushing water pouring over his eyes. He shuffled his feet, as though setting himself for a chip out of a bunker. Felt the soft sandy floor of the riverbed.

"What do you see, Con?"

She still spoke from everywhere, some memory - a conscience.

"Seriously, Ella, where am I?"

"Brilliant, you're starting to see it now!"

She was right.

Conor was used to going inward, but where he went was always on dry land. More than that, he'd never even gone off-road. He wondered whether that had been cowardice. He'd stuck to bus routes for God's sake. Ella had gone to the very bottom of the world.

"You'd only taken the bus routes before - right?" she laughed. The laugh was the first time he'd seen her in months. His Ella. He felt all the blood in his heart.

"God, I'm so glad you could come," she said, grabbing his hands. He could still only make out her outline.

Conor stopped for a moment, forced his mind outward - back to his father's bed - and reminded himself that he was down here with a psychopathic murderer. He had to get back. He held his breath, made the real world so prominent in his mind and awaited the familiar flight and crash that would mark his return. But he had no authority, no route back. He hadn't travelled to his own deep. Ella had taken him deeper than he'd ever been into hers.

"Come up."

She reached out and took his hand. He could still scarcely see. The riverbed darkened as they approached the bank. He felt the first uneven rocky step ahead of him that would eventually lead them up and out to dry land. He felt the hardness of her hand, all her calluses, squeezed gently. She reciprocated. He was terrified of how he needed her. Reaching out as she led him up the stairs, gripped round her tricep, felt all the sinewed strength she had. Begging to know this girl. What terrified him most was how his guts all twisted and strained, desperate to trust her.

Mr Armitage reached the front door before realising that the knock had been at the back. It was Mrs Careen. They sat down together at the table under his canopy by the pond.

"Don't ask me to talk about it just yet," he said. "Let me tell you and the police together, hey, Ellen."

He left the back door ajar so he could hear the police whenever they arrived. He had heard their sirens over at the boys and reckoned they'd be here in a moment once they'd cordoned their perimeters. They didn't end up saying Mrs Careen could listen in on what had happened, but they were simply delaying the inevitable. The two of them had told each other nearly every aspect of their lives since they were eight years old. Well, Mrs Careen had at least.

Mr Armitage took them through his day, and a little before. Told them what he could of the tales the boys had told him. How they had assumed Ella had left late yesterday. How she'd attacked the father verbally and physically in recent weeks. He told them how he'd heard Calum, and the state he'd found him in, and of what he'd seen in the bloody diamond - what they'd all seen. Then he told them the worst of it - that Ella had taken Conor - and God knows what state they'd find him in.

Mr Armitage stepped into the bedroom. Calum sat up in bed, quiet. Mr Armitage took the chair beside him. Somehow, he looked well rested. He had foreseen some torture to mark the boys' jagged return to reality. But he seemed quite fine. He simply asked where he was. Mr Armitage explained that he was at his house and that he was welcome to stay, making no mention of his having been appointed next of kin. They were quiet for a while, then the great man rose and asked the boy if he wanted to come downstairs for some cedar tea. The lad agreed. A police officer asked questions from the chair where Conor had been sitting just hours earlier, and he recounted events much as Mr Armitage had. But he left aside the details of the sea-snake that had gobbled up the entire earth. He made no mention of how it had swallowed the sea and lapped up all the stars and left the night sky barren. They'd never believe him. The officer rose. Calum turned sharply to Mr Armitage.

"Wait, where is Conor?"

"We did it, Con, we fucking did it."

Conor didn't speak. Ella was practically panting with excitement. This was one of those times when questions would yield fewer answers than silence. Ella looked at him. He regarded the slight blue hue and swelling on her forehead where he had struck her before turning away, back to Ella's river, trying desperately to make sense of his bizarre arrival, breathing in the river. She turned aside and began climbing a tree. There were many to choose from in the jungle that surrounded them. Ascending with ease, she soon found a branch where she lay back, draped her legs over the sides and looked up at the canopy.

Conor, usually so comfortable with silence, found himself wrestling his tongue. As she basked in a great victory, he sat - waiting for some indication of what this creature wanted next.

"You're in my deep, Con, I managed to get you in."

Not yet, thought Conor, *don't speak*. She continued gazing at the canopy. A minute passed. Finally -

"You remember Mr Armitage's girls?" She asked.

"Yes, I remember his girls."

"You remember when they disappeared? The police questioned him, of course, but he hadn't even been in the country. You were what then? Six?"

"Seven." Conor corrected.

"It changed him completely. I spent as much time with him as I could. At first, he couldn't bear to have me there. But he said I reminded him of Sara. So one day he unlocked the back door and never locked it again."

"But how do you know they're down here?"

"I never said they were down here with me, Con. I wouldn't need you for that. I brought you to prove we could get to them, in his deep."

Mr Armitage stood up tall and stepped over to put another log on the burner outside. He was finally ready to speak to Mrs Careen, mummified in two of his thickest blankets. He'd put on a fleece. Calum had gone back to bed. The lad would be exhausted for years.

"I've been thinking about my girls all day. No more than usual, I suppose. But Conor told me this morning that Ella had run away, too. It terrified me. Though now I wish she had."

"What happened, Phil?" Mrs Careen pressed. *"Please tell me."*

"She killed her Dad, Ellen, more brutally than you could imagine, and she has Conor."

They sat then, gazing into the flames. Mr Armitage watched the underside of the log he had placed blister. He watched the drops of white gold fall and join the sea of ashes. His body remained there by the fire with Mrs Careen, though she knew to wait for him. He'd travelled inward, visiting the sisters' field - his prayer of comfort.

There in his deep, Mr Armitage reached for his shovel again. The calloused hands dug the great hole they had so many times before. He stepped in. He raised his great arms and began to gather the mud and dirt around him, filling his shoes, down his sleeves, and into his shirt. He got as much as he could in and waited for them. The three of them arrived quickly, as they always did. They palmed the remaining dirt he'd piled over. He marked the tallest mound in the three sisters' field, and as they covered him with the remainder of the dirt, filling his eyes and mouth, he moved through to that warm dark. When he could no longer see, he returned to Mrs Careen.

"I miss the girls every day, Ellen."

They sat together in silence for a long while. Mrs Careen looked over his shoulder and out to the section of the bloody diamond that was still reflecting light from the moon and stars. She thought of what Calum and Mr Armitage had seen that day. Her darkest imaginings were but dim reflections of the reality. She looked back at Mr Armitage. She loved him when he stood tall. She thanked God for him in the quiet of her heart. Remembered all the ways he had been steadfast through her life. She was a selfish woman; she knew that. Mr Armitage begged for this world he imagined. He had been a man of great yearning. That was why he had never desired her - a woman who owned warm, comfy things.

She reached her hand out to him. He looked at her. A stab in her stomach when he did. She observed that he was in appalling pain. He met her hand, and their fingers interlaced. He gripped her hand tightly and rubbed the side of her thumb with his own.

"None of this is your fault, Phil."

"I'm afraid it all is," he winced.

Calum's world had been unzipped, and everything poured out onto the floor. He had been left with absolutely nothing to hold onto. The first thing he did upon waking was poke and prod at his stomach and sides, hard, desperately trying to confirm the presence of his vital organs. Mr Armitage had left some clothes at the end of his bed. Some comfy tracksuit bottoms and a shirt. He put the shirt on and went to button it as he fumbled. The buttons were on the opposite side. The shirt was shapely. He cried out sharply -

"Mr Armitage!"

He came running, clattering around again. Calum imagined him in church, in his school library, on a plane, on a boat. God, he didn't fit anywhere. By the time he reached the room, Calum had pictured him at the beach and felt a gentle calm creep over him.

"Yes, lad," he said as he opened the door and stepped in.

"Is this a girl's shirt?!" he asked.

Mr Armitage laughed softly as he looked at him before turning aside a moment, holding the door-frame, he took three heavy breaths.

"Yes, it was my daughters, it was Bethany's," he said. *"But it definitely doesn't work for you, lad!"* he laughed again. *"Let me find you a t-shirt."*

The two of them had breakfast in near silence. Mr Armitage breathed heavily - bacon and eggs and some more cedar tea. Calum listened as Mr Armitage told him that the police suspected Ella. Calum burst out loudly in protest at the word 'suspect'. Once he'd calmed, he continued letting the boy

know that they had not yet heard any reports from people seeing Ella or Conor since he found his father. He let them know that they had teams out looking through the woods to the rear of all their gardens and would have parties onward all the way out onto Dartmoor, the most likely place nearby for someone who doesn't want to be found. Calum simply scoffed and shook his head, resigned. He knew full well they wouldn't be found unless Ella wanted them to. The two of them returned to the quiet meditation of Mr Armitage's deep breaths. Then -

"Lad, do you still have that little white journal I gave you yesterday? Can you grab it?"

A boy again. Calum reengaged, ran upstairs, and began rooting through his trouser and coat pockets. Nothing. Then he struck its firm outline against the pouch of his hoody. Running downstairs, he called out -

"Yep! It's here!"

Arriving at the table again, out of breath, he continued -

"You said Ella had given it to you, right?"

"That's right. Tell me - have you ever seen any of these flowers before?"

Ella squatted down. A perfect squat with flat heels. She ran her hand through the tall grass surrounding the tree. There were all manner of wildflowers. She slowly touched them, felt the texture of each petal and stem with her index finger. Then she stood up slightly, crossed her legs and sat flat. Conor thought how peaceful she looked then. Her calm quiet stirred in him a rage. An anger at how he was longing to forget exactly what had just happened to their father. His father. He forced the image back up in his mind. He had to keep central exactly who he was here with, since it was not his Ella.

"I meant what I said in the river, Con, I am so bloody happy you are here. Go ahead, tell me what it's like where you go - in your deep - I mean. I've sat and watched you go there so many times. Tell me about it."

"I don't want to, Ella."

He did - desperately. But not under these circumstances. No, that wasn't it exactly; he just wanted to tell *her*, but he had no idea who it was exactly that he was now speaking with. She certainly looked like Ella; most of the time, she felt like her. Looking at her now, he saw something in her, at once new and very old. New to him, but far older than anything he'd encountered before. He thought of the fossils in the shoebox of rocks he kept above his wardrobe.

"Come on, Con, I'll explain all this. Come, let me take you somewhere to explain it. I brought you to my deep - don't you see how amazing that is?"

"Look, I have nothing to say to you. I don't know who the fuck you are. Either you killed my Dad, and I'm in some psychotic break, or Dad's fine and the psychotic break just, just happened earlier. Either way, I'm not talking to you." He didn't sound convinced by any of this. Ella knew what Conor already did. The deep feels realer than the rest of life. She didn't care for his attitude.

"Conor, I want this to be a good experience." She hopped into her squat again, no longer resting, some predator inhabiting once more - *"but do not fucking speak to me like that again."*

Looking into her eyes, he recalibrated. Didn't speak.

"I asked you to tell me what it's like where you go. So, tell me, now. Do you remember the first time you went?"

He looked closer, looking for his Ella, failing to find her, he gave half-truths.

"I think I must have started going in dreams? I don't remember much. But then I became able to go in quiet moments in the day. I don't do much there, honestly. I just catch a bus and sit for a while. Then, when I'm ready to get off, another passenger gets on. He always pays my fare."

Ella laughed - *"He doesn't always pay, Con."*

Conor wasn't telling the truth here; he remembered it well. It was the second passenger who had first dragged him inwards. He remembered the day, the feel of his hand. They'd been on the south coast. Mum had taken them to the beach. Conor loved the sea. He'd been paddling with the reluctant Calum. Ella lay sunning herself. Mum had been watching them until she turned to the man walking the beach selling ice-lollies. A trio of Twisters and a Fab in hand, she turned back to loud cries and a man running out, whole body straining towards Conor. He watched this memory as a bystander now. Saw his own little limbs jerking as he was pulled out to sea. The man eventually reached him, turning his tiny body back over and quickly returning him to shore. Conor had felt only the cold hand of the second passenger who had pulled him down. Down for their first bus ride together.

The roads they travelled were unfamiliar to him. The man without eyelids travelled with him just this once. Here, on his first trip, as if to assure him it was safe to relax. They passed through towns much like his own, passed by beautiful parks and woodlands. Then an enormous viaduct came into view. One moment it was in the distance, and almost immediately it overtook all else, stretching out across the horizon. They drove on into one end of it and into a great bus station here on the outskirts of the city. Conor had the sense you feel on the London Underground: untold opportunities and impossible urgencies.

There were hundreds of buses passing through. The station was hunched, heaving heavy breaths. It ran like clockwork. The signs on the buses had only a number and the time, no maps noting any destinations or stops. But the number would arrive at its set time, flash on the board, sit for no more

than three minutes, and depart. There must have been thirty bus stands. Nearly three hundred buses had passed through in the ten minutes he was there. Conor knew already that you could take any of these buses and never get anywhere. But that seemed to be precisely the point. He was about to board a second bus when a hand reached and grabbed him by his shirt collar and wrenched him back. He tumbled back off the steps of the bus, and as he landed, about to crack his head on the concrete, he coughed and opened his eyes to bright light and the slowly emerging faces of Calum, Ella and Mum.

They mostly avoided water after that. Mum decided there was plenty of fun and adventure to be had on land, so they stuck to forests and hills. They never told their Dad what had happened that day. He was away that week, and they all knew Mum was ashamed of what had happened. He'd only pile on, barbed jokes for years. Conor and Mum had gone to the hospital, and even after they had cleared him, she remained with him constantly for two days, resting together and watching movies. He even slept on the couch beside her. Conor learnt later from Ella that she hadn't slept, monitoring him, scared of secondary drowning. It didn't matter to him; those two days, inseparable from his mother, were the best of his young life.

After that experience, Conor went to his buses often. But never again to the viaduct bus station. Empty, yes, but frantic. He found on his buses a quiet that he could never quite grasp up top. The man without eyelids was never there when he arrived, only as he left. Conor could travel his buses for hours alone, but whenever and wherever he got off, he would ring the bell, thank the missing driver, and as he stepped off, the man without eyelids would step on. They would each say nothing, Conor would stare at the man's shoes, his hands, his neck or chin. It was always a while before he'd meet his gaze. One. But when he did. Two. Conor would return.

Ella didn't mind his half-truths. She'd expected his first day in his deep to have been that day at the beach. Ella had been born with her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. She'd met the man without eyelids before she'd met her own mother.

"Did you ever speak to him?" asked Ella.

"No," replied Conor, *"did you?"* Conor realised then that he'd always assumed he couldn't speak. *"What did he say?"*

Ella smiled and shook her head gently, and Conor knew that there was no sharing with others what he'd said to you privately. He could tell then that the second passenger trusted Ella while he still, even after all these years, was quietly testing Conor. To see whether he was ready for whatever he may call on him to do.

"Nope," Calum replied, *"I've never seen any of them before."*

"Nor I, lad," said Mr Armitage, flicking once more through the white journal of wildflowers. He had no way to account for these flowers but one. But he wasn't yet ready to voice that possibility, especially not after yesterday. Since these flowers were not known to anybody. No book, no individual he had consulted, then they had not been found by Ella, but created by her.

Just then, Calum continued - *"Did she make them, then?"*

Mr Armitage laughed heartily at the sensibility of a child's reason. How innocently they profess impossible truths.

"Well, yes, I believe she did - but how - I couldn't tell you".

Calum had been in the bathroom before Conor had entered Ella's room, but he had been gradually coming to terms with the fact that their sister was not subject to the same constraints he was. It was not just in the immediate aftermath of his father's brutal murder, for a long time, he'd felt she was growing in his mind. The sea-snake the size of the centre of the earth, had not been a conjuring, but a revelation.

"She's not like us, Mr Armitage," he said.

"I know, lad."

"No, I mean, she-"

"I know." Mr Armitage continued. His finger - as big as the page - gently stroked a blue and yellow wildflower with a deep red centre. For the first time in years, he felt like he was in the room, with Calum, ready to listen to whatever he had to say. *"Sorry, lad, go on - what do you mean?"*

Calum looked into his eyes and saw that he was finally there. He was entirely attuned to him at that moment. It sent a shock of pain from his throat down to his stomach as the openness of his face made him think of his brother. He was about to tell Mr Armitage what he'd come to believe about Ella, without speaking through him to Conor. He hoped that he could be trusted.

"Go on," smiled Mr Armitage.

Then Calum spoke.

"Well, you know what she's been like. You know how she's changed, right? I mean, I know she's been to see you plenty. Well, she has spent a lot of time at home too this past year. Lay in bed for days at a time. Always saying she's sick. She didn't want to see any of us - even Conor - and she loves Conor."

He was struggling to decide what to include and leave out. The presence of mind Mr Armitage was offering him seemed almost painful to the man. Calum went all over - told him the awful names she'd called their father, told him how she'd hurt him, scratched him and screamed for what seemed like days.

"She hated me, too, I think. I mean - the way she looked at me - almost hungry. It looked like she wanted to stick me with a fork or throw rocks at me."

Calum was embarrassed then; she'd only hurt him once, and nothing like what she'd done to their father. He felt ashamed. And weak. He could see he was losing Mr Armitage.

"And, and, and. We, we went to Wales, and this thing happened. This horrible man, he spoke to her."

Mr Armitage returned.

"We, we were camping on the hills above Bethesda. Middle of the night, I woke up. Conor and I were sharing a tent. I heard a voice outside. I opened the tent slightly and looked out to see Ella by the fire with this man I didn't know. He was crouched down, pulling ashes from the fire and covering her feet with them. I knew Ella was frightened. She looked more like herself that night than I'd seen her all year. She was dead still. She looked like a girl again, while the man talked. It was so windy. But he said, "You can do what you like with the empties." Then she reached out her hands to him, hugged him. And then, and then it was like, like he became water. Just water, and ran into her until it was just her by the fire. Alone. I never told anyone that. Not even Conor. Do you believe me? Do you?"

Mr Armitage nodded.

"She only ever wanted Conor, though, which was fine by me. I usually managed to avoid her, but one time she caught me without Conor around. She gripped my forearms - here and here - her fingers digging in under -"

Calum grabbed Mr Armitage's arms, but the dimensions were all wrong. He raised his arms to show him - he had four marks from the deepest cuts.

"- digging under here, asking - sorry, telling - telling me that I was empty. Her grip was so tight, Mr Armitage, it was as though, as though - you were gripping me. I shouted and shouted until Conor and Dad came running. As soon as Conor appeared, she let go and ran off to her room. Conor helped with my arms, they both bruised badly, and there's still some marks - see? Do you see it now, Mr Armitage? She isn't like us. She's the one without organs! Maybe if I'd said something sooner, I could have done something. I could have stopped her. Or you, if you'd listened! I'm sorry. It's just - she isn't human, she's the one with no insides - no organs. I don't know, God - Conor!"

The boy began to cry then, Mr Armitage moved his hands out across the table to his, then slowly rose instead and crouched down beside him. Calum stretched out his hands and wrapped them around his neck - *"Please - please help me."*

Mr Armitage looked past the lad out at his field as he held the boy. He saw the three walking towards them, but the five fingers of his right hand flicked out and off Calum's shoulder as he gestured to them to turn back, they obliged.

"I will, lad."

The boy lay down to rest once more. Leaving Mr Armitage to reflect on all he'd said. He decided a walk outside would be the best approach. No good thinking ever gets done inside. He crouched down and out the low back door, around the pond, zig-zagging his way between the flower beds. On to the fence at the end of the garden. He opened the gate, bending beneath the branch that hangs above it. He was once again in the sisters' field. He snaked between the mounds of earth and thanked them as he went. He asked them - not for comfort - but for guidance. He carried on to the centre of the field and looked east. Out and up, he could see her branch. He pictured Ella there then, waving at him and the girls. The sisters' field was bare today, but in a few months, he would once more become scarcely visible in the sea of green and gold.

Reaching the brook, he stepped over and arrived at the low branch - Calum's. The lad was so different from the other two. His brother seemed to be his only access to anything internal. Without Conor, his internal vision was largely impaired. All he cared about was how things looked, how they sounded, how things smelt, how the world around him felt. Mr Armitage thought about the lads' claim - that Ella had no organs - and sensed that he was referring to his late realisation that he had a whole life inside that had largely been neglected or not requiring access before now. He knew this because Calum talked so bloody much. It was as though, to him, there were no events but those that had been described. But he was wrong about Ella. He knew that girl; she was the opposite of empty.

He looked up at Conor's branch and winced a smile. He thanked God that he was the one with Ella. He might actually survive. He had watched Conor turn inwards many times. He knew the lad had a way of processing the things that were happening to him. Knew he had ways of storing what he needed to and letting go of the rest. He never needed to speak to Calum, but he did so to somehow collect the memories and fragments for him, too. But somehow Calum had kept from Conor the man who had covered Ella's feet with ashes. He wished for Conor's return, as he had been constantly, though momentarily not for his safety, but for his counsel.

Mr Armitage had been fragmented for years. He split three times the day his daughters disappeared, and again every day since. He never used to clatter around the house when they were there. He'd been gentle. It took everything he had to concentrate on Calum earlier, and more to focus and go over it again now. He thought of the three of them as he looked up to Ella's branch. Thought about attempting the climb before quickly thinking better of it - no use to anyone with a broken neck. The wind blew a cold that made him grab his jacket zips and pull them closed. He glanced down, watched the frost blowing around his feet. Thought of the ashes. Thought of the *empties*. He was chief among them. He felt them again walking through the field behind him. Stretched his hand out behind him without turning and cried out -

"No!"

The icy snow whipped around his hands. Watched as flecks of ice alighted on his jacket and melted. His mind turned back towards Conor again. *You're not here, are you, lad*, he thought.

