



Human

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HUMAN

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CHAPTER 1 – THE NEST, MID SEPTEMBER

I woke this morning and didn't feel human.

It wasn't that a door to my humanity closed suddenly but more like the rusted hinges that had gradually been grinding inward for most of my life just scraped shut. And right now, I can't reopen that door. Then again, I don't want to.

I felt it happen the moment I realised Amber was dead. I'd been watching her for hours but thought she was sleeping. She was, but not in the way I thought. But I'll talk about her later as I want you to know a little more about me. I'll give you my version and leave you to draw your conclusions on whether I'm deranged or not. I've just had a lot of knocks, that's all, but rather than fight, I've retreated, blaming, quite rightly in my opinion, you for the damage you've inflicted on me. And you made me think...

I began to wonder what kind of life I lived in this world. Even to this day I'm wondering about it, but it doesn't matter how much I think about it. I don't believe I'll find a worthwhile world because I don't know life as it is, or for what it is. They say this is a wonderful world to live in, but I don't believe I've ever lived in a wonderful world.

My name's Nigel Noon. I'm in my late forties, thin, greying, balding, aware of my general decay, but nonetheless doing nothing to avert it. I live on my own, as if you hadn't guessed, in a house that's way too big. I only use one room now, but that's all I need for what I do. And what I do is a secret.

My birth was something of an anticlimax - it would have been nice for my father to have had one at the point of my (mis)conception. I was born on a pivotal day in the sixties. It was the day *after* man landed on the moon, and I sense the world groaned when I finally emerged. The world was bored that day and I dare say that apathy passed into me...

I like “living” in the 21st century. You see, I can do things without having to talk to anyone. But I hate it when people want to talk to me. They don’t really, it’s just that a computer selects my phone number, dials it, then tells “them” who I am the moment I’m fool enough to answer it. I hate “them” and don’t mind telling them how I feel. How dare they invade my space, waste my time, whisper nonsense to me! I’ll never see them or hear from them again so they don’t matter. No-one matters, except me and Amber.

I’m rich but before we get onto a philosophical debate, it’s only in monetary terms. I inherited this wealth because people who I was close to died. And I suppose that was the day the door began to close. Once I had money and property I became mistrustful. I feared others may hatch plots against me. That’s why I don’t have friends. That’s why I live a long way from people. In fact, I’ve almost forgotten what I used to be like as it’s a decade since I was left alone, and that was the last day I ventured out of my compound.

It’s a large house, too big, as I said, and I don’t have the time or skills to maintain it and I don’t want to hire people in because I don’t trust them. I’d hoped that my quietness meant the neighbours would never bother me. Sadly, it had the opposite effect. Their offspring threw stones at the windows, ransacked my garden, sprayed my walls with graffiti, burned effigies of me on the road outside my house, and generally made life excruciating.

I used to like cooking and would spend lots of time in the kitchen preparing meals. I felt odd even then but at least I could look out of the window onto the town and sense hope. Guess it was my subconscious trying to keep me from the mire.

‘Little bastards!’ I cried as a stone flew through the kitchen window, striking me a glancing blow. Panicking, I hid under the table but no matter how much I concentrated or how tightly I clamped my hands over my ears, I still heard their taunts. And the taunts of the youngest ones were the most hurtful and vicious, for they knew no fear, no law threatened them. In the past I’d run at them like a wild animal, threatening to capture them in a net and

saying that once I'd dragged them into the house I'd hang them up like carcasses. I only wanted them to go away. They'd terrorised me, but when I retaliated, they just complained to their gutless parents. Predictably, they believed their devilish children and then, as befits a rotten system, would call the police who'd want to talk to me and tell me I'd been horrid. They weren't interested in *my* story. So when inevitably those sour and nasty children called again I just retreated to the bowels of a place I used to call home. It was *my* home! Why should some unruly spawn tell me what I should do or where I should live?

It was my mother who christened our house The Nest, for it was a loving home and insular in an innocent way. But since then it had become like a ruined Rhine castle, full of shadowy, cobwebbed steps, sitting atop a desolate mountain and below which was a haunted wood. And it was in this place I feared that the dark elements of strength, solitude, grotesqueness and ignorance might combine to form the perfection of the hideous.

