GRISTLE

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1

AT TEN YEARS OLD, Eli possessed not the faintest apprehension of the meaning of life, yet he suspected already that the world was governed by a myriad of distortions – shifting realities imagined and purposed by the mortal minds crossing his path. And yet, beyond these frail constructions lay another world, a supernatural and inaccessible realm that nevertheless dictated the events of human reality, holding sway and shaping the destinies of creatures exactly as it pleased. The religious mind might brush against this world, but only in submission; it could not wield such power, could only accept the silent comings and goings of the Spirit. And the Spirit would never intercede where it was not invited – certainly not in spaces where vanity and greed and self-indulgence occupied the hours of the day in such great, intoxicating measure.

Confined to the boundaries of his own family, his subjects for raw human study were few. He observed his kin in a rigorous silence, often holding himself to a single space, perched high on the stairs and staring through a narrow slit in the wooden railings like an anchorite in a cell charting the tempests of the secular world. He applied this monastic scrutiny to a domestic setting that offered little

contrast or societal fascination, save for the occasional sprawling parties and the wretched trips to his Uncle's manor. But such earthly observations, however mathematically precise regarding who was who and what they did and how much they earned, could not aid the boy. They offered no true revelation. They illuminated nothing of the cruel mechanisms acting upon him.

He was trapped, therefore, in a sort of paradise. The home was a place of comparative tranquillity built into the immense, ancient bedrock of the south-western shires, nestled between great mounds of earth where the only signs of escape were the narrow roads winding out of the valleys, beckoning towards the noise of distant towns and cities he would not truly meet for another eight years.

Of the beauty lying in wait in such places – whether born of high culture or people wrapped in pretty attire – he had no pure experience. And even if he had, a child is too captive to prevailing circumstances, too bound by the erratic whims of his superiors, to ever fully lose his mind in the sweet balm of life's joyous offerings. He could not even lose himself in nature; a fleeting glimpse of a daffodil up close, its sweet yellow aura catching the sun, was always destined to be shattered by an interruption – some adult demanding to know his welfare, or questioning why he stood so aloof amongst the meadows.

Perhaps the youthful intellect is simply not yet forged to

ascend towards that universal geometry of joy found in the bosom of the earth. Perhaps it must first weather the crucible of adolescence, must come face-to-face with the manifold sorrows of man-to-man existence, before it can taste those projected glories, before it can understand anything beyond the immediate, nervous excitements of social contact and its invisible contracts.

And yet, despite the absence of a guiding hand from above, he harboured a most serious flame of intuition that tickled at his innermost self – a flame that not even the harshest of misfortunes could extinguish. He sensed that the battles and furnaces of life's journey would only ignite this providence, stoking the fire to burn stronger, if not necessarily brighter. He sensed that the randomness of earthly existence could not possibly be nature's ultimate gift. Rather, all things were ordained towards the culmination of some majestic design, a reality so incomprehensible that not even a stubborn child could refute it. He was as firmly held in the clutches of these supernatural forces as he was in the clutches of his parents. In fact, so lofty-minded was the boy that he could feel this unseen providence pulsing without pause, as surely and incessantly as the blood through his veins.

But this intuition could not yet direct him in any meaningful way. How could he reach the invisible, if he knew not how to pierce the visible veil of transcendence?

Adult human reason might ascend with the aid of a cultivated intellect, abetting mysticism and visions, but such philosophical ascensions demanded a proper, constant education, not merely flights of ecstasy or inspired fantasy – an avenue firmly barred to a small country boy. Instead, his only true communion with the divine was rooted in the earth, found in the damp soil of the garden as he jammed it firmly beneath the quick of his fingernails. Or, it was found in the rare, unclouded excitement of capturing his parents' attention, that sudden, rushing validation of being alive and seen that gives most mortals their narcissistic purpose. In those fleeting instants of rapturous communion, Eli's parents ceased their bickering; they abandoned their internal, bitter miseries and torrid shortcomings. For a miraculous moment, their minds ripened in perfect unison with his delight at a simple event: a bird passing close overhead, or an autumn leaf caught in the wind, landing at Eli's feet with a brushing, feather-light tickle. If life could be tailored to such purposes as these, then world peace might truly flourish.

That gentle touch of the leaf upon his skin evoked the bristled surface of a fresh runner bean drawn across the tongue. It recalled the days he had stalked the garden rows, harvesting the swollen green pods into a bucket on the patio for his mother, Helen. It had not felt like monotonous labour then; every bean seemed entirely

unique, varying in shape and length, and in the fibrous way it came apart when torn. There was something magical about them, not simply because of the nursery tales so well known to young children, but because the wet beans themselves appeared like extraterrestrial cells, exactly as one might imagine them from the pages of science fiction magazines. Though Eli found the taste itself lacking once the beans were cooked, the satisfaction lay in witnessing the cycle: the growing, the picking, and the quiet completion of digestion. To a child blocked from higher contemplation, this harmonious, earthly process was, perhaps, the closest he could approach to beauty. And any adult ought to admire and envy anyone able to retain this childlike sense of monotonous beauty.

