

Eyelids

by Joel Delaney

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 when she was gone. 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 river, 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.