



THE

RITUAL

ADAM NEVILL

THERE ARE SOME THINGS WORSE THAN DEATH . . .

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THE
RITUAL

MACMILLAN

For Anne and our cub,
for making me and my life less beastly.

The Gods are here, if they are anywhere at all in the world.

Algernon Blackwood
from *The Willow*

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I

BENEATH THE REMAINS

PROLOGUE

And on the second day things did not get better. The rain fell hard and cold, the white sun never broke through the low grey cloud, and they were lost. But it was the dead thing they found hanging from a tree that changed the trip beyond recognition. All four of them saw it at the same time.

Right after they clambered over another fallen tree to stumble into more of the scratching bracken they came across it. Breathing hard, damp with sweat and rain, speechless with fatigue, they came to halt. Bent from the weight of the rucksacks, bedding and wet tents, they stood under it. Looked up.

Above them, beyond the reach of a man standing upright, the dead thing sagged. Between the limbs of a spruce tree it was displayed, but in such a tattered state they could not tell what it had once been.

From the large rib cage drooped the gut, wet and blue in the light seeping through the canopy of leaves. The pelt was spread out across surrounding branches, holed but stretched taut in places. A ragged hem about a crumpled centre suggested the skin had been torn from the back in one quick ripping motion. And at first no head could be seen in the mess of blood and flesh. Until, in the violent red and yellow suddenness of hung meat, the bony grin of a jaw bone was picked out by them all. Just above it was an eye, big as a snooker ball but glazed and dull. Around it a long skull in profile.

Hutch turned to face the others. He always led the group as it staggered through the forest looking for the new trail. It was his idea to come through here. His face was pale and he did not speak. Somehow the shock of this sight made him look younger. Vulnerable, because this mutilated statement up above their heads was the only thing on the camping holiday he did not have an answer for. Didn't have a clue about.

Phil couldn't keep the tremor from his voice. 'What is it?'

No one answered him.

'Why?' Dom said. 'Why would you put it up there?'

The sound of these voices reassured three of them enough to start talking over each other. Sometimes answering questions. Sometimes just voicing new ideas. Only Luke said nothing. But as the others talked they moved away from the thing in the tree more quickly than they had approached it. And soon they were all silent again, but their feet made more noise than at any other time during the hike of the last two days. Because there was no smell coming from the corpse. It was a fresh kill.

ONE

FOUR HOURS EARLIER

At midday, Hutch stopped walking and turned to look back at the others; three colourful figures appearing insignificant upon the misty vastness of the rocky landscape they meandered across. They were spread apart along a plain of flat grey rock, smoothed like a footpath by the retreating ice a few million years before. Every set of shoulders on his companions was hunched, every head was bowed to observe the monotony of one foot before the other.

In hindsight, only he and Luke were fit enough for the three-day hike. Phil and Dom were carrying too much weight and the blisters on the heels of Phil's feet were now raw meat. Of more concern, Dom had twisted his knee on the first day in a vast boulder field, and after walking on it for a day and a half he now limped and winced with every step.

Through their discomforts Dom and Phil were missing everything of interest: the sudden strip of marshes, the faces in the rock formations, the perfect lakes, the awesome Måskoskårså valley groove into the earth during the Ice Age, the golden eagle circling above it, and the views of a landscape it was impossible to believe existed in Europe. Even in the rain and bad light the country could be astonishing. But by the afternoon of the very first day, Dom and Phil had their heads down and eyes half closed.

'Take a load off, guys.' Hutch called back to the other three. Luke looked up and Hutch beckoned with his head for Luke to catch up to him.

Hutch eased his pack off his back, sat down, and pulled the map from the side pocket of his rucksack. His back was aching from walking so slowly at the pace set by Dom and Phil. He could feel his irritation evolving into anger, manifesting as a tightening across his chest; it seemed to bustle behind his teeth too, as if his jaws were clamping down on a long hot monologue of curses he wished to rain down upon the two men who were turning this trip into what now felt like a death march.

