

# C O N T E N T S



[Naming of Parts](#)

[About the Author](#)



*Naming of Parts* is copyright © 2000, [Tim Lebbon](#) , all rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by any means electronic or mechanical, without prior permission of the publisher, with the exception of brief passages quoted in reviews.

ISBN: 1-931305-87-0

Scorpius Digital Publishing

PO Box 19423

Queen Anne Station

Seattle, WA 98109

<http://www.scorpiusdigital.com>



# Naming of Parts



Tim Lebbon

*“A child grows up when he realises that he will die.”*

— *proverb*



That night, something tried to break into the house. Jack heard the noises as he lay awake staring at the ceiling, attempting to see sense in the shadowy cracks that scarred the paintwork. The sounds were insistent and intelligent, and before long they were fingering not only at window latches and handles, but also at the doorways of his mind.

He liked listening to the night before he went to sleep, and out here in the country there was much to hear. Sometimes he was afraid, but then he would name all the different parts that went to make up that fear and it would go away. *A sound I cannot identify. A shape I cannot see. Footsteps that may be human, but which are most likely animal. There’s nothing to be afraid of, there are no monsters. Dad and Mum both say so; there are no such things as monsters.*

So he would lie there and listen to the hoots and rustles and groans and cries, content in the knowledge that there was nothing to fear. All the while the blankets would be his shield, the bedside light his protector, and the gentle grumble of the television from downstairs his guarantee.

But that night—the night all guarantees were voided—there were few noises beyond his bedroom window, and with less to hear, there was more to be afraid of. Against the silence every snapped twig sounded louder, each rustle of fur across masonry was singled out for particular attention by his galloping imagination. It meant that there was something out there to frighten everything else into muteness.

And then the careful caress of fingertips across cold glass.

Jack sat up in bed and held his breath. Weak moonlight filtered through the curtains, but other than that his room was filled with darkness. He clutched at his blankets to retain the heat. Something hooted in the distance, but the call was cut off sharply, leaving the following moments painfully empty.

*Click click click.* Fingernails picking at old, dried glazing putty, perhaps? It sounded like it was coming from outside and below, but it could just as easily have originated within his room, behind the flowing curtains, something frantically trying to get out rather than break in.

He tried naming his fears, this time unsuccessfully; he was not entirely sure what was scaring him.

A floorboard creaked on the landing, the one just outside the bathroom door. Three creaks down, three back up. Jack's heart beat faster and louder and he let out a gasp, waiting for more movement, listening for the subtle scratch of fingernails at his bedroom door. He could not see the handle, it was too dark, it may even be turning now?

Another creak from outside, and then he heard his mother's voice and his father hissing back at her.

"Dad!" Jack croaked. There were other sounds now: the soft thud of something tapping windows; a whispering sound, like a breeze flowing through the ivy on the side of the house, though the air was dead calm tonight.

"Dad!" He called louder this time, fear giving his voice a sharp edge to cut through the dark.

The door opened and a shadow entered, silhouetted against the landing light. It moved towards him, unseen feet creaking more boards. "It's okay, son," his father whispered, "just stay in bed. Mum will be in with you now. Won't you, Janey?"

Jack's mother edged into the room and crossed to the bed, cursing as she stumbled on something he'd left on the floor. There was always stuff on the floor in Jack's room. His dad called it *Jack debris*.

"What's going on, Dad?" he asked. "What's outside?"

"There's nothing outside," his father said. His voice was a monotone that Jack recognised, the one he used to tell fatherly untruths. And then Jack noticed, for the first time, that he was carrying his shotgun.

"Dad?" Jack said uncertainly. Cool fingers seemed to touch his neck, and they were not his mother's.

She hugged him to her. "Gray, you're scaring him."

"Janey?"

"Whatever... just be careful. Be calm."

Jack did not understand any of this. His mother hugged him and in her warmth he found the familiar comfort, though tonight it felt like a lie. He did not want this comfort, this warmth, not when there was something outside trying to get in, not when his father stood in his pyjamas, shotgun closed and aimed at the wall, not broken open over his elbow as he carried it in the woods.

The woods. Thinking of them aimed Jack's attention, and he finally noticed just how utterly silent it was out there. No voices or night-calls, true, but no trees swishing and swaying in sleep, no sounds of life, no

hint of anything existing beyond the house at all.

His father moved to the window and reached out for the curtains. Jack knew what he would find when he pulled them back—nothing. Blankness, void, or infinity...and infinity scared Jack more than anything. How could something go on forever? What was there after it ended? Occasionally he thought he had some bright idea, but then sleep would come and steal it away by morning.

“Dad, don’t, there’s nothing out there!” he said, his voice betraying barely controlled panic.

“Shhh, shhh,” his mother said, rocking him.

“I know,” his father said without turning to offer him a smile. He grabbed a curtain and drew it aside.

Moonlight. The smell of night, a spicy dampness that seemed always to hide from the sun. And the noises again, tapping and scraping, tapping and scraping.

“Mum, don’t let Dad open the window,” Jack said, but his mother ignored him because she was hugging him, and that was usually enough. He would forget his bad dreams and go back to sleep, Mum would smile at the foolishness he’d spouted, but didn’t she know? Didn’t she see that they were all awake, and that what he was thinking was not foolishness because his dad really was standing in his room with a shotgun, opening the window, leaning out now, aiming the weapon before him like a torch—

There was an explosion. Like an unexpected scream in the depths of night it tore through Jack’s nerves, shred his childish sense of valour and set him screaming and squirming in his mother’s lap. Her arms tightened around him and she screamed too, he could smell the sudden tang of her fear, could feel the dampness between her breasts as he pressed his face to her chest.

“Gray, what the fuck—”

Her words shocked Jack but he could not lift his face to see.

“What the hell? What are you doing, what are you shooting at?”

Somewhere in the blind confusion his father came across and offered soothing words, but they were edged with his own brand of fear. Jack could not see him but he could imagine him standing there in silence, staring at a wall and avoiding his mother’s eyes. It was his way of thinking about what to say next.

He said nothing. Instead, Jack felt his dad’s strong hands under his arms, lifting him up out of the warmth of his mother’s fear and letting the dark kiss his sweaty skin cool.

“Dad,” Jack sobbed, “I’m scared!”

His dad rocked him back and forth and whispered into his ear, but Jack could barely hear what he was saying. Instead he tried to do what he had once been told, name the parts of his fear in an attempt to identify them and set them open to view, to consideration, to understanding.

*Something, outside in the dark. Dad, he saw it and shot it. The sounds, they’ve gone, no more picking, no more prodding at our house. Monsters, there are none of course. But if there are...Dad scared them off.*

“Gray,” his mother said, and Jack looked up sharply.

“They weren’t monsters, were they Dad?” His father did not say a word. He was shaking.

“Gray,” his mum said again, standing and wrapping them both in her arms. “We should try the police again.”

“You know the phone’s dodgy, Janey.”

“You shot at someone. We should try the police.”

“Someone? But you saw, you—”

“Someone,” Jack’s Mum whispered softly. “Robbers, I expect, come to steal our Jackie’s things.” She ruffled his hair but Jack could not find a smile to give her.

“I heard them picking at the putty,” he said. “Robbers would just smash the window. Least, they do in *The Bill*. And there’s nothing else making a noise, like the fox in the woods. I always hear the fox before I go to sleep, but I haven’t heard it tonight. Dad!”

His father turned and stared at him, his face unreadable.

“Did you shoot someone, Dad?”

His father shook his head. He began to smile as he pulled Jack’s face into his neck, but the expression was grotesque, like one of those old gargoyles Jack had seen on churches when they were in France last year. “Of course not, Jack. I fired into the air.”

But he had not fired into the air, Jack knew. He had leaned out and aimed down. Jack could not help but imagine something squirming on the ground even now, its blood running into the gravel alongside the house, screams of pain impossible because it had no jaw left to open?

“Come on,” his dad said, “our room for now, son.”

“Didn’t you try the mobile?” Jack asked suddenly, but the look on his mother’s face made him wish he hadn’t.

“That’s not working at all.”

“I expect the batteries have run out,” he said wisely.

“I expect.”

His father carried him across the creaking landing and into their bedroom, a place of comfort. He dropped him gently onto the bed, and as he stood the telephone on the bedside table rang.

“I’ll get it!” Jack shouted, leaping across the bed.

“Son?”

He answered in the polite manner he had been taught: “Hello, Jack Haines, how may I help you?” *It’s*

*the middle of the night*, he thought. *Who rings in the middle of the night? What am I going to hear? Do I really want to hear it, whatever it is?*

“Hey, Jackie,” a voice said, masked with crackles and pauses and strange, electronic groans. “Jackie...the town...dangerous...get to Tewton...Jackie? Jackie? Ja...?”

“Mandy,” he said, talking both to her and his parents. “It’s Mandy!”

His mother took the receiver from his hand. “Mandy? You there?” She held it to her ear for a few seconds, then glanced at Jack. “No one there,” she said. “Line’s dead. It did that earlier.” She turned to his dad and offered the receiver, but he moved to the window and shaded his eyes so he could see out.

“She said we should go to Tewton,” Jack said, trying to recall her exact words, afraid that if he did he would also remember the strange way she had spoken. Mandy never called him Jackie. “She said it was safe there.”

“It’s safe here,” his dad said without turning around. He was holding the shotgun again and Jack wanted to believe him, wanted to feel secure.

His mum stood and moved to the window. “What’s that?” Jack heard her mutter.

“Fire.”

“A fire?”

His father turned and tried to smile, but it seemed to hurt. “A bonfire,” he said, “over on the other side of the valley.”

“At night? A bonfire in the middle of the night?” Jack asked.

His parents said nothing. His mother came back to the bed and held him, and his father remained at the window.

“It *was* Mandy,” Jack said.

His mother shrugged. “I didn’t hear anyone.”

He tried to move away from her but she held him tight, and he thought it was for her own comfort as much as his. He didn’t like how his mum and dad sometimes talked about Mandy. He liked even less the way they often seemed to forget about her. He was old enough to know some stuff had happened—he could remember the shouting, the screaming, the punching on the last day Mandy had been with them—but he was not really old enough to realise exactly what.

It was so quiet, Jack could hear his father’s throat clicking as he breathed.

They stayed that way until morning.



*“There are secrets in the night,” Mandy once told him. She was sitting next to his bed, looking after him because he’d been lost in the woods. He usually liked it when Mandy talked to him, told him things, but today even she could not cheer him up. She and his parents were hardly speaking, and when they did it was to exchange nothing but nastiness.*

*“What do you mean?”*

*She smiled. “You know, Jack. Secrets. You lie awake sometimes, listening for them. Don’t you? I know I do.”*

*“I just like listening,” he said, but he guessed she was right. He guessed there was more going on than most people knew, and he wanted to find out what.*

*“If you find a secret, sometimes it’s best to keep it to yourself. Not to tell Mum and Dad.”*

*Jack was subtly shocked at her words. Why keep something from Mum and Dad? Wasn’t that lying? But Mandy answered for him.*

*“Sometimes, grown-ups don’t understand their kid’s secret. And I’ll tell you one now.”*

*He sat up in bed, all wide-eyed and snotty-nosed. He wondered why Mandy was crying.*

*“I’m leaving home. At the weekend. Going to live in Tewton. But Jack, please, don’t tell Mum and Dad until I’m gone.”*

*Jack blinked as tears stung his eyes. Mandy hugged him and kissed his cheeks.*

*He didn’t want his sister to go. But he listened to what she said, and he did not tell their parents the secret.*

*Three days later, Mandy left home.*



In the morning Jack went to fetch the milk, but the milkman hadn't been. His father appeared behind him in the doorway, scowling out at the sunlight and the dew steaming slowly from the ground, hands resting lightly on his son's shoulders.

Something had been playing on Jack's mind all night, ever since it happened. An image had seeded there, grown and expanded and, in the silence of his parent's bedroom where none of them had slept, it had blossomed into an all-too-plausible truth. Now, with morning providing an air of normality—though it remained quieter than usual, and stiller—he was certain of what he would find. He did not *want* to find it, that was for sure, yet he had to see.

He darted away from the back door and was already at the corner of the house before his dad called after him. The shout almost stopped him in his tracks because there was an unbridled panic there, a desperation...but then he was looking around the side of the cottage at something he had least expected.

There was no body, no blood, no disturbed flower-bed where someone had thrashed around in pain. He crunched along the gravel path, his father with him now, standing guard above and behind.

"You *didn't* shoot anyone," Jack said, and the sense of relief was vast.

Then he saw the rosebush.

The petals had been stripped, and they lay scattered on the ground alongside other things. There were bits of clothing there, and grimy white shards of harder stuff, and clumps of something else. There was also a watch.

"Dad, whose watch is that?" Jack could not figure out what he was seeing. If that was bone, where was the blood? Why was there a watch lying in their garden, its face shattered, hands frozen at some cataclysmic hour? And those dried things, tattered and ragged around the edges, like shrivelled steak ...

"Gray!" his mother called from the back door, "where are you? Gray! There's someone coming down the hill."

"Come on," Jack's dad said, grabbing his arm and pulling him to the back door.

Jack twisted around to stare up the hillside, trying to see who his mother was talking about, wondering whether it was the Judes from Berry Hill Farm. He liked Mr Jude, he had a huge Mexican moustache and he did a great impression of a *bandito* .

"We should stay in the house," his mum said as they reached the back door. "There's nothing on the radio."

*If there's nothing on the radio, what is there to be worried about?* Jack wondered.

"Nothing at all?" his dad said quietly.

His mother shook her head, and suddenly she looked older and greyer than Jack had ever noticed. It shocked him, frightened him. Death was something he sometimes thought about on the darkest of nights, but his mother's death...its possibility was unbearable, and it made him feel black and unreal and sick inside.



“I thought there may be some news . . .”

And then Jack realised what his mum had really meant. . .no radio, no radio *at all* . . .and he saw three people clambering over a fence higher up the hill.

“Look!” he shouted. “Is that Mr Jude?”

His father darted into the cottage and emerged seconds later with the shotgun—locked and held ready in both hands—and a pair of binoculars hanging around his neck. He handed his mother the shotgun and she held it as if it were a living snake. Then he lifted the binoculars to his eyes and froze, standing there for a full thirty seconds while Jack squinted and tried to see what his dad was seeing. He pretended he had a bionic eye, but it didn’t do any good.

His dad lowered the glasses, and slowly and carefully took the gun from his wife.

“Oh no,” she said, “oh no, Gray, no, no, no . . .”

“They did warn us,” he murmured.

“But why the Jude’s? Why not us as well?” his mum whispered.

Jack’s father looked down at him, and suddenly Jack was very afraid. “What, dad?”

