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Liverpool, again. From the desert to London, from London to this worn-out city beside a river, six years have passed. And now he's back, parked on the corner of his street, the engine running, telling himself he can do this. It starts to rain, loud against the paintwork, a welcome distraction from the anxiety that's been streaming toward him since seeing the woman step from the black Audi on Utting Avenue twenty minutes ago. The woman he knew when she was just a girl before he left for the army at eighteen. Despite the medication and the vaccine cocktails, he had understood that approaching her, reconnecting, would be the worst thing he could do, for both of them. He kills the engine. Dread grows around him, pulsing, tumorous. He focuses on rainwater flowing in waves down the windscreen changing the colour of the morning.

A deep breath and he takes a Cipramil, grabs his kitbag off the backseat, and gets out. He crosses wet pavements, grass verges, beneath dripping trees, this final distance between him and his past an agony threatening to tear him apart. If he had the strength he would run. He's outside the terraced house when the front door opens and his mum appears. His mum, well-dressed and wearing makeup, on her way out. His mum, six years older but still everything he remembers. His mum, pregnant.

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"Joel, what are you doing here?" She stares at him from the doorway, a hand on her throat. "What's happened?"

"Nothing's happened, I'm okay. Are you going somewhere?"

"What?" She remembers her appearance and waves off his words. "Never mind that. Where's Emma? Is she with you?"

"She's still in London. Her dad's not well. She's gone to stay with him for a while."

"What's wrong with him?"

"His heart." He swaps shoulders with his kitbag. "Anyway, I thought I'd come up and see you, say hello."

"When did you get back?"

"I've just pulled up." He points at his car.

"No, I mean, from the tour."

He lowers his arm. "The tour ended early."

"I didn't know. I hadn't heard."

"They don't tell the world everything, Mum."

The phone inside the house starts to ring. Neither of them acknowledges it. She steps forward, hesitant, and puts her arms around him. He hugs back, a clinging, desperate embrace, and feels his throat closing, his eyes blurring. Her distended stomach presses against him and they separate. She looks down at herself.

“I was going to tell you.”

The ringing stops and awkward silence unfolds. A silver BMW cruises past in the rain, its tinted windows hiding someone from the world, someone who wants to be hidden but still able to see. They start to speak at the same time.

“You first.”

“No, you.”

“Is it okay if I stay, Mum?” He rubs the back of his neck. “I just . . . I just want to stay a while.”

Something flickers across her face, doubt, maybe fear, but is gone as quickly as it came. “You don’t have to ask. You never have to ask.”

She stands aside and he looks again at her stomach before entering the house, wiping his wet boots on a rubber mat. Inside, nothing has changed. The couch, the wallpaper, the carpet, even the damp smell masked vainly with air freshener.

“Sit down. I’ll make us a drink.” She switches on the TV and heads into the kitchen.

He waits in the armchair, elbows on his knees, fingers forming a cage, watching aftermath footage of an IED blast in the desert. Fresh corpses have been laid at the side of a road shimmering with heat and dust. The camera pans to an upended Warrior smoking in a scorched crater.

“How long was the drive?” She hands him a cup of milky

tea and lowers herself on to the couch, sucking and blowing air.

“From London? Four hours.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s . . .” He trails off and shrugs. “It’s what it takes.”

Her eyes slide to the floor. “So, how are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“When are you back on tour?”

Rain or sweat dribbles from his haircut. “Soon.”

“How’s it been?”

On TV, a crowd of Muslim men wave a burning Union Jack, their eyes wide and wild. The voice-over says the words “peace,” “frenzied,” and “faithful” all in the same sentence.

“Can you turn this off?” He nods at the TV.

She points a remote and the TV screen becomes a black mirror. When she thinks he isn’t looking, she wraps strands of hair around two fingers and tugs.

“Where’s Ryan? Hasn’t moved out, has he?”

“He stayed the night at his girlfriend’s place.”

“He’s got a girlfriend?”

She smiles. “Her name’s Kelly. He’s been seeing her a while now. Must be six, seven months. She’s nice.”

“Ryan with a girlfriend.” He tries picturing her but doesn’t have the imagination and instead sees Emma. “Last time I saw him he was this big.”

“He’s shot up a bit since then. You need a shave.”

