

## The Guest's Secret (Excerpt)

The darkened silhouette formed a small, narrow framed shadow, cast through the dim glow of the old sash window where it was eventually swallowed into the darkness of the night. The flickering brushstroke of rain cut through its form until the figure the shadow belonged to moved away and the light of the attic room evaporated, casting the cold night into a boundless, peripheral void.

When Jacob entered his home and emerged through the warm, onion scented fog into the kitchen, his squat mother stood over the steam of the simmering pot, and the guest was lowering himself onto the cracked seat below. Jacob looked away as the guest leaned forward on the table and shot him a wink. Suddenly, the smorgasbord of boiled food smells began to churn at his stomach.

“Sit down, boy”, his mother’s voice crackled as she stirred the food haphazardly, “you’re late.”

Jacob shot another reluctant glance at their guest, “sorry, I had to close down again.”

“That man thinks you belong to him, making you work longer than what he’s paying you for”, his mother sniffled, “I never liked him. You should look for a job elsewhere.”

The guest snickered and released an exaggerated yawn. Jacob watched him carefully as he lowered his own body onto the seat, but as the man’s head began to turn back in his direction, he released his gaze and ruffled his hair, combing the loose, dark locks to one side as the psoriasis on his scalp flared up.

“You should get a job at the local library”, the man said, his voice an unwanted intrusion upon the wordless hum of the oven, “I’ll have a word with Alan, we need more help upstairs.”

“That’s a great idea”, his mother turned around quickly, almost knocking a pan off the hob, “you’ve always loved your books. It’ll be better than that awful petrol station.”

“Maybe”, Jacob sunk against the table, “We’ll see.”

Jacob accidentally pushed his foot up against the man’s encroaching shoe. He moved it away quickly and stretched into a forced yawn as the table thudded with his sudden jolt of nervous energy. It was difficult to tell through the whistling boil of the pans on the stove, but a whispered snicker appeared to drift amongst the bubbling ambience.

“Oh”, his mother wiped at her apron, “I forgot the sauce in the pantry. I’ll just be a minute.”

“I’ll get it”, Jacob began to stand up but his mother quickly turned and shooed him with a dismissive waft of her hand.

“No, no. You sit. You’ve done enough work today, boy.”

“But, your hip-”

“Never mind that”, his mother spat, “I am fine, I can get it myself”.

The guest leaned back in his seat, the old wood creaking with his unsubstantial weight. His narrow frame, twig like, lay hidden behind his baggy, green sweater. He sucked on his lip, making his already gaunt face appear skeletal. He waited until the kitchen door shut against the splintered frame before turning to Jacob.

“Boy? When did she start calling you boy?”

Jacob leaned further into the table, “I don’t know”.

“Well, boy”, the man grinned as his tongue rolled out the word in an elongated, smug manner, “grab us both a beer. I could use a drink after a long day of work.”

“Get it yourself”, Jacob clenched his teeth as he spoke.

“Well, can’t say I didn’t try”, he pulled himself out of his seat slowly, kicking the table as he did so. Jacob sat up with a start but said nothing as the horrid man uttered a low cackle.

“Remind me tomorrow, we need more beer, I’ll buy us some”, the man pulled the lid off with his hand, a trick he performed to no applause, and threw the misshapen shard of metal at Jacob, who ducked as it clattered against the floor, “oops”.

“Idiot”, Jacob murmured.

“You love me deep down, boy.”

Jacob’s body spasmed, “nobody loves you.”

The man merely grinned as he took a small swig of beer, collapsing back against the chair, but as he did so a twitch coursed through his expression and his grin quickly faltered, “What would you know about love? You know, you’re too much like your mother. You think you know everything about the world, when in reality you know very little.”

Jacob said nothing as he held his hand against his face.

“Go on then”, the man leaned back, folding his arms against his chest, his voice cracking despite his attempt to appear relaxed, “what do you know about love?”

