

CHAPTER 1

Holmes County, Ohio, 1992

The Town Court opened its heavy, rickety doors after so many years. There had never been so many people gathered in the parking lot at once. They seemed to be fighting with each other like unleashed packs of wolves, just to see who the notorious man that had broken the county's safety and peace was. I was still young and naïve, bustling and flying with energy and racing through the streets surrounding the town court everywhere I went. I knew the whole county by heart; in fact, I knew all passages with my eyes closed. Everyone in the county was easy-going, friendly and mostly close-knit, especially those residing in Clinton Alley alongside the court. The school was situated close to my home – just a brisk bus ride away to the east.

It all began on the 23rd February 1992 at eleven sharp, when I saw the parking lot swarming with so many people – on a Sunday, which was supposed to be peaceful. Everybody I knew was there; pandemonium danced through the roads of the county, the acts of barbarism made everyone go wild. I pushed and broke a way through the tumultuous screaming and shouting, successfully squeezing my whole body through the crowd, to see why such commotion was taking place. There were about ten cars, the newest brand of them – the Ford Mustang – and a large jeep, parked before the court's entry. Strange ... Normally the county saw little traffic, but on that day, it was congested. A moment later I discovered the reason; it was all about that evil murderer, and I saw the accused suspect before me.

Dr Yorkin, the police chief and superintendent who was rarely seen walking in these parts, was here. Usually he was in called for duty in the woods regarding mild, soft cases of crime. But today he

led an army of marshals and police officers, hiding someone behind their tail. That someone was the murderer ... He looked distraught, older than he really was, sensitive enough to detect every sleight of hand, ready to escape the moment an officer took his sight off him.

He was a blonde, tallish young man, with a thin stubble, but he had something quite odd about him: his face was covered entirely by the dark shadow of his fedora's brim. The sun shone bright that day, so the shadow itself was fortified enough to cover his facial identity. He wore a fashionable tuxedo suit belonging to the wealthy – recently polished, spic-and-span – so clean it made him appear even neater than the journalists themselves. His perfectly positioned tie complemented his formal ironed shirt; his shoes were luxurious, radiating against the sunlight.

When he stepped out of the car, everyone roared, shouting, and throwing their fists in the air. Of course, the police tried to pacify the angry crowd, but the people just didn't care about themselves anymore. It was as if they wanted to kill the wrongdoer themselves, rather than let justice take its course. Nevertheless, the police eventually managed to control the panic just for a second. Was I the only one admiring the beautiful atmosphere of that fine winter day?

The man entered the court, alongside Dr Yorkin and his army. Why did one person need such a large group of skilled officers around him? My impatience and curiosity propelled me to infiltrate the trial myself. The large pack of journalists would allow me to blend in. And so, I did, without making it obvious, crouching behind an influx of spectators who briskly keyed themselves in, behind an inflow of jurors.

We entered successfully, and instantly I caught the aroma of fresh wood coming out of those old benches. The court was actually smaller than I thought it would be – about the size of a chapel. The audience occupied every seat and I had been left there alone, in the

farthest row of benches from the judge's bench and the rows of jurors on each side.

Then, a short man with a goatee and coal black hair showed up, raising his right hand to silence the clamour inside. That man was clearly the Bailiff. The trial had begun, and the atmosphere changed in the blink of an eye. The still silence of the audience was somehow too loud for the court.

'All rise. Department Two of the Holmes County Court is now in session. The Honourable Judge McFaulin is presiding over the trial. Please be seated.'

The judge was as old as the county's hills and wore rimless spectacles. He waited for everyone to sit down to begin. 'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Calling the case of the People of the state of Ohio versus Orion Pettsburgh. Are both sides ready?'

Both sides nodded. On the left was the Defence Attorney, who said, 'Ready for the defence, Your Honour.'

And on the right, the District Attorney, who said, 'Ready for the People, Your Honour.'

The judge calmly said, 'Will the clerk please swear in the jury?'

In front of the judge's bench was a smaller one for the clerk, occupied by a middle-aged woman – clearly a chain-smoker, as one could tell from her whitened face and yellowed teeth. The clerk at once replied, 'Yes, your honour.'

She then turned to the jury and began talking in a hoarse voice, 'Will the jury please stand and raise your right hand? Does each of you swear that you will fairly try the case before this court, and that you will return a true verdict according to all necessary evidence and instructions of the court, by the help of God? Please, all say, "I do".'

And everyone said aloud, in one single chorus, 'I do.'

'You may be seated.'

The right side, which was the District Attorney's side, commenced with the opening statements. The attorney stood

up from his seat and took out fresh printouts of evidence. He scrutinised some personal notes, then turned to the jury,

‘Your Honour, and ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the defendant has been accused and charged with the crime of premeditated murder of many lives without moral reason. One victim was the sheriff and detective Albert Myles. As the evidence will show, the victim entered the Mansfield Police station the day he was called in for work. Sources show that he never left the building after the defendant entered. Although no physical evidence was unearthed, the defendant exited the station with blood stains all over his shirt, as derived from a snapshot from the police station’s CCTV Footage, on the night of March 15 1991. This is the clearest photo of the defendant wearing the blood-stained white shirt after Myles entered the station.’

The deputy passed his photograph to the jury, and afterwards to the audience. The man depicted was faded in that snapshot, as the camera mostly captured the night’s gloom. ‘As most of us know, both those of us present in this session and the greater public, the defendant has been evading local law enforcement for more than three years, and of course, as I am here standing before you all, I encourage the jury to help bring justice to all the victims’ loved ones.’

The trial was such a long drag that I couldn’t stop beating my legs against the bench’s supports. I couldn’t see the two sides quarrelling against each other clearly, but between intervals I could see the murderer, who still hadn’t raised his head up, ignoring the dull trial as well. I slowly left the court and went outside, undetected by anyone, as my age was insufficient to attend such important case calls. I was only sixteen years old, and if I’d been caught by someone, I would have been locked up with the madman.