'What's up?' Luke asked, squinting through the fine drizzle that made his square features shiny. The rain and his sweat created a froth around his unshaven mouth and upon his blond eyebrows.

'Judgement call. Change of plan.'

Squatting beside him, Luke offered Hutch a cigarette. Then lit his own with hands red as raw beef.

'Cheers, buddy.' Hutch spread the map across his thighs. He issued a long sigh that came from a deep place and hissed around the cigarette filter clamped between his teeth. 'This ain't working.'

'This is my surprised face,' Luke said, deadpan. Then turned his head and spat. 'Ten bloody miles a day. That was all we asked of them. I know there's been some rough ground, but they were done for day one.'

'Agreed. So we need a new route. Got to cut this short now or we'll end up carrying them. One each.'

'Fuck's sake.'

Hutch rolled his eyes in conspiratorial agreement, but realized in this moment of weakness, he was probably only encouraging a similar tirade he'd sensed rising in Luke since they met at his flat five days ago. Luke just wasn't clicking with Dom and Phil at all, and the physical hardship and terrible weather had added a whole new element of corrosive tension and sniping into the mix. Something Hutch had been doing his best to limit by remaining enthusiastic, patient, and with his sporadic optimistic outbursts about the weather changing. He could not take sides; could not allow division. This was no longer a matter of salvaging a reunion holiday, but one of safety.

Luke's mouth went all tight and his eyes narrowed. 'New shoes. Wrong socks. Phil's even wearing jeans today. What did you tell him? Jesus Christ Almighty!'

'Ssh. I know, I know. But breaking their balls is only going to make things worse at this moment in time. Much worse. So we need to put the safety catch back on. Me included. OK?'

'Understood.'

'Anyway, I reckon I got it figured out.'

Luke swatted the khaki hood off his head; lowered his face to the map. 'Show me.'

Hutch pressed a finger to an approximation of where he believed them to now be floundering, and behind schedule, on the map. 'Another afternoon and a full day in the rain up here is going to ruin things beyond repair. So forget Porjus. We're just not going to make it. But if we drop south east. Here. Through this forest, which you can just see in the distance. See it?' Luke nodded at where Hutch was pointing; at a dark spiky strip of distant woodland, half concealed by drifting white vapours. 'If we slip through the section where it's narrow, here, we should come out near the Stora Luleälven River by early evening, maybe earlier. We can follow a trail along it eastwards. And downriver there a couple of tourist huts at Skaite. Bit of luck and we'll be at the river by nightfall. If we shift it. We can walk downriver to Skaite tonight. Or, worse-case scenario, we camp by the river and hit the huts tomorrow morning. We can put our feet up for a day at Skaite and demolish Dom's Jack Daniel's before an open fire. Smoke some cigarettes. Then I'll look at arranging some transport back to Gällivare the day after. And in the forest this afternoon we'll be less exposed to the rain, which is showing no signs of stopping.' Hutch looked at the sky, squinted, then turned his gaze upon Dom and Phil; the twin huddled lumps, coated in Gore-Tex, seated and silent, just out of earshot. 'Not much walking left for this pair. So I'm afraid, buddy, that the expedition is over today, more or less.'

Luke gritted his teeth. His whole face tensed hard. He dropped his head when he realized Hutch was studying him.

Hutch was shocked at how much anger Luke had in him these days. Their regular phone calls, that Luke tended to initiate, often deteriorated into rants. It was like his friend could no longer internalize his rage and deal with it. 'Hey, anger management.'

Luke looked startled. Hutch winked at him. 'Can I ask a huge favour?'

Luke nodded, but looked wary.

'Like I said, cut the Slim Fast Massive some slack.'

'I will.'

'I know there's some attitude there. Especially Dom. But they're both feeling the strain right now. Not just this. Other shit too.'

'Like what? They never said anything to me.'

Hutch shrugged; could see how disappointed Luke was to be in the dark about Dom and Phil's domestic situations. 'Well . . . kids and stuff. You know Dom's youngest lad has a few problems. And Phil's wife is a permanent state of ball-ache for the guy. There's some trouble at both mills, if you follow. So go easy, is all I'm saying.'

