

Good, Clean Living

The bath was full. Glassy eyed, John undressed, removing first his shirt, then trousers and boxer shorts. He shivered and looked down at his body. Without clothes, most of the blood was gone, only his hands were still tacky, as if he was wearing a pair of tight fitting red gloves.

He rinsed them clean in the sink; not wanting to bathe in what was, in some ways, another person. When the swirls ran pure he reached to make them stop. A dread look fell across his face. The faintest of handprints gripped the tap. He turned to the bath. Keener versions of the print clung to the taps and dashed the rim. Picking one from several towels heaped on the radiator, he made good these, before noticing the same marks on the walls. Doubtless these daubs continued throughout the house, but they could wait for now. The bath was the important thing. He dropped to his knees and stared into the water, wafting a hand in front of his face to clear a view through the steam.

It was impossible to be sure: additional measures needed to be taken.

He emptied the glass containing his toothbrush and paste into the sink and took a sample of the water. Holding it up to the light, he squinted and turned it slightly this way then that. He smiled weakly. Clean.

With a hissing intake of breath, John plunged his right foot into the soak, then followed with his left. He squatted for a second to get used to the temperature before immersing himself. Perspiration dappled his brow. The idea of a roaring fire flashed through his head.

The soap was translucent orange with opaque white streaks running through it and, though the smell was slightly bitter - industrial even - it worked up a lather that made John feel really clean. He dipped it and rubbed it between his hands then over his body. Soothed as much by the extractor fan's thrum as by the routine act,

he sleepily began to count the red marks peppering the room. There were six on the door, easily identifiable against the white gloss, but upon the ochre walls they were ill defined and he found whenever a total was close to being reached, a momentary stupor would send him back to the start.

Replacing the soap, he closed his eyes and submerged his head.

Silence. Light flickered against the surface of the water. Then a shape cut into the corner of his vision. Gasping, John sat up. Splashes slapped against the floor. He wiped his hands over his eyes and glanced around, blood pounding violently in his ears. The room was empty. His nostrils flared and lips quivered. Noiselessly he wept. The day had gone wrong, terribly wrong.

The boy's name was Martin.

If only John could rinse him down the plughole, like the blood, like a spider. People kill spiders all the time and no one flicks an eyelid. But it's still murder. Ask god if it's not. And Martin was an accident. God would know that too. John sniffled, composed himself. He had twenty-eight years of good, clean living behind him. He raked his fingers through his hair, slicking it back. He thought of Martin's hair: thin, so thin it was inevitable he would go bald early. After their struggle John had swept his hand through it, brushing it away from the boy's eyes and, though he did not appear vain, he imagined Martin was always sweeping aside his fringe, especially when his head was bowed and he was concentrating on his schoolwork. Then John saw, quite clearly, an image of Martin lying on the floor of a well-lit room, his feet raised in the air behind him and homework spread out in front of him. The left side of his body was hot, much hotter than the right. How did John know that? Because he could feel it, a wave of heat hitting his left side and the sound of flames crackling. And now Martin was gone. It was John on the floor, gazing down at the books. At the top of a ruled page was a question. He read it and put pen to paper. A minute or two went by without movement. He sighed - the heat was really too much to bear - and shuffled slightly to the right. He looked back at the problem, pressed the pen nib into the indented blue dot he had created and began tapping his shoes together.

'Martin!' a female voice whispered sternly. He looked over his shoulder. A woman, sitting with her legs tucked under her on a fat leather couch, lowered a magazine onto her lap and smiled. Softly, almost apologetically, she said, 'You don't use your feet to write.'

A cold drip landed on John's big toe, rousing him to the perception of his surroundings. He shook his head. Why was he daydreaming of doing Martin's

homework? His mouth dropped open and throat tightened. The thought must have leaked into his body from the blood! There must be traces in the bathwater after all!

He gripped the handles on the sides of the bath, thrust himself to his feet and reached for a towel: needed by the rumour that there was a girl in the year above that fancied him and the desire for a pair of fashionable trainers. He dried himself vigorously, pleased for a second by the thickness of his pubic hair - it would certainly impress in the changing rooms. But no! Bodily hair was something John had long taken for granted. And yet upon inspection he thought it less dense than previously - balder - his chest hair too.

He stepped over to the mirror, wiped the condensation away and craned his neck towards the smudged reflection. He dropped his gaze and took a deep breath, releasing it through a series of short, trembling exhalations. He looked back at the reflection. It was John's face but John's face smoothed of all detail: wrinkles, stubble, even the scar he got falling off his bike as a child, were absent.

His head lolled. He needed to lie down, clarify things. He took a step towards the door, tottered, then staggered back a pace, bringing himself to rest on the edge of the bath. He hunched forward and vomited over his feet, then, shaking hysterically, dropped onto the damp carpet and curled up.

An entire childhood flooded John's mind. Some vague notion that he had once unwittingly drank a mouthful of his best friend's urine - a secret he tried to keep even from himself; a football match where his team had trounced the opposition six goals to nil; a joke that had backfired badly, leaving his sister partially deaf in one ear. But within all this one memory dominated. He was alone on a street, trees lining either side of the road. He was happy. Why? Because school was over for the day and he would soon be home. His heart warmed with the thought of sitting in front of the fire, watching the cartoons on television. He ran up the gravel driveway and pushed the doorbell, the sound of which never failed to make him feel welcome. The passage light came on and he heard footsteps. He ran his fingers through his hair, smiled.