I knew I was a recluse but the children didn't have to keep reminding me of that or make up stories that the house was haunted and that I was mad. Now I wanted to go way further, telling them I robbed fresh graves, murdered, decapitated, and eviscerated when the moon was full. I wanted to reveal that I capered around my lonely house be-decked in corpse hair, wearing castor-oil-treated human skin masks made from the faces of my victims and a vest of female breasts and puttees of skin stripped from their legs. I stopped short. Nevertheless, such idle talk intrigued me, not only because I'd dreamt it up but because the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to do it, the more I wanted to gaze at human entrails stowed in my refrigerator.

With Amber gone, I didn't know what to do. She gave me stability, even though I'd never met her. My mother told me that we die when we run out of reasons to live. Tomorrow, and the plans we have, keep us alive. Amber showed me that tomorrow existed but now I can't see it.

Then I remembered something else my mother said. I had a nightmare once. I woke up screaming and she came running to my bed. I told her what I'd seen and she listened to me but when I was done she gave me a warning and told me *never* to bring the things I dreamt about into reality. "The real chamber of horrors is in the grey, twisting, pulsating, blood-flecked core of the human mind," she told me. "Never unlock that chamber." Sadly, I did.

CHAPTER 2 – THE NEST, MID SEPTEMBER

Amber and me go right back to the start of it all, I suppose. She was the first and would always remain special to me, if only she knew it. I hated her dating other men. She picked some strange-looking ones. I was never quite sure how old she was but I guess in her early thirties and already contemplating a nip and tuck for I'd been with her to the clinics, seen the estimates, and they were more frightening than the procedure. I'm digressing. Anyway, what day is it? "Today!" my mother would shout. "When can it be tomorrow?" I used to groan. "Never," she said, and I didn't question her. In fact, I never questioned any choices she made. "Nigel, stop wishing your life away," she'd say as my brother and I sat at the dinner table. "Killing time is a horrible desire to have at your age. I must work you harder," she'd say. I smiled at her for she knew best, but I wasn't listening. That was my secret in never questioning anything she said, I didn't listen, deep down, I mean. On the surface, one is a robot, giving out and taking orders, but the true freaks are the ones that remain as robots even in their hearts. So, when Amber died, that's why it took such a long time for me to twig what had happened.

I was bored that day. I'd been calculating that at my present rate of expenditure I'd be 150-years-old when the money ran out. It wasn't mine really, it was my mother's. It just so happened I had to lose her, and my brother, to become rich. It wasn't my choice but I'm stuck with it now. As I don't fancy getting much past fifty, I guess I'll have to spend quicker or burn it. But if I can't and the pain of living gets too much, I've an idea as to how it'll end. I came across some explosives, but won't tell you how. Now the house is rigged up to blow and I've got the detonator somewhere but I can't lay a hand on it at the moment. Don't think it's down the back of the sofa like so many remote controls but I dare say I won't have time to change

channel if I sit on it. I've also got a shiny gun but I'll probably chicken out of pulling the trigger, or miss, knowing my luck. Maybe I should invite everyone in the street over for a party, bundle them inside, pocket my rediscovered detonator then head far away before pressing the switch?

Anyway, I'm the type who likes routine. Nevertheless, it does mess me up. You see, you never get a second opinion when you're on your own. I've simplified my days over the years. Wake at seven then logon to the Net and stay there until my eyes are burning. Frequently, I forget to wash or eat. But who cares? The Net is where the action is, always has been.

But when Amber was murdered, everything changed. Even I began to change. And when my humanity emerged, like green grass as the blanketing frost is burnt off by the morning sun, I felt sick to my stomach. I was smart enough to realise that this was normal but couldn't stop panicking. I wanted the sensation to pass like a cloud or be able to turn it off like a tap, but I couldn't. Only when I felt like this did I realise how little emotion had been in my life since the others left me. I was sterile, lonely, hardened, or so I believed. In fact, rather than mature I'd grown more childlike. Amber's death had put the previous decade into such sharp relief.

She'd been out with some black geezer the night before, and I'd seen it all. He'd been on top, behind and below her, and she'd taken him in her mouth until he'd shuddered in violent orgasm. Amber plainly enjoyed his company so I figured she'd be seeing him again that night. In that case I'd move on to someone else.

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Until someone close to you dies, you're never quite sure what death is. Clearly, it's the opposite of birth but the body doesn't disappear, immediately anyway, into some cavity. It stays there, whole, yet clearly dead. You talk to the body, arrange it into some pose that appropriates to that of a living person, but you know it is

dead. I remember when my mother died. She was sitting in her chair, gently rocking, while I watched TV with the sound turned down. Then the rocking stopped. I looked across at her, called her name, but she didn't answer. "You're dead, aren't you?" I kept saying, gazing at the space between her head and the cracked ceiling. I was looking for a shadow floating upwards or maybe dangling there, a stain that somehow was her soul. I jumped up, ran around her chair, throwing my arms at the air but could feel nothing.

