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William didn't stick around after the first symptoms showed. He had always known he would abandon his mother, but he had not expected to do so in a fog of shame and trepidation, with bristles sprouting on his shoulders.

They appeared one frosty Saturday morning in October. William awoke to unbearable itching, as if pieces of straw were trapped beneath his T-shirt. One glance was enough to send him scrabbling around his bedroom in search of his backpack, hands trembling.

He dropped onto all fours and looked under his creaky bed as somnolent morning rays filtered through the curtains, mocking him with ethereal amber light. But there lay only dust and scraps of old comic strips, so he checked behind the rickety chest of drawers and his bookcase riddled with woodworm, knocking over dated atlases and a copy of Homer's *Odyssey* in drowsy desperation.

'What are you doing?' cried his mother from the kitchen. 'You're making a hideous racket.'

William said nothing. Was it because of *her* that Eliza had never returned? Had *she* driven away Dad seventeen years ago? And was *she* the reason William was now transforming?

Not entirely, but there was no doubt that life with the self-proclaimed 'last Victorian woman' had never been easy, especially for William. Unlike Eliza, he didn't share his mother's patrician nose, straight black hair, slender frame, penetrating emerald eyes and porcelain skin, but his father's chiselled facial features, brown locks, gangly limbs and rich hazel eyes. His very appearance reminded his mother of the husband who had left her without giving a reason, forcing her to raise two children by herself.

Perhaps that's why she had never spoken of him, never so much as acknowledged his existence. William had spent his entire childhood living under his mother's programme of denial, which had eventually turned into her own personal world of make-believe as she began buying dresses for imaginary balls and sending out dinner invitations to members of the Royal Family – acts of tortured loneliness which had baffled the nine-year-old William and horrified his older sister.

Still, it was only after Eliza had departed for university that the Thorn household had been thrown into *true* turmoil. William had sensed she was leaving for good, which is why he had been unsurprised to awake the next morning to the overwhelming stench of iron. It wafted up the stairs, mingled with the scent of the apple and blueberry smoothie that his mother made every day at 8am.

'Small problem with the family silverware,' she told William when he came downstairs. 'I'll fix it after breakfast.'

But Elaine Thorn would be battling with the bleeding silverware for the rest of her life. Every morning, William found her wearing rubber gloves and surrounded by myriad cleaning products, scrubbing the silver heirlooms: the teapot, tea tray, cutlery, salt and pepper shakers, goblets, gravy boat, and everything else. Yet each evening the bleeding resumed, seeping through the silver to leave puddles of blood on the antique chests and

snail trails that deoxidised into russet clumps. By morning the carpets were brown and saturated, reeking of blood; and that would be the story of the next six years as all the divorce money went on cleaning products – until nearly every other cupboard was filled with sponges, j-cloths, carpet detergent, silver polish, wood polish, carpet fragrance, odour eliminators, mops, buckets, and glass cleaner, and the entire house stank of blood and chemicals.

‘If no one else is going to preserve the Thorn name,’ Elaine would mutter as she scrubbed away, ‘then I, the last Victorian woman, shall. Really, how can *my* children show such little respect for their glorious past?’

After Eliza failed to return home, Elaine became obsessed with the Thorn family history. Each year she bought the newest edition of *Burke’s Peerage* and scoured the mildewed letters and diaries of forgotten ancestors, recording any noble deeds performed by her forefathers.

‘Did you know, William,’ she announced one morning, ‘that your great-grand uncle received a commendation for his heroics in the Second Boer War? You should be very proud.’

Yet her infatuation had only succeeded in filling the living room with mountains of dusty books, making it almost impossible to breathe and move around. William had not dared venture in there for over two years, terrified of catching a throat infection or being crushed beneath an encyclopaedia of genealogy.

In weak defiance of his aristocratic blood, William had told his friends to call him ‘Will.’ He signed every message so, introduced himself to new people as ‘Will’ and even corrected those who called him by his full name.

‘But you’re not a Will,’ Jake had said at last. ‘You’re William.’

It was about the most rebellious act of his teenage years. The ages made for misbehaviour, sarcasm and rudeness had passed William by without making any significant impact. He had never even complained about not being allowed a phone.

