

The Tattooist

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from
Morbid Tales

Published by
Tartarus Press

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THE TATTOOIST

Not all great artists are famous. Not all great artists explain themselves, or have a public to explain themselves to. Some, wrapt in a spell of inarticulacy, wordlessly follow the phantom of their private vision into the misty dissolution of Death, and see their dreams curling round the bars in the unlocked gates of a quirky paradise, and not another human being notices. Such an artist was Shane. His themes, if he could be said to have had such, were ephemera and sensuality. And thus he worked in the appropriate medium of tattoo. His satisfaction in his work was deep and of varied nature. Nobody had to go to a gallery to see his work. It was walking the streets of the world, mixing with crowds, worn as the costume in countless private dramas, pressed close against the sweating skin of a lover in the act of sex. Also, he lived an artist's life, among those who inhabit the fringes of society, and his studio was frequented by the living canvases of bodies. Flesh for him was part of the atmosphere of daily life. There was something else too; he had a theory, an idea, that his work always came back to him somehow.

Make no mistake, Shane was a great artist. He was silent as a carpenter, and gentle, and so often seemed a simple man, but his work was eloquent. As a genuine old master can be told by the brush strokes, so Shane's work had a shimmering, iridescent texture, much like sweeping brush strokes, that could be reproduced by no other tattooist. Shane was more a craftsman than a thinker or a talker, but he did attempt once to put words on paper. He set about the task with all the draughtsman-like thoroughness and artistry that he applied to his tattoos. And just as he had to execute his tattoos perfectly the first time, so he wrote this piece once only, with no revision. This is the story he told.

Morbid Tales



I remember the first time I saw the Boy as if it were my first memory, as if I did not know who I was until his arrival. The seasons are appointed and regular, but beyond the seasons, above the level of normal human life, other irregular events are appointed like strange conjunctions of the planets or the appearance of comets.

Summer had come early and on a midweek afternoon I waited in the shop for customers. I was happy just to doss about, since I'd already made pretty good takings that week. All the doors were open, letting occasional sighs of wind relieve the baking heat, and Barry, who was masquerading as an apprentice and business partner, was loafing in a swivel chair next to me, taking advantage of our friendship and generally lending the place his own threatening and untidy brand of charm.

At the front of the shop, the waiting room where the walls are lined with designs to choose from, I saw a slender grey shadow hovering uncertainly. I saw this out of the corner of my eye and for a moment I felt uncomfortable, naked. I could not account for the feeling. I looked up to see a young boy standing there, as if he had been sent on an errand by a teacher and had lost his way. I can't help saying 'young boy', but I suppose strictly speaking he was a young man, in his late teens, early twenties. The Boy waited, weaving his head inquiringly, as if in need of rescue. I get customers from all different backgrounds, but still he managed to look painfully out of place. Then it suddenly occurred to me that he would have looked out of place almost anywhere on Earth. His uncertainty made me uncertain, so that I didn't know what to say on my very own premises, in my very own business. I allowed the situation to hang suspended for a while, and then I said, 'Have you come for a tattoo?' The words sounded dull in my mouth.

'Yes,' he lisped, his eyes cast downwards.

'You'll need to make an appointment. What sort of tattoo did you want? Was there anything on the walls that caught your fancy?'

The Tattooist

‘No.’ He said it dismissively, as if it were obvious that the designs on display were of no interest. ‘I’ve brought a picture with me. Um, do you do custom designs?’

‘Sure. Let’s have a look at it.’

He finally came through the short passage to my parlour, moving in a decidedly lackadaisical manner as if even the act of walking was still a new and curious thing to him. He stood in front of me and fished something out of a scraggy carrier bag.

Now that I could see him properly he no longer appeared the grey, wraithlike silhouette he had when viewed through the filter of the corridor, whose corners were wispy with dust. His white skin seemed to shine. I was quite dazzled. He almost gave off a natural halo, blurring the air around him into a shining mist. I was reminded of the way that the Pre-Raphaelites made their models’ complexions so pale they were almost silvery, glowing through the mist of whatever legend they happened to be depicting at the time. I thought of wounded knights, their blood half lost, faint and trembling. But mingled with this unhealthiness, this fey suggestion of something reared in darkness for death, was a refreshing brightness, as if the Boy had brought the outside sunshine and breezes in with him on his skin. Suddenly he didn’t seem so uncertain a creature either. It was as if he proceeded in everything through his sense of touch, had no rules to guide him but the ultra-sensitivity of his hands, his face, his skin. In those few seconds he appeared to me an awesome canvas, one that I hardly dared take my needle to.

He had produced a comic book, immaculately preserved, but from the speed with which he located the desired page, obviously well read.

‘Here. This picture.’ He cocked his head. ‘Or perhaps this one,’ and he pointed to two separate frames on the same page. The picture he pointed to was a cute, girly character with dead white skin, black spiky hair and Cleopatra-like eye make-up. I flicked through the pages and saw the same character depicted in a more realistic, adult form, as a sort of Gothic chick. I turned back to the original picture, the little girl cartoon version of the character. She was standing on grass so green it was like Eden, an Eden of English summer holidays in the countryside.

Morbid Tales

‘Baz,’ I said without looking at him, ‘have we got any appointments this afternoon?’

I knew we hadn’t, but I wanted to remind Baz that he was supposed to be a *working* partner. He flicked lazily through the black appointment book.

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘This design is pretty small,’ I said. ‘If you can hang around a little for me to prepare a stencil and stuff then we can do it today.’

The boy nodded.

‘Which one is it then? This one or this one?’

The Boy thought for a moment and, once again without speaking, pointed to the picture of the figure leaning forward on tiptoes, lips pouting, about to kiss someone.

I took the comic book to the back bench, pushed aside some of my scrolled pencil sketches, and set to work on a stencil of the design in question. Barry motioned and laconically told the Boy to ‘Siddown’, which he did. Soon a couple of friends, Jools and Steve, came by, and both looked at the Boy with obvious amusement and curiosity. Everyone began asking questions, which he answered briefly and politely, never putting any questions of his own. I observed this all half-occupied with my work. It occurred to me that the Boy was like a lamb, oblivious and innocent in a den of wolves. That is perhaps too harsh a judgment to level at my friends, but nonetheless that is the comparison that sprang most readily and persistently to my mind. It is surprising, half distracted as I was, that the final tattoo should have turned out as it did. Barry went out to get some cans of beer, and Jools and Steve soon moved on too, so by the time I had completed the stencil I was alone in my studio with the Boy.

‘Where do you want it?’

‘Here.’ The boy indicated his right upper arm.

I asked him to roll up his sleeve and held the stencil up to his arm to judge where it would be best positioned.

‘OK. Can do. You like comics then?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve never seen this character before. She’s a wee bit weird, isn’t she? What’s the comic called?’

The Tattooist

‘Well, the character is Death. I don’t know what the comic is called. I mean, there’s not a regular series. This is a, a what-do-you-call-’em, a spin-off type thing.’

‘Death is a girl?’

‘That’s right.’

‘I always thought Death was a skeleton in a hood with a big scythe. He is on the wall out in the waiting room. You don’t want one of them?’

‘No, no, no. Death is a girl.’

‘Right you are. So why do you want death impregnated in your skin, might I ask? You don’t think it’s a bit morbid?’

I had tattooed Death and his black cape, like the spreading wings of a luxuriant decay, on the taut, sweating bodies of more people than I cared to count, and never before questioned if it was morbid. But there was something rather earnest and purposeful about the Boy. He had obviously thought well about his reasons for having a tattoo, to the extent he even seemed a little shy that his deep personal motives were obvious, making him vulnerable.

‘I don’t know about morbid. It’s just, this is how I want Death to come to me, like springtime. Maybe you can get that feeling from the picture too. If you could give that same feeling to the tattoo . . . Then she would always be with me to the hour of my death.’

I had often been given very precise instructions by customers, or very vague but exacting instructions, and had always tried to stick to them as much as I could. This usually required an immense effort of concentration. However, there was something so unexpected about the instructions I was given by the Boy that I could not have forgotten them if I tried. I could now only view the design through the filter of those instructions. I could not reinterpret it in any other way.

‘Take off your shirt, please.’

‘And my T-shirt?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

The Boy was wearing a shirt with some William Morris-style design on it, and beneath that a T-shirt of some band that he liked, which he now removed, messing up his hair as he dragged the T-shirt inside out over his skinny arms. He was shallow-chested, slightly potbellied with puppy fat,

Morbid Tales

and his arms and torso were even whiter than his face. Not the usual muscular physique that is given as representing male beauty, but with a purity about it consisting of lack of strenuous exercise and a life of shade, irresponsibility and daydreams. Really, it was an astonishing body, speaking as an artist. Nothing was disproportionate. It was a perfect model of weedy grace. One thing that I noticed, almost with the same alarm I might have noticed a flick-knife, was a flash of silver dangling in the stiff, shallow plain, flushed with dark hair, between his slight pectorals. It was a crucifix, a symbol cruel with nails and thorns. A symbol so often associated with a kind of asexuality, and a kind of pacifism, seeing it swing there in front of the Boy's male cleavage, while he bent forwards, his stomach creasing around his belly-button, naked to the worn tops of his jeans, I suddenly associated it instead with sexuality and brutality. It could just as easily have been a Hell's Angel's ammunition belt or a nipple piercing.

