

Here is the boy, drowning.

In these last moments, it's not the water that's finally done for him; it's the cold. It has bled all the energy from his body and contracted his muscles into a painful uselessness, no matter how much he fights to keep himself above the surface. He is strong, and young, nearly seventeen, but the wintry waves keep coming, each one seemingly larger than the last. They spin him round, topple him over, force him deeper down and down. Even when he can catch his breath in the few terrified seconds he manages to push his face into the air, he is shaking so badly he can barely get half a lungful before he's under again. It isn't enough, grows less each time, and he feels a terrible yearning in his chest as he aches, fruitlessly, for more.

He is in full panic now. He knows he's drifted just slightly too far from shore to make it back, the icy tide pulling him out farther and farther with every wave, pushing him towards the rocks that make this bit of coast so treacherous. He also knows there is no one who'll notice he's gone in time, no one who'll raise the alarm before the water defeats him. He won't be saved by chance, either. There are no beachcombers

or tourists to dive in from the shoreline to save him, not this time of year, not in these freezing temperatures.

It is too late for him.

He will die.

And he will die alone.

The sudden, gasping horror of knowing this makes him panic even more. He tries again to break the surface, not daring to think that it might be his last time, not daring to think much at all. He forces his legs to kick, forces his arms to heave himself upward, to at least get his body the right way round, to try and grasp another breath just inches away—

But the current is too strong. It allows him tantalizingly near the surface but spins him upside down before he can get there, dragging him closer to the rocks.

The waves toy with him as he tries again.

And fails.

Then, without warning, the game the sea seems to have been playing, the cruel game of keeping him just alive enough to think he might make it, that game seems to be over.

The current surges, slamming him into the killingly hard rocks. His right shoulder blade snaps in two so loudly he can hear the *crack*, even underwater, even in this rush of tide. The mindless intensity of the pain is so great that he calls out, his mouth instantly filling with freezing, briny sea water. He coughs against it, but only drags more into his lungs. He curves into the pain of his shoulder, blinded by it, paralyzed by its intensity. He is unable to even try and swim now, unable to brace himself as the waves turn him over once more.

Please, is all he thinks. Just the one word, echoing through his head.

Please.

The current grips him a final time. It rears back as if to throw him, and it dashes him head first into the rocks. He slams into them with the full, furious weight of an angry ocean behind him. He is unable to even raise his hands to try and soften the blow.

The impact is just behind his left ear. It fractures his skull, splintering it into his brain, the force of it also crushing his third and fourth vertebrae, severing both his cerebral artery and his spinal cord, an injury from which there is no return, no recovery. No chance.

He dies.

PART 1

The first moments after the boy's death pass for him in a confused and weighty blur. He is dimly aware of pain, but mostly of a tremendous *fatigue*, as if he has been covered in layer upon layer of impossibly heavy blankets. He struggles against them, blindly, his thrashing increasing as he panics (again) at the invisible ropes that seem to bind him.

His mind isn't clear. It races and throbs like the worst kind of fever, and he is unaware of even thinking. It's more some kind of wild, dying instinct, a terror of what's to come, a terror of what's happened.

A terror of his death.

As if he can still struggle against it, still outrun it.

He even has a distant sensation of momentum, his body continuing its fight against the waves even though that fight has already been lost. He feels a sudden rushing, a surge of terror hurtling him forward, forward, forward, but he must be free of his body somehow because his shoulder no longer hurts as he struggles blindly through the dark, unable to feel anything, it seems, except a terrified urgency to *move*—

And then there is a coolness on his face. Almost as of a breeze, though such a thing seems impossible for so many

reasons. It's this coolness that causes his consciousness – his soul? His spirit? Who's to say? – to pause in its fevered spin.

For an instant, he is still.

There's a change in the murk before his eyes. A lightness. A lightness he can enter, somehow, and he can feel himself leaning towards it, his body – so weak, so nearly incapable beneath him – reaching for the growing light.

He falls. Falls onto solidity. The coolness rises from it, and he allows himself to sink into it, let it envelop him.

He is still. He gives up his struggle. He lets oblivion overtake him.

Oblivion is purgatorial and grey. He is passably conscious, not asleep but not quite awake either, as if disconnected from everything, unable to move or think or receive input, able only to exist.

An impossible amount of time passes, a day, a year, maybe even an eternity, there is no way he can know. Finally, in the distance, the light begins to slowly, almost imperceptibly change. A greyness emerges, then a lighter greyness, and he starts to come back to himself.

His first thought, more vaguely sensed than actually articulated, is that it feels as though he's pressed against a cement block. He's dimly aware of how cool it is under him, how solid it feels, like he's clinging to it lest he fly off into space. He hovers around the thought for an indeterminate

amount of time, letting it clarify, letting it connect to his body, to other thoughts—

The word *morgue* suddenly flashes somewhere deep inside him – for where else are you laid out on cool, solid blocks – and in rising horror, he opens his eyes, unaware they were even closed. He tries to call out that they must not bury him, they must not cut him open, that there's been a terrible, terrible mistake. But his throat rebels against the formation of words, as if it hasn't been used for years, and he's coughing and sitting up in terror, his eyes muddled and foggy, like he's looking at the world from behind many thick layers of dirty glass.

He blinks repeatedly, trying to see. The vague shapes around him slowly fall into place. He sees that he is not on the cold slab of a morgue—

He is—

He is—

Where is he?

Confused, he squints painfully into what now seems to be rising daylight. He looks around, trying to take it in, trying to see it, make sense of it all.

He seems to be lying on a concrete path that runs through the front yard of a house, stretching from the sidewalk to a front door behind him.

The house is not his own.

And there's more wrong than just that.

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He breathes for a moment, heavily, almost panting, his mind groggy, his vision slowly becoming a little clearer. He feels himself shaking from the chill and pulls his arms around himself, sensing a dampness covering his—

Not *his* clothes.

He looks down at them, his physical reaction slower than the thought that ordered it. He squints again, trying to see them clearly. They don't seem to really be clothes at all, just strips of white cloth that barely fit the name *trousers* or *shirt*, stuck closely around him more like bandages than things to wear. And all along one side, they're wet with—

He stops.

They're not wet with sea water, not with the soaking, briny cold of the ocean he was just—

(drowning in)

And only half of him is wet anyway. The other half, the half that was against the ground, is cool, but quite dry.

He looks around, more confused than ever. Because he can only be wet with *dew*. The sun is low in the sky, and it seems as if it must be morning. Underneath him, he can even make out a dry outline of where he was lying.

As if he had lain there all night.

But that can't be. He remembers the brutal winter coldness of the water, the dark freezing grey of the sky overhead that would never have let him survive a night out in it—

But that isn't this sky. He lifts his face to it. This sky isn't even winter. The chill is merely the chill of morning,

of possibly a warm day to come, of possibly a *summer* day. Nothing at all like the bitter wind of the beach. Nothing at all like when he–

When he died.

He takes another moment to breathe, to just do that, if he can. There is only quiet around him, only the sounds he himself is making.

He turns slowly to look at the house again. It resolves itself more and more as his eyes get used to the light, used – it almost seems – to seeing again.

And then, through the fog and confusion, he feels a soft tremor in his blanketed mind.

A brush, a hint, a featherweight of–

Of–

Is it familiarity?