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He was just seventeen when he came to Portmantle, a runaway like the rest of us, except there was a harrowed quality about this boy that we had not seen before in any of the newcomers. A private torment seemed to clamp the muscles of his face, as though every disappointment in the world had been disclosed to him too young and stunted his expression. We knew him as Fullerton: an ordinary name, a plain one, but not the sort that sinks into the depths of memory without unsettling others.

Our anticipation of him was enough to disrupt our normal routines, setting us off course the way a premature adjustment to the wind can strand a kite. Rarely had we paid so much attention to the refuge gates, or given more than a terse thought to another resident's circumstance. But he was presented to us as a special case, a kindred spirit worthy of our time and interest. So we offered it.

We were conscripted to his cause from the beginning: Quickman, MacKinney, Pettifer and me. The provost himself had called a meeting in his study to explain, over a glass of pomegranate juice, that Portmantle was about to receive its youngest ever

resident, and had made a show of outlining how much he would personally appreciate our support. ‘You know I’m loath to burden you with this kind of responsibility,’ he had told us, ‘but the boy’s going to need some help finding his feet, and Ender can’t manage on his own—his English isn’t up to it. I need the four of you to be there for him while I’m gone. You remember what it’s like to be gifted at that age—a sympathetic ear can really make a difference.’ In truth, we were cajoled into a volunteering mood by the hint of a reward, some luxury that might be procured from the mainland in return for our good deed: Earl Grey tea leaves, smoked bacon, porridge oats; the most banal of pantry items were great delicacies to us, and we wilted at the thought of them.

There was plenty that the provost did not make clear and much that we were not privy to. The details of Fullerton’s troubles were as confidential as our own. No doubts were raised as to his temperament. Nothing was discussed as to his reasons for admittance. We only asked for some small insight into the type of work the boy was known for, but getting answers from the provost was like trying to press cider from geraniums. ‘You can ask him yourselves in a few days,’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t want to prejudice the boy before he even gets here.’

We awaited his arrival from the mainland for two eventless days, like prisoners expecting mail, and cursed him on the wasted afternoons he did not show. ‘Assuming the little sod ever gets here,’ Pettifer said, ‘he’s going to work off every last bit of time he owes me. He can start by polishing my boots. I want a shine so good I can see up my nose.’ This after we had given up an entire Saturday morning to assist the caretaker with his preparations. While Ender and his staff had cleaned and organised the boy’s lodging, we had

dug the snow from all the footpaths around the mansion, taking turns with the shovel, only for another flume of mothy flakes to come down overnight, leaving just a faint and rutted trail to show for all our grunt work by Sunday lunchtime. Our charity did not extend to shovelling a path twice, which is why the snow was so thick and undisturbed when Fullerton finally appeared.

He came stumbling up the hill with nothing but a canvas bag and the hood of his cagoule cinched tight around his head. MacKinney spotted him in the window of the mess hall—‘Hey-o,’ she said, ‘here comes trouble’—and we abandoned our plates and gathered on the landing to get a better look at him.

It was clear from the simple determination of the boy’s strides as he pushed and staggered through the white-dusted pines that he needed the sanctuary of Portmante as much as we did. From our very first glimpse of him, we understood that he was one of us. He had the rapid footfalls of a fugitive, the grave hurriedness of a soldier who had seen a grenade drop somewhere in the track behind. We could recognise the ghosts that haunted him because they were the same ghosts we had carried through the gates ourselves and were still trying to excise.

‘He hasn’t even stopped to catch his breath, you know. It’s quite impressive,’ Quickman said, bothering to lift his pipe out from his teeth for the first time that day. He had run out of tobacco so long ago that the bowl was dry, but he was content just to chew on the mouthpiece—there was residual flavour there, he insisted, that would suffice in lieu of smoke. (He still kept an empty pouch of Golden Harvest in his trouser pocket and would often be found inspecting it, as though in hope the contents had replenished by some miracle.)

