

Him

His phone wouldn't stop ringing. It was on the quietest setting, but it was tinny still, and irritating. He knew how to set it to silent; knew how to turn it off. His thigh was falling asleep from the repetitive buzzing. He kept his arms folded across his chest.

This was where he had gone missing. Right here, in this very spot.

He kicked the back of his shoe off the brick wall, and caked dirt fell like dandruff to the frozen ground. He waited a moment, letting his eyes fall out of focus, staring at the sparkling frosted tarmac, before stamping down and mashing the dirt back into the crevices of his rubber-soled right shoe. Cause and effect. Rinse and repeat. Put things back where you found them, always put things back. He had thought that his being here, his being in this exact, terrible spot, would help to bring him back. Now that he was here, he didn't know what steps to take.

Had it actually started to get dark at this time of day, or was it just that it was overcast? He hadn't been paying much attention recently. Still, it seemed very early in the day. It couldn't have been more than three hours since noon.

The frost made it all look so innocent. Pristine and friendly and terrifically unmarred, almost like the place itself had forgotten what had happened here. There wasn't a mark to be found, and yet he knew ineffably that this was the spot. It was as if a weight was tugging his shoulders upwards, somehow. He strained to force them to fall. He was less comfortable now, which made him feel oddly more relaxed. Or was it the other way around?

This was it, this was where it had happened. Could being here really bring him back? He didn't know where else to start. Now that he was here, he didn't know where to begin. His eyes were squeezed shut and stinging. The air bit at him viciously as he pulled it in through his nose. His mind could not make sense of what he was trying to do, but then again, neither could he.

Opening his eyes, he watched the tiny specks of white float miserably down to the iridescent street. Perhaps it would stick. Perhaps there would be snow. He would have liked that, he thought, had he still been here. It didn't really matter; perhaps the snow wouldn't stick. It never usually did. It didn't really matter; perhaps he was gone for good.

The steady rise and fall of his chest, infinitesimal but inescapable even through his thick wool-blend coat and scarf, felt like a betrayal. To be standing here, freezing and dazed but irrefutably alive and breathing, felt gaudy. It was disloyal, deceitful, abhorrent to be so incontrovertibly present. So incontestably living. Flaunting. Flourishing.

He released one arm, his right arm, from the lock across his chest, and raised it to his face. Fingernails like bitten and ragged knives dug into the skin millimeters below his hairline, securing a hold there in four concave depressions. His eyes were closed again, and his face was knotted into a hard grimace. Slowly, agonisingly, he dragged his hand down his brow, over onto his right cheek, and finally over the crest of his jaw. He felt his skin snag more than once on his serrated nails, and it sang out jubilantly in breathtaking pain.

He was exhilarated, relieved as he opened his eyes once more, this time to look at the blood under his fingernails. In the mounting darkness, it could have been dirt. It could have been anything really, but it was blood. His blood.

This was the very place from which he had disappeared. Had he bled? Had his fingernails played host to his own blood, or perhaps that of someone else? Had his skin been stinging, singing, trickling quietly of its life in the cold? He couldn't remember.

He had been there when it happened. He was there when he disappeared. In his head now, he could hear it all. No screams, just the scuffle and kicking, the muffled sound of the rain. He couldn't see him. He was never able to see him.

His phone, which had moved to the back of his awareness, swung around full circle and was suddenly vibrant in his senses once more. Louder and louder, it drilled into his eardrum. Tinny. Shrill. Metallic, like the blood that had found its way into his mouth now. Piercing, like the cold that chewed at his ears and his toes. Unrelenting, like the buried and ever-burrowing thoughts and accusations. He was there. He was right there.

He had been standing right here, in this very spot. This terrible spot, filled now with these useless feet.

Where could he start? Where could he begin? How could he possibly set about finding all that had been lost here? All that had been changed, all that had been taken. It was more than innocence that had been stolen that day; it was a life. A boy's life. A year ago now to the day, and still it was as fresh as the frozen air.

It had been with such purpose that he had made his way here today. So clear had it been in his mind, that this would fix it all. All he had to do was to come here, to come to the place where it had happened, and it would all become obvious. He would know then, how to get him back. He would know where he had been taken to. He would know, finally he would know where he was being held prisoner.

It's always in the last place you would look, that's what people always said. People said that about everything. Where did you see it last? That's where you should check, so that's where he was checking. He had seen him here, and he had been helpless, utterly inept at saving him. He knew what was happening.

There was nothing you could have done, that's what people always said. People said that about everything. It wasn't your fault. How could it have been your fault? Nobody blames you. In that much, they were wrong. He shouldered the blame because he knew it was his. He had been the only one there. Had he done something, had he just been quicker on his feet, quicker in his mind, quicker in his fear, none of it would have happened. He could have gotten away.

He kicked his useless feet off the wall again. The blood had frozen hard to his face.

It had been hours now, and finally he could see blue and red flashing sluggishly in the distance. Sirens swelled to contend with his phone's infernal ringing. He would have to accept now that he would never find him. This had been it. This was the only idea he could come up with. Show up where he had been lost, and hope to find him waiting for him there. To find some clue, at the very least. But there was nothing. He was gone.

A month ago now to the day since he had been found. A month since he had returned to his family, gaunt and ruined beyond hope of repair. Irretrievably altered. Suffocated by the loss of something so dear to him. So integral.

He stood now in the place that it had happened. In the place where everything had ended for him. He stood there now, and abandoned what hope he had left of finding the part of himself that had died that day, and that had died over and over, again and again for every day since.

It was heavy on his conscience, and it was heavy on his heart, but he knew that this was what he had expected to find. To find that there was nothing at all to find.

And now, tired, bleeding, disconsolate, he resigned himself to be found once more.