“We’ll be leaving now, son,” he said. “Go down to the car with your mum, there’s a good boy.”

“Can I take my books?”

“No, we can’t take anything. We have to go now, because Mr Jude’s coming.”

“But I like Mr Jude!” A tear had spilled down his dad’s cheek, that was terrible, that was a leak in the dam holding back chaos and true terror, because while his dad was here—firm and strong and unflinching—there was always someone to protect him.

His father knelt in front of him “Listen, Jackie. Mr Jude and his family have a . . .a disease. If we’re still here when they arrive they may try to hurt us, or we may catch the disease. I don’t know which, if either. So we have to go?”

“Why don’t we just not let them in? We can give them tablets and water through the window, and . . .” He trailed off, feeling cold and unreal.

“Because they’re not the only ones who have the disease. Lots of other people will have it too, by now. We may have to wait a long time for help.”

Jack turned and glanced up the hill at the three people coming down. They didn’t look ill. They looked odd, it was true, they looked *different* . But not ill. They were moving too quickly for that.

“Okay.” Jack nodded wisely, and he wondered who else had been infected. He guessed it may be something to do with what had been on the telly yesterday, the thing his mum and dad had been all quiet and tense and pale about. An explosion, he remembered, an accident, in a place so far away he didn’t even recognise the name. “Mandy said we should go to Tewton, she said it was safe there.”

“We will,” his father nodded, but Jack knew it was not because Mandy had said so. His parents rarely listened to her any more.

“That big bonfire’s still burning,” Jack said, looking out across the valley for the first time. A plume of smoke hung in the sky like a frozen tornado, spreading out at the top and dispersing in high air currents. And then he saw it was not a bonfire, not really. It was the white farm on the opposite hillside; the whole white farm, burning. He’d never met the people who lived there but he had often seen the farmer in his fields, chugging silently across the landscape in his tractor.

Jack knew where the word *bonfire* came from, and he could not help wondering whether today this was literally that.

His dad said nothing but looked down at Jack, seeing that he knew what it really was, already reaching out to pick up his son and carry him to their car.

“Dad, I’m scared!”

“I’ve got you, Jackie. Come on Janey. Grab the keys, the shotgun cartridges are on the worktop.”

“Dad, what’s happening?”

“It’s okay.”

“Dad ...”

As they reached the car they could hear the Jude family swishing their feet through the sheen of bluebells covering the hillside. There were no voices, there was no talking or laughing. No inane *bandito* impressions this morning from Mr Jude.

His parents locked the car doors from the inside and faced forward.

Jack took a final look back at their cottage. The car left the gravelled driveway, and just before the hedge cut off the house from view, he saw Mr Jude walk around the corner. From this distance, it looked like he was in black and white.



Jack kept staring from the back window so he did not have to look at his parents. Their silence scared him, and his mum’s hair was all messed up.

Trees passed overhead, hedges flashed by on both sides, and seeing where they had been instead of where they were going presented so much more for his consideration.

Like the fox, standing next to a tree where the woods edged down to the road. Its coat was muddied, its eyes stared straight ahead. It did not turn to watch them pass. Jack thought it may be *his* fox—the creature he had listened to each night for what seemed like ages—and as he mourned its voice he heard its cry, faint and weak, like a baby being dragged from its mother’s breast and slaughtered.

They had left the back door open. His mum had dashed inside to grab the shotgun cartridges, his dad already had the car keys in his pocket, they’d left the back door open and he was sure—he was *certain*—that his mum had put some toast under the grille before they ran away. Maybe Mr Jude was eating it now, Jack thought, but at the same time he realised that this was most unlikely. Mr Jude was sick, and from what Jack had seen of him as he peered around the corner of their cottage, toast was the last thing on his mind.

Living, perhaps, was the first thing. Surviving. Pulling through.

Jack wondered whether the rest of Mr Jude’s family looked as bad.

The sense of invasion, of having his own space trespassed upon, was immense. They had left the back door open, and anyone or anything could wander into their house and root through their belongings. Not only the books and cupboards and food and fridge and dirty washing, but the private stuff. Jack had a lot of private stuff in his room, like letters from Mandy which he kept under a loose corner of carpet, his diary shoved into the tear in his mattress along with the page of a magazine he had found in the woods, a weathered flash of pink displaying what a woman *really* had between her legs.

But that sense of loss was tempered by a thought Jack was suddenly proud of, an idea that burst through the fears and the doubts and the awful possibilities this strange morning presented: that he actually had his whole life with him now. They may have left their home open to whatever chose to abuse it, but home was really with his family, wherever they may be. He was with them now.

All except Mandy.

He named his fears:

*Loss, his parents disappearing into memory. Loneliness, the threat of being unloved and unloving. Death...that great black death...stealing away the ones he loved.*

Stealing *him* away.

For once, the naming did not comfort him as much as usual. If anything it made him muse upon things more, and Mandy was on his mind and why she had run away, and what had happened to start all the bad stuff between the people he loved the most.



Jack had come home from school early that day, driven by the headteacher because he was feeling sick. He was only eight years old. The teacher really should have seen him into the house, but instead she dropped him at the gate and drove on.

As he entered the front door he was not purposely quiet, but he made sure he did not make any unnecessary noise, either. He liked to frighten Mandy—jump out on her, or creep up from behind and smack her bum—because he loved the startled look on her face when he did so. And to be truthful, he loved the playful fight they would always have afterwards even more.

He slipped off his shoes in the hallway, glanced in the fridge to see if there were any goodies, ate half a jam tart...and then he heard the sound from the living room.

His father had only ever smacked him three times, the last time more than a year before. What Jack remembered more than the pain was the loud noise as his dad's hand connected with him. It was a sound that signified a brief failure in their relationship; it meant an early trip to bed, no supper, and a dreadful look on his mother's face which he hated even more, a sort of dried up mix of shame and guilt.

Jack despised that sound. He heard it now, not only once, not even three times. Again, and again, and again—smacking. And even worse than that, the little cries that came between each smack. And it was Mandy, he knew that, it was Mandy being hit over and over.

Their mum and dad were in work. So who was hitting Mandy?

Jack rushed to the living room door and flung it open.

His sister was kneeling on the floor in front of the settee. She had no clothes on and her face was pressed into the cushions, and the man from the bakery was kneeling behind her, grasping her bum, and he looked like he was hurting, too. Jack saw the man's willy—at least he thought that's what it was, except this was as big as one of the French bread sticks he sold—sliding in and out of his sister, and it was all wet and shiny like she was bleeding, but it wasn't red.

“Mandy?” Jack said, and in that word was everything: *Mandy what are you doing? Is he hurting you? What should I do? “Mandy?”*

Mandy turned and stared at him red-faced, and then her mouth fell open and she shouted: “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Jack turned and ran along the hallway, forgetting his shoes, feet slapping on quarry tiles. He sprinted across the lawn, stumbling a couple of times. And then he heard Mandy call after him. He did not turn around. He did not want to see her standing at the door with the baker bouncing at her from behind. And he didn't want her to swear at him again, when he had only come home because he felt sick.

All he wished for was to un-see what he had seen.

Jack spent that night lost in the woods. He could never remember any of it, and when he was found and taken home the next day he started to whoop, coughing up clots of mucus and struggling to breathe. He was ill for two weeks, and Mandy sat with him for a couple of hours every evening to read him the fantastic tales of Narnia, or sometimes just to talk. She would always kiss him goodnight and tell him she was sorry, and Jack would tell her it was okay, he sometimes said fuck too, but only when he was on his own.

It seemed that as Jack got better, so everything else in their family got worse.



It was a little over two miles to the nearest village, Tall Stennington. Jack once asked his father why they lived where they did, why didn't they live in a village or a town where there were other people, and shops, and gas in pipes under the ground instead of oil in a big green tank. His dad's reply had confused him at the time, and it still did to an extent.

*You've got to go a long way nowadays before you can't hear anything of Man.*

Jack thought of that now as they twisted and turned through lanes that still had grass clumps along their spines. There was no radio, his mum had said, and he wondered exactly what they would hear outside were they to stop the car now. He would talk if they did, sing, shout, just to make sure there was a sound other than the silence of last night.

The deathly silence.

"Whose watch was that in the garden, Dad?"

"I expect it belonged to one of the robbers."

Jack thought about this for a while, staring from his window at the hedges rolling by. He glanced up at the trees forming a green tunnel over the road, and he knew they were only minutes from the village. "So, what was the other stuff lying around it? The dried stuff, like meat you've left in the fridge too long?"

His dad was driving so he had an excuse, but his mum didn't turn around either. It was she who spoke, however.

"There's been some stuff on the news—"

"Janey!" his dad cut in. "Don't be so bloody stupid!"

"Gray, if it's really happening he has to know... he will know. We'll see them, lots of them, and—"

"All the trees are pale," Jack said, the watch and dried meat suddenly forgotten. He was looking from the back window at the avenue of trees they had just passed, and he had figured what had been nagging him about the hedges and the fields since they'd left the cottage: their colour; or rather, their lack of it. The springtime flush of growth had been flowering across the valley for the last several weeks, great explosions of rich greens, electric blues and splashes of colours which, as his dad was fond of saying, would put a Monet to shame. Jack didn't know what a Monet was, but he was sure there was no chance in a billion it could ever match the slow-burning firework display nature put on at the beginning of every year. Spring was his favourite season, followed by autumn. They were both times of change, beautiful in

their own way, and Jack loved to watch stuff happen.

Now, something *had* happened. It was as though autumn had crept up without anyone or anything noticing, casting its pastel influence secretly across the landscape.

“See?” he said. “Mum? You see?”

His mum turned in her seat and stared past Jack. She was trying to hide the fact she had been crying; she looked embarrassed and uncertain.

“Maybe they’re dusty,” she said.

He knew she was lying; she didn’t really think that at all. “So what was on the news?” he asked.

“We’re at the village.” His dad slowed the car at the hump-back bridge, which marked the outskirts of Tall Stennington.

Jack leaned on the backs of his parents’ seats and strained forward to see through the windscreen. The place looked as it always had: the church dominated with a recently sand-blasted tower; stone cottages stood huddled beneath centuries-old trees; a few birds flitted here and there. A fat old Alsatian trundled along the street and raised its leg in front of the Dog and Whistle, but it seemed unable to piss.

The grocer’s was closed. It opened at six every morning, without fail, even Sundays. In fact, Jack could hardly recall ever seeing it closed, as if old Mrs Haswell had nothing else to do but stock shelves, serve locals and natter away about the terrible cost of running a village business.

“The shop’s shut,” he said.

His dad nodded. “And there’s no one about.”

“Yes there is,” his mum burst out. “Look, over there, isn’t that Gerald?”

“Gerald the Geriatric!” Jack giggled, because that’s what they called him at school. He’d usually be told off for that, he knew, on any normal day. After the first couple of seconds he no longer found it all that funny himself. There was something wrong with Gerald the Geriatric.

He leaned against a wall, dragging his left shoulder along the stonework with jerky, infrequent movements of his legs. He was too far away to see his expression in full, but his jowls and the saggy bags beneath his eyes seemed that much larger and darker this morning. He also seemed to have mislaid his trademark walking stick. There were legends that he had once beaten a rat to death with that stick in the kitchen of the Dog and Whistle, and the fact that he had not frequented that pub’ for a decade seemed to hint at its truth. Jack used to imagine him striking out at the darting rodent with the knotted length of oak, spittle flying from his mouth, false teeth chattering with each impact. Now, the image seemed grotesque rather than comical.

His mother reached for the door handle.

“Wait, Mum!” Jack said.

“But he’s hurt!”

“Jack’s right. Wait.” His dad rested his hand on the stock of the shotgun wedged down beneath their seats.

Gerald paused and stood shakily away from the wall, turning his head to stare at them. He raised his hands, his mouth falling open into a toothless grin or grimace. Jack could not even begin to tell which.

“He’s in pain!” Jack’s mum said, and this time she actually clicked the handle and pushed her shoulder to the door, letting in cool morning air.

“Janey, remember what they said—”

“What’s that?” Jack said quietly. It was the sound a big spider’s legs made on his posters in the middle of the night. The fear was the same, too—unseen things.

His mum had heard it as well, and she *snicked* the door shut.

There was something under the car. Jack felt the subtle tickle of soft impacts beneath him, insistent scrapings and pickings, reminiscent of the window fumblers of last night.

“Maybe it’s a dog,” his mum said.

His dad slammed the car into reverse and burnt rubber. The skid was tremendous, the stench and reverberation overpowering. As soon as the tyres caught Jack knew that they were out of control. The car leapt back, throwing Jack forward so that he banged his head on his mother’s headrest. As he looked up he saw what had been beneath the car. . . Mrs Haswell, still flipping and rolling where the chassis had scraped her along the road, her hair wild, her skirts torn to reveal pasty, pitted thighs. . .

His father swore as the brakes failed and the car dipped sickeningly into the ditch. Jack fell back, cracking his head on the rear window and tasting the sudden salty tang of blood as he bit his tongue. His mum screeched, his dad shouted and cursed again, the engine rose and sang and screamed until, finally, it cut out.

The sudden silence was huge. The wrecked engine ticked and dripped, Jack groaned, and through the tilted windscreen he could see Mrs Haswell hauling herself to her feet.

Steadying her tattered limbs.

Setting out for their car with slow, broken steps.

“Okay, Jackie?” his mum said. She twisted in her seat and reached back, the look in her eyes betraying her thoughts: *My son, my son!*

Jack opened his mouth to speak but only blood came out. He shuddered a huge breath and realised he’d been winded, things had receded, and only the blood on his chin felt and smelled real.

“What’s wrong with her?” his dad said, holding the steering wheel and staring through the windscreen. “That’s Mrs Haswell. Under our car. Did I run her over? I didn’t hit her, did you see me hit her?”

“Gray, Jackie’s bleeding.”

Jack tried to talk again, to say he was all right, but everything went fluid. He felt queasy and sleepy, as if

he'd woken up suddenly in the middle of the night.

"Gray!"

"Jack? You okay, son? Come on, out of the car. Janey, grab the binoculars. And the shells. Wait on your side, I'll get Jack out." He paused and looked along the road again. Mrs Haswell was sauntering between the fresh skidmarks, and now Gerald the Geriatric was moving their way as well. "Let's hurry up."

Jack took deep, heavy breaths, feeling blood bubble in his throat. The door beside him opened and his dad lifted him out, and as the sun touched his face he began to feel better. His mum wiped at his bloody chin with the sleeve of her jumper.