'Sure. No worries.'

'On the bright side,' Hutch said, trying to change the conversation, 'we cut this crap in half today then we get more time in Stockholm before we head back. You love that town.'

'I guess,' Luke said.

'But?'

Luke shrugged. Blew smoke out through his nose. 'At least here, we are on a trail we can see on the map. The forest is new ground. It's off piste, mate. There are no trails marked.'

'It'll be a treat. Trust me. Wait until you get inside. It's National Park. Completely untampered with. Virgin forest.'

Luke's index finger tapped the map. 'Maybe . . . but you don't know what the ground is like in there. At least this rock is flat. There's marshes in there, H. Look. Here. And here.'

'We won't go near them. We'll just weave through the thinnest band of the trees, here, for a couple of hours, and *voilà* . . . pop out the other side.'

Luke raised his eyebrows. 'You sure? No one will know we're down there.'

'Makes no difference. The Environment office was closed when we left, and I never called ahead to the Porjus branch. It'll be fine though. That's only a precaution for winter. It's hardly even autumn. There won't be any snow or ice. We might even see some wildlife in there. And the fat men couldn't walk on sponge for another two days, let alone rock. This short cut will halve the distance. We're still looking down the barrel at walking through the second half of today. And we'd need another whole day and evening to reach Porjus tomorrow. Look at them. They're done, mate.'

Luke nodded, exhaled long twin plumes of smoke down his nostrils. 'You're the boss.'

TWO

FOUR HOURS, TWENTY MINUTES LATER

Dead wood snapped under their soles and broken pieces were kicked away. Branches forced aside snapped back into those walking behind. Phil fell and crashed into the nettles, but stood up without a murmur and jogged to catch up with the others who were almost running by this time. Their heads were down and their shoulders were stooped. Twigs whipped faces and laces were pulled undone, but they kept going. Forward, until Hutch stopped and sighed and put his hands on his knees in a tiny clearing. A brown place where the dead wood and leaf mould was shallow and the thorny vines no longer ripped into socks or left burrs, impossibly, inside shirts and trousers.

Luke spoke for the first time since they'd stumbled across the dead animal. He was breathless but still managed to get a cigarette into his mouth. Only he couldn't light it. Four attempts he made with his Zippo until he was blowing smoke out of his nose. 'Hunter I reckon.'

'You can't hunt here,' Hutch said.

'Farmer then.'

'But why put it up there?' Dom asked again.

Hutch took his pack off. 'Who knows. There's nothing cultivated in the whole park. It's wilderness. That's the whole point of it. I could use a smoke.'

Luke wiped at his eyes. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Bits of powdery bark kept getting under his eyelids. 'A wolf killed it. It was an elk, or deer. And . . . something put it in the tree.' He threw the packet of Camel cigarettes at Hutch.

Hutch picked the cigarette packet from the ground.

Phil frowned, stared at his feet. 'A forest has wardens. Rangers. Would they . . .'

Hutch shrugged, lit up. 'I wouldn't be surprised if we were the first people to walk through this bit. Seriously. Think of the size of the county. Twenty-seven thousand square kilometres. Most of it untouched. We're at least five kilometres from the last trail, and that's hardly ever used.'

Luke exhaled. He tried again. 'A bear. Maybe a bear put it up there. To stop things eating it. You know, on the ground.'

Hutch looked at the end of his cigarette, frowned. 'Maybe. Are they that big in Sweden?'

Dom and Phil sat down. Phil rolled a sleeve up a chubby white forearm to his elbow. 'I'm scratched to buggery.'

Dom's face was white. Even his lips. 'Hutch! I'll ram that map up your useless Yorkshire arse.' Phil often spoke to Hutch like this. Luke was always surprised at the outbursts, at the violence of the language. But there was no genuine hate in these exchanges, just familiarity. It meant Dom and Hutch were closer these days than he and Hutch. And he'd always considered Hutch to be his best friend. It made him envious because Dom and Hutch were better friends. They'd all known each other for fifteen years, but Dom and Hutch were just as close as they had been back at university. They even shared a tent. Both Luke and Phil felt short-changed by the arrangement; Luke could tell Phil felt the same way, even though it would be impossible for them to admit it without offending each other.