'You believe in that, do you?' I nodded to the crucifix. I don't usually ask such questions of my customers, but something about the Boy's scant conversation made a kind of non-intellectual, strangers' profundity the only natural way of speaking.

'What is there to believe in?'

'So you don't believe in it?'

'What's there to disbelieve?'

He seemed genuinely puzzled.

'I wear this the same way I'll wear your tattoo. It's a sort of accessory.'

In my parlour there is a chair, or couch, for customers to sit in when they are being tattooed. It is very much like a dentist's chair. I asked the Boy to sit in it and started up the engine of my sound system. For me the act of tattooing is a physical thing, a performance, like stepping into a boxing ring. When I am in the middle of my work, thoughts and words are not necessary. Everything else is preparation, rest, survival. When I am tattooing the waiting and talking are over. I am living. Everything that slipped out of its own outline when you tried to understand, to define, to make connections and correspondences, returns to its outline, is single and complete. The electric guitars were revving. I thought of the ammunition belts the Boy had brought to mind a moment before. Cartridges exploding one by one in quick succession. I thought of the working of my own nee-

The Tattooist

dle, faster than any sewing machine. I took hold of the Boy's upper arm and sprayed it with shaving foam. I scraped the foam and light hairs cleanly from the chosen area, applied a layer of unguent, slapping it like wallpaper paste to the bald, pink skin. I pressed the stencil tightly against the flaccid muscle. I fixed the head on the arm of my needle, like someone assembling a rifle.

'Is this going to hurt?' asked the Boy. 'Will I have trouble keeping my arm still?'

'Naah. It's not that bad. Some people get really terrified before they come. But it's not worth it. I'm just going to put the needle to your arm and you'll see. Okay?'

The Boy looked almost indifferent, but somewhere I sensed him tense almost imperceptibly.

The smell of antiseptic, like the rippling of adrenaline, was in my nostrils. My needle was poised like that of a dentist over his arm. There was a moment of cringing, exquisite anticipation, and then I applied the needle to his flesh. He stiffened a little, but his face remained passive.

'There! That wasn't so bad, was it?'

'No.'

And so the tattoo began. I gripped his arm as if holding on for my life, and when I removed my hand to reposition it I saw my finger-marks in red and white. My needle furrowed through his flesh at one with the churning, dirty chaos of the guitars, which formed the background to my work. Now that skin was entrusted to me utterly to handle as roughly as I, the expert, felt necessary, it was as if I was granted a special insight into the skin and its wearer. It became luminous to my vision and it suddenly occurred to me as an obvious and indisputable fact, clear as the smarting redness of the flesh, that the skin that I was burrowing into, in a sort of ritual scarring, had never been caressed by a woman. That was the source of its airy purity. It actually breathed a blissful aura of being untouched, and was so much more sensitive and responsive for that. His beauty was of that simple male kind, like daylight, angular, Apollonian, so different to the excessive beauty of the female, a fertile abundance of curves tainted with seduction, ripe and full of the tendency towards decay, like pure water clouded with the slight tinge of blood. It seemed weird and pro-

Morbid Tales

found to me that we were both males, supposedly sterile, but that our meeting would produce a female offspring. A female! What did she know of all this? And yet it was appropriate somehow that she should materialise between us. She was to be impregnated in the flesh no woman had touched, an Immaculate Conception: Death.

‘I don’t usually do designs this small,’ I said. ‘It’s going to be a bit tricky. It may not turn out as good as the picture. Well, we’ll give it a go.’

And I began to sweat like a doctor deep in the garish, tangled complications of surgery. I wiped the seeping blood from his arm. He sat the way some children sit when having stitches, docile, almost limp, resigning themselves peacefully to the suffering as if it were a mother’s hand stroking their fevered forehead.

Barry came back with the beer, cracked a can open and slurped at it, watching silently like a government artist watching afternoon TV in a bedsit. He ventured a few comments about the design. ‘She’s a bit of a weird bird, isn’t she? She your type?’ And slightly more thoughtfully, picking up the comic in one hand and inspecting it, ‘Nice style. It’s like a kind of morbid Disney.’

The Boy’s only response was to smile and laugh.

‘Disney is morbid,’ I interjected at the last comment, not taking my eyes off the Fabergé-like miniature I was working on.

At last it was finished, inked in, highlighted, tinted and titivated by my needle. I looked at the result and a grin of satisfaction seemed to rise spontaneously from my guts to my mug. It was good work, after all. The girl Death stood on her tiptoes as lightly as a soap bubble blown from a plastic wand, her lips pouting to kiss the air. Beneath her feet was a patch of turf I could almost smell, merging with the white loam of the Boy’s flesh that I had freshly turned with my digging needle. The whole thing seemed to sparkle like dewy grass. It was something to be proud of. The smallness of the design had given me the necessary spur to excel myself in subtlety and intricate detail.

‘So! Your first time!’ I said. ‘Not a bad debut! It didn’t hurt too much, did it?’

The Boy tilted his head.

The Tattooist

‘Well, it did hurt, but it was strangely pleasant. It felt like being sliced by a scalpel, or a cheese wire. And at the same time it was as if a trickle of sand were running through my flesh, eroding it away. Hmm. It really did hurt, but then, facing up to what we want is often painful. The hardest thing we can do.’

Barry swapped a glance with me when the Boy murmured these last few words, as if to say, ‘Has he been like this all the time?’ Yes, it was rather difficult to imagine how a boy who spoke like that habitually, fluently, had made it this far in the world.

I washed off the beading blood from the Boy’s arm, treated its soreness with stinging antiseptic and cold ointment, and dressed it like a wound. I gave him the usual instructions, to remove the dressing in three hours and bathe the tattoo in hot water, and afterwards not to get it wet or pick at the developing scab. I gave him some ointments to treat it with daily and told him to come back in about a week or so, when the scab had withered and dropped off, for me to check that it was okay and add any touches that might be needed.

The Boy fished out the agreed sum of fifty quid from his pocket, where the notes had become sadly crumpled. ‘Forty’s fine,’ I said, waving away the final tenner. I was pleased with the tattoo, and hardly felt like taking money for it at all.

So that was the first of my encounters with the Boy. It had lasted three or four hours, but even now I feel as if the thirty odd years of my life leading up to it were like the long prologue of a film before the titles start. That afternoon, marked by the bloody stigmata of my needle, became my Anno Domini.

When the Boy dutifully returned in twelve days time there was no trace of a scab, and the Little Girl Death who had so newly sloughed the dross of dried blood had gained such a lustre since her inception that I could hardly believe it was my own work. The colours of the design shimmered and iridesced like the fanning plumes of a peacock’s tail, and the figure herself had such an expressive attitude about her, like a newborn lamb gambolling in its first spring, that the tattoo almost seemed to move with the light, flickering as the images on schoolgirl’s rulers do. To be

Morbid Tales

astonished at one's own work is involuntarily to disclaim it. I had no more created this tattoo than a father can be said to create their daughter.

Just as the Boy had seemed vulnerable about his specific wishes, so now I felt vulnerable about my fulfilment of those wishes. The tattoo was too nakedly brilliant, it was almost painful, and I called Barry across to see it with distinct apprehension. But if the tattoo had given him any insight into the heart that had been the medium of its creation, it was the kind of insight that one can never frame in words, and simply has to assume is commonly understood. On these occasions, instead of naming the insight, any commentary takes the form of the most general praise.

Barry whistled when he looked at the Boy's arm. 'Wow! That's something! That's really quite something! You're coming out with some weird shit, Shane my son! But I like it. Very different.'

It was hard to ignore the fact that there was something unnatural about the tattoo. Still, Barry's obvious approval had reassured me that people generally are more broadminded than we give them credit for when entrusted with something like a deep and honest personal confidence. Perhaps it was pride in my new creation, or perhaps it was a quality the Boy had of arousing your curiosity, but I felt the need, like the need for a cigarette, to invite the Boy out for a drink with me and some mates. There was definitely something addictive about him, in the sense that enigma is addictive. Asking him questions was irresistible, yet his answers never really dispelled the enigma. You just had to ask another question, and another, nibbling away with questions while your hunger for a final answer kept niggling away in your gut.

I suggested a pub to the Boy and he nodded as if already thirsty. I had to have a photo of the tattoo for the shop's album, but the camera's batteries were used up. So Barry sent the Boy on an errand for some new ones, and some film, as if his having been tattooed had now made him a junior member of staff, a tea boy or something. Still, the Boy complied readily enough, even as if he was the shop's official, waged tea boy. He came back slightly out of breath having had to search for the precise film Barry had requested and being unable to find it at the shop Barry had given him directions to. It had taken some time, but he had completed his mission, following his instructions to the letter.

The Tattooist

The pub was the Fo'c's'le, and we met on a weekday evening, in the dingy games room, where torn PVC seats lined the smoke stained walls. The Fo'c's'le is situated, appropriately enough, right next to a beach. A sturdy, slanting stone wall, built in imitation of battlements, meets the pebbles below. At high tide a spray-wreathed sea breaks and sloshes heavily against it, as if it were a real fo'c's'le. The regulars, or at least half of them, could be mistaken for old sea dogs, too. The other half are the young unemployed, petty criminals, blaggers, bullshitters, bullies, youths in skin tight T-shirts who seem to spend their whole lives 'hanging out', those who smell of patchouli oil, and those whose names are scandalised in bus shelters, delinquent animal torturers and pullers of moonies, people who will never escape the dead end of their home town and their lowly social position. Many of them are my customers. The Fo'c's'le is one of my haunts. I feel as comfortable amongst its creaking, ashtray-filthy wood fittings as a soaked mac hung on the coat stand.

