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opening extract from

Stoneheart

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Things men have made with wakened hands, and put soft life into are awake through years with transferred touch, and go on glowing for long years.
And for this reason, some old things are lovely warm still with the life of forgotten men who made them.

'Things Men Have Made' – D.H. Lawrence 1929

Our happiness here is all vain glory,
This false world is but transitory
The flesh is weak, the Fiend is slee
Timor mortis conturbat me.

'Lament for the Makers' –William Dunbar ?1460–1520

1

BELLY OF THE WHALE AND THE MONKEY'S TEETH

George never spent any time wondering why he wanted to belong. He just did. Things were like that. You were in or you were out, and in was a lot safer. It wasn't the sort of thing you questioned. It was just there.

On the class trip before this one they'd been to the War Museum and learned all about trench warfare. George had thought that's what life felt like: just keeping your head below the parapet so you wouldn't get hit.

Of course that was last year, in the past, like all the other things about being a kid. He still thought about them sometimes. He still remembered what being a kid was like. But he was over that. He was twelve. Real Twelve, not 'Only Twelve', as his father had called it the

last time they'd spoken. He knew *his* twelve wasn't anything like his dad's because he'd seen pictures of his dad as a kid looking clueless and speccy and fat, all of which – in George's twelve-year-old trench – would be the equivalent of sitting on top of the parapet with a big round target painted on your head yelling, 'Cooee, over here'.

George could remember talking and laughing about stuff like that with his dad, before his dad moved out and there was too much talking altogether.

He didn't say much at home any more. His mother complained about it, usually to him, but sometimes to other people late at night on the phone when she thought he was asleep. Somewhere inside it hurt when he heard her say that – not as much as when she said he used to have such a lovely smile – but nearly.

And nowhere near as much as never being able to say anything to his dad ever again.

The thing was he wasn't *not* saying anything on purpose. It was something that seemed to have just happened, like his baby teeth falling out, or getting taller. Mind you, he wasn't getting taller as fast as he would have liked, and right now that was part of the problem.

He was average height for his age, maybe even a bit more – but somehow he *felt* shorter, the same way he sometimes felt older than he was. Or maybe it wasn't

exactly older, just a bit more worn and rumpled than his classmates – rather like his clothes. His clothes were all thrown in the same washing machine, colours and whites together, and though his mother said it made no difference, it did. It made everything pale and grey and washed out, and that's exactly what George felt like most of the time.

It was certainly what he felt like today, and not being able to see properly was making him feel more insignificant than usual; all he could make out was the whale's belly and the back of his classmates' heads as they clustered round a museum guide showing them something interesting. George tried to push forward, but all he got was an elbow in his ribs. He sidled round the pack and tried to get another view, careful not to push anyone.

He found a place where he could nearly hear and edged closer, peering through the thin gap between a circular stand full of pamphlets and a boy about four inches taller than him. As he rattled the stand with his shoulder and reached to steady it, the boy turned and registered him.

George found himself smiling at him on reflex. The boy didn't return fire on the smile. He just looked away without comment. George wasn't too worried about being blanked. In fact he was relieved. The boy was the

name-maker, the one with the gift for finding the cruellest nick-names for his peers, then making them stick. He'd *almost* been a friend of George's when they'd all been new together, but finding his gift had given him a kind of easy invulnerability, a power that meant he didn't have to have friends any more, only followers. That's what made him dangerous.

The boy turned back round. This time he spoke. 'Something I can help you with?'

George froze. Then tried to hide the freeze with another smile and a shrug. 'No. Uh. Just getting a better—'

'Don't stand behind me.'

The boy turned away. But several others had seen, and in their eyes George saw something he recognized. Not interest, certainly not sympathy, not even much dislike. Just a pale gratitude that they weren't the target this time.

So George swallowed and stayed where he was. He knew enough not to be seen being pushed around. He knew once you did that you were sunk. He knew there was a level below which you couldn't afford to sink, because once you were down there, there was no ladder back up. Once you were in that pit, you were fair game for everyone, and everyone unloaded on you.

So he looked down at the square of marble he stood

on and decided he'd stick to it. There were teachers present, anyway. What's the worst that could happen?

