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The Not-Dead and the Saved

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Not Dead

THEY'VE BEEN ASKED to wait in *Paediatrics*. It is five o'clock, already; and the sun is streaming in through the high, unopenable windows. There's a concert going on in the Day Room: hrum, thrum, thrum, *and his name is Aitken Drum*.

The Son is lying on top of the blanket and has kept his trainers on. He has lately taken to wearing aggressively small jeans which he buys in the children's department and customises with razor blades, black thread and biro drawings in the style of Aubrey Beardsley. He taps his dirty fingers on his ripped tee-shirt. His large, glittering brown eyes sweep the empty ward.

'Look,' he says, in his new, adolescent, scratchy

voice, 'a Not-Dead.'

'What?' says the Mother, sleepily. The Mother has been putting off her tiredness for so long that it tends, like a neglected middle child, to leap at her at the least chance. Just now it is sitting on her lap, arms tight around her neck, breathing the scents of *Paediatrics* into her mouth: strawberry syrup, toasted cheese, pee.

'A Not-Dead,' says the Son. 'Look. Under the window.'

Mother cranes round, then stands up briefly. She sees a baby sleeping in a plastic cot. It is wearing a pink woolly hat and cardigan and has oxygen tubes in its nose.

'See,' says the Son.

'It's a baby,' says the Mother, crossly, 'someone's baby.' But the baby's eyes are too far apart, and it has a cleft palate, and its whole body has a flattened, spatch-cocked look, as if it is trying to separate into two pieces, East and West, and the Mother is already worrying that there might be a crisis and she will be called upon to Do Something. The Mother is not a good choice for the parent of a chronic invalid. She is scrawny and impatient and she fears sick things: fallen fledglings, wounds, things that pulse. Someone else always has to pick them up. Her ex-husband preferably, who

is bluff and easy with illness, who would carry the Son, as a six-year-old, casually around the hospital in his arms, the tubes draped jocularly but handily over his shoulders – talents he is now wasting on a new, completely well, wife and child.

‘She should be dead,’ says the Son, ‘like in nature. I mean if that baby was born in a primitive tribe she’d be dead in seconds.’

‘So would lots of people,’ says the Mother. ‘So would I.’

‘I would,’ says the Son. ‘Definitely.’ He raises his fists to his forehead, surveys the puncture wounds inside his elbows, and adds, ‘I’d be the deadest.’ The Mother feels impatient. Once, the Son was prodigious and original, and the Mother was daffy and whacky, and they were on the same side: now they seem doomed to partake in endless EFL oral exams, with the Son taking the part of the difficult student, the one with the nose stud.

‘You were a perfectly healthy baby,’ she snaps.

‘Not really,’ says the Son. ‘Only *apparently*. I was born with it, remember. My tumour. That’s what the new guy reckons.’ Oncology is a new favourite subject. So is genetics, and blame. The Mother decides not to meet the Son’s eye.

‘Anyway,’ she says instead, ‘we’re not primitive.’

‘No,’ says the Son, leaning back on his pillows,

‘we’ve got the technology now. And cos we have the technology, we have to save her. The baby. I mean the Doctors and people, when a baby like that is born, they have to save her. It would be wrong to ask them not to save her, I can totally see that, cos then they would be like murderers.’

‘And?’ says the Mother.

‘So then the person they save is not dead, but sometimes they’re not alive either. Like they need the technology to keep them going? Like they can’t be properly alive, but no one knows what to do with them? Not Dead. See?’

The Mother wakes up. She scents danger. She leans forward, and the Son fixes her with his shining eyes.

‘I see them everywhere. You know? Not just in the hospital. Some of them are in disguise, but I can spot them. Like they have a little shiny outline round them, like in a game on a screen. They pixelate, Mum, they pixelate at me. Like: there, there, there. Shouldn’t really be here. You, you, you. Not really here. Me, me, me. Not-Dead.’

‘No,’ says the Mother, loudly, unsurely, ‘you’re alive.’

‘I’m not dead,’ says the Son, ‘because of the Machine, but where am I alive?’