I'd only just sat down again when I saw a shadow looking down at me. It was me! I blinked yet when I reopened my eyes, the stain had gone. So too had my humanity and innocence.

I stayed with her all night. My brother and I made sweet tea which we ended up drinking but we did manage to open her mouth a little and pour some liquid inside, hoping she'd cough right back into life. Looking back, we shouldn't have kept her body in the chair for seven days. She'd begun to smell, curl over like a stale sandwich, and her limbs were like frozen hunks of bruised meat. If we'd have got her out, accepted she'd gone sooner, and then held each other to dispel our grief I wouldn't have ended up like this.

— ♦ —

Having got bored with my other friends, I focussed on Amber again. I just thought she was sleeping but the clock in her bedroom told it was almost midday.

"Maybe it's reading wrong?" I'd pondered for she was always punctual.

Its true Amber was a party girl, but alcohol gave her fitful dreams and she'd be moving by now, no matter how bad the hangover. I was worried. Fuck, I was worried for *her*! I didn't want to look but I couldn't stop myself.

"How long is it since I've been worried about anyone else?"

I had a good memory, although it's a painful burden, but such moods were so far in my past I couldn't remember. Wishing to get

control of my emotions, I made a drink but when I got back she was still in the same position.

Amber was ill but I couldn't contact her. I wanted to scream but knew she couldn't hear me.

Trembling, I nipped skin from a finger while pondering. But I simply couldn't think. So, for the very first time, I shut all the windows down.

CHAPTER 3 – THE NEST, MID SEPTEMBER

“She’s dead!” I cried, waking, marinated in sweat. I slept in the same room I worked in so after tumbling off a mattress and clearing the mucous that had encrusted my eyes I sat down amidst the compelling collection of computers.

For six years I’d been a god to Amber. Of course, she didn’t worship me or curse me when things went wrong but I loved her, watched over her, gave her gifts and shaped her progress. And through those years I’d recorded thousands of hours of footage, and watched most of it. Now, I had to accept there’d be no more one-night-stands, no more risqué sex, no more business meetings or Sunday lunches with mum and dad.

I touched my eye and thought I was bleeding. I lurched to a light switch and flicked it. After the bare bulb had warmed to bright yellow I placed my finger under it but didn’t see any blood. I had no mirror so I dabbed my eye again, but the only liquid my dirty finger collected was clear.

“I’m crying,” I said, groping a whiskey bottle before swigging from it.

When I’d gulped enough to dull my rawer parts, I turned the computer screens on.

Amber was still staring at the ceiling, but the clock had moved on a couple of hours since last I looked. In time, the image I was receiving would die, just like her, but for now the camera was transmitting and was arguably the only thing thriving inside her.

“Amber!” I wailed with intense anger. I wanted to smash my head on a wall or rip a light bulb from its socket before placing my tearstained fingers into it. “Amber!” I cried, hoping she’d stir. “I must work else I’m going to go mad,” I said then began to rewind her

footage hoping, yet dreading, to find the instant when she was no longer with me.

I found that passage only too quickly. She'd been murdered, or that was my instinct. It was dark but when I saw that vaporous face hanging over her I knew it was evil, I knew it had done something to her. I stopped the film then tried to capture still frames but the computers crashed. They'd never done that before.

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I couldn't sleep. Then again, sleeping in the same room as your work was like trying to read a book in a tiger's cage or keeping a flaccid penis when met by a bevy of writhing naked women - impossible. I fired-up the computers yet had this heaviness in my heart that they weren't going to work. I was right. I'd got the images again, attempted to save them, and then spent heaven knows how long glaring at a blue worm inch along the screen until it stopped. I drew closer to the screen until able to discern each pixel but they wouldn't change no matter how much I wanted them to. "Fucking machines," I cursed but in my next breath I prayed for them.

After several hours of trying, I knew it wasn't to be. I took a blunt pencil and scrawled what I remembered seeing on a yellowing scrap of paper. I thought it best not to spend too much time drawing for I could sense the spectre might become one of the beasts from my nightmares if I wasn't careful. Putting the paper and pencil down, I tried the computers again, hoping a rest had done them good. But my faultless machines were ailing. I thought briefly about recapturing that face but chose to rewind farther into Amber's past, content that I would surely see the face again.

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In the end, I fell asleep.