That evening I went along with Barry, who was as familiar to me as an old pair of jeans, and whose air of happy-go-lucky, oi-ish aggression now fitted me just as comfortably and was tamed to me into nothing more pugnacious than friendship. We slipped in the front door together as if it were a side door. Those already in the games room included Mark—Sparky we used to call him, for his penchant for setting dustbins on fire—his skirt, Susan, Fat Darrell, Chit, Dave and Vince. I can't say I've ever liked Mark much, although he is indisputably one of the immortal faces of the crowd. He is simply in and one of us, without there being any question of how he got in, who let him in, if anyone actually wants him in. He's somehow beyond all that. You could no more question his presence than you could the Queen's head on the back of a Lady Godiver. Mark is almost a skinhead. He has a dark vagueness of fluff curving over his scalp, and one of those pale, hard faces so often seen in British playgrounds that seem inherently offensive, made to be pigged up into the absurd sneer that is prelude to a punch-up. Even his smile is offensive, all pointy, with ridges like the curve of a frisbee, dimples sharp and plasticky. Unlike most who possess such faces, faces they love to push in the faces of others, Mark is not wiry. Under his black bomber jacket Mark's muscles are as hard as

Morbid Tales

pool cues. But thicker. His physique is more that of a squaddie. Susan? I don't know what she was on. Very pretty girl in a spiteful sort of way. She wore a ponytail and leather jacket, and her red lipstick matched her dress. She was, for all the world, like some godawful imitation of a teddy girl from the Fifties. The secret of Mark's intimacy with her was a mystery to me. But then I suppose the secret of most couples' intimacy is mysterious, even to them.

With tabs in their mouths, Mark and Susan were having some conversation as meaningless as chewing gum and as offensive to the outsider as a couple necking. This is when the Boy made his tentative entrance with an insubstantial air about him, as if he'd sent on a timid astral body to check if this was the right place and apologise for his lateness. Actually he was as punctual as the haunting of a ghost. Only I noticed him stretch his neck through the door of the games room and hover vaguely over to the empty stools by the table where Barry and I sat. Then, as everyone caught on to his presence, it was as if he had materialised in front of them. The assembled company either glanced at him and ignored him or stared in eyeballing, gob-smacking confrontation, a coldness that was on the hostile side of indifference. What was it about him that invited such thick suspicion, such defensiveness? I could only think that he was a sort of human mirror. His sensitivity raised the hackles of those unwilling to admit their own softer feelings. His helpless intimacy spoke to that of those who feared and loathed intimacy. His vulnerability made them feel vulnerable. As he felt out of place, so they thought him out of place. Still, behind his helplessness was a serenity that could only have been a lack of true fear.

Barry resolved the situation with that truly laconic smartness which is one of the reasons that I appreciate him. An act of true consideration and magnanimity was disguised as an act of tough self-assertion.

'Siddown,' he said, indicating a stool, much as he had in the shop.

'D'you wanna drink?' I asked, and he nodded.

'What would you like?'

'Bitter, please.'

These simple manoeuvres sufficed to introduce the Boy into the circle of the seated in a more or less settled and comfortable way. There was

The Tattooist

some bitty conversation between the three of us, and then Barry said, 'Let's see it, then!'

The boy wriggled out of his threadbare jacket, undid his shirt cuffs and rolled up his sleeve.

'Nice tattoo, shame about the shirt.' said Barry, 'It's even worse than the one you wore the other day.'

'Really. Is that possible?' The Boy's intonation was too soft and serious for Barry to register the joke.

'Where do you get your clothes, anyway, Oxfam?'

'Well, sometimes, but Oxfam is a lot more expensive than the other charity shops, and for some reason there's not much there in my style.'

'I see.'

'This is from Cancer Research. It's a blouse, see,' and he indicated the position of the buttons.

Mark had been observing us with unusual concentration, and made a sidelong play at entering the conversation.

'A big girl's blouse!'

The Boy looked his way. 'Well, I suppose it was a girl's blouse once, but now it's a boy's blouse. Mine! Actually, I think blouses are more subtle than shirts. And there's more variety.'

Mark turned and chuckled, as if about to nudge the person next to him.

'A boy's blouse, eh?'

Susan wrinkled her top lip and sniffed sarcastically. 'You wearing lingerie under that?' she said to him.

'No.'

'Want to borrow mine?'

'No, thank you. That's okay.'

I felt sorry for the Boy. Why he felt he had to answer such questions, I don't know. They deserved neither earnestness nor wit. Still, he must respond in his own style and, after all, if it occurred to me that he gave them more respect than was necessary, this embarrassing imbalance, in the eyes of the people present and the very air of the room, comprising a sort of existential jury, must have weighed in the Boy's favour. It must have gone on record in the great courtroom of existence.

Morbid Tales

Mark flicked another tab into his mouth with a certain bother-boy cheekiness, lit it with his head slant-wise like a craftsman making some sort of estimate or appraisal. I noticed with the usual flicker of distaste the crudely scratched tattoo on his left wrist, two letters coupled to make a single symbol, not the initials of a lover. A cold and supreme hatred or anger that I understood well had put the boot in, kicking any soft sentiments of love in the face. In their place was an insignia whose call was militant and rousing, as inspiring as lightning. The two letters that had become one were N and F. I must note that this tattoo was a large part of the reason I disliked Mark. It was not so much that I disapproved of his flaunting runes of bigotry: I recognised that his politics were at best imprecise. If he were really interested in politics he would have updated the initials to B.N.P., but then their true resonance would have been lost. Mark's patriotism consisted of a stubborn, regressive nostalgia for his childhood. He reproduced on his left wrist a mysterious and forbidden sign he had seen on brick walls and scratched on desktops at the age when all children begin to look beyond the lies and authority of their teachers. His nostalgia was a longing for the closed, secure world of crime and violence that is a British childhood. His equation of the ultra right wing conservatism of the National Front with rebellion was puerile, stultifying, but from the inside possessed an emotional cohesion, a beautiful simplicity, that logic could not hope to challenge. All this I understood. What I could not forgive was that Mark had deigned to make this essay at a home-made tattoo after I had already entrusted to his body one of my own works.

The spidery tattoo looked as if it were biro that would wash off. But it never would. He had probably used a compass and a bottle of ink. Now, whenever I saw the tattoo I cringed to think my own work might be associated with it. Such stupidity to inscribe on one's wrist a shibboleth of powers one does not understand. I squirmed to see the weak point of a person who cannot bear to be weak.

'One of yours, is it, Shane?' said Mark. 'Let's have a butcher's.'

He stood and loped over. The Boy flinched slightly when Mark grabbed his arm, then settled into a kind of novel serenity. Mark examined the tattoo silently for an inordinate amount of time, like a child trying to read some especially difficult writing.

The Tattooist

‘Not bad,’ he said finally.

If he had been working up the banter of challenge he seemed to forget it completely now and his last words were a lame attempt to keep up his smart tone. Perhaps he had meant the words to sound sarcastic, but they had sounded reflective instead, and I was duly flattered. If I am to be honest with myself there is something in the queasiness of my dislike for Mark that occasionally resembles a keen fondness, an affection sharp as hate that can only arise out of our mutual distance. Perhaps it is a side effect of watching his behaviour and listening to his words with a naturalist’s curiosity and trying to work out what makes him tick. I was fascinated that my tattoo of Death should have made some connection in his brain, as clearly it had. It had stumped him completely. As if he had forgotten why he had come over he returned to his seat.

Barry invited the Boy to have a game of pool with him. The Boy agreed. His playing was hopeless, but fluky. His skewed cue might completely miss the white, then with the next shot, with no attempt to aim at all, he might pot two balls after bouncing off the cushions twice. Games of doubles were instituted with various partners, and the Boy even potted the black a couple of times.

Partners and opponents in the game began to speak to the Boy, and he answered them in such a way as to convey the minimum information required. Then sometimes, breaking this pattern only slightly by volunteering a few unsolicited words, he would prove himself capable of saying the most unusual things. In fact, he seemed capable of little else, despite his modesty. It was as if he had been given the most unconvincing lines in a film and was a terrible under-actor. Everyone soon discovered he was basically friendly, just a little odd, and there was a buzz of faint intrigue in the games room. There was something too lofty about the Boy for them to take a frank and direct interest in him, but while his good humour was impenetrable it seemed to promote a sort of liberality and respect amongst those he spoke to.

The Boy had been bought drinks by more than one other person. Smoke hovered in front of the dartboard. Barry had sneakily rolled a spliff beneath the table, and I felt the pungent vibrations of the drug, like glowing embers in my head, my throat and my body. Time was as vague and

Morbid Tales

slow as the mystery of the smoke, whose acrid flow was more nebulous than that of the waterfall it resembled. The Boy had retired from the pool table, and I glanced round to see him sipping a sour pint on his stool, Mark sitting next to him in my empty place.

For some reason I couldn't shape the questions I wanted to ask the Boy. So when I saw Mark and the Boy together I was struck by strange inspiration. Of course I didn't know what questions to ask, but I had set in motion a dialogue that would reveal the answers by itself. Mark and the Boy were too clearly like the two people who shouldn't exist in the same universe, who you would love to see meet. They were meeting now, and I felt like I'd done it on purpose. Then I felt almost used. I decided to take a back seat for a while and see what happened. I shunted out of their gaze, to give the conversation time to catch, set my back as if into a supporting wind, and listened.