There was a sound now, a long, slow scraping, and Jack realised it was Mrs Haswell dragging her feet. She'd never done that before. She was eighty, but she'd always been active and forceful, like a wind-up toy that never ran out. She hurried through the village at lunchtime, darted around her shop as if she had wheels for feet...she had never, in all the times Jack had seen her or spoken to her, been slow.

Her arms were draped by her sides, not exactly swinging as she walked, but moving as if they were really no part of her at all. Her mouth hung open, but she did not drool.

"What's wrong with her, dad?"

"She's got the disease," his dad said quickly, dismissively, and Jack felt a pang of annoyance.

"Dad," he said, "I think I'm old enough for you to tell me the truth." It was a childish thing to say, Jack understood that straight away at some deeper level; petulant and prideful, unmindful of the panic his parents so obviously felt. But Jack was nearly a teenager, and he felt he deserved some trust. "Anyway," he said, "she looks like she's dead." He'd seen lots of films where people died, but hardly any of them looked like the old woman. She seemed lessened somehow, shrunken into herself, drained. She had lost what little colour she once possessed. In his mind's eye, this was how a true, real-life dead person should look.

His dad aimed the shotgun at Mrs Haswell.

Jack gasped. For the second time in as many minutes, he found himself unable to talk.

"Gray," his mother said cautiously, quietly, hands raised in a warding-off gesture, "we should go across the fields."

Jack saw his dad's face then—tears stinging the corners of his eyes; lips pressed together tight and bloodless, the way they'd been on the day Mandy left home for the last time—and he realised what a dire situation they were in.

His dad had no idea of what to do.

"Across the fields to the motorway," his mum continued, "if there's any help, we may find it there. And I'm sure they couldn't drive." She nodded at Mrs Haswell as she spoke. "Could they? You don't think they could, do you?"

His dad was breathing heavily, just as Jack did whenever he was trying not to cry. He grabbed Jack's



hand.

Jack felt the cool sweat of his father's palms...like touching a hunk of raw meat before it was cooked.

They walked quickly back the way they had come, then hopped over a stile into the field.

Jack glanced back at their car, canted at a crazy angle in the ditch, and saw that the two old people had stopped in their tracks. They stood as still as statues, and just as lifeless. This was more disturbing than ever—at least before, they had seemed to possess some purpose.

*She was under our car, Jack thought. What purpose in that?*

And then his own words sprang back at him: *She looks like she's dead.*



*"You know what an open mind is, Jack?" Mandy said. She had crept into his room in the middle of the night after hearing him whooping and crying. Sometimes she would sit on the edge of the bed until daybreak, just talking. Much of what she said confused him—she read all the time, and occasionally she even confused their mum and dad—but he remembered it all...and later, some of it began to make sense.*

*Jack had a grotesque vision of someone with a trapdoor in their skull, their brain pulsing and glowing underneath. He smiled uncertainly at this bloody train of thought.*

*"It's the ability to believe in the unbelievable," she continued, apparently unconcerned at his silence. "It's a free mind. Imagination. Growing up closes off so many doors. The modern world doesn't allow for miracles, so we don't see them. It's a very precious gift, an open mind, but it's not passive. You've got to nurture it like a bed of roses, otherwise it will wither and die. Make sure you don't close off your mind to things you find strange, Jack. Sometimes they may be the only truth."*

*They sat silently for a while, Jack croaking as he breathed past the phlegm in his throat, Mandy twirling strands of her long black hair between her fingers.*

*"It's something you have," she said suddenly, "and you always will. And that's another secret, to keep and tend."*

*"How do you know I have it?" he asked.*

*Mandy smiled at him and he saw a sadness behind her eyes. Maybe she still blamed herself for him being lost in the woods. Maybe she could already see how different their family was going to be.*

*“Hey,” she said, “you’re my brother.” As if that was an answer.*



The further they moved away, the more Tall Stennington appeared normal. Halfway across the field they lost sight of the shuffling shapes in the road, the empty streets beyond, the pigeons sitting silently on the church tower. Jack found himself wishing for any sign of life. He almost called out, wanting to see windows thrust open and people he knew by name or sight lean out, wave to him, comment on what a lovely brisk spring morning it was. But his tongue hurt from the car wreck. His dad had crashed because a busy old lady had cut or torn the brake cables. And she had done that because...because ...

There was nothing normal this morning. Not with Tall Stennington, not with Mr Jude, not with the fox at the edge of the woods. Not even with his parents, because they were tense and worried and hurrying across a newly-planted field, and his mum still had on her slippers. His dad carried a shotgun. His mum had her arms crossed, perhaps against the cold but more likely, Jack thought, against something else entirely.

No, nothing was normal today.

They followed the furrows ploughed into the field, stepping on green shoots and crushing them back into the earth whence they came. Jack glanced behind at his footprints, his identity stamped into the landscape only to be brushed away by the next storm. When he was younger he wanted to be an astronaut, purely for the excitement of zero-G, piloting experimental spacecraft and dodging asteroids on the way out of the Solar system. The idea still appealed to him, but his main reason now would be to walk on the moon and leave his footprints behind. He’d heard that they would be there forever, or at least near enough. When he was dead—perhaps when *everyone* was dead—some aliens might land on the moon, and see his footprints, and think, *Here was a guy willing to explore. Here was a guy with no closed doors in his head, with an open mind. Here was a guy who might have believed in us .*

Jack looked up at the ghost of the moon where it still hung in the clear morning sky. He wondered if his exact centre-line of sight were extended, would he be looking at Neil Armstrong’s footprints right now.

He looked down at his feet and one of those doors in his mind flapped wide open.

Falling to his knees, he plucked at a green shoot. It felt dry and brittle between his fingers, not cool and damp as it should have. He rubbed at it and it came apart, shedding its faded outer skin and exposing powdery insides.

He picked another shoot and it was the same. The third bled a smear of greenish fluid across his fingertips, but the next was as dry as the first, and the next.

“Jack, what’s up son? What are you doing?” His dad had stopped and turned, glancing nervously past

Jack at the stile as if constantly expecting Mrs Haswell and Gerald the Geriatric to come stumbling after them.

Jack shook his head, not *unable* to understand—he understood perfectly well, even for a twelve year old—but *unwilling*. The doors were open but he was stubbornly grasping the frames, not wanting to enter the strange rooms presenting themselves to him now.

“This crop’s dead,” he said. “It looks fresh, Dad. Mum? Doesn’t it all look so fresh?” His mum nodded, cupping her elbows in her hands and shivering. Jack held up a palm full of crushed shoot. “But look. It’s all dead. It’s still green, but it’s not growing any more.”

He looked back at the village. Their footprints stood out in the young crop, three wavering lines of bent and snapped shoots. And the hedge containing the stile they had hopped over...its colours like those of a faded photograph, not lush and vibrant with the new growth of spring...He’d once read a book called *The Death of Grass*. Now, he might be living it.

To his left the hillsides, speckled with sheep so still they looked like pustules on the face of the land.

To his right the edge of a stretch of woodland, at the other end of which stood their house, doors open, toast burnt in the grille, perhaps still burning.

“Everything’s dying.”

His dad sighed. “Not everything,” he said.

Jack began to shake, his stomach twisted into a knot and he was sure he was going to puke. Another terrible admission from his father, another fearful idea implanted when really, he should be saying, *There, there, Jackie boy, nothing’s changed, it’s all in your imagination*.

What could he name? How could he lay all this out to understanding, to comprehension, to acceptance, all as he had been told? He tried, even though he thought it was useless: *The villagers, like walking dead, perhaps they are. The plants, dry and brittle even though it’s springtime. Mum and dad, scared to death*... He thought at first there was nothing there that would work, but then he named another part of this terrible day and a sliver of hope kept the light shining: *Mandy, in the town, saying it’s safe*.

“Not everything, Jack,” his dad said again, perhaps trying to jolt his son back to reality.

“Let’s go,” his mum said. “Come on, Jack, we’ll tell you while we’re walking...it’s only two or three fields away...and there’ll be help there.” She smiled but it could not reach her eyes.

The motorway was not three fields away, it was six. His parents told Jack all they knew by the time they’d reached the end of the second field. He believed what they said because he could smell death in the third field, and he mentioned it, but his mum and dad lied to themselves by not even answering. Jack was sure as hell he knew what death smelled like; he’d found a dead badger in the woods a year ago, after all, and turned it over with a stick, and run home puking. This was similar only richer, stronger, as if coming from a lot more bodies. Some of them smelled cooked.

They saw the stationary cars on the motorway from two fields away. Wisps of smoke still rose here and there. Several vehicles were twisted on their backs like dead beetles.

From the edge of the field abutting the motorway they saw the shapes sitting around the ruined cars—the grey people in their colourful clothes—and although they could not tell for sure what they were eating, it was mostly red.

Jack’s dad raised his binoculars. Then he turned, grabbed Jack’s and his mother’s hand and ran back the way they had come.



“Were they eating the people from the cars?” Jack asked, disgusted but fascinated.

His father—white-faced, frowning, shaking his head slightly as if trying to dislodge a memory—did not answer.

They walked quickly across another field, their path taking them away from the woods and between Tall Stennington and the motorway. Neither was in view any longer—the landscape here dipped and rose, and all they could see around them was countryside. Nothing to give any indication of humankind’s presence; no chimney smoke or aircraft trails; no skyscrapers or whitewashed farm buildings.

No traffic noise. None at all.

Jack realised that he only noticed noise when it was no longer there.

“Dad, tell me!” Jack said. “The dead people—were they eating the people from the cars?”

“No,” his father said.

Jack saw straight through the lie.

He had taken it all in, everything his parents had told him, every snippet of information gleaned from the panicked newscasts yesterday, the confused reports from overseas. He had listened and taken it all in, but he did not really understand. He had already seen it for himself—Mr Jude and the people in the village did not have a disease at all, and the young crop really was dead—but he could not believe. It was too terrifying, too unreal. Too crazy.

He whispered as they walked, naming the parts that scared him the most: *Dead people, dead things, still moving and walking. Dumb and aimless, but dangerous just the same.*

Those fingers last night had not sounded aimless, those probings and proddings at their locked up, safe cottage. They had sounded anything *but* aimless.

He carried on naming. *Those of you who are immune, stay at home.* The broadcasts his parents had listen to had told of certain blood groups succumbing slower than others, and some being completely

immune. In a way, these positive elements to the broadcasts—the mentions of immunity—scared Jack more. They made him feel increasingly isolated, one of the few survivors, and what was left? What was there that they could use now, where would they go when dead people could cut your brake cables (and that sure as shit wasn't aimless, either), when they caused crashes on the motorway so they could...they could ...

Jack stumbled, dug his toes into a furrow and hit the dirt. His face pressed into the ground and he felt dry dead things scurrying across his cheeks. He wanted to cry but he could not, neither could he shout nor scream, and then he realised that what he wanted most was comfort. His mother's arms around him, his father sitting on the side of his bed stroking his brow as he did when Jack had the occasional nightmare, a cup of tea before bed, half an hour reading before he turned out his light and lay back to listen to the night.

Hands did touch him, voices did try to soothe, but all Jack could hear was the silence. All he could smell was the undercurrent of death in the motionless spring air.

Before the world receded into a strange flat brightness, Jack saw in sharp detail a line of ants marching along a furrow. They were moving strangely—too slowly, much slower than he'd ever seen one moving before, as if they were in water—and he passed out wondering how aimless these red ants really were.



He was not unconscious for long. He opened his eyes to sunlight and sky and fluffy clouds, and he suddenly knew that his parents had left him. They'd walked on, leaving him behind like an injured commando on a raid into enemy territory, afraid that he would slow them down and give the dead things a chance—

And then his mother's face appeared above his and her tears dropped onto his cheeks. "Jackie," she said, smiling, and Jack could hear the love in her voice. He did not know how—it did not sound any different from usual—but out here, lost in a dying landscape, he knew that she loved him totally. She would never leave him behind. She would rather die.

"I want to go home," Jack said, his own tears mixing with his mother's on his face. He thought of the cottage and all the good times he had spent there. It would be cold inside by now, maybe there were birds...dead birds, arrogantly roosting on plate racks and picture frames. "Mum, I want to go home, I want none of this to happen." He held up his arms and she grabbed him, hugging him so tightly that his face was pressed into her hair, his breath squeezed out. He could smell her, a warm musk of sweat and stale perfume, and he took solace in the familiar.

"We can't stay here too long," his father said, but he sat down in the dirt next to his wife and son. "We've got to get on to Tewton."

"To find Mandy?"

“To find safety,” his dad said. He saw Jack’s crestfallen expression and averted his eyes. “And to find Mandy.”

“She never hurt me, you know,” Jack muttered.

“She scared you, made you run away!”

“I ran away myself! Mandy didn’t make me, she only ever hurt herself!” Once more, he tried to recall his time in the woods, but the effort conjured only sensations of cold, damp and dark. Ironically, he could remember what happened afterwards with ease—the coughing, the fevers, the nightmares, Mandy by his bed, his shouting parents, Mandy running down their driveway, leaving her home behind—but still a day and a night were missing from his life.

It was a pointless argument, a dead topic, an aimless one. So nothing more was said.

They were silent for a while, catching their breath and all thinking their own thoughts. His mother continued to rock him in her lap but Jack knew she was elsewhere, thinking other things. His dad had broken open the shotgun and was making sure the two cartridges in there were new.

“How do you kill a dead thing, Dad?” Jack asked. A perfectly simple question, he thought. Logical. Reasonable.

His dad looked across the fields. “Tewton should be a few miles that way,” he said. He looked at his watch, then up at the sun where it hung low over the hills. “We could make it by tonight if we really push it.”

Jack’s mum began to cry. She pulled a great clod of mud from one of her slippers and threw it at the ground. “We can’t go that far alone,” she said. “Not on foot. Gray, we don’t know what’s happened, not really. They’ll come and help us, cure everyone, send us home.”

““They’?”

“You know what I mean.”

“There was a film called *Them* once,” Jack said. “About giant ants, and nuclear bombs. It was nothing like this, though.” Even as he spoke it, he thought maybe he was mistaken. He thought maybe the film was *very much* like this, a monstrous horror of humankind’s abuse of nature, and the harvest of grief it reaps.

“It’s all so sudden,” his dad said then. Jack actually saw his shoulders droop, his head dip down, as if he was being shrunken and reduced by what had happened. “I don’t think there’s much help around, not out here. Not yet.”

“It’ll be all right in Tewton,” Jack said quietly. “Mandy said it was safe there, she phoned us because she was worried, so we’ve got to go. I don’t want to stay out in the dark. Not after last night, Mum. Remember the noises?”

His mother nodded and tightened her lips.

“I don’t want to know what made those noises.” Jack felt close to tears once more but he could not let

them come, he would not.