I awoke, believing I'd dreamt her death. I imagined I saw the vaporous face, but when I looked again the clock in Amber's room was still ticking forward and no one seemed to be around.

Amber was good at sex and I'd rerun her greatest moments many times, reaching such a sensitive state myself that her image in my mind was utterly genuine. Then, five minutes after getting release I'd be ready again and her image came back and the pressure would mount in my head. I have an irresistible impulse or what others call an impulse unresisted.

I watched Amber seesaw on her moonlit bed with the man she'd met last night. Well, I assumed it was a man for I'd not seen a face, just an outline. And in all those years, Amber, apart from the odd stroke and lick, had never "been" with another woman. Nonetheless, her manner was friendly towards the person so I assumed she knew him, or her. Nothing happened, just the slow churn of sleep, the endless quest to find the most comfortable spot. I saw the window, the wall, the contour of the person she was sleeping with then finally she must have lay on her back. It was about four in the morning. I figured she was saying something but I couldn't hear. Then, that horrid grey face loomed from nowhere. There was movement. I thought Amber was being pinned down but I couldn't be sure. Then she stopped moving.

"Who are you?" I asked, glowering at the screen, wanting to rewind and freeze that ethereal face yet knowing the computers would crash the moment I attempted it. "Why did you do it?" I sobbed. I should have asked myself that question a million times. But then I had to judge whether, through my gifts, I'd made Amber into what she was and let her be there at the club that night and find someone who, in the deadest and loneliest part of the night, would kill her. I didn't know who'd done it and probably never would yet I ached to tell someone about it. But if I did they'd find out about me and might accuse me of wrongdoing. Then again, if they found out how I knew all these things about her, then I was guilty of wrongdoing.

CHAPTER 4 – THE NEST, LATE SEPTEMBER

I chose to do nothing, arguably the most hideous thing I could have done. I sat, eyes cemented to the screen, for days. In that time I'd bitten my nails to the quick, urinated in my pants, not eaten, and drunk barely any whiskey. Amber *still* hadn't moved and neither had I, for I was craven and callous by default. Why did I find it so tormenting to get involved with real life? But early one afternoon, I saw shadows.

A woman entered Amber's room, her face white with shock and mouth gaping open in the midst of a scream.

"Wake up!" I sensed the woman howl then flinch on seeing a bluing face and dead eyes staring wildly. She contemplated the kiss of life but knew that Amber had gone

Stepping back, she yanked a black bag from her shoulder, spilling all sorts of paraphernalia before grabbing a tiny silver phone. Pacing back and forth, she started making calls while wiping tearful eyes and a dripping nose. She knelt over Amber, probing her before a large tear dribbled onto Amber's forehead. That was the last I saw for the tear, like a raindrop on a winter's day, just stayed there, veiling my vision. I watched for several more hours, noting shadows crowd the body, disperse and then return again. It recalled an episode from my childhood.

I'd had toothache all the previous night but by morning the pain had gone. I told my mother I was fine but she still dragged me to the dentist. He checked me over, whispered something to my mother then I found myself being driven somewhere. I tried to scramble from the moving car but mother kept beating me down and wouldn't disclose where I was going.

I was led to a large, empty, room and made to sit on a sticky plastic chair. Mother held my hand, squeezing hard each time I looked as though I wanted to say something.

I was called.

Ignoring my anguish, a grey-haired man manacled me in his muscular hands and towed me into a damp green-marbled room.

“What are you going to do with me?” I asked but the adults weren’t going to answer a child.

I was placed on my back and a heavy rubber mask clamped over my mouth. I was told to breathe - so fucking obvious. I was told to count from one and keep going.

Soon I was flying and the face of the man with the muscular hands was receding, melting into grey mist. Then I saw nothing but shadows...

Those same eerie shadows were milling round Amber now. It was hard to tell how many people there were but I figured four or five. I hoped they were paramedics and forensics people. Trouble was, as her core body temperature had come into balance with the ambient temperature, the experts would have to look elsewhere for clues as to when and how she died. Rigor mortis was unpredictable for the body’s muscles became relaxed again after thirty-six hours. Besides, the time of onset was reliant on the amount of work the muscles had done immediately before death. And if my pictures were to be believed, she was working *hard*. So, and this is where I try not to vomit, the presence of insects would have to determine how long she’d been dead. I knew that flies rapidly discovered bodies and that the time of death can be calculated from the state of development of insects living on the corpse. I’d studied anatomy and entomology so I knew what shape her body would be in for, whilst it was winter, the room was likely warm and humid, the ideal breeding ground. Then, as the vomit rose to the top of my throat, the picture died and my link with Amber disappeared.