Part 2

A roar away to their right. Ella set off at a sprint. Conor knew better than to let her get a head start. He was straight on her heels, straight into the brush. They were so good at this. She was bounding up over fallen branches. Vaults and leaps and dashes. They were crouching, sliding. Running, really running. She would glance back, and whenever she did, Conor would nearly smash his head into a branch or slam his body off some unseen trunk. He only watched her. Before he knew it, he completely trusted her again. He could hear the sound, louder, crashing through the brush towards them. A moment passed, and he was beside her. He cried out -

"Don't let me win, Ella!"

She threw her head back and laughed before shifting gears. Conor was breathing heavily now as she pulled away. But he wasn't done. They crashed through the edge of the forest in unison and onto bright salt sands. He closed his eyes as he watched the train careen out from the woods and onto the tracks ahead. He closed his eyes for a quiet second, willed his heart to slow, filled his lungs. Switched to breaths through his nose before opening his eyes again. She was still just ahead. She looked back at him. He couldn't believe how fast they were running. His feet were hardly touching the cracked earth before they were up again, striding forwards. He looked at the train. He laughed again at the shallowness of his own inward journeys and quietly thanked Ella. The siding of the car nearest them rattled open. Conor sensed they were running from something - the law or a raiding band of Apaches, perhaps a jaguar. It didn't matter; it was anything and everything all at once. Ella leapt and grabbed a ladder rail before pulling her legs up and on. She looped around into the car and left her arm out for him. He knew he didn't need it. He closed his eyes again. A single breath through the nose. Felt his heart slow a beat. He opened them and leapt for it, grabbed the ladder bar but not well, Ella leant round and grabbed him by the fat below the armpit and dragged him in. They tumbled into the car, screaming laughing. He rolled into her as she held him. Felt his head land on her chest as they came to a stop against the back wall of the train car.

"This? This is how you choose to travel around down here?!" He laughed up at her.

She laughed back as she kissed him on the forehead. Here was his Ella.

"Of course it is," continued Conor.

She sang a line then.

"Knew a man, Bojangles, and he'd dance for you."

Conor was amazed at this flash of cruelty. Many songs had been mutilated that day, along with his father. This one might top the list. He saw in his mind Ella and their father singing it together. He twisted out of her arms and scuttled away from her, across the train car. Looking out, he watched the rains approach from the distant mountains. A sheer wall of water racing across the plain. More water

than he had ever seen in his life. It was beyond a storm. For a moment, the rift between them had closed, now she'd ripped it open again. The water ripped through the salt. He watched as the ground melted. The wound before him culled all pretence.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Ella? You really are sick," he cried, *"don't you dare fucking sing that"*. She looked at him and saw his eyes were cold. He continued, *"Where is this train taking us?"*

"God, Conor, even when I make it fun, you have such an attitude," replied Ella. *"I left something at the station that we're going to need."*

Much time passed, the rain pounding deep into the earth. As they neared it, he saw just how deep the canyon was that the impossible downpour had created. It was as though a sea had emptied above and created this new river below. Suddenly, the earth fell away in a perfect line, and this new tributary fell headlong to meet a deeper body of water. He watched it as they now ran atop a vast suspension bridge. Conor watched as the salt plain river crashed deeper still. The body it ran into reminded him of flying over the English Channel, though its sides were not beaches or cliffs but walls that looked more like steel or iron than rock or sand.

"Bet you're glad I didn't make you climb out here." Said Ella.

Their terminus was just over the bridge. It was somewhat like his viaduct bus station, only far larger and busier - what felt like a thousand trains passing in and out in the ten minutes they spent there. There were ten platforms Conor could see. One gangway spanned them. No guard rails, no ticket barriers, no walls, no ceilings. It was either open-plan and minimalistic or unfinished. Conor decided it was the latter. The trains themselves had no identifiers or destinations, but he knew they were all late. Ella had jumped off while the train was still slowing, knowing they had to be fast in alighting before it set off again with them still on before turning to her brother with a gentle sternness he'd only ever known in her that said, *'Come here, now'*.

The train they'd travelled on was the type you would see carrying gold and oil and vagrants between frontier towns - Legend of Zorro trains. There were trains from all the metros of the world, trams, steam trains, bullet trains and everything in between. Conor turned and saw Ella at the far end of the upper concourse. He ran after her. She'd arrived at the only structure, a stall, like a WHSmiths. Reaching over, she slammed on the till, denting it slightly. She walked back towards the stairs of the concourse and rattled the handle of the little maintenance closet. Tried the handle, no luck. She stepped back and kicked, slightly southeast of the handle itself. Conor thought about how she must have read to do that in the little book of random facts in the downstairs toilet of their house. That's where he'd read it. The door snapped the lock from the rotten wood around the hinges. She tried to pull it towards her, but it had jammed, so she opted to kick more and force the entire door to retreat further into the cupboard. Her hand went rooting around behind it, emerging with a claw hammer.

Back at the till, she jammed the claws in at the top of the till and pulled down as the entire top of the till wrenched open. She reached in.

"You can sit on my branch if you want to." Said Calum to the great man as he approached.

"Very kind," replied Mr Armitage obligingly. His back lay against the trunk while his legs draped. The size of the tree made Mr Armitage look, for once, like a regular-sized man.

"The view from Ella's branch is the best, apparently," Calum said, *"You can go there if you want, you can't see much of anything from mine and Conor's."* Mr Armitage regarded the thickness of the branches and decided that he ought to attempt it for the boy's sake. He wished to reclaim something for Calum. The man despised private property on principle, for the boy to feel that space in this tree was off-limits was a complete injustice. He rolled up the tattersall sleeves, reached up to Conor's branch, wrapped his left hand as far as he could until most of his forearm was applying friction and threw his right leg up. He hopped and jerked awhile - not in the least gracefully - until he'd finally reached his leg the whole way over, leaning back against the trunk once more.

"It doesn't belong to her, Calum," he said - as he repeated his technique until he summited Ella's branch. He sat once more in the strong joint, facing eastward. He could finally see more than frost on neighbouring trees and bushes. With the branches cleared, he looked out across the sister's field. He observed the messy mounds, the plots where he'd planted in years past. He revelled in its disorder; he'd never seen it from this angle, so clumsy, so human. He looked out beyond the field to the neighbouring woodland beyond. He was looking at the exact spot where his girls had been seen for the last time - by Ella. She'd never spoken to him about their disappearance, but he knew she'd seen them. It would have been July when she'd watched them go. The field full and beautiful. He was late to harvest that year.

Calum rejected the invitation to climb up and join him. Mr Armitage didn't press. He hoped it had done some good for the lad to see him there, assuming it's always good to break small curses whenever you can. But the boy didn't think any curses were broken; more likely, they were activated - fury of the gods.

As Mr Armitage turned to climb back down the way he'd come, it oriented his view back towards their houses. Turnt that way, leaning over Ella's branch, he could make out the bloody diamond in the distance alongside glimpses of Mrs Careen's and his own home. But centre-line, glaring back at him, an unencumbered view of Number Seven. Pausing a moment, before purposing to return Calum home, insist on his grabbing a quick dinner and heading to bed, so that he could make a visit upon his long-silent neighbour.

Mrs Careen watched from her first-floor deck as the two of them passed through the field back towards Mr Armitage's. Calum practically sprinting to keep up with Mr Armitage's long, slow strides. She could see the glee with which Calum moved. It was the joy of the protected. It is a child's unearned right to come out from even the most horrific of torment into the arms of the good and

find refuge, albeit fleeting. For even the truest of guardians must occasionally turn aside or lay them down to sleep at night. She had heard Calum crying for him as he looked around the house and garden. It was she who had told him he'd walked out to the sisters' field. He'd run frantically after him. She'd still been able to see him and make out the moment when he'd spotted him in the distance and decided to slow to a walk, wanting to appear brave and well by the time he reached the great man.

They cast a funny pair in the dim light. Mr Armitage's silhouette - known to her - cast the boy as being in the safest of company, though any outsider would no doubt imagine the boy to be in hideous peril from some man or beast. They saw her then, heads tilted in unison as they waved. She laughed quietly at how he had once again found himself a new shadow. She saw how Calum tried to get the swing of his arms to mirror him. He watched his hand as he mapped Mr Armitage's wave onto his own before returning to their walk home. She even noticed his chin drooping lower down and into his chest. Though she reasoned perhaps that was just the result of the weight that had been flung upon him the day prior. But children aren't like adults; they bend, they don't break.

She watched as Mr Armitage stopped the boy, who immediately lost all his grace and composure when he instructed the boy inwards, gesturing towards the house. She then saw the cause of the commotion and the outburst of terrified emotion arising from the boy. He had pointed him toward the house alone.

"Good evening, Mr Armitage, Calum," she called loudly.

All she got in return was a firm and outstretched arm, palm facing her from Mr Armitage, who remained turned toward the boy.

"Can I help you with anything?" she cried *"Some dinner?"*

At that, Calum broke and ran to the hedge holes. Through Number Seven and on to her garden. He knew not to run through her garden and changed from his sprint to a calm stroll through her maze of flower beds, still vibrant with vigilant winter flowers. As the boy approached, she watched Mr Armitage press his body through the first hedge hole, before turning down the overrun rear of Number Seven.

Conor observed as Ella reached into the till. She pulled it out, tried it on. He recognised it immediately. The watch was far too large for her wrist. A thick silver band, almost clunky, with a beautiful deep blue face. She pocketed it.

"I pulled it from Number Seven," she said proudly - *"first thing I ever brought down here."*

Conor didn't ask how she'd managed to bring something real down here. He'd never even thought of taking anything with him when he went down. His deep was space, not storage. Ella led him back up to the concourse, where they sat on a bench and looked out over the station. Conor watched as a

train in the distance pulled away too fast and derailed as it tried to turn sharply, immediately blocking the paths of three others. She pulled the watch out again and looked at it. Her feet tapped the concrete, averaging eighteen taps in each five-second increment. The second hand did not tick or tock, it simply rolled around perfectly smoothly. It made Conor think how readily we discount the time between the seconds. But here, this watch illustrated all the time between one and two, two and three. No gaps, the entirety of time was full. She looked up from the watch at him girlishly again, the way she did when she was lying. Or afraid.

"We're late to see him, Con, he won't be pleased."

Conor watched as rain began falling back over the bridge. The river was shining. Conor knew exactly to whom she was referring. The only person you would find in their great lands. Though he'd never seen him angry, or disappointed, or show any emotion at all, especially not about something as trivial as lateness. In fact, in Conor's deep, the man without eyelids seemed to be the embodiment of patience. Perhaps here in Ella's, he was different. Given what he'd done to her, Conor was not inclined to attend this meeting.

"Ella, you need to let me back up. I don't have anything to do with this. I can't go with you anymore."

"Fucking hell, Con, why are you being so difficult. Constantly. God, it's tedious. Here's what we're going to do. You are going to stop complaining and start just doing what the fuck I say. Listen, I'd love you to be my partner in all this, you know, really make the most of it. But you're pushing it a bit."

"If you don't need me, let me go," Conor said softly.

"Shut the fuck up and follow me, Con," she barked.

The rain was falling heavily now; they were both soaked as they moved through the train station and further into the city, which, along with everything else, was an amalgam of every time and space. They passed through ancient temples surrounded by skyscrapers, walked by shanty towns and alpine chalets. Conor thought then of where he travelled to; it was simpler, far more orderly. He never travelled to the same place twice, but he was confident that he could. It was indexed in its way; the bus station could be used if he needed it. But here, there was no rhyme or reason. Ella was operating absent any structure whatsoever. Regardless, she skipped along down paths he'd never expect, turning off sensible routes. Twice, he looked back and saw that had they remained on the central road, they would have made up time, but she had taken him on two detours - equally marvellous in their own way - a cathedral and a mountain lake.

Conor sensed then, when they were back in the central street, a presence he knew. Just ahead, a bus pulled up. The driver, missing, as always. Ella smiled.

"Familiar?" She asked.

"Not quite," he said. His buses were clean. Stagecoach. This was a hideously rusted American school bus. Its brakes screamed as it halted, the doors creaked noisily as only one side stuttered open, the other jarred and stuck shut.

"He's on," Ella continued, gesturing with her head for him to enter.

Conor resisted. He had no desire to get on this bus. His throat was closing, he wanted to grab the skin by his collar bones and rip his chest open to get some air. He turned to run, but she grabbed him by the upper arm. He struck and kicked, but she was much stronger. She tugged, and his feet lifted off the ground momentarily. He could hear himself screaming for something, though not for help; there was no one on this bus to help him.

"Ready to meet him?"

She thrust him onto the bus then, through the half-opened doors. Conor's eyes were clamped shut. Do not look at him. He felt the man's eyes boring into him. This could not be the same man as in his deep.

"Open your fucking eyes, Conor," Ella screamed. *"Open your fucking eyes!"*

A knock on the dark red door at the rear of Number Seven. Mr Armitage had not spoken to his neighbour since he'd asked him about the disappearance of his girls. No answer. He knocked again, louder this time, and rattled the kitchen window also. The owner of Number Seven never left the house, but the fact that he was in did nothing to increase the likelihood he would make himself available to a visitor. His knees and back cracked as he knelt and put his face to the letterbox. Something rank hit his nose as he did so. A flash of primal concern before he glanced once more through the kitchen to the sink and the counters, home to what looked like a hundred dirty plates - *you filthy bastard.*

"I know you're home! Come on, man, I need to talk to you!"

He waited two minutes more before wrapping his knuckles on the door a third time. The garden was a horror. Mr Armitage hated it - abject chaos. Ivy grew up and fully covered the eastward wall up towards his fence. It covered and blocked all light from every window on that side. The side facing Mrs Careen was free of the ivy at least, though that section of patio was completely covered in purposeless cardboard and rotten wood. Remnants of an unscaped project. All down the yard were the remains of flowerbeds usurped by giant weeds, stinging nettles, and twisting vines. Where there was grass, it had grown far too high, fallen in autumn and lay dead, ugly comb-overs on old skull rockeries.

The neighbour peered out from the staircase window, through the ivy, spying Mr Armitage. *What does the Bear want,* he wondered. *Let me guess - more missing children?* He stepped away from the window, for fear of being seen. Not that it was possible, thanks to both the overgrowth and his

choice to omit any light in rooms other than the upstairs antechamber. Number Seven was set out as a perfect square, three rooms encircled the antechambers, and a staircase spiralled up the eastward side where he now stood, squinting out at Mr Armitage from behind the circular frames of his small silver glasses. He had no interest in traversing the bulwarks of his hoarding and turned back towards the upstairs antechamber. Its sister room directly below had been the latest to become uninhabitable. He moved gracefully back upstairs through his accidental barricades towards the unencumbered space and cleanliness of the antechamber. The cool green light welcomed his return, as he called back to the beast at the door -

"Not today, Bear!"

"I said open your fucking eyes, Conor! Now!"

This was not his Ella. Sounded nothing like her. Scarcely sounded human. She pulled his head back towards her. He felt her then, one hand pulling his hair, he only felt the cold blade across the top of his eyelid after the first warm trickle of blood rolled towards the corner of his eye - she was digging in.

"Open them, Conor, stop fucking with me."

He felt the blade begin moving across. The blood pooling and steadily streaming down his cheek. He sent up some tears to meet it. River into the sea once more.

"Alright, Jesus, fuck!" He screamed.

He felt her gently flick up, but could feel it hovering just millimetres away. She lowered his head, gently waving his hair up and away from his face like she was styling it. Sisters. Old habits. Conor slowly opened his eyes. The floor of the bus was covered in ashes, blowing lazily about them from the gentle breeze rolling through the bus doors.

"Sorry we're late," she said.

The man said nothing. Conor knew he wouldn't as soon as he saw him. It was the same man, no difference between depths. It was still his man without eyelids. The man who'd held his hand the first time he took the bus, the man who paid his fare every time he travelled. A man whom, strangely, he realised now, he had always trusted. He realised then that his trust had emerged simply because he'd been there for him, paying his fares. He had never even considered who he was. Too late now. It seemed then as though barely any time had passed since Conor had found Ella in the bloody diamond and realised he did not know the girl: same lesson, different teacher.

"Let me in, for God's sake, man," yelled Mr Armitage to the muffled refusal from the neighbour within.

He looked through the window again. As soon as he moved through the door and past the first few boxes, he'd be all but trapped. The neighbour proved him right, there is never enough space inside. He had to speak with him, explain what had happened. Ask what he knew.

The neighbour, having retreated to the cool green light of the upstairs antechamber, began circling the bizarrely out-of-place pedestal that resided in the middle of the room.

He muttered, *"Leave me, Bear, leave me. Never here when I needed you. Never here, never any time for me. Just disappointed in me, that's all. I can see it on you now. You hate the state this house is in. Well, so do I. But it's needed, Bear, it's needed. Came to me when your girls left - no, no - haven't seen them. You'd all disappeared from me long before then. Well, they were lost on your watch, hey, under your guardianship. What exactly do you expect from the rest of us now? All this time and here you are - here - knocking again. Another lost one for you to split yourself over, it seems, well, not me! Run off another cliff, Bear, down another ravine. Every bone - broken - that's what you want. That's the price you want to pay. But I shan't join you. I can't, and I'm not strong enough to stop you. I am not -"*

He broke off when he heard a window smash. He moved out from the eastward door of the antechamber, straight to the staircase and spiralled down, padding softly but hurriedly around and over stacks of old papers and boxes of clothes. Reaching the bottom, he turned slowly, eyes creeping round the side of the wall towards the kitchen and watched as an animal was thumping the door into the boxes and piles of unopened letters blocking the entryway. Eventually, they all toppled, not to the floor, but on top of the second rank of crucial tat that lay stacked behind them. The Bear spoke.

"Good evening, neighbour."

"Number Seven, hey," said Mrs Careen as she laid a bowl of mushroom soup before the boy with three thick slices of bread on the side of the plate the bowl stood on. Calum had never been in Mrs Careen's house before, but it was beautiful, and the food smelt incredible. He dipped a corner of his bread in it. His head leant back as he swallowed it. His mind immediately raced ahead to whether he'd be allowed to ask for seconds.

"Been a long while since I've seen Mr Armitage speak to our neighbour," she continued, *"did he mention why?"*

"No," replied Calum - *"he just told me to help myself to some dinner and head to bed. Thanks for calling out to us, and offering me food - this is delicious!"* Calum was quietly pleased with that line. Laying the groundwork for seconds. Then his curiosity reached its hand through his oncoming satiety and asked -

"Why do you think he went to Number Seven?"

Mrs Careen had no answer for the boy. The obvious reason, and the one she offered, was that it must have been simply to check in, inform their neighbour of what happened yesterday and to let

them know if he needs anything. You know - community sticking together in a crisis - that sort of thing. But she knew something of the history that the two of them shared. Though it angered and sickened her, it wasn't she that Mr Armitage would call on in a crisis, it was him.

Calum could tell she was not telling him what she knew, and that she had suspicions about their meeting. He had to choose between finding out what he could and pushing for seconds. He slowed down his last few mouthfuls to savour it as he asked -

"Why do we never see the neighbour at Number Seven?"

"I don't think you want to know too much about our neighbour, Calum."

"I do, I do want to know, Mrs Careen - why does he never leave?"

"Calum, I don't want to speak out of turn - it's very much between the two of them. But I'll tell you this before you get ready to sleep, it's as with most things around here, many things changed when Mr Armitage's girls went missing."

"Number Seven changed?" the boy replied.

"Yes," she continued - *"very much so."*

He pushed - *"changed how?"*

The boy was earnest, not prying. He had intuited what she already knew, that the girl's hands were marking all their lives, still, that they lingered even as overseers of the terror in the bloody diamond. She prized the earnest above all virtues. It was what she loved most in Mr Armitage. He was rubbing off on the boy more than even she'd realised.

He finished his last spoon of soup, supposing he'd not get anything more from Mrs Careen, and was about to stand up and get ready to sleep. But she had stood and turned to the kettle, deeming the lad deserving of a little more of what she knew.

"Tea before bed, lad?" She asked.

Calum knew he'd won her over and prayed he'd learn more from his chosen second guardian - one that could actually cook. He followed her outstretched hand and moved to the armchair behind him that it pointed to. He sat down.

"The three sisters weren't born to Mr Armitage," she said as the kettle began whistling.

"Sorry about the window," Mr Armitage smirked as he moved through into what was once a lounge - *"may I?"* He continued as he accidentally knocked over two towers of magazines and five large boxes - nesting dolls - of Tupperware containing other Tupperware. He shoved it all away to his left, making himself a small perch on the couch. He looked up and saw the flash of eyes through the little glasses, peering around from the staircase. The neighbour, saying nothing.

"I have some unpleasant news to share with you," he continued, "would you like to find a place to sit?" The eyes simply continued staring back at him. He watched them closely to see their reaction. *"Right, well, there's no easy way to say it. Ella - two doors down - she killed her father yesterday."* The neighbour didn't blink - glossed over a little - imagining. They remained there a few moments, Mr Armitage willing the eyes to show anything more, or the mouth to make any sound.

"You'll see one of the boys with me, Calum, but the other lad, Conor, is missing. Police suspect abducted by his sister. Terrible thing."

"Terrible thing," the echo croaked from behind the wall.

Mr Armitage held his gaze for a moment longer before looking away back into Number Seven's garden. He considered leaving, but, seeing his neighbour rooted to the spot, further trapped in his own home, fed a little cruelty in him. He wished for fury, but received none.