A breeze came up and rustled through the dead young crop.

Jack jerked upright, eyes wide, mouth hanging open.

There was something around the corner of the L-shaped field, out of sight behind a clump of trees. He could not hear it, nor smell it exactly, but he knew it was dead, and he knew it was moving this way.

“Mum,” he said, “Dad. There’s something coming.”

They looked around and listened hard, his dad tightening his grip on the shotgun. “I can’t?”

“There!” Jack said, pointing across the field a second before something walked into view.

His mother gasped. “Oh, no.”

His dad stood and looked behind them, judging how far it was to the hedge.

Eight people emerged from the hidden leg of the field, one after another. There were men and women, and one child. All of them moved strangely, as if they only just learnt how to walk, and most of them wore night clothes. The exceptions were a policeman—his uniform torn and muddied—and someone dressed in thick sweater, ripped jeans and a bobble hat. He had something dangling from his left hand; it could have been a leash, but there was no dog.

One of the women had fresh blood splattered across the front of her night-gown.

The child was chewing something bloody. Flies buzzed his head, but none seemed to be landing.

Perhaps, Jack thought, the flies were dead as well.

The people did not pause. They walked straight at Jack and his parents, arms swinging by their sides from simple motion, not habit.

“I doubt they can run that fast,” Jack’s dad said.

“I’m scared,” his mother whispered.

“But can they get through the hedge, Dad? Once we’re through, will they follow us?”

Jack looked from the people to the hedge, and back again. He knew what was wrong with them—they were dead and they craved live food, his parents had learned all that from the news yesterday—but still he did not want to *believe*.

Their nostrils did not flare, their mouths hung open but did not drool, their feet plodded insistently...but not aimlessly. These dead things had a purpose, it seemed, and that purpose would be in their eyes, were they moist enough to throw back reflections.

“They’re looking at us,” Jack said quietly.

They walked slowly, coming on like wind-up toys with broken innards; no life in their movements at all.

Seconds later, they charged.

Whatever preconceptions Jack had about the ability of dead things to move were slaughtered here and now. The dead folk did not run, they rampaged, churning up the earth with heavy footfalls, shattering the strange peace with the suddenness of their movement. Yet their faces barely changed, other than the slack movement of their jaws snapping shut each time their feet struck mud. They did not shout or pant because, Jack guessed, they had no breath.

His dad fired the shotgun and then they all ran towards the hedge. Jack did not see what effect the shot had, he did not want to. He could sense the distance rapidly closing between them. The hedge seemed a hundred steps away, a thousands miles, and then he saw his father slowly dropping behind.

“Dad, come one!”

“Run Jackie!”

“Dad!” He was fumbling with the shotgun, Jack saw, plucking out the spent cartridges and trying to load fresh ones. “Dad, don’t bother, just run!”

“Gray, Gray,” he heard his mother panting under her breath, but she did not turn around. She reached the hedge first and launched herself at what she thought was an easy gap to squeeze through. She squealed, and then screamed, when she became impaled on barbed wire and sharp sticks.

Jack was seconds from the hedge but his dad was now out of sight, behind him and to the left. Jack was watching his feet so he did not trip, but in his mind’s eye he saw something else: his father caught, then trampled, then gnawed into, eaten alive while he lay there broken-backed and defenceless ...

He reached the hedge but did not slow down. Instead he jumped, scrabbling with his hands and feet even before he struck the tangled growth, hauling himself up and through the sharp thorns, the biting branches, the crisp spring foliage. Bloody tears sprang from cuts on his hands and arms.

“Mum!” he shouted as he tumbled over the other side. The breath was knocked from him as he landed, and he crawled back to the hedge in a kind of silent, airless void.

As he found his breath, he heard the blast of the shotgun once more. Something hit the ground.

His mum was struggling in the heart of the hedge and Jack went to her aid. She was already cut and bleeding, the splashes of blood vivid against withered leaves and rotting buds. “Stop struggling!” he shouted.

The shotgun again.

“Dad!”

He could see glimpses of frantic movement through the hedge—

And then he knew it was going to be all right. Not for ever—in the long term everything was dark and lonely and different—but for now they would all pull through. He saw his bloodied parents hugging each other, felt the coolness of blood on his neck, smelled the scent of death receding as they left the mindless dead behind to feed on other things. He also saw a place where everything would be fine, but he had no



idea how to get there.

“Jack, help me!” his mother shouted, and everything rushed back. He reached out and grabbed her arms, and although she screamed, still he pulled.

The hedge moved and shuddered as bodies crashed into it on the other side. He could not see his dad but he did not worry, there was nothing to worry about

( *yet*, nothing to worry about *yet* )

and then he came scrambling over, throwing the shotgun to the ground and following close behind.

His mother came free with a final harsh scream. Jack saw the wounds on her arms and shoulders where the barbed wire had slashed in and torn out, and he began to cry.

“Oh Janey,” his dad said, hugging his wife and letting his tears dilute her blood. Jack closed his eyes because his mum was bleeding...she was hurt and she was bleeding...But then she was hugging him and her blood cooled on his skin.

“Come on, I don’t want to stay here a minute longer,” his father said. “And maybe they’ll find a way through. Maybe.”

They hurried along the perimeter of the new field, keeping a wary look out in case this place, too, had occupants ready to chase them into the ground.

Jack looked back only once. Shapes were silhouetted on and in the hedge like grotesque fruits, their arms twitching uselessly, clothes and skin stretched and torn on barbed wire and dead wood

He did not look again, but he heard their struggles for a long while. By the time he and his family reached the gate that led out into a little country lane, their stench had been carried away on the breeze.

The lane looked unused, but at least it was a sign of humanity.

Jack was so glad to see it.



They turned east. Jack wondered at his conviction that there was something dangerous approaching, moments before the crowd had rounded the corner in the field. He had smelled them, of course, that was it. Or perhaps he had heard them, he had a good sense of hearing, his mother always said so.

Or perhaps he had simply known that they were there.

His mother and father were walking close together behind him, almost rubbing shoulders. Almost, but not quite, because his mum's arm was a mess, there was blood dripping from her fingertips as they walked, and Jack had seen her shoulder where a flap of skin hung down across her armpit, and he'd seen the *meat* of her there where the barbed wire had torn her open.

It didn't hurt, she said, it was numb but it didn't hurt. Jack knew from the way she talked it that the numbness would not last. Once the shock had worn off and the adrenaline drained from her system, the slow fire would ignite and the pain would come in surges. For his mother, the future was a terrifying place promising nothing but worse to come.

Total silence surrounded them. The landscape had taken on an eerie appearance, one normally reserved for the strangest of autumn evenings, when the sun was sinking behind wispy clouds and the moon had already revealed itself. The hills in the distance were smothered in mist, only occasional smudges of green showing through like old bruises. Nearer by, clumps of trees sprouted on ancient hillocks. The trees were all old, Jack knew, otherwise the farmers would have cut them down; but today they looked positively ancient. Today they looked fossilised, petrified like the wood his friend Jamie had brought back from his holiday in the Dominican Republic the year before, wood so old it was like stone.

What would those trees feel like now, Jack wondered? Would their trunks be cold and dry as rock, or was there still that electric dampness of something alive? Were their leaves as green and fresh and vibrant as they should be in the spring...or were they as dead inside as the young harvest across the fields?

*If I cut them, Jack thought, will they bleed?*

"Hang on," his mum said, and he knew that the pain had begun. He turned back and saw her sink slowly to her knees in the lane, his dad standing over her, one hand reaching out but not touching her shoulder because he did not know what to do. It was always Jack's mum who did the comforting, the molly-coddling when Dad had a cold, the reassuring when Jack woke from nightmares and became frustrated when he just could not explain exactly what they were about. And now that she needed comforting, his dad was standing there like he was balancing a teacup on the back of his hand, unable to help his wife where she knelt bleeding and crying into the muck.

"Mum," Jack said, "my teacher said that pain is transitory."

"Big words, Jackie," she said, trying to smile for him.

"It's what he said, though. He was telling us because Jamie was going to the dentist for a filling, and he was scared of the needle. Mr Travis said pain is transitory, you feel it when it happens but afterwards you can't remember exactly what it was like. You can't recreate pain in your memories because your body won't let you, otherwise it'll only hurt again."

His dad handed her a handkerchief and she lifted her sleeve slowly, revealing some of the smaller cuts and dabbing at them as if that would take her attention from the gaping wound in her shoulder. "The point being?" she said, sharply but not unkindly. Jack could see that she was grateful for the distraction.

"Well, if you're hurting just cast your mind into the future. When you're all better, you won't even remember what the hurting was like. And pain doesn't actually *hurt* you, anyway. It's only in your head. Your cuts will heal, Mum. In a few days it won't matter."

"In a few days..." she said, smiling and sighing and opening her mouth as if to finish the sentence. But she left it at that.

“It’s almost midday,” his dad said.

“I should be in school.”

“School’s off, kiddo!” Tears were cascading past his mum’s smiling mouth.

“We should get moving, if we can. Janey, you think you can move, honey? If we’re going to get to Tewton—”

“Where are we now?” Jack’s mum asked suddenly.

His dad frowned but did not answer.

“Gray? Don’t tell me that. Don’t say we’re lost.”

“Well,” he said, “Tall Stennington is maybe three miles back thataway.” He turned and pointed the way they had come, though Jack thought he was probably off by about a sixth of a circle anyway. “So we must be nearing the river by now. You think, Jackie?”

*You think, Jackie?* His dad, asking him for advice in something so important. He tried to see himself from his father’s eyes. Short, skinny, into books instead of his dad’s beloved football, intelligent in his own right but academically average. . . a kid. Just a kid. However much Jack thought about things, used big words, had a hard-on when he watched bikini-clad women on holiday programmes. . . he was just a kid to his dad.

“No,” Jack said. “I think you’re a bit out there, Dad. I reckon we’re closer to Peter’s Acre than anything, so we really need to head more that way, if we can.” He pointed off across the fields to where the landscape rose in the distance, lifting towards a heavily wooded hillside. “Tewton is over that hill, through the woods. If you drive you go that way, yes,” he said, indicating the direction his father had suggested. “But if I was a crow, I’d go there.”

“So by the time we get that far,” his mum said, “what I’m feeling now I’d have forgotten.”

Jack nodded, but he was frowning.

“OK, Jackie. Let’s hit it.” And up she stood, careful not to look down at the strip of her husband’s T-shirt wrapped around her shoulder, already stained a deep, wet red.

They left the lane and moved off across the fields towards the tree-covered hillside in the distance. Between them and the woods lay several fields, a veiny network of hedges, hints of other lanes snaking from here to there and a farmstead. It looked quiet and deserted; no smoke rose from its chimneys; its yard seemed, from this distance, empty and still. Yet for the first time, Jack was glad that his dad was carrying the gun.

Something had changed, Jack thought, since before their flight from the dead people and his mother being tangled and wounded in the hedge. It was her attitude to things—the nervousness had been swept aside by the pain, so that now she seemed to accept things more as they came than as she expected them to be. But this change in his mother had also moved down the line to his father and himself, altering the subtle hierarchy of the family, shifting emphases around so that none of them were quite the people they had been that morning.

Jack suddenly wanted to see Mandy. In the four years since her leaving home she had become something of a stranger. They still saw her on occasion—though it was always she who came to visit them—but she changed so much every time that Jack would see a different person walking in the door. She and Jack were still very close and there was an easy atmosphere between them that his parents seemed to resent, but she was not the Mandy he remembered.

Sometimes Jack would imagine that his sister was still living at home. He would go into her bedroom, and although it had been cleared out by his parents and left sterile and bland—forever awaiting a visitor to abuse its neatness—he could sense her and hear her and smell her. Only his memories placed her there, of course, but he would sit and chat with her for hours.

Sometimes, when he next spoke to her on the phone, they would carry on their conversation.

“When can we go to see Mandy?” he asked, realising as he spoke that he sounded like a whiner. They were going, that was that, and they certainly could not move any faster.

“We’ll be there by tonight, Jackie,” his mother said comfortingly.

“You do love her, don’t you?” he asked.

“Of course we do! She’s our daughter—your sister—so of course we love her!”

“So why don’t we go to see her any more?”

His mother was silent for a while, his father offering no help. There was only the crunch of their feet crushing new grass into crisp green fragments in the dirt. It sounded to Jack as though they were walking on thin ice.

“Sometimes people fall out,” his mother said. “There was that time she made you run away—”

“She didn’t make me, I told you, I did it myself!”

His mother winced in pain as she turned to him and Jack felt ashamed, ashamed that he was putting her through this soon after she had been dragged through a wire fence and torn to shreds. But then, he thought, maybe there was no better time. Her defences were down, the pain was filtering her thoughts and letting only essential ones through, holding back the ballast and, maybe, discarding it altogether.

“Mandy scared you,” she said. “She was doing something she shouldn’t have been doing and she scared you and you ran away. We didn’t find you until the next day, and you don’t . . .” She looked up at the sky, but Jack could still see the tears. “You don’t know what that night did to your Dad and me.”

“But you still love her?”

His mother nodded. “Of course we do.”

Jack thought about this for a while, wondering whether easy talk and being together were really the most important things there were. “That’s okay then,” he said finally. “I’m hungry.”

*Mum dying, because she’s hurt, he thought, naming his fears automatically. Things changing, it’s all still changing. Dead people. I’m afraid of the dead people .*

“We’ll eat when we get to Tewton,” his dad said from up ahead.

“And I’m thirsty.” *No food, no drink...no people at all. Death; we could die out here .*

“When we get to Tewton, Jackie,” his dad said, more forcefully than before. He turned around and Jack could see how much he had changed, even over the last hour. The extraordinary had been presented to him, thrust in his face in the form of a gang of dead people, denying disbelief. Unimaginable, impossible, true.

“I expect those people just wanted help, Dad.” He knew it was crazy even as he said it—he *knew* they’d wanted more than that; he had seen the fresh blood—but maybe the idea would drain some of the strain from his dad’s face. And maybe a lie could hide the truth, and help hold back his mother’s pain, and bring Mandy back to them where she belonged, and perhaps they were only on a quiet walk in the country...

“Come on, son,” his father said, and Jack did not know whether he meant *move along* , or *give me a break* . Whatever, he hated the air of defeat in his voice.

*My dad, failing, he thought. Pulling away from things already, falling down into himself. What about Mum? What about me?*

*Who’s going to protect us?*

They had crossed one field and were nearing the edge of another when Jack suddenly recognised with their surroundings. To the left stood an old barn, doors rotted away and ivy making its home between the stones. The ivy was dead now, but still it clotted the building’s openings, as if holding something precious inside. To the right, at the far corner of the field, an old metal plough rusted down into the ground. He remembered playing war here, diving behind the plough while Jamie threw mud grenades his way, ack-ack-acking a stream of machinegun fire across the field, crawling through the rape crop and ploughing their own paths towards and away from each other. Good times, and lost times, never to be revisited; he felt that now more than ever. Lost times.

