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The Missing Piece



His loose hair brushed against his ears in the sudden autumn breeze as he left the quiet country pub behind him and stepped into the cold October night. The streets were empty now, a far throw from London, where cars travelled past in endless strings throughout the night, and the city never seemed to sleep. This place seemed to be lifeless as soon as night fell, not that he minded, because the low lights and lack of distraction allowed for him to focus on the clear sky, the stars that illuminated it, the pure endlessness of it.

He lit a cigarette, watching the smoke rise in swirling mists around him, as he began to stalk along the pavement, the monument of the Great War Memorial rising ahead. Areas like this reminded him of home, the names engraved into the marble, the benches placed around it, the visions of poppies stacked upon it in November.

The gate to the Memorial creaked as he pushed it open and the sound seemed to echo through the street, although nobody else was there to hear it. That satisfied him – the way that sounds here weren't lost to the screaming of breaks and bustle of crowds as they were in the city.

Here, he was able to hear the birdsong each morning, the bleating of sheep and the sheepdogs that guided them. Each sound seemed significant, as though they were there to be listened to and appreciated.

The smell of tobacco smoke drifted throughout the small area as he gazed at the statue atop the monument. The soldier, helmet placed precariously on his head and gun in hand, seemed to stare back at him. The boy bowed his chin, almost expecting the statue to return the gesture. Of course, it remained still, its life and movement lost to the Great War all those years prior.

He remembered another monument, back in London, situated right in the centre of a busy roundabout, unlike this one, built beside a road leading away from the heart of the town.

He'd like to read here one night, he decided, maybe during sunset, when he was sure nobody would disturb him. There was little else to do in the sleepy town where everyone disappeared when darkness fell and all the senses seemed amplified.

He nodded farewell to the soldier before retreating back through the gate and onto the dimly lit pavement, cracked with age and use. He liked how the buildings that made up the skyline didn't block out the light glimmering from the moon and stars above him, their celestial embrace comforting. He was sure the sky he looked up at now wasn't the same as the one he'd surveyed in London, where its identity and beauty was disfigured by the bright lights of the city and the mass of clouds that seemed to cast a near permanent grey shadow over everything below.

Even the rain felt cleaner here, how it fell heavily in fresh, clear drops onto the fields overnight, the smell of it that arose from the ground as it pooled, watered the flowerbeds of the university and urged the grass in the fields to grow higher, faster.

Despite this, he missed the life of the city, the energy of those hurrying about their duties, rather than strolling along the lanes in the early mornings nonchalantly. Everybody seemed content here; content... and slightly bored.

The young couples he saw milling around the town now and again seemed passive, as though their passion, their drive had dissipated. The elderly men, long since retired, returned to the same pubs day after day, alcohol providing a temporary relief from the monotony of their lives.

Groups of school children loitered outside shops, on street corners, anywhere they deigned to spend a few hours of their time before their parent's called them home for dinner, before the streetlights went out, before the firm clasp of ageing dragged them deeper into darkness.

The darkness of the people here was different to the darkness of the night, which was striking, surrounding him with its warm blanket. It wasn't empty and absent like those he'd seen so far.

The men here were strange, too. At least, that was what he'd gathered from his female friends who'd spoken to him deep into the night after a visit to one pub or another, or when they'd had enough drinks to allow their concerns to display themselves. It wasn't the younger men - those with pulsing hormones and a supposed conformity to the patriarchy, but the older ones. The ones with wives and children and pensions to pay into. They were the issue.

He was glad the streets were empty now, as rage began to pulse through him. He knew he could be seen as strange, like those old men with their curious hands and penetrating looks, as he skulked along the streets, but he wasn't like them.

Back in London, he'd been worried that he didn't fit in with the crowds of boys with their balaclavas and cans of beer, their crude language and stoney faces. He'd been sure he'd belong here, amongst the relaxed atmosphere of country life; but now he wasn't sure he even *wanted* to.

He felt as though he was a jigsaw piece, one which didn't fit in anywhere. In London, he was a piece

that had been dropped under the sofa, discarded and forgotten about. He'd been forced into a puzzle, one that didn't have space for him.

Now, however, he'd been found, been picked up from where he'd been hiding, and placed on a desk for safekeeping. Maybe he didn't fit into any puzzles yet, but he was so bright and colourful, so interesting and important, he knew he'd find one eventually.

It would be a landscape, maybe an image of the town memorial. He could be a part of the luscious grass, of the worn soldier, maybe the wooden benches. He didn't care.

He was simply comforted by the idea that here, amongst the bored residents of the town and the old men who smelt like sweat and beer and the University students who dragged themselves to lectures each day, he would find the other pieces of him, the ones that would not be forgotten.