‘In your mind,’ says the Mother, ‘you’re alive in

your mind, that's the thing. The life of the mind.'

Because the Mother believes this most sincerely. And so, during the long while they have to wait for the plasma and the trolley, for the Machine and the nurses, the Mother babbles about Robert Louis Stevenson, also sickly, also bookish. Then she enumerates to the Son the titles of all the books he loves the most, all the books they've read together, their favourite episodes, and, after a while, the Son says, 'You know *White Fang*? I was thinking about that. I think it's like a prequel to *Call of the Wild*. White Fang is Buck's grandfather. You can work it out. There are, like, all these little clues.'

Then he curls down on the pillows, and chatters on about the great dog Buck, and how he is actually fulfilling White Fang's dream or maybe, like, the call of his *genes* when he runs into oblivion in the Canadian woods, and daringly the mother takes his hand and folds it inside her own and remembers how soft it was when he was a little boy, really as soft as a petal, the curved veined petal of a magnolia in its brief spring-time brilliance; and all the while the baby breathes in its tubing, its arms abandoned by its sides, its ribcage moving up and down with exaggerated depth in its pink covers, like a giant, disconnected, heart.

Three weeks later, they are in *Acute General*.

They can't be in a single room, because of the price of nurses. Because nurses have to watch him, now. Because, yesterday, the Son unplugged his Machine and watched silently as his life blood was pumped to the floor. And where was his Mother? His Mother was on her way to the library, that's where, because her Son had said, 'Go and find a job, a life of your own,' that's why. She was more than halfway there when she turned and sprinted back. She doesn't know why.

Now they have pumped pints of blood back into his veins, now they have reinflated his internal organs and wheeled him out of the ICU. Now the Mother and Son are going to have their first conversation. The tubes are out of his throat, but they seem to be in hers. She feels as if she has a broomstick stuffed in her mouth. They need to have this conversation. There is morphine still in his system, she should remember. They are in a bay with the curtains drawn. Acute General. Anyone could overhear.

'It was an impulse, Mum,' he says, loudly, to the ceiling tiles, his voice hoarser than ever. 'One of those things. Try not to fixate, okay?'

'How can it be an impulse,' hisses the Mother, furiously, round the broomstick, 'to bypass six security systems?'

'Oh, I worked out how to do that ages ago,'

carols the Son. 'Sort of for the fun of it. Like chess. You know?'

The Mother taught the Son to play chess herself. He is a ferocious player, but he fastens too fixedly on elaborate schemes, seven-move tangos of knights and rooks, and cries when he realises he has left his king unguarded, mate in two. Yes, she can see how he could do that: work it all out. And already, just two moves in, the Mother starts to weep, and the Son looks at her, then away.

'The thing is, Mum,' says the Son, picking his nails, 'you got it wrong.'

The Mother is prepared to accept she has got many things wrong. Which one, though?

'Robert Louis Stevenson?' says the Son. 'Remember? He just wasn't that ill, Robert Louis Stevenson. He could walk. He got to have sex. He grew fucking up, Mum. Not —' the boy gestures at his feet, sticking up in a little tent of blanket halfway down the bed.

The Mother slumps out of her chair and puts her head on the end of the bed, on the brown hairy hospital blanket. She is thinking about her love for her son. It was born at the same time as him, and she is not in control of it. She imagines it as very strong and not at all intelligent, something that moves about in the dark and grabs things. It has claws and tiny eyes, like a lobster. The mother decides to say something stupid,

so as not to go on thinking:

‘But your transplant,’ says the Mother, ‘it could be any time. Next month.’

‘Yeah,’ says the Son, ‘exactly.’ And they both remember the last transplant.

‘What about me?’ says the Mother, after a while, sitting back on her heels. ‘What would I do without you? How would I feel?’

The Son sighs deeply. ‘Mum,’ he says, ‘you have to see, don’t you? You have to see that I can’t be responsible for that?’

