

Eli possessed not the faintest apprehension of the meaning of life, yet he suspected the world was governed by a myriad of distortions: shifting realities imagined and purposed by the mortal minds that crossed his path.

Because his waking life was confined to the boundaries of his own family, his subjects of study were few. He observed his kin with the silent rigour of an anchorite, charting the tempests of their human nature. But such earthly observations could not aid the boy. They offered no true revelation regarding his own circumstances, nor did they illuminate the cruel mechanisms of the world acting upon them.

He was trapped in a sort of paradise. The place of his residence was a home of immense tranquillity, built into the ancient, rural bedrock of the south-western shires. It sat 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 cities he could not yet see.

Of true beauty, he had no pure experience. A child is too captive to prevailing circumstances, too bound to the erratic actions of his superiors, to lose the mind in the sweet balm of nature's most joyous offerings. Perhaps the youthful intellect is not yet forged to ascend towards that universal architecture of joy; it must first weather the crucible of adolescence, coming face-to-face with the manifold sorrows of earthly existence, before it can taste such projected glories.

Yet, of a guiding hand from above, he had a most serious intuition. He sensed

that randomness could not possibly be nature's ultimate gift. Rather, all things were ordained towards the culmination of some majestic design – a reality impossible to comprehend, yet impossible to refute. Eli felt this unseen providence as surely as the blood coursing through his veins.

But this intuition could not yet direct him. He knew not how to pierce the visible veil to reach the invisible, nor how reason might ascend with the aid of a cultivated intellect. Such philosophical ascensions demanded a proper, constant education, 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. In those fleeting instants, they ceased their bickering; they abandoned their internal, bitter miseries and torrid shortcomings. For a miraculous moment, their minds ripened in perfect unison with their child's 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.

That gentle touch 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. Though he found the taste itself lacking, the profound 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.

The meadows were plentiful, stretching outwards to weave 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 moors, crowned by the sheer granite rocks of the ancient mounds known as tors, those primordial towers of lore guarding the high earth. Yet, from the modest white cottage where Eli gazed out of his bedroom window, this grand panorama was dampened. Sheets of perpetual rainfall swept in from storm-clouds gathered over the northern coast. Though thirty miles distant, the tempestuous winds collapsed the space, carrying the deluge across the county in a mere matter of minutes.

He 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. He simply surrendered his mind 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. 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, worldly topics. They called it education – the stuffing of the intellect with mere facts and rigid information – but Eli preferred not to burden his soul with such barren things. Therefore, the only truths he retained from the day were not facts at all, but subjective, impressionistic memories. 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.

Such tentative, drifting thoughts sailed past the boy as he leaned against the cold sill. 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. Night would now assert its dominion for twelve unbroken hours. In the very pit of his stomach, Eli felt the immense weight of this darkness – as heavy and impossible as a child attempting to digest an ox. It pressed upon him deeply, a spiritual 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 weight 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.

Such rigid daily practices 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 their dutiful garments: laces tied, shirts tucked, top buttons choked tight, and blazers doubly secured. Her name was 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 profound significance where none was intended. Broadwood Lane, for instance, offered no broad woodlands at all, but was merely a wide street skirting the town's edge. Perhaps, in some forgotten epoch, ancient trees had graced the northern slope of the valley where his school now sat, on a road bearing the name of St Rumon.

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. Naturally, the name stirred in Eli the concepts of rumour and rumination, leaving him to doubt the holy man's existence entirely. Nevertheless, he was certain these long burdened lands had once harboured pagan rites, and he welcomed the soothing, ordered current of Christianity. He found solace in the school's thrice-daily prayers, thanking the Lord's

glory for the blessings of the day. 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 moorland.

Yet, this grisly, ancient 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 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 confined beneath his father's rule, subjected to a countryside display of loud, parochial joviality and bloodshed. His mother, 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 in its most deep, hidden place.

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 towards the unknowable, murky borders of the sleep realm – the door opened. His father entered the bedroom to deliver a goodnight and to reveal the design of the coming weekend.

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 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 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?’

Eli had not a clue why his father invoked a three-syllable name rooted in the ancient Greek and Hebrew – *Ēlīās*, the prophet of Yahweh – especially since the man had repeatedly and viciously denounced any belief in God. To Edward, the whole business of the 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 with a bitingly sarcastic tone. Such was the profound pessimism of Edward’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 saying 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.'

Eli's eyes flared with a brief light, but a question immediately anchored him. '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, 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?' 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 to make the whole 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. Yet, Eli knew the truth: his father did not wish for his son to stand in the light of the Brits. He wanted the boy to exist solely in the light of his world, a captive audience to whatever erratic, unrhymed song he chose to sing. It was thus love of a possessive nature, and only God could decipher the secret operations of such a mind. But Eli did not know quite that much, only that the father must first and foremost be pleased; success knows no other name.

