Blackouts

by James Knight

The Bird King is trapped behind the mirrors. Sometimes you'll see a hand, a wing, fluttering in a dark space. You may even see his breath, a pulse of mist in a corner of the glass. But don't ever smash his silvered prison. Don't ever let him out and into the world.

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O little town of Bethlehem. Max is four. He sits on the floor, near the Christmas tree. Grampy is enthroned in his floral armchair and Max can hear the old man's wheezing above the music. Grampy has thin nostrils with hairs sprouting from them and breathes through his mouth in slow gasps. He looks like a horrible old bird. While mortals sleep, the angels keep. Go on, Max. Aren't you going to open it? Max looks at the unopened present in his lap. His mother has wrapped it beautifully in shiny silver paper and written on the gift tag. To my special grandson. Merry Xmas. Lots of love, Grampy xx. He looks for a way to open it and catches sight of the boy in the sheen of the silver paper. He looks thin and unhappy. Maybe when he's finished admiring his reflection he'll open the present! Flustered, Max tears at a small tab of paper. How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. The present is a wooden train set. Now come and say thank you to Grampy. Max looks up and says, Thank you. Thank him properly, Max. O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Max gets to his feet and walks across the room to the rasping bird. A hand rises suddenly from its habitual place on the armrest and grabs at Max's arm and the dead dead eyes widen. Mummy's waiting, smiling, anxious. Thank you very much for my present. The hand jerks Max nearer and the dreaded moment comes when he has to kiss the proffered cheek. O come to us, abide with us. Cold skin on young lips. Grampy smells of vinegar. Max feels as if he's kissing a corpse.

Five years pass. Grampy is gone but his smell remains in the house, in its furniture, in its shadows. To Max, Grampy still haunts every room, even his own, his narrow sanctuary. Max remembers the

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veins on the hand gripping the armrest. Watery eyes drift over mum and dad, the coffee pot, the cups and saucers and stale biscuits, never resting on anything. Time to say goodbye to Grampy, Max. Bye bye, Grampy. The Bird King waves from his throne, his mind elsewhere.

Now Max is king of the castle.

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A violet sky on this summer evening. Past your bedtime, young man. Oh, but it won't hurt just this once, John. I know, I was just saying. A mind barely mindful of background parental noise. Eyes looking out over the garden.

The garden. Three rectangular lawns, gravel pathways, beds seething with weeds. Everything slightly brown, scorched by a fortnight without rain. This was never Grampy's; the old man never left the shadows of the house, never allowed sunlight to touch him.

The garden isn't Mum's or Dad's either. Since they moved here they've barely bothered venturing into it. They sit on the terrace, sipping wine some evenings, close to the house and its reassuring solidity. There has been talk of a gardener, but Dad is nothing if not thrifty. I can mow the lawn myself. I don't see why I should pay someone to come in to do it for me. It's not as if it's difficult. He glugs down the remainder of his glass, decisively. Her eyes narrow. As if he'll ever get round to it! When he looks at her she smiles blankly.

Three weeks into their occupancy of Grampy's home and no one has cut the grass. How long ago had it been mown before that?

Max lies on his stomach in the warmth of evening, looking at the grass. Having placed himself as close to the centre of one of the lawns as he can (the one furthest from the house), he enjoys feeling surrounded by the grass. With his chin on the ground, the underside of his jaw scratched and tickled by bent blades, the grass comes up to his eyes.

He looks at the house through the prism of the grass. It's a gravestone, a cenotaph. Mum and Dad sitting on the terrace, distant, lifting wine glasses to their lips now and then. He listens

intently but doesn't hear them speak. Above the roof, a formation of birds makes a little black cloud.

The garden is Max's. Most of his days are spent here, alone. A world away from school, friends, his former life, he populates the garden with friendly shadows, invisible creatures, improvises stories around them. Stories whispered to flowers and insects. Adventures lived riotously in the midday heat. The three lawns assume epic proportions, become battlefields, snowy wastelands, hostile planets. Only as the sun starts receding and two wine glasses appear on the rusty wrought iron table by the patio doors, does Max become self-conscious, more circumspect, the thrust of his inner narrative dwindling to a dawdle amongst weeds and ants. What is he doing? Why doesn't he ever go inside or do something? Maybe all this time on his own isn't good for him.

At the bottom of the garden is a curtain of evergreens. A small gap in the curtain admits Max to another place, of smouldering monsters. A huge compost heap. The perpetually glowing core of the bonfire fed regularly by Dad (with what?). He can't see the house from here. The house can't see him. He likes the stench and the feeling of enclosure. Over the fence: a stream, a grassy bank, and beyond that the woods. Max sits a few feet from the wrack of scorched wood, stares into its dim, orange heart. He feels as if he's in communion with something alive.

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Lying on his front on the lawn. Grass blades: spears, soldiers, a forest.

Looking at the house, Mum, Dad, through the grass, everything seems still, stifled, as if any moment a terrible cry will well up from someone or somewhere.