The boy calmly reached backwards and toppled the stand, right into George. He stepped back, but there wasn't enough room, so he batted at the metal column with his hands to protect himself. It hit the floor with a loud metallic crash, spilling pamphlets all across the tiling around George.

The room went suddenly very quiet. Faces turned. The boy turned with them, innocent-looking amazement quickly morphing into shocked surprise.

'Chrissakes, Chapman!'

The cluster of boys around him dissolved into hooting anarchy, and the three adults, two teachers and a guide, were left looking for the culprit. And with everyone else doubled up and pointing, there he was, head above the parapet, feet bogged down in a landslide of bright-coloured paper booklets.

Mr Killingbeck fixed him with a sniper's eye, crooked a bony trigger finger at him and fired a one-word bullet.

'Chapman.'

George felt his face reddening. Killingbeck snapped his fingers at the other boys.

'The rest of you clear Chapman's mess up! You – follow me.'

George walked after him as he stepped away from the mob.

He followed him out of the whale room back into the central hall of the Natural History Museum. Mr Killingbeck stopped in the middle of the room beneath the dinosaur skeleton and beckoned him closer.

George had enough experience of Mr Killingbeck to know not to start what was coming. So he just waited. The man's mouth worked slowly. He always worked his mouth as if everything that he said tasted bad, and had to be spat out before it caused him more pain and discomfort.

'Mmm, tell me, were you trying to be rude, Chapman, or does it just come naturally?'

'It wasn't me, sir.'

'Who was it then?'

There was no answer to that. No answer George could give. He knew it. Killingbeck knew it. So he didn't say anything.

'Moral cowardice and dumb insolence. Neither very appealing, Chapman. Neither what you were sent here to learn, are they?'

George wondered what planet Killingbeck was on. Planet 1970-something probably. Not a planet where George could breathe. He began to get choked up. His face began a slow burn that he could feel without seeing.

'That was unforgivable, boy. You behaved like something wholly uncivilized. Like that ape over there.'

The bony finger jabbed at a monkey in a glass cage, baring its teeth in the grimace that would be the last message it ever sent to the world. George knew what it felt like.

'You're uncivilized, Chapman. What are you?'

George just looked at the monkey, thinking how strong and frightening its teeth looked. More like fangs really.

Killingbeck worked his mouth.

George found the blob of Plasticene in his pocket and began kneading it with his fingers. It still had the knobbly contours of a face he'd made on the bus.

'I think it's worth something more than sullen silence, Chapman. I think it's worth an apology for a start.'

George's thumb coasted over the open mouth in the Plasticene face and wedged it a bit wider.

'Get your hands out of your pockets.'

George smashed the nose on the Plasticene and pulled his hand out of his pocket.

'You're going to say sorry if you have to stand there all day. Do you understand?'

George worked the Plasticene in his fist.

'Or you can tell me who you say did it. Do you understand?'

George understood. There was a rock. There was a hard place. And then there was him, jammed up between the two. He couldn't grass on another boy, even a bully, because grassing would drop him into a place so low in the eyes of the other boys that not only was there no ladder back up, but there was no floor either. Grass someone up, and the rest of your life would be spent in free-fall down a pit that just got deeper and darker and never stopped.

That was the rock.

That was simple.

The hard place was less simple, maybe because it was so big, so immovable.

The hard place was everything else.

The hard place was his life.

The hard place was everything that led to this moment.

And the moment was clamping round him and giving him nowhere to run.

'Chapman?' Killingbeck's finger tapped impatiently on the side crease of his trousers.

George looked at the monkey's fangs. How easily they'd snap through that impatient stick of flesh and brittle bone. He'd like to have those teeth in his head. He'd like to bite that finger off and spit it back at Killingbeck. He'd like it so much that he could feel the

crunch and crack and almost taste the blood. The feeling was so immediate, so nearly real that he was suddenly frightened by it as it hung black and treacly in his mind. He'd *never* had a thought like that. The shock made him reel inside and forget he wasn't speaking.

'Sir?'