The neighbour stared out at him. This conversation had been a rich dialogue for him, and would feed him for many days. He stored it all away, his anger at the smashed window, the new disorder of the lounge, with his files and materials toppled and rearranged to give the Bear a place to sit. And the very fact of his visit, more fucking missing children. Him, central in it all again. Saviour of the boy, Calum, no doubt the one to chase down and try to find the boy, Conor, and ultimately, as always, he would be the one to be swooned over for how hard it is on him. Oh, the depth of his love for them. First the sisters, and now Conor. Oh, look how he cares for Calum. But ask again - who is at the centre of it all? Him, the fucking Bear. Sat there, leaving behind a mess again. Yes, there would be plenty for the neighbour to chew on here. He silently offered him bitter thanks, the man at the centre of everything shit. Nobody sees it but him - the generous, open-hearted man - nothing but a destroyer.

Conor turned away from the man without eyelids, to his sister. Tending the fire in the centre aisle. Conor had been aware of the dried blood around Ella's thigh; he watched now as she reached in and gave a sharp tug. He thought of Velcro as he heard it pull away from the fibres of her shorts. It had definitely shrunk - more of a leather purse than a handbag now. She threw their father's scalp onto the fire beside the man. Conor's thumb slipped on blood and snot as he hurried to plug his nose - he had to, couldn't bear the fact that he liked the smell. It took time, but eventually, like paper, it crumpled. Ella squatted down by it and watched as it moved from flesh to meat to ash. She reached it, cupped the ashes in her hands and moved towards the man without eyelids, placing them upon his lap where he sat. No sooner were they laid there than they were lost entirely, falling through into the sea of ashes that surrounded him.

"If you want to speak with him, we need to take him up," said Ella, *"he won't speak to you down here."*

Conor couldn't speak. He sure as hell didn't want to hear anything the man without eyelids had to say. Taking him up was not an option.

"You have to promise him something, Conor, something that matters. Then he will take you up and explain all this. I need you."

"God, Ella, you're sick. I won't listen to that man."

She was a stampede then, marching back towards him, she wrenched his head back, left hand pressing on his forehead. He saw then the wild eyes of the dangerous animal that his father must have seen moments before he died.

"Promise him something, Conor! Something that hurts!" The blade was in her right hand, raised above him and closing. The strip lights down the bus were flickering, Conor thought of all the time between one and two. He knew he couldn't take this man up. He believed they were the same, but he prayed they were different. He felt a gentle touch on his hand, the familiarity of his own man without eyelids reaching out again. He hadn't been able to get there in his earlier attempt to escape from Ella. But they had managed to travel together once before. With all the force he could, he wrapped his arms around her, legs loosened as he pulled his dead weight, hurtling out of the door of the bus, towards the ground. The knife remained just above his left eye. Seeing beyond it, he watched Ella's eyes widen as she realised the control she had lost. Conor felt his body hit the concrete and waited for the knife to plunge through his eye until it too met the earth below.

Everything went black as he pulled Ella into his deep.

Mrs Careen sat down on the chair beside Calum and set the tray with the teapot and their cups on the coffee table that lay between them. Calum had glanced about this lounge while she'd got the drinks. It was dark outside now, but inside was well lit; it looked as if it had been decorated by someone younger than Mrs Careen. Put simply, there was nothing garishly silver or reflective that you tend to see in the homes of most older women in England. It was just - warm.

Calum fought the urge to ask a follow-up question like 'whose kids were they?' He knew Mrs Careen was taking the time to assess exactly what to divulge and what to withhold. He would do what Conor always did with him, take the route of silence, and see how far she'd go.

"I can only tell you the things that matter for you specifically, Calum," she said.

"Of course, I understand," he lied, aware that he was about to have a conversation much older than he could convincingly carry.

She remembered his earnestness then, even as he now sat awkwardly, a boy trying desperately to look ready to understand adult things. She said then -

"The girls, Mr Armitage met their mother when he was living in North America. The way he farms, the way he tends his garden, it isn't like most of us. He likes old things, ancient things. So he'd travel to communities where they retain such practices. Frankly, I think he resents that any of us own our homes, himself included. If he could, I dare say he'd roam the plains, tracking, killing, eating buffalo."

Calum flinched at the word *killing*. Mrs Careen reminded herself to speak slowly and tenderly, try the words on before letting them out.

"I'm not sure where he was exactly, but he was living on a reserve, a place where Native American Indians still live, with a group that still practised many of their old ways. It's where he learnt many of his stories, and where he decided much of what he believes about the world and people. The girls each had different mothers. You mustn't ever speak to Mr Armitage of this, boy, not unless he speaks to you about it first."

Calum nodded.

"The girls' mothers, they all passed - big accident. Mr Armitage never told me what it was. But that's how they came into his care. God, I don't know how or why they landed with him - I suppose they must have thought the girls some kind of curse or something. Regardless, they wound up with our Mr Armitage. For some reason, he thought it would be easier to raise them here, so he filed to become their legal guardian and returned home to us. None of us neighbours knew quite what was happening when Mr Armitage returned - three years after he'd left - with three girls, all younger than ten years old. But we knew instantly that he loved them, and they him in return."

The four of them were totally inseparable. I'd never seen him happier. I didn't know until later how often he had to comfort the girls at night when they cried for their mothers. Things were very different then. Sometimes when Mr Armitage needed to travel, the girls would stay over at Number Seven. They would tend his garden together - it was marvellously beautiful - and he too loved the girls. We all did. They brought so much life to our lives, Calum. Them gone - was hell for us. When the girls went missing, Mr Armitage went to our neighbour for help, and, well, that worked out well."

Calum saw on her face that she knew she'd told him too much. It seemed to him that she'd been desperate to tell someone, and those she had around her were unavailable - wounds of their own - and none of them had anything to treat them with.

"I'm so sorry, Calum, I'm only telling you because it's so important that we don't lose you like we have these others."

"Do you think I'll see Conor again?" He continued - quietly - so as not to conjure her - *"Ella?"*

"I hope so," she replied, *"but for now you're the only one we have here to protect."*

He'd fed his cruelty a little too long, and it had blossomed into familiar rage - *"Another two missing children, and you're just going to stay in here? Rot in here?!"* Bellowed Mr Armitage.

The eyes stayed where they were

"Come out from back there, please, come and at least be with me, I need you."

His chin slunk back down into its resting place upon his chest - *"Say, something, please."*

The eyes turned away, and he began to walk upstairs to the antechamber. He'd had enough of the Bear's pleas. But he started running when he heard more boxes crashing in the kitchen, the sound of Mr Armitage finding his footing and crashing down as he lost it again. He heard the first step on the wooden stairs where he'd stood moments earlier and knew he was gaining on him. He threw all manner of detritus back towards the Bear as it continued to crash through everything. He stretched for the handle of the door to the antechamber, felt the Bear's great paw wrap around his calf. His hand scratched the door as he slid down and smacked his chin on the floor; dull pain rang through his teeth. The Bear turned him over.

"I'm sorry," said Mr Armitage, looking at his face and bloody chin. The neighbour was what he'd always been. A terrorised boy, desperately clawing for a locked room without windows. *"I'm sorry about the girls."*

As soon as they landed in his deep Conor set off running. Straight off the road, and he was hopping fences. He caught himself thinking how much of a mockery Ella would make of the world down here, so like the one above. He heard her come to in the distance. Right on cue - laughter. Her voice thundered as he ran -

"You turned your deep into this?!" She cried, *"You made England?!"*

Embarrassment was fleeting; he loved it down here. Always had, and at least he could make his way around his deep without getting lost. He realised that the detours in Ella's weren't to show him anything; she just didn't remember the way. He kept hopping fences, all doors were unlocked, so he ran through a three-bed semi, across a cul-de-sac, through another and on to a small park, a lot of green space near homes here in Conor's deep. Good governance. *Conor for Mayor*, he thought. He knew that he had to get to the viaduct - sensed that was where he'd find his man. The park led onto the grounds of a school - the Raleigh - his primary school. Ella somehow made it there first. A click. He heard her on the PA as he sprinted down the halls.

"Your imagination is fucking embarrassing, Con. Seriously, does this even count?" The PA clicked off. He burst through the front doors of the school and out the gate. He was sprinting, chest heaving as he ran down the lane, refusing to look back. He saw the junction and knew there was a bus stop away to his right that would take him back to the viaduct. He heard it before he saw it, another deep breath, and he held it as he ran straight out into the road, it wasn't slowing yet. He passed in front of it - the front dipped when the brakes finally engaged. No payment yet, he took his seat. Conor breathed a sigh of relief as the doors closed behind him, first smooth inhale as the hydraulic doors closed perfectly together.

Three stops later - sweaty and out of breath, wild-eyed but evidently amused - Ella stretched out her hand as the bus came to a stop.

Mr Armitage watched as the neighbour reached down, grabbed his hand from around his calf and prised his fingers loose. He shuffled his hands along the floor and slumped against the wall; the green from the antechamber showed him more clearly than Mr Armitage had seen him in years. Facing each other, the neighbour gently touched his chin and saw the blood running down and onto his shirt. He grabbed some underpants from a box that had toppled nearby and rubbed his hand and chin on them.

"Do you need me to take you -"

"Leave," replied the neighbour.

"- you might need stitches, let me take you to -"

"Leave, now, Phil."

Mr Armitage stood up, clattered over some new mess on the stairs and stumbled out to the kitchen. He switched the light on as he rooted through several drawers until he found some scissors and tape. He ripped the top off one of the cardboard boxes and cut a small rectangle. As he left, he taped it down, patching the small window of the rear door he'd smashed to get in. Clicked the light back off.

He left and wandered down the garden, tripping several times over, but managing to avoid any overturned rakes. He bent down and pressed himself through the hedge hole. Calum would get through with ease now. He made his way down Mrs Careen's garden. She waved as she saw him making his way up. His head remained low as he passed through her back door and sat down in the adjoining lounge beside the kitchen.

"The boy is asleep upstairs. How was next door?" She asked.

Mr Armitage just waved his hand.

"That bad?"

"Worse," he replied.

She finished wiping the counters and returned the kitchen to its hard-earned, effortless orderliness, then sat down. She observed he wasn't hunched in his usual dejected grief - his face was marred with shame.

"What happened?" She insisted.

"Fucking Bear, look what it did to me! Ow, that really fucking stings." The neighbour was standing at the bathroom mirror. Refusing to turn the light on meant it had taken longer than it should have to find the antiseptic wipes, a couple pills he hoped were paracetamol and those small, strong adhesive plasters you could use - unwisely - in place of stitches. Regardless, no chance he was going to A&E for anything of that sort.

He finished up and returned to the antechamber. The green light welcomed him. He circled the pedestal, watching his feet move freely, with nothing to hinder his cadence. He kicked his legs up high, walked one way a while, turned back, then he ran a little. He stretched out his arms, fingers traipsing against the walls. He ran around the pedestal, running his hands all the way to the corners. He stretched his arms up as he ran faster, reaching up towards the tall ceiling. *"See, Bear! I have room, I have plenty of room!"* He lay down, stretched out his body, and began to crawl. He felt the smooth wood beneath his hands as he slowly slunk across the floor. He reached out again and, as he did, noticed that one half of the protective strip of his adhesive plaster had followed him in here from the bathroom. He shrieked and crawled over to it, grabbed it. *"Look, look what you've done, what you've done to my room!"* He opened the bathroom door halfway, careful not to topple over the shampoos and soaps stacked behind it. He reached back and grabbed the Tupperware to put it in with the other protective strips. One had been from cutting a bagel, another from a sore he'd developed, scratching just beneath his temple. He closed the bathroom door again and returned to his once-again clean room, and muttered more curses for Mr Armitage making a mess of it.

He returned to the head of his pedestal, opened the case that sat atop it, and ran his fingers over the tops of each of them. Felt every buckle and bevel. He touched each one, excepting the one empty slot. The one he knew the Bear had taken. On the last day, he'd let him in. *"Time is a test of trouble, Bear, but not a remedy."*

"God, Phil, what good did you think any of that would do?"

Mr Armitage had finished recounting his return to Number Seven to Mrs Careen. He shrugged and gave a look imploring her not to make him feel worse than he already did. They both paused. His guilt created the perfect opening for her to tell him the conversation she'd had with Calum, wagering that his frustration at himself would temper his anger at her - or so she reasoned.

"Calum and I had a nice chat this evening," she said, *"a special boy, that one."*

Mr Armitage nodded, but glanced at her uneasily.

"What did you talk about?"

"All sorts really, but he had plenty of questions about the man he's reckoned to be his new guardian."

"Doubly unfortunate, getting me as guardian," he scoffed.

She poured the remainder of the pot of cedar tea into Mr Armitage's cup and sat back down.

"What did you tell the lad?" He quietly insisted, tilting his head back and looking up at the ceiling, willing himself to remain calm regardless of what she said next. He'd further damaged enough relationships tonight with old ghosts. Couldn't afford any rifts with the living.

"I told him a little of what I know to be true - that what happened to him and his family is somehow tied up with you and your girls - when you found them, and when you lost them."

At their mention, the three began approaching again.

"I know we won't see Conor again," she continued, "or Ella. But we have to keep this one, Phil, we have to."

All his small fissures were worsening. Compound fractures. He felt the earth beneath him cracking open, willing him in. He fought it, reached up and struggled to remain in the room with Mrs Careen.

"I'm not convinced we won't be seeing Conor again. But I agree, we need to keep Calum close."

Mrs Careen felt a jolt of delight at these words. He was a wonderful guardian. He knew he'd have more questions from Calum once he'd had a chance to pull at the threads between his own torment and that of the sisters. But that would come tomorrow.

He rose to head upstairs for the boy, and as he turned, he kicked the dog's water bowl as it spilt on the floor. *"Jesus, do you really need that?"* he asked. He apologised as she threw him a tea-towel. He wiped up and then continued towards the staircase, careful not to make a noise. He found the boy in Mrs Careen's bed and wrapped him up in blankets. Calum's face burrowed into his chest when he picked him up. He carried him downstairs, kissed Mrs Careen on the cheek and let her kiss the boy on the forehead as he moved back through the hedge holes and eventually laid him down in Bethany's bed.

When he was alone again, he went and lay in Sara's bed, which was too short for him, of course, as it had also been for her. He lay his face in her pillow and thought of Number Seven, his neighbour, lit by the cool green light, blood pooling from his chin and running down his neck. He wouldn't help.

Ella stepped onto the bus, and Conor saw that she was far calmer here than last she'd stood before him. More human. That made it worse. She knew he needed time, more than this bus ride would give them. She sat in the very first seat, by the door, facing away from him. She knew there was nothing to be done until they alighted. The coin was spinning. Heads - it's the same man, tails - something else. Conor no longer hoped the man would be good, he just hoped he'd be different. But he was the one who always paid for Conor's journeys. So since he'd made it on, he knew they would see him again soon.

Ella watched out the window as they passed through mirages of places they'd been together. Conor had travelled a long way out through the years. It was a long way back to the viaduct. The bus passed through Devonshire towns, skirted around Dartmoor as quickly as possible. Conor lay across the back seats and pretended to sleep then, *bloody boring Dartmoor*.

Conor could feel Ella's presence on the bus as acutely as holding two fingers to your carotid artery. She was like the very blood pumping into his brain. As always, he waited for her to speak. He

wondered where she would eventually start: apology, explanation, justification, or perhaps she would just will herself back down into darkness, abandon all attempts at coercion and opt for penal servitude. Chain him up for his misbehaviour and flog him until he slipped and fell in pools of his own blood.

Eventually, as they were passing through North Wales, Bedgellert, she turned to him.

"Remember Gellert?"

He did. She continued regardless, putting on her grand storytime voice. Conor's stomach smiled.

"That great hound, so loved by Prince Llewellyn. Remember? One day, the Prince returns from a hunt, finds his hound, Gellert, with his mouth covered in blood. He looks to the cradle and finds it so - dripping red. This trustworthy hound, turned mad and dangerous, killed his heir! What else, Con, he kills the faithful hound, runs it through, and wounds himself the more deeply when he hears the baby hidden away beneath the cradle. Reaching down for his son, he finds behind it the dead body of a great wolf. The wolf that the brave and faithful Gellert had killed protecting the Prince's boy. And you recreated his town down here. It's bloody excellent, Conor, it's just like it."

They passed by it then, the bronze statue of the hound, at the door of the ancient grave. Conor had not expected her to mention this story. He despised how he loved hearing her tell it, remembering the three of them together when she'd first recounted it for her brothers, recalling her lifting the two of them onto the model hound as she played Llewellyn.

"I know the story, Ella."

Part 3

It was the drop of a mug that brought Mr Armitage back. He'd slept the entire night on Sara's bed. His legs numb from hanging off the end. Left him stumbling even worse than usual on his way downstairs.

"I'm sorry, Mr Armitage, shit, I'm so sorry." The boy was struggling with the handle of a mug, trying to find something to reattach it. He was rooting through drawers for some glue or tape. *"I'm so sorry,"* he repeated.

"No bother, lad, have you met me?!" He laughed.

Calum eased up then, chancing a joke - *"Yes, I suppose it's a miracle any of them are still intact."* He stared warily at Mr Armitage.

"It certainly is!" He replied, as he came closer into the kitchen, *"Making breakfast? Very kind of you, lad."*

Calum smiled. He liked making breakfast. *"Breakfast of champions,"* he said, with great bravery, as he laid down the meal for Mr Armitage that he'd carried up to his father two days ago. He was grateful to Mrs Careen, but she had left him with more questions than answers. He opted for formality, thinking Mr Armitage would find his tone appropriate and respectable. Peers. He felt the need, given his outburst yesterday when he'd been sent to the house alone.

"I've been through a lot, you'll understand," he began, *"and I must say I am very concerned for my brother."*

"As am I, lad, greatly so."

"I believe, all things considered, that I am proving myself resilient, and I feel we'll need my involvement - and yours - and Mrs Careen's - if we are to find him."

Mr Armitage made sure to sit straight and listen intently to the lad, despite finding everything about this moment rather hilarious. The boy was speaking as if he were in an episode of Poirot.

"Quite right," he replied, *"you've been most impressive since this whole terrible business began, and you're absolutely vital in unpicking this whole mystery."* His language was designed to meet the boy's formality, though the words themselves were true.

Calum beamed - *"Awesome - I mean - I'm glad you agree"*.

He risked trouble but had to take the opportunity while Mr Armitage was sold on their partnership;

"I overheard you and Mrs Careen last night - you aren't exactly quiet, and I am not sleeping particularly well - and, well, I thought - I suppose you'd have more success if you revisit your neighbour, with me accompanying you."

Mention of Number Seven immediately brought an end to their game. It was a dangerous idea for the boy to entertain.

"Absolutely not, lad."

"Why not?"

"Because he's not safe, lad, he's far worse than he used to be. Plus I might just lose you in that bloody house of his."

The neighbour had woken up after first falling asleep on the floor of the antechamber, which wasn't allowed, checked the case and saw he'd been there until a little after three, before moving out the northward door, to his bedroom. He'd slalomed in the dark, feeling everything as he manoeuvred to the section of available mattress. When he woke up with the dim morning light clawing at his curtains, his mind flashed a question that he could have sworn he'd had killed - *shall we go outside?*

As he stood washing the dishes, after dismissing the lad, Mr Armitage had time to think further through exactly what he'd hoped to achieve yesterday with his neighbour, and whether Calum was right. When the girls went missing, he'd hoped the neighbour would be his greatest support. Of course, the authorities suspected him of something dreadful, but there was no evidence. The bodies were never found, and besides, Mr Armitage hadn't even been in the country.

He'd been with the Haudenosaunee, where the girls were from. He was especially close with Sara's father, and counselled him greatly after what had happened to their mothers. He soon returned after hearing the distressed call from his neighbour, who said he hadn't seen the girls in the fields for two days. He arrived home and went straight to Mrs Careen, who explained that the neighbour had filed the two new missing persons reports, disappeared inside and refused to come out again.

He thought then about going to him that day - how his neighbour had cried and hit him, asking why he hadn't left the girls in his care while he travelled, though the girls had been between fifteen and seventeen when they had been last seen. It hadn't even occurred to him to find them some minder. Prior to that day, there had been growing animosity, but they had mostly retained a bond of friendship. But Number Seven was becoming necrotic even then - and that was the day the necessary amputation happened.

Mr Armitage had finished washing and drying their plates, trays, and the pans Calum had used to cook. He recalled the Dickinson lines the neighbour had quoted him that day -

Time is a test of trouble, but not a remedy

if such it prove, it prove too,

there was no malady.

The lines always helped the men understand the true nature of the hardships they faced. His were all maladies. He thought again of Calum - young enough to perhaps discover a different truth than he found. The boy still hoped for remedies; perhaps there was one at Number Seven, so Mr Armitage settled in himself to introduce the boy to their neighbour.

Mrs Careen regretted the amount she had told the boy, but remained unsure how she could have parsed the truth out any more appropriately, nor how she could have told him any more without making everything in his world more impossible to comprehend. She had intended to help the boy to see, of his own accord, the likelihood of seeing his siblings again, given the track record of found children in this little alcove. She needed to share the girl's history with him, help him see, and firmly drive the child into the safety of their grip. Everything was likely to be far more difficult if, at this moment where they must pull together, the boy himself felt compelled by a desire to prove himself strong, to tear away from their guardianship and into some righteous crusade to find his brother. Mrs Careen knew that, since the boy was gone, especially given the circumstances of his capture, the chances of his reappearing were ostensibly nil. That Mr Armitage had chosen that exact moment to

awaken the long-buried resentment of their neighbour infuriated her. She had smiled and listened while he explained what happened, while her insides screamed at the insane buffoonery he had exhibited. Smashing his window, damnit, physically grabbing the man, leaving him bleeding. Good God, what novel hells he'd dug up last night. Mr Armitage was too confident in the hiddenness of the recluse, thinking that while in there, he could do no damage. Damn it, nothing could be further from the truth; that man had ways of wreaking havoc. Any person able to tear up their own life like that has a depth of vengeance to plumb for the most minor of grievances; the worst thing you can do is give them real ones. They have one child left. One. And the great fool had smashed the face of the man she was most afraid of into the floor.