As soon as I closed the big, mahogany door, the air was much lighter than it was before I’d entered. The people had evidently found someplace else to shout it, as the parking lot was so empty

that a yell would have ricocheted back in a ringing echo. There was nothing but the traces of the people's mess – muddied shoeprints, beads of all sorts ... surprisingly even a pair of boots.

But I couldn't even realise the mess I had got myself into. I had never heard of a murderer here in this tiny-sized county. Well, not *tiny*, but densely populated, as it amassed an impressive 45,000 residents, almost half of them belonging to the Amish. Which, by the way, made me wonder deeply; if this so-called murderer had ever committed a crime in the county, then it mustn't have been as tranquil as I'd always thought it. Maybe my innocence had constructed this inability to sense an extremely dangerous man during my whole life there in the county.

I went to the town square, where the crowds had gathered, and everyone looked so worried and anxious, intensely frightened by terror reminiscent of war. But it didn't bother me that much.

When I crossed back to the vacant parking lot on my way home, about an hour later, I encountered a tall, middle-aged man wearing a fine shirt and jeans and sporting a perfect cut of hair. He was the only one daring to walk in that haunting silence. He seemed uncanny and teetered around misguidedly, as if looking for someone but unsure as to who. To be honest, I'd always had a slight dislike of walking around strangers, as I must admit I was a quite a sociophobe. But, as my legs were on the brink of fleeing, the man abruptly turned fully on his six and stared at me, as if he'd *smelt* my presence from that distance. He laughed heartily as he saw my pair of hazel eyes gazing in sudden fright.

'Hey – hey kid! Don't be scared – come here, come, quick.' he called, as he gestured with his hand in order to reel me in. I did as he told. He snapped his hand into his backpack and took out a large sheaf of fragrant papers, seemingly typed fresh from a typewriter.

'Take this, my child. And you will know what happened and – please, please *run away*. He's after all of us. Go! Run away! Run!' I looked down at the sheaf of papers, confused, but by the time

I opened my mouth to ask why, the mysterious man had already vanished into thin air. I was left all forlorn beside the entrance of the fourth street, with that huge sheaf of small papers, page-numbered carefully and, on the front page, a headline that read, **A life, long forgotten, leading to our devastating doom.**

The hell? Why the haunting title? Why does humanity's fate have to be "devastating"? But I could sense something alien, so that just by looking at its rigid typing, I was compelled to read, to sit on a cobblestone fence and flip to its first page. The style of writing was almost like a plain narrative, but also too insightful for the content to have been taken from a newspaper or something. But it was five o'clock already, so I got up at once and returned home.

On my way, though, I recognised the same uncanny man who'd given me that bunch of papers, this time scurrying about Main Street, with the same bizarre, teetering pace that thirsted for someone like me. He was smoking a large cigar now and held a briefcase full of papers, presumably copies of the same sheaf I had. I tailed him cautiously; nobody was a bystander. But just after three long paces he stopped at once. From the corner of my right eye, I caught a glimpse of something dark and rigid, sweeping across the whole scene in half a second, with a form that almost resembled a human's, *or something otherworldly.*

Succeeding the glimpse, I spotted the man just before he tripped; he turned on his rear and consequently saw me, with those large, reddened eyes that seemed to be almost bleeding. Unable to breathe, he reached his hands out and, knock-kneed, coughed out these words: '*He ... H-he killed me ... I told you to ... G-go-*' before spitting out a large sludge of blood, rolling his eyes hastily, concealing the pupils inside, and finally losing his balance to fall completely flat, smashing his head in half against the sidewalk.

His head drowned in a puddle of his own blood that came from beneath his head. I blinked heavily, barely believing what I had just witnessed. It was almost staged, the way it had happened. But who was the "he" he referred to in his last words? His blood trickled

slowly but relentlessly towards my shoe. I put my coat's collar up to protect my neck against both the shivers and the chilly winter breeze, and ran away at once, leaving his corpse lying in a lake of his own gore.

The very next day I woke up, put on my cosy slippers, and stretched out my spine, still haunted by the day before. I opened my room's silk curtains and the sun's rays shone against my face, with the blue skies giving me a humble smile. I went down the long flight of stairs and entered the dining room. There was my mother, sipping on her coffee with her usual closed, sleepy eyes, dressed in her nightgown.

'Morning, Andrew,' she murmured, and I sat down on my favourite chair to have my coffee. She slowly opened her eyes to a slit and asked, 'Where were you yesterday? You didn't even have breakfast or care to say hello. What happened?'

I swallowed my first mouthful of warm coffee and replied, 'Nothing, mum – I just went for a stroll on the hills – still came home last night to sleep, didn't I?'

She opened her eyes just a trifle more and scrutinised me, asking meekly, 'Were you over there in the parking lot with them hooligans? You were so quiet last night, dear.'

I rolled my eyes and answered, 'Yeah. That's why I came back late. Apparently, there's a murderer; the newspapers yesterday noted it on their headlines – "Holmes County doomed after the death of many innocent folks" – or whatever, and really, it's nothing special, as you might tell.' I continued to stare at my mug, concentrating on my reflection swirling in the coffee.

'Tell me what *really* happened, Andrew,' she answered disappointedly. 'You know you ain't gettin' out of here before you tell what really happened.'

I removed my mug from between us and began to recount what had happened the day before, relying on every snippet my memory provided me with.

'And what are those papers? Who gave them to you?' she asked.

‘I really don’t know exactly, but I sure can tell it’s disturbing – about the murderer, I suppose? But he – he passed away just a few moments after he handed them to me ... It was just after the trial itself.’

‘Great heavens!’ she exclaimed. ‘Wha – were you hurt, son?! God, how did he die? Has someone called the police about this?!’

‘No – I ran away. I’m guessing someone must have seen him and called the police ... But I really don’t know – he was just walking around and out of nowhere he began wheezing for life. But yeah – in his last words, he said a man had killed him or something.’

‘I don’t like this at all. This is all nonsense,’ she then finally tittered.

I laughed, ‘Don’t you want to read this with me?’

But she stubbornly refused and carried on sipping her now cold coffee. I didn’t blame her, though; it seemed too farfetched to identify as truth, and equally odd to recount. Besides, my mother had always been time-poor in dealing with the chores at home. She was just a housewife, whom I have admired every day of my life, because most of my care and security had always resided on her shoulders.