Paediatrics, again. They’ve been called in for the transplant, but there’s been an emergency, and a blood test gone AWOL, and here is the upshot: wait overnight. The Mother doesn’t mind: she knows the ward so well, and how to change the sofa into a bed. She is doing that, and the Son is lying on the bed, plugged into his i-pod and a drip-stand, when he takes out his ear piece and beckons to her conspiratorially.

‘Look,’ he whispers, ‘it’s the Not-Dead baby.’

The Mother sits by him on the bed and peers where he points, out through the gap in the curtains. In the opposite bay, flanked by machinery, is a cot and a pink-clad shape.

‘Are you sure,’ says the Mother, ‘it’s the same one? That was months ago. Wouldn’t she have grown?’

‘Mum,’ says the Son, ‘haven’t you learnt anything? Of course she wouldn’t grow.’ Now a woman stands up, and draws the curtains of the bay. In the slice of light they glimpse the shadow of her belly.

‘I hope she didn’t see us,’ says the Mother.

‘Did you see her?’ hisses the Son. ‘Pregnant! Holy moley!’ and he collapses theatrically flat against his pillows. The Mother finishes pulling out her sofa bed and lies on it. It is incredibly narrow: her elbows are on wood. Her Son is staring at the ceiling, and has not replugged the i-pod.

‘Is it bad that she’s pregnant?’ she says, after a while. In *Paediatrics*, there are pictures on the ceiling: Piglet and Pooh, walking into the sunset.

‘No,’ says the Son, ‘but it’s weird.’

‘How weird?’

‘Well, that baby is going to die. The Not-Dead one. I think it has Edwards Syndrome. I looked it up. So that baby will die, and then, just at the same time, she’ll have a new baby. And then what will they think?’

‘Maybe,’ says the Mother, though it is a bothering thought, ‘they’ll think they’ve got a new baby to love?’

‘Yeah, and maybe they’ll think the old baby got a new body? You know? Transmutation of souls?’

‘Would that be bad?’

‘Not like, Hitler bad, but it is fucked up. Because, what I think is, your soul doesn’t exist. Your mind doesn’t, even. Your mind is a bit of your body. It’s just the same. That’s what the Prozac tells you, Mum. See. Look at us. We’ve taken the pills, and they’ve changed our bodies, and that’s changed our minds. Here we are, having the transplant, happy campers. Different souls. See?’

‘Yes,’ says the Mother, who has brought zopiclone with her and is about to take one, ‘I do see that. I see that point.’

‘I’m going to put the light out now,’ says the Son, and does. In the dark he says, in his dalek voice from way back, from his Doctor Who phase, ‘Tomorrow, I get my transplant. Then, I start to grow. I am on drugs that make me optimistic, so this is easy. Good night, mother-unit.’

The Mother’s pillow smells of rubber. The wall next to her head is padded vinyl. When the Son was little, she would lie here and tell him they were camping out, in the Dormobile, lost in the French countryside. She tries to tell herself one of these stories now, but can only think of the Son’s illness, the long road, the many forks, and how, at each one, they have borne inexplicably left, further and further down B routes, nearer and nearer the sea. Recently, several people have told her that the Son owes her his life,

but the Mother doesn't feel that at all. It is she who owes him his, in the same way you owe a child a good picnic, when it is your idea to set out, and you who forgot the map, and now you are lost and there is no hope ever of the rain turning off.

A Spike on the Graph

This is a new hospital, in the city where the Son now goes to University. The Mother had to get a taxi and a plane and another taxi; she had to ask at two reception desks; a junior Doctor met her at the second and is now trotting beside her; he is saying the crisis has peaked, and new antibiotics and best foot forward, hopefully; but she can hardly hear him for the fire-doors and steel barriers swing-swinging in her head; but here they are: *Cardio-Respiratory*.

The Son is already stable. He is sitting up in bed, attached to, for him, a minor amount of apparatus. He will always be small, but his cheekbones are good, he is bonily handsome. 'Lollypop head,' he says, of himself. 'I should be on TV.' There are girls, now, and here is one beside him, importantly holding his hand. She has blond hair in plaits and liquid dark eyes and an animated, elegant, deer-like way of holding her head and back.