She looked over her deck and saw in the morning frost, barefoot and wrapped in a dark red tartan dressing gown which just passed his knees - her neighbour - perfectly still, aside from a hand, gesturing a wave as though seven years hadn't passed.

Hag. Hag! You hated the girls, you hated them because he loved them. I know everything you want. Everything. You wounded mother, you want to eat everything, you want to eat the whole world. Yes, eat. Eat it up, eat him up. Hag. The Hag chasing the Bear, same as always. He's weak enough for you again now, try again, Hag. Now he has a young charge to look after. Of course, he's the one to take the boy in. When nobody wants the child, who's there? The Bear - and traipsing behind him - the Hag. You love nothing but your own self-sacrifice. You rejoiced when the girls disappeared. Oh, you licked his wounds; consoling, counselling. I bet he cried with you. I bet you screamed into your pillow when he told you all he loved about the girls. You begged to hear him say one thing of you; one tenderness, one facet of you that he loved. But he never did, did he? Because he loves but one thing about you. That you're always there. When he needs you. And that you are able to lie to yourself that he thinks about you when you're not. Oh, Hag, I wish I felt anything for you but loathing. Poor boy, falling into the care of you and the Bear. I hope he dies as I pray they did - peacefully.

Calum was looking out of Bethany's window when he spotted the neighbour next door, waving to Mrs Careen. He was much smaller than Mr Armitage, though that didn't make him short. He had round glasses. Barefoot. His hair was wispy and scraped back across his head. He looked younger than Calum had anticipated, but not well. *Preserved*, perhaps. He could hear Mr Armitage downstairs; he hadn't yet mastered the art of knowing from the creaks and shuffles where he was exactly, though he suspected it wouldn't be long before he could. He supposed he was exactly where he wished he wasn't - in the chair by his little bookcase - looking out on the sisters' field. He didn't have long. The neighbour was likely to turn around at any moment; he was making a play of looking relaxed, but Calum could see his terror all over him. His feet were tapping, though Calum doubted it was from the cold, and his left hand was pulling at the cord that wrapped around his gown, the pale hand squeezed so tight that Calum could see all the blood in his veins.

He went downstairs, coat on, and nodded to Mr Armitage as he quickly moved to the low back door.

"Little fresh air," he said - moving speedily.

"Great idea!" Replied the great man, heaving himself forwards and reaching for his wax jacket.

"No, no, I think I'd like to be alone for a short while," said the boy.

Mr Armitage slowly let go of his wax jacket, eyeing the boy warily.

Don't look away - thought Calum.

The lad did a dreadful job of looking calm and collected, as he had planned to. His eyes were wider than usual, and he was unblinking as he stared at Mr Armitage, who resigned himself to the fact that the boy had lost all capacity for a baseline from which to compare any of his behaviours. The recalibration would be ongoing.

"As you were, lad," he said eventually.

Calum turned and walked out the door. He hoped the neighbour would still be where he'd left him. He walked down the garden, refusing to look back at the hulk in the corner of the low cottage windows. He also knew the hedge hole to Number Seven was out of bounds if he wanted to pass through without hindrance. If he walked through it after the conversation they'd had a couple of hours prior at breakfast, Mr Armitage would be up and chasing him down the garden before he'd make it to the neighbour's patio.

He moved straight out of the garden, through the gate that led to the sister's field and veered right as though he were heading to his oak. Once he was out of sight of Mr Armitage, he turned back. The fence at the back of the garden leading to Number Seven had plenty of spaces to crawl through. The wood was rotten, and if you were willing to crawl through the brush, you could make it in relatively easily. He opted for a partially missing fencepost, ringed by some brambles nearer to Mrs Careen's hedge and gradually made his way through, a couple nicks in his trousers and a right hand grazing some stinging nettles, and he was in. He hadn't wanted her to see him and sound any alarm either. Standing up, he began to make his way nearer the house. He regretted his choice almost immediately but felt a duty to himself to finish what he started, knowing that if Conor were here, he would not allow anything to turn him back.

Help me, Con.

He moved slowly, finding plenty of debris to hide himself behind as he moved nearer, aiming to be seen only when he was ready. It was most likely for nothing, he reckoned - assuming the neighbour, quivering as he was, had moved back inside as soon as Calum had moved away from his window. Midway down the garden, he moved his head slightly from behind a stack of glass, metal and terracotta shards he assumed were the remnants of a torn-down greenhouse. He looked up and met the eyes of the gowned man, ten metres away, stood pulling hard on either side of the knot at the belt with both hands. He saw his wounded chin. It would definitely need stitches.

He held his eye on the lad for a moment before turning and stepping over the threshold through the red door. It stayed open.

Hours had passed since Bedgellert. Ella had sung a little - songs she knew Conor enjoyed - but none like Mr Bojangles, none that helped constitute who he was. He couldn't help his thankfulness. Her gentlest mercies still giving rise to his detestable reverence.

"How much further is this place, Con?" She asked.

Conor said nothing. Ella groaned. Her displeasure at his sulking made him furious. Sitting up from his make-shift bed across the back seats, he felt the blood drain from his head, dizzy, his brain pressed up against his skull until the fluid returned. He looked out the window. He could see the viaduct.

He ran through his plan again and realised it had one step. One step and no contingencies. He renamed the plan '*shit-show*' and opted for prayer. He laid his elbows on his thighs and turned his hands upwards. He leant forward and pressed his face into his hands. His closed eyes pressed onto the hard, meaty section of his palm. He felt a suction on them, pressing harder until his vision shifted from complete black to flashes and rolls of light across his entombed field of vision. He released the pressure slightly, felt the suction click and listened to the noises as his soft eyes pressed inwards. He pushed again and made that simple request. He prayed he wouldn't die.

Lifting his head, the light of the bus rushed in, and he saw nothing. His eyes adjusted as he looked out to see the vast arches of the viaduct rolling past. Here. The bus pulled in and under the next arch. Glancing ahead, they moved by parked buses in the bays, the bus from Bay 1 now reversing to commence its journey. The bus dipped as the absent driver hit the brakes, pulling into Bay Six. The doors opened, then the key turned as the engine clicked off. Ella's shoulders were pumping, her whole body lightly reverberating. Not nerves - excitement. She saw him first. Stepping out from the bench where he'd been waiting. The bus was silent but for the creaking of Ella's seat and the cold meeting of silver and plastic as the man dropped his payment and the coins wrestled to make their way into the slot.

The entry to Number Seven seemed to swell and constrict as Calum stared at it. A moment ago, it had grown teeth all around its edges, the red door a tongue ready to swallow him whole if he dared enter. Now, however, it was shrinking, becoming much too small, even for a boy. But he was shrinking too. All scaling factors failed as he stared towards the inner dark. When he'd met the neighbour's gaze, it had felt as though a mallet had driven great tent pegs through his feet. He'd need to rip them out to keep moving.

The door was beginning to widen again. This was his moment. He had survived his greatest terrors; somehow, that reality breathed in him as boldness. He ripped the pegs out, took a deep breath in, puffing up his chest as big as he could and sprinted. The door was shrinking again as he approached.

Luckily, all the air he'd sucked in was blowing out, and he was deflating, he leapt and squeezed through over the threshold, tripped over a pile of shoeboxes and flew headfirst into the far wall, finally slumped amongst a stack of mops, buckets, and what looked like the motors and accessories of several different vacuum cleaners - Henry grinned at him. He followed his gaze towards the spiralling staircase. He sat up and journeyed through the accidental jungle gym, forgetting momentarily exactly where he was. Until he reached the clearing at the top step. The space ahead of him made the mess he'd travelled through suddenly very unnerving. Ahead of him lay the first light he'd seen in the house, a warm green glow emanating from the base of the door that lay before him. He put his eye nearer to it. He heard padding feet inside. He remembered exactly where he was.

"Come in," said the neighbour then. Calum's throat dried up. He reached his right arm across his thin body and tried to squeeze one of his ribs. He closed his eyes and tried to become completely silent.

"I said come in," he repeated. Calum laid his left hand across his mouth, the knuckle of his index finger and his thumb pressing up, covering his nostrils to silence the racket of his pesky breathing. He lay there, in the green light of the door, as he doubled in age. His eyes remained clasped shut even as the warm green light washed over him, as the door gently creaked open.

Once payment was made, the man without eyelids gestured to Conor. He rose from the back seat and approached his old friend. Same as always, Conor and the second passenger alighted the bus together. However, this time, as his feet touched back down, he did not rush through the floor and back into the bloody diamond as he had reluctantly hoped he would. Ella followed behind them. Another minute passed, three total - right on time - the bus departed Bay Six.

Conor walked three paces behind his second passenger. He led them out and into the bus station. Everything glistened with that new-build sheen. No graffiti, no smashed windows. Conor couldn't help but smile at how well he'd looked after it. They passed Bay One and crossed the road, soon passing through the arch of the viaduct, across to a small field. A table stood at its centre. Conor felt a pang of embarrassment again. It was one of those plastic folding tables you see in old churches, that's what he had in his deep. Conor couldn't get the image out of his mind of the man without eyelids wrestling and clicking the table legs into place for their meal.

He moved one chair out and gestured to Ella to approach. She did so and sat as he shuffled the chair in behind her. He repeated this with Conor. He walked around to the other side and took his seat facing them. He gestured for them to eat. The meal was a ceremony they were familiar with. They had had this meal every year with Mr Armitage. It was the three sisters' harvest.

Calum felt weak hands awkwardly slip into his armpits; they tried to slide him in. The hands readjusted and attempted to reach under him, lifting him a fraction before giving up and laying him

down again. The boy opened one eye and looked up at the gashed chin with the adhesive plaster half pulling away.

"Please come in, I said, Goddamnit," said the neighbour, visibly frustrated - *"I'm not going to carry you."*

Can't, Calum corrected him in his mind. Suddenly, a pen pierced a hole in the cup of fear he was carrying. It began to drain. He turned towards the green; for some reason, the floor remained safest, so he scooted in on his bottom. The neighbour turned and was evidently displeased by this, but made no effort to restrict him from doing so.

"I, I'm Calum," he said.

"So I've heard."

Calum continued, *"I'm sorry about your chin."* The neighbour let out a deep grunt at that. Cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry about your father," he replied, *"and brother."* They both paused - *"sister too, I suppose"*. Calum wished he hadn't mentioned the sea-snake; she made him feel cold, and he felt himself run his hands through his hair, checking everything was where it should be.

Calum had no tact for the moment and no time to pretend that any would help get what he needed. He knew that Mr Armitage and Mrs Careen were too terrified of what might be too much for him to see that he may never find out the forces that led to the destruction of his family. He was thankful Mr Armitage had said no, since his greatest advantage was that this man had no cause to care for niceties. It was his cruelty that might give Calum exactly what he needed. He opened his mouth to ask about the disappearances of the three sisters, but as he went to, a wiser voice called up and through him. *Thanks, Con.*

"Mr Armitage's girls, the three sisters. What happened to their mothers?"

Reaching again for the wax jacket, Mr Armitage arose and walked into his garden. He made his way up, keeping his eyes ahead, searching for the boy, to ensure he kept his distance. He continued through the gate into the sisters' field. He approached one of the mounds and laid his hands upon it. He wished it were time to plant now. Waiting for spring was always hard. This empty time was when he felt most distant from the girls. The harvest had always been an act of remembrance, at first for their heritage and then for their lives. Mr Armitage had learnt the practice in which he now farmed from their tribe, the Haudenosaunee. The western farming tradition pained Mr Armitage, its structure and isolated efficiency. He despised the monocultures of British farms and the chemicals needed to satisfy our laziness.

The Haudosaunee had better ways - the three sisters. In another month or so, once the frost cleared, and the sun spent enough time bathing the field, even while a chill remained, he would tend again to

the mounds, and lay down the first of the sisters - the corn. The corn always sprouted quickly, incredibly so. It would break through the softening ground and begin rushing to the sky. Though remaining but one sister, the land would limit its gifts and the table would be plain. So when the stalks began to show, Mr Armitage would bed in the second sister. They would come up a little slower, but the beans, who would usually require a trellis - dead sticks and twine - would instead hug their sister, the stretching corn. A remarkable girl, doing for free what agri-business products make millions doing - managing to crystallise the nitrogen in the atmosphere for food for her older sister, and the younger, a quieter, slower girl. Lastly, Mr Armitage laid the pumpkin seeds on top of and between the mounds, and their great leaves would stretch out, protecting the moisture needed for the roots, and protecting their older sisters from pests that would damage them at their more tender height.

These three sisters each ensured their mutual benefit. They kept themselves and the land well with practically no input from Mr Armitage at all. He thanked them again for their harmony and generosity. He never ate meals with these ingredients, save their coming from his field. He had not eaten of it for many months. He felt his stomach groan slightly. He was hungry.

They looked out at the sisters' harvest. Mr Armitage's way of preserving the memory of the three sisters. Ella and Conor realised then just how ravenous they both were. They piled their plates high: bean casseroles, corn cakes, great slices of pumpkin pie. There are many ways to prepare these three sisters, Mr Armitage always did as he recounted their legend, and here their host had prepared all the same dishes. Conor began, hounding down his food, reaching immediately for seconds as soon as a mouthful from his plate created new space that could be taken up.

Ella coughed. Conor noticed he was being rude, and tried to eat the present mouthful quietly. He had that horrible feeling when you move from eating too quickly and loudly to trying mid-mouthful not to appear piggy. Too late. It was a long time before that mouthful was swallowed, everything had turned to mush, and he'd achieved his aim of eating quietly as he slurped the last of it down.

Conor realised that Ella's twisted mission had support even in his deep. The three sisters were here, manifest as he'd known them up top, a meal. He saw here that their journeys were indeed bound together. Even as the man sat without eating, he noticed also that this was the same man without eyelids as he who had called for sacrifice from Ella's deep. Yet here he asked for nothing, but instead sat feeding them.

The legend Mr Armitage had shared with them had been about how the sisters loved and needed one another, how they had provided stability, nourishment and protection to one another. But he'd told them how, in the tale, they had ended up at a table. With a boy, coming first, wooing the eldest sister, taking her home to his family, before returning for the second sister, who fell in love with him too, and finally the third sister. Each of them going willingly out of love for the boy.

He watched as Ella ate, delicately cutting into some roasted pumpkin before lifting it to her mouth. He remembered her, the knife pressing against his eye, threatening to permanently heal his voluntary blindness. He saw it all then, and promised him something that hurts. As soon as he spoke it, the man took them up.

"I offer you Ella."

He'd never seen a laugh quite as ugly as the neighbour gave then. It bared his yellow teeth and brought up bile in the coughs that lived with it.

"The girls' mothers, well, that's a bloody good question. And yes, your new guardian would never speak to you about them, you're quite right about that," heaved the neighbour.

Calum shrank back from him again. Felt his back press up against the wall. He was still sitting, pulling his knees in towards his chest. He quietly waited in hope that he'd continue. He watched as the neighbour stood opposite him, almost at a lectern, as though he were about to give a speech. But instead, he'd lifted a lid off a case before him and stood, gently palming the items within.

"Your Mr Armitage wouldn't have told me anything about them had sweet Bethany not told me her recollection first, though she'd been so young then. She asked me because she had questions herself, and had come to discover, as you will soon, that this guardian you've found for yourselves speaks in riddles. Granted, he'd make you feel as though he'd told you the story. But I know the man, I know how hard it is to get him to tell the truth."

The neighbour stepped back before crossing his arms across the base of the case that lay before him. He bent forward and rested his forehead on the hard bone of his right forearm and exhaled deeply. He spoke then.

"The girls had been young, Bethany, the middle sister, was six when it happened. She had recalled the arrival of the great man from England who had been welcomed on their reserve. He's not easily forgotten, that one. Your Mr Armitage lived with them for three years, travelling with them, learning how they build, how they use the land, what and how they cook. He'd listened to their stories and embedded himself with their people."

The girls knew each other then, but as many of the young children did. Their mothers were close, but they were by no means sisters, though they would become so that night. As Bethany recalled, they'd been out, out playing in the woods. One of the boys had built a shelter, and a whole group of the kids were planning to stay there that night. Some of the older boys had turned it into a real camp, and they played music. They sat singing and eating breads they'd taken with them. Bethany said she smelt smoke before she could see it through the trees. They ran back then. It was dark, but they followed the sound of the screaming and the crying. When they arrived, they saw the house. It would be mostly rubble by the time the fire engine arrived."

The other children who'd arrived back were in the arms of their mothers. Their fathers took the girls home, but quickly became utterly useless. Here, I'll thank him for that. For that and nothing more, I daren't say what further horrors those girls might have known had he not intervened at that moment.

Enough of that. He did plenty of damage, too. I've wondered whether the great man did all the damage. Regardless, those were the circumstances of the deaths of the girls' mothers. Tragedy strikes and the guardian appears, as he has again for you.

When he'd finished, he asked Calum, "Why do you ask?"

"Um, may I ask, what were their mothers like when they found them? I mean, did they have their eyelids? And, well," he hesitated, "their scalps?"

Conor felt a jolt of pain through his back as they landed back up top. He had slammed into a small log by a forgotten firepit. The spot was familiar; it was on the hills out beyond Glyder Fawr in Snowdonia. Far from any trails, but he knew it. He, Ella and Calum had camped here several times.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, you stupid piece of shit, I'll fucking murder you. Good God, you've no idea what you've done. Oh, you're fucked, Conor. You 'offer' me - I'm not yours to give you fucking stupid child. Oh, Jesus. Ugh, I'm not even mad, really. It's just ridiculous, it's, it's nonsense is what it is. But just fucking keep your mouth shut, hey, how fucking stupid are you?"

She was pacing like a tiger behind a sheet window from a big piece of meat. A *matter of time*, thought Conor. He caught her looking at him like he'd seen her looking at Calum on occasion, like she was picturing him thrown from a great height. Tryfan was the perfect spot for this fantasy of hers. There were plenty of ledges nearby that would offer her the opportunity to see his broken and bloodied body smashed against jagged rocks 100 metres below.

"Offer me. Offer me!" She continued raving, *"You'll do nothing, Conor, you can do nothing, you're fucking weak. You need me for everything. You creep behind me, crawl on me. You're a pet, Conor. A pet. Fuck me, credit where it's due, it's a ballsy move, but you can do nothing to back it up. You know that, nothing. And me - I won't lie down and be your offering. Anything you want from me, you'll have to fucking take it. Only you won't, you wouldn't even try, and you certainly wouldn't manage it. I'd have you skinned before you ever laid another hand on me. Skinned alive and burned. I'd have you watch it fold and melt and burn before your eyes, too. Offer me all you want, Conor, I'm not going anywhere."*

The man had been constructing the fire during Ella's tirade. As the night darkened and the fire grew, his features shifted and changed as the light beneath him grew. He sat back then, finally, long legs crossed, leaning back against a rock, half a metre from the flames. Then he spoke, his voice hard like water on rock.

"Ella, enough. Come, sit beside me." She started, seeming to have almost lost track of his being there, immediately stopping her pacing. Conor watched as she filled her lungs before slowly exhaling and closing her eyes. Conor was grateful to have them off him for the moment, but prayed for them back as he now locked onto the man without eyelids, who was inexplicably speaking now, here in the world above. The exhale was long and quiet as she sat down beside the man, close enough to lean into him, had he raised an arm to meet her.

"Adults have sacrificed their children for ages and millennia, Conor. As long as man has been here, he has plunged dagger into child to demonstrate his love to the unknowable unseen. The man that does so rejoices, the sickness of the ego to translate that into virtue, remarkable."

Conor looked his man in the eyes, they were dark. They were fixed on him without movement. His breath was slow and steady, he scarcely moved. Conor realised just how much he was adjusting his position on the floor while the man spoke. Looking for a good place to sit before the reality he was living crumbled under its own madness, and he was pulled down to an unimaginable depth from which there would be no returning. He grasped for any comfort, for even the space between the seconds, but there was none to be found.

"A man sacrifices his child on the altar to some god. To what is the purpose of his offering? It is for food, to appease some world-destroyer, so that crops might grow, so that another enemy might be defeated, for vision. What man will not do to be able to see what to do next. Then also, to whom is his offering directed? Well - at first glance you see that it is for the one he speaks of. His momentary deity, they are always invoked. No one lays down a child without knowing what they expect out of it, nor from whom they expect this gift of mercy. Mercy, boy - grace, from one who asked you to lay an innocent life down for them. You see it now, don't you? You only need a moment of consideration to see the truth - they do it for themselves. The man takes the knife to his own child and you discover that it was for no one but him. The act of anti-virtue constructed properly makes the man, in his own eyes, the perfectly selfless."

Conor had placed his fist in front of his mouth, with the side of his index finger laying across the space between his lips. He did this to help him feel more keenly the sensation of his breath through his nose. He felt his insides screaming. He had promised this man something. Unbearably desperate to have him speak to him he had offered all he could and here he was, hearing that his offering was simply an act of selfish pride.

"And what of the child, Conor, they sit upon the laps of their fathers and mothers. Nursed they give nothing, do nothing. They are a commodity, it's true. No agency, no rights, not really. They lean on even those that cut them, curse them, abandon them. Children are scars, Conor, nothing more."

Conor felt all the water in his body as he quietly began to cry.

"So you have made me your offer, and I accept it."

Ella's mouth shot open, and her sinews tightened as she set herself to stand and throw herself at Conor, but the man quickly laid a hand across her. None of the tension in her body relaxed, but she sat back again.