The plentiful meadows of that childhood abode stretched idyllically outwards, weaving into woodlands that snaked up the heart of the valley. This ascending path offered fleeting vantages of the taller hills beyond – uplands steeped in the treacherous bogs of the ancient moors, crowned by the sheer granite rocks of the mounds known as tors, those primordial towers of lore guarding the high earth that make a mortal feel infinitesimally small and powerless. And yet, viewed from an angle of safety, caught in the net of a cosy, furnished household, the wilderness of the moors seemed no threat at all to body nor mind. From the modest white cottage where Eli gazed

out of his bedroom window, this grand panorama was neither exalted nor melancholic, but dampened by the relentless British weather. Sheets of perpetual rainfall swept in from storm-clouds gathered over the northern coast, where they met the thunderous God of the Atlantic Ocean. Though 30 miles distant, the tempestuous winds collapsed the space, carrying the deluge across the county in a mere matter of minutes.

Eli listened to the storm as the sun began its descent behind the brow of the distant hills. Without conscious effort, his young mind emptied itself of the day's trivialities, surrendering wholly to the scenery beyond the misty windowpane. The latch was painted shut – sealed less than a week prior and under firm orders to remain locked – so the view remained blurred and streaked. Yet, this very distortion aided his reverie, allowing the mundane events of the waking world to dissolve into the teary glass. As his mind decompressed and slipped into a relaxed state, so the external world seemed to compress inwards, shrinking until it felt small enough to be held in the palm of a hand. This, he thought, must be how God feels when He weighs the earth upon the tip of His finger and His Son embraces it. The memory of five consecutive school lessons fell away from him. He had spent the hours trying to decipher the sounds pouring from his teachers' mouths as they prattled on about niche topics of apparent importance to the world.

They called it education – the stuffing of the intellect with mere facts and rigid information – but Eli preferred not to burden his soul with the storing up of such barren things. He could not say why, but it was of no interest to learn about anything written down at school; all there was to learn was unspoken, the hidden rules of life that each person tries to govern and manipulate to achieve different ends. And though varied, all those ends seemed ultimately the same: after a life of maximising pleasure, finding a place to finally rest one's head and comfortably die. Therefore, the only truths he retained from the day were not facts at all, but subjective, impressionistic memories and quiet predictions about the future. He recalled the quiet queasiness that unsettled his stomach on the morning drive, and the peculiar sight of another pupil in the playground, zealously guarding a football as if it were a sacred treasure meant to be hoarded in a miser's shed, rather than kicked and played with. Eli pondered what would become of that football; someday, perhaps in only a couple of years, that same boy would carelessly throw the deflated husk into a refuse bin along with a bucketful of other beloved, forgotten instruments of fun.

Such tentative, drifting thoughts sailed past the boy as he leaned against the cold sill. And soon, the last rays of the sun truly vanished, swallowed by the ether or cast to the other side of the globe, just as his science teacher had

proclaimed. The teacher had spoken of planetary rotation, of heliocentric mechanics and the earth turning its cold back on the light, but to Eli's mind, such celestial mathematics felt entirely too sterile; it felt, rather, like a grand, mournful abandonment, a vast extinguishing of the divine spark that left humanity to fend for itself in the void. Night would now assert its dominion for 12 unbroken hours. In the very pit of his stomach, Eli felt the immense weight of this darkness – as impossible as a child attempting to digest an ox. It was a burden akin to the sacrificial beast upon the altar, an unleavened mass of dread, as though he were attempting to swallow the great Leviathan of the deep. It felt as if he had been cast into the outer darkness spoken of in the gospels, a spiritual wilderness where the soul starves for the manna of the dawn. It pressed upon him deeply, a malady in desperate need of healing, as though some chthonic force had burst forth from the crust of the underworld to deliberately sever his passage to the light. This abyssal depth of night's fear would only flee with the arrival of morning. More precisely, the dark spell shattered at the exact moment the cock crowed. At that sound, Eli would often wake. Though weary in his bones, he would fall back into slumber with a profound and sudden ease. In that liminal hour, the holy promise of a new day rushed up through him, dispelling the lingering pangs of loneliness and banishing the night

back to the earth's deep core.