Eli anticipated 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 stood waiting. He waited until he was the last boy remaining on the threshold. For a time, a girl named Annabelle had stood beside him, and her presence granted him a quiet, unexpected ease. She possessed fair blonde hair that cascaded further down her shoulders than that of any girl or woman he had ever

known. It was a spectacle of such astonishing elegance that his gaze lingered upon it, utterly captive, until she finally departed. She had offered a few scattered words to him during their vigil, but he had merely nodded, issuing only the hollowest of syllables in return – a murmur, an ah, an um. Perhaps this paralysis was his maiden encounter with earthly beauty: the outward glory of flesh and form, akin to the swelling bosom of the hills as they folded into the springtime distance, bursting with the tender, fragile crispness of new dandelions and sprouting timber. Yet, Eli's nascent intellect knew this could not be the totality of beauty. The very fragility of the girl and the spring blooms betrayed their impermanence. There must exist, he reasoned, some higher, eternal architecture of beauty that did not wither or decay. If such permanence did not exist, he would surely be condemned to a melancholic cast of soul, forever mourning the fleeting nature of life, tracing a path towards a hell constructed solely by the limits of the human eye.

Soon, Annabelle vanished, leaving Eli solitary in the fading afternoon. The master on duty, sensing the abandonment, escorted the boy into the frigid confines of the school office, intending to summon his parents through the telephone. But at that precise moment, a great flood of headlights breached the twilight. Eli knew instantly it was not the rumbling motor of his father, but the mechanical roar of a grander beast – a Land Rover. He stepped back out into the gathering dusk beside his teacher, watching a woman descend from the carriage.

'I know who that is,' Eli murmured.

'Who?' the teacher asked.

Eli hesitated. It required a profound shift in perspective to place her here. He had not laid eyes upon her in months, and knew her only as the third wife woven into his uncle's lineage. 'My Auntie,' he replied. 'Emily.'

The teacher let out a sigh of relief. 'Thank goodness for that, then.'

Auntie Emily offered a bright, apologetic smile, speaking of sudden alterations to the great design of the weekend. But the moment Eli was entombed within the large vehicle, she unleashed a torrent of chatter. She spoke of her day, inquired after his father, and detailed the endless roster of rules and activities she had prepared. She began to catalogue the remarkable, grandiose possessions she and Uncle Robert had recently acquired, laying bare the material enormity of their existence. This flood of worldliness rendered Eli mute, stirring a beefy sickness within the pit of his stomach. The nausea was only compounded by the serpentine roads that twisted and climbed towards the manor. The estate sat upon the pinnacle of a village hidden deep within the most untamed reaches of the county. Though the remotest parts harboured the wealthiest folks of the land, it was a place where the darkness seemed to press down with the greatest ferocity – perhaps because, nestled so deeply between those isolating hills where so few hamlets dared to exist, there had never been much light to begin with.

By this hour, encased within the heavy carriage of his Aunt's vehicle, Eli was utterly lost. He had slipped into a shocking reality of fear – a terror that invariably descended upon him in moments of the unfamiliar. It was a sudden disorder,

uncontrolled, lasting a distended stretch of time that defied all mortal description, for there existed no way to encompass the phenomenon in reason, and no certain way to anticipate its arrival; the anxiety arose from no discernible place; rather, it lay deeply lodged within the flesh, sizzling like an unwelcome brand that threatened to permanently scar the soul. He felt it creeping, vertebra by vertebra, up the column of his spine, threatening to infect the brain and entirely possess the rational sanctum of his mind.

This was the fear that most alarmed his conscious intellect: the dread of being wholly paralysed by panic. He was trapped in a demonic war with no avenue of release, the very walls of the car becoming a stricture of the life within him, battering him with a tide of adrenaline utterly disproportionate to his fragile build and his young capacity for calm. It felt as though some strange, ancient illness had planted itself within him, seeded in an epoch he knew not when, by a hand he knew not how. Yet, the affliction was there, undeniable and absolute. He knew he must find a passage through the battlefield without inflicting harm upon himself, or drawing irrefutable embarrassment from those who watched. But in truth, he cared little for the outward shame, for the urgency surging through his veins carried the ultimate, binary weight of life and death. His only imperative was to avoid total destruction, for beneath the crushing scales of the panic, he still harboured a desperate will to live.

But then the enraged demon of his anxiety roared up. It commanded him to surrender the fight, whispering that these abyssal depths were far too vast to be mapped, let alone conquered, and that he would never again reach the dawning light of relief or hope. Yet, even this was not the cry Eli feared most. The true terror lay in

the demon's screech – a soundless vibration heard only within the cavern of his own skull. It tolled the death knell of despair, tolling the lie that there was no turning back, and that his turmoil must be ended once and for all by a final, fatal submission. Death by one's own hand. Thus to Eli, this silent knell was as devastating as the apocalyptic end of times. It was the shattering of the earth's core, the falling away of all known reality, plunging his spirit into a fearsome, unimaginable purgatory. It mirrored that paralysing dread one feels when a terrifying new existence is forced upon them, and all hopes of embracing the change are dashed against hot coals. It was the sensation of the impossible, the perpetual trembling of a soul cast into the void after the end of days. And so, it was this silent, adversarial voice of the demon that Eli knew he must somehow strangle, before it could rise to bind his fevered mind to the almighty, eternal torment of the panic.