"I accept your offering because you understand this truth, that the sacrifice of the older at the hand of the younger is right. You are entering your time to build, Conor - you can remove all that stands in your way. The sacrifice of a child is the way of the old to maintain life as they had it. But an offering is not meant to maintain, but to advance."

Looking at his sister, Conor said, *"Our tasks are bound - right, Ella"* before turning back to the man without eyelids, who was prodding the fire as the logs collapsed and embers rose. He continued, *"If the offerings we make are for ourselves, and I have promised you mine, who sacrificed the three sisters?"*

"What kind of question is that, boy? Jesus!" The neighbour reproached the lad then, looking at him, wondering what sort of sick mind he had. Until he recalled the very reason the boy had plucked up the courage to come to his antechamber in the first place - *"why would you ask me that?"*

"Well," he huffed uncomfortably. He stood up then, as though he too needed a lectern to deliver the message. *"Well,"* he didn't want to say why he'd asked, saying made it so. The neighbours' eyes were glistening in a way they hadn't before. *"Well -"*

"Go on, lad, out with it," said the man, looking him steadily in the eye for the first time.

"Well, that's how we found my Dad, you see, and -" He was out of breath now; he could feel his blood rushing out from his heart and into his hands, down into his legs. His chest was emptying again. The neighbour was veiling his pleasure poorly. Calum suddenly had a desire to run north. Far north. As far as, as far as wherever it is that the sun never sets in summer. They call it the midnight sun.

Much later, his remaining words arrived - *"and, it's not normal, sir, to be found like that."*

"It certainly isn't."

"I should really be going, but thank you for your help, sir, very insightful, sir."

Calum's etiquette was embedded so deeply that he couldn't withdraw his outstretched hand as it moved away ahead of him towards the neighbour. The boy was tall for his age, and as he approached, he peered at the case that sat atop the lectern, which was like a half-pillar. It reminded him of the type of thing you might see propping up a bird bath in Mrs Careen's garden. The case was beautiful, oak perhaps, gold etchings on the corners. The lid was open, and the glass lay hanging over the back of the lectern. He watched the man stop running his narrow fingers over the bezels, lugs and clasps of the eight beautiful watches and stretch out his hand in kind. Calum didn't notice; he was taken in by the stunning watch nearest him. It struck him in its perfect simplicity. The strap was

rich, dark leather - he could smell it - even as it contended with the rest of the house's aromas, trying desperately to penetrate the four walls of the antechamber. The face was ivory, and the dials in the lower segment of the watch showed something he couldn't quite make out; he chose to assume it was lunar cycles, like the watch his Dad wore. Part of the face was open, and Calum could see a portion of the mechanism at work, silently spinning in the background. Parts that ran endlessly, forcing the second hand to tick slowly on. Next to it lay a plastic digital Casio. An odd collection. He noted the man pawing the empty ninth slot with his left hand before it reached forward and closed the lid.

Calum shook the cold hand.

"Very brave," said the neighbour as he watched the boy turn around and head back out towards the jungle gym. They're never as fun the second time.

The neighbour watched from the staircase window as the boy made his way back out and through his garden. This time, he decided not to crawl through the brambles back to the sister's field. He passed back through the hedge hole to his new guardian. The news of the demented manner of the boy's father left his body quaking with excitement. The sheer fucking lunacy. He grabbed his eyelashes, pulled them forward, felt the globby *pluck* as the suction plucked his eyelids from his eyeballs, and then the stickiness as he dropped them back in place, felt how wet they were. Ran his hands through his thin hair, felt the wet grease. Again, this time running his sharp nails across his scalp, scraping hard until he felt it nick and a little pool of blood come up to meet his finger.

His mind changed clothes; this girl, Ella, had given the tormented license to torment. He decided it was time to visit the Hag.

He stretched out his hand toward her. Ella didn't know exactly what he wanted for a moment. She just stared at him. The tips of his fingers twitched. He expected something from her. She reached for her short pockets. The front right pocket was still sealed shut with the dried blood of her own offering. Her left hand plunged into the other and came out clasping the watch.

"How did you come by this, girl?" He asked.

"It was a gift," Conor saw the girl reply. Saw the girl lie - *mistake* - he thought.

"It is a beautiful gift; whoever gave it must have loved you greatly," the man replied softly.

"Yes, he did, it was my father's."

The man's hand was still outstretched. Conor thought how this hand that had thrown with seeming ease the very flesh that covered their father's skull onto a fire was now white-knuckled as she wrestled to give up this watch.

"The watch, Ella." Conor could tell this was an impatient man who had done much too much waiting. She let go and the watch fell into his hand. He palmed it, turned it over and looked at the exposed back that showed the entire mechanism inside. He traced the lines of cogs and wheels within it for a moment. *"Thank you,"* he said quietly before turning back to Conor.

"Would you like me to tell him how you came by the watch, girl? Or will you?" Ella opened her mouth to protest before seeing on the faces of both man and boy that she'd convinced no one of the gift.

"I told you, Conor, that I'd seen the sisters the day they went missing. Seen them pass through their field and into the woods across the field from our oak. I went to visit Mr Armitage when he arrived back from America, as I was passing through the gardens to his house I watched him approach the rear of Number Seven. He was banging on the door, screaming for our neighbour to let him in. I'd never seen him like it, Conor. He looked small. Eventually the door opened and Mr Armitage crashed in, pulling the man down with him to the floor as he wept. Jesus, he was wailing. It was dark out so I made my way closer. Easy enough to hide in that garden even back then. By the time I approached the door I could see that the two of them had made it out of the doorway and off to some lounge. I'd never been in that house. For some reason, here, with the door open I felt desperate. There was something in there, Conor."

Her eyes flickered for a moment as Conor saw her tense up as her body relived the moment into Number Seven, quiet and unseen.

"The two of them were pre-occupied, God - Mr Armitage like that - it was so ugly. There were no lights on so I just went in and made my way upstairs. I had no real reason to, I just knew there was something there I wanted. The house is odd, too, not like ours or Mr Armitage's, or Mrs Careen's for that matter. Everything encircles these inner rooms, I went into the one upstairs, it was bare but for this pedestal with a case on it. Inside were these nine watches. I saw this one, watched how the second hand just rolls around. I think it's beautiful. I think it's quite perfect really. So I took it. So what. He had a load of others. I hid behind the door as Mr Armitage went up to use the bathroom. I followed him back down afterwards as he passed by, taking the tea from our neighbour - and Jesus, that man is all kinds of fucking wrong. I moved behind them in the dark and back out the door as they made their way back to sit once more. I swear if you two think this is a big deal that's really fucking embarrassing."

The man without eyelids had been watching Conor while his sister had spoken.

"One and the same," he said.

"What do you mean?" Asked Conor, *"I haven't stolen anything."*

"No, no. Sacrifice and theft. They are one, Conor. Ella gave me your father, but stole him from you."

Conor saw his brother in his mind then, stood with the tray of breakfast smashed on the floor as he wretched violently. *From us,* he thought.

"The question of sacrifice is therefore - first and foremost - a question of ownership. It seems only right that you have this, Conor." He handed him the watch, *"It was your father's."*

"So that's what you do, then? You just sit there staring into space? I think you're fu-, you're useless." Calum barked at Mr Armitage as he moved rapidly through the room towards the stairs. He felt bad as soon as he'd said it. Just a child seeking intimacy in punishment. He waited for his guardian to march after him, say, *'Who the hell do you think you're talking to?!'* No one came. He didn't blame him, figured the old man thought what the boy wanted was to be left alone. That's what he told himself at least, though what he heard was that the old man regretted ever letting him or his brother in his house.

Lying in Catherine's bed, he was pressing again, determined to keep all his organs. Recalled what the man had said to Ella at Bethesda - *you can do what you like with the empties*. He thought about the three of them: Mr Armitage, Mrs Careen, and Number Seven. He needed a way to check them all.

Mrs Careen heard a knock at the back door. She stepped over to the cabinet in the front lounge, picking up a bottle of Laphroaig, two glasses and the wooden block and pegs. *Never a bad time for cribbage*, she thought.

Wandering through the door to the kitchen, she stopped still, seeing the Neighbour from Number Seven out in the freezing rain. Though not remotely inclined to let him in, she found herself opening the door as she watched him shivering uncontrollably. She stepped back as he stepped his bare feet in and onto her mat. His nails were long and sharp.

"I met your boy today," he said, *"a sweet lad."*

Mrs Careen winced, hearing this man's voice again after all these years. It had grown mouldy. She said nothing in return, hoping that he was in an episode that might resolve itself speedily if she did nothing to feed whatever delusions his twisted mind had created that had been powerful enough to lure him from his cavern.

"His sister, quite the demented fuck, hey." He continued. Again, she said nothing. His eyes narrowed as he saw the dog bowl. The neighbour stepped further in, his drenched housecoat ran last year's mud onto the tile floor. Only a shower can show just how filthy someone is.

"Funny of Phil to take him in, what will he do to memorialise the boy when he disappears, do you think? I hope he rears chickens, something meaty to go with that ridiculous picnic of his." Mrs Careen realised then that she needed to do something to get him out, both to keep him away from her carpets and because she sensed him getting that horrible confidence of the deranged with an audience.

"I think maybe you should head home, you must be freezing - head home, hey - nice warm bath."

"Warm bath does sound good, actually," he said, moving closer to the love-seat in the corner. "Big chair," He continued, "wonder who that's for" he choked his sick laugh.

"Seriously, come on now, please, you're scaring me a little. It's late, please go."

"I don't mean to frighten you Ellen, wouldn't want to make you feel uncomfortable at all. Just thought it might be nice to catch up again. But I can see I've come by a little too late."

"Thank you, thank you for understanding, it's, it's been lovely to see you again."

The neighbour stepped back from the chair, a small pool had run from his leg over the tiles down to the edge of the rug and started to stain it brown. He walked close by her, leant in for a small kiss, but she quickly stepped back and around to the other side of the kitchen. He looked at every part of her then. She watched his eyes run along her hairline, he checked her ears, the space between her nose and upper lip. She watched as he ran over her arms, checking her fingers, back across her chest and stomach and down. She kept her eyes on his as he finished his review of her legs, her feet. She felt her hands keep touching her body against her will in the places he'd been.

"That's a lovely watch," he said as he turned and walked out the open door back into the freezing night.

Mrs Careen dove down to the sprays beneath the sink, grabbed a cloth and was straight over to the rug. Too late.

"Thank you." The man without eyelids had passed Conor the watch, and manners mandated his gratitude before his mind had a chance to mark the man unworthy of appreciation and shutter his lips. Too late. He stood gazing at the watch for a short while, looking as one does at a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, checking it from every angle. He slid it over his hand onto his wrist. He sealed the clasp, and it clamped gently into place. Conor noted how, in a few days, perhaps sooner, the attention it warranted now would be lost to familiarity. He turned back to the man, who was facing away from him. The boy saw then just how tall he was, and took in more of his body, since he was so often seemingly just a pair of cold, unblinking eyes to him. He saw the wisps of his thin, grey hair pulled back across the pale head. The dark, well-fitted jacket wrapped around his broad shoulders. He had the shape of a man who had done a lot of heavy lifting a long time ago. He bade Conor and Ella walk with him in the emerging light as they moved away from the fire and towards the edge of Glyder Fawr and onwards toward a set of sharp rocks set out like a dragon's back. He spoke again.

"Some call it 'orenda' - that which gives everything life. The young are born full. Through your life, you either retain that fullness, or you give it up. The ones that die are the empties. All manner of circumstances lead to this emptying. The old sacrifice the young for precisely this, to thief their fullness and consume it. It is how they remain in the world. Abraham ascends Moriah, preparing his son Isaac as an offering. The Lord intervenes and provides a Ram to sacrifice, and we close the book and look away. But there are those who have offered their Isaac's. There are many. Many empties

offer up the full to consume them entirely. So we take Abraham instead, we lead him up, bind him hand and foot and plunge the dagger. And why not? You can do what you like with the empties. All they do is eat. Eat to fill their swollen bellies, all the world would not satisfy them. The empties are always hungry. It is the full-old that you should fear."

Conor felt ill. The man continued.

"The empties consumed the three sisters. Took them in and devoured them. They dig their faces in and feast. The empties are grotesque creatures, Conor. They don't mind scraps, mould or rot. I will not accept your offering yet. First you must choose your empty."

Part 4

Calum arrived back at Mr Armitage's, looking like he was approaching a cliff edge. He did not look at the man, in his high-back chair. The boy was on the verge of tears, making his way straight past his new guardian. Mr Armitage hinged forward and stretched his long arm, wrapping his great hand around the skinny forearm and gently pulled him towards himself. The boy toppled over the edge. A gentle headbutt at first, into his chest, before his head craned upwards and pressed his face in. His whole body heaved as heavy tears reached through the tattersall shirt, pooling and running down Mr Armitage's body like sweat. He leant the left side of his face gently upon the top of his head as the boy sat crouched upon him. He applied great pressure to the boy, he needed to be surrounded, and Mr Armitage's structure was able to oblige. They waited together for a long time. This cry was not short-breathed panic. The fear was subsiding. His breathing was steady and deep, this was not mere sadness either. Mr Armitage knew well what he was embracing, the boy was truly mourning. He heard Calum's grief doing that most challenging work, somehow reconciling the irreconcilable. The boy was pulling his gaping wounds together and attempting sutures with his teeth. Mr Armitage felt a rush of admiration for this boy as he wept hard through controlled, heavy breaths. They remained this way deep into the evening.

When he was ready, Calum lifted his head, before he could excuse himself, Mr Armitage reached left and grabbed some tissues on the side table that Mrs Careen must have placed there on some prior visit. Calum wiped his face.

"I'm sorry Mr Ar-

"You've nothing to apologise for my lad."

He could tell the boy was desperate to tell him something, but he had that look children have - not knowing whether their questions are cause for adult dismissal or something worse. He tried to make his face seem welcoming, like the boy could say whatever was on his mind. Whatever face he pulled mustn't have worked since Calum's face distorted to a kind of confusion at what exactly he was looking at. Mr Armitage gave up then and reverted to words.

"Have you something you want to speak to me about my boy?"

Calum realised then that he trusted this man only because he had no one else. He looked at his eyes closely, still on his lap, he readjusted himself so that he could press down on his stomach a little to feel the resistance. See what was in there. Calum trod carefully.

"I went to Number Seven."

Mr Armitage tensed, a flash of anger across his face gone as quickly as it came. Calum couldn't tell whether the anger was for him or the neighbour.

"He's a sick man, isn't he?" He continued.

"Very." Replied Mr Armitage.

Calum continued, *"Why did you go to him? What did you want from him?"*

"Ah, just neighbourly kindness, I suppose, lad, and having had police around, it's best just to stay informed. But he's not my responsibility, hey, a mistake, really."

"Please don't lie to me."

"I'm not." Said Mr Armitage, who immediately regretted trying to withhold from the boy, who turned away then, rather like a disappointed parent. *"I'm sorry, boy, it just feels natural to want to protect you after what you've been through, but I can see it isn't what you want or need."*

The genuine nature of his contrition was like a warm wind on Calum. It was a short while before Mr Armitage answered truthfully.

"I just missed my friend."

Calum sat quietly for a while. The warm wind was gone - winter was back in earnest - how could anyone be friends with that man? The boy spoke again, *"he told me about what happened to them. Your girls. Where they came from, I mean. You were very brave."*

The neighbours' bare feet practically danced out and onto the soft, wet grass of Mrs Careen's garden. He made his way slowly down the garden before he turned back. The lights at the back were all off, and the curtains now drawn. He drew a grimacing smile upon his lips as he realised he had sent her further inwards. Her locked doors were delicious.

Arriving back at the pass-through, leftward to his home, he turned right and looked through the opposing hedge-hole, then glanced at the rain crashing against the top of the bloody diamond, further away above Mrs Careen's hedge. He dug his nails into his scalp. He padded slowly nearer to the boy's family home, crouched slightly to get through the hedge-hole, his feet submerged in a deep, muddy puddle. He made his way slowly closer in the creeping dark. There were two - he assumed - police officers speaking away and to his right, near the outhouse that jutted out from the

kitchen. Stepping away, he reached the second back door that would take him directly into the cottage lounge.

His hand wrapped around the large brass handle, and he twisted left slowly. Nothing. Without even a consideration of turning back, he jerked the handle sharply again, and it released. He pulled, and the familiar welcome of a twisted home ushered him in. He wiped his feet on the mat, dislodging a few fragments of the mud that had accumulated between his toes. The rest followed him in. He looked around the lounge. He spotted on the wall a very young boy, whom he acknowledged as the lad who had visited him, beside him another lad, and in the middle of them a young girl. Her eyes betrayed their kinship; he admired the veil but gazed straight through it. Her own compulsions had made the same journey as his own - moving on through shame, to complete abandonment of anything right in favour of anything she wanted. The house had a tone much like his own, a quiet ringing that pulled you to its centre. Here it rang from upstairs. He moved through, pressing his hands, as he always did, on the steps in front of him as he ascended to identify the spots that would not creak.

He reached the top, crouching beneath the tape, and pressed his hands to his mouth tightly to stop himself from crying out. He stared at the mattress, laid out like someone had conducted brain surgery, and multiple amputations. The dried blood was all over the room. He clasped his lips tight and dug his nails into his scalp. He scratched hard, reaching for his skull. He could feel the tips of his fingers as they grew wet. He touched them to his mouth again.

Past the art installation on the mattress was the walk-in closet. Opening the drawer nearest him, he found their fathers' underpants, beautifully arranged like ornamental napkins. At the back of the open drawer was the small silver clasp. It clicked and pulled it open. Above the underpants now stood another tray, eighteen watches laid out in three rows. He laughed when he saw it; the girl's father had replaced it.

"Like for like, you fucking motherfucker," he whispered through clenched teeth. He reached his bloody fingers through the band and lifted it gently, tucking it away into the pocket of the tartan dressing gown. He made his way back through the silent house, through the rear door and into the night. He heard one officer mention some *'right 'orrible bastard'* as he passed by the outhouse on his way back through the hedge-holes and into his beloved filth.

The man without eyelids had driven the three of them back from the car park by Llyn Ogwen south, the length of Wales, out through Bristol. The journey only took a few hours, but Ella and Conor took the opportunity to sleep despite the discomfort of the vehicle. Conor found it strange at the service station in Cardiff how nobody took a second glance at their strange keeper. Frankly, no one seemed to pay the three of them any mind at all. They exited the old Land Rover Defender near Platt Park, which led into woods that would eventually bring them home.

It was late when they reached their oak. Very late. Conor was glad he'd slept. He knew he needed to be alert for whatever came next. The strength of the man without eyelids was made apparent again

as he heaved himself first to Conor's branch and then up to Ella's with total ease. Ella had adopted Conor's branch as her own now, leaving Calum's to the new youngest. He placed his can of Monster from the service station in the twisted root.

"To whom will you go?" The man asked, looking out at the three houses ahead of them as they peered out leftwards from Ella's branch towards the faint outline of Mrs Careen, Number Seven and Mr Armitage.

"Mr Armitage's, of course," replied Conor - the only possible play for safety - *"he's the only one that can tell us anything about the three sisters."*

"Not so fast," replied his sister, *"are we sure about that?"*

Conor paused, he realised then that there was no way of guaranteeing finding safety with Mr Armitage. More likely they'd be taking the man without eyelids, the man who accepted their fathers scalp as sacrifice, into the house of the two people Conor had left in this world. The way to safety was to do what this man wanted. He thought of Mr Armitage, unable to listen to a word his brother said. His total absent-mindedness and aloofness. He'd drawn nothing from the loss of the sisters, that had simply expedited his emptying.

"What about Number Seven?" He asked Ella, *"he must be one of the empties?"*

They stood and watched as a dark figure emerged crossing through Mrs Careen's back garden, through the hedge-hole and down through the barricades of Number Seven, the shape moving like it was avoiding land mines. The back door opened and the outlined dark stepped inside and was swallowed.

Ella was laughing, *"but we're not looking for someone empty, are we, Con. We need someone old and full. Believe me, he is - diseased but full."*

The three of them descended the oak and began moving towards Number Seven. Conor and Ella walked behind their foul guardian.

The Neighbour moved straight to his antechamber and pulled out the empty band holder in the corner. He took the new watch and slowly placed it and pressed the clamp closed. He put it back in its place. Like for like. The case was full again. He looked at all of the pieces, thought of each of the quiet homes they had come from. Those stolen from gain acuity. Everything heightens. Creaking floorboards, twisting latches, even a dripping tap come together to be a thunderstorm. He moved to his room, found his serpentine patch of available mattress and wound his way upon it and lay beside them - the ones from whom he'd taken the watches. He heard them breathing; aware of every familiar sound received as completely alien. Felt their cortisol rise as they clawed and bit for that Illusive state - to be unafraid. He lay awake with them, aware as they were, of all their fears. He pictured his muddy feet on their bedroom floors, the drawers left open. The batteries he'd

sometimes take out of their wall clocks. He was not interested in being inconspicuous. His message screamed from the space where a single watch had been - *I was in your fucking house*. He cast his eyes over Mrs Careen again. Without ever taking a watch from her, she had nevertheless joined the others, lay awake, ears attuned to even the changing of the wind outside.

Number Seven lay deadly still. The snake in its nest, until a low rip removed the cardboard covering the rear door. The neighbour opened his eyes and turned towards the staircase. He heard the padding of a hand on the brass of his doorknob as it twisted. A loud click then, as he unwillingly welcomed an intruder of his own. It was not the Bear, far too delicate. Nor was it Mrs Careen; she was incapacitated, begging for the light of morning when she would have eighteen hours to pull herself together and sort out this nonsense worry so she could sleep better. That was a futility the neighbour knew would last several weeks or more. This guest was new. He placed his bet.