He touches his beard. “Listen, Mum, the drive’s caught up with me. I’m gonna throw my bag in my room and get my head down. Okay?”

A vile mix of anger and sadness spreads through him when he sees her relief at this suggestion.

“Of course it is. Do you need anything bringing up?”

He heads for the door, leaving the foul tea untouched, saying he just needs an hour.

“I’ll do you some bacon when you get up.”

Ignoring her, he walks upstairs, a trick of the light giving his shadow on the wall long twisted horns.

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The room is cold and dark. He opens the curtains. Rain-muted light greys the air. All he can find of the time spent here is his old wooden bed, a small table, a gutted wardrobe, and outlines on the walls where football posters once hung. Nothing else. He hadn’t expected it to remain untouched, frozen outside time until the day he returned, but the room’s bleak emptiness is depressing. He drops his kitbag on the bed and sits next to it, staring through the carpet. The smell of dust and stale air has memories rearing before collapsing under their own weight. A wheelie bin dragged along the cobbled alley at the back of the house rouses him and he lies on the bed without taking off his jacket or boots. In a corner of the ceiling a dead spider vibrates in a dusty web snapping on a breeze. His eyes won’t stay closed. He stands and paces the room, muttering and swearing, then leans on the sill and looks out the window. In the cobbled alley, beyond walls crowned with broken glass, a bald man in his forties with a thick black-grey beard is standing beside a lamppost looking up at him. He’s wearing a navy blue parka with the hood down, its fur trim soaked, indifferent to the rain pouring down his scalp. Joel watches him, chewing another Cipramil,

a church bell ringing somewhere, and only when the man has walked away, talking on a phone and checking his watch, does Joel lie back down. Something smashes downstairs in the kitchen, startling him. He stands again and looks out the window. It's a Thursday morning at the start of winter.

2

Joel was murdered four days after returning home. He was last seen on surveillance cameras leaving Lime Street station, his left hand wrapped in what appeared to be a black bandage, and later his car was flashed by a speed camera heading north along Scotland Road at twice the limit. Eleven days later his corpse was discovered entombed in a concrete block in a self-storage unit on the outskirts of Liverpool after being strenuously tortured to death elsewhere. The discovery was made by an Edge Hill University postgraduate who had been given the keys to the wrong unit. He entered the windowless room, switched on the overhead fluorescent and saw, leaning against the back wall and covered with a shroud, what looked like a “vertical coffin.” Following the removal of the shroud, the student found a “man with his face and toes

sticking out of a concrete slab,” reminding him of “Han Solo frozen in carbonite in *The Empire Strikes Back*.” Only after Joel’s corpse had been jackhammered from the concrete did the details emerge of the horrors he had undergone—the scourging, the castration, the fractured hyoid—including the bizarre discovery of a crumpled photo stuffed down his throat. But by this time, as rumour bled into fact and the two became indistinguishable, I was neither surprised nor upset because, in my own way, I had put Joel there.

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Leaning on the windowsill in Eddie’s second-floor flat, watching a pretty, young mum walk her little boy to school, my phone vibrated with a text from Kelly: *What happened last nite? Talk to me*. An image of her lying in the dark, naked and silent, blazed across my memory’s retina. It had happened again and I was running out of excuses, out of time.

It started to rain. The mum took the boy’s hand and they ran, the boy laughing, excited by the scene. I sat on the ripped-up couch beside Mick, almost spilling the can he’d been holding for the past hour.

“Fuck, watch what you’re doing, lad.” He glared at me, his eyes bloodshot, before turning back to a remake of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* he was watching on DVD, the volume turned up loud considering the time.

I tipped back my head and gazed at a ceiling overcast with damp clouds, cracked with forked lightning. Eddie’s flat consisted of a dingy kitchen, a dingier bathroom, and a shoebox living room that doubled as his bedroom. The toilet

flushed and Eddie walked in towelling dry his face, his skin pale. He dropped on to the armchair beside the Calor Gas heater, the skin around his eyes swollen, running a hand over his shaved head. He looked at Sam and Knoxy asleep on his bed behind the couch, their snoring buried in screams and revving chainsaws coming from the TV.