I could tell by his slight slouch and slur that Mark was more than half cut by now. He was examining the tattoo again, grasping the Boy's arm in a rough, familiar way. Everyone had looked at the tattoo by now, and the reactions were largely the same. People seemed respectful and almost jealous, as if this tattoo had somehow placed me outside the run of normal human beings. The very existence of the tattoo was beginning to make me nervous. Now Mark was showing a renewed interest in it.

'I've got a tattoo too, you know,' said Mark. He lifted his T-shirt past the slit of his navel, past the operation scar, to reveal the shiny illustration draped across the distinct muscles of his abdomen like lustrous silk. It seemed part of his body, like a lizard's crest, or a bird's bright plumage.

'Not as good as this one, though,' and Mark slipped his T-shirt back down his gun-turret stomach and presented the Boy with his left wrist, bent to show the tattoo, as if he expected the Boy to kiss his hand.

'I did it meself. Good, innit?'

He flexed his wrist as if showing off a watch.

'You're like me, see,' Mark continued, 'A man with a cause. You're wearing that cross. Well, that don't mean bollocks to me. You can keep vampires off with that, but you can keep Pakis out with this.'

'I don't think so.'

'You what?'

The Tattooist

‘I doubt that’s really any more effective against Pakis than this is against vampires.’

‘You’re one of these Paki lovers aren’t you?’

‘England is a beautiful country,’ said the Boy, ‘Don’t you want people to know how beautiful it is?’

‘If you let in too many people there won’t be an England any more.’

‘Nonsense. The land beneath our feet belongs to no one. You cannot lose it unless you’ve already made others your enemies. What harm would it do to be friendly? No spirit that unafraid can be destroyed by welcoming others.’

‘Naah, naah, naah. It doesn’t work like that. I’m not racist, right, but these Pakis really do smell. We’re not meant to mix. It’s the way of the world. Everybody fights. Someone has to be on top. It might as well be us.’

‘Listen, I’m afraid I’m not very good at arguing, but I have a feeling from this conversation that I would like to tell you something. It’s no good me trying to explain properly, I’ve just got to tell you straight what I see and feel and maybe it will mean something to you. Maybe not.’

I doubt if anyone had ever spoken like that to Mark before, had ever told him there was ‘something they wanted to say to him’. Perhaps I’m wrong. In any case, he listened as he might do to the unravelling plot of a film on late night television, ready to entertain some new science fiction-like angle of reality. (Such new realities are peddled so cheaply nowadays in the world of entertainment there’s almost a new one every night). Mark flicked another fag into his mouth and lit it in a way that told the speaker he was listening without showing too much real keenness.

‘Some time back, when I first came to this town, I didn’t have any friends except a boy I met at school. He lived near the harbour and I would often visit his house. We’d go to the hills overlooking the sea, the one with the flag and the old gun emplacement on it, and the one with the old monastery, and without further talk we’d find ourselves rolling around together on the grass.

‘That kind of fighting is something you learn very quickly. It’s wrestling really. You somehow know not to punch or kick. I’m a very weak person, but even I can wrestle. There is a sort of earnestness, when you hear the other person’s breath in your ear, and feel them kneel on your

Morbid Tales

chest, a kind of bullying satisfaction that can be frightening. But when you've tumbled over and over, being underneath and on top, being bruised and wrenched and tangled, you begin to forget who is winning and who is losing. You just become one thing: a fight, a struggle. It's a very intimate feeling. I remember rolling in a clinch and above me was the giddy sky, seagulls wheeling and breaking around the wind-roughened flag. I felt a knee in my solar plexus and experienced a moment of utter, helpless, winded euphoria. The fight seemed to end there naturally. We got up, brushed off bits of dry grass from our clothes and smiled at each other quite as if there had been no aggression involved at all.

'Now, if you were in such a fight with a Pakistani, wouldn't it be better, after you've stood up and brushed yourself down, to smile and carry on as friends? After such a fight how can you ever bring yourself to punch the other person in anger? It's just not necessary. I can understand the feeling of hatred, all the ideologies of distrust and suspicion, but when you're actually face-to-face with someone, how can you take it seriously? How can you carry it through?'

I lost the thread of the dialogue at that point and never did learn what passed between them at that table afterwards. Barry had come over from a game of pool to pass me another thin, soft burning spliff and talk. He leaned towards me, his face shadowed by his hair, and spoke in a low tone like someone tired of a party and suggesting a getaway. A strange anxiety told me I was missing the most revealing part of the whole puzzle of the conversation, so I hardly listened to Barry's words. I sucked purposefully on the stained and withered spliff and strained my ears. Eventually I saw it was no good, and afraid Barry would notice I was elsewhere I gave up and turned my attention to him. A little after I saw the Boy go towards the toilet over Barry's shoulder, and Mark sat back down with Susan where she was counting money out of her purse with a pinched expression on her face. They were talking about the Boy. Not in any idle way, either. My attention zoomed in on them. I caught a few words that fell from Susan's mouth that somehow sliced through my stomach and bowels like an icy blade. Something in her eye, clawing hatred for the Boy after such short acquaintance, shocked me.

'You listening?'

The Tattooist

I swung back to Barry.

‘Sorry Baz, just a bit wrecked, y’know.’

There was a sudden burst of movement like a dog let out of a trap, and everyone looked round to see that Mark had torpedoed into the Boy, whose slack form would have collapsed onto the floor if Mark hadn’t caught it. Mark suddenly removed the caliper-grip of his arms and let the Boy drop like a sack of bones just to jerk him upright again by the wrist. He released the Boy just as he regained his balance. Then he pulled his fists back in a boxing stance and grinned.

‘Put ’em up, then.’ He dangled the words out of his mouth like a tab.

There was something distasteful in the whole scene, but Mark didn’t seem to notice the disapproval around him. No one said anything, anyway. The whole room was caught on the suspension evoked by Mark’s raised fists. The Boy hardly attempted to defend himself. Mark threw a few lazy, but sharp-curving punches, which were muffled by the Boy’s upraised arms, as floppy as rabbit’s ears. Mark aimed a kick and knocked the Boy’s feet from under him. He wasn’t trying particularly hard, but neither was he taking any care not to hurt the Boy. If the Boy remained unhurt it was because he seemed to trust Mark’s blows and so render himself elastic. He let himself be flung about like a jerky ballet dancer.

The Boy was crawling slowly and pathetically on all fours, trying to get to his feet with a sloppy clumsiness, as if he were crawling in mud. Mark fell to his knees behind the Boy and viciously twisted his arm behind his back. Like all children showing off, Mark seemed oblivious to the squirming spectacle he was making of himself. There was something about the floundering of the two of them that I could hardly bare to watch. The whole display was undignified, humiliating to those watching and at least one of those being watched. I inwardly groaned at the fact that Mark was giving away much more to his audience than he realised. Mark continued to go through his routine with the confident air of someone with a trick up his sleeve. I saw real pain flicker and spasm across the Boy’s face. Mark hooked the Boy’s delicate neck in the crook of his arm and squeezed.

‘Surrender? Submit?’

Morbid Tales

‘I submit,’ the Boy managed to gasp in a gurgling voice that was grotesquely comical.

Mark released the Boy as if he were a magician who had just made his assistant appear with a flourish. We were supposed to be astonished, perhaps by this *coup de grâce*. The Boy blinked, but looked unharmed and unharassed. He smiled as if at a joke that he didn’t get.

‘What’s everyone staring at?’ Mark addressed the whole room. ‘We were just having a friendly play fight, weren’t we?’

‘Yes,’ said the Boy politely and took Mark’s extended hand to shake it.

Everyone accepted this. They were probably aware at some level that they had been in complicity with the whole scene. They had let it happen, locked into a suspense of trust that the two figures would not make any wrong moves and let each other down in their violent balancing act.

The people watching dissolved back into their conversations and relaxed interaction. I sat back down at our table with Barry and the Boy. Mark came over, too, and plonked himself down, beaming as if waiting for praise. No one mentioned Mark’s attack of high spirits. I noticed Susan was still sitting glumly in her place with a face like a smacked arse.

‘Susan not joining us then?’ I said.

‘Naah. She’s sulking.’

‘Why?’ asked Barry.

‘Fucked if I know. . . . Time of the month. I can’t be doing with it anyway. “If you don’t know why I’m angry then I’m not telling you.” What kind of sense is that? Anyway, she can come over if she wants.’

Mark had never been good mates with either me or Barry, and was not usually prone to showing great eagerness to enjoy another’s company. His present behaviour was surprising and somehow, in this new surge of friendliness, presaged as it was by mock violence, there was a disturbing element. I decided to put some of his exuberance down to drunkenness.

‘You know, I like the new tattoo, Shane. It’s not really my kind of thing, but I don’t know, it’s kind of grown on me. In fact it’s pretty fucking cool.’ He turned to the Boy. ‘Let’s have another look.’

The Boy obligingly rolled up his sleeve again.

‘It’s fucking good, Shane.’

The Tattooist

I suppose that despite the unusual subject matter, the workmanship was enough to earn Mark's admiration. At any rate, he was no longer afraid to praise it.

