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More Than This

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He tries to rise, and the feeling vanishes. Rising is difficult, surprisingly so, and he fails. He feels terrifyingly weak, his muscles resisting even the simple command to stand. Just the effort to sit fully upright leaves him winded, and he has to stop for a moment, panting again.

He reaches out to grab a sturdy-looking plant by the side of the path to try to rise once more–

And pulls his hand back immediately when short spikes prick his fingers.

It's not a regular plant at all. It's a weed, grown staggeringly tall. The flower-beds that line the path to the door of the house have all grown extraordinarily wild, much higher than the low stone dividing walls on either side. The shrubberies among them look like they're almost living creatures reaching out to him, poised to do him harm if he moves too close. Other weeds, *enormous* weeds, three, four, even six feet high, have blazed through every inch of dirt and every possible crack in the pavement, one of them crushed underneath him where he lay.

He tries again to rise, finally making it up, though he sways dangerously for a moment. His head is overweighted

with grogginess and he's still shivering. The white bandages around him are in no way warm, nor are they even – he notices with alarm – covering him properly as clothing. His legs and torso are wrapped tightly, his arms, too, and most of the width of his back. Bafflingly, though, the entire area from his belly button to the middle of his thighs is naked to the world, front and back, his most private parts unthinkably out in the morning sun. He frantically tries to pull down the too-scanty fabric to cover himself, but it sticks tightly to his skin.

He covers himself with his hand and looks around to see if anyone has seen him.

But there is no one. No one at all.

Is this a dream? he thinks, the words coming to him slowly, thickly, as if from a great distance. *The last dream before death?*

Every yard is as overgrown as this one. Some that had lawns are now sprouting fields of grass shoulder-high. The pavement in the road is cracked, too, with more weeds almost obscenely tall growing right out of the middle, a few approaching the status of *trees*.

There are cars parked along the road, but they're covered in thick layers of dust and dirt, blinding every window. And nearly every one has sunk under four deflated tyres.

Nothing is moving. There are no cars coming down the road, and from the look of the weeds, no car has driven down

here in an impossibly long time. The road to his left carries on until it meets a much wider street, one that looks like it should be a busy, bustling main road. There are no cars driving there either, and he can see a gigantic hole has opened up across it, forty or fifty feet wide. Out of which a whole glade of weeds seems to be growing.

He listens. He can't hear a single motor anywhere. Not on this street or the next. He waits for a long moment. Then a long moment more. He looks down the other end of the road on his right, and through the gap between two apartment buildings he can see some raised train tracks and feels himself listening for the trains that might run on them.

But there are no trains.

And no people.

If it's the morning that it seems to be, people should be coming out of their houses, getting in their cars, driving to work. Or if not, then walking their dogs, delivering the mail, heading off to school.

The streets should be full. Front doors should be opening and closing.

But there is no one. No cars, no trains, no people.

And this street, now that he can see more of it as his eyes and mind begin to clear a little more, even the geography of it looks strange. These houses are crammed together, all stuck in a line, with no garages or big front yards and only the narrowest of alleys between every fourth or fifth house. Nothing like his own street back home. In fact, this doesn't look like an American street at all. It looks almost–

It looks almost *English*.

• • •

The word clangs around his head. It feels important, like it's desperately trying to latch on to something, but his mind is so foggy, so shocked and confused, it only heightens his anxiety.

It's a word that's wrong. That's *very* wrong.

He wavers a little and has to catch his balance on one of the sturdier-looking bushes. He feels a strong urge to go inside, to find something to cover himself with, and this house, this house–

He frowns at it.

What is it about this house?

Surprising himself, without even feeling as if he's decided to, he takes an unsteady step towards it, nearly falling. He still struggles to articulate his thoughts. He cannot say why he's walking towards the house, why it might be anything other than an instinct to get inside, to get out of this weird deserted world, but he's also aware that all of this, whatever it is, feels so much like a dream that only dream logic can possibly apply.

He doesn't know why, but the house draws him.

So he goes.

He reaches the front steps, steps over a crack running along the lowest one, and stops before the door. He waits there

a moment, not quite knowing what to do next, not quite sure how it will open, or what he will do if it's locked, but he reaches for it–

It swings open at his lightest touch.

A long hallway is the first thing he sees. The sun is really shining now, filling the clear blue sky behind him – so warm that it *must* be some kind of summer, so warm he can already feel it burning his exposed skin, too pale, too fair to be under such harsh light – but even in this brightness, the hallway almost disappears in darkness halfway down. He can only just see the staircase at the end, leading up to the floors above. Before the stairs, on the left, is the doorway that leads into the main house.

There are no lights on inside, and no sound.