That day felt cooler than ever; the winter bustles were calm, fidgeting with the leaves that rested gently on the sidewalks and alleys outside the window.

I got up, changed into my everyday outfit, and flung myself on the couch, which had been crypted within the living room’s four walls for more than a decade. I nicked the television’s volume just above zero and lay back, the sheaf slipping to fall onto my chest. I picked it up and grabbed it tighter to begin reading, from the first word under that disturbing bold headline.



Sagres, 1973

Years ago, in the early 1970s, the small town of Sagres in Portugal suffered a disastrous heatwave, which caused many of its crops to lose produce by an immense thirst that killed the young saplings. It had been an ongoing disaster for about four weeks, leaving the citizens with a vast and terrifying experience of hunger when it ended its misery. Life wasn't breathing for many months; the population in Sagres took a colossal knock down, leaving only three small families near the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, the only lifesaver after that heatwave. The neighbouring villages tried to sustain life there in Sagres, but since only twenty people remained, little help was given.

One family closest to the ocean was the Pettsburgh family. It was the family you'd imagine in the poorest of settlements. Mr Pettsburgh, a lousy, tired farmer, had to feed three squawking mouths at least four times a day, as he'd had the miracle of having a full set of healthy triplets. But the children cost the life of his wife, Samira, during childbirth, after enduring a complicated caesarean surgery. Hubert Pettsburgh had to be a single parent for the rest of his life, having his lover buried in his backyard, a sight that brought him tears every time he looked at the stone. Such a pity that he had to undergo all this at the age of thirty-two.

He hardly ever used currency; he always used natural resources from his reliable livestock for the family's welfare. However, Hubert had inherited some escudos from his father, storing them in a hiding place beneath his bed. So far, he'd never used a single penny, reserving them only for emergencies.

Hubert had been a top-notch farmer, earning a sustainable amount of money throughout his career, using the old, traditional way to farm – the organic procedure, as he always believed that fruit and vegetables must be as fresh as Mother Nature intended them to be. He recalled the long lines of residents that would form around his hut to pick up his fresh fruits daily. But sadly, that time

had long died, as the dry, ruinous heatwave had left nothing but the earth's dusty elements.

The triplets were identical, with the same pairs of eyes, the same freckled faces, and the paper-thin blonde hair. They were loveable and cute, and they were truly a treasure for Hubert; he woke up every morning thanking God for his children.

Hubert adapted to a new, monotonous routine: he would wake up at four o'clock every morning; milk the calm, quiet cow; feed his little angels and play with them, to keep them entertained. Miraculously his cow and chickens had survived the heatwave, therefore playing a key role in sustaining his family's health. Then, at noon, he would harvest the unhealthy, dry crops in his fields and prepare a soup for the kids. After he made his sons take their summery siesta, he would go out for a walk near the ocean, sometimes going fishing. Other times he'd go hunting for deer, or chopping logs in halves. It was always the same; nothing less and nothing more. They lived forever from hand to mouth.

But time never stops – it flies, and his triplets celebrated their fifth birthday before he even knew. He was also five years older, but still, his mind always locked itself in the same cage.

However, on one frosty night, his mind enlightened itself. Growing sick of the same, dreadful routine inspired him to come up with the idea that this life of his, as he had lived so far, had to stop at once – he had to begin enjoying it to the fullest. Before that nightmarish heatwave, the neighbours had said that *the American world is heaven for those who seek a better life, either economically or socially*. Remembering this, he decided that he should migrate to America and leave Europe for good – and this was his sole mission. He packed everything up from his hut and prepared enough food for the long, dreadful trip. He successfully convinced another family who also wished to leave Europe and emigrate to America to set up a strong, durable sailboat that could resist the nasty, fierce waves of the Atlantic. He could imagine themselves striding against the

winds, holding on to wooden boat, struggling for their lives. But this was a golden opportunity, and he had a whole family accompanying him, people who were known to be experts in building good boats and preserving their wits, as well as having a deep understanding of navigating through the harshest of environments. They embarked on the boat when it was the best time, after everyone had awakened from a good night's sleep. The boat was the best they could make, because neither family was rich enough to migrate to America with a more sustainable way of transport.

'Here, that should do it, Hubert, no need to worry,' the neighbour said in a jolly tone. Indeed, the boat had been perfectly constructed, after five staggering weeks of planning and renovation.

'Espero que sim ... But why Ohio?'

'Oh, trust me. That place isn't fancy, if you know what I mean. There's plenty of fields and countryside, just like here. *Perfeito!* We can start a new life there. Similar to here. Leave it all to me; I'll guide us to Port Clinton, nearest to Ohio. Here – look at this picture Manny gave me before the heat came in. Been thinking about going to America for years! *Estou tão animado.*'

He handed Hubert a worn daguerreotype, its image browned and faint, almost, as it depicted a panoramic view of a port bathed by calm seas. It was pleasant to gawk at.

'But we might have to walk a bit to arrive there, alright?' Finn then said.

'Well, okay. Thanks, Finn.'

'Don't you worry. I know how to get us there. Always go west, that's all. Now, let's just hope the seas like us!'

His children had already boarded the boat as the two men were undoing the ropes. There was quite a large space for both families. The other family also had children of their own, but they were already adults. Hubert embarked on the boat along with Finn, and they then set sail, leaving their homeplace for the other end of the world. That day was sunny, without a single brush of cloud drifting

along the skies. Hubert prayed for their safety, as he had a piercing gut feeling that the seas wouldn't let their journey be as easy as Finn said it would be. But they had a surprisingly good start to their voyage, thankfully.

The Atlantic Ocean, 1978

'Orion ... Orion!'

'I'm here, dad!'

'Oh, *obrigado Senhor* ... Wh-what's wrong, son?'