“Goodbye,” I said, and meant it, for in death Amber’s life had become momentous. I felt tremendous hurt. It was pain that I feared would never leave me.

CHAPTER 5 – THE NEST, LATE SEPTEMBER

I couldn't watch the screens for days. In fact, I couldn't open my eyes for my tears had soldered them shut. I was lonely, always had been, but acceptance of this sorry state had been shattering. I could think of nothing but Amber. I didn't want them to cut her up, to delve inside her perfect casing yet knew they must to find truth.

Waking after yet another erratic sleep, I felt it was time to see how they were doing.

In darkness, I began searching the Net.

"AMBER LEE MURDER" I typed and waited impatiently for answers.

Dissatisfied with the results, I added "WESTLOCK" to the criteria but still wasn't pleased with the upshot. Sure, the great cyber-organism found Amber but there was no mention of murder just her funeral which was taking place on the 25th.

"The 25th," I muttered for there was no sense of time down here, no connection to the present. "But that's *today*," I said and began further searches but there was no word of murder, police appeals or manhunts. I began to doubt whether I'd seen this vaporous face at all. I had a chance to re-embrace insularity but wouldn't take it. "They've got it wrong! I can't let the authorities burn her and pour her into a tiny urn..."

I opened a can of beans and used a teaspoon to eat them cold. I was so dehydrated it was painful swallowing but I managed to find one last bottle of mineral water and drank it eagerly. I thought about sending an email or calling the police or even leaving a message on Amber's answerphone but either one may implicate me. So I was left with no option but to leave The Nest for the first time in years. Usually, my only exercise would be unlocking the doors between this basement and the front door, before skulking about looking for breeches in the fence. And once a week, I collected groceries from a

special compartment I'd fitted to the fence so the deliveryman didn't have to encroach. It was better, I thought, not to buy anything fresh like bread, milk, fruit and vegetables. So I get lots of tins, mineral water, and, of course, whiskey. I'm so predictable in what I buy a blind man could pick my order. And the fact that my wretched diet was making me ill, never seemed to matter.

"Why can't I *stop* caring?" I cried for a compulsion had taken me over. I stood shivering in a corner, completely naked. I'd had my previous clothes on for so long they'd stuck to my skin so before I re-dressed I washed a little.

Isn't it marvellous how a dab of cold water here and there is such a restorative?

I put my shirt on first. It fitted well and I made no mistakes with the buttons. Nonetheless, I longed to rip it from my back and burn it. I then rolled some holey socks onto my scaly feet and up my shins before donning a pair of stained trousers.

My clothes smelled as I rarely washed them. I had a system that used a rack so I'd put the clothes I'd just worn on the left side of the rack then take the ones I was wearing next from the rightmost slot. I'd keep rotating my outfits this way. As you can imagine, the basement stank - ozone from the computers, stale breath, rotting food plus dried sweat on my tawdry clothes. Still, I was wearing the best I could muster when I stumbled breathlessly out of The Nest.

I stood for a moment, hanging on the door as if it was a piece of driftwood and I was floating powerlessly in an ocean. I'd not been afraid of the "outside" before my mother and brother died but their passing made me grow into myself, paranoid that everyone was out to get me.

"I can't do this," I said weakly.

"Do it for Amber."

I lurched forward, almost tripping on the moss-carpeted steps that led onto a stone forecourt. The forecourt had been spotless in my mother's time but now it was a sea of weeds bordering great continents of lichens. I scuttled back up the steps, feeling my

intestines twist around inside. I tried convincing myself that I was ill but I wasn't ill, apart from those lesions in my mind.

I made it to the rusting gates, garlanded with padlocks and chains. I fumbled with the keys, frightened that if I delayed my exit, the children would soon be massing here, yelling at me, their dogs barking with jagged teeth bore.

The keyhole of the first lock was caked in mud and impossible to clean out. I tried a second lock but my key simply sheered off.

"Well I just can't go then," I said before my eye caught a hole in the tall fence that circled The Nest. Someone had recently prised the tightly-spaced bars apart. I cursed them but realised I could use that same opening to escape.

I traipsed through the overgrown shrubs to the opening, knelt down and felt my heart pound and blood surge in my veins.

"It's too small," I said knowing I *could* get through.

I closed my eyes, pushed, and I was there.