Dom pulled a boot off. 'Some holiday, you tosser. We're lost. You haven't got a clue where we are, have you, you mincing fruit?'

'Dom, cool your boots. Just about a click that way' – Hutch pointed in the direction they had been scrambling towards – 'you'll be eating hot beans and sausage beside a river. There's a quartet of Swedish beauties pitching their tent right about now, and getting the camp fire ready. Relax.'

Phil laughed. Luke smiled. Dom felt obliged to join in, but in seconds his laughter was genuine. ~~And then they were all laughing. At themselves, at their fear, at the thing up in the tree.~~ Now they were away from it laughter was good. It felt necessary.

THREE

They never found the river, and the mouth-watering dream of Swedish girls and hot beans with sausage dimmed like the September light, and then vanished along with any expectation of finding the end of the forest that day.

While the other three squatted in silence – Luke sitting apart from Dom and Phil, who wolfed energy bars – Hutch glared at the map again, for what must have been the fifth time in an hour. With a dirty finger, he traced the intended short cut between the Sörstubba trail they had abandoned at midday and the river trail. He swallowed again at the frisson of panic that had appeared in his throat as the light started to dim.

In the morning he had known exactly where they were on the map, where they were in the Gällivare municipality, where they were in Norrbotten County, and where they were in Sweden. By late afternoon, with the glimpses of sky through the treetops changing from a thin grey to a thicker grey, he was no longer certain where they were in the forest that intersected the two trails. And he never anticipated so much broken ground or the impenetrable thickets when he chose this route.

Which wasn't making any sense at all. They were no longer even following an approximation of a direct course; the sense of moving in the right direction stopped for him over two hours before. The forest was leading them. They needed to move south west, but once they were four kilometres deep it was as if they were being pulled due west, and sometimes even northwards again. They could only move where the foliage was thin, or where spaces occurred naturally between the ancient trees, so they were never moving in the right direction for very long. He should have compensated for that. *Shit.*

He glanced over his shoulder at the others. Maybe it was time for another judgement call: to go back the way they had come in. But if he could even find the haphazard route now, it would be dark by the time they returned to the place from where they had started at midday. And it would mean going past that tree again, with the animal hanging from it. He could not see the idea going over well with Dom and Phil. Luke would be cool with it. The forest made him uneasy too; he could tell. Luke's lips moved as he talked to himself; always a sign. And since they had been so deep among the trees he'd been smoking constantly; another bad sign.

At least the exertion was limiting the speculation on how the corpse came to be hanging from the tree. Hutch had never seen, read, or heard of anything like it; not in twenty years engaged in outdoor pursuits. It had confounded Luke too; he could tell his friend was still struggling with the mystery in silence. And also thinking exactly what he was thinking: *what the hell could do that to a large animal*. In his mind Hutch ran through images of bears, lynx, wolverine, wolves. No fits, but it was one of those. Had to be. Maybe even a man. Which seemed even more disturbing than an animal performing such a slaughter. But whatever had done that much damage to a body, wasn't far away.

'On your feet, men.'

Luke tossed his butt and stood up.

'Piss off,' Dom said.

'Here, here,' Phil added.

Dom looked up at Hutch. The lines at the side of Dom's mouth cut deep furrows through the filth on his face; his eyes were full of pain. 'I'm waiting for the stretcher, H. I can hardly bend my leg. I'm not joking. It's gone all stiff.'

'It's not far now, mate,' Hutch said. 'River's got to be close.'

FOUR

Four kilometres due east from the thing in the tree, they found a house.

But this was only after another four kilometres of wading through ivy, nettles, broken branches, oceans of wet leaves, and the impenetrable naked spikes formed by the limbs of smaller trees. Like everywhere else, the seasons were confused. Autumn had come late after the wettest summer since records began in Sweden and the mighty forest was only now beginning to shuck its dead parts to the ground with fury. And as they had all remarked, it was so 'bloody dark'. The thick ceiling of the trees let little daylight fall below to the tangled floor. To Hutch, the forest canopy left an incremental impression of going deeper inside something that narrowed around them; while looking for the light and space of an open sky they were actually descending into an environment that was only getting darker and more disorientating, step by step.