They were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, after a month's length of striding through the threatening weather that angered the sea and neglected the sunshine for the majority of the journey so far. They didn't see fine weather for four dreadful weeks; the squalls hurled up to an insane gale that made the waves rise up like towers from the ferocious waters in the ocean. The clouds coated the high skies, blanketing the ocean's face from the sunlight. The weather was so scary that even a whale could have drowned under the tall crests of the waves, compelled by winds pummeling the ocean's surface, stampeding, and bouncing on it endlessly.

That day was surely petrifying, as the merciless storm swallowed the ocean by its fatal strength. It was a miracle that the boat was still standing, although its sails had been ruined, on the verge of breaking apart.

A day later, as the seas managed to collar down a bit, his oldest child, face reddened with tears and hands shaking as if they were under ice, cried and fell onto his father's feet. Hubert picked him up and tried to calm him down.

'They're ... Th-they're dead! *Morta!* They're ... g-g-GONE!'

'No ... Don't tell me! Orion, what happened?!'

Indeed, he saw Finn along with his oldest daughter splattered on the floor like dolls, with bodies gone lifeless and heads swollen and puffed from drowning, locked inside the small rooms till no

air was left for them to breathe in. It was amazing that their lifeless bodies hadn't vanished with the waves.

'Wh-where are Mordecai and Victor?!

Orion screamed and cried, "They're gone!"

His other two sons weren't on board anymore; there wasn't any trace of their disappearance. Who knows where they had ended up in that colossal calamity of the oceans! Hubert felt his heart dampen. He fell onto his knees and whimpered, as he imagined his sons struggling, crying, shaking their tiny numb hands under that cold, shivering water, lurched towards the ocean floor, seeing the white light before their eyes, and their heartbeat caving under all that pressure exerted on them. Everything darkened and his heart shattered into a hundred pieces. Orion cried with his father, in the middle of the Atlantic, far away from the nearest land, adrift from everyone. It was also raining thin drops, so hurriedly they went inside the cabin.

Only five minutes passed before the sun finally seeped through the clouds and poured in some light from a narrow crack, a sun they hadn't seen for a week. The boat was standing still, unmoving an inch, the winds stopping to a total halt after stampeding through the seabed for an entire day. With a melancholic frown that tainted his face, Hubert pulled in the sails, and patiently began stitching together some rags he'd brought up to fill in the holes. The sails were severely damaged and it took Hubert about two hours to complete his repairs. Orion began whining for food, but fortunately enough for Hubert, none of the food supply got lost in that storm. There was about enough food for two months, striking a problem less for him at least.

After Hubert had set the sails back in place, they went to their bedroom to wait for a breeze to be felt. The only sounds they could hear were the crashing and booming of the ripples against the boat, their salty odour diving through the wooden profile. Fifteen minutes later the sea finally began to rock its waves back and

forth, slowly pushing the boat westwards. Hubert got up from his chair and set sail towards America. The major problem was that without Finn, he didn't know where to land, as the only thing he knew about navigation was how to understand the compass, so he tried to make sure they were always heading west, hoping that what was next wouldn't cost him another loss of his beloved ones, so to speak, as Orion was the only one still breathing.

Orion was the first of the three who'd made Hubert a dad. The child was exceptionally gifted, showing an outstanding interest in cooking and drawing, but the one thing that made him so different from the other two was his attraction to poetry. Every day he would grab a piece of torn paper, fetch an old, chewed pencil and write a whole batch of stanzas, forming an original, passionate poem, making Hubert prouder than a peacock. He was a charming, lovely boy, making his brothers happy all the time, also showing the leader's spirit within.

Twenty days passed, the squalls growing stronger to push the boat always west. For this, Hubert thanked God and worshipped him like a dog, praying that another storm wouldn't target the boat once again. He would never forgive himself if he lost every single person he loved. His days comprised of nothing more than striding and struggling to brace himself against those horrifying waves, feeling as if his body was a breeze blowing a feather. It was truly a miracle that Orion didn't even feel seasick after all that rampage.

Orion spent the days in the little room, drafting poems and drawing something from whatever corner in his imagination he chose. The trauma of watching Victor shouting for his life, Mordecai wrestling himself from falling off the boat's ledge, corrupted his happiness and submerged his heart into an endless void of dejection. He, being a child without yet having seen the world's horrible things, couldn't do anything; he had braced himself in that tiny room, helplessly scared that a wave would soon swallow him whole. Seeing that nightmare at such an early age tainted him forever.

‘Orion! Orion, I see it! *Olhar!*’ Hubert suddenly began crying whilst pulling the sails.

‘What?’

‘America! *Está lá!* See – look, son!’ he said excitedly.

Hubert lifted Orion onto his shoulders and, indeed, from afar he could see a pale, foggy line emerging from the horizon, creeping closer as the sails pushed them towards it. They celebrated and cheered, after accomplishing such an outstanding achievement in crossing the Atlantic Ocean all alone, half dead. They couldn’t have lived like that anymore; their headaches and boredom had grown to be just too much for them to bear.

The sun hid under the horizon, its red glimmer reigning upon the high sky until it darkened and showed its shiny freckles. They slept for the last time on that boat for only six hours, Hubert making sure that the boat anchored close enough to see the land.

The day after, the boat finally arrived at the nearest edge. The sun illuminated the day like a torchlight, without a cloud in sight. Hubert packed up and rationed what was salvaged of their belongings after the terrible storm. Everything seemed good, at least. However, there was only one problem; he didn’t even have a clue where they were. The place they’d arrived at didn’t seem quite like Port Clinton, he thought, as he tried to remember what Finn’s photo of that Port had looked like.

As Hubert kicked away the boat and saw the keel adrift from the light breeze, he picked his son up and placed him on his craggy shoulders and walked briskly along the pathway leading up. Orion gazed upon the landscape they were in; he had missed the refreshing air of the land’s breeze, after wasting six weeks from his young life. His eyes welcomed themselves to an unexplored world; he never saw bicycles driving uphill on a road made from – what is that? Orion began asking himself incredulously – what is that black path? He guessed that they were lineages of cracked pebbles painted black. Who knows? He also saw things made from shiny

blue metal standing atop the wheels themselves. He recognised it as a car, but he'd never seen one in person before.