MacKinney tilted down her glasses, peering over the lenses. ‘What kind of coat is that to be wearing in winter?’ she said. The boy was stooped now, battling the slope, both hands folded into his armpits. ‘I don’t understand why it’s so hard to get a man into a proper coat. There’s nothing heroic about freezing to death.’ She was the most parental of the four of us, being the oldest by a distance, and the only one with daughters of her own out in the world. Her mothering nature often surfaced at meal-times, lending her the compulsion to cant her head and tell us, too often, that we were drawn or undernourished. She had this very look about her now.

Pettifer gave an amused little snort—his own peculiar laugh. ‘No scarf, no hat, no gloves. Stupidity is more like it.’ The boy was stumbling over the frosted Mediterranean scrub, into the open space before the boundary wall. When he reached the gates, he fell forwards, gripping the bars, pressing his head to the metal as though in prayer. ‘Look at him—he can barely stand up in those silly shoes of his.’ And, with this, the boy bent and vomited. The yellowy liquid steamed by his feet. ‘Oh dear. There goes breakfast.’

‘Don’t laugh,’ I told them. ‘He’s got to be exhausted.’ It was a mile uphill from the ferry—a draining enough hike in clement weather. And the boy was not even wearing proper boots. No wonder he was retching.

Pettifer grinned. ‘How do you know he didn’t eat something bad while he was on the mainland? That street offal the Turks love so much. The chopped-up stuff.’ He turned to Quickman. ‘What’s it called again?’

‘*Kokoreç*,’ Quickman said. ‘Sheep’s innards.’

‘That’s it. All very tasty while it’s going down, but once it’s in

your system—’ He mouthed a silent explosion, then made the action with his spreading fingers to illustrate it.

I ignored him. ‘You’d think someone could’ve warned the lad.’  
‘About what?’

‘The snow. I’ll bet he doesn’t have much in that bag of his, either.’

‘Nobody warned me about *kokoreç*,’ said Pettifer, ‘and I survived. He’s a teenager, not an eight-year-old.’

MacKinney wiped a circle in the fogging glass. ‘Tif’s right. You start telling people what to pack, next thing they’ll be showing up with their valets.’

‘Especially the women,’ said Pettifer, winking. ‘We can’t have them coming here with evening gowns and whatnot.’ This sort of provocation was a feature of his company. He was a flirt by reflex and, because the pickings of women at Portmantle were so scant, he quite often directed his affections towards me in the manner of schoolyard teasing. That I harboured no physical attraction for him and made this fact consistently evident was what gave him the confidence to be flirtatious—such was the male tendency, in my experience. He was no more a chauvinist than a fascist, but sometimes he liked to test my temperature for his own entertainment.

MacKinney leaned closer to the pane. ‘A bit of snow shouldn’t stop anyone who needs this place enough. Man or woman. And, anyway—he seems fine now, look. He’s not complaining.’

‘Can’t be anything left to spit up,’ Pettifer said. ‘Half his guts are on the ground.’

He took my boot tip in the shin for this. ‘I wish you wouldn’t revel in it quite so much. When was the last time *you* hiked anywhere?’

‘I ran cross-country when I was his age.’ He patted his paunch.  
 ‘Now I can’t get off the toilet in the morning.’

‘Jesus,’ Quickman said. ‘What an image.’

‘You’re welcome.’

It was difficult now to recall the days when Pettifer and Quickman were strangers to me. They had landed at the refuge a season apart, but they had bonded almost immediately, over a dinnertime discussion of the weather (what better topic was there for two Englishmen to deliberate upon?). Later, when MacKinney and I had been playing backgammon at the shady end of the portico, they had both lurked some distance from our board with glasses of *çay*, making disparaging remarks about our game in whispered voices. ‘If you’re going to sit there tittering all day,’ MacKinney had called to them, ‘why don’t you come and show us how it’s done? We’re not exactly playing to the death.’ They had apologised for their rudeness and sat down with us. ‘Didn’t anyone ever tell you,’ Quickman had said, ‘that all games should be taken seriously? My father used to drill that into me.’ I had scowled at him then, uncertain of his meaning. ‘Still, once you’ve seen a grown man break his ankle playing musical chairs, you start to question his advice a bit.’ Mac had laughed her big, ingenuous laugh, and that was it—the beginning of our attachment. It did not seem to matter that we had travelled thousands of miles to remove ourselves from the hindrances of life in Britain only to hitch ourselves to each other.