'Shane won't do me any more, y'know.' Mark turned to the Boy again. 'He's jealous 'cos the one I did is better than his.'

'You've read the sign in my shop, Sparky. I don't do anyone with tattoos on their face, neck or hands.'

'This isn't on my hand. It's on my wrist.'

'You can still see it when you wear a shirt. That's the point.'

'That's a bleeding weird attitude for a tattooist!'

'It's a bleeding responsible attitude for a tattooist!'

'Fuck that, man! Since when has tattooing been about being responsible?'

'Since when have you known anything about tattoos? I'm not discussing it further.'

'Anyway, I must say, Shane, you're much better than you used to be. It's not fair. You've fobbed me off with this inferior article.'

He touched his abdomen to indicate his tattoo. He pawed the Boy's exposed arm again, his fingers stretching the smooth flesh into pits like the teeth of a guard dog playing with a kitten, and making the tattoo shimmer with a thousand tiny velvet wrinkles.

'I want one like this, too. Tell you what,' Mark's hand slipped away and flashed back slickly in an instant. This time his fist was sharp and wicked with a flick-knife. It was old, ivory-handled, but the blade was sharp and bright, almost greasy, as if it had been polished with Brylcreem. Mark's pride and joy. 'What if I was to take this tattoo off you, and then you could get another one the same later? That way we'd all be happy. Or would you rather I cut your dick off?'

The tip of the blade was just at the Boy's eye level, and he regarded it uncomfortably. Mark was using it to punctuate his words like a drunkenly jabbing finger.

'Sparks! Hey, Sparks!' Barry spoke like someone trying to make themselves understood to a moron, 'Put the toy prick away. Cutting off someone's tattoo 'cos you haven't got one of your own is one thing, but

Morbid Tales

cutting off their dick 'cos you haven't got one of your own is just not going to work. Now put the toy prick away.'

The insult could have piqued Mark's pride and goaded him into real violence, but something in Barry's voice conveyed an effective warning. The sarcasm was well calculated to belittle any attempts to act out of pride. Also, Barry seemed to have adopted the Boy almost as an unofficial mascot of the shop, the lifestyle behind the shop, and the friendships that made up that lifestyle. I had never seen Barry in a serious fight, but obviously he was not afraid of Mark, and he was not laughing. So, for one reason or another, this time Mark acted with restraint and put the knife away. He folded in the blade and was just about to slip it back in his pocket when he drew it out again in a flash. The blade was still tucked into the handle, and he smiled. He circled the Boy's right wrist with his thumb and forefinger, tugged his arm out and pushed the knife into the Boy's upturned hand as if it were a handful of sweets.

'Here!' he said. 'You need this more than me, I reckon. You should be more of a man. Learn to look after yourself.' His voice was touched with concern.

The Boy regarded the flick-knife in his hand. 'Thank you,' he said. He located the tiny button in the handle that releases the blade and pressed it. The blade flicked out faster than a snake's tongue. He held it up, turned it about, fascinated, perhaps, by the novelty of owning such an object.



I only met the Boy again once after that occasion. In this life there are one or two calm days that seem to belong to no particular time, when one is released from age. These days are for one reason or another unshackled by the usual chain of chores and obligations that make up human life, turning it into a tedious dream. You wake up and realise, with sad detachment and infinite relief, that the rest of life is meaningless; these few calm moments will in the end be your finest moments. In my work I have had more than my fair share of such sun-blinded, reflective days. I am lucky.

The Tattooist

It was on just such a day, similar to the day I first met him, that I met the Boy for the last time. He dropped by almost casually, but with that strange, alien self-consciousness about him that I can only call nervousness, though it is more like an uncertainty of the usual social patterns of human beings. He obviously wanted to appear casual, but was too aware that he had no real reason to call except a social interest that remained somehow unspoken, unconfirmed.

Someone had cancelled an appointment, and Barry phoned to say he was having trouble with his bike and would be in later. So I was working on a few designs when I felt a silent prickling and turned around to see the Boy standing in the corridor with his hand on the doorframe.

‘It was so quiet, I didn’t know if you were open or not.’

‘Yes. Open for business. What can I do for you?’

‘Er. Well, I just thought I’d say hello, since I was passing.’

‘Yeah, come in, sit down. I’m not busy.’

The Boy took a seat and sat very properly with his hands in his lap. He said nothing. He didn’t even seem to have anything on his mind he wanted to say. He merely sat, waiting. I didn’t know whether to carry on with my designs or wait myself in silence for him to say something. I tried working on my designs for a while, but could not concentrate. I sighed as if I had simply tired of the work and turned to him.

‘Fancy a cuppa?’

‘Yes, please!’

So I made tea—I don’t drink alcohol on duty—and managed to whet the conversation.

‘I’m sorry about the other night,’ I said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean Sparky. He’s a moron. I’m sorry. I put you in that situation and let you fend for yourself. It was pathetic really, everyone just watching while he showed off. Me to, of course. I’m afraid that is typical of the bad points of the kind of people I hang out with: selfish, cowardly, no sense of responsibility. Very little. . . . No respect, really, when it comes to it. They’re the kind of people who will tread their fag ash into someone else’s carpet and think that person is being uptight if they get angry.’

Morbid Tales

‘There’s no need to be sorry, honestly. I was honoured to be invited into your circle. And I don’t think it’s true that they have no respect, either. It was a very interesting night. I feel as though I’ve made the kind of contact that is only made once in a few lifetimes.’

‘Sparky kind of spoiled things though.’

‘No, not at all. He really made the evening.’

The Boy was smiling as he said this. I was surprised to feel a distinct pang of jealousy lurking behind my disapproval. Luckily it was distinct enough for me to step back from. I became very circumspect in my questioning.

‘So you didn’t think he was just a racist wanker, then?’

‘His racism is like his poverty. It limits him. It’s really just a fantasy world. I don’t believe he is a bad person. In his own world, in his own context, he is a good person. I know this because he is capable of true friendship.’

‘True friendship?’

‘Yes. Sweat is true friendship. As for me, my skin is cool, I don’t sweat enough. But that night we were both sweating a little.’

‘I don’t quite follow you. You can sweat while kicking someone’s head in. Doesn’t mean you’re bum chums.’

‘It’s so hard to explain. Everything is hard to explain, really. Usually I just tell myself that I can’t explain, and then just feeling the air on my skin is bliss. Life without explanation is rapture. But anyway, this time I will try to explain, and you must forgive me if it isn’t very logical.’

‘When I see, for instance, workmen in a hole in a road, filthy and sweating after tearing up the earth with a pneumatic drill, and resting to have some tea and talk together, I think to myself, that is true friendship.’

‘Get away.’

‘No, really. Okay, so, for instance, I listen to Mark’s voice and it is tight with violence. It’s like the tightness of a football full to bursting with air. So full up with that invisible softness that it has become hard. And the violence is like the violence of that football bouncing off a brick wall. The boys kicking the ball are playing rough, but the game still has rules, and behind the violence, the roughness, they trust each other implicitly. They trust each other because they can be mutually rough. Usually that kind of

The Tattooist

person doesn't know how to deal with me because they think they will only hurt or insult me by being rough. So they deliberately hurt and insult me. Mark, I think, really was trying to trust me, and not to insult me.'

'Hmm. I'm not sure what Mark would make of what you've just said. I think you're being too generous by half.'

The Boy attempted no further argument on the matter and we settled into silence again. Eventually, as if it was something he'd been meaning to say for a long time, he said, 'Thank you for the tattoo.'

'Don't mention it. It's my work.'

'It's more than just your work, I think. It seems to have settled into my arm very well. It's better now than when it was first done. It's like it's blossomed.'

'Show me.'

He was right. It was even fresher now. It looked as if it might even smudge, like the brilliant dust of a butterfly's wing. Before, when I had looked at it, I had the faint illusion of smelling damp turf. Now the illusion was stronger. The thing was alive; as alive as the flesh it was indelibly impregnated in. The eyes winked, the Little Girl Death rocked on her heels. I caught a breeze of all the memories that were imbued in that body, and of other things that weren't memories, but daydreams. Before I knew it a whole montage of images presented itself to my mind's eye, a tapestry into which was woven something like a story. First there was the dark and soothing coolness of earth. Then I rose up, through the dense, shadowy tickling of the dozing grass. It was a sports field in a primary school, glaring in the sun, dazzling with daisies and with the daisies of girls doing cartwheels and handstands. There were boys, too, differently occupied, their navy blue jerseys wrapped around their waists like reverse aprons, their clothes covered in withered grass cuttings, tri-coloured sweat bands on their wrists. In the background, blackened bindweed spiralled between the interstices of a rusty wire fence. And beyond that were the back lanes and gardens of an English village. I sank once more into the damp, restful earth, and seemed to sleep the halcyon sleep of the dead. When I stirred upwards once more, through grass of a darker green, I was at the top of a hill overlooking a choppy sea. The hard, brilliant colours of a Union Jack streamed jubilantly in a snapping wind, and behind glowed the god-

Morbid Tales

solemn clouds. A spiked palisade protected it from any would-be climbers or vandals. Seagulls wheeled and hovered around it in formations as broken as the wind. A hexagonal gun emplacement stood near by. There was no longer any gun. Instead it was full of graffiti, the stains and smells of booze and piss. Even now some muddy-haired grebos stood and crouched, swilling lager and bottles of beer and cider from the local offy. Even now one stood to slash his dripping initials in urine on the inside of the embrasure. There was a strange continuity between the two scenes I could not place. Both were somehow full of other images and associations too nebulous to enumerate. The buffeting wind and lowering skies of the latter scene left me with a feeling cold, threatening, and remotely beautiful.

