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Thirteen Chairs

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Let Me Sleep

When it came it was so quiet it was barely a sound at all, less than a whisper. But William heard the words clearly enough; and thought, as well, that he felt a wisp of breath against his ear.

Give it back.

Terror jolted him awake with a sharp cry that blew out his candle and dropped him into darkness.

'Who's there?' he cried. He fumbled for matches, spilled most of them, and took three attempts to finally strike one. He held it high, trembling and twitching, as he turned two full circles on the spot, staring into the dimly revealed room. Finding no one there he re-lit the candle and looked again. Nobody.

He cursed his foolishness, and his dreams, and made his way to bed, singing to himself – quite without thinking – a song from his childhood. He lit a second candle from the first, then climbed into the bed and, shivering at a chill he hadn't previously noticed, drew the blankets up tight and listened attentively to the silence. Satisfied that he was most definitely alone, his grip upon the bedclothes gradually loosened and the tension in his body unwound. He closed his eyes, and his thoughts began to dissolve as sleep embraced him.

Give it back.

The voice was just as quiet and as clear. William's eyes snapped open, but he was still alone. He trembled and shook. He knew the voice now. It was the voice of a dead man buried in a wood. He tried to convince

himself he had been dreaming, but he knew that he had not.

He took off the ring and shut it away in a drawer, but he did not sleep again that night. He did not hear the voice again, but he did not – could not – sleep.

Sometime before dawn, he rose, dressed and, without much thought, gathered together his most valuable and most necessary possessions into a satchel, and left the house. The ring, he left in the drawer: he wanted no part of it now. He walked out to the city limits with no idea where he was going, and when buildings gave way to countryside and farmland he still carried on, and on. He walked at a good pace, and without rest or sustenance, through the dawn, through the day, and through village after village until, after dusk, with no idea where he might be, he crept into a barn on some remote farm.

He collapsed to the floor, and pulled straw around and over him for a blanket. He didn't even notice the hardness of the ground, felt nothing but gratitude for the opportunity to rest now. His feet ached, the muscles in his legs burned, and he felt drained and hollow. But he was pleased to be so many miles from his lodgings, away from the ring and the dead man's voice, and exhaustion would surely now send him quickly to sleep. Blissful, beautiful sleep. His eyelids fell shut.

Give it back.

No! How could this be? William screwed his eyes tighter shut and tried to ignore the voice. He wrapped

his arms round his head, covering his ears. It made no difference.

Give it back.

Louder now. More insistent.

This was madness. This was imagination. This was the fevered invention of his mind, addled by lack of sleep and desperate exhaustion.

Give it back.

William yelled out. But his voice had been silent for over a day and he was unable to form actual words, his mind too maddened and panicked to form thoughts to demand them, he could only let out a strange animal sound of profound anguish. Then the tears came, and he did not hear the voice any more, only his own racking sobs, and he lay there, weeping like a child, until morning. And then he staggered to his feet and walked on.

William kept walking for two more days, but all the distance he put between himself and the ring made no difference. He could not escape the whispering voice. And despite a weariness far beyond any he had ever known before, he still could not rest. The voice, or just the thought of the voice, held him back from the brink of sleep, denying him the thing he most craved.

He was *so* tired, so utterly ragged and broken, that it was now a kind of madness. His thoughts were small, angry things that flitted and lurched and tumbled and fought each other in his head. And though he could not sleep, he began at times to think that he *was* dreaming.

All that he saw seemed unreal, distorted and terrifying.

People were the worst, so he avoided all human contact, but still he was never truly alone. Every step was full of pain, and his muscles seemed to have worn away, and his limbs had grown heavy and clumsy. He felt as if he didn't know how his body worked any more. And the one thought he could hold onto, the one constant, like a screaming hunger beyond any hunger he had ever known, was his desperate need to rest, to sleep, to stop.

On that third night, hunched up at the foot of a tree, shaking with madness, he pleaded with the dead man, crying out to the night: 'Let me sleep! For the love of God, please, let me sleep!'

And the voice replied: *Give it back. Give it back and let* me *sleep!*

William, blank-faced, gave a weary nod. He rose unsteadily to his feet and began to walk back the way he had come.

*

Standing at the open drawer, William looked down at the ring. He felt nothing. He reached down, picked it up and placed it on the same finger as before. Then he went out and paid all the money he still had for one further coach journey. It was a long trip and William stared out of the window for all the hours that it took, the chaos in his head fractionally tamed by his new sense of purpose, his glimmer of hope.

In the woods on the hill it took some time to find

the spade again, but then he returned to the grave as if led to it. The remains of the flowers confirmed that this was the place; he noticed the sickly sweet smell of their decay as he started to dig.

The ground was mercifully soft. He had no strength left in his weary limbs, but a desperate will still somehow moved them, and slowly he progressed down into the earth. His body ached, but he did not notice. Tears fell from his eyes, but he did not know it. His breath rasped in time with the rhythm of his work.

When he reasoned that he was deep enough, he knelt down at the bottom of the hole and scraped at the earth with his hands. Quite quickly he found cloth: the upper part of a shirt sleeve. He scrabbled at the soil, feverishly scratching earth away to reveal an arm, a hand. He held it for a moment, looked down at his own hands, blackened by the earth, clasped as if strangely praying around the body's cold, dead flesh. When he pulled the ring from his finger it left a clean pink circle of flesh amid the earth-stained skin.

He lifted the dead man's hand, parted the ring finger from the others, and slid the ring onto it. Then, for a moment, he knelt there, still holding the dead man's hand, and he closed his eyes expectantly and listened to his own breathing. There was no other sound. The silence was beautiful.

William laid the dead man's hand back by the side of his body, then filled his own lungs with the sweet woodland air. He opened his eyes again, as if waking

to a new day. He might have smiled if he had had the strength.

It was over.

But when he tried to rise to his feet he found that he could not. And it was not fatigue that prevented him. The dead man's hand was closed around his own, holding him down. He pulled against it wearily but it only pulled back with greater determination. He toppled forward, his face landing against soil beneath which the dead man's face must have lain. He knew he should struggle, but his slow brain was failing to tell his body how. And then he felt the embrace of another bony arm thrown round his back, holding him down with surprising force. Then the other hand released its grip, reached up above him, and began to claw at the earth, bringing down clods of it onto his back.