During the late afternoon and into the early evening, when they were too tired to do anything but stagger about and swear at the things that poked and scratched their faces, the forest had become so dense it was impossible to move in any single direction for more than a few metres. So they had moved backwards and forwards, to circle the larger obstacles, like the giant prehistoric trunks that had crashed down years before and been consumed by slippery lichen; and they had zigzagged to all points of the compass to avoid the endless wooden spears of the branches, and the snares of the small roots and thorny bushes, that now filled every space between the trees. The upper branches ratcheted up their misery by funnelling down upon them the deafening fall of rain in the world above, creating an incessant barrage of cold droplets the size of marbles.

But just before seven they suddenly fell across something they were sure they would never see again. A trail. Narrow, but wide enough for them to walk upright in single file, without lurching about or being tugged backwards by a sleeping roll or backpack snagged on a branch.

By this time Hutch knew that none of them even cared where the trail led, and they would have followed it north, just for the luxury of being able to walk upright and in a straight line. Even though the trail would lead them either due east or even further out west, instead of southwards, the forest had cut them their first break. He could sort out exactly where they were later and chose the eastern direction to try and compensate for the north-westward course the forest had thus far enforced. Someone had been here before them and the path suggested it went somewhere worth going. Somewhere out of this dark and choking nowhere.

It led to a house.

Their packs were soaked. Rivulets of water ran from their coats and soaked the thighs of their trousers, and Phil's jeans were sodden and black; the jeans Hutch told him in Kiruna not to take in case it rained. From the cuffs of their sleeves the rain poured onto their scratched and red hands. And it was impossible to tell if the rain had saturated and then seeped into the fleeces and clothes they wore underneath their Gore-Tex coats, or if the moisture was sweat soaking outwards from their hot skin. They were dirty and dripping and exhausted and no one had the nerve to ask Hutch out loud where they could pitch a tent in the forest. But that was what they had all been thinking; he knew it. On either side of the trail, the undergrowth was as high as a man's waist. And it was during that time when the fear in Hutch's own belly began to turn into a shivery panic reminding him of childhood, and when the realization of the fact that he had made a terrible misjudgement and was now endangering the lives of his three friends hit him, that they found the house.

A dark and sunken building that slouched at the rear of an overgrown paddock. The ground was

covered to the height of their knees with nettles and sopping weeds. A wall of the impenetrable forest they were lost inside bordered the grounds.

‘It’s empty. Let’s get in there,’ Phil said, his voice wheezy with asthma.

FIVE

‘We can’t just break in,’ Luke said.

Phil bumped Luke’s shoulder as he walked past. ‘You can have the tent to yourself, mate. I’m spending the night in there.’

But Phil never took more than a few steps through the paddock. Whatever instinct made the other three hesitant caught up with Phil and he eventually stopped with a sigh.

They had seen hundreds of these *Stugas* on the train journey north from Mora to Gällivare, and then again around Jokkmokk. Outside of the cities and towns of northern Sweden there were tens of thousands of these simple wooden houses; the original homes of those who lived in the countryside before the migration to the cities over the last century. Luke knew they were now used for recreation during the long summer months by Swedish families when they renewed their bond with the land. Second homes. A national tradition; the *fritidshus*. But not this one.

It lacked the bright red, yellow, white or pastel walls they were accustomed to seeing on these fairy-tale houses. There was no neat white fence or lawn mowed flat as a bowling green. Nothing cut or quaint or homely about it. No sharp right angles or neat windows about its two storeys. Where there should have been symmetry it sagged. Tiles had detached and slid away. The bulging sides were blackened as if there had once been a fire and the place had not seen any attention since. Boards sprung loose near the foundations. The windows were still shuttered fast against winters that had come and gone. Nothing about it seemed to catch or reflect the watery light that fell into the clearing, and it suggested to Luke that the interior would be just as wet and cold as the darkening wood they were lost inside.