I returned to my shop to see the Boy looking at me as if awaiting a reply. His face changed subtly to the face of someone who has been given a satisfactory answer. He sighed almost inaudibly. His visit had drawn to a natural end. There was little reason for him to linger.

‘Well, I should get on really,’ he said.



There are so many kinds of relationships we don't really have names for them all. In fact, each is unique, and the most significant and influential relationships in a person's life are not always those with people they see regularly and often. Sometimes there comes a relationship hard to place, not belonging exactly to the spheres of friendship, or family, or business, as if it has arisen for purposes far more specific and will take up no more time than is necessary to achieve those purposes.

Although I never again met the Boy in the flesh, I sometimes saw him about. His presence in my thoughts and my life only grew stronger. There were still some weeks of summer left, so my last memories of the Boy are of a fresh face, breeze blown hair, and arms exposed as far as the cool shadows of the T-shirt sleeves. Even now I know very little of the Boy's background. I heard from Dave once that he'd seen him signing on at the Job Centre. He had apparently looked as out of place there as he did everywhere else. Amongst the sullen and resentful jobless in the queues, and the staff behind their desks who acted as if they'd been coached in

The Tattooist

exactly the disapproving, humourless attitude to adopt to make those they dealt with feel sheepish and guilty, the Boy had stood out like a natural poet, or a stooge. He had been pleasant in the face of the morale-wearing sternness of the staff, whose inquiries were so full of covert accusations—much to their irritation. Any prospective employers, imbued with the same grey spirit of oppression, would no doubt be similarly irritated by the cooperative naïvety of this flower-spangled child. He was clearly unemployable and irrepressible. Barry bumped into him on a couple of occasions and exchanged a few friendly words. Others reported similar encounters as if they were lucky omens. He always seemed to be alone, on his way to somewhere, who knows where, to do who knows what? Boyfriend or girlfriend there was none. His, it appeared, was a mayfly existence, sustained by fresh air and sunshine. Whenever I saw him, or thought of him, there came to my mind visions like those I had when he had last showed me his tattoo. The visions deepened, became more detailed. Single enigmatic images would occupy me for some time till I saw them quite as clearly as life, but with a poignancy of meaning to them that life had long forgotten. Children on a nature trail. Haystacks. A boy watches whilst other boys and girls trampoline in the hay, and roll about, and kiss. In all this was diffused such a feeling of purity and loneliness that it wrapped me up in astonishment and wonder.

We entered autumn in all its pagan gloom, and then the bleak iciness of winter. Sightings of the Boy were few, then for a long time he was not seen at all, as if he had migrated or gone into hibernation. When I thought of him, too, it was as if I thought of an era so remote it was more legend than history. There was the abstractness about my thoughts of a passenger staring at wet streets from a bus window. The Boy's face hovered vaguely across the sky like my own faint reflection in the window.

In early February, when pensioners were skidding on the pavements and fracturing their fragile bones, Barry came into the shop shaking rain off his leather, took off his helmet and looked at me as if searching for some shared knowledge or understanding. I will never forget that face, pale and almost brutal with the cold. There was a weariness about it suitable to the season that made his expression, his actions, his words, almost casual. On such occasions formalities are difficult to grasp. Life and events

Morbid Tales

have confounded formalities, rendered them false and clumsy. There was enough news and gossip to piece together a general picture of what had happened, but although there had been many eye-witnesses, there were still a number of odd inconsistencies in their various accounts. What actually took place I will never know, but this at least is the oral fossil the event left behind.

On the far side of Ilford, a neighbouring town, in the flat-spirited area beyond the housing estates, Mark and the Boy happened to come across each other walking the same pavement. It was apparently the first time they had met since the night I 'introduced' them. A passer-by on the other side of the road, Sidney Street, it was, saw Mark give a great, elastic smile. That person's attention was caught by something in the manner of the two talking. It did not appear to him a usual acquaintance or a usual conversation. His first feeling was of vague alarm, but when he saw that the two were smiling and chatting in an apparently friendly manner his reason told him there was nothing to be alarmed about. Still, his curiosity was aroused and he walked along with many backward glances, till eventually he saw Mark and the Boy walking away together in the opposite direction. Out of some sense of novelty, perhaps, Mark had invited the Boy to have an afternoon pint with him. The Boy had accepted and kept up with Mark's swift strides by half walking, half running, so that he almost appeared to be skipping. They followed the low, smooth-worn pavement to the nearest pub, The Hound and Hare, where neither of them were known. It was a thin-carpeted place with the atmosphere of a launderette, where sad-looking regulars measured out their watered-down pints over hours.

Mark and the Boy sat down at their own table, and Mark bought drinks. The regulars glanced their way now and then, sensing some odd tension or excitement in their conversation. Mark drank far more than the Boy, drank with a determined, methodical haste, as if steeling himself for something. The conversation became heated and now everyone looked their way. Something the Boy said must have struck a powerful nerve. Whatever it was it turned Mark's face a terrible pale colour, like white-hot iron. Most people understand that someone like Mark, who seems incapable of taking anything seriously, will suddenly become incapable of hu-

The Tattooist

mour when certain things are mentioned, and they simply try to be careful. The Boy must have obliviously, and with shocking naïvety, ran into some inner territory of fear and anger that no one else would ever even have discovered, some incontrollable molten core of pure, brutal reaction. In some way, the Boy's naïvety, comparable almost to a congenital deficiency, mirrored Mark's equally pathological implacability. When the two met was it is not bound to result in some crisis?

'You fucking queer!'

Mark spewed out the words as if they were silage. His mouth was turned down in a sneer of disgust. Everyone in the pub heard serious danger in the looping vowels of the three words as plainly as if they themselves had been kicked in the stomach and slashed with a Stanley knife.

This is where the story becomes splintered. Most of the witnesses saw Mark pull a knife, and described one very much like that Mark had given the Boy last summer. Mark swept the table away from between them and hurled it across the room. He grabbed the Boy by the front of his shirt, yanked him to his feet and dragged him outside. The proprietor phoned the police. The pub regulars looked at each other uncomfortably and a few of them got up to follow Mark and the Boy in a vain show of doing something useful. It was already too late. The pavement outside was slick with blood that was to remain and attract all kinds of people for days to come. Mark himself looked like he had been in some terrible accident. He was stunned and simply stood, unspeaking, his chest heaving, until the police came and the blue of their sirens flashed garishly on the glutinous crimson. The strange thing is that one witness swore that the Boy actually passed a knife to Mark a moment before Mark's outburst. Three witnesses swore that there was no knife at all, and indeed no knife could be found on Mark, on the Boy, or anywhere in the vicinity of the crime. Mark was later to insist, against the advice of his solicitor, that there had been no knife. But the debate is redundant anyway since the white body whose head hung back touching the pavement and whose scrawny arms were raised feebly into foetus-like fists, had been pierced many times by a blade and lost blood like a shredded bag. He had been stabbed to death. Perhaps stranger than the absent murder weapon was the Boy's silence. After he had been dragged outside the customers in the pub had heard Mark shout-

Morbid Tales

ing, and noises of a scuffle, but the Boy's voice had not been among those noises. Perhaps he had died instantly with the first stab before he could raise a cry of protest.

I never saw the body, of course, but I spoke to more than one person who did. They seemed shocked that such violence can be contained within the human frame, unseen, to be released at any time. There was something about the violence that was almost superhuman. The corpse itself seemed so fragile and vulnerable it was more than they could bear to look at it for more than a few dismayed seconds. It was as if the Boy were still suffering the explosive agony of his wounds from which there continued to flood a sweet, dumbfounding, compassion. The bleached-pale skin looked more tender than ever, the poor, stupid, slaughtered Boy ravished and wasted by the merciless iron tongue of Death.

Mark went down for that. There was no avoiding it. His solicitor somehow managed to get the charge reduced from murder to manslaughter on the plea of diminished responsibility and drunkenness. I attended the trial and saw a subdued figure standing in the dock. There was something missing from him, as if some spirit had left him with the frenzy of violence he had wreaked upon the Boy. If I didn't know him I might have thought he was mentally retarded. He did little to defend himself, often had to have questions repeated to him, and only showed any signs of remaining will when two points were touched upon—the knife, and the subject matter of the final conversation. He insisted almost deliriously that there was no knife, then weakened his own defence by insisting he had been too drunk to remember the conversation or what had ignited his anger. His avoidance of this latter subject had about it the shadow of superstition. It was clear, at any rate, that nothing on Earth would induce him to talk about it, and as he stood there I seemed to see the bricks of a prison building themselves up around him, the gloomy walls box him in with shadows, bars spring up before his face and grass curl from beaten soil below.

Something odd came out at the trial. It had little bearing on the case, at least from a legal point of view, but it left me unable to concentrate on much that came after. I was called briefly to witness as someone who had

The Tattooist

known both the victim and the accused. I was asked how I knew the victim and replied that I had tattooed him. There was some whispered consultation in the Dock as the defence lawyer questioned some anomaly in my statement. It seems that there had been no tattoo on the body, but this was soon explained, albeit in a way which begged further and equally mystifying questions, by the presence of a strange scar on the right upper arm. It was apparently too old to have been inflicted by the accused. In any case it was not a stab wound. Instead it appeared as if a whole section of epidermis and subcutaneous tissue had been painstakingly removed, as if with a flick-knife.