He wondered if the new day would dawn differently, if the horizons might stretch further without inducing fright, if the crooked roads would be made straight, and the rough places plain. Or would the inherent crookedness of the world merely reassert itself? He feared the incomprehensible acts of others, and, more disturbingly, his own. Often, Eli knew not what dark compulsion guided his hands. There was the blinding frustration of lacing his shoes upon the wrong feet, forced to undo and retie them beneath the crushing pressure of his mother's voice calling from the car, when the morning had advanced upon them with the rapid, unmerciful gait known to every family rushing against the eight o'clock hour. Perhaps his panic was merely imitative, absorbing the sudden terror that seized adults when a mistake was made. But to err twice in a daily ritual felt like an unforgivable shame, a sheer embarrassment in the face of time. But even with his utmost attention, the clumsiness remained; it was not conscious in his brain how to be precise at certain tasks that most other children seemed to do effortlessly. Whilst the other boys and girls darted about with an unthinking grace, their limbs perfectly attuned to the gravity of the world, Eli's hands betrayed him. Fingers became thick and wooden, shoelaces turned to complex riddles of knots, and the humdrum, automatic mechanisms of bodily existence

remained an exhausting conundrum he could never quite fathom.

Such rigid daily practices of good acumen and adult bearing had been drilled into him by a teacher some years prior – a woman who insisted that by the seventh year of life, a child must possess absolute dominion over his dutiful garments: laces tied, shirts tucked, top buttons choked tight, and blazers doubly secured. The teacher in question was a Mrs Unwin. To Eli's hyper-literal mind, it was a peculiar title, sounding inherently of defeat – an un-winner, a perpetual runner-up. His intellect possessed a strange gravity that pulled literal meaning from the ether of words, ascribing the utmost significance where none was intended. In fact, though his mind was prone to flights of imaginative fancy, he utterly despised metaphoric language and the cynical use of sarcasm – anything that unnecessarily complicated the pure logic of language's inherent simplicity and its noble, communicative necessity.

Broadwood Lane, for instance, situated but one road removed from where the school lay, offered no broad woodlands at all; it was merely a wide street skirting the town's edge. Perhaps, in some forgotten epoch, ancient trees had indeed graced the northern slope of the valley where his school now sat, on a road bearing the name of St Rumon, but the great medieval tomes – the Domesday Book and its ancient cartularies – bore no record of a

Broadwood. St Rumon was yet another peculiar title, belonging to an Anglo-Saxon saint of whom the teachers knew nothing, save that he had once walked the Isle to convert the pagans and establish the blessed Kingdom of Jesus Christ. He certainly did not appear in the golden pages of Jacobus de Voragine's Lives of the Saints. Naturally, the name stirred in Eli the concepts of rumour and rumination, leaving him to deeply doubt the holy man's existence entirely. Nevertheless, he was certain these long-burdened lands had once harboured dark pagan rites, and he welcomed the soothing, ordered current of Christianity that had transformed the terrain into one of relative peace, prosperity, and longevity. He found solace in the school's thrice-daily prayers, thanking the Lord's glory for the blessings of the day, especially the final invocations at the afternoon bell, right as they were about to be released from the confines of it all. And he was certainly grateful to receive a marginally civilised education, spared from being reared on the wind-scourged edge of a tor, forced to slit the throats of sheep upon a stone altar to appease the ceaseless, weeping rains of the moorlands – a barbaric fate he imagined his forebears had suffered whenever he gazed out of his bedroom window.

Yet, this grisly, primeval life was not so far removed from his own. He knew the horrors of the beastly realm all too

well, for his uncle commanded a nearby cattle farm – an enterprise that filled Eli's very person with a visceral, physical dread. This terror loomed especially large with the approaching weekend, where he would be expected at his uncle's manor for a shoot. There, he would be cramped beneath his father's rule, subjected to a countryside display of loud, parochial joviality and needless bloodshed. Eli's mother Helen, wisely, would absent herself from such carnage. She sought refuge in a broader vision of the world, fleeing the hunting and the feasting. She preferred to wander quiet streets with friends, to read, and to lose herself in the sweet abstractions of the finer life; she savoured the arts, the intellect, and perhaps even the untormented emotions of the soul seeking sanctuary in its most deep, hidden place.

And so, the new day brought forth no minor revelations regarding the meaning of a life governed by adults. It proceeded, rather, with a predictable tiresomeness. Once the clock had run its logical course and Eli's eyes were finally closed – his mind drifting toward the unknowable, murky borders of the sleep realm – the door opened. His father entered the bedroom to deliver a perfunctory goodnight and to reveal the grisly design of the coming weekend.

His father, Edward, was a man of manifold descriptions, but chief among them was his indefatigable energy for the

shaping of wood. He boasted of building castles out of timber, though these structures bore no turrets and offered no mighty views of a stronghold. They were low things, crouching in valleys of brick and mortar, adorned with wooden beams and the occasional barn crafted from pure English oak. These trees, torn from copses spread across the county, would surely have screamed to be left standing in their sacred groves had they been granted a voice. This obsession with physical creation bound Edward to a perpetual stench: a heavy musk of petrol, sawdust, sweat, and other raw, metallic elements for which Eli possessed no names. The hours of his toil varied as the dark impulses of creation demanded, so when he arrived for this nocturnal blessing, it might have been anywhere from the ninth hour to midnight. Tonight, it felt closer to nine, for Eli had only just met the watery edge of slumber.