‘What now, Hutch?’ Within the confines of his glistening orange hood, Dom’s round face was tight with irritation, but his eyes flicked about. ‘Any more bright ideas?’

Hutch’s eyes narrowed; they were pale green with long inky lashes and almost too pretty for a man. He took a deep breath, but didn’t look at Dom. He spoke as if he hadn’t heard his friend. ‘It’s got a chimney. Looks solid enough. We can get a fire going. We’ll be as warm as toast in no time.’ Hutch walked to the small porch, built around a door so black it lacked all definition within the front of the house.

‘Hutch. I don’t know. Better not,’ Luke said. This wasn’t right. Neither the house nor breaking in it. ‘Let’s get moving. It won’t be dark until eight. We’ve got another hour and could be out of the forest by then.’

Around Luke the tension from Dom and Phil gathered until it felt like it was squeezing him to a standstill. Phil turned his bulk quickly with a rustle of wet blue Gore-Tex. His doughy face was dark red. ‘What’s wrong with you, Luke? You want to go back into that? Don’t be a stupid arse.’

Dom joined in. As he spoke a drop of spit hit Luke’s cheek. ‘I can’t walk any more. It’s all right for you, your knee isn’t the size of a rugby ball. You’re as bad as the Yorkshire twat who got us into this.’

Luke went dizzy and hot. They would be forced to stay here for a night because Phil was so fat his feet were ruined merely by walking outdoors. His feet were ruined the first morning. That’s when he started bitching about them. Even in London he drove everywhere. He’d lived there fifteen years and never used the Underground once. How was that possible? Dom was no better. He looked about fifty these days, not thirty-four. And every time he swore, it made Luke grind his teeth. Dom was a marketing director for a big bank with a mouth like a hooligan; what had gone wrong? He used to be

superb fast bowler who came close to county cricket, a guy who travelled across South America, and a friend you could stay up with all night, smoking joints. Now he was one of these married men with children, and a forty-six-inch waist, dressed from head to toe in Officers Club casuals, who tutted and sniggered and dismissed him whenever he mentioned some new girl he'd been seeing, or a crazy bar he'd visited back in London.

He recalled his shock when he'd struggled to continue a conversation with either Dom or Phil on the first day of the reunion, when they all met in London the night before the flight. They had laughed at his shared flat in Finsbury Park before they and Hutch fell to the usual banter, as if the three of them had been seeing each other every week for the last fifteen years. Perhaps they had. Right from the start he'd felt left out. A lump formed in his throat.

Hutch must have seen his face. 'Chieftain,' he said, and winked at Luke, conspiratorially, like a grown-up coming to the rescue of a boy being picked on in a playground. It just made Luke's face flush hotter, but his anger immediately switched to himself and against his own poisonous thoughts. Hutch followed the wink with a warm smile. 'I don't think we have much choice, buddy. We have to get dry. We'll never do it in a tent. We've been pissed on all day.'

'Knock knock, we're coming in,' Phil called out and joined Hutch before the front door with more purpose than he'd shown all day while floundering and wheezing in the undergrowth. Suddenly, Luke couldn't stop himself glaring, all over again, at Phil's rounded shoulders and pointy head in the blue hood. He actually hated the sight of him right now, so he made a decision: once he was back in London, he'd even avoid their one drink a year.

'You can stay outside with the wolf that gave that moose a good seeing-to,' Dom said with a half-smile on his face.

Luke refused to meet Dom's eye, but found his voice; a tight, aggressive, sarcastic thing that slightly shocked him when he heard it come out of his own mouth. But he didn't care what he said, just wanted the others to know how he was feeling. 'Or we could feed you and your useless knee to him, and while he's busy stoving you in, we'll head to Skaite.'

Dom paused as he walked after Hutch and Phil. Disappointment and surprise softened his features for a moment before anger tightened them. 'Spoken with all the petulance of arrested development. Stay outside you silly arse and you can freeze to death. Who's going to miss you but some tart. This is for bloody real, if you hadn't noticed. I'd like to get home in one piece. People depend on me back there.'