A spring day released me and made the intervening years uncountable; many or few, they were simply years, now over. As a matter of fact I had been meaning to make the visit for a long time. At first my intention had been pointed, but I did not know where the grave was. Then I learned which churchyard it was and visited a couple of times, but the headstone had still not been erected, so I could not find the plot of earth that belonged to the Boy. Not knowing when it would be erected, the visit became just something I would do 'sometime', and whilst I did not quite forget about it, it lost all urgency. Life came closer again, stood between me and the quiet grave. So years passed. The day of my visit seemed to come round naturally enough of its own accord. A number of things prompted it. Barry happened to mention that he had seen the grave, that it was well-tended and peaceful. I had also heard of Mark's release from prison. In his absence Mark had become some grim bogey of folklore. It was not that he was feared because he had committed a crime whose violence no one had expected, even of him, although doubtless that was a part of it. It was more that something of the ill omen of the grave he had made, and something of the iron dark shadow of prison, now clung to him. He was feared not for any harm that he might do but for the ruin and dolour, the frame-distorting and spirit-wrecking bad fortune that had fallen on him. People were afraid that something of that unhappy shadow might fall across them and blight them with blindness or lameness. He had become

Morbid Tales

something like the shuck, the monstrous black dog that haunts country lanes, a harbinger of Death.

So I did not know how to interpret the omen of his release. Would the spring sun blast away the darkness of that shadow? Or would the darkness spread from the very dust of his footsteps to infect the sun in the sky? How had he lived in prison, and how was he to live now?

I set the day for the visit as formally as if I had had to consult the Boy himself to see if it was convenient for him. It was a Sunday, a day of time-honoured timelessness. The churchyard in question was in the hill-secluded village where he had spent the primary years of his life. I had not been there often. I caught one of the irregular buses that go by the slow undulating coast road and got off in the High Street. Suddenly it seemed as if I had been detached from all those things which gave life direction and a sense of chronology. School, work, the family, were all forgotten things. Even my name seemed abstract and unnecessary. This is the condition in which awareness exists before it is born into the world and forced into narrow channels of identity. I was simply me, casual clothes, a pair of hands both strange and familiar, a pair of legs to walk with, vision and the air on my skin, a shadow to accompany me. What I saw were the sun-baked, gritty pavements, old as the hills, ancient, irremovable chewing gum trodden in, and everywhere the grey dust of memory become unconscious, inanimate. I noticed the spiky-leafed dandelions growing from cracked tarmac. I saw in their ragged shadows the shadow of Mark's release.

Time in this village was of the same quality that time has for a child, pure, boundless and unmoving. It seemed appropriate that the Boy should be buried here, where time was a still, limpid pool. It was an unreal place, with the special unreality of the past. When the past is gone it becomes unreachable, as remote as something that never was, and takes on that haze of nostalgia so often conjured up in phrases such as 'The Good Old Days,' or 'The Golden Age'. Many people insist that such things are a mirage, a cuckoo-land that is the vestigial memory of the child's innocence of the existence of Death. That world has the bold simplicity of an illustrated ABC on the walls of a classroom. A is for Apple. B is for Ball. C is for Cup. A person's own childhood can seem to be something archaic,

The Tattooist

belonging to some free-floating idyllic century that is close to history, close to storybook, but far from reality and more real than life.

As I walked I saw few people. The village was hushed. Even the church bells did not seem to touch that hush; they were a part of it. I listened to the bells as I walked. The sound has always been to me a disturbing cross between gaiety and melancholy, like a smooth, grey patina dulling the rays of the sun.

I looked at the map that Barry had sketched for me on the back of one of our flyers. I turned into an alley, passed a bowling green, a public lavatory, a car park. I arrived at a road at whose side was a low wall. Looking over it I saw the fast flowing, thrush-coloured waters of a narrow stream, swelling clear as birdsong over rocks and pebbles, a constant racing from one unknown to another unknown, which to the onlooker was as if static. The walls that banked it in were thick with weeds. This must be the river marked on the map, I thought. All I had to do now was follow it and I would arrive. In fact I was nearly there. The church tower, the source of the time-slowness, solemn clangor, was visible cresting a mound of green and grey that could only have been the graveyard. I became conscious now of every step I took, so that my steps became uneven, standing out in strange, echoless relief in the afternoon. To the left was a small Victorian park, the grass trim and shining in the sunlight. I looked at the empty benches, the neat lines of roses, and there was a fragility to the whole scene that made me think of the last days of life, the serenity and faintness of old age. That too was a return to elemental things, perhaps, to be retired and to see the sheen of the grass so blinding and vivid that it might disappear at any moment. Both old age and childhood approached the fragility of non-existence.

A few more gritty footsteps and I came to a lichgate at the base of whose posts there grew lush clumps of long grass. The lichgate was also a bridge over the rich, variegated brown of the stream I had been following. Just inside the wall of the graveyard there stood an old well, and, under the iron dawn chorus of the bells, on my way to the grave of the Boy, I found myself suddenly thinking of an old rhyme. The rhyme came from such a dark depth of memory it was as if I had hauled it up from that well in a bucket. And yet, so appropriate was it in feeling to the situation I now

Morbid Tales

found myself in that it was as if it repeated itself automatically in my mind with the monotony of the bells.

*Ding, dong, dell,
Pussy's in the well.*

*Who put her in?
Little Johnny Green.*

*Who pulled her out?
Little Tommy Stout.*

*What a naughty boy was that,
To try to drown poor pussy cat,*

*Who never did him any harm,
And killed the mice in his father's barn.*

I was prepared to take my time searching for the grave, a sightseer of lichen, stone and archaic, weathered epitaphs. As it turned out, my way was destined to be signposted and my leisurely perusal to be cut short. I started up the path that rolled between the sod banks of graves. The blades of grass were translucent with sunlight; a ragged peace had gone to seed, as old and vague as the letters chiselled in headstones. I felt like whistling, but some noise or movement told me I was not alone. Beyond a screen of small, scraggy trees, someone else was standing. Usually, in such a situation, I would have avoided the area where the stranger stood, but this time I just kept walking. I rounded the edge of the line of trees and saw a figure in jeans and T-shirt. They were not standing in a formal attitude, but looked almost ready to run. Nonetheless it was clear they were mourning. There was agony in the shoulders, the face turned away like someone caught in the act. I did not know if it was this wild and natural grief that struck me and made me feel as if the scene was something to do with me, or whether there was some detail my conscious mind was missing. Then I realised. I was astonished at first, but in an instant it seemed not so

The Tattooist

strange, after all. It even seemed fitting and inevitable, as if I had come here expecting this. And, in a way, hadn't I? Hadn't I finally acknowledged what that unnamed anticipation I had felt all along was? Perhaps he had been pretending not to notice me, but it was no use. It was obvious I was not going to go away. And Mark finally turned his face towards me.

His pointy smile was now replaced by the grimace of sorrow, creasing that plastic action man face grotesquely. He did not look away, so I approached. The grave was the Boy's, of course, overhung by a hood of crooked boughs and surrounded by pillows of grass. Only the stone itself gave away the relatively recent date of the internment. To see Mark and the grave at once was almost too much to take in. My own feelings were brimming and spilling so that it seemed first that I was moved and then that I felt nothing in alternate flashes until I could not tell numbness from profound emotion. I could feel the presence of the Boy's body, though it was presented to my mind as whole and perfect. I could almost see it. I did not want to think what the true condition of the corpse must be.

Mark held something in his right hand and he gave it to me now. It was a rusty tin box covered in sentimental Victorian designs. Perhaps it had once contained cough sweets. I tugged off the tight fitting lid and saw inside an envelope, a bundle of papers and a knife.

'He left it me,' said Mark in a clogged voice. 'He knew before I did it. He knew.'

I took out the knife. It was Mark's old flick-knife with the ivory handle, but there was something different about it. On the handle there was an image I knew well, Little Girl Death, standing on tiptoes, about to kiss someone. It glimmered on the hilt like a plundered jewel. At first I marvelled at how it had been done. Then I saw the lines around the tattoo where the skin had been cut away from the arm. Inside the envelope was a simple note from the Boy, which read, 'This belongs to you.'

I almost forgot Mark was beside me and fished out the papers that lined the bottom of the tin in the hope they might resolve this mystery. They only confirmed it. They were the copied pages of the will. Young as he was, the Boy had taken the unusual precaution of making a will, rudimentary, but scrupulously legal. It was witnessed by one Sidney Matthews,

Morbid Tales

a local pariah, a little backward, who was said to have offered small boys and girls money to see and touch them.

I turned the knife over in the palm of my hand in admiration and wonder. Could such an object, with all that it implied, really exist in the world? Who had removed the tattoo so skilfully from the Boy's arm and pasted it onto the handle under a layer of varnish, preserving it like an ant in amber? None of the details of the story behind this object, taken separately, were impossible, but together they defied belief. Now the dark, miraculous nature of the whole chain of events was brought home to me in the knife that joined them all together and formed their cryptic embodiment.

I looked up at Mark to confirm in his eyes that we were involved in the same mystery. I could not quite make out what his expression was. Then, as if the knife were actually some obscene heathen artefact, incriminating evidence, he burst out, 'I'm not queer! I'm not fucking queer!'