“I know this place!” he said. “There’s a pond over there behind that hedge, with an island in the middle and everything!” He ran to the edge of the field, aiming for the gate where it stood half-open.

“Jack, wait!” his dad shouted, but Jack was away, cool breeze ruffling his hair and lifting some of the nervous sweat from his skin. The crinkle of shoots beneath his feet suddenly seemed louder and Jack wanted nothing more than to get out onto the road, leave these dead things behind, find a car or thumb a lift into Tewton where there would be help, where there had to be help, because if there wasn’t then where the hell *would* there be help?

Nowhere. There’s no help anywhere. The thought chilled him but he knew it was true, just as he had known that there were dead people around the corner of the field—

—just as he knew that there was something very, very wrong here as well. He could smell it already, a rich, warm tang to the air instead of the musty smell of death they had been living with all morning. A *fresh* smell. But he kept on running because he could not do anything else, even though he knew he should stay in the field, knew he *had* to stay in the field for his own good. He had played here with Jamie, they had shared good times here so it must be a good place.

Jack darted through the gate and out onto the pitted road.

The colours struck him first. Bright colours in a landscape so dull with death.

The car was a blazing yellow, a metal banana his mum would have called it, never lose that in a car park she would say. Inside the car sat a woman in a red dress, and inside the woman moved something else, a squirrel, its tail limp and heavy with her blood. The dress was not all red, he could see a white sleeve and a torn white flap hanging from the open door, touching the road.

Her face had been ripped off, her eyes torn out, her throat chewed away.

There was something else on the road next to the car, a mass of meat torn apart and spread across the Tarmac. Jack saw the flash of bone and an eyeless head and a leg, still attached to the bulky torso by strands of stuff, but they did not truly register. What he did see and understand were the dozen small rodents chewing at the remnants of whatever it had been. Their tails were long and hairless, their bodies black and slick with the blood they wallowed in. They chewed slowly, but not thoughtfully, because there could not have been a single thought in their little dead minds.

“Dad,” Jack gasped, trying to shout but unable to find a breath.

More things lay further towards the pond, and for a terrible moment Jack thought it was another body that had been taken apart (because that’s what he saw, he knew that now, his mind had permitted understanding on the strict proviso that he—)

He turned and puked and fell to his knees in his own vomit, looking up to see his father standing at the gate and staring past him at the car.

Jack looked again, and he realised that although the thing further along the road had once been a person—he could see their head, like a shop dummy’s that had been stepped on and covered in shit and set on fire so the eyes melted and rolled out to leave black pits—there was no blood at all, no wetness there. Nothing chewed on these sad remains.

Dead already when the car ran them over. Standing there in the road, dead already, letting themselves be hit so that the driver—he had been tall, good looking, the girl in his passenger seat small and mouse-like and scared into a gibbering, snotty wreck—would get out and go to see what he had done. Opening himself up to attack from the side, things darting from the ditches and downing him and falling on him quickly... and quietly. No sound apart from the girl’s screams as she saw what was happening, and then her scream had changed in tone.

When they’d had their fill, they dragged themselves away to leave the remains to smaller dead things.

“Oh God, Dad!” Jack said, because he did not want to know any more. Why the hell should he? How the hell did he know what he knew already?

His dad reached down and scooped him up into his arms, pressing his son’s face into his shoulder so he did not have to look any more. Jack raised his eyes and saw his mother walk slowly from the field, and she was trying not to look as well. She stared straight at Jack’s face, her gaze unwavering, her lips tensed with the effort of not succumbing to human curiosity and subjecting herself to a sight that would live with her forever.

But of course she looked, and her liquid scream hurt Jack as much as anything ever had. He loved his

mum because she loved him, he knew how much she loved him. His parents had bought him a microscope for Christmas and she'd pricked her finger with a needle so that he could look at her blood, that's how much she loved him. He hated to hear her scared, hated to see her in pain. Her fear and agony were all his own.

His father turned and ushered his mum down the road, away from the open banana car with its bright red mess, away from the bloody dead things eating up what was left. Jack, facing back over his dad's shoulder, watched the scene until it disappeared around a bend in the road. He listened to his father's laboured breathing and his mother's panicked gasps. He looked at the pale green hedges, where even now hints of rot were showing through. And he wanted to go home.



*"Are you scared, Jack?" Mandy had asked.*

*"No," he said truthfully.*

*"Not of me," she smiled. "Not of Mum and Dad and what's happening, that'll sort itself out. I mean ever. Are you ever scared, of things. The dark, spiders, death, war, clowns? Ever, ever, ever?"*

*Jack went to shake his head, but then he thought of things that did frighten him a little. Not outright petrified, just disturbed, that's how he sometimes felt. Maybe that's what Mandy meant.*

*"Well," he said, "there's this thing on telly. It's Planet of the Apes, the TV show, not the film. There's a bit at the beginning with the gorilla army man, Urko, his face is on the screen and sometimes it looks so big that it's bigger than the screen, it's really in the room, you know? Well...I hide behind my hands."*

*"But do you peek?"*

*"No!"*

*"I've seen that programme," Mandy said, even though Jack was pretty sure she had not. "I've seen it, and you know what? There's nothing at all to be scared of. I'll tell you why: the bit that scares you is made up of a whole bunch of bits that won't. A man in a suit; a camera trick; an actor; a nasty voice. And that man in the suit goes home at night, has a cup of tea, picks his nose and goes to the toilet. Now that's not very scary, is it?"*

*Even though he felt ill Jack giggled and shook his head. "No!" He wondered whether the next time he watched that opening sequence, he'd be as scared as before. He figured maybe he would, but in a subtly different way. A grown-up way.*

*“Fear’s made up of a load of things,” she said, “and if you know those things...if you can name them...you’re most of the way to accepting your fear.”*

*“But what if you don’t know what it is? What if you can’t say what’s scaring you?”*

*His sister looked up at the ceiling and tried to smile, but she could not. “I’ve tried it, over the last few days,” she whispered. “I’ve named you, and Mum, and Dad, and the woods, and what happened, and you...out there in the woods, alone...and loneliness itself. But it doesn’t work.” She looked down at Jack again, looked straight into his eyes. “If that happens then it should be scaring you. Real fear is like intense pain. It’s there to warn you something’s truly wrong.”*

I hope I always know, *Jack thought* . I hope I always know what I’m afraid of.

*Mandy began singing softly. Jack slept.*



“Oh no! Dad, it’s on fire!”

They had left the scene of devastation and towards the farm they’d spotted earlier, intending to find something to eat. It went unspoken that they did not expect to discover anyone alive at the farm. Jack only hoped they would not find anyone dead, either.

They paused in the lane, which was so infrequently used that grass and dock leaves grew in profusion along its central hump. Insidious green grass and yellowed dock now, though here and there tufts of rebellious life still poked through. The puddled wheel ruts held the occasional dead thing swimming feebly.

Jack’s dad raised his binoculars, took a long look at the farm and lowered them again. “It’s not burning. Something is, but it’s not the farm. A bonfire, I think. I think the farmer’s there, and he’s started a bonfire in his yard.”

“I wonder what he could be burning,” Jack’s mother said. She was pale and tired, her left arm tucked between the buttons of her shirt to try to ease the blood loss. Jack wanted to cry every time he looked at her, but he could see tears in her eyes as well, and he did not want to give her cause to shed any more.

“We’ll go and find out.”

“Dad, it might be dangerous. There might be...those people there. Those things.” *Dead things* , Jack thought, but the idea of dead things walking still seemed too ridiculous to voice.

“We need food, Jack,” his dad said, glancing at his mother as he said it. “And a drink. And some bandages for your mum, if we can find some. We need help.”



“I’m scared, why can’t we just go on to Tewton?”

“And when we get there, and there are people moving around in the streets, will you want to hold back then? In case they’re the dead things we’ve seen?”

Jack did not answer but he shook his head, because he knew his dad was right.

“I’ll go on ahead slightly,” his dad said, “I’ve got the gun. That’ll stop anything that comes at us. Jack, you help your mum.”

*Didn’t stop the other people, Jack thought. And you couldn’t shoot at Mrs Haswell, could you Dad? Couldn’t shoot at someone you knew .*

“Don’t go too fast,” his mum said quietly. “Gray, I can’t walk too fast. I feel faint, but if I walk slowly I can keep my head clear.”

He nodded then started off, holding the shotgun across his stomach now instead of dipped over his elbow. Jack and his mother held back for a while and watched him go, Jack thinking how small and scared he looked against the frightening landscape.

“You alright, Mum?”

She nodded but did not turn her head. “Come on, let’s follow your Dad. In ten minutes we’ll be having a nice warm cup of tea and some bread in the farmer’s kitchen.”

“But what’s he burning? Why the bonfire?”

His mother did not answer, or could not. Perhaps she was using all her energy to walk. Jack did the only thing he could and stayed along beside her.

The lane crossed a B-road and then curved around to the farmyard, bounded on both sides by high hedges. There was no sign of any traffic, no hint that anyone had come this way recently. Jack looked to his left where the road rose slowly up out of the valley. In the distance he saw something walk from one side to the other, slowly, as if unafraid of being run down. It may have been a deer, but Jack could not be sure.

“Look,” his mum said quietly. “Oh Jackie, look.”

There was an area of tended plants at the entrance to the farm lane, rose bushes pointing skeletal thorns skyward and clematis smothered in pink buds turning brown. But it was not this his mother was pointing at with a finger covered in blood; it was the birds. There were maybe thirty of them, sparrows from what Jack could make out, though they could just as easily have been siskins that had lost their colour. They flapped uselessly at the air, heads jerking with the effort, eyes like small black stones. They did not make a sound, and that is perhaps why his father had not seen them as he walked by. Or maybe he had seen them and chosen to ignore the sight. Their wings were obviously weak, their muscles wasting. They did not give in. Even as Jack and his mother passed by they continued to flap uselessly at air that no longer wished to support them.

Jack kept his eyes on them in case they followed.

They could smell the bonfire now, and tendrils of smoke wafted across the lane and into the fields on either side. “That’s not a bonfire,” Jack said. “I can’t smell any wood.” His mother began to sob as she walked. Jack did not know whether it was from her pain, or something else entirely.

A gunshot coughed at the silence. Jack’s father crouched down low, twenty paces ahead of them. He brought his gun up but there was no smoke coming from the barrel. “Wait—!” he shouted, and another shot rang out. Jack actually saw the hedge next to his dad flicker as pellets tore through.

“Get away!” a voice said from a distance. “Get out of here! Get away!”

His dad backed down the lane, still in a crouch, signalling for Jack and his mum to back up as well. “Wait, we’re all right, we’re normal, we just want some help.”

There was silence for a few seconds, then another two aimless shots in quick succession. “I’ll kill you!” the voice shouted again, and Jack could tell its owner was crying. “You killed my Janice, you made me kill her again, and I’ll kill you!”

Jack’s dad turned and ran to them, keeping his head tucked down as if his shoulders would protect it against a shotgun blast. “Back to the road,” he said.

“But we could reason with him.”

“Janey, back to the road. The guy’s burning his own cattle and some of them are still moving. Back to the road.”

“Some of them are still moving,” Jack repeated, fascination and disgust—two emotions which, as a young boy, he was used to experiencing in tandem—blurring his words.

“Left here,” his father said as they reached the B-road. “We’ll skirt around the farm and head up towards the woods. Tewton is on the other side of the forest.”

“There’s a big hill first, isn’t there?” his mum said. “A steep hill?”

“It’s not that steep.”

“However steep it is . . .” But his mum trailed off, and when Jack looked at her he saw tears on her cheeks. A second glance revealed the moisture to be sweat, not tears. It was not hot, hardly even warm. He wished she was crying instead of sweating.

His father hurried them along the road until the farm was out of sight. The smell of the fire faded into the background scent of the countryside, passing over from lush and alive, to wan and dead. Jack could still not come to terms with what he was seeing. It was as if his eyes were slowly losing their ability to discern colours and vitality in things, the whole of his vision turning into one of those sepia-tinted photographs he’d seen in his grandmother’s house, where people never smiled and the edges were eaten away by time and too many thumbs and fingers. Except the bright red of his mother’s blood was still there, even though the hedges were pastel instead of vibrant. His dad’s face was pale, yes, but the burning spots on his cheeks—they flared when he was angry or upset, or both—were as bright as ever. Some colours, it seemed, could not be subsumed so easily.

“We won’t all fade away, will we Dad? You won’t let me and Mum and Mandy fade away, will you?”

His dad frowned, then ruffled his hair and squeezed the back of his neck. “Don’t worry son. We’ll get to Tewton and everything will be all right. They’ll be doing something to help, they’re bound to. They have to.”

“Who are ‘they’, Dad?” Jack said, echoing his mum’s question from that morning.

His dad shook his head. “Well, the government. The services, you know, the police and fire brigade.”

*Maybe they’ve faded away too*, Jack thought. He did not say anything. It seemed he was keeping a lot of his thoughts to himself lately, making secrets. Instead, he tried naming some of his fears—they seemed more expansive and numerous every time he thought about them—but there was far too much he did not know. Fear is like pain, Mandy had told him. Maybe that’s why his mum was hurting so much now. Maybe that’s why *he* felt so much like crying. Underneath all the running around and the weirdness of today, perhaps he was truly in pain.

They followed the twisting road for ten minutes before hearing the sound of approaching vehicles.

“Stand back,” Jack’s dad said, stretching out and ushering Jack and his mum up against the hedge. Jack hated the feel of the dead leaves and buds against the back of his neck. They felt like long fingernails, and if he felt them move...if he felt them twitch and begin to scratch ...

The hedges were high and overgrown here, though stark and sharp in death, and they did not see the cars until they were almost upon them. They were both battered almost beyond recognition, paint scoured off to reveal rusting metal beneath. *It’s as if even the cars are dying*, Jack thought, and though it was a foolish notion it chilled him and made him hug his dad.

His dad brought up the gun. Jack could feel him shaking. He could feel the fear there, the tension in his legs, the effort it was taking for him to breathe.

“Dad?” he said, and he was going to ask what was wrong. He was going to ask why was he pointing a gun at people who could help them, maybe give them a lift to Tewton.

“Oh dear God,” his mum said, and Jack heard the crackle as she leant back against the hedge.