He looks around again. There's still no drone of machinery or engines from anywhere, but he notices for the first time that there's no buzz of insects either, no calls of birds, not even any wind through the foliage.

Nothing but the sound of his own breathing.

He just stands there for a moment. He feels hideously unwell, and so weak, so *tired*, he could almost lay down on this doorstep right here and sleep forever, just forever, and never wake up–

He steps inside the house instead. Hands on either wall to keep himself steady, he moves slowly forward, every second thinking he's going to be stopped, that he's going to hear a voice demanding to know what he's doing trespassing in a strange house. As he stumbles into the shadows, though, his eyes not adjusting to the change in light as fast

as they should, he can feel dust under his feet so thick it seems inconceivable that anyone has been here in a long, long time.

It gets darker the further in he goes, and this seems wrong somehow, the blast of the sun through the open door not illuminating anything, just making the shadows heavier and more threatening to his bleary eyes. He fumbles on, seeing less and less, reaching the bottom of the stairs but turning from them, still hearing nothing, no sounds of habitation, no sound of anything at all except himself.

Alone.

He pauses before the doorway to the living-room, feeling a fresh thrust of fear. Anything could be there in the darkness, anything could be silently waiting for him, but he forces himself to look in, letting his eyes get used to the light.

When they do, he sees.

Caught in a few beams of dusty sunlight from the closed blinds at the front, he sees a simple, plain living-room, merging into an open dining area on his right, leading to a doorway through to the kitchen at the back of the house.

There is furniture here, like any normal room, except it's all covered in dust so thick it's like an extra cloth draped over everything. The boy, exhausted still, tries to make the shapes match up to words in his head.

His eyes adjust to the light more, the room becoming more of itself, taking shape, revealing details–

Revealing the horse screaming from above the mantelpiece.

A crazed eye, a tongue like a spike, trapped inside a burning world, looking at him from behind a picture frame.

Looking right at him.

The boy cries out at the sight of it because all at once he knows, *knows* beyond a shadow of a doubt, the realization coming like a tidal wave.

He knows where he is.

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He runs as fast as his exhausted feet will take him, staggering back down the hall, stirring up clouds of dust, heading towards the sunshine like–

(like a drowning man reaching for air–)

He can vaguely hear himself calling out in distress, still wordless, still unformed.

But he knows.

He knows, he knows, he knows.

He stumbles down the front steps, barely able to stay upright, and then not even barely. He falls to his knees and can't find the strength to rise again, as if the sudden rush of knowledge is a weight on his back.

He looks to the house in panic, thinking that something, some*one* must be coming after him, must be in pursuit–

But there's nothing.

There's still no sound. Not of machines or people or animals or insects or anything at all. There's nothing but a quiet so deep he can hear his heart beating in his chest.

My heart, he thinks. And the words come clearly,

cutting through the fog in his mind.

His heart.

His dead heart. His drowned heart.

He begins to shake, as the terrible knowledge of what he saw, the terrible knowledge of what it *means*, starts to overtake him.

This is the house where he used to live.

The house from all those years ago. The house in *England*. The house his mother swore she never wanted to see again. The house they moved across an ocean and a continent to get away from.

But that's impossible. He hasn't seen this house, this *country*, in years. Not since primary school.

Not since–

Not since his brother got out of the hospital.

Not since the very worst thing that ever happened.

No, he thinks.

Oh, please, no.

He knows where he is now. He knows why it would be this place, knows why he would wake up here, after–

After he died.

This is hell.

A hell built exactly for him.

A hell where he would be alone.

Forever.

He's died, and woken up in his own, personal hell.

He vomits.

He falls forward onto his hands, spitting up the contents of his stomach into the bushes on the side of the path. His eyes water from the effort of it, but he can still see that all he's throwing up is a weird, clear gel that tastes vaguely of sugar. It keeps coming until he exhausts himself, and since his eyes are already watering, it seems only a very short step to weeping. He begins to cry, slumping back down to the concrete face first.

It feels, for a time, like drowning all over again, the yearning for breath, the struggle against something larger than himself that only wants to take him down with it, and there's no fighting it, nothing that can be done to stop it, as it swallows him up and he disappears. Lying on the path, he gives himself over to it, in the same way that the waves kept demanding that he give himself to them–

(though he did fight the waves, up until the very end, he *did*)

And then the exhaustion that's threatened him since he first opened his eyes overtakes him, and he falls into unconsciousness.

Falls away and away and away–

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"How long are we going to sit here?" Monica asked from the back seat. "I'm fucking freezing."

"Does your girlfriend ever shut up, Harold?" Gudmund teased, looking into the rear-view mirror.