'Okay. Okay,' I said, trying to reassure him without thinking about whether I believed him or not. It was as if he had wanted to say many things in his own defence but when he opened his mouth there only came this dubious denial. There was nothing he could say now that would not dig him deeper into a hole. He could only be defiant.

He looked into my eyes a moment longer. Long enough for him to see that I accepted his grief and vulnerability as genuine, that I saw him now as a mourner and not the Boy's killer. I replaced the knife, the letter and the will in the tin and gave it back to Mark. There didn't seem any need for further words. Indeed, I could not have spoken if I had wanted to. Mark took the box, looked at me once more and walked silently away. I stood by myself in front of the grave a while longer to pay my respects and contemplate all that had happened. When I finally left, the rhyme was still tolling dolefully in my head.

*Ding dong dell,
Pussy's in the well.
Who threw him in?*

The Tattooist

Soon after that time there came a strong resurgence of the daydream images that had first overwhelmed me on the Boy's last visit to my shop. The images came quite involuntarily and with sufficient power to crowd out the everyday world entirely. Their vividness was abnormal, and I was particularly disturbed by the quality of forcible intrusion from outside that the visions possessed. I even wondered about my own mental health, as I suppose I still must. I did not feel as if I had received the necessary shock or undergone the necessary trauma to explain such psychological malfunction, but perhaps a subtle accumulation of events in just the right spiritual combination had caused something inside to crack silently, just as one can bleed internally with no external signs of injury. I don't believe we are ever sure when to consult professionals about our symptoms, especially when those symptoms are mental.

All this made it difficult for me to work. Once or twice, in a sort of trance, I even incorporated details from these visions into customer's tattoos. On these occasions I apologised embarrassedly and gave a discount. I believe it was only the exceptional quality of these details that enabled me to placate the customers.

The visions themselves still centred around the same images, that primary school playing field and the wind-torn, hilltop Union Jack. The periods spent beneath the earth in these visions seemed to grow longer and somehow more intense. That is, when my disembodied consciousness lingered beneath the soil of the sports field there was still a sense of eternal laziness, but intermingled with a buzz of expectancy. The darker soil of the hill, however, seemed to squeeze me tight as a rugby scrum. I felt a sort of thudding that I thought might be heartbeats, and a sweet, piercing sensation that was a mixture of the coldness of mud, exquisite loneliness and the exhilaration of running with bursting chest from a gang of bullies.

Some of the visions focused on traditional childhood games, some of which I had forgotten about for a long time. There were girls doing cartwheels, handstands, splits, the crab. Doing the crab—they pushed their bellies up into an arch and progressed gymnastically on all fours. Their skirts fell between their legs and I could almost see the flat mandibles of the creatures they were imitating. There were boys foraging for conkers in the outlying lanes and fields of the village on misty days. This pastime in

Morbid Tales

particular seemed so ancient and so clichéd that I could hardly believe it had ever been reality. There was a mystery in all these games and pastimes. That mystery was their transmission. They were all traditions limited to children; they could not be passed from adult to child. They seemed to come to children with the naturalness of the passing seasons. Now it occurred to me that the Boy was of one piece with this mystery. I did not know where he came from, and he seemed to exist in a self-contained world of youth and immaturity.

Mark was to become as much of a pariah as the witness to the Boy's will. No one would employ him and the only words cast his way were insults. This was nothing to do with concern or grief for the fate of the Boy. It was simple superstitious fear and that petty hatred that lives wherever there is ignorance, seeking out any target to sting with its poison. So Mark seldom came out in the daylight anymore. The will to fight had left him. He was sapped of all courage. He had taken a blow that had bled the colour from him, drained the very life from his tissues. Now there was nothing left for him but to skulk in lonely places. This condition of Mark's was obviously a terminal one, but it was more nebulous than a physical illness and so the whole environment was involved in it. Mark's end came inevitably and soon, the world falling in with the grave taint that had soured his will to live. He was kicked to death on a grassy sports ground in front of a rugby clubhouse. His killers were an evil pack of thirteen and fourteen year-old boys from the local comprehensive. Their grating accents could be heard cheering the word 'queer' like a football chant. I know their type well, kids in whom utter stupidity is the basis of evil, in whom not a single natural instinct for kindness exists, whose dicks get white-hot hard on violence and cheap hate-lust, and whose sense of humour does not extend beyond tormenting the disfigured and socially inept. They are the grease and scraps that collect around the microwaves of bickering households. They are the lager-swilling essence of British manhood. And they are spineless. Mark could have pulverised the lot of them. Their hearts are so harrowed up with bullying fear and hatred, they are nothing more than a nasty jelly. Compared to them Mark was great and noble. It was his tragedy to be savaged by such a mangy pack of dogs. Not so much

The Tattooist

British bulldogs as British pit bulls. I do not believe he even defended himself.

The boys, in the manner of their kind, ran away when a few people with pluck began to approach. Mark was as bruised and dented as if he had been the soil of the pitch itself. His blood soaked into the dark grass and mud around him, filling up the footprints and the pits made by studded boots.

Perhaps because I was the only one who ever looked him in his eyes after his release from prison, Mark left me something in his will. It was the flick-knife. Mark, too, must have foreseen his end. So my work has returned to me, as I always thought it would. You throw something out into the sea and eventually the waves carry it back to you. And this piece, pasted to the handle of the knife like a pressed flower, is undoubtedly my greatest work. I keep the knife in my wardrobe. Sometimes I take it out to look at it, turn it over in my hands. The tattoo is still exquisite. Even detached from the body of the Boy, it seems to be alive. Now that the knife is in my possession I understand just what a deadly object it is. The blade is unbelievably sharp. I have even used it to shave with.

Soon after I received the knife, which came with a note written by Mark that was word for word the note the Boy had written to him, I had a dream. It was very simple, but in its very simplicity it was strangely impressive and quite unlike any dream I have had before. In fact, I only call it a dream because I believe it occurred when I was asleep and I don't know what else to call it.

I thought I awoke to find the Boy standing at the foot of my bed. I say standing, but actually it was a patch of turf he stood upon, and the turf itself hovered just above the level of the bed frame. I knew the Boy was dead, and yet I had no doubt this was really him. One cannot mistake the presence of another human being, especially when it has become so much a part of one's life that they live inside you as well as outside. There was a sort of halo of sunshine around him and in a moment I recognised it as the background of the tattoo. The Boy himself had somehow taken on something of the texture and character of the tattoo. He smiled at me for some time. I was not afraid, but I could not speak. I felt at peace. I was

Morbid Tales

glad just to receive the blessing of that smile. I could have lain like that for so long. So often people search and search for another's soul with probing words. If you know how to smile and how to look, that is enough. Words then convey mere information. At length the Boy did speak.

'Thank you for the tattoo. It was with me till I died.'

'What happened?' I hardly knew what I was asking. Tears were rolling down my cheeks and I realised I was grieving again for the Boy's brutal death and the wasting of his beautiful life.

'It's okay. Mine was a happy death. I was blessed with the great fortune to die by the hand of someone who loved me. That is a very rare blessing, believe me.'

'You died a cruel and ugly death.'

'Behind the violence is a sweet mercy. Please remember this.'

'What about Mark? What happened to him?'

The Boy lowered his eyes and his face looked strangely sad. The look was so pure that I found tears pricking hotly and springing once more from my eyes.

'Sometimes getting what we want is painful.'

That is all I remember. The visions increased after that dream and I can no longer work. The image of the hilltop has developed into a more explicit scene, which I experience over and over. The thudding is the thudding of boots. The sweetness and excitement accompanies the pain of being kicked by those boots again and again as I sink with my flowing blood into the dark unconsciousness of the soil beneath. I stay at home in this gloomy room and watch the visions cascade in front of the closed, sun-blocking curtains. Barry calls. He wants me to see a doctor, but he will not call one without my consent because he doesn't want to see me put away. My thought processes are lucid and logical enough and perhaps that has helped to convince him that this is only temporary. But I can see he is frightened and doesn't know what to do.

More than anything else I find myself contemplating for hours the last words the Boy spoke to me.

'Sometimes getting what we want is painful.'

What do I want? What is my ultimate fulfilment? Will it be painful? Will it turn me inside out? I await in cringing, tingling anticipation.

The Tattooist



Shane's testimony ends there, a fragment curiously incomplete. It was not meant for publication. Writing was not his true vocation and in the manner of amateurs he failed to bring the piece to a satisfactory conclusion. It ends with a question and an unnamed expectation. However, there was another record far more eloquent than these roughly-cobbled words. Shane died before Barry ever knew what the best course of action was. His body was found covered with tattoos of almost supernatural beauty. Not a square inch of his skin was left untattooed. The tattoos formed a sweeping tapestry, a seamless pageant folding back in on itself at every point of the cornerless body. The scenes depicted in this tapestry seemed to make up a sort of story. There were children playing on a sports field, a pale-skinned boy among them. A pseudo-skinhead offering a flick-knife to this boy as if it were a Holy Grail. A body gnawed by stab wounds. A Victorian park, a well, and a grave in a halcyon churchyard. A Union Jack flew atop a hill with seabirds scattered around it. The skinhead was kicked to death below in another field. There was all this and much, much more; a miracle of detail, a silken, skin-tight, illustrated shroud. The carpet around the corpse was soaked with blood. Strangest of all, the tattoos were executed in Shane's own inimitable style.