There were bodies tied across the bonnets of each car. He’d seen pictures of hunters in America, returning to town with deer strapped across the front of their cars, parading through the streets with kills they had made. This was not the same, because these bodies were not kills. They were dead, yes, but not kills, because their heads rolled on their necks, their hands twisted at the wrist, their legs shook and their heels banged on the hot metal beneath them.

Jack’s father kept his gun raised. The cars slowed and Jack saw the faces inside, young for the most part, eyes wide and mouths open in sneers of rage or fear or mockery, whatever it was Jack could not tell. Living faces, but mad as well.

“Wanna lift?” one of the youths shouted through the Ital’s smashed windscreen.

“I think we’ll walk,” Jack’s dad said.

“It’s not safe.” The cars drifted to a standstill. “These fuckers are everywhere. Saw them eating a fucking bunch of people on the motorway. Ran them over.” He leaned through the windscreen and patted the dead woman’s head. She stirred, her eyes blank and black, skin ripped in so many places it

looked to Jack like she was shedding. “So, you wanna lift?”

“Where are you going?” Jack asked.

The boy shrugged. He had a bleeding cut on his face; Jack was glad. The dead don’t bleed. “Dunno. Somewhere where they can figure out what these fuckers are about.”

“Who are ‘they’?” Jack’s dad asked.

The youth shrugged again, his bravado diluted by doubt. His eyes glittered and Jack thought he was going to cry, and suddenly he wished the youth would curse again, shout and be big and brave and defiant.

“We’ll walk. We’re going to Tewton.”

“Yes, Mandy rang and said it’s safe there!” Jack said excitedly.

“Best of luck to you then, little man,” the driver said. Then he accelerated away. The second car followed, frightened faces staring out. The cars—the dead and the living—soon passed out of sight along the road.

“Into the fields again,” Jack’s dad said. “Up the hill to the woods. It’s safer there.”

*Safer among dead things than among the living*, Jack thought. Again, he kept his thought to himself. Again, they started across the fields.

They saw several cows standing very still in the distance, not chewing, not snorting, not flicking their tails. Their udders hung slack and empty, teats already black. They seemed to be looking in their direction. None of them moved. They looked like photos Jack had seen of the concrete cows in Milton Keynes, though those looked more lifelike.

It took an hour to reach the edge of the woods. Flies buzzed them but did not bite, the skies were empty of birds, things crawled along at the edges of fields, where dead crops met dead hedges.

The thought of entering the woods terrified Jack, though he could not say why. Perhaps it was a subconscious memory of the time he had been lost in the woods. That time had been followed by a mountain of heartache. Maybe he was anticipating the same now.

Instead, as they passed under the first stretch of dipping trees, they found a house, and a garden, and more bright colours than Jack had names for.



“Look at that! Janey, look at that! Jack, see, I told you, it’s not all bad!”

The cottage was small, its roof slumped in the middle and its woodwork was painted a bright, cheery yellow. The garden was a blazing attack of colour, and for a while Jack thought he was seeing something from a fairytale. Roses were only this red in stories, beans this green, grass so pure, ivy so darkly gorgeous across two sides of the house. Only in fairytales did potted plants stand in windowsill ranks so perfectly, their petals kissing each other but never stealing or leeching colour from their neighbour. Greens and reds and blues and violets and yellows, all stood out against the backdrop of the house and the limp, dying woods behind it. In the woods there were still colours, true, vague echoes of past glories clinging to branches or leaves or fronds. But this garden, Jack thought, must be where all the colour in the world had fled, a Noah’s Ark for every known shade and tint and perhaps a few still to be discovered. There was magic in this place.

“Oh, wow,” his mum said. She was smiling, and Jack was glad. But his father, who had walked to the garden gate and pulled an overhanging rose stem to his nose, was no longer smiling. His expression was as far away from a smile as could be.

“It’s not real,” his dad said.

“What?”

“This rose isn’t real. It’s...synthetic. It’s silk, or something.”

“But the grass, Dad...”

Jack ran to the gate as his father pushed through it, and they hit the lawns together.

“Astroturf. Like they use on football pitches, sometimes. Looks pretty real, doesn’t it, son?”

“The beans. The fruit trees, over there next to the cottage.”

“Beans and fruit? In spring?”

Jack’s mum was through the gate now, using her one good hand to caress the plants, squeeze them and watch them spring back into shape, bend them and hear the tiny snap as a plastic stem broke. Against the fake colours of the fake plants, she looked very pale indeed.

Jack ran to the fruit bushes and tried to pluck one of the red berries hanging there in abundance. It was difficult parting it from its stem, but it eventually popped free and he threw it straight into his mouth. He was not really expecting a burst of fruity flesh, and he was not proved wrong. It tasted like the inside of a yoghurt carton: plastic and false.

“It’s not fair!” Jack ran to the front door of the cottage and hammered on the old wood, ignoring his father’s hissed words of caution from behind him. His mum was poorly, they needed some food and drink, there were dead things—*dead* things, for fucking hell’s sake—walking around and chasing them and eating people. Saw them eating a fucking bunch of people on the motorway, the man in the car had said.

All that, and now this, and none of it was fair.

The door drifted open. There were good smells from within, but old smells as well: the echoes of fresh

bread; the memory of pastries; a vague idea that chicken had been roasted here recently, though surely not today, and probably not yesterday.

“There’s no one here!” Jack called over his shoulder.

“They might be upstairs.”

Jack shook his head. No, he knew this place was empty. He’d known the people in the field were coming and he’d seen what the dead folk in the banana car were like before...before he saw them for real. And he knew that this cottage was empty.

He went inside.

His parents dashed in after him, even his poorly mum. He felt bad about making her rush, but once they were inside and his dad had looked around, they knew they had the place to themselves.



“It’s just not fair,” Jack said once again, elbows resting on a windowsill in the kitchen, chin cradled in cupped hands. “All those colours ...”

There was a little bird in the garden, another survivor drawn by the colours. It was darting here and there, working at the fruit, pecking at invisible insects, fluttering from branch to plastic branch in a state of increasing agitation.

“Why would someone do this—” his mum asked. She was sitting at the pitted wooden table with a glass of orange juice and a slice of cake. Real juice, real cake. “Why construct a garden so false?”

“I feel bad about just eating their stuff,” his dad said. “I mean, who knows who lives here? Maybe it’s a little old lady and she has her garden like this because she’s too frail to tend it herself. We’ll leave some money when we go.” He tapped his pockets, sighed. “You got any cash, Janey?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t think to bring any when we left this morning. It was all so...rushed.”

“Maybe everything’s turning plastic and this is just where it begins,” Jack mused. Neither of his parents replied. “I read a book once where everything turned to glass.”

“I’ll try the TV,” his dad said after a long pause.

Jack followed him through the stuffy hallway and into the living room, a small room adorned with faded tapestries, brass ornaments and family portraits of what seemed like a hundred children. Faces smiled from the walls, hair shone in forgotten summer sunshine, and Jack wondered where all these people were now. If they were still children, were they in school? If they were grown up, were they doing what he and

his parents were doing, stumbling their way through something so strange and *unexpected* that it forbore comprehension?

Or perhaps they were all dead. Sitting at home. Staring at their own photographs on their own walls, seeing how things used to be.

“There it is,” his dad said. “Christ, what a relic.” He never swore in front of Jack, not even damn or Christ or shit. He did not seem to notice his own standards slipping.

The television was an old wooden cabinet type, buttons and dials running down one side of the screen, no remote control, years of mugs and plates having left their ghostly impressions on the veneered top. His dad plugged it in and switched it on, and they heard an electrical buzz as it wound itself up. As the picture coalesced from the soupy screen Jack’s dad glanced at his watch. “Almost six o’clock, news should be on any time now.”

“I expect they’ll have a news flash, anyway,” Jack said confidently.

His dad did something then that both warmed his heart and disconcerted him. He laughed gently and gave him a hug, and Jack felt tears cool and shameless on his cheek. “Of course they will, son,” he said, “I’m sure they will.”

“Anything?” called his mum.

“Nearly,” Jack shouted back.

There was no sound. The screen was stark and bland, and the bottom half stated: ‘This is a Government Announcement’. The top half of the screen contained scrolling words: ‘Stay calm...Remain indoors...Help is at hand...Please await further news.’

And that was it.

“What’s on the other side, Dad?”

Buttons clicked in, the picture fizzled and changed, BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, there were no others. But if there were, they would probably have all contained the same image. The Government notice, the scrolling words that should have brought comfort but which, in actual fact, terrified Jack. “I wonder how long it’s been like that,” he said, unable to prevent a shiver in his voice. “Dad, what if it isn’t changing.”

“It says ‘Please await further news’. They wouldn’t say that unless they were going to put something else up soon. Information on where to go, or something.”

“Yeah, but that’s like a sign on a shop door saying ‘Be back soon’. It could have been there for months.”

His dad looked down at him, frowning, chewing his lower lip. “There’s bound to be something on the radio. Come on, I think I saw one in the kitchen.”

His mum glanced up as they entered and Jack told her what they had seen. The radio was on a shelf above the cooker. It looked like the sort of antique people spent lots of money to own nowadays, but it was battered and yellowed, and its back cover was taped on. It crackled into instant life. A sombre

brass band sprang from the speakers.

“Try 1215 medium wave,” Jack said. “Virgin.”

His dad tuned; the same brass band.

In six more places across the wavelengths, the same brass band.

“I’ll leave it on. Maybe there’ll be some news after this bit of music. I’ll leave it on.”

They tried the telephone as well, but every number was engaged. 999, the operator, the local police station, family and friends, random numbers. It was as if everyone in the world was trying to talk to someone else.

Twenty minutes later Jack’s dad turned the radio off. They went to check the television and he switched that off as well. His mum laid down on the settee and Jack washed the cuts on her arms and the horrible wound on her shoulder, crying and gagging at the same time. He was brave, he kept it down. His mum was braver.

Later, after they had eaten some more food from the fridge and shared a huge pot of tea, his dad suggested they go to bed. No point trying to travel at night, he said, they’d only get lost. Besides, better to rest now and do the final part of the trip tomorrow than to travel all night, exhausted.

And there were those things out there as well, Jack thought, though his dad did not mention them. Dead things. *These fuckers are everywhere*. Dead cows, dead birds, dead insects, dead grass, dead crops, dead trees, dead hedges... dead people. Dead things everywhere with one thing in mind—to keep on moving. To find life.

*How long before they rot away?*

*Or maybe the bugs that make things rot are dead as well.*



There were two bedrooms. Jack said he was happy sleeping alone in one, so long as both doors were kept open. He heard his mother groan as she lowered herself onto their bed, his father bustling in the bathroom, the toilet flushing... and it was all so normal.

Then he saw a spider in the corner of his room and there was no way of telling whether it was alive or dead—even when it moved—and he realised that ‘normal’ was going to have to change its coat.

Night fell unnaturally quickly, but when he glanced at his watch in the moonlight he saw that several hours had passed. Maybe he had been drifting in and out of sleep, daydreaming, though he could not



recall what these fancies were about. He could hear his father's light snoring, his mother's breathing pained and uncomfortable. What if something tries to get in now? he thought. What if I hear fingers picking at window latches and tapping at the glass, nails scratching wood to dig out the frames? He looked up at the misshapen ceiling and thought he saw tiny dark things scurrying in and out of cracks, but it may have been fluid shapes on the surfaces of his eyes.

Then he heard the noises beginning outside. They may be the sounds of dead things crawling through undergrowth, but so long as he did not hear them shoving between plastic stems and false flowers, everything would be fine. The dark seemed to allow sounds to travel further, ring clearer, as if light could dampen noise. Perhaps it could; perhaps it would lessen the sound of dead things walking.

The night was full of furtive movements, clawed feet on hard ground, sagging bellies dragging through stiff grasses. There were no grunts or cries or shouts, no hooting owls or barking foxes screaming like tortured babies, because dead things can't talk. Dead things, Jack discovered that night, can only wander from one pointless place to another, taking other dead things with them and perhaps leaving parts of themselves behind. Whether he closed his eyes or kept them open he saw the same image, his own idea of what the scene was like out there tonight: no rhyme; no reason; no competition to survive; no feeding (unless there were a few unlucky living things still abroad); no point, no use, no ultimate aim...

...aimless.

He opened and closed his eyes, opened and closed them, stood and walked quietly to the window. The moon was almost full and it cast its silvery glare across a sickly landscape. He thought there was movement here and there, but when he looked he saw nothing. It was his poor night vision, he knew that, but it was also possible that the things didn't want to be seen moving. There was something secretive in that. Something intentional.

He went back to bed. When he was much younger it had always felt safe, and the feeling persisted now in some small measure. He pulled the stale blankets up over his nose.

His parents slept on. Jack remained awake. Perhaps he was seeking another secret in the night, and that thought conjured Mandy again. All those nights she had sat next to his bed talking to him, telling him adult things she'd never spoken of before, things about fear and imagination and how growing up closes doors in your mind. He had thought she'd been talking about herself, but she'd really been talking about him as well. She'd been talking about both of them because they were so alike, even if she was twice his age. And because they loved each other just as a brother and sister always should, and whatever had happened in the past could never, ever change that.

Because of Mandy he could name his fears, dissect and identify them, come to know them if not actually come to terms with them. He would never have figured that for himself, he was sure.

What she said had always seemed so right.

He closed his eyes to rest, and the dead had their hands on him.

They were grabbing at his arms, moving to his legs, pinching and piercing with rotten nails. One of them slapped his face and it was Mandy, she was standing at the bedside smiling down at him, her eyes shrivelled prunes in her grey face, and you should always name your fears...

Jack opened his mouth to scream but realised he was not breathing. It's safe here, he heard Mandy say. She was still smiling, welcoming, but there was a sadness behind that smile—even behind the slab of

meat she had become—that Jack did not understand.

He had not seen Mandy for several months. She should be pleased to see him.

Then he noticed that the hands on his arms and legs were her own and her nails were digging in, promising never, ever to let him go, they were together now, it was safe here, safe...

“Jack!”

Still shaking, still slapped.

“Jack! For fuck’s sake!”

Jack opened his eyes and Mandy disappeared. His dad was there instead, and for a split second Jack was confused. Mandy and his Dad looked so alike.

“Jackie, come with me,” his dad said quietly. “Come on, we’re leaving now.”

“Is it morning?”

“Yes. Morning.”

“Where’s Mum?”

“Come on, son, we’re going to go now. We’re going to find Mandy.”

Her name chilled him briefly, but then Jack remembered that even though she had been dead in his dream, still she’d been smiling. She had never hurt him, she *would* never hurt him. She would never hurt any of them.

“I need a pee.”

“You can do that outside.”

“What about food, Dad? We can’t walk all that way without eating.”