Hutch snapped away from the door again, realizing the irritation behind him had turned to provocation. 'Time gentlemen, please. If you don't cool it, I'll fetch me a long piece of green cedar and stripe your arses.'

Phil burst into his dirty laugh that sounded unpleasant near the house, but didn't bother to turn around. He banged and pushed at the door.

Too angry to move or breathe, Luke stared ahead, meeting no one's eye. As if the exchange had meant nothing to him, Dom followed Hutch back to the house. He even laughed. 'You'd enjoy that. Beating the buttocks of a fine young man in the woods.'

'I would. And I wouldn't check my swing either. You'd get it backhand.'

'There's no lock. But it's stuck,' Phil said.

Hutch removed his pack. 'Not for long. Step aside.'

Luke took the cigarette packet from the side pocket of his wet combat trousers. His hands were shaking. This was not the time to be analysing the situation, but he couldn't help it. Could not stop himself thinking about the four of them. Because the trip had been such a disappointment. Not because of the weather; he'd have come out here even if he had known it would rain every day. He had been so excited about hanging out with them all again and looked forward to it for the six months following

Hutch's wedding, when the idea was first mooted. But the trip had been so wretched because he recognized so little of the others now. Which made him wonder if he had ever really known them at all. Fifteen years was a long time, but part of him had still clung to the notion that they were his best friends.

But he was truly on his own out here. They had nothing in common any more.

SIX

Once the door was open, Dom, Phil and Hutch rooted through their packs for torches. Nothing could be seen through the space Hutch had created by directing the stamping sole of his boot around the iron door handle.

With each bang of Hutch's foot on the shuddering wood, Luke had winced. The idea of it opening made him nervous. Reluctance to join the others at the door was worsened by his sulking after the confrontation with Dom, which now made him feel foolish, again. But he was also ashamed by this vandalism. He remained in the paddock in the rain while the others crowded around the door egging each other on.

Like the other three, he was dead on his feet. And wet and hungry and thoroughly miserable. He just wanted it all to end – the tortuous walking, the rain, the dark unpleasant forest – but they should not be reduced to this: breaking into private property. A place that just wasn't right. And had they really thought it through? This was a place no more than a few miles from the carcass in the tree. Something they could make no sense of, but should get as far away from as possible before nightfall.

Everyone's judgement was impaired. Nothing said or done now could be trusted. But somehow it wouldn't be forgotten or forgiven.

Slowly, Luke walked towards the black house. To the sound of their voices. The others were inside now, all talking at the same time. Someone was laughing. Phil. Luke threw his cigarette into the weeds and considered joining them and forcing himself back into the camaraderie.

A crash erupted behind him. A tremendous splintering of wood. From out of the trees.

He turned around and stared at the wall of dark wood they had just walked out of. Beside the silvery rain falling past the trees and the chaos of bracken between the thick trunks, nothing moved. But the terrific sound of strong fresh wood being snapped still rang through his ears. A trace of an echo, like the hollow sound made by a stone bouncing off tree trunks, seemed to pass away, deep into the forest.

What could possibly have broken a tree like that? Somewhere inside there, not too far back, he could almost see the pale sappy fibres and spikes breaking from the bark of a thick limb. Ripped from a blackened trunk like an arm from a torso.

Swallowing, and suddenly feeling weaker and more insignificant than he could ever remember, Luke couldn't move. Pulse up between his ears, he stood still, disorientated with fear, like he was waiting for something to smash out of the wood and rush towards him. He briefly imagined a terrific rage and strength, a terrible intent, out there. Imagined it until he almost accepted it.

Thunder rolled across the sky, over the treetops and into the wet murk above the house. The sound of the rain against the wood changed from a pattering to a sky-fall of stones.

'Buddy!' It was Hutch. 'Get in here. You have to see this.'

Luke snapped out of his trance. Wondered at himself. Exhaustion overwhelmed you. Played tricks with your mind. The dark trees they had been amongst all afternoon and evening had left a stain inside him; a taint upon every thought and feeling if he allowed his mind to drift.