‘Oh!’ cries the Girl, in a sweet, carrying voice. ‘Look, here you are! He’s come through! He’s beaten the infection back! They never saw such a spike on the graph!’

The Mother sinks on to the edge of the bed, her mouth open, her hands stretched out, her body pulsing forward, ga-ga-ga-ga, my dearest love, and the Son gives her a quick lift of the eyebrow and an embarrassed smile. He lifts his hand but it is encumbered with tubes and with the girl’s hand. He is about to drop out of college and marry the girl; he is going to live on an organic farm with a white-robed group of medical emergency survivors called The Saved he is going to give up meat, alcohol and irony and assume white robes and quasi-Zen belief; he is going to surrender to the leadership of a tall, wintery, ex-kidney patient named Attila, and he will tell his mother that he is dedicated to the celebration of the moment and meditation and macrobiotics and this is why she cannot visit him or speak on the phone or even write more than twice a year, and, that all this is done with his free will and is legal and not a cult and that Attila has plenty of experience with private detectives and the resulting period of constant acute tension and mourning will last more than three years; and though his gesture may start as an embrace, it ends as a flat-

handed, Popish, stop-sign.

Saved

A third hospital. This ward is *Acute Assessment*. Here is the Mother who has just sat down, and here is the Wife on the opposite chair, wearing grubby white cheesecloth robes with a blue cardigan over them and chewing a bead of her amber necklace. The Son is propped up on pillows with his eyes shut. His hair has come out in tufts, now, and his skin is yellow-green and mottled like slipware. Now he is thin as a November guy.

The Son opens his eyes. Something has happened to them: they have curdled or solidified, gone from beer, full of yellow lights, to toffee. It must be the Wife's fault. The Son doesn't greet the Mother. He says to her:

'It's the baby. I can't stand the baby.'

'What do you mean?' says the Mother, 'What baby?'

'His baby,' says the Wife, pointing to a toddler playing in a shaft of sunlight on the other side of the ward. The child is also wearing white – a dirty little tee-shirt and a hefty covered nappy – and the light catches the filaments of his hair. The trout, love,

thrashes in the Grandmother's chest.

'He wants juice,' says the Son. 'Then he wants milk. Then he spills it on the floor. Then he howls. I mean, is that reasonable? Does it strike you as reasonable behaviour?'

'When did you have the Baby?' says the Mother.

'Don't you mean why?' says the Son. The Son has broken out in a sweat, the beads standing out on his yellow skin. His sharp limbs twitch under the sheet.

'He's fourteen months,' says the Wife, taking the bead out of her mouth. 'He was born at the farm. A water birth.' She makes a calm blank face and looks straight at the Mother, her eyes so wide apart they could have a blind spot between them like a cat's.

'I'm taking Jaybird back to the Farm now. Ok?' she says. But the Son has his eyes shut. The Mother runs after the Wife, and at the Ward door she puts her hand briefly on the Baby's head and tries to smile at the Wife, but it comes out as a moan.

The Son opens his eyes for his mother. 'They think I have a brain tumour,' he says. 'They're really pretty sure. Maybe even more than one brain tumour, they're going to do a scan. Then they might want to do chemo but I can't be bothered, I mean what's the point, do you think?'

'Is that why you're angry with the baby?' said the Mother. She knows this doesn't come first, but the

heat of the Baby's head is still burning in her palm.

'How should I know?' said the Son. 'How can anyone know that, Mum?' And then he vomits on the floor, and fits, and his Mother, still squeamish after all these years, doesn't know where to touch him and jumps up and shudders and finally presses the alarm above the bed and the Doctors come, dozens of them, more than even she has ever seen.

In *Oncology*, the Mother is shown images of the tumours. There are three: bore holes or storm systems or black beetles in the bright contour maps of her son's brain, and the Consultant wants to operate or at the very least shrink them with chemo or radio. The Son is refusing all treatment, but, as the Consultant says, the tumours are already actively disturbing the state of the Son's mind, and so perhaps he should be Sectioned.