There were so many people, their faces like no other, wearing bright colours without suspenders to hold their pants in place. *How clean they are ... They must be rich! What's that pants that man is wearing?* he began wondering as he saw a man, whose head feathered light with beverage, wearing a sweaty pair of ragged jeans. The environment they were in was too overwhelming. Not even a single corner of farmland ploughed up anywhere ... And those houses ... So beautiful. With those majestic triangular roofs.

Hubert walked without a clue as to where they were going, mesmerised by the surroundings, like his son. A man walked past them on the pavement, with a net hanging loose by the rims of his shirt. Hubert guessed he was a fisherman with that nasty smell of seawater. He walked up to him, asking,

'Sir, um ... W-what place?'

The man stopped to a halt and stared at Hubert's nose, and spat, 'The hell's wrong with ya? 'Course, this is Scituate!'

Hubert placed Orion down onto the pavement and uttered, with his struggling English, 'Why ... I'm - I'm lost. M-me new. I - I am new. Where is ... Ohio?'

The fisherman, seemingly desperate to take a leak, dropped his fishing cage and rested his wrinkled hand on Hubert's shoulder and whispered frantically, 'Jesus, man, talk clearly! Ohio?! Hell, that's quite a way away! Why the hell do you want to go there, eh?'

Hubert swallowed a gulp and spat out, 'I - I need to go - quick. What can I do?'

'Why, take a damn train over from that station over there! Take a trip to Ohio or whatever ... Damn folks these days, ugh...' he murmured rudely as he lifted the fishing cage and stomped away, cussing about in his deliberate frustration. They crossed the road up ahead, and after a ten-minute stride they arrived at the station, where four long tracks paved the way for a seemingly endless voyage on either side. There were old men sitting on the bench beside

the operator office, with their canes dropped lousily by their feet, gawking at the horizon embroidered with trees. Hubert pulled Orion to his side by the head and walked up to the operator – a woman in her twenties wearing a fine white dress buttoned to her neck.

‘Good morning, sir. How can I help you?’

‘Uh, hi. Train to Ohio?’

‘Ah, let me see, um ...’ she said, fingering across the states of America in her journal, trying to find a path to Ohio. ‘Ah yes ... Ohio, yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you need to go to the Alliance Station. The only problem is that you must catch a train to the South Station before it leaves ... Is that fine?’

‘No ... *Quantos?*’

‘Pardon?’

‘H-h-how ... how-?’

‘How much?’

‘It’s fifty dollars, please.’

Hubert fished his hand inside his pocket for the dollars he and Finn had gone to exchange from the nearest bank back in Sagres. In total he only had sixty dollars, yet another major problem clamouring in his mind.

‘New in town, I reckon?’ she smiled, looking at Orion then.

‘Yes ... Good? Will it come soon?’

‘In the next minute, perhaps.’

‘*Excelente ...*’ he said, doing his utmost to understand her flawless English.

‘Have a good day,’ she smiled.

The train arrived after three minutes, and the two climbed aboard, showing the ticket to the conductor, and off they went to the South Station, which only took five minutes to arrive. Orion gaped as he pressed his face against the windowpane, watching the ground sliding beneath him, with those wonderous views of houses and hills. Hubert smiled at his son, but his insides were drenched in

The Obscure

tears, picturing the faces of his two other sons, slowly drowning in water, and yelling for help. He frowned and sighed, trying to forget the trauma he'd got himself into. It was sure a long way to get to Ohio in the first place, he thought, but what was it worth if he were to just stubbornly deviate his journey to some place other than that state? Sure, there were fifty states to choose from, but he assured himself that he was to stick to his old pal's advice, if it were the last thing he'd do. In for a penny, in for a pound.

CHAPTER 2

I took a break from reading and stretched out my ankles, which I'd placed on the coffee table in front of me. A sudden thought startled me, almost causing me to miss a heartbeat as the mischievous thought swam through my brain.

'Mum ... Is it true that ... that a serial killer's here in Holmes County?'

She cleared her throat, surprised by my remark, 'Wh-what makes you think that, dear?'

'I think the murderer yesterday was somehow a local. I could tell by everyone's reaction as he entered the court.'

She sighed, then started speaking, 'Let me tell you something. I don't know where to begin, honestly, but, remember when, five years ago, or six, when you were ten, or eleven, I spent two whole days at the police station? Said it was urgent?'

I blinked, 'Um, yeah – wasn't it the time when dad died?'

'Well, dear ... I think it's about time that I should tell you this. Your father didn't die from a cardiac arrest ... He was shot – *murdered*.'

I felt my heart fail for a whole minute as I heard her saying that. My mouth opened but failed to utter a single word. Mum continued,

'Andrew, the police are still working like dogs to find out why and how he was killed – we do know he was working, like always, but he and his colleagues – out of nowhere – were shot to death. The entire USA stood on its feet that day; it was chaos in the history of America's murders. Nobody has identified the killer, even six years later. 'The Gunpoint Triad', they call it. Believe me, I – I felt something in my gut when he didn't return home after four days. You know how he worked, though – one time he even spent two weeks abroad – but something felt odd when he didn't even call me. Your aunt and grandma told me not to panic, well ...'

I could see her eyes crystallise in tears, her lips pressed together, panting sadly. I felt her misery; she'd been taking care of me as a widow. Suddenly, though possibly irrationally, I felt guilty of not having put two and two together about the disappearance of my father. Her hands curled into a pair of weakened clenches, and as I grasped them, they felt deathly cold; her waxen cheeks were stained with a wide teardrop that bowled down. I didn't want this sudden burden of news that I couldn't have ever dreamed of, but the way she'd said it, with all that emotion playing about, sounded truer than true.

'Gosh, I ... W-why didn't you tell me a-all this, mum?' My tongue felt terribly dry, my breathing failing. 'W-why?' I cried.

Her teeth chattered and she wrapped her arms around herself to expel the sudden cold. 'You were a kid then ... I didn't want to traumatise you with anything; dad wouldn't have wanted that. The reason I'm telling you all this now, is that – is that I really want this torture on me to end, you know? Now don't worry about me, honey, I will always love you no matter what, okay?' she smiled a bit, her eyes wide. 'Besides, there's nothing that we can do, really. It's been six years without him around ... Let's get on with what we were doing, okay?' she wiped her tears, gripping my trembling hands.