Jacob remained silent as he inhaled into his palm, the sticky heat of his breath pulsating out of his cupped hand and drifting amongst his face, irritating his skin.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I know about love,” the man said.

“Don’t bother”.

“No”, the man held out his hand, “just listen for a second, I-”

He was interrupted by the sudden, heavy clash of the door against the counter top as his mother rushed back into the kitchen, holding various packets of thick, red substances against her engorged stomach. The guest coughed in frustration and leaned forward against the table, one hand wrapped into a fist which quickly unravelled.

“Henry”, his mother called out, “help me with the sauce, would you?”

As his mother and their guest quietly prepared the meal, the silence only interrupted by his mother’s strict instructions, Jacob tapped the scuffed edge of his shoe against the cracked linoleum below and looked out through the crack in the doorway ahead. The hallway was black apart from the distant flicker of moonlight emerging through the pale frosted glass on the rear door. He stared out into that near lightless void for a long time before his stupor was violently interrupted by the crashing of plates against the table. Looking up, he saw the narrow grin of their guest.

“Made with love”, he said, grinding his teeth as he winked again.

The phrasing caused a sudden wave of nausea to come upon him. He looked down at his plate, the gloopy substance of a meal that once seemed so appetising in the unflayed thoughts of a work-addled mind now a mass of inedible substance. His empty stomach churned at the thought of eating it. Picking at his food as the other's ate he sunk a potato into the oil-skimmed red sauce, bringing it up occasionally to tear a small piece out with the edge of his teeth, chewing slowly before forcing himself to swallow. The taste was fine, but the act of ingesting the food whilst the gristly noise of the stranger's chewing rose over all other sounds seemed almost impossible. With little bites he managed to finish the meal as his mother and the guest engaged in awkward small talk.

After finishing, he excused himself in a quiet mumble. His mother waved him away whilst the guest's eyes turned to him, lowering into slits. Jacob hurried out, fighting back a gag as the bitter aftertaste of the food returned to him.

He collapsed on his bed and unbuckled the gnawing pressure of the belt on his small bulge of a stomach. Whilst the guest's lingering presence still permeated the air of the house, Jacob's exhaustion was too strong for this to fight back sleep and his vision blurred until the fluttering of his eyelids intertwined and he drifted into a dreamless slumber.

Awaking to a sudden, hollow thud from above, the pitch darkness of the cold air closed around him, the endless space of sleep contracting to a small point instantaneously. For a moment he murmured in confusion and twisted his body until he once again became aware of his physical existence. With a sharp gasp of realisation he smacked his lips together violently, their dry, scarred flesh sticking together as a layer of saliva dribbled across the worm like skin. His eyes opened, crust cracking around his lashes and rubbing against the jellied globes. He wiped at his face and pushed himself up against the headboard.

Looking around, shapeless forms stirred before him, recognizable only through a recognition of what they once was before the dark beetle

ess encroached. He leaned and reached out before clicking the light switch softly, the bulb immediately blasting painful illuminance across most of the room. Despite the light an element of the endless void of dark remained, a question in his mind which seemed related to the unknown depths of the black space which had faced him before. It was only as he adjusted to the light did he, with a sudden weighing of the bile in his throat, recall the hollow, ringing thud from above which had awoken him.

The sound had not yet been followed up, and silence was maintained for so long that the beat of his heart began to calm and he convinced himself he had imagined it.

Releasing a sound like a wheezing rodent, Jacob noticed the time. It was 11:30pm, dark had settled completely outside, the starless night sky visible through the crack in the blinds, and the street was devoid of life. In fact, the narrow side-street was absent of all movement except the scutter of a loose, empty packet of crisps being carried along by a slow, heavy breeze.

Another thud, this time muffled by something soft, echoed across the ceiling like the wet thump of bone and tissue, followed by an uneasy scraping on the floorboards, almost weightless. Next came the tapping of tiptoed steps. Then, once that was over, silence one again.