'No,' says the Son, to the Consultant, 'this is really me. This is actually how angry I am. I am actually this angry with hospitals. I really do hate you. You are not doing anyone any good and I do not give you permission to put your fingers in my brain.'

But it is true he is also angry with everyone else. He can't remember why he asked his Mother to come, and keeps shouting for her to be taken away. When Attila arrives, in his clean white nightie, carrying Tupperware boxes, the Son refuses to let him lay

on hands, and calls the proffered macrobiotic curry a 'cow-pat'. The Mother, watching from the next bay, smirks, and in a whirl of white, Attila catches her arm in his hairy hand.

'I'm going to tell you a story,' he says, as the Mother blinks into his large-boned, plain face. 'About laughing. My *roshi* had a tumour in his arm. He watched it grow, and he said to it, "Tumour, you will be the death of me". And then he laughed at the tumour. At first, we could not understand, but then we laughed with him, and after some days of laughing the tumour shrank and disappeared. I saw this with my own eyes. Now, laughing woman, will you laugh with me?' The Mother is shaking her head but Attila opens his big bearded mouth and laughs, mirthlessly and loudly, showing his teeth, big as a donkey's.

'Holey moley,' says the Son, and pulls his blanket over his head.

This, to the Mother, demonstrates that the Son is sane. But next, in comes the Wife, with the Baby, and the Son turns his back on them and buries himself in his pillow, and when the Baby tries to tug it off with his little plump hands, calling 'funny dada', the Mother witnesses the Son knock the child over on the lino, and in the stramash that follows, the screaming, fits and forcible injections, she thinks the small cold

thought that perhaps the Son should be Sectioned, after all.

The Mother sits by the Son's bed while he sleeps. When he wakes, his eyes are clear.

'You were right,' says the Son. 'We shouldn't have had him.'

'I didn't say that,' she replies. 'How could I? I wasn't there.'

'You didn't need to be,' he says. 'I internalised your response.'

It is indecent, how much this pleases her.

'But you love him,' she says, hopefully, 'the baby?'

'I expect so,' says the Son, 'but I'm letting him down. You see?'

'Yes,' says the Mother. 'It's a terrible feeling.' But the Mother is smiling, because she is still looking into her boy's eyes. Over the years, she has lived with many imaginary versions of the Son – a spry, unmarried one, most recently, but also a heavy-limbed footballing boy, also a big lad who picks up her bags at the station, easily, as if they were empty, also a grown man who lifts her off her feet, tight to his cashmere chest, and all of them have had these eyes, eyes with gold lights, with pinpoints of the true dear dark.

'Because this time,' says the Son, 'I am going to die. And you have to let me. You really do.'

In the Hospice, the tumours eat the Son's brain rapidly, like chalk cliffs eroding in a storm. Things fall off: houses, people. So, when the Wife comes in, the Son turns to her and smiles, and her face opens in joy.

'Hello,' says the Son. 'Have you come to visit me?'

'I brought Jaybird,' she says, indicating the child.

'Is he yours?' he says.

It takes a further fifteen minutes of conversation – during which the Mother gets to play peekaboo with the Baby, the sweetness of which she will remember all her life – to truly establish that the Son has no recollection of ever having met the Wife or the Baby, but that he thinks them interesting and pretty. The Wife leaves the hospital at once, the Baby like a luggage on her shoulder, and gets in a taxi, the Mother at her side all the way, pleading. 'It isn't you he's forgotten,' says the Wife, and the Mother feels a goldfish flick of pleasure.

Now they are in the *Garden Wing*, which is not for *Respite*. The tumours are busy, eating words. They substitute 'sausage' for bedpan and 'window' for drink, but for a long time they are unable to eat music. So, round the Son, everyone sings 'I love coffee' or hums 'Food, glorious food'.