“I wish them two arseholes would wake up. I need to get my head down.” Eddie rubbed his face with both hands as if trying to remove a mask and looked at me. “How come you showed up so late?”

I'd called around at four in the morning after failing to perform with Kelly again. She hadn't said anything, just laid there in the dark, silent, which somehow made it worse. I got dressed and walked out on her, unable to think of another excuse. When I got here these four—dressed scalp to sole in black tracksuits and hoodies, like me—were already coming down off the cocaine Eddie was holding for a local dealer for twenty pounds a week.

“Just needed to get out the house.”

Mick laughed. “Lad, wait till there's a kid shitting and screaming, you won't know what the fuck's hit you.”

Mick and Eddie grinned at each other. I knew what they were doing. They were taking the piss because my mum was pregnant again. She'd had Joel at twelve, lost one, had me at eighteen, and now another at thirty-six. All to different men. And I was a laughingstock. I put on my hoodie and was looking for my trainers, needing to get away from these snakes, when Mick's phone lit up and vibrated in his lap. He looked at it, his face a skull in the screen's blue-white wash.

I found my trainers and when I was ready to leave, Sam had woken and jumped up, dazed, checking his phone for the time, as if late for something. He said he'd walk with me. We were on our way out when Mick leaned over the back of the couch and stuck out his arm, blocking our path.

"Watch this before you go. Ripper sent it."

With Knoxy still sleeping behind us, me, Eddie, and Sam gathered around Mick's phone. He pressed Play and a grim, silent video began. By the time it'd ended, the screen collapsing into darkness, my stomach was cold and still. After a brief discussion on its authenticity, Mick and Eddie woke Knoxy to watch the video again.

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Down the creaking staircase and out of Eddie's flat into the street, an ordinary, ugly, dimly lit street. The rain came down in thick rippled sheets, darkening the house bricks, the pavements, the air itself, a spreading stain. Sam strode ahead.

"What's the rush?"

"I just want some sleep in my own bed."

He wasn't in any mood for talking so I didn't press. I'd known him long enough to know when to keep my mouth shut and lately, based on how distant he'd been, it seemed all the time was best.

We took the same route as the one we'd taken home from school countless times as kids, walking wordlessly through the rain until his street appeared. I asked if he was in work today.

"I'm off till next week."

“How come?”

He sighed, annoyed having to explain himself. “My dad’s gone the Lakes with his girlfriend. Got the house to myself for the week.”

“Yeah? You didn’t say.”

He walked away without another word. I continued along Pinehurst Road, sidestepping a crumbled wall workmen were cordoning off with temporary barriers. Passing St Columba’s Vicarage, the words MEN ARE EARTH’S CANCER spray-painted on its front doors, I remembered the video on Mick’s phone and my stomach froze again. In contrast to the controlled carnage of the Hollywood horror Mick had been watching on DVD, the silence and stillness of this bleak video was chilling. Its title: “Taliban Leader Executes Traitor.”

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A dark-skinned bearded man in his twenties kneels in a concrete chamber with a black flag on the wall. His hands chained to his ankles from behind. His naked body bruised and lacerated. He stares vacantly, almost serenely, into the camera. Behind him stand five figures in ski masks carrying rifles. Another figure steps into the frame gripping a long, thin knife with a serrated edge, grabs the man by his scalp, and shouts something inaudible at the camera. Then he slits the man’s throat, shouts again, and starts sawing through the neck and spine. The headless body slumps into a lake of blood as the detached head is raised and brought toward the camera, filling the frame, its mouth lopsided, an eye scrunched shut, the other rolled white. Blood drips everywhere. Before

the screen collapses into darkness one of the figures carrying a rifle produces a knife and stabs out the dead man's eyes.

•

I had to lean on the railings on the corner of my street because outside my house, stepping from a car with a kitbag over his shoulder, was Joel. Over the past six years my mum had shown me the occasional photo of Joel—leaning against a tank, or in a group of scowling soldiers pointing guns at the camera, or alone, his eyes dead as coins, the scarlet sky full of ravens—and this was him. Memories ripped open and I stood there, now practically clinging to the railings, a sickening fear growing through me, watching as my mum opened the front door. My phone vibrated in my pocket. A text from Kelly: *Is it me? Have I done something wrong?* I was suddenly desperate to see her, to lie on her bed and get stoned listening to her terrible CDs. Issues that seemed crucial only moments ago now seemed simple, irrelevant. Wind hissed through swaying trees on Utting Avenue. I wiped rain from my eyes and texted: *Of course not. I'll fone u soon x.* Then I phoned home and listened to the rings while glaring at my mum, willing her to walk back inside, close the door, sever any connection between her and Joel, and answer my call. But she didn't. Instead, she hugged him. I hung up and sent her a thought: *Do not invite him into our home.* I stood where I was for a long time after she'd invited him into our home.