'Well?' Killingbeck's voice jerked him back into the now, back between the rock and the hard place. He didn't know what he was going to do. But he suddenly knew from the prickling in his eyes that there was one treacherous possibility.

George was not going to cry. And knowing what he *wasn't* going to do suddenly made it all clear. He knew what to do, what to say. And he knew to say it very slowly, very calmly so as not to let the thing rising in his throat choke him.

'I understand that's what you think I should do, sir.'

Killingbeck looked at him with the surprise of a hungry man whose dinner just bit back. His mouth stopped chewing at the next thing he was going to say.

'I just don't agree with it.'

The pupils in Killingbeck's eyes irissed down to the size of full-stops.

George knew he'd made a mistake. He knew, with a sudden flash of intimacy which scared him more than the

finger-biting image, that Killingbeck wanted to hurt him. He could feel the itch in the man's hand as the bony fingers blunted into a fist.

'Well. Well, well, well. That's fine.' Killingbeck closed his eyes and ran his free hand through the thick grey hair that curled back round his skull, as if he was trying to massage the very thought of George out of his head. 'You'll stay here until you decide to apologize. If you haven't done so by the time we leave, you will be in more trouble than you can imagine. You will stand straight, you will not sit down, you will not put your hands in your pockets, you will not chew at sweets, you will not move from this spot. The museum guards will not let you out unless you are with the rest of the party. We will pick you up in an hour and a half and you will apologize then, in front of everyone. Do you understand *that*?'

His eyes snapped open. George didn't flinch. 'Yes.'

Killingbeck 180'd and strode off after the rest of the class.

George listened to the click of his heels across the stone floor.

Then he put his hands in his pockets. Then he sat down on a bench. Then he put a piece of chewing gum in his mouth.

And then he got up, walked to the door and out into

the drizzle that was soaking the steps in front of the museum.

The guards didn't give him a second look.

2

THE HORROR

George felt the cold wind slap him as he stepped out of the museum. He felt horrible. The black treacly feeling was still bubbling in his head and the chill on his face only made it worse. He didn't know what to do next. He only knew he'd had to get out and be alone for a moment.

George knew that it was safer and easier to be alone. He'd decided this right after his dad had died, when life had suddenly filled with too many people saying all the wrong things, as if their words could begin to fill the new dull hole in the middle of him.

Being a loner seemed like a hard road, and sometimes his weakness betrayed him: for example, he hated himself for smiling at the boy who'd toppled the pamphlet stand

on him; it had been sheer, unthinking weakness.

He'd betrayed himself.

Smiling had been like trying to be friends when they weren't. Smiling had been a gutless, needy thing to do. And George had definitely decided he didn't need anyone, friends or otherwise.

Rain spat at him in a flurry, and he looked up, thinking that alone was the way to be, because alone meant you were in charge of what could get to you and what you could keep out.

Above him, high on the decorated façade of the museum there were carvings of imaginary animals, nearly real, but not quite. Lizards that only existed in the mind of the sculptor alternated with alarming pterodactyl-like birds. The pterodactyls had nasty pointy teeth jagging out of nasty pointy beaks, and ugly hooks stuck out of their featherless wings. Their eyes had the wide-open glassy stare of someone you don't want to cross.

He felt the cold air on his gums and wondered if he was smiling or grimacing. The more he looked the more he saw that the whole front of the building seethed with stone carvings of animals. They made him uneasy. He didn't know why, but he didn't like them. He felt watched. Maybe it was the windows in the façade, the people who could be looking out, seeing him with a red

face and eyes pricking with frustration and tears that he wasn't going to let come.

He knew enough about self-pity to hate it, more than Killingbeck, more than the rock or the hard place. So he turned from the façade and wiped his eyes to be sure no one saw him nearly cry.

He looked at his watch: three forty-two. They'd be in there until four-thirty at least. He didn't know what he was going to do. He turned away and leaned back against the building.

Something jagged into his back.

Behind him, at waist height, on the corner of the front portico of the museum, a little nubby carving of a dragon's head stared up at him.