A feeling of triumph briefly rid my darker views but as soon as I began slouching along the pavement, I noticed the people scowl and heard them mouth obscenities at me, or so I imagined. The traffic was grumbling too. Yet what truly scared me were the changes. It wasn't my town at all. Maybe I was on the far side of the world for these soaring grey blocks, sleek cars and new fashions were not the things I'd seen when I was last here. But they still spoke my language for I could hear the filth pouring from their mouths. I guess it was no worse than what I thought of them.

I reached another intersection.

The houses were smaller here, terraces, sporadically boarded-up, shells of cars parked on mucky patches of ground that were once lawns. They'd been palaces to the miners who'd risked their lives to dig the coal that fired the furnaces, made the munitions, and won the war. Wars now, to these people, were things fought on a screen,

beamed into your skull, fashioned by some geek who had caffeine for blood. They knew of no past, where I was haunted by it. I understood the sacrifices that made us what we are. Ironically I was now sacrificing myself for Amber's sake.

I crossed another road then almost fell down with disbelief. Ahead was the tiny chapel that I'd been christened in, that my parents were married in, an enduring fixture through the history of my family. And it was here we were going to say goodbye to Amber.

"You smell bad," said a dusty-faced child with a tattoo of an angel on his neck. I wanted to strangle him and dump his body in a large drum that stood outside one of the houses but I ignored him. Nevertheless, the irritating insect followed me. Maybe it was time to tell him of my fantasies? Maybe that'd scare him? Or maybe he was desensitised already, beaten by his father, despised by his mother, so my tales of butchering women might be a nice diversion whilst he studied which car to break into next.

I kept quiet and he eventually went.

I hid behind a wall, watching the chapel's entrance. No-one was there. I started to wonder if they were inside but then a black hearse turned off the road and parked by the chapel's side.

I'd never felt as ill. I was cold, sweaty and longed to wilt away but I had to speak to someone. I stared through my fingers as the hearse's rear door was pulled up and Amber's tiny coffin slowly rolled out. And in the strained face of a pallbearer I saw myself, at that same wretched spot all those years ago. My brother was by my side, but no more than a year later I was carrying him to the everlasting. Maybe this was my moment? I'd suffered only gloom in the ensuing years so if I told them the truth would that reverse my decline?

I looked around nervously, expecting the dusty-faced child with the tattoo to be grinning at me. Surprisingly, he was there but beaming a warm, intelligent, smile.

With eyes near shut, I scampered from behind the wall and across the busy road.

"You must stop this!" I cried, holding up my arms.

A late middle-aged man with white-blond hair and cold blue eyes stepped up to me. I simply knew it was Amber's father. Below his golden face he wore a black suit and shirt without a tie. He had a gracious countenance and seemed to recognise me, but then I realised that that's how "friendly" people get along, they welcome you rather than repel you.

"Can I help you? Did you know Amber?"

I nodded eagerly.

"Are you coming inside?" he asked as I stared at the chapel's open doors which might as well have been the maw of Hell. "Are you joining us?" he asked as my eyes fixed on the coffin that was being carried on six youthful shoulders. Rather than answer, I started panicking, turning more heads and almost stopping the coffin's march.

"Who are you?" he posed.

"I'm... I'm..." I stuttered then exploded. "Your daughter was murdered."

"What are you saying? That's simply preposterous," said the man who'd been joined by a woman whom I assumed was his wife.

"Why are you saying this now? Why do you want to hurt us?" she said.

"I'm not trying to hurt you, just giving you the truth," I replied but the man's mild features had hardened.

"Who are you?" he pressed but I failed to answer.

"Naturally we're all shocked at her death but it was natural causes, a medical problem she'd been born with," said his wife.

Presently I wanted to melt, to tell them I was mistaken but I'd already gone too far.

"Who are you!" the mourners shouted. "Why are you saying these things?"

I wanted to talk but the knot in my throat was strangling my words and making me look so guilty. Afraid of being snared in their grabbing arms, I dashed back across the busy road.

“Come back!” they shouted.

Losing focus, I clipped my toe on the kerb. When I got up, that little dusty-faced child was there. He wore a cunning grin and I wanted to strike him down but my lungs were afire.

I took a last look at the coffin before vanishing into an alleyway.

I waited there for a minute or so, my whole body expanding and contracting like bellows. I didn't feel safe as I knew they'd taken pictures or were burning my face into memory. An impulse to return possessed me. But like a passing shadow, the weak-willed person I'd grow to live with, returned.

I was right, that chapel was the maw of Hell and someday I would see it burn.