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The house is a cave. Even though it's summer the rooms don't warm up; they're tall and wide and deep, and the sun only ever inches into them a short way. Grampy probably liked it. Max never saw him outside. His throne was a long way from the nearest window, so direct sunlight never touched him. He must have decided

at some point in his old age he wasn't going out anymore. He must have made a pact with the darkness surrounding him never to let himself be warmed by sunlight, never to walk about outside, exposed. But what did he get in return?

Maybe he had never been outside. Maybe his mother had heaved him out of herself in this house and he had grown up here, never once crossing the threshold separating him from fresh air, nature, life. While we're living here, which won't be long, you'll be educated at home. Maybe Max's new situation was Grampy's permanent reality.

The house is a palace of shadows. The air is heavy, dusty, damp. Everything's a dull green: sofas, armchairs, crockery, the fossilised flowers in the wallpaper. Green, the colour of sickness and envy. Mum has a book of paintings by an artist called Munch. In one of them there are several people, standing or sitting around a bed, looking miserable. One of them might be praying and they all have hunched shoulders. You can't see all their faces. A woman who stands stiffly and seems somehow disapproving stares out of the painting at Max and her sunken eyes say, This is private. You've no right to be here. Everything is green: the walls, the people's clothes, their skin. Grampy's house is the same.

Rooms, rooms, rooms. Their old house was a cosy new build: a lounge with just enough space for a small dining table, two bedrooms forming an L shape, a tiny bathroom. The garden was a patch of grass. Here, Dad can't touch the ceiling. The hallway is huge. There are rooms they'll never use, that Grampy never used. When it rains Max brings his stories into this film set of a house and the shadows reach out to him, become characters in the worlds he creates. But he's always glad to return to the garden and the smell of a hot day that has just felt rain; although he has seen nine years he is not confident that the Bird King is not waiting for him somewhere inside, claws gripping a doorknob, ravenous eye pressed to the keyhole.

The door to Grampy's bedroom remains locked. Max can only imagine what's inside. Every time he passes it, on his way to bed or

going downstairs for breakfast, he can't help but look at it. The forbidden room. He pictures a single bed, soiled linen, light seeping in through closed curtains. There's a chest of drawers, a chair, a wardrobe. Grampy sleeping on his side, curled up, withered, farting in his sleep. A crack in the mirror on the chest of drawers. Seven years' bad luck. But that's just a load of rubbish.

Grampy looking into the mirror, seeing the grizzled face of the Bird King.

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The overhead light's on, even though it's still bright outside. A mouth full of tough, dry beef. Quick cutlery, the efficiency of the family meal. Mum smiles abstractedly between sips of wine. Just eat up, for God's sake. It won't kill you. I am: I'm chewing! She seems not to hear what they're saying.

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Days drift, weeks blend into one another. Time seems to stop. A series of vignettes, like a stack of photos, shuffled, looked at again and again. Mum brushing her hair. Max opening the patio doors and stepping into the day. Wood pigeons on neighbouring roofs. Toast crumbs on the kitchen table. Dad closing the front door behind him in the light of a cloudy morning.

Sunset. Red light bleeds across the garden. The air is heavy. In the darkness of the living room two people move about. Upstairs, through frosted glass: the silhouette of a boy.

Max prowls the rooms and corridors, a wolf, a predator, a wild thing. He hunts shadows and secrets. He sniffs the air for the vinegary smell that tells him a ghost is in the room. He pounces at darkness. And the darkness in the house is deep and thick. Who knows what monsters are harboured by the immense gloom?

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The looking glass. Funny name for it, implying you can look through it and see something new. But there's nothing there, only yourself and the things around you. And why would anyone need to look at himself?

Max's eyes are dark blue. He can see thin flecks of red in the whites, like veins in marble. Eyes roll, marbles roll. A boy made of porcelain with white skin and marbles for eyes. He looks down, trying to catch his reflection doing the same. But when he looks back the eyes are still on him.

The room on the other side of the glass is different. The light is greenish, everything is paler. It looks cold through there. Quiet. Max whispers, “Hello,” but the mirror boy just mouths the word. If Max were to smash a window, its counterpart through the looking glass would shatter without a sound. Cold, quiet, still. Land of the dead.

The mirror door opens and the spectre of his mother appears. From behind him, a voice: What are you doing in here? Admiring yourself? The ghost regards him archly. He turns. His mother has pink cheeks and a kind smile. He reddens and shrugs.

As he leaves the room he does not look back at the mirror.

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On the windowsill in the kitchen: a photo he has never noticed before. A monochrome portrait of a young boy. For an instant Max thinks it's a picture of himself. Black, shiny hair, serious eyes. The corners of the mouth look sour.

Who's this? he asks.

Grampy. He was probably about your age when that was taken.

The sound of a newspaper being straightened up. Max puts the picture back where it was. He glances across the table. Dad is hidden behind The Times, only his hands and bald crown showing. His fingers look like talons.

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