The roar of the combustion engine severed the afeared silence as Aunt Emily buried the accelerator, tearing the car around a steep, banked curve. 'Eli!' she shouted over the mechanical din. 'Are you alright?'

Eli had been staring through the darkened glass at the soaring hedgerows, desperate for a singular glimpse of the heavens lying beyond their thorny crowns. He struggled to draw a clean breath into his constricting lungs, wringing his hands together with a fervour that rivalled a martyr in the throes of prayer. And startled by the sharp shift in his aunt's tenor, he wrenched his index finger too fiercely. The joint cracked with a sickening pop. He let out a sharp cry, the physical agony piercing the shroud of his psychic dread.

He could only issue a breathless murmur before grasping for a mortal tether.
'Are we nearly there?'

'Five minutes,' Emily replied, casting a wary glance towards the passenger seat. 'You aren't going to be sick, are you?' She harboured a distinct terror that he might purge the contents of his stomach out onto the seat, desecrating the pristine, perpetually new-smelling leather of her sanctuary.

Eli did feel the bile rising, yet he knew his bodily constitution rarely succumbed to the sheer force of terror alone. Furthermore, his stomach was largely barren. His midday sustenance had consisted merely of half a wrap, smeared with hardened butter, and a dry biscuit. He had forsaken the frozen dessert; the school served it melting into a soft, wretched pool, and Eli possessed an ascetic interior that abhorred such formless, wet sensations upon the tongue. He would have preferred the purity of milk, but the bell for grace always sounded too swiftly, and his narrow throat forbade the gluttonous gulping exhibited by his peers. Thus, he offered a slight shake of his head.

'Good,' Emily said. 'Well done. We're in no hurry. Just shout if you need me to stop. Robert will be late home from work, perhaps even later than Edward. And we cannot eat without your father. You know how upset he becomes if the meat isn't served hot, don't you? It needs to be scalding.'

She offered a brittle, conspiratorial laugh at this critique of their patriarchs, but Eli could not fasten his mind to her worldly logic. He had already retreated back to

the window, sucking the thin air into his chest.

‘Do you have an inhaler?’ she pressed.

‘I don’t need one of those,’ he whispered.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. The doctor said my health is normal.’

‘Did he? That’s good. But tell me what normal is, because I wish I knew.’ She chuckled once more – a slight, irritable sound, as though she were suffering some quiet, invisible misfortune and found it terribly amusing. It was the laughter of despair, yet she wore a mask of supreme, affluent confidence that hungered for the spoils of life. Eli sensed therein an unholy contradiction dwelling within her. Perhaps it was such a fracture of the soul, he thought, clawing at his nascent reason, that compelled her to drive with such erratic violence, slamming the heavy gear stick and torturing the engine through every bend.

He closed his eyes. Moments later, the electronic stutter of the iron gates breached his darkness, followed by a machine-like groan and the loud crunch of tires upon bulging gravel. He kept his eyes sealed, counting out the long duration of the driveway, waiting until he was certain they had fully crossed the threshold into his uncle’s domain. When he finally opened them, the ancient manor loomed against the night. It was a stronghold of brick and mortar and stone raised some two centuries

prior, dominating the heights of the hill. Five massive, unblinking windows lined its flanks. To the north and east, lesser panes stared out over barns, outhouses, and wild, sprawling gardens where climbing vines choked the western veranda. Beyond that, a vast, black field stretched outwards until it plummeted into the shadowed river valley below. The only illumination bled from the house itself, casting weak, ghostly beams across the drive as they rounded the property towards the rear stables. A single plume of smoke drifted from a lower chimney, signalling the hearth of the kitchen, whilst the towering flues of the second floor stood dormant and cold against the sky. Eli's gaze was drawn to those upper levels. He recalled the long, echoing corridor of vacant rooms where he was to be entombed for the weekend, and a sudden shudder wracked his spine. To sleep in such vast, isolated magnitude seemed an impossible task. No neighbour's light could pierce this gloom; the nearest village sat upon the opposing hill, entirely shrouded by dense woodlands. The manor was a severed realm, a dark village unto itself.

Suddenly, the engine cut. The vibration ceased, and in its quiet wake, Aunt Emily pushed her door open and slammed it shut with a thud. The sheer aggression of the sound shattered Eli's reverie, dragging him fully back into reality. He realised exactly where he was, and knew he must swiftly abandon the vehicle and follow her into the house, before she turned back to loudly summon his name.