It reminded him of the things his dad made – used to make – in his workshop. Not the big stuff, the serious stuff, but the little animal toys he'd sometimes squidge out of clay to make George smile when George was smaller, on days when George found him at work but not too busy.

The memory didn't make him happy. Maybe because he'd thought about his dad too much for one day anyway, or maybe because the dragon had fangs and the fangs reminded him of the monkey, of the taste in his mouth, of Killingbeck.

Whatever the reason, the result was strong and sharp.

He hated the carving.

He hated it a lot.

His fist was bunched and in motion before he thought about it. Once he thought about it he knew it was going to hurt. He knew there'd be blood, split knuckles, maybe even broken bones. He knew he didn't mind. He knew in a place that was closer to wanting than knowing that all this was likely and all this was OK.

His fist was the size of the dragon's head. His fist was not made of granular stone. In the micro-second before impact he realized he didn't know what this would feel like. He realized he was going to break his first bone. He felt more air on his gums as his grin rictussed wider.

He didn't feel the impact. He heard it. He heard a sharp ugly crack and the world jerked a bit.

Something hit his foot.

He closed his eyes and cradled his hand instinctively, waiting for the wave of pain. It was going to be bad. From the cracking noise alone he knew that bad damage had been done. Now he'd done it he wished he hadn't. He didn't want to look at his hand in case something was sticking out of it. Like a bone. He checked it with his good hand, carefully. No bone, but definitely wetness.

Something hissed at him.

He opened his eyes. He must have imagined it. As he turned to check behind him his foot stumbled over an obstruction. He looked down.

It was the stone dragon's head.

He'd knocked it off.

He looked at the portico. There was the stump of its neck, sheared off neat as a scalpel cut.

Now he looked at his hand. No bone. No blood even. Just wet from the rain. It was fine. He picked up the dragon's head. He couldn't believe it. He looked at it. Something had changed. It wasn't looking at him any more. It wasn't looking at anything. Unless he was going mad, it had been looking at him. Now its eyes were closed. He decided it must have been a trick of the light.

There was another hiss from behind him. There was a wet scrape and a dry squeal.

He knew without looking that the noise must be one of the museum guards, maybe even Killingbeck coming out to give him a real beasting about leaving the hall. He had no idea how Killingbeck was going to react to seeing that his least favourite boy had just broken a carving off the museum wall.

So as he turned he jammed the dragon's head into his coat pocket, hoping to hide it but knowing he wasn't going to get away with it.

It wasn't Killingbeck. It was something worse, something so much worse that if he'd had time to think he would have given anything for it to be Killingbeck instead.

It wasn't anything human.

It wasn't anything possible.

It was, however, peeling itself off the stone façade of the museum and looking at George with flat, blank hatred. And not just hatred – hunger too.

It was a pterodactyl.

Its eyes were wide and unblinking, as if permanently surprised to find there was room for them at all in a skull that wasn't so much a head as a long heavy beak that tapered back into a ribbed neck bent under the strain of holding up all those teeth. Its body was small and surprisingly pigeon-chested, but was more than made up for by the large bat-like wings and the sinewy legs that ended in bent knuckles and ripping talons.

It clacked its beak with the effort of unpeeling, and something like breath hissed from deep within its stony neck.

George's body had entirely forgotten to breathe.

The thing jerked off the frieze with a final effort. It tried to spread its wings, but only succeeded in getting one uncurled before it disappeared from view, plummeting below the level of the balustrade.

George heard a noise like a sackful of wet suitcases hit the grass below. Unable to stop himself, he peered over the balustrade. The monster continued unpacking itself and getting all its wings and talons in the right order. It

had its back to him. It stretched itself like an old man working a kink out of his neck.

And then it turned.

It looked right at him with dead stone eyes. And as the rest of the body twisted to follow the head and point itself at him, George knew what those eyes were doing.

They were locking on. Acquiring a target.

And that target was him.

As if to confirm this, the pterodactyl raised its beak to the lead sky and chattered its teeth in a noise like a drum-roll played on dead men's bones.

Then it lowered its head and began to lurch forwards, dragging itself towards him on its wing-knuckles, swinging its body and foot-talons along between them, like a demon on crutches.

George ran.