"Jesus, it fucking stinks in here," said Ella.

"Shhh!" Hissed Conor. Immediately regretting choosing this house. How they would find out from this man anything about the three sisters suddenly felt impossible. A rush of shameful embarrassment rushed the boy. *Shit-show phase two*, he thought.

The man who lived here broke conventions. He lived like an empty. The neighbour did not mind mould nor rot. But Ella was right, he was positively overflowing. Conor could feel him upstairs. The presence of the man without eyelids allowed Conor and Ella to commune with the man's deep, even as they remained above.

"This guy is more fucked than me," said Ella then, *"I don't want think I want this."*

The neighbour lay listening to the rustle and careful movement of his boxes downstairs. He heard a footstep, then another sound by the back door. There was more than one visitor. He heard whispers and a sharp intake of breath as the first one tripped. They did not use their hands to identify the creaking spots. The floorboard a metre from the first of the stairs let out its groan. Unwelcome guests - what a pleasure. He knew what they were here for. He knew where they were going. He threw an old bone down into his deep to wake him up. It clattered on the ground, and he heard it rise, gnawing and clawing at the bone and thrashing at the door. He relished its hunger.

His Ella flashed before Calum's eyes. *Not now!* He begged the demon to drown her, and thankfully, she did. The valkyrie he'd spent the last two days with grabbed the girl he loved and rammed her head down into the river. Her body twitched, and she looked ready to run fast. He watched her turn back towards the stairs, reaching out right first to the nearest kitchen drawer. It had once been for cutlery, but now it was - like much of the rest of the house - a post office. She rifled through old bills

and notices and drew a steak knife. He watched her hands wrap around it. She took her own out, clicked the buckle and withdrew it from its leather case, reaching back to hand Conor the serrated edge of the steak knife, mimed a thrust, bad joke. His Ella lay lifeless in the river once more. Conor laid his thumb across the top of the handle and pressed his index finger against the first jagged ridge of the blade. He was tense and quickly drew blood. Neither of them were thinking at all of their companion, who was standing, running his finger across the top row of the bookshelf in the lounge behind them. He seemed like a man in the waiting room of a dentist. The three of them turned back to the stairs when they heard the creak of a mattress and two feet knock over something before landing on solid ground.

A moment later, the neighbour leant over the top rail of the staircase, looking straight down at her. The faint moonlight reflecting from a cracked curtain and the glow of green scurrying out from under the antechamber married in her eyes. She was remarkable.

Ella saw something quite different. The neighbour made his way to the top of the stairs, and Ella saw it. His stomach seemed to be rippling, almost like she could see the day's food, some still tinned, moving through his body. It was like his skin was too tight and his innards were about to burst out and run down the stairs towards her. Too much to be just today's food. It was everything he'd ever eaten. He was moving towards them now. *Full*. She knew Conor could see it too, beside her now. Ella gently squeezed the handle of her knife; the slightest nick would cause the man to burst. Not something she wanted to see.

"Are you satisfied with your choice?" Called out the man without eyelids from the waiting room, *"Retrieve them for me."*

Ella reached back for Conor, grabbing him by the forearm before lunging forwards, blade straining. It slid in easily through the flesh and muscle above his right hip, and they followed.

He'd had trouble sleeping the past two nights, so here at perhaps four, Mr Armitage sat up, threw his legs down over the side of his bed and began moving downstairs. He walked the whole way, an arm tracing one of the walls to help him move more slowly and carefully. He had no desire to wake the boy. He made it downstairs and to his chair, staring out into the blackness outside. The sun wouldn't arrive for another couple of hours. He reached beside him and started the old Dell laptop Mrs Careen had given him. It powered on. A little while later, Internet Explorer croaked and breathed again. He typed with the very tip of his right index finger. *s-k-y-s-c-a-n-n-e-r-c-o-m*. He put in his dates. Today. Calum wanted answers, so did he. He picked out their flights. To Toronto, across the border and down to the Onondaga Nation, the fire-keepers, just outside of Syracuse - where his girls were from - it was time to meet their fathers.

He paid the fares and sat back in his chair, thought he heard something like wailing outside. But the wind was heavy, and his shoulders were already too loaded to pick up anything more. So he lied, knowing his old friend was screaming in anguish and torment. *A windy night* he thought, as he returned quietly to his room and packed a bag for the few days he had booked for him and the boy.

His eyes were embers. He arose from the waiting room and paced towards the neighbour. The detritus failed to hinder his strides. Lay at the bottom of the stairs, blood pouring from his wound, he screamed and cried.

"No-one is coming for you" said the unblinking eyes, less than a foot from the man's face. He stayed with him a while. Gazing into his face, peering down at his stomach, watching as the neighbours' hands struggled increasingly to apply pressure to the wound, since his strength was fading, and because it was just so slippery. Then the visitor reached into his pocket, and pulled out a handful of ashes. Still hot he laid them over the man's wound. The neighbour watched them fill and cover the wound.

"Don't die," said the eyes, as everything went black.

Their hands were clasped tightly around their knives. They did not run. The siblings were standing back to back, as though they were seeing whether Conor was finally taller than his sister. He wasn't. They stood on smooth concrete looking out into the encroaching dark. They couldn't see the walls, though they knew they were out there. There had to be walls, because there was a ceiling. With a single dim green bulb flickering above their heads. Conor realised that he had assumed that the neighbours deep would be even more of a shit-hole than his home. But there was nothing in it. They walked away from the green light. Slowly, side-by-side now. Ella made sure to walk one half-pace ahead of her brother. As the light behind them was fading to leave them in near pitch black, another green light flickered on ahead of them. They passed this way for some time. Conor counted eleven lights before Ella stopped.

"Give me your wallet," she said.

"What? Why?" Conor was baffled. She just stared at him and held her hand out. He reached and grabbed his small Billabong zip wallet that he kept his coins in. Ella had bought it for him in Cornwall. She reached in, grabbed a 50p and hurled it as far as she could out in front of her, she managed to light five lamps on the ceiling as she did. She threw a 2p next and got another four lamps in the distance to the right of them. Conor wanted a go. Grabbed a 20p and got just two. Blamed it on the size and weight of the coin, but didn't throw any more. A minute later Ella had lit up perhaps thirty lights all around them. Then Ella launched a £2 coin which skittered along the ground, it looked almost like skimming a stone on a lake. It ran right on until a wall was illuminated. The coin continued running until it slid right beneath an old wooden door. That triggered a great deal of commotion in

the next room. Conor closed his eyes and winced as he heard the scratching of nails and thuds against the doors and wall in the distance.

"In there, I guess," said Ella.

Mrs Careen was the taxi to Heathrow. She'd been awake when they'd knocked at the door. She always drove him to the airport, which was easier than parking somewhere for the week, and she got the sense that Mr Armitage wanted her to witness his bravery. She paid him little notice. The brave one resided in the back of the car. She'd grown wildly impressed with this young lad. He was evidently worried about their onward journey, but was clearly pleased to have Mr Armitage firmly in the game with him.

Neither she nor Mr Armitage spoke much on that drive. She was still shaken by the neighbour's visit last night, and the cries she'd heard from him in the dead of the night that had woken her. Neither of them mentioned it. It was hardly a mark of bravery to say you had heard what they had and done nothing. But she counted him a mutt. Whatever self-imposed torture he'd inflicted last night was earned. She hadn't been sleeping well, woken by any and every noise. She'd gone to the bathroom in the middle of the night and cracked the window to be nearer his screams of agony. Only when he'd finished did she return to bed.

They arrived at Heathrow drop-off. The two of them had carry-ons and a backpack each. Calum was wrapped and geared up for an even greater cold when they landed. Mr Armitage wore what he always did. But she knew he'd have packed a couple fleeces too. She leant down and hugged Calum, before turning to Mr Armitage, who gave her a hug with his right arm only, already turning away towards the doors of Terminal 2.

"I am not going in there, Ella," replied Conor emphatically, *"no fucking way."*

"I'm open to suggestions, Con."

"I mean, can't you do something? Don't you have some kind of powers down here?"

Ella shrugged. She hadn't really thought about that. Something about holding a knife in her hand made her forget anything else. When she was gripping her knife, she just wanted something to run at her.

"Well, it's not my deep, Con, so I don't really think I can."

"I'm not going in there unless you try something."

"I spent years filling my deep with stuff, everything I could get down there. So yeah, I could use a lot of it. But this guy has nothing in here."

Conor thought of the wall of water that burrowed a river in the salt flats of Ella's deep.

"What about water, Ella? Do something with the river."

Ella laughed, she knew he'd been impressed by that. And he was right, of course. Every deep had a river. Every deep had a sea. She reached down and felt the cold concrete beneath them. She reminded herself how she had moulded her deep. How malleable she had made it. She ran her hands out rightwards, feeling the smooth ground until her fingers gently rolled over a bump. She felt for the seam, pulled at it, and it ripped like old carpet. She grabbed it with two hands and tugged sharply up, and the ground popped and buckled away behind them. The seam stretched back to a 20p coin she'd thrown earlier. Under it was cold black soil. Ella dug her hands in, rooting around, a moment later, and she was in past her elbows. She glanced back at Conor and smiled, lifting her arms out as water bubbled up from the two holes she'd plunged. The water began flowing faster then, and the two of them watched as the water ran up and under the door where the £2 coin had disappeared. The water was flooding in then. The sound on the other side of the door was becoming more frantic. More skittering, more thuds, squeals and wails.

The water was pumping under the door at an unbelievable rate. Conor and Ella's feet were soaked as the water filled around them. But their chamber was large. The excess water pooled out here even as it ran relentlessly into the next room. Soon, the sounds subsided as the roaring water grew louder and louder. Eventually, the door burst open, flying to the ground, sliding away between them. With it came a great wave that burst through and then ran away, bathing the entire chamber in a cool green light reflecting all around them. It lit up a great hound. A huge malnourished beast, teeth bared and shrunk stomach now gorged - along with its lungs - with water. She recognised it, despite its enormous size, as having once belonged to Mrs Careen.

Ella paced towards it, squatted deep - bum to heels, and stared in its wide eyes.

"Sorry, Gellert," she said quietly.

The neighbour awoke several hours later. The green light above him gently warmed his eyelids before he slowly opened them. He lay flat beside the birdbath pedestal that his watches sat on. He sensed his tormentor - the one with the ashes - present in the antechamber also, tainting it. He cried in agony as he attempted to sit up, the wound above his hip burning again as he tightened his core to move. He dropped his head back down to the floor with a thud. He wondered for a moment whether this man was a friend of the Bears. Whether he'd put him up to it, to scare him, until he recalled again the ember eyes he had. They hadn't blinked. Not once. He'd been in such agony that he hadn't realised at the time - only now, as he rewound the old tape, the man had no eyelids. He was no acquaintance of the Bear. This man was from some deep.

"I tried to visit you many times before. But you locked it. How?" asked the ember eyes behind and to the left of him.

"I. I don't know what you're talking about," the neighbour whined.

The eyes laughed - patient and painful.

"No one ever locked their deep before you. I live in a world of open doors. I dislike the precedent you set."

"I didn't set any precedent. I just, I just, I don't know what you're asking."

"The boy and the girl are down there now. They both paid a lot to open that door. I need to know how you locked it."

"Locked what?"

The laugh was worse, his patience was waning. The eyes moved closer; he was as tall as the Bear. He moved to the watches, brought his hand crashing down through the lid of the case. The neighbour cried out. His great hand picked up a shard of glass as he moved back around the pedestal, stepping towards the neighbour and dropping down. Squatting behind his head, he lifted his face closer to his. The neighbour again reckoned the proximity of his end.

"Your deep - you fucking mongrel," said the eyes.

"I didn't even know it was locked. I mean, I never locked it. I didn't, I, you could have come. I. You," he carried on starting several sentences that failed to materialise. The patience was gone.

The visitor lifted the neighbour's head with his left hand, placed the shard of glass against the crown of his forehead, and pressed it in and up. Pulling towards him. He felt his skin tighten and begin to fold before the tension gave, and he drew a single deep cut across the crown of his head.

"Think. Quickly," said the ember eyes as they disappeared behind the shower of warm, thick blood pouring down into the neighbour's eyes.

Part 5

The rental Dodge crunched as Mr Armitage passed too quickly from the smooth asphalt onto the dirt roads of the reserve. The sound and jolt woke Calum in time for him to glimpse the sign -

ONONDAGA NATION WELCOMES FRIENDS AND RESPECTFUL VISITORS

The reserve had these roads because the community owned pickup trucks, and the federal government had no right here to roll through and pave them. They had to be invited, and never had been, so the old Dodge jerked and bounced its way along the main street; the school, fire station and the liquor store Mr Armitage had often frequented in the three years he'd lived here, usually with Sara's father. They weren't far now. He turned right onto Hemlock Drive. They made their way down the mile-long drive along the tributary. The two men had cast long shadows as they'd moved through town together years ago, he still did. The lights of the rental car slammed into the man as his

shadow-frame split the house in two. *He's grown*, thought Mr Armitage. He had played several greetings in his mind on the four-hour drive over from Toronto, typically settling on deferent, apologetic and respectful approaches. Seeing him now he knew exactly what he would do.

He hit the brakes, placed his hand on Calum's chest and told him to wait there until he turned and told him to come out. He stepped out of the car. He started running, Calum watched as his shadow joined the first that had caused the house to split in two. Mr Armitage was running then. Right at him. A metre from him he dove forward, catching the second man's legs, wrapped around them and crashed him heavily into the ground. The second man howled a laugh and quickly rolled to take Mr Armitage's back, but he scurried free. Mr Armitage went for the legs again but the second man just parried with his arms before ducking his own head down. He was fast, very fast and he had him now, gripping his side he twisted quickly and rolled him back down to the ground. In the sharp ice and mud at the bottom of the stairs, gazing back towards the lights, Calum watched Mr Armitage tap the man's arm. Calum had enjoyed the show, never once feeling his guardian to be in any real danger. The men stood and Mr Armitage, still hunched slightly, gestured with his hand for him to come out and meet them. Calum leant over and flicked the lights off and took the key out of the car. Didn't want them to end up locked out without a way back in.

Mr Armitage, still out of breath, tried to introduce Calum to the man, but failing to do so, the second man coolly held out his giant paw to him - *"Pleasure to meet ya - I'm Wesley"* he said.

Ella remained beside the great hound she had named Gellert for a short while, gently stroking his back and tracing the lines of its ribs with her index finger. Conor had made his way into the hounds room. All that was in there was a fireplace. An old, ornate thing. He wandered over to it, wondering when it had last been lit. If there had been ashes they'd all been washed far away. The only other thing to rush out when the door had burst its hinges along with the dog had been those bones left as food. There weren't many. Conor ran his hand along the top of the mantelpiece of the fire. He sat down in front of it and leant in to look up the chimney. He suspected that to be where the bones were thrown down. As he leant in the cove he felt the end of his fingers run over a ridge. He felt to the corner, sat back and lifted. The metal plate in the fireplace came up. He grabbed the other side and lifted the whole block and set it down behind him. There were stairs leading down. Narrow, twisting stairs like he'd seen in turrets of Welsh castles. He called out to his sister. He heard her gently say some last rites for the dog before slowly making her way through to him. She glanced around the empty room before taking in her little brother, who was standing beside the only other way out of the hounds cage.

He had stepped back from it, waiting for her. She could see he was masking poorly his unwillingness to go first. He felt like a wimp, she knew it, but at this moment she didn't judge him for it. She bent low into the fireplace and crept a foot down to the next step as she spiralled further inwards. Her

brother followed close behind. She reminded him of Mr Armitage in that narrowing tunnel - bumping her arms and head more as they delved deeper.

Calum walked behind the two great muddy beasts into the house. Wesley pointed the boy to a seat by the kitchen as the two men went their separate ways to get clean. They both returned to the room to find the boy dozing.

Mr Armitage walked through to the kitchen to find Wesley nursing a bottle of whiskey he'd been partway through already when they had their wrestle on the threshold. He nudged the other glass towards his old friend and tipped the bottle over and filled the glass half full.

"Who's the boy?" Asked Wesley.

"It's a long story."

"Aren't you here to tell long stories?"

"I come here to hear stories, Wes."

"Hm," he grunted.

They were not quiet men. Roused, Calum made his way over to the counter where they were sitting. He had been brought for a reason and was determined not to be left out of the conversation. Mr Armitage was quietly pleased, having no confidence in his own ability to get Wesley to speak, and had been considering a loud cough to wake the boy. The boy did as they often do and touched something without thinking. Laid across Wesley's lap was a traditional wampum belt. The texture of the beads drew his hand to it before he realised what he was doing and before he'd realised he was tracing the outline of the white squares marked across it, laid above the deep blue background. The wampum belts are designed to help remember the old stories. The one that Calum touched now told the oldest and most important stories of the Haudosaunee. Mr Armitage quietly thanked the Peace Maker for Kayanerenk'wa - the Great Law of Peace.

Mr Armitage seized the opportunity as it arose - *"Tell him your story, lad."* The boy did.

Wesley sat, gazing intently at the boy as he shared the recent days with him. He stuttered and circled tales and half-tales. Beginnings and endings, some of which were connected. Wesley listened to it all. Calum had spent much of the time quite far from the core of his story. Mainly because the great sea-snake was still there, and he hated very much to visit it. When he did mention his own man without eyelids, and how his sister had removed the scalp of their father, his recitation drew to its end. There was great silence in the house then.

The boy and the new largest presence in the house sat beside one another, palming the wampum belt. The belt this was modelled after is stored in some gallery, University or library in New York. But Wesley had made his own to recall the Great Law that his people had made years ago. It

commemorated the agreement that brought together warring tribes and six nations, of which the Onondaga were the eldest brothers, the fire-keepers. He brought to mind the strength of the leaders who had managed to bind together those disparate nations, able to maim and kill and scalp their fellow brothers. He thought mainly of the war priest Thadodaho, the monstrous force that had for ages held back the peace until Hiawatha, the orator-student of the Peace Maker, persuaded him. He felt his dark hand reaching out to choke the roots of the tree of peace. Saw the world pulled once more and further into brutal, bloody hand-to-hand combat. He laid his hand upon Calum's head, felt his orenda - his life-force, and leant in close.

"I am sorry for all you have been through. I am glad you are here now. Shall we find you somewhere to sleep, dear boy?"

"Stop, stop, fuck - please - Jesus." The hand holding the shard of glass was perfectly still, but the neighbour's trembling pulled at the edges of the great seam it had just opened across his forehead.

"I will tell you everything, I'll do whatever you want. Just, fuck, stop. I can't fucking think, please!"

The hand held him there. The neighbour was trying desperately to stop moving so much. Blood completely covered his face; he could feel it running down his neck. No more words. He waited for the hand to pull away so he could at least see and wipe the thick, hot blood from out of his eyes with the hem of his gown. The shard peeled away, and the neighbour felt the skin fold back down wrong, like sellotape that had stuck to itself.

He'd heard a great clattering, and when he looked up again, he saw the man without eyelids had moved to grab a chair from his bedroom and was slowly dragging it back to the antechamber. Now sitting, he'd calmed somewhat, though the neighbour didn't know for how long. Or what words would reconjure his terrible barber. The neighbour opened his mouth, but the eyes spoke first.

"You understand how strange that is. We call it orenda. Everyone has it. Everything, in fact. It is my job to oversee it. I watch as you cultivate it, or slowly let it die. Orenda is personal, yes, but it is also communal. With the children, I refer to it as being full or empty. But it isn't so simple. A man as obsessed with isolation as you should have just slowly suffocated the fire within you. But instead, you managed to steal something. You are hungry, aren't you? You are repulsive - beautifully so! One true man. One eater."

The man was beaming. His eyes were burning again. The whole room was brighter; the green light seemed to be pulsing.

"You know me, don't you?" the eyes asked.

The neighbour nodded - *"I looked for you. I looked for you, but you wouldn't come to me. No one ever did. But here the girl has brought you up to me."*

The space in the stairwell was growing increasingly cramped as they descended. They noticed just how bad it was getting when Ella made the move from crouching to bum-shuffling. Conor followed suit. Having felt cowardly when entering the stairwell, Conor felt unwilling to compound by suggesting they stop or turn back. So they contorted themselves further as they crawled deeper in. The stairs themselves began to lose all definition, growing shorter and closer, until the descent became sheer. They had flipped while they still could and were now both crawling head first, shimmying and elbowing their way down.

"This is fucking stupid Ella, seriously." His sister just laughed in agreement. He wasn't wrong. Bizarrely they were both thoroughly enjoying themselves. Neither party were claustrophobic, and this was precisely the rare brand of stupid and unwise thing that they loved doing together. The two of them were kind of like a pair of happy drunks in their best moments together. That sweet spot where there are no bad ideas, and before the consequences make their vain attempts to redefine the experience. They were the drunks now. They had managed to shimmy alongside one another, clamped between the two tightening slabs of rock at their front and back. They turned their heads to each other and howled laughing, filling their lungs they pressed hard against the rock. It hurt. That made them laugh more. Conor watched Ella's eyes in the dim light and loved her despairingly. They were screaming the heart-laugh that only siblings know. This went on for some time, until the painful pressure from their full chests began to subside as the passage ahead seemed to widen slightly. This made the whole thing less funny, but at least they could move forwards again. They pressed their hands down and wriggled. Their toes pressing down and back as they moved forward, eventually cresting over the edge they reached their arms out and down. They emerged from the sliver of rock they'd crawled through and let themselves topple out and down. They stood on soil. They looked up from the pit. It was unbearably deep. They had no way of knowing how far down they had travelled through the tunnel. Far above them, towering over them from out the pit was an enormous tree. There was no way of knowing this from down here by looking up at it, but all around the pit wrapped great roots. Huge and white they twisted like bolts of lightning breaking through the edges of the earthen cylinder they were in. Conor opened his mouth wide and popped the seal on his ears. Ella did the same.