•

After pausing in the hallway outside the living room, mumbled talk and the smell of bacon fat in the air, I finally breathed and stepped inside.

“Ryan, look who’s back.” My mum smiled broadly but falsely.

Joel was slouched on the armchair facing the TV, a leg dangling over the arm, a plate of crumbs on his lap, still chewing. He was bearded, with an overgrown shaved head and pale skin, ghostly pale considering how long he’d been in the desert.

“How’s it going, bollocks?”

I shrugged. “Not bad.”

As if he’d never been away, the last six years compacted into a single memory and I regressed to a twelve-year-old boy.

“Fucking hell, you’ve filled out. Been on the ’roids, lad?”

“The what?”

“The buff stuff. Steroids.”

My mum laughed nervously and took the plate from him. “Ryan doesn’t do drugs, he just eats well.” She walked into the kitchen, her trichotillomania noticeable, patches of scalp visible through her hair. I put it down to her latest pregnancy as it tended to flare-up during times of stress. I looked at Joel.

“I thought you were still over there.”

He sniffed and wiped his mouth on the back of a wrist. “The tour ended early. A job well-done.” He smiled with just his upper lip.

“Where’s Emma?”

He unhooked his leg from the arm of the chair and sat up. “Gone to stay with her dad for a while. He’s not too good.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

A flicker of annoyance in his eyes. “His heart.”

From the kitchen, I could hear the tap running and my mum whistling tunelessly. She came back carrying a plate of biscuits and told me to sit down. I sat on the couch without taking off my soaked hoodie.

“Joel’s going to be staying a few days.” She held her swollen stomach and lowered herself on to the couch beside me, panting. “Just till Emma’s back home.”

“You won’t even know I’m here.”

He mimed zipping shut his mouth and I looked at my mum, who tried to smile but couldn’t. She looked at the TV instead. I could sense Joel staring at me, considering me with the cool detachment of a spider. Seconds stretched into minutes before the cordless phone rang, saving my mum the trouble of thinking up something to say just to keep the air from freezing. She answered, said hello. A moment later, frowning, she held out the phone to Joel.

“It’s . . . for you.”

Microexpressions of horror, shock, and confusion flashed across his face before he took the phone and held it to his ear. He said hello and, after a stretch of silence, hung up, staring at the floor. I looked at my mum. She could only shrug. Joel came to and inputted the caller’s number into his mobile.

“Who was it?”

He looked at me, his face haunted. “No one. Wrong number.”

“Have a biscuit.” My mum offered me the plate.

“I’m not hungry.”

Joel looked at her. "How long gone are you?"

She put down the plate and brushed a strand of dyed blond hair behind an ear. "Five months."

"Boy or girl?"

She smiled demurely. "I like surprises."

Joel yawned but it wasn't contagious, for me or my mum. Maybe you can't catch a yawn from someone you dislike. He moved to the door and paused, looking at me.

"Come outside for a minute, lad."

A wide, blank space formed inside my skull and I was frozen, barely capable of blinking. Then I felt myself rising from the couch. Now that I was as tall as Joel it felt strange and unnerving standing beside him, our similar heights preventing me from hiding behind the mask of youth any longer, forcing me to stand up and be a man, when all I felt was puerile fear.

"Where are we going?"

He ignored me and looked at my mum. "Who's the dad?"

She nibbled on a biscuit and turned to the TV to hide her face, doing all she could to remain calm. "No one you know."

There was a pause long enough for a flock of birds to streak past the windows, shadows slashing the walls, before he asked her, his voice a drone, "Anyone you know?"

She looked at us standing in the doorway, her sons divided by dads. The heartbreaking look in her eyes reflected my own crippling anxiety and confusion.