"Don't call me Harold," H said, his voice low.

*Monica slapped him on the shoulder. "*That *was the part of the sentence you didn't like?"*

"You're the one who wanted to come along," H said.

"And fat lot of fun it turned out to be," Monica said. "Parked outside Callen Fletcher's house waiting for his parents to go to bed so we can steal his Baby Jesus. You really know how to treat a girl, Harold.*"*

The back seat lit up as Monica started furiously tapping the screen of her phone.

"Turn that off!" Gudmund said, reaching back from the driver's seat to cover it with his hand. "They'll see the light."

Monica snatched it out of his grasp. "Please, we're miles away." She went back to tapping.

Gudmund shook his head and frowned at H in the rear-view mirror. It was weird. They all liked H. They all liked Monica. But it turned out nobody much liked H and

Monica together. Not even, it seemed, H and Monica.

"What are we going to do with it, anyway?" Monica said, still tapping. "I mean, Baby Jesus? Really? Isn't that just a little blasphemous?"

Gudmund pointed out through the windshield. "Isn't that*?"*

They looked out to the vast Christmas scene that blanketed the Fletchers' front yard like an invasion force. Word was that Mrs Fletcher was angling not just for Halfmarket's local paper, but an actual TV news crew over from Portland, maybe even Seattle.

The display started with Santa and all his reindeer in bright fibreglass, lit up from the inside and strung from a tree near the Fletcher house out to their roof, so it looked like the over-burdened sleigh was coming in for a landing. Things got worse from there. Lights sprang from every conceivable crevice and outcropping on the house to every tree branch and utility abutment within reach. Ten-foot-tall candy canes made a forest through which mechanical elves waved onlookers slowly into eternity. Off to one side, there was a live, twenty-foot Christmas tree decked out like a cathedral next to a lawn full of prancing Christmas-related animals (including, inexplicably, a rhinoceros in a Santa cap).

In pride of place was a Nativity that made it look as if God had been born in Las Vegas: Mary and Joseph, complete with manger, hay, lowing cattle, bowing shepherds, and rejoicing angels who looked like they'd stopped mid-dance routine.

Right in the centre, surrounded by them all, was the spotlit, golden-haloed infant, lifting his hands beatifically

towards the peace of all mankind. It was rumoured he was carved from imported Venetian marble. This would turn out to be tragically false.

"Well, he's small enough to be portable is your Baby Jesus," H explained to Monica, who wasn't really listening.

"Easy to grab in one swoop," Gudmund said. "Easier than that rhinoceros, anyway. What the hell's up with that?"

"And then you bury him waist-deep in someone else's lawn," H continued, raising his hands like the Baby Jesus statue as if he were sticking halfway out of the ground.

"And voilà*," Gudmund finished, smiling. "A Christmas miracle."*

Monica rolled her eyes. "Can't we just do meth like everybody else?"

The whole car laughed. Yep, everyone was going to be a lot happier when she and H broke up and it could all be normal again.

"It's almost eleven," Monica said, reading her phone. "I thought you said–"

Before she could finish, they were plunged into darkness as the entire Fletcher display shut off in obedience to the county-ordered curfew the neighbours had gone to court to obtain. Even from where they were parked down the gravel road from the house, they could hear shouts of disappointment from the last of the chain of cars that had spent the evening driving leisurely by.

(Callen Fletcher, a tall, awkward boy, spent the time from Thanksgiving to New Year desperately trying not to be noticed in any way at school. He was usually unsuccessful.)

"Right then," Gudmund said, rubbing his hands together. "We just wait for the cars to clear, and then we make our move."

"This is theft, you know," Monica said. "They're bonkers over that display, and if Baby Jesus suddenly goes missing–"

"They'll go apeshit," H laughed.

"They'll press charges," Monica said.

"We're not going to take him far," Gudmund said, and then he added, mischievously, "I thought Summer Blaydon's house could do with a holy visitation."

Monica looked shocked for a moment, then seemingly couldn't stop herself from grinning back. "We'll have to be careful we don't interrupt some late night cheerleading practice or something."

"I thought you said it was theft," Gudmund said.

"I did," Monica shrugged, still grinning. "I didn't say I minded."

"Hey!" H snapped at her. "You gonna flirt with him all night or what?"

"Everyone shut up anyway," Gudmund said, turning back. "It's almost time."

There was a silence then, as they waited. The only sound was the squeak of H rubbing his sleeve on the window to clear it of condensation. Gudmund's leg bounced up and down in anticipation. The cars thinned out to nothing on the road, and still the silence ruled as they held their breaths without knowing they were doing it.

At last, the street was empty. The Fletchers' porch light clicked off.