One night, the tumours have swallowed fifteen years of bad feeling against the Father. The Mother

calls him, and he comes, salt-and-pepper-haired, now, prosperous and bourgeois and wearing sports shirts the Mother would never, not in million years, have allowed him. He strides in, he picks up his Son in his arms, as easily as when he was six years old, and the Son, barely audibly, starts to hum 'Dance for your Daddy'. Everyone, even the case-hardened hospice workers, weeps.

The tumour cannot eat chess, and for as long as the Son can lift the pieces, the Mother plays with him. It induces healthy synaptic activity, say the doctors, and she should keep it up. The doctors do not think the same of *White Fang*, but the Mother reads it aloud anyway. The pathways are there, she thinks, in the brain, for her sledge and its dog. Deep down the brain stem is a pebble which is the Mother and the Son, and this is where they are headed. The pebble is ivory and has an embryo etched on it, curled. 'Speed Bonny Boat', sings the mother to that embryo, and 'You Are My Sunshine'. All those sad songs.

One tumour is an electric storm: it shakes the Son's body like a tree. One tumour picks him up like a pillow and doubles him over and squeezes vomit from him. One tumour sends his eyes back into his skull looking for something. Together, the tumours take him by the throat and he can't

swallow.

The Wife returns, with the indefatigable Attila. Attila says they have come to let the truth of the Son's death colour their lives, and the Wife says nothing. The Son's face is frozen now, anyway, so who knows who he knows? The Wife wipes it, and sits by him. All her hairstyles connote innocence, or princess – Rapunzel, Hebe, coronet – and she has grown out of them, all at once, and not noticed.

Days go by. Now the Son's mouth has to be opened with a spatula, wiped with damp cotton wool, dried and greased with Vaseline on a finger, three times an hour. The Mother does this very badly. She worries that his skin will rip, she fears the dry knock of the spatula on bone, she is both too ginger and too clumsy, each time. The Wife does it with Madonna-like ease and the Mother compliments her and she smiles, but still she does not bring the Baby.

More and more of The Saved gather and chant in the Day Room. The Hospice complains, so Attila negotiates duties for them: vase-filling, visiting the unvisited. The Father sits among them, incongruous in his golfing jumper, helping with vases, holding his daughter-in-law's hands, conversing with Attila. He is exactly Attila's height and build, the Mother notes, their heads bend together above all the other heads, the tallest trees. The Father's eyes are con-

stantly wet, he is tireless, he does not mind the spatula at all; the anger, as Attila points out, is all on the Mother's side.

The Mother likes to sit by the Son in the death of the night, when they can be alone. That is when, long after language has started to leave him, she hears the Son say:

'What people forget when they are afraid of dying is that when you die, you are ill. So you don't mind really. Being ill is shit.'

But maybe he didn't really say that. Maybe she has just internalised his response. The last thing he certainly says is 'Big pot', and is probably a request for a bedpan.

The Saved and the Father agree on a plan. The Wife brings the Baby to the Hospice garden. Everyone else disconnects the Son from his tubes and lifts him out of bed, eight pairs of flat, kind hands. Stiff and light as a charred log, they carry him outside and hold him under the cherry tree while the wind blows through it, and chant their mantras, the Father loudest of all on the Oms, while the Wife, a garland on her lovely head, helps the Baby stroke his cheeks with a bunch of blossom. The Mother watches all this from the Hospice window, noting that the Son's expression does not change, longing for the Baby, weeping, thinking

she should have been asked.

But, when he does die, it is the Mother beside him. What happens is: he stops breathing and death passes over his body and stills it. The Mother isn't frightened of it, after all. One eye is open, and one shut, and she reaches across and closes the open one. There, now, Jonathon. The eyelid is warm and soft as a silk scarf left in the sun, but there is nothing living now in the hard round of the eyeball, not the least tick or twitch of life.

Then she stands up. Her name is Julia. It is nearly dawn. She goes out to the Day Room where her ex-husband and Attila and The Saved are sleeping, in their white robes, like so many discarded petals. She was going to tell them something, the thing she has learnt, but already it is draining from her, disappearing like water poured over sand, and she lets them sleep on and just sits down.