I nodded wearily, clouded by the sudden news. My father was, and always had been, a good man – everywhere he went, he always brought laughter and joy; never a smudge of negativity. Mum got up and continued washing the dishes. I had never envisaged my father's demise as murder – the worst way anyone can die. I mean, who could've wanted to hurt him? My mind couldn't think of anyone.

The shock never left me that day, as my mind couldn't think of anything else other than my father. At ten years old, I had been too young to fully reconcile my grief. However, my urge to continue reading the story became unbearable, nevertheless. Reading was

the only thing I was able to do that time. So, I wiped off a tear and continued my perusal.



Alliance Station, 1978

About an hour later, the train arrived at the so-called Alliance Station. The ticket cost the painful amount of \$50, leaving Hubert hanging on only \$7. He became concerned and utterly anxious about this financial burden. How could he feed his little boy? America was far costlier than Sagres; as evidence of that rallied up instantly as soon as they arrived there. He prayed to God he would be able to grow a farmland for himself once he was settled, or else he wouldn't make it. Orion lay his head on his father's hip and soothed his worries, embodying a form almost as diminutive as a baby. The little gesture made him smile, and he heartily kissed him on his papery hair. They both slept after that, from start to end of that devastating fourteen-hour-long journey. The sun hollered its light on the sky, jostling away the small drifts of cloud that wandered aimlessly afront of it.

They arrived in Ohio as the night hatched, when the crescent moon peered slowly from the skyline, glowing white rays of pleasant light that replaced the beauties of the morning sun. The train, exhausted from its tiring runs and stops, finally braked into the station, waking the two up as it squeaked its rails to a halt. Hubert stood up, shouldered his backpack, and left the train, holding Orion's small hand in his.

Hubert tried his luck and asked the receptionist for a guide of local house-hunting. She handed him a pamphlet and a whole catalogue of potential houses for sales appeared as Hubert scrutinised the first page, scavenging vigilantly for the cheapest house Ohio could afford.

Miraculously, after scrolling through an extensive list of names, his finger landed under the name of a particular man, described as a house dealer, situated in Millersburg, Holmes County, exhibiting a slogan beside his name saying, **Cheapest Houses in Ohio! For the best selection come to this address for extra info or call here and ask for Gordon Attswire!**

The address below was written in bold, almost imprinted by a fine calligrapher's hand itself, saying, ***Attswire Mansion, 31, Walnut Street, Millersburg, Holmes County.*** How far was the county from the station? That's the question, Hubert wondered. They'd spent fourteen tedious hours riding that train and yet he put his legs to work, for a hell of a long hike from that station, after such a rough day. He didn't even know what time it was.

They began walking on the first road they found themselves on after leaving the station, until they found a large green sign with the names of places etched above arrows and their distances. And luckily for Hubert, he did find **Millersburg** written on it, but it was still thirty kilometres away from there. God, how big was this land? It wouldn't be wise to find another mode of transportation, so he held his stance, took a deep breath, and held Orion's hand to continue their walk. Orion wondered as he chewed his thumb, waddling – wasn't it fine over there? There were those large rich houses, gardened in the front, with roofs in a triangle – and, best of all, with the view of the Atlantic Ocean out front as you walk outside. Just like back in Sagres, the other extreme end of that gigantic ocean. It felt as if they had left a planet and went on another, with that rough, merciless ocean splitting the world in two. He could never go back in time, playing with Mordecai and Victor at home, he thought, as his jaw lowered down, pulling his lips into a depressing frown.

After a whole night of walking that never-ending road, following pathetically the signs that seldomly appeared as they struggled to pace much further, they finally stepped through the entrance of the notorious county. Of course, to lessen most of the difficulty of that walk, they rested for an hour or two by a tree, and

even hitchhiked the last five kilometres when a transit van passed, out of the blues – the rescuers even gave the pair some beef jerky to munch on before they arrived. The sun had already squinted its rays from the horizon, with the moon sunk towards the ground. Hubert dragged his feet, which shaking madly, almost disjoined themselves from his body. Orion was tired, too, although he'd spent most of the journey sitting like a duckling on his father's shoulders; still, he began grunting, as such long distances done in two months, through sea and land, were too much for a five-year-old like him.

When they arrived, Hubert leaned onto the first fence he saw and stretched out his ankles, sighing in relief. His heartbeat took five minutes to stabilise. He looked down at his son beside him, who was circling aimlessly as he stared at the rubbly ground beneath them. Smiling in a fatherly way, Hubert exclaimed in his native tongue,

'*Estava qui!* What did I tell you?! Now let's go find this man's house!'

'We're going home?'

'We'll find a new one here, son. We talked about it. *Aqui é melhor*, don't worry, my little poppet!'

'But I'm still hungry.'

'Here, eat some berries I brought from our farm. This will be a good snack to fill us up for a longer while ... I'll have some, too.'

And the two sat on that fence, further replenishing their strength with some farmed berries Hubert had brought in a little plastic container. The jerky they were given sure did help them along that long way, and those berries served as a nice dessert to it. They got up, then, Hubert asking everybody passing by for directions to Walnut Street. Orion observed the quiet country folk minding their business as they ambled past them, with the little shops and houses surrounding the street beautifully. The county had this aura of life Orion had never dreamed of. It was circled by the countryside, as well.

An old man with a fine pencilled moustache helped him finally after so much asking. Disregarding his little attitude, he still conveniently pointed towards the corner on their left, about six blocks away, up ahead for Walnut Street, so off they headed. Upon arriving they beheld a large house with roses flourishing in its front garden. It loomed over them, bordered by quite a distance away from its neighbouring house at the end of the street. Hubert, illiterate and raised in a farm, had never seen such a diverse place as Amish country. Especially by simply seeing this house, which almost shadowed the high noon sun by its height. Hubert didn't think twice and walked up the garden to knock, because, he reasoned, it wouldn't have been worth the struggle if he didn't consult a house dealer after crossing the Atlantic.