'Elias,' Edward said. 'Are you awake, son?'

Eli had not a clue why his father invoked a three-syllable name rooted in the ancient Greek and Hebrew – Ēlíās, the prophet of Yahweh – especially since the man had repeatedly and viciously denounced any belief in God. It was Helen who had chosen the name Eli, honouring her Jewish roots, whereas Edward had been far more keen on a simple, blunt British token like Jack. So keen had he been, in fact, that he had preemptively told a few friends the boy's name, resulting in a flurry of cards for Eli's first

birthday bearing the name Jack. Helen had thrown them in the bin immediately, refusing to allow her son to keep them for even a day, lest it cause confusion. To Edward, the entire business of the Judeo-Christian religion was merely a Jewish wisecrack, a cynical fiction designed to congregate disparate peoples so they might cease massacring one another. These two utilitarian functions may well have held a grain of historical truth, yet they were always spat from Edward's mouth with a bitingly sarcastic tone. Such was the profound pessimism of the man's outlook: if an intellectual or spiritual pursuit did not contribute to the immediate, tangible utility of a manufactured thing, he deemed it utterly pointless.

Eli opened his eyes. Of course he was awake. Edward had made no effort to whisper, and his brooding form stood no more than a few feet away. The very odour of his coming had already breached Eli's nostrils, sending a preemptive shudder through the boy's fragile frame.

'You are awake,' his father said. 'Good. Guess what?'

'Are you here to say goodnight?' Eli asked. He knew this to be the usual ritual, yet a rising anxiety pressed him to uncover what differed about tonight's occasion.

'Your Uncle Robert is having a few people over this weekend,' Edward declared. 'Well, more than a few. As many as he cares to host. Who knows how many acquaintances he makes nowadays with all his trips to the

big smoke. It will be a good crowd. A good opportunity for you to socialise with some adults.'

Eli's eyes flared with a brief light that lingered as he processed the voluble information. It could have been interpreted as either excitement or anxiety, but his immediate question anchored him firmly back in reality. 'What about Mummy?'

'Mum is busy this weekend, so I'm going to take you along and we'll have some fun. Uncle Robert, for all his mischievous ways, is a good man, and a good entertainer. Less so a good brother – more of a bully and a greedy swine, but–' Edward broke off, offering only a dismissive gesture. He was weary, his ire too depleted to launch into a bitter rant.

'Are you excited to come?' he asked instead.

Eli offered a solemn nod, then let his head fall back into the pillow. Edward remained there, a towering figure hovering over the sleepy child, before finally withdrawing into the gloom.

'Goodnight, Elias,' he said.

He pitched the name upwards, raising the second and third syllables into a strained lilt beyond the murmur of the first, attempting to make the whole sound somewhat melodious. It was as if he desired to sing the name, to lift his son up onto a pulpit for the entire nation to witness. It sounded like the voice of a man who desperately wanted

his son to be a colossal success – nay, the greatest in the world at something: a gold-medal athlete, the genius CEO of a vast corporation, or a prime minister exercising diplomatic restraint and great pride in Great Britain as the world's foremost country. Yet, Eli knew the truth was not even this grand; it was far worse. His father did not truly wish for his son to stand in the light of the British public and illuminate the world. He wanted the boy to exist solely in the light of his own small world, a captive audience to whatever erratic, unrhymed song the patriarch chose to sing. It was a life to be lived strictly under the father's roof, within his immediate proximity, under his absolute jurisdiction and knowledge. It was thus a love of a possessive nature, and only God could decipher the secret operations of such a mind. It was not for a non-possessive, non-judgemental, terrified soul to understand the exact opposite of itself – an impossibly grotesque undertaking. But Eli did not know quite that much yet; he only knew that the father must, first and foremost, be pleased. Success knew no other name in that household, and as a child bearing a burning inner flame, Eli was desperately willing to please.

He lay awake long after his father departed, anticipating that on the morrow – a Friday – Edward would retrieve him from the imposing white facade of the school, a structure anchored carnivorously upon the hillside. The

appointed hour was exactly half-past three, the moment when the pupils of the sixth year were surrendered back into the hands of their guardians. He prayed he wouldn't have to wait alone, like last time, watching everybody else's parents arrive promptly. He didn't so much mind the solitude, for it allowed his mind to wander, but the school car park was a cold, wind-swept expanse of tarmac entirely devoid of shelter. Only if a parent arrived more than an hour late were the shivering day-children permitted back indoors, sent to join the boarders whose prison was also their home.