"I've never been this far down," said Ella. She was excited. *"I'll wager our neighbour has never crawled down here either."* Conor saw as soon as she placed her hands on the first of the white twisted roots above her and hauled herself up why she was so excited - she loved to climb.

Calum woke up late. Padded across the carpet and looked out the window across to the woods out the back of Wesley's house. No neighbours. The two great men sat on two adirondack chairs at the rear of the property. He quickly changed and made his way down to join them. He wanted to hear everything Wesley said. He was one of those rare people you were desperate to listen to but who made you so comfortable and important that you couldn't help but blither on. Calum was bad with that at the best of times. He brought his brother to mind. Looked at him, and willed himself to

channel his quiet presence today. He needed Wesley to help make sense of what was happening. *Quiet, Cal*, he told himself.

They had made a big pot of cedar tea, enough for another round of full mugs. Calum carried it out two-handed and poured a second cup for the two men before returning inside and pouring his own. A moment later, the three of them were sitting in their chairs, Calum's swallowing him, his feet just managing to flop over the crest of the long seat. He'd heard the bones of their conversation. Mr Armitage wanted to meet the council of elders.

"You can't just call them together, Phil, especially not at such late notice."

"Some of them will be available, though, Wes, I'm not asking for a vote on anything."

"Yes, but you're not calling them, are you? I am. You're asking me to gather them, and I'm the one who has to live with these people after you fuck off back home."

Mr Armitage had remained silent. He looked a little like he was praying. Then Wesley stood up, reached into his jeans, pulled out an old Nokia, and carefully keyed in a number with the tip of his great finger.

"See if they're around tonight. Tell them it's important - it's about my Sara." He hung up and turned back to Mr Armitage. *"We'll meet at the shelter over the campsite tonight. See who turns up."* Mr Armitage nodded a great silent thanks and leant back.

Wesley sat back down. Thanked Calum again for topping up their teas. He suggested the three of them take a walk. He spoke to Calum of his daughter, who had been ten when her mother had died. He talked to Calum directly, his guardian walking along ten paces behind them. The girls had belonged to the three most powerful families in the Onondaga, and by extension, the whole Iroquois Confederacy. The men in these tribes take office; they are the chiefs. But it is the women who hold the power of appointment. Their death placed the entire peace at risk. They would not have returned to clubs, knives and raiding bands. But retribution was seriously considered. It was only the lack of an agreed enemy and no group taking ownership of the attack that spared the other Haudosaunee nations from violent retaliation. Mrs Careen was wrong. The girls were not adopted by Mr Armitage because they were outcast. They were sent away because they feared the vengeance they would inflict upon the neighbouring nations when they came of age. Peace never strengthens. It is an ever-tender shoot.

"And how - sorry - how did she die, your wife I mean?" Asked Calum.

"A fire, the three of them were at Bethany's mother's. I imagine just drinking and listening to music in the basement flat. They said there was some issue with the furnace, but the door was locked from the outside."

Calum was silent.

The eyes were intrigued. The ever-open eyes were always attentive, but not always excited. They were now.

"You wanted the girl to bring me up?"

The neighbour had been released from the clutches of the man without eyelids for now. He had permitted him to crawl through to the box of dressings and bandages and watched as he clumsily wrapped his head. The visitor had pulled a chair through into the antechamber, and the neighbour himself had carried in a couple of cushions to sit on the floor. The clutter was seeping in, though these were exceptional circumstances - this was not how a room in Number Seven typically developed its mess, so he forgave himself. He knew the eyes had asked him something. He had waited a long time to meet him, to speak with him. But now he was finding it wildly difficult to concentrate.

"I've been holed up here for quite some time. I'd started to question whether you were even real. It was, it was Bethany who had mentioned you. Said she'd started seeing you around clear as day. As though you were up here."

"What did you tell the girl?"

"Told her what any sensible adult would. Told her of nightmares. But you were obsessed with her, it seemed. Obsessed with each of them. I'd watch them up here. At times we'd be sat and one of them would just pause a while. Eyes a little, a little vacant, you know. And I'd know. I'd know they were with you." The neighbour paused. Wanted to check his tone wasn't leading him to a second mauling.

"Go on." Said the eyes.

"I'd started with my watches then. I took the first one from the bloody diamond when the family were away. It somehow - somehow cracked something in me. My 'deep', right - that's what you called it. Well, I was down there constantly. The watches keep the door open. They leave a door open for me, waiting for me to come back." He leant back and breathed deeply. One long drag on an invisible cigarette. He ran his right hand along the antechamber wall, feeling for the variable textures of the homes he'd been in. The eyes on him leant closer, thought to rush him, before remembering they had no rush bar the one they set.

"I looked for you down there for a long time. But I just had this one room. This huge, never-ending room. I'd started to think there was something wrong with it - this deep. The Hag had this dog, too - a great, barking thing. You want to check they're real, you see - these places. And, and the only way to do that is to take something else living there. I swear I didn't know until you said so that I'd locked it. I still don't know how that happened. But I did manage to bring the Hag's dog in with me. I'd tracked it out as it passed through her fence to the sisters' field. It wandered far. I found it by this creek. It was spring."

The eyes knew. They were watching it now.

"I stuck my knife in the thing's belly. It howled a moment, before I stuck it again in the neck and pulled it down with me. It seemed to melt in the creek, like ice. It sort of ran into me then. I could hear it bounding around. Immediately I resented the thing. It ran around my great chamber, lighting the whole thing. So I built it a little room and left it there to rot. Never fed it much of anything, but the bloody thing refused to die."

The man without eyelids relished the sick man, he quietly muttered his affection again - *"One eater. Tell me, what else did you take?"*

Hugs and handshakes and greetings for *"Armitage! Armitage!"* Rang out across the small gathering space beside Hemlock Creek. A good number had turned out. Around twenty. Firstly, it was still winter and so people were home. Secondly word had got out that Armitage would be there. Many of them loved that man and missed him greatly. Finally, no one had called a meeting in some time, and it was likely to be the fount of great gossip. Many had a look of disappointment when they saw others in attendance that they had hoped to twist some truths for in the coming days.

People took their seats in the small amphitheatre facing the spot where Wesley took his stand.

"You know but one of our guests. He's here with a brave young lad. Another that our friend Armitage has stood to take charge of in the face of a terrible tragedy. I appreciate you all being here. You know that Armitage stepped in to help our people avoid violent retribution. Only for our mutual loss to beset him while he was here with us. With the loss of my daughter - Sara, and yours; Frances, Roger."

He nodded to the two men on the second row before continuing. He held his wampum belt firmly in his right hand, running its thumb across its shells. Calum noticed how scared he was - like he'd seen the neighbour standing in his gown on his rear stoop, but where his neighbour shrank in his fear, Wesley but grew in his bravery.

"The news young Calum brings reminds me how vital our traditions are. Traditions I have forgotten. I see how we have rested upon something that in truth leans on us. Presses and makes demands of us. Demands that we have ignored or passed on in our own grief to those willing to try to stand under them. We are the fire-keepers of the Iroquois, I fear that we have stood by and let it die. I certainly did. The day we lost our wives."

He unrolled the wampum and laid it across the table in front of him. The two squares either side of the great white tree in the centre of the belt, all connected. He pointed to each and named the tribes, before holding his hand above the great tree that represented the Onondaga - mediator between the brother tribes.

"You recall the one in fiercest opposition to this confederacy - our Great Law of Peace?" Continued Wesley - *"Do you still speak to your children of the warlord? The twisted one with snakes in his hair? Of Thadodaho."*

She was far ahead of him, climbing the roots. Conor decided not to rush. It was a long climb.

"Ella!" He called, *"Slow down! This isn't safe!"* His sister looked back at him and scoffed. He felt his embarrassment flush his face a little. *"Shit!"* He felt a foot slip off the edge of a root as he reached for a ledge to rest. *Concentrate.* They'd long since passed the height of twisted ankles and broken bones, on past wheelchairs and onto certain death. Conor didn't mind heights, but even he had his limits.

"I'm going back! I'll meet you. I'm going back the way we came!" He cried out.

"Don't you fucking dare!" Ella noticed Conor's stubborn defiance light up his face at her reply - wrong approach.

"I'm not going to die here, Ella."

"You're right, Con, but we can't split up. You know as well as I do that this is the only way to that tree. You feel it, don't you?" He did. *"This is the way."*

Conor twisted and sat on his ledge. *The way* he thought. *The way to fucking what?*

A minute later, Ella, who had babooned her way down to him, joined him on his perch. The root jutted out from the pit wall, wide enough for Ella to drape her legs over the sides. Conor felt then a rush of the total emotional exhaustion he was under. The longer they travelled together, the more he hungered for his Ella. Whether or not it was a lie, at this moment, it made no difference. He turned to his sister and chose to see her as he prayed she was. He crawled closer. She laid a hand on his right shoulder as he slowly turned. A moment later, he shuffled back into her. Felt her legs beside his as her arms closed in around him. She leant her head on his right shoulder, their faces touching lightly. Conor bade his father stay away. Begged him. He did.

Conor didn't know how long he slept, the pit had not changed. Ella hadn't moved, nor slept, just held the boy close. Her kindness earned his bravery. He stood, held a root above him, and did some jumps and kicks to get his blood flowing again. Ready to ascend. He glanced over and caught the wild look in Ella's eyes staring back at him as he laughed.

"I'm still not racing you, Ella!"

Wesley hit his stride with the invocation of Thadodaho. Any remaining mutterings were silenced. The council were cast back to nights by the fire - the faces of their grandmothers temporarily floating in the mind of each one.

"You recall the brave one who turned the heart of the warlord? Hiawatha. You recall what happened the first night he made the case for peace to him - how Hiawatha lost his first daughter. You recall the second time he asked the warlord for peace - how he lost his second. And the third?" He turned back to Frances, *"your Catherine."*

Calum listened to the creek for a while as Wesley paused.

"Hiawatha made the case for peace to the warlord even as his daughters were ripped from him. Yet here we are, and I was the first one - in my heartbreak - to give mine up. For the sake of peace. Or so I told myself. But here we lost their mothers, and, believing it to be an act of violence from our neighbours, we sent our girls away. To keep peace by avoidance. We heard that our girls, too, were lost, having run away. I sensed the foulness of it, but - in that state I was in - I was no use to anyone. But now I hear from this brave one his story, and I know that any peace is over."

Calum felt the eyes of the amphitheatre on him. He considered his orenda. His life-force. Could they see it? He planted his own gaze firmly forward, on Wesley.

"This boy's father was killed. At the hands of his sister. Marked in the old ways. The boy found him, scalped. So here is my contention for the fire-keepers to debate. Whatever spirit was found in Thadodaho in ages past has returned again with nothing to offer us but violence. Who here will stand against this case?"

"Theft and sacrifice mark the same coin. You know it well. You sacrifice nothing. Look at this house. You would give nothing up - nothing of your own. Utterly unwilling to sacrifice, and so you steal. I do not blame you. This house is truly hideous, but I care not. Since it is perfectly natural. But you stole something from me. That was unwise."

The neighbour went to speak, but the man without eyelids held out a hand and commanded silence - no stuttering attempts at justification.

"I was the very first person to meet Ella. Born with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. Nearly another sacrificed firstborn. She visited her deep every day, built everything she had ever seen or thought of there. It was vast and marvellous. I loved her like a father, like I did the other three. The three you stole from me. Ella wanted to travel as I did, traversing deeps. She would constantly ask how to get to Conor's and whether her other brother even had one, shallow boy. She made many pledges of valueless things for passage, getting ever nearer to something I truly wanted. When she did, I brought her up and told her she could have what she wanted if she made her payment and returned to me what was taken from me. My harvest. You and your bumbling neighbour - hiding them all these years. Tell me, surely you can feel it, are they close?"

Ella hadn't listened. Of course, it had been a race. And she had wiped the floor with her brother. She looked down at the crawling speck below her as she crested out of the pit. The tree was far larger than either of them could have possibly imagined. It stood alone in a familiar field. It looked just like Mr Armitage's, but harvest day had long since passed. The sisters were all around her, a sea of corn stalks leant and sank. The beans shrivelled and withered. She took a step forward and tripped, plunging her arm into a rotting squash, which let off behind a foul odour and juice. She ran around

the pit to the base of the trunk, it looked as though it had been struck by lightning and caught flame. She hauled herself up to the first branch, loose charred ash bark crumbled in her hands as she ascended. She looked out across the never-ending field of rot and back down to the pit. She whispered quietly;

“Sara?” Nothing. A little louder then - “Bethany? Catherine?”

Conor had been right in the pit, he didn’t need to say anything to her, she knew. *The way to fucking what* she repeated, in his tone. *If every deep has a river*, she thought, *every deep must have a tree*. If there was one in hers, she’d never found it. But she’d never crawled so low in hers. She knew for a fact that Conor hadn’t. Scoffed again - *fucking buses*. Before she knew what she was doing she silently said something resembling prayer. A prayer that their trees were still alive.

She continued watching her brother as he moved slowly up through the pit. Then, something stirred further down. She watched as the great white roots at the base where they had begun their climb began breaking loose of the pit wall. Conor felt the wall shake and looked down. She could see the outline of terror marking his face as he turned back and began scrambling faster. The roots below had broken loose and were contorting in the base of the pit. They began thrashing. The first emerged fully, bringing with it an enormous cascade of soil away from the pit wall to Conor’s left. She was screaming at her brother to run. It wasn’t helping. He was at maximum speed already. The second winding root broke loose and fell upon the first that was now laying at the bottom of the pit. It landed on it and the first one thrashed violently. Ella saw then that they were not roots, but great serpents. They reared up, massive, and threw themselves at each other. Before they twisted up again in a heap at the bottom. Only when the third - the smallest of the beasts - emerged from the side wall did they calm down. White like the strange roots they now writhed below, their wet skin flashed, the twisting outlines turned the pit into a moonlit well. Conor had some way to go still, as the serpents turned to face upwards and began jostling for position as they made their way up the pit wall towards the tree.

It’s a fucking race, thought Ella.

A woman spoke then.

“I will take the other side of this argument.”

Wesley smiled wide. Calum sensed he had great love for this woman.

“Yes! You must!”

“Let me begin by clarifying your argument, lest I build my opposition upon soft ground.”

“Of course.”

"The man, Armitage, returns to us with a boy. Another child, left with this careless guardian. The boy has suffered a great tragedy, true. A grotesque murder, a daughter and a father with a mutilation that reminds us of the old conflicts. I see why this moves you, Wesley, I do. But you are right to start long ago. So I shall join you there.

You were of no use to us after the fire. No one here would disagree with that. But you were in pain, all three of you were. Then the girls themselves were lost. You never discovered why. You never even had any deep tale from the man, Armitage. Instead, he came here for answers? Wesley, you should have gone there with questions!"

Wesley laughed and interjected - *"I see that your clarification is done? Proceed with your argument."*

"Now I see that time has passed, that your griefs somehow have quieted, and now you seek to remedy your losses with a show of courage. This boy gives you that opportunity, and you invoke the twisted one, Thadodaho! You seek to untangle his matted hair! You suffered greatly, and it is sensible to conjure for yourself the warlord - the one who opposes peace - Wesley, you have had none for many years. But understand that Hiawatha stood to convince the warlord not for the sake of any one man, but because he was brokering peace for the five nations. What war is there with the five? I desire us to retain our connection to our ancestors and our old ways, but through remembrance of the stories, not by reliving the tragedies of others.

So, explain your case again if I misunderstood it, because it seems to me that you believe that, because of one boy's tragedy, the spirit of the ancient warlord is somehow unleashed again on the earth? Wesley, my friend, if that is your story, then I fear you may not be well - perhaps some cedar tea and a quiet night is what you need."

Wesley was glowing, the argument was strong, Calum was not sure why the large man seemed so happy. But the woman was not yet done.

"And as my last point, I would ask, why are you the one making this case, Wesley? We know nothing of this boy or his family. Why do we cheer for our old friend? Should we not begin this case again with the trial we never had - give Onondaga their audience with the man Armitage."

He knew as soon as he glanced down that it was impossible. He stood no chance of escaping this pit. He must have been ten metres from the top still, and the thick, wet, white bodies of the serpents could emerge from this pit in a matter of seconds if they decided to. So instead of climbing, Conor opted to make himself small and hope they were blind or disinterested. A poor strategy, but the only one he had. He lifted the root that would have been his next rung up and crawled beneath it. The roots here were thick and tightly knit, so he could manoeuvre himself closer to the soil of the pit wall. He crept in and turned as he slammed his back against the dirt and juttied his feet out to one of the roots below. He was in plain view, but at least here he could watch as the three serpents jostled each other as they ran up the pit wall. The one that had emerged second ran nearest, its peculiar

white body propelled past him but a metre away. The three serpents rammed into each other repeatedly, causing the entire pit to shake, loosing huge flakes of earth from the wall, avalanching dirt down to the base. Conor realised he had been holding his breath only once he gently exhaled. The third one that had emerged and quieted the other two slowed and turned back towards Conor. It slowly crept nearer him. A moment later, its great head stood glaring in at him behind the roots of his little cell. It seemed to know him somehow, and then two words. Two words that pulled him right back to Ella in the bloody diamond.

"Come in."

With that, it turned and returned upward towards the light and the tree above. Conor waited a short while before twisting out of the roots and returning to his journey up the pit wall. The serpents were out of view now, but, minutes later, when his head crested above the top of the pit edge and met a wall of rotten vegetables, he could see the paths the serpents had made, and could see the three of them, reared up and looking in the eyes of the young woman in the first large branch of the burnt oak tree.

The man without eyelids had been silent a long time; he was vastly less patient up here than down in the deeps. It must have been because he'd spent such a short time above compared to his time below. It could also be the sound of the nine watches ticking. They were not perfectly aligned, so the noise from the eight watches was a ceaseless irritation. He arose then, and the neighbour got that beautiful flood of calm that washes over you when he looks away. He stepped up and over the neighbour and exited by the door next to the neighbour's head, straight out to the stairs. He began descending.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Called the neighbour. He received no reply. In agony, he rose and attempted to follow, his head pounding and the pain from the incision in his hip like a burn. The wound pulled as he stepped on uneven surfaces that gave way, pulling at it. He cried out in pain all the way downstairs. He turned the corner to see the man open the rear door and step out into crisp midday air. The neighbour crept and crawled his way behind the man, who had led out and across to the Bears'.

"This was where the girls lived, wasn't it?" he asked. *"Bethany drew it up in her deep. Though she made it far larger."*

The neighbour said nothing as he approached the man, who stood by Mr Armitage's fire-pit. He tried the low rear door. It was locked. The man without eyelids broke a small pane with a rock from beside the pond and opened it, returning the favour. They moved together through the house. In Bethany and Catherine's room, he finally took a seat on the small chair that faced out to the two beds, turning away from the far corner by the window. The neighbour didn't know the Bear had left that morning. The neighbour went to sit on Bethany's bed.

The eyes held out a hand as the man gently shook his head. The neighbour had no inclination to finish his terrible haircut. So he slunk to the floor, resting his back against their wardrobes. The room was quieter now without the watches. But the man seemed no more patient.

"You are right, you know. I like owning things. I, I like taking things. But, it's not as you say. I didn't mean to steal your sacrifices."

The eyes glistened. The neighbour continued.

"I swear, I did love them. But the fucking Bear stopped them seeing me as they got older. Thought he owned them. Thought they were his. I followed them that day. It was for you, wasn't it? What they did. They wanted the same as Ella."

"To traverse deeps? No, they just wanted access to one."

"Well, they gave themselves. It looked like some ritual. The three of them, loose hands clasped as they lay at the river's edge. They had cut each other. When I went to them their blood was running out and away. I grabbed them, held them. But they - like that filthy hound - melted like ice and moved into me. I swear I didn't mean anything to happen. I, I didn't do it."

"One eater indeed. They gave themselves to me, and you were there to gobble them up."

As Conor neared the tree, the smallest turned to him. It was clear there would be no repeating themselves. Ella had the eyes of the valkyrie again. She looked like she had conjured from far within her the unerring confidence that if it came to it, she could kill these three beasts, eat their flesh and leave no left-overs. Conor prayed it would not be necessary since, on this occasion, he knew she was wrong.

He took his first grip of the tree and the charred oak flaked away. Reaching again he jumped but failed to get purchase on the first solid branch. Back at the base he looked up, expecting Ella's hand to be reaching down to pull him but she was still above him, staring out into the eyes of the first. He saw her right hand behind her back, gently massaging the handle of the knife as it pointed down from the fat of the hand by her pinky. She was ready to plunge it straight into that enormous eye. She would not look away to help him, she had her prize.

Just as he was about to begin the climb again he felt the smallest serpent lightly press its head under his foot. He steadied himself as it moved slowly towards the first branch. He felt it now as his left hand got a good grip on the branch close to the trunk. He pushed himself gently to roll on, though the serpent did most of the work. He rose again to the second branch and a moment later stood by his sister. His hand grasping for the steak knife he had tied between two belt buckles with his shoelace belt. Ella had worn a shoelace belt back when she had been into skateboarding, so they all did.

Now he saw them, he realised that he'd expected, from their colouring, that they would somehow look more beautiful than they truly were. They were thick, ugly things. Conor stared closely at the small one. It stared back, unblinking. Conor remembered from some biology class that snakes too don't have eyelids. No, that's not it. They do, but they are clear. Their eyes are inexplicably always closed but always seeing. *Neat trick*, he thought.