Three strong knocks followed the first one. They waited for about half a minute and the door creaked wide open, a starched man with a smile outstretching his face appearing behind it. The man took off his newsboy cap, a pair of eyes both surprised and smiling, and greeted the two, 'Please, do come in.' They looked at each other and were led inside.

The inside of that house was purely Baroque; the rooms had ceilings diminishing the furniture by their height, the entrance hallway long and narrow to allow for the rooms' dimensions on either side. Also, as they walked deeper inside the castle-like corridors, they saw that most of the light inside came from the central garden circumscribed nicely by the building itself. The man had a friendly sense of humour – he was a porcine, scruffy middle-aged man with a toothless smile, sporting long, unkept hair and skin wearing out by his age.

When they reached the study, he threw himself on an oak rocking chair behind his big, polished reading table, with Hubert and Orion sitting awkwardly in front of his desk. A warm cup of coffee for Hubert and water for Orion were brought over by the porter. The

old man took out a long pipe to smoke lavishly, took the monocle he was sporting off his eye, and said, 'Welcome, my friends.' He raised his hand high up towards the ceiling, paused for a moment to control his excitement, and continued, 'Good afternoon! How are you doing today? Hope your day's been fine, so let me introduce myself. I, Sir Gordon Attswire, am honoured to be the gentleman to give you a fine, comfortable place to live in this fabulous county. Now, then, if you please, Sir ...'

He gave his hand to Hubert, and the Portuguese man immediately grabbed his arm and shook his hand, saying as formally as he could, 'Hubert, Hubert Pettsburgh,' and gave him a warm, humble smile.

Then Gordon patted Orion's blonde hair, with the warmest of smiles, asking, 'And who is this young fellow?'

Hubert replied, 'My lovely son, Orion Pettsburgh.'

'Oh, what a lovely name it is ... *Orion*. Such originality to come up with a name like that!' The gentleman was too friendly and sincere, but his character made Hubert smile with joy, as he felt that he'd found the perfect man to help them create a new life.

'So, Mr Pettsburgh, how shall we begin?' he spoke.

Hubert, feeling at ease with the exorbitant environment he was breathing in, answered, '*De qualquer maneira você gosta.*'

'Pardon me, sir?'

'Uh ... Any way ... y-you l-like,' Hubert spat, still smiling.

The landlord chuckled, 'Oh, okay! Well, um, what kind of price did you have in mind?'

Hubert stared at his five-year-old, nervous, afraid of getting kicked out after what he was going to say next. 'I'm poor. I came from Portugal, alone, by boat, with family, to work as farmer ... *não quero casa grande.*'

'What? Big house?' he asked, cupping his hand around his ear.

'No ... small is good. I want it ... not much money.'

Sir Attswire gave a sour, sad smile and looked down at Hubert's torn shoes. He raised his eyes toward his and exhibited a long, confused face, patted him on the shoulder, and said slowly, 'I'm deeply sorry and I do apologise, but it seems that I have no house that suits your needs.' But then, almost as if a thought struck him all of a sudden, he exclaimed, 'Wait a moment! Hold your horses ... wait – I think I *do* have one house in mind.' Gordon pointed towards his bookshelves and dashed towards them, wrapping his hand around a bunch of thick, polished books, and handed out the thickest book from the far end. He blew off a dusty spiderweb from its surface and opened the pages.

Attswire finally found the page after several seconds of sticking his tongue out, and ordered Hubert, 'Come here, my friend – this is the only house I can actually give you. It was supposed to be my old lad's farming shack, but the client declined, so its value pretty much ... *expired*. Quite rare to happen here with the Amish ... Usually in some way I lend such a building out to someone, but oh well ... guess it kept its head a little hard,' he chuckled.

Hubert got up from his seat gladly and pulled his son's hand into his. They saw his finger circling a picture of a hay-barn settled out far in the outback of the county. Orion blared at the picture, yelling, 'I don't wanna live there! It's small!'

'Fique quieto, Orion. Only this I afford. How much, mister?'

And the landlord gave a triumphant smile, sat down on his rocking chair again and crossed his legs. 'What currency do you use, my dear friend?' He began to look a bit mistrustful and doubtful. Suddenly he took out a tiny whiskey bottle from the small inner pockets of his coat, chugging it in one breath, giving a small, faint laugh to Hubert afterwards.

He replied, 'I have \$7 – I use money to get here, from – from far away! It's tiring, *não estou brincando!*' Orion edged himself back to the chair and sat voraciously down, as he'd found it exceedingly comfortable.

The gentleman stood up from his rocker, glimpsing at Orion, chuckling, and whispered loudly, ‘Don’t tell anyone, but use that little money for that boy of yours, my friend. Do you work something?’

‘I’m a farmer.’

‘That’s perfect, lad – the county here is perfect for labourers like you! But hear me out – I’m giving you this promising piece of land for free. I see the fatigue in your eyes, mister, and it pains me to see nice folk like you struggling to get here. Not much of you are left, at the end of the day! But do remember, do not tell anyone of me – I never liked this country, if I do say so myself. Not one single bit. The council here are as mindless as sheep untethered by a shepherd, believe me!’

Hubert couldn’t believe his ears, unable to utter his joy. He couldn’t even thank Gordon with all the butterflies that poked his belly with excitement – he had never been treated that wholesomely by anyone. Was he really that lucky to have found such a genuine soul? Orion, too, felt the same joy, somehow. He was aware enough of the charity the gentleman was treating them with. Gordon turned towards the boy and smiled with his eyes closed showing all his facial wrinkles.

‘Oh, one more thing, p-please.’

‘Yes, Hubert?’

‘Can I farm ... on land? I have no money, I can’t buy food, and I–!’