His dad turned his back and his voice sounded strange, as if forced through lips sewn shut. “I’ll get some food together when we’re downstairs, now come on.”

“Mum!” Jack shouted.

“Jackie—”

“Mum! Is she awake yet, Dad?”

His father turned back to him, his eyes wide and wet and overflowing with grief and shock. Jack should have been shocked as well, but he was not, not really that shocked at all.

“Mum...” he whispered.

He darted past his father’s outstretched hands and into the bedroom his parents had shared.

“Mum!” he said, relief sagging him against the wall. She was sitting up in bed, hands in her lap, staring at the doorway because she knew Jack would come running in as soon as he woke up. “I thought...Dad made me think...” *that you were dead*.

Nobody moved for what seemed like hours.

“She was cold when I woke up,” his dad sobbed behind him. “Cold. So cold. And sitting like that. She hasn’t moved, Jackie. Not even when I touched her. I felt for her pulse and she just looked at me...I felt for her heart, she just stared...she just keeps staring...”

“Mum,” Jack gasped. Her expression did not change, because there was no expression. Her face was like a child’s painting: two eyes, a nose, a mouth, no life there at all, no heart, no love or personality or soul. “Oh Mum...”

She was looking at him. Her eyes were dry so he could not see himself reflected there. Her breasts sagged in death, her open shoulder was a pale bloodless mass, like over-cooked meat. Her hands were crossed, and the finger she had pricked so that he could study her swarming blood under his microscope was pasty grey.

“We’ll take her,” Jack said. “When we get to Tewton they’ll have a cure, we’ll take her and—”

“Jack!” His father grabbed him under the arms and hauled him back towards the stairs. Jack began to kick and shout, trying to give life to his mother by pleading with her to help him, promising they would save her. “Jack we’re leaving now, because Mum’s dead. And Mandy is all we have left, Jackie. Listen to me!”

Jack continued to scream and his father dragged him downstairs, through the hallway and into the kitchen. He shouted and struggled, even though he knew his dad was right. They had to go on, they couldn’t take his dead Mum with them, they had to go on. They’d seen dead people yesterday, and the results of dead people eating living people. He knew his dad was right but he was only a terrified boy, verging on his teens, full of fight and power and rage. The doors in his mind were as wide as they’d ever been, but grief makes so many unconscious choices that control becomes an unknown quantity.

Jack sat at the kitchen table and cried as his father filled a bag with food and bread. He wanted comfort, he wanted a cuddle, but he watched his dad work and saw the tears on his face too. He looked a hundred years old.

At last Jack looked up at the ceiling—he thought he’d heard movement from up there, bedsprings flexing and settling—and he told his dad he was sorry.

“Jack, you and Mandy...I have to help you. We’ve got to get to Mandy, you see that? All the silly stuff, all that shit that happened...if only we knew how petty it all was. Oh God, if only I could un-say so much, son. Now, with all this...Mandy and Mum can never make up now.” Bitter tears were pouring from his eyes, no matter how much he tried to keep them in. “But Mandy and I can. Come on, it’s time to go.”

“Is there any news, Dad?” Jack wanted him to say yes, to hear they’d found a cure.

His dad shrugged. “TV’s the same this morning. Just like that ‘Be back soon’ sign.”

“You checked it already?”

“And the phone, and the radio. All the same. When I found your Mum, I thought... I wanted help.”

They opened the front door together. Jack went first and as he turned to watch the door close, he was sure he saw his mother’s feet appear at the top of the stairs. Ready to follow them out.

It was only as they came to the edge of the grotesquely cheerful garden that Jack saw just how much things had changed overnight.

Looking down the hillside he could recognise little. Yesterday had come along to kill everything, and last night had leeches any remnants of colour or life from those sad corpses. Everything was dull. Branches dipped at the ground as if trying to find their way back to seed, grasses lay flat against the earth, hedgerows snaked blandly across the land, their dividing purpose now moot. Jack’s eye was drawn to the occasional hints of colour in clumps of trees or hedges, where a lone survivor stood proudly against the background of its dead cousins. A survivor much like them.

Nothing was moving. The sky was devoid of birds, and for as far as they could see the landscape was utterly still.

“Through the woods. Back of the house. Come on son, one hour and we’ll be there.” Jack thought it would be more like two hours, maybe three, but he was grateful for his dad’s efforts on his behalf.

They skirted the garden. Jack tried desperately not to look at the cottage in case he saw a familiar face pressed against a window.

Ten minutes later they were deep in the woods, still heading generally upward towards the summit of the hill. The ground was coated with dead leaves—autumn in spring—and in places they were knee-deep. Jack had used to enjoy kicking through dried leaves piled along pavements in the autumn, his mother told him it was an indication of the rebirth soon to come, but today he did not enjoy it. His mum was not here to talk to him...and he was unsure of what sort of rebirth could ever come of this. He saw a squirrel at the base of one tree, greyer than grey, stiff in death but its limbs still twitching intermittently. It was like a wind-up toy whose key was on its final revolution. Some branches were lined with dead birds, and only a few of them were moving. There was an occasional rustle of leaves as something fell to the ground.

Grief was blurring Jack’s vision, but even without tears the unreality of what was on view would have done the same. Where trees dipped down and tapped him on the shoulder, he thought they were skeletal fingers reaching from above. Where dead things lay twitching, he thought he could see some hidden hand moving them. There had to be something hidden, Jack thought, something causing and controlling all of this, otherwise what was the point? He believed strongly in reasons, cause and effect. Coincidence and randomness were just too terrifyingly cold to even consider. Without reason, his mum’s death was pointless.

His dad kept reaching out to touch him on the head, or the shoulder, or the arm, perhaps to make sure he was still there, or maybe simply to ensure that he was real. Occasionally he would mumble incoherently, but mostly he was silent. The only other sound was the swish of dead leaves, and the intermittent impact of things hitting the ground for the final time.

Jack looked back once. After thinking of doing so, it took him several minutes to work up the courage. They had found an old track that led deep into the woods, always erring upwards, and they were following that path now, the going easier than ploughing across the forest floor. He knew that if he turned

he would see his mother following them, a grey echo of the wonderful woman she had been yesterday, her blood dried black on her clothes, smile caused by stretched skin rather than love. She had pricked her finger for him that Christmas, and to the young boy he'd been then, that was the ultimate sign of love—the willingness to inflict pain upon herself for him. But now, now that she was gone, Jack knew that his mother's true love was something else entirely. It was the proud smile every time she saw him go out to explore and experience. It was the hint of sadness in that smile, because *every single time* she said goodbye, somewhere deep inside she knew it could be the last. And it was the hug and kiss at the end of the day, when once again he came home safe and sound.

So Jack turned around, knowing he would see this false shadow of all the wonderful things his mother had been.

There was nothing following them, no one, and Jack was pleased. But still fresh tears came.

They paused and tried to eat, but neither was hungry. Jack sat on a fallen tree and put his face in his hands.

“Be brave, Jack.” His dad sat next to him and hugged him close. “Be brave. Your mum would want that, wouldn't she?”

“But what about you, Dad?” Jack asked helplessly. “Won't you be lonely?”

His dad lowered his head and Jack saw the diamond rain of tears. “Of course I will, son. But I've got you, and I've got Mandy. And your mum would want me to be brave as well, don't you think?”

Jack nodded and they sat that way for a while, alternately crying and smiling into the trees when unbidden memories came. Jack did not want to relive good memories, not now, because here they would be polluted by all the dead things around them. But they came anyway and he guessed they always would, and at the most unexpected and surprising times. They were sad but comforting. He could not bear to drive them away.

They started walking again. Here and there were signs of life, but they were few and far between: a bluebell still bright amongst its million dead cousins; a woodpecker burrowing into rotting wood; a squirrel, jumping from tree to tree as if following them, then disappearing altogether.

Jack began to wonder how long the survivors would survive. How long would it be before whatever had killed everything else killed them, like it had his mum? He was going to ask his dad, but decided against it. He must be thinking the same thing.

In Tewton it would be safe. Mandy had said so, Mandy was there, and now she and Dad could make up for good. At least then, there would still be something of a family about them.



They walked through the woods and nothing changed. Jack's dad held the shotgun in both hands but he had no cause to use it. Things were greyer today, blander, slower. It seemed also that things were deader. They found three dead people beneath a tree, not one of them showing any signs of movement. They looked as though they had been dead for weeks, but they still had blood on their chins. Their stomachs were bloated and torn open.

Just before midday they emerged suddenly from the woods and found themselves at the top of the hill, looking down into a wide, gentle valley. The colours here had gone as well; it looked like a fine film of ash had smothered everything in sight, from the nearest tree to the farthest hillside. In the distance, hunkered down behind a roll in the land as if hiding itself away, they could just make out the uppermost spires and roofs of Tewton. From this far away it was difficult to see whether there were any signs of life. Jack thought not, but he tried not to look too hard in case he was right.

"Let's take a rest here, Jackie," his dad said. "Let's sit and look." Jack's mum had once used that saying when they were on holiday, the atmosphere and excitement driving Jack and Mandy into a frenzy, his dad eager to find a pub, an eternity of footpaths and sight-seeing stretched out before them. *Let's just sit and look*, she had said, and they had heeded her words and simply enjoyed the views and surroundings for what they were. Here and now there was nothing he wanted to sit and look at. The place smelled bad, there were no sounds other than their own laboured breathing, the landscape was a corpse laid out on a slab, perhaps awaiting identification, begging burial. There was nothing here he wanted to see.

But they sat and looked, and when Jack's heartbeat settled back to normal, he realised that he could no longer hear his father's breathing.

He held his breath. Stared down at the ground between his legs, saw the scattered dead beetles and ants, and the ladybirds without any flame in their wings. He had never experienced such stillness, such silence. He did not want to look up, did not want events to move on to whatever he would find next. *Dad dead*, he named. *Me on my own. Me, burying Dad*.

Slowly, he raised his head.

His father was asleep. His breathing was long and slow and shallow, a contented slumber or the first signs of his body running down, following his wife to that strange place which had recently become even stranger. He remained sitting upright and his hands still clasped the gun, but his chin was resting on his chest, his shoulders rising and falling, rising and falling, so slightly that Jack had to watch for a couple of minutes to make sure.

He could not bear to think of his father not waking up. He went to touch him on the shoulder, but wondered what the shock would do.

They had to get to Tewton. They were here—hell, he could even *see* it—but still they found no safety. If there was help to be had, it must be where Mandy had said it would be.

Jack stood, stepped from foot to foot, looked around as if expecting help to come galloping across the funereal landscape on a white charger. Then he gently lifted the binoculars from his dad's neck, negotiated the strap under his arms, and set off along the hillside. Ten minutes, he figured, if he walked for ten minutes he would be able to see what was happening down in Tewton. See the hundreds of people rushing hither and thither, helping the folks who had come in from the dead countryside, providing food and shelter and some scrap of normality amongst the insanity. There would be soldiers there, and

doctors, and tents in the streets because there were too many survivors to house in the buildings. There would be food as well, tons of it ferried in by helicopter, blankets and medicines...maybe a vaccine...or a cure.

But there were no helicopters. And there were no sounds of life.

He saw more dead things on the way, but he had nothing to fear from them. Yesterday dead had been dangerous, an insane, impossible threat; now it was simply no more. Today, the living were unique.



Jack looked down on the edge of the town. A scattering of houses and garages and gardens spewed out into the landscape from between the low hills. There was a church there as well, and a row of shops with smashed windows, and several cars parked badly along the two streets he could see.

He lowered the binoculars and oriented himself from a distance, then looked again. A road wound into town from this side, trailing back along the floor of the valley before splitting in two, one of these arteries climbing towards the woods he and his father had just exited. Jack frowned, moved back to where the road passed between two rows of houses into the town, the blurred vision setting him swaying like a sunflower in the breeze.

He was shaking. The vibration knocked him out of focus. There was a cool hand twisting his insides and drawing him back the way he had come, not only to his father, but to his dead mother as well. It was as if she were calling him across the empty miles that now separated them, pleading that he not leave her alone in that strange colour-splashed cottage, singing her love to tunes of guilt and with a chorus of childlike desperation so strong that it made him feel sick. However grown up Jack liked to think he was, all he wanted at that moment was his mother. And in a way he *was* older than his years, because he knew he would feel like that whatever his age.

Tears gave him a fluid outlook. He wiped his eyes roughly with his sleeve and looked again, breathing in deeply and letting his breath out in a long, slow sigh.

There were people down there. A barricade of some sort had been thrown across the road just where houses gave way to countryside—there was a car, and some furniture, and what looked like fridges and cookers—and behind this obstruction heads bobbed, shapes moved. Jack gasped and smiled and began to shake again, this time with excitement.

Mandy must be down there somewhere, waiting for them to come in. When she saw it was just Jack and his dad she would know the truth, they would not need to tell her, but as a family they could surely pull through, help each other and hold each other and love each other as they always should have.

Jack began to run back to his dad. He would wake him and together they would go the final mile.

The binoculars banged against his hip and he fell, crunching dry grass, skidding down the slope and coming to rest against a hedge. A shower of dead things pattered down on his face, leaves and twigs and petrified insects. His mum would wipe them away. She would spit on her handkerchief and dab at the cuts on his face, scold him for running when he should walk, tell him to read a book instead of watching the television.

He stood and started off again, but then he heard a voice.

“Jack.”

It came from afar, faint, androgynous with distance and panic. He could hear that well enough; he could hear the panic.

“Jack.”

He looked uphill towards the forest, expecting to see the limp figure of his mother edge out from beneath the trees’ shadows, coming at him from the woods.

“Jack!”

The voice was louder now and accompanied by something else—the rhythmic *slap slap slap* of running feet.

Jack looked down the hill and made out something behind a hedge denuded of leaves. Lifting the binoculars he saw his father running along the road, hands pumping at the air, feet kicking up dust.

“Dad!” he called, but his father obviously did not hear. He disappeared behind a line of brown evergreens.

Jack tracked the road through the binoculars, all the way to Tewton.. His dad must have woken up, found him missing and assumed he’d already made his way to the town, eager to see Mandy, or just too grief-stricken to wait any longer. Now he was on his way into town on his own, and when he arrived he would find Jack absent. He would panic. He would think himself alone, alone but for Mandy. How would two losses in one day affect him?

His dad emerged farther down the hillside, little more than a smudge against the landscape now, still running and still calling.

Jack ran as well. He figured if he moved as the crow flies they would reach the barricade at the same time. Panic over. Then they would find Mandy.

He tripped again, cursed, hauled the binoculars from his shoulder and threw them away. As he stood and ran on down the hill, he wondered whether they would ever be found. He guessed not. He guessed they’d stay here forever, and one day they would be a fossil. There were lots of future fossils being made today.