Ella, still without breaking eye contact with the largest of the three, spoke -

"Found them."

Mr Armitage looked smaller there, at the centre of the small amphitheatre by Hemlock Creek, than he ever had in Calum's life. He always looked smaller next to Wesley, who had only grown through the night's proceedings, but Mr Armitage, standing for this public interrogation, was shrinking by the second. Calum watched as his chest heaved heavily and fast. Wesley held out his arm to him as he took his position. He laid a hand upon his chest and touched Mr Armitage's forehead with his own. Calum watched Wesley's hand rise slowly as Mr Armitage took one long breath. Stood together as the woman sought to begin her questioning. Wesley whispered something to him and then, at last, he lifted his chin off his great chest and faced the gathering. Before the woman could speak, Mr Armitage began.

"Good evening, fire-keepers. I know most of the faces here, but for those I have not met, my name is Armitage. I have lived among you several times throughout my life. I first met Wesley here when we were both much younger men. I love your people, your history. I love the way you tether yourselves to the truth and one another with beautiful stories. I chose to adopt all I could of your traditions into my own way of life. I am not a man of delicate craft; I can bead no wampum, but I am a man of the earth. I keep a field, I plough it in the old ways. I took in your three girls: Sara, Bethany and Catherine. The community was grieving the loss of three great leaders. We were afraid. Afraid of mindless retribution. You all agreed to send them away to give these fathers, my friends, time to grieve.

I returned home with them and planted the three sisters in memory of their mothers and the three girls. I still do. I raised them to know their heritage, and they knew where they came from. They knew why they were with me. Many nights, they cried for their mothers. You were right - I saw it on them - had they stayed, they would have found whoever locked that door. They would have gone to the ends of the earth to find them. You would not have known it to look at them; they were always calm, peaceful, funny. Our community loved them. But I saw their hunger.

They disappeared while I was here with you. I stayed, Wesley and I, waiting to see whether and when one of the leaders of your neighbour tribes raised an alarm of some act of violence. But none came. I believed they had embarked in search of retribution, the return of the warlord, but I saw no evidence. At least not until I saw what happened to this boy's father. I know I failed you all, and for that I am sorry. I see that Wesley's tale is lofty. It surely is. Though I looked in the eyes of those girls each night

before they went to sleep, and I saw everything. Every dream for the future, cut short by their desire to go back, to go back and burn whoever stole their mothers from them."

"You are not the one we waited for." Said the first.

"All this time, and the little ones from the bloody diamond are the ones to come for us?" Asked the second.

Conor observed Ella, begging her not to use the knife. The first stared straight at her, spoke again, *"Touch me with that knife, and I will bite off every limb and let you crawl to the pit for death."* The calm with which it said these words caused his Ella to resurrect briefly. She took a breath, letting Conor enjoy a rare pragmatic moment from his sister, she replied -

"A friend sent us here to find you. Now that we have done so, we must take you up."

"And how do you propose to do that?" asked the smallest of the three.

Ella realised she had no answer for this. Back the way they came was impossible; the serpents would never fit through the narrow tunnel. Besides, it would only take them back into the enormous greenlit room. Back the way you came was never possible. There was no route back up from there. It took her an embarrassingly long time to get to the conclusion Conor had recognised immediately. The man without eyelids took them both up when he'd promised his offering. Now the way up was by completing his pledge. The words rang in her ears again - *I offer you Ella*. Conor had quietly edged away from his sister, further out along the branch. He had no desire to fulfil her fantasy of seeing a sibling flung from a great height.

The smallest of the three, the one Conor assumed was Catherine, continued - *"I see your way up! This one has not yet made his sacrifice. Go on, boy - do what you must."*

Concluding his opening remarks, the Hemlock Creek council began - *"To start with the worst of it, you have made it plain, Armitage, that you were a terrible choice of guardian. And now you throw shadows masking your own inattention and poor judgement with fingers pointing at the terrible potential of three teenage girls supposedly able and willing to commit horrific, violent atrocities in the name of vengeance. Well, there is but one way to rebuff your cases, since for all the fearful language you invoke, you and dear Wesley, there has been not one drop of blood spilt. Not one instance of the peace of this confederacy breaking apart."*

At this, Calum stood up and turned to the woman.

"Not one drop? I found my father, covered in blood. Loads of it! Out from where she'd cut his arms, lots of cuts. From, from here," He pointed to just by his armpit and ran his fingers down to his palms, *"to here! And blood from his head from where she'd cut all,"* he lost the word 'scalp' in the heat of

the moment, but the crowd followed him, *"cut his head off! And his eyes too,"* he was close to hyperventilating now, and Wesley was approaching, *"he still had his eyes, I mean, she didn't cut them out, but they were open, she'd cut off his eyelids too."*

The room fell silent. Calum listened again to the creek, or tried to. As his breaths slowed. He felt Wesley's huge hand across his back. The woman spoke again -

"Wesley, you should have mentioned this. Why would you leave it to the boy to speak of this?"

"I told you, he's brave - you see his orenda - no?" Wesley was still smiling his great grin. Calum knew the people loved him. He did too.

"I speak of the warlord because he has always crossed boundaries. He visits me in my dreams. I know he visits you in yours. This is why the room is silent when the boy speaks of how he found his father. This man is my image of Thadodaho. I do not speak with him. Even so, he offers me silent remedies. If only I will give something to him, he will make those things right that I cannot resolve in myself. But this is not so. I know he does nothing but lie. We know this from our stories. The warlord is ever-watchful, ready to undo any and every hard-earned peace. So tell me, the murder of the boy's father, does it not sound like the darkest sacrifice Thadodaho ever asked you to make to him while you lay in your beds?"

"What are you asking of us, Wesley?" the woman asked.

"Only that we use this as an opportunity to return to our stories. To our traditions. Use this as a sign that if we do not that the warlord will come again."

Conor knew he had a matter of seconds to convince Ella that he would not carry out his offering. He hoped she would not hurt him, but the memory of their father floated before him and he knew he was in mortal danger if he was her only way up.

"Ella, I won't do it. I swear I won't."

"Can't, Conor. The word you're looking for is can't," she turned back to the sisters, *"I need to take you up. We will find a way. He can't have sent me down here without a way back."*

"Ha!" Cried Catherine, *"he has sent you down with a way back. It is in your brother's hands. But we all come to realise too late that our mutual friend serves only himself."*

Conor spoke then - *"what of you - how did he do this to you?"*

Ella seemed impatient. The kind of frustration she'd show when the weekly shop was taking too long. But she knew Conor's question was necessary. Catherine spoke again.

"Some empty took our mothers from us. But the warlord, the man we know as Thadodaho, made us his promises. Vowed to take us to their deep, let us drain it. So we made our offering, but there has been no reward. Instead, he sent us here, left us here to rot."

Conor replied, *"I don't think he abandoned you here. He sent us down here to find you. Do you even know who's deep this is?"*

The neighbour knew that his time was limited. Soon enough, the girl and the lad would find their way back up, ripping through the wound. His visitor would provide no salve a second time. When they concluded their search and returned with the sisters, he'd be left to bleed out here, on the floor beside Catherine's bed, to be found rotting whenever the Bear returned home.

Ah, Bear, you wretch. You, the best of us all, a wretch. The beloved guardian. And how come you by these opportunities of guardianship? Is it not always by violence? I've watched your burial, you know. I've seen the mothers pour the dirt over you. Your mask of guilt was perfect, your shame delightfully timed. Casting a shadow over your deep mourning of the loss of the girls. But when did they first bury you? Was it not long before your three daughters gave up their lives? Did they not bury you the first night you laid them in their beds here in this house? Yours was the perfect theft, how you brought these ones back to us. Your obsession with the old legends. You saw these three and somehow believed them the living embodiment - incarnation - of what? Of the very spirit of sustenance and nutrition for the earth? These three sisters. What was it you told me? That no one else 'appreciated them' as you did - your Great Law of Peace, your harmony. Recall Sunday school, brother, 'unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it remains but one seed, but if it dies, it becomes many'. Your harvest is rotten. Your fields lie fallow. You, the masked man, grieving over the ones you lost. Dear Bear, you grieve the ones you stole. Your deep is shallow, I watched your world shrink to this field alone. Never enough room inside. How am I the one here with this beast? And here I believe you! Still! I believe you did find the ones - some living embodiment of the spirit that nurtures and enlivens the world, but you turned them into something sick. You gave them over to this man and left them bleeding out in the river. A guardian they call you. They called you father. Join me, Bear, Chief in the council of eaters.

The eyes had heard every unspoken word.

"You don't know?" Asked Conor, "We're in the neighbours' deep. You know - Number Seven."

Bethany's eyes flashed with grief and confusion. But before she could speak, Sara boomed - *"Have we forgotten why we are here? I am here for my mother; are you not both here for yours? But somehow that little wretch tore us from him. We made our sacrifice, now let us enjoy what we paid for."*

Catherine's great eye created a lens for the boy through which he could see Ella. They were ready. She asked, *"What do you think, little one? Do you have the strength to take us up?"*

Ella would strike any moment unless he did. He slowly reached for the knife and pulled it slowly from its shoelace sheath. He prayed the man without eyelids would accept his sacrifice as he leapt forward. He and Ella had been of one mind. He plunged his knife into Catherine's left eye. It went straight through the great, clear eyelid and into the white. Ella had been more successful; her knife had gone straight into the great slitting pupil of her right eye. They held onto their knives as the serpent threw its great body and pulled them both off the branch. Ella had dug her knife in far, twisting and burrowing it further and through to the soft nerves behind it. The other two serpents threw themselves at them, but they were too late. Ella and Conor were hurtling down towards the earth. Conor could see himself about to plunge headfirst into the ground below, and he prepared to feel his chin snap through his jaw and out the back of his neck. Everything went black as he was pulled straight down through the ground. Instead of the neighbour's spiral staircase, they were pulled right through and landed beside the neighbour next to a pair of beds he didn't recognise. He'd never been upstairs in Mr Armitage's house before.

He watched then as two small snakes, their white skin dripping red as they emerged from the reopened wound in the neighbour's hip, creeping down and over his legs, across the floor and up the trouser legs of the man without eyelids. Sitting across the room from him, he heard his laugh. It made Conor feel ill. He reached to his left and grabbed his sister's hand.

Mr Armitage looked out at the gathering, making vows to one another to tell their old stories. He considered how it was only the fear of violence that would return them to their role - these fire-keepers. The three sisters finally made their story plain. In the legend, a young man came to the field, found them growing together, took the first sister home with him, returned later for the mourning second sister, and finally for the third. They had all given themselves as a meal for the boy. Not only is the three sisters a message of mutuality, connection, and individuality that enables the thriving of all. At its core, it is a story of consumption.

Onondaga had a rich heritage. They had instituted the Great Law of Peace, resolving cycles of brutal violence with no law courts. What credit did they receive for such an accomplishment? None. The colonisers had made them a joke. Get called primitive enough, and you will end up adopting the same ways as those deemed 'modern'. That was the issue with these 'fire-keepers'. Their language was ripped away. The wampum has no Ten Commandments, no written constitution. It is a set of stories. Stories they lost. Stories that were stolen - fine - but they made little effort to reclaim them. They stole their land, too. Gave them tracts like this. Hindered their movements. No more tracking with the buffalo. No longer a people of the longhouse. Look at Onondaga now. It's just the arse-end of Syracuse, with dirt roads.

The worst of it. The one thing they could keep. The one practice they could hold to they threw away. He stared out across Hemlock Creek at the field fifty metres away. He knew it belonged to Bethany's father. The rows lay overgrown. They'd need to be ploughed in perhaps six weeks. When they did he would prepare and lay down his seed. And he would grow corn. Just corn. He would use unnatural feed. He would lay down nitrogen-rich fertilizer to account for the missing beans. He would leave the squash, its leaves covering and protecting the feet of the corn. Instead he would opt for herbicides and insecticides. Each head would look the same, and he would care for but two things - size and yield. No one would stop these people from farming in their traditional ways. They could teach their children the lessons their grandmothers had taught them. But they wouldn't, because they chose to live like everyone else.

He had to stop himself from laughing as he listened to Wesley conjure the warlord as the reason for all this. He brought the sisters to himself so he could train them, grow them, reconnect them with a heritage they would not receive here. The living embodiment of the story. An emblem, an example of a way to live. But they would not stop harping on about their mothers. These women were not leaders, not fire-keepers - just three gossips enjoying a respect in the community they had not earned and upholding none of the responsibilities they ought. This community was sick and wayward. But the girls departed too, so there would be no easy lessons. The girl, Ella, had her own twisted visions, which he'd helped farm and cultivate; she conjured the threat. Detours mattered not, here they were invoking the warlord! The return of an ancient enemy meant the return of ancient practices. *Thank you, girls*, he thought.

"Conor! You are magnificent, my boy!" Cried the man without eyelids - *"Of course I accept your gift! Anything to keep this little one with us!"* He ran across to Ella. Grabbing her by the hand and lifting her up. Conor had never seen him this animated; he found it somehow grotesque. He continued -

"Look, look at the eater. Do you see where the sisters crept from?" Conor wasn't looking at the neighbour, his blood pouring out on the floor, moments from losing consciousness again. He had little faith the man had any way of returning in earnest to the land of the living. Conor was gazing at Ella, her movements were wrong. Up until this exact moment she had seemed to relish every moment of chaos she had wrought on the world since he found her in the bloody diamond. She reminded him of Calum that morning in their oak. She looked terrified. She knew what the man would offer before he spoke.

"Ella, my girl. You've got what you wanted! The deeps are open to you now. You could even visit your other brother. I dare say you could be the one to open his deep for him, I believe he's always just stayed up top before now. But I cannot let you travel alone, it isn't safe. Come now, take the place of Catherine. Three is good. I'll make sure the other two hold no grudges."

Ella said nothing. The man went on.

"Come, the other two have waited long enough! They'll forgive you when you travel together to the deep of the man who took their mothers. Give them that, feast on what little remains of the man's orenda, and you will be bound to one another forever."

She glanced at Conor.

"Him? All bonds are lost to you there, girl. He cannot look at you without seeing what you did. His debt is paid; I accept his offering. You have no brothers, now, Ella. Take your place as one of the three sisters. This is what I promised, this is your freedom."

Ella remained silent a while. Conor bade her stay with him. Tried to fill his eyes with all the forgiveness he couldn't yet voice. Her terrors weren't fading. No, she'd practiced this, this is what she'd wanted. She took her fear and threw it off a very high building as she took the man's hand.

Wesley concluded the gathering, making the final note that they would reconvene the following Wednesday evening, again at seven, where he would begin to take the council again through the first of the stories marked by his wampum. There was much shaking of hands and embraces as those in attendance thanked Mr Armitage for helping return them to their identity and reminding them of their position in the council of the five tribes. Many touched the head of Calum, who, for some reason, would clench his fists tight and squeeze his entire body when they did so, so as to try and make his newly discovered orenda as big as possible. At one point, he was squeezing so hard that he went red and got a little bit dizzy.

The three of them began walking back to Wesley's beside Hemlock Creek. Calum was asking Wesley every question he could about Thadodaho. About whether you can somehow kill or defeat the warlord, it seemed to him that would be exactly what he would want. Mr Armitage was silently revelling in their conversation. A young one - asking an elder about their legends - this victory had been hard-won.

Then, running behind them, the woman appeared.

"May I accompany you gentlemen home?" She asked.

Wesley wrapped his arm around her, Calum realising before he said it by the look in their eyes - a look he'd seen shared by Ella and Conor many times - that they were siblings, replied, *"Yes, my beautiful sister, nothing would delight me more."*

Wesley's great arm wrapped around her; she turned to Mr Armitage. Calum noticed that she squinted at him a lot, like she saw something crawling beneath his skin, and asked -

"Armitage, a man of simple means. Why does it always seem as though your mind is so full? It is as though you hear nothing unless you've made space first."

"Is it not that way with everyone?"

"No, not usually." She replied.

"I don't think that's fair, Mary. Most people aren't good listeners, and yes, I have a lot of memories. I have a lot of memories, and I think about them. What's wrong with that?"

The tone of his final question betrayed his frustrations. He'd hoped to carry the conversation with levity and have her questions pass quickly. He knew Mary; this lapse would keep her on him.

"Good memories?" She asked.

"Many good, some less so. As you'd hope for in a life."

She was silent for a moment, then. Just long enough for Mr Armitage to relax again.

"What do you remember of the night the girl's mothers died?"

As always, he felt the air leave his lungs. He felt himself pull inwards, saw the locked door. He felt the river begin pulling him back towards his field, before it diverged. Every deep has a river; tonight, his was Hemlock Creek.

Conor watched as Ella took the hands of their mutual friend. He saw how he must have passed into Ella in the bloody diamond. A river running into the sea. It was just him and his old friend now - the man who paid his fares. The neighbour lay beside him, perfectly still. He spotted a watch on his wrist, prodded at the sleeve to see it more clearly. It was the same as his father's, the one Ella had given him. He unclipped the clasp and slid it off the man's arm and onto his own. Clamped it shut. He'd give it to his brother.

"Where is Calum?" He asked.

"I don't know, boy, would you believe it, I've never met the lad."

"Thank fuck for that."

"Come, Conor, be fair."

Conor paused for a moment, then - thought of the hound in the neighbour's deep.

"You're a wolf."

"Ah, Conor, Bedgellert is a beautiful town, but I reject your allegory. There are many wolves. And many babes lie gored and dead in their mouths. Don't play some Llewellyn now. Your sister - is she supposed to be the brave and misunderstood hound? The truth is rarely as simple as a folktale."

"So what then?" Cried Conor in desperation. The eyes stared back at him with great warmth. He could tell the man did love him, however inexplicably.

"You all remind me of Llewelyn. So passionate. Passionate and wrong."

Ella was running. Just ahead of her were Sara and Bethany. They were sprinting. *Fuck, they're fast*, she thought. One slow breath. Then she tipped her chest forward a little, drove her knees high with each step and began gaining on them. She could smell the smoke before she could see it. They broke through the tree line and ran right. They turned onto a dirt road. The girls were not slowing. Ella knew she didn't need to stay right on them, their destination marked by the roaring flames above the house in the distance. But she stuck with them regardless. *It's always a race.*

Sara and Bethany won. They stood fifty metres away, watching the inferno and the flames like horrid tongues licking around the edge of the basement door. Five steps leading down to it. *Infamous*, thought Ella, *these must be the gates of hell*. Watching these two girls gaze upon the collapsing building that housed the remains of their mothers, she realised finally and completely that Conor and Calum would never forgive her. She'd silently assumed the three of them were alone. Then, a familiar voice away to their right, knees in the dirt -

"Where is my Catherine?"

Sara ran at him, her knee came flying and crashed into his temple as he crumpled awkwardly. Lay there, blood pouring from the wound, he smiled at her, as she grabbed a handful of soil and began jamming it down his throat.

Mr Armitage fell then, clutching his neck. Calum figured an asthma attack. Wesley figured Thadodaho. Mary figured pretence. He coughed and sputtered. It very quickly didn't look like an asthma attack. It was less like he couldn't get enough air in his lungs, but like his lungs were filling with something else.

Ella stood behind the two of them as they crouched over him, pouring more and more soil into his mouth, it looked like a grotesque version of when Calum and Conor had buried their mother that day at the beach. They were screeching and wailing. Mr Armitage's eyes were reddening as seemingly every blood vessel popped. He stopped moving, but Sara just held his mouth open as Bethany thrust her hand in, pushing more and more soil down she rammed her fingers down his throat, sliding all the dirt she could. They got a huge amount in. Of course they did. *You can do what you like with the empties.*

The End

Epilogue

Conor watched as the man without eyelids stood. Eyes off him, he turned from the room and down the stairs. He noted his careful steps as he walked behind him. Seeing him, a man a similar size to Mr Armitage was strange. He cut so graceful a figure as he wandered out into the night. Conor turned away, moved through the hedge-hole of Number Seven and again into Mrs Careen's pristine garden. He checked his father's watch, it was half eight in the evening. He saw the light of her rear room on and approached. All the curtains were closed, no visitors appeared welcome, but he had nowhere else to go.

He knocked on the door. She sounded panicked.

"No, no thank you! No, no!"

Conor replied - *"Hi, Mrs Careen, it's Conor from Number Three."*

He heard commotion as she threw whatever was on her lap to the ground and grasped for the key. After some fumbling, she unlocked the door and slammed it an inch into the chain latch. Shut it again and a moment later reached for him, immediately stopping herself before she held the boy as she realised she had no depth of relationship from which to hug him. But the boy wanted nothing more than to be held. As soon as his right hand stretched out slightly and upturned, she saw what he needed, bent down and wrapped her arms around him.

News of Mr Armitage's death made its way back to Mrs Careen from Wesley swiftly since she'd been making calls to inform Mr Armitage of Conor's return. He told her what had happened, and she instructed him to return Calum as soon as they'd buried the great man. She knew he'd be as happy laid to rest on their land as he would on his own. They buried him that day, and Wesley escorted Calum home. He wished to see the field where Mr Armitage had raised and paid tribute to his girls.

He stayed for a few weeks, stayed for the planting. Showed Calum and Conor how to plant the three sisters. Mrs Careen noted how the pair of them mirrored this man exactly, even better than Calum's Armitage impression. She wished he'd stay to help the boys, but only time would test their trouble. He reminded her of Mr Armitage, but more present in his body, fuller somehow.

Wesley knew he had to return for the planting on his own land. He had agreed with many of the townsfolk to plant the three sisters this year in memory of their old friend and guardian, in an attempt to reclaim some of the traditions he'd loved and to tie them once again to their history and stories. The only protection they had against the warlord, who continued to make his silent offers whenever he travelled in his deep.