‘Has anybody seen Ender? Someone’s got to let the boy inside.’ I looked back into the emptying mess hall, where the old caretaker had last been spotted at the back of the line for bluefish stew. A few of the other guests were still finishing their lunches, alone

together on the same long table. We had hardly taken the time to learn their names, but we had heard about their projects in various ways and dismissed them as short-termers already—‘transients’, Pettifer called them, which was his way of saying ‘lesser talents’.

It was our judgement that the duration of a stay at Portmantle was equivalent to the value of the work being done: if you were gone after one season, it was likely because your project could not sustain a greater period of gestation. For example, there was the Spanish poet we had spoken to at lunch, who had proudly announced that he was working on a sequence of minimalist poems that were disdainful of linearity, narrative, and meaning. ‘Sounds like an important collection,’ Quickman had responded, and turned his head to roll his eyes at us. ‘If anything needs to be eradicated from poetry, it’s meaning.’ The Spaniard had nodded at this, deaf to the sarcasm, and proceeded to discuss the remarkable complexity of his work with Quickman, whose feigned interest was admirably upheld throughout.

We gave this poet two seasons, maximum. Any guest who could not wait to talk about the project he was working on was usually a short-terminer—that was our evaluation. Anyone who proclaimed his own genius was a fraud, because, as Quickman himself once put it, genius does not have time to stand admiring its reflection; it has too much work to get finished. We never sought out the company of short-termers. We left them to work and find their clarity alone, while we got on with jabbing at our own unwieldy projects. None of us seemed to recognise the fact that our separation from the others was, in fact, a tacit declaration of our own genius—and, thus, it surely followed that we were the biggest frauds of all. We did not even consider that the purest talent at

Portmantle was standing at the front gate in a pool of his own vomit.

'No point calling the old man,' said Quickman, eyes on the window. 'Our boy's about to hit the buzzer.' And right on cue, the hallway below us echoed with the sound of it: three long, grating blasts. Quickman set the pipe back in the crease of his mouth. 'Places, everyone,' he said, his voice betraying a little excitement.

The buzzer sounded again.

Ender, the old caretaker, emerged from the mess hall with a napkin stuffed inside his shirt collar. It was streaked with pale stew-stains. He was still holding his spoon. 'It is him?' he said. 'The ringing?'

'Yup,' said Pettifer. 'He's probably got hypothermia by now. Better hop to it.'

'OK. I go. You stay.' Ender tore the napkin from his collar, dabbed his moustache clean, and tucked the spoon into his breast pocket. He went scuttling down the stairs. 'You can wait inside the library, yes?' he called back to us from the bottom step, putting on his coat. 'I bring him.'

From the window, we watched the old man tread across the thick white lawns, making holes in the snowpack. He carried the provost's shotgun with him, as was the customary practice, hinged over his left forearm, unloaded. The fur trim of his parka matched the two-tone grey of his hair. When he got to the gate, he spoke to the boy through the ironwork.

There was a passphrase incoming guests were told to use, which the provost changed every season, though it was usually a line from a poem or some favourite literary reference. MacKinney and I had both been given the same quote to recite: *Eastward we turn*

*and homeward, alone, remembering.* Pettifer had: *To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping, glad from a world grown old.* Quickman's had been a translation of a Turkish author, Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar, whose work was the provost's academic fetish, though Quickman claimed he could not remember the line in detail. Poor old Ender had to memorise all of these passphrases every season, his spoken English being the most reliable. His mind must have been loaded with enough disordered verse to rival our resident Spaniard. But, in all his time as caretaker, there had been no cause for him to fire a single shot. The system worked too well. Anyone who deigned to buzz the gate at Portmantle had to know the procedure for entry. You would be turned away at gunpoint if you did not.