He could no longer see his dad, but he could see the hedgerow hiding the road that led into Tewton. His feet were carrying him away, moving too fast, and at some point Jack lost control. He was no longer running, he was falling, plummeting down the hillside in a reckless dash that would doubtless result in a broken leg—at least—should he lose his footing again. He concentrated on the ground just ahead of him, tempted to look down the hillside at the road but knowing he should not, he should watch out for himself,



if he broke a limb now and there were no doctors in Tewton ...

As the slope of the hill lessened so he brought his dash under control. His lungs were burning with exertion and he craved a drink. He did not stop running, though, because the hedge was close now, a tangled, bramble-infested maze of dead twigs and crumbling branches.

Tewton was close too. He could see rooftops to his right, but little else. He'd be at the barricade in a matter of minutes.

He hoped, how he hoped that Mandy was there to greet them. She and their father would have made up already, arms around each other, smiling sad smiles. *I've named my fears*, Jack would tell her, and though their father would not understand they would smile at each other and hug, and he would tell her how what she had told him had saved him from going mad.

He reached the hedge and ran along it until he found a gate. His knees were flaring with pain, his chest tight and fit to burst, but he could see the road. He climbed the gate—there was a dead badger on the other side; not roadkill, just dead, and thankfully unmoving—and jumped into the lane.

It headed around a bend, and he was sure he heard pounding footsteps for a few seconds. It may have been his heart; it was thumping at his chest, urging him on, encouraging him to safety. He listened to it and hurried along the lane, moving at a shuffle now, more than a run.

As he rounded the bend everything came into view.

The people first of all, a couple of them still dragging themselves from the drainage reens either side of the road, several more converging on his father. He stood several steps from the barricade, glancing frantically around, obviously searching for Jack but seeing only dead people circling him, staring at him.

“Dad!” Jack shouted, at least he tried to. It came out as a gasp, fear and dread and defeat all rolled into one exhalation. Tewton...hope...help, all given way to these dead things. For a fleeting instant he thought the barricade was a dividing line behind which hope may still exist, but then he saw that it wasn't really a barricade at all. It may have been once, maybe only hours ago, but now it was broken down and breached. Little more than another pile of rubbish that would never be cleared.

“Dad!” This time it *was* a shout. His dad spun around, and it almost broke Jack's heart to see the relief on his face. But then fear regained its hold and his dad began to shout.

“Jack, stay away, they're here, look! Stay away, Jack!”

“But Dad—”

His father fired the shotgun and one of the dead people hit the road. It—Jack could not even discern its sex—squirmed and slithered, unable to regain its feet.

*Mandy*, he thought, *where's Mandy, what of Mandy?*

*Mandy dead, Mandy gone, only me and Dad left—*

But the naming of his fears did him no good, because he was right to be afraid. He knew that when he heard the sounds behind him. He knew it when he turned and saw Mandy scabbling out from the ditch, her long black hair clotted with dried leaves, her grace hobbled by death.

“Mandy,” he whispered, and he thought she paused.

There was another gunshot behind him and the sound of metal hitting something soft. Then running feet coming his way. He hoped they were his father’s. He remembered the dead people in the field yesterday, how fast they had moved, how quickly they had charged.

Mandy was grey and pale and thin. Her eyes showed none of his sister, her expression was not there, he could not *sense* her at all. Her silver rings rattled loose on long stick fingers. She was walking towards him.

“Mandy, Mandy, it’s me, Jack—”

“Jack! Move!” His father’s words were slurred because he was running, it *was* his footsteps Jack could hear. And then he heard a shout, a curse.

He risked a glance over his shoulder. His father had tripped and slid across the lane on his hands and knees, the shotgun clattering into the ditch, three of the dead folk closing on him from behind. “Dad, behind you!” Jack shouted.

His father looked up at Jack, his eyes widened, his mouth hung open, his hands bled. “Behind you!” he shouted back.

A weight struck Jack and he went sprawling. He half turned as he fell so that he landed on his side, and he looked up and back in time to see Mandy toppling over on top of him. The wind was knocked from him and for a few seconds his chest felt tight, useless, dead.

*Perhaps this is what it’s like, he thought. To be like them .*

At last he drew a shuddering breath, and the stench of Mandy hit him at the same time. The worst thing...the worst thing of all...was that he could detect a subtle hint of *Obsession* beneath the dead animal smell of her. His mum and dad always bought *Obsession* for Mandy at the airport when they went on holiday, and Jack had had a big box of jelly-fruits.

He felt her hands clawing at him, fingers seeking his throat, bony knees jarring into his stomach, his crotch. He screamed and struggled but could not move, Mandy had always beaten him at wrestling, she was just so strong—

“Get off!” his dad shouted. Jack could not see what was happening—he had landed so that he looked along the lane away from Tewton—but he could hear. “Get the fuck off, get away!” A thump as something soft hit the ground, then other sounds less easily identifiable, like an apple being stepped on or a leg torn from a cooked chicken. Then the unmistakable metallic snap of the shotgun being broken, reloaded, closed.

Two shots in rapid succession.

“Oh God, oh God, oh...Jack, it’s not Mandy Jack, you know that don’t you!”

Jack struggled onto his back and looked up at the thing atop him.

*You can name your fears*, Mandy had said, and Jack could not bear to look, this bastard thing

resembling his beautiful sister was a travesty, a crime against everything natural and everything right.

Jack closed his eyes. “I still love you Mandy,” he said, but he was not talking to the thing on top of him now.

There was another blast from the shotgun. A weight landed on his chest, something sprinkled down across his face. He kept his eyes closed. The weight twisted for a while, squirmed and scratched at Jack with nails and something else, exposed bones perhaps—

A hand closed around his upper arm and pulled.

Jack screamed, shouted until his throat hurt. Maybe he could scare it off.

“It’s alright, Jackie,” a voice whispered into his ear. Mandy had never called him Jackie, so why now, why when—

Then he realised it was his father’s voice. Jack opened his eyes as he stood and looked straight into his dad’s face. They stared at each other because they both knew to stare elsewhere—to stare *down*—would invite images they could never, ever live with.

They held hands as they ran along the lane, away from Tewton. For a while there were sounds of possible pursuit behind them, but they came from a distance and Jack simply could not bring himself to look.

They ran for a very long time. For a while Jack felt like he was going mad, or perhaps it was clarity in a world gone mad itself. In his mind’s eye he saw the dead people of Tewton waiting in their little town, waiting for the survivors to flee there from the countryside, slaughtering and eating them, taking feeble strength from cooling blood and giving themselves a few more hours before true death took them at last. The image gave him a strange sense of hope because he saw it could not go on forever. Hope in the death of the dead. A strange place to take comfort.

At last they could run no more. They found a petrol station and collapsed in the little shop, drinking warm cola because the electricity was off, eating chocolate and crisps. They rested until mid-afternoon. Then, because they did not know what else to do, they moved on once more.



Jack held his father’s hand. They walked along a main road, but there was no traffic. At one junction they saw a person nailed high up on an old telegraph pole. Jack began to wonder why but then gave in, because he knew he would never know.

The countryside began to flatten out. A few miles from where they were was the coast, an aim as good as any now, a place where help may have landed.

“You okay to keep going, son?”

Jack nodded. He squeezed his dad’s hand as well. But he could not bring himself to speak. He had said nothing since they’d left the petrol station. He could not. He was too busy trying to remember what Mandy looked like, imprint her features on his mind so that he would never, ever forget.

There were shapes wandering the fields of dead crops. Jack and his dad increased their pace but the dead people were hardly moving, and they seemed to pose no threat. He kept glancing back as they fell behind. It looked like they were harvesting what they had sown.

As the sun hit the hillsides behind them they saw something startling in the distance. It looked like a flash of green, small but so out of place amongst this blandness that it stood out like an emerald in ash. They could not run because they were exhausted, but they increased their pace until they drew level with the field.

In the centre of the field stood a scarecrow, very lifelike, straw hands hidden by gloves and face painted with a sappy sideways grin. Spread out around its stand was an uneven circle of green shoots. The green was surrounded by the rest of the dead crop, but it was alive, it had survived.

“Something in the soil, maybe?” Jack said.

“Farming chemicals?”

Jack shrugged. “Maybe we could go and see.”

“Look,” his dad said, pointing out towards the scarecrow.

Jack frowned, saw what his dad had seen, then saw the trail leading to it. It headed from the road, a path of crushed shoots aiming directly out towards the scarecrow. It did not quite reach it, however, and at the end of the trail something was slumped down in the mud, just at the boundary of living and dead crop. Jack thought he saw hair shifting in the breeze, the hem of a jacket lifting, dropping, lifting again, as if waving.

They decided not to investigate.

They passed several more bodies over the next couple of hours, all of them still, all of them lying in grotesque contortions in the road or the ditches. Their hands were clawed, as if they’d been trying to grasp a hold of something before coming to rest.

Father and son still held hands, and as the sun began to bleed across the hillsides they squeezed every now and then to reassure each other that they were alright. As alright as they could be, anyhow.

Jack closed his eyes every now and then to remember what Mandy and his mum had looked like. Each time he opened them again, a tear or two escaped.

He thought he knew what they would find when they reached the coast. He squeezed his father’s hand once more, but he did not tell him. Best to wait until they arrived.

For now, it would remain his secret.



*The End*

**Tim Lebbon**



photo by Tracey Lebbon

Tim Lebbon's books include *Face*, *The Nature of Balance*, *White and Other Tales of Ruin*, *As the Sun Goes Down* and *Until She Sleeps* . He has won two British Fantasy Awards for Best Short Fiction (one for *Naming of Parts* ), and one Bram Stoker Award. His future books include the dark fantasy duology *The Dead of Night: Dusk and Dawn*, *Exorcising Angels* (a novella with Simon Clark), and *Fears Unnamed* , a novella collection due in limited hardback and mass market paperback. His novel *Face* has just been optioned by BBC Wales.

Visit Tim's website at <http://www.timlebbon.net> .

[Return to Copyright Information](#)

Scorpius Digital Publishing Titles



[After the Vikings](#), by G. David Nordley - Interwoven Stories of a Future Mars

[The Algis Budrys Omnibus, Volume One](#)- *Some Will Not Die* and selected short fiction

[Ariel](#), by Steven R. Boyett - A magical adventure through a world where fantasy and reality have collided

[Beyond the Valley of the Cyberpunks](#), by Bruce Bethke - Short fiction by the Campbell and Philip K. Dick Award-winning author of *Headcrash* and *Cyberpunk*

[Dark Corners](#), by Barry B. Longyear - A master of science fiction takes you to the darkest places in the human soul

[Dreamlode](#), by John Meaney - Short fiction from the BSFA Award-nominated author of *To Hold Infinity, Paradox, and Context*

[Fine Cuts](#), by Dennis Etchison - View the bright lights of Hollywood through the dark lens of Dennis Etchison's imagination

[Flesh Wounds](#), by Brian A. Hopkins - 30 subtle and disturbing stories by the Stoker Award winner

[Ghostland](#)-Three haunting novellas by the Nebula Award-winning master of the modern ghost story

[The Goddess Letters](#)- A timeless myth made new again by the Western States Book Award winner

[Hardwired](#), by Walter Jon Williams  
- The science fiction cult classic reissued with sequel novella “Solip:System”

[The Hedge, the Ribbon](#), by Carol Orlock - A storyteller, a hedge, and a ribbon weave a magical spell into the everyday reality of a small town. Winner of the Western States Book Award, by the author of [The Goddess Letters](#)

[Hemogoblins, Stories to Chill the Blood](#), by Alan M. Clark and Friends - Stories to astound, startle, and amuse, illustrated with paintings by award-winning illustrator Alan M. Clark

[Hong on the Range](#), by William F. Wu - Louie Hong's adventures through a New West of cyber-enhanced cowboys and mechanized singing steers, by the author of [A Temple of Forgotten Spirits](#)

[Hours of Darkness](#)- 21 of the 21st century's best horror writers spin tales about what happens in the dark

[Immortal Khan](#), by H. Doug Matsuoka - A tale of taoist masters, love, and laundromats, told in screenplay form

[Living Midnight](#), by H. Doug Matsuoka - A dark future tale of mystery, music, and murder from the IEB

Award finalist, author of [Immortal Khan](#)

[Mars Dust and Magic Shows](#), by Mark Bourne - Unforgettable Stories from “science fiction’s best-kept secret”

[Mobius Highway](#), by Howard V. Hendrix - Science fiction stories from the brilliant and daring author of *Empty Cities of the Full Moon*

[Naming of Parts](#), by Tim Lebbon - Winner of the British Fantasy Award

[Nearly People](#), by Conrad Williams - The British Fantasy Award and International Horror Guild Award-nominated novella

[Orphans](#), by Steven R. Boyett - The best short fiction from the author of [Ariel](#)

[Pieces of the Sky](#), by Marina Fitch - Tales of love, loss, laughter, and yes, lust, from a rising star of sf and fantasy

[Rags and Old Iron](#), by Lorelei Shannon - A novel of childhood betrayed, love lost, and secrets rediscovered, by the author of [Vermifuge](#)

[Something Rich and Strange](#), by Carrie Richerson - Extraordinary Tales of Fantasy from the Campbell Award finalist

[The Sorcery Within, Book 1 of War of the Dragons](#), by Dave Smeds - A novel of magic, new worlds, and high adventure by the Nebula Award finalist

[Street](#), by Jack Cady - A novel about horror and heroes, by the Nebula Award winner

[Tales for the Long Rains](#), by Kij Johnson - Beautiful and enchanting short fiction by the author of *The Fox Woman*

[Talking to Shadows](#), by Phoebe Reeves - A Story About Murder, Art, and Transformation, from the Stoker Award Nominee

[A Temple of Forgotten Spirits](#), by William F. Wu - Jack Hong's adventures in the world of spirits and the world of men, following the kei-lin, by the author of [Hong on the Range](#)

[Triad](#), by Sheila Finch - A Novel of Alien Contact by the Nebula Award winner

[Vermifuge, and Other Toxic Cocktails](#), by Lorelei Shannon - Stories to make you shudder, weep, and laugh out loud, by one of today's best new talents, and the author of [Rags and Old Iron](#)

[Wildest Dreams](#), by Norman Partridge - A novel of death, deliverance, and the Devil in California by the Stoker Award winner

[A Writer's Life](#), by Eric Brown, winner of the BSFA Award - A tale of literary obsession and haunting discoveries



For more quality eBooks, visit [New Albion Press](#) , A Special Selection of Books for Discerning Readers

[Crow Street Press](#), eBooks for Book Lovers