‘Why not?’ his friends had asked.

‘I just don’t care that much.’

It was a passivity that would come to characterise William, gain him a reputation for being relaxed yet hinder him from taking real action when most needed. In the case of the phone, however, rebelliousness wouldn’t have made a difference anyway: there had never been money to spare, and William knew Elaine was terrified that he would try to contact his father.

Of course, school had influenced him in some ways. Around the age of fourteen, his friends began paying attention to girls and fantasising about their naked curves. They discussed masturbation techniques and wet dreams, how best to hide an erection, and other teenage topics. In time, William realised that perhaps he didn’t need to suppress the urges his mother had told him were unnatural, and that wanking might not give him cancer.

Nonetheless, it was only a year ago, at the age of seventeen, that he finally mustered the courage to try. He stood in the shower as hot water poured onto the cream tiles, staring at the lump below his left knee cap – Osgood-Schlatters disease, or so the

internet claimed – while trying to convince himself that he wouldn't catch a terminal illness. Eventually he got it up, but he couldn't stop all the warnings received as a child from clouding his mind. His legs trembled, his vision blurred; and amid the steam, the hazy mental images of his scantily clad English teacher and the internalised sound of his mother's constant criticism, he collapsed onto the floor. When he came around, diluted blood was trickling down the drain.

'How did you get that gash on your forearm?' his mother asked that evening.

'I slipped in the shower.'

(Technically, it was true.)

All these memories replayed in William's mind as he searched frantically for his backpack, finally finding it at the back of his cobwebbed closet. He began stuffing in clothes and other essentials for the road – a penknife, water bottle, sleeping mat, towel – while wondering what would happen next: would his mother be worried? Distraught? *Pleased?* There was no way she would call the police (that would be too embarrassing), but would the neighbours notice? Or would she lie to them, like she had about Eliza and Dad? Perhaps he would never know.

The front door slammed. Elaine had gone to buy more carpet detergent, which gave William about one hour to get away.

He shouldered his backpack and stumbled down the moth-eaten carpet stairs, into the kitchen, where he grabbed bread, cheese, apples and a few cans of cold spaghetti, then into the dining room. If it was as valuable as Elaine claimed, selling just the silver gravy boat would be enough to sustain him for months. Nevertheless, he took the teapot and tray too, running his fingers over the words that supposedly captured the Thorn family spirit: *scire quam sentire*, to know and not to sense. And although William forgot to take sponges, j-cloths and silver polish, he would still manage to flog these pieces for several thousand pounds, for they would stop bleeding as soon as he left home.

Silverware wrapped in tea towels and stowed away carefully, William opened the front door and stepped onto the gravel drive, looking for the last time over the skeletal flowers with flesh petals that had transformed the front garden into a boneyard. He glanced left and right as he passed by the neighbours' homes; but the coast was clear, and he made it to the bus stop undiscovered.

His shoulders were still itching. What was happening? In time he would find out, yet somehow he already knew the black bristles would transform him, that their appearance marked a new period of hardship in his life, and that he would be struggling against them for at least as long as his mother had battled with the bleeding silverware.

The bus came. He stepped on and stared around at the sunken faces, the two blond hockey girls in green sports skirts, and the obese mother cradling her sleeping baby. It was okay – he knew none of them – but whenever new passengers boarded, his bristles tingled and his heart faltered. The journey seemed to take an eternity. Every eventuality, realistic and fanciful, went through his mind: being recognised; sent back home; imprisoned for stealing; beaten for stealing; *hung* for stealing.

'This must be your stop,' said the conductor in a gravelly voice.

William nodded and thanked him. It was the last stop, the one nearest the M5 – which is where William headed next, crossing over the concrete footbridge and down the stairs. Cars were rushing past: would anyone stop for him? Where was he even heading?

He pushed these questions to the recesses of his mind as he tramped towards the slip road's layby, where he dumped his backpack and checked his jumper was concealing the bristles on his lower neck. Then – with a half-hearted prayer to fate, not God – he took a deep breath and stuck his thumb out, forcing a smile.