After Fullerton had spoken his noiseless passphrase, the old man let him in. The boy stepped through, peering up at the window where we stood above the portico. If he saw us staring back at him, he did not let on. He waited patiently for Ender to lock up, and then the two of them slogged across the grounds in single file.

At the front steps, Fullerton stopped to kick the powder off his heels and switched his bag to the other shoulder. He gazed back in the direction he had travelled, pausing there awhile, as though the gate signified a line between the present and the past and he was taking a moment to acknowledge the gravity of his circumstance. We had seen this quirk of behaviour in others. Some time ago, too far back to recall how it felt, we had made the same gesture ourselves.

'We ought to get a move on,' MacKinney said.

We went along the corridor, into the dark library with its

classroom smell and its awkward collection of furniture. I opened the curtains and switched on the lamps. Pettifer and Quickman crouched at the hearth, debating the merits of lighting a fire. 'How long are we expected to entertain this lad?' Pettifer asked of nobody in particular. 'I mean, there's only so long I can sustain these airs and graces.'

'Just hurry up and light the thing. He'll be in need of it,' MacKinney told him.

'Seems to me—' Pettifer sighed, reaching for a block of firewood, 'that others are getting the benefit of my exertions a little too often these days.'

Quickman nudged him. 'How about you give us the benefit of your silence then, instead?'

'You're going to wish you hadn't said that.'

Quickman laughed. 'Here—toss this paper on the pile.'

'You should twist it first. Burns better.'

The two of them were still lighting the fire when Ender shuffled in. The boy loomed behind him, shivering on the threshold. He was wrapped up in a blanket, standard issue: scratchy orange wool with a hand-embroidered P.

Ender coughed and said, 'Excuse me, our guest is very cold and tired, so maybe not much of talking for today. Hello, hello, and then we go—OK?' The old man took a step to one side, presenting the boy with an extended arm, as though he were the conclusion of a magic trick. Then he said, 'Fullerton, this is some people who take care of you now, for today, and soon the provoss hisself will be here.' In the old man's unaccustomed tongue, it sounded more like *Foolertinn*. 'They are old but not so bad for talking. You can like them.'

‘Crikey.’ Pettifer rose, wiping soot on his trousers. ‘Impossible to live up to that sort of introduction.’

The boy lifted his chin and forced out a whisper: ‘Hey.’ He was trembling so much the blanket quivered about his body like a storm sail. Now that his hood was down and he was close enough, we could see the wholeness of his face. His small brown eyes were close together, sunken, drawing attention to the slim pillar of his nose and its bell of soft cartilage. He had a slack lower jaw—what my father used to call a ‘lazy mouth’—the tongue nesting behind the bottom row of teeth, giving wetness to his lips. His dark hair parted easily in the middle, like the pages of a Bible, and it was fashioned in that lank teenage style, curtaining his brow, obscuring what appeared to be a birthmark on the left of his forehead. He was probably shorter than most boys his age, though his broad, hod-carrier’s shoulders held an arching shape beneath the blanket that made him seem older.

I was the first of us to speak to him. The others hung back, unsure. We had almost forgotten how to talk to anyone but ourselves. ‘Hell of a trek, isn’t it?’ I said. ‘Your feet must be aching. Sit down.’ For some reason, I did not offer him my hand to shake but gave an odd sort of Sitting Bull wave, palm flat and raised. ‘I’m Knell. With a K. Good to meet you.’

He nodded back, shuddering.

‘Come on in by the fire. It’s going a treat now. Get yourself warm.’

He moved in closer to the hearth. Then, casting off the blanket, he leaned with both arms spread across the mantelpiece, imbibing the heat. From behind, it seemed as though he was holding up the wall itself.