He needed to keep active. Focused. He moved to the door. Just inside the frame he could see Hutch's pale face peering out. He'd taken his hat off.

'Did you hear that?'

Hutch looked at the sky. 'I know. Thunder and a cloud burst. We couldn't have found this place any sooner. I think a storm would've finished off the fatties. We'd have been forced to lose them.'

‘Piss off, Yorkshire!’ Dom called from inside the dark hovel.

~~Despite his unease, Luke couldn’t stop the nervous giggle that came down his nose. Stupidly, he was smiling too. Hutch turned around to go back inside the house, where torch beams flashed across indistinct walls.~~

‘No. Not that. The trees. In the trees. Did you not hear it?’

But Hutch wasn’t listening. He was back inside with the other two. ‘What you got there, Domja?’

Luke heard Dom say, ‘More of that evil Christian shit.’ He took one look back at the woods then passed through the doorway to join the others.

SEVEN

It was impossible to tell how long the place had been uninhabited. Or what kind of people once lived there.

Uncovered by yellow torchlight, that struggled to reach far into the cramped hovel, the first things Luke noticed were the skulls. And then the crucifixes.

From small birds to what could have been squirrels and stoats, small mottled heads had been fixed with rusted nails to the timber walls of the large room on the ground floor. Larger skulls of lynx and deer and elk had mostly fallen from the walls and cracked against the floorboards. One or two still grinned from near the low ceiling, where their porous bones managed to hang on.

Between the skulls still mounted upon the walls were at least a dozen crosses. By the look of them, though no one looked for too long, they had been handcrafted from bundles of twigs tied with twine, and were mostly tilting now, or even hanging upside down. From the ceiling beams that brushed the tops of their uncovered heads, two empty and corroded oil lamps creaked irritably on their hooks if touched.

Under the floor, mice scampered. In this place they sounded angry at being disturbed, though something far too confident and unafraid was also suggested in their rustlings.

Hutch came back from an annex joined to the main room. 'Tools and stuff. A nasty-looking scythe in there. I'd hazard a guess this place could be a hundred years old.' He went to the little iron stove in the hearth. He patted his dirty hands around its round belly. 'Bugger's rusted shut, but it feels dry-ish.'

Phil was testing the sawbuck table, which creaked under the pressure of his two hands pressing down. Dom had claimed the one seat – a crudely fashioned wooden stool at the head of the table – and was wincing as he tried to remove his boots. 'Hutch. Get your mittens on these. I can't undo the laces. I'm actually scared to see what's inside. And my knee feels like a water-skin full of nails. I want the magic spray you had this morning. Then you can get the fire going.'

From where he was crouching, Hutch grimaced at Dom over his shoulder. 'I'm seriously thinking of leaving you here in the morning.'

Around them the house creaked and shifted like a wooden ship trapped in the ice. 'Is this even safe?' Phil asked.

Hutch swore at the stove. And then, without moving his head, he said to Phil, 'I wouldn't put it to the test.'

Luke flashed his torch over the walls and ceiling again. He was the tallest of the four and as he warned himself to watch the low beams, he cracked the side of his head against one of the iron lamps.

Phil, Dom and Hutch laughed. 'You all right, mate?' Hutch then asked as an afterthought. 'That sounded nasty.'

'Fine.' Luke shone his torch at the narrow staircase that led to the second storey. 'Anyone been up there yet?'

'With this knee,' Dom said, 'I'm not moving again until Hutch fetches help and the Swedish air force lands a helicopter in the garden. Ain't that right, you hopeless Yorkshire arse? And you can use that map to get the fire going for all the use it's been.'

At this, they all laughed. Even Luke who couldn't help himself, or stop himself from warming to Dom all over again. He was being too sensitive. It was the dreadful forest and the desperate walking. His thighs still seemed to be moving as if they continued to clamber up and down rocky slopes and stretch over deadwood. They were just tired. That was all. 'I don't want to sound like a fool—'

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