Gordon shushed him and smiled, ‘Like we said, lad – here’s perfect to farm anything! And nobody would ever notice you, trust me. This part of Ohio has more trees than houses! Just make sure that you don’t build that farm of yours more than ten meters away from the nearest one. Don’t mind that you’re immigrants; I’ll fix the proceedings myself, don’t worry.’ He looked at Orion and smiled blissfully, kneeling before him, and whispered, ‘Hope I get to see you graduate, son. Believe me, I miss seeing people succeeding in life.’ Orion hugged his face dearly with the innocence he still had, a pair of large azure eyes gazing into Gordon’s. He nodded and smiled, almost laughing for the first time in two months.

Hubert himself laughed and thanked the kind man. Gordon walked them to the entrance door, and gave the keys to Hubert, telling him, ‘The house is out on the hills, just before the Berlin Township – on your right – and it’s ten minutes away from the Holmes County School. Good luck, Hubert!’ He waved his arm high up in the air and locked the door instantaneously as the two waved back.

‘Well, son, *nós fizemos!* We live in Ohio, now! Welcome to your new life, Orion!’ he vocalised to his son with full pride, smiling a smile that made him look like a wealthy man.

But they certainly couldn’t go any further without thanking Gordon’s hospitality, and it was certainly impossible to thank him enough. It might have seemed fishy at first, that the old man had tried far more than expected to find a decent home for the two strangers, whose dirt and poverty almost stunk up his mansion’s study – and even gave it to them for free! There was no paperwork to be signed, either, as the home he’d given them seemed to be either illegal, or about to be given up for destruction if left unused. But the old man had done all this with no tricks up his sleeves, no scheme of mischief, but from the bottom of his heart, purely from his genuine soul, as the main reason he’d been touched by the encounter with these two immigrants was the little boy, for whom he saw a bright future ahead.



I yawned and stretched my spine once again, placing the mug back on the saucer, just on the edge of our small coffee table. My mum was on the verge of drying out the last plate from her washing up. In an instant she turned to me and inquired,

‘How’s the story, then?’

‘Oh, it’s pretty much nothing. Except they finally found a home in America. A pretty damned coincidence that from all the counties here in the USA, they chose Millersburg.’

'I honestly am disliking this story more and more, Andrew. It's too similar to the one we have. I'm scared of it, almost.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, the man died in front of you, without any clear cause. And there's no reason why he should give you that for free. I simply do not like it,' she snarled as she strolled about the living room with the duster clasped in her left hand.

'Nah, there's nothing disturbing yet, mum. I'm just going to continue reading this further, then.'

She shrugged her shoulders and carried on minding her own business, leaving me at peace in my perusal once more, desperate to read further out of sheer curiosity and fascination.



Holmes County, 1985

Seven years went by like a breeze, Orion growing up with his beloved father in the hay-barn, still well-kept after all the years of toil, as Hubert managed to continue farming with the help of his son. Throughout these seven years Hubert took advantage of Orion's capabilities: to shoot passenger deer effectively with a repeater; to hit two birds with one shot after six years of intensive training, making him a sharpshooter by the age of twelve. He also seized the occasion to teach Orion how to butcher most meat that could be found in the wilderness, cooking perfect dishes every time. Needless to say, Hubert did a pretty good job in developing Orion to his fullest extent, making him the chip off his father's brick soon after.

Alas, this smooth ride didn't roll on much further. All the joys and emotional rides now came to disdain, as Hubert contracted the severest form of fatal insomnia, just when Orion turned twelve years old. Hubert was well aware of the fact that he didn't have many breaths left in this world, and this at just thirty-nine years of age.

Doctor Nathan Marlow, the only Ohioan therapist and physician settling in this part of the country, treated Hubert after one month of severe pain, consequently realising he had no good news to share. The fatal insomnia had clawed onto his brain, delving deep into its functions, and infecting it very slowly for more than four years. While ineffective at first, it had become a disorder reaching its full potential in withering away all signs of hope for his recovery.

‘I have awfully bad news, Mr Pettsburgh,’ the doctor frowned, Hubert sitting weakly in front of him, ‘but it seems you have only one year left to live ... You see, this fatal insomnia you have is chronic and has reached an incurable stage. Of course, the brain just can’t cope with all of these tortures and, well, it has to rest someday. I know this is very hard to come to terms with, but do keep in mind to enjoy these last few months in the best way possible. So, stay strong,’ he smiled sadly, ‘and remember to take the best care of your young man. Make these last moments worthwhile, so that your son remembers you for a lifetime.’

Hubert wept and wept, in pure dread of his looming demise. He knew he didn’t have much time left breathing in the air around him. It was even more saddening to think that he had been bustling with strength just a few months back. His lips merely moved, his voice almost muted, the terror gathering in his eyes. Numbly, he thanked the doctor for the update and went home, waiting for his beloved son to come back from school. He couldn’t hide the news from him.

Undoubtably the diagnosis came because of the loss of his two other sons all the way back on that treacherous voyage in that damned ocean seven years prior. He could still picture it perfectly; Orion sitting in the middle of the boat, covering his face with his hands, alone under that loss of heat as the sun hid behind devilled clouds that smouldered his life for two whole days. First his loving wife, Samira, then Mordecai and Victor. And the neighbours. No wonder his soul had become empty. The only wish he had, when

seeing the reaper lowering his scythe upon him, was to join his entire family in the heights of heaven above, waiting for his beloved son to join, as well.

Orion came back on foot, whistling happily after a wonderous day of learning. As he entered Hickory Street, he ran with such enthusiasm and came up to the front door and knocked hard and loudly. Who could ever ruin the spreading joy of this young child?

Hubert had prepared him corn soup – his favourite dish. After lunch, while sitting down on the couch he told Orion everything – about his fatal insomnia, his life expectancy, and every sad thing. Finishing his emotional confession, they both looked at each other with tears in their eyes. It had been a long time since they'd experienced such emotion. Orion stood up, with a smile that held the prettiest colour imaginable, placed his finished bowl in the red bucket underneath the spigot, and hugged his father tightly, trembling. 'Thank you, dad. You are the best person in my life. I love you forever and ever and nothing will take you away from me!' he muttered, tightening his arms against Hubert's spine, and the two wept solemnly and heartily.

Holmes County, 1986

It was Orion's birthday, the 13th of March, the day the young man celebrated his lucky birthday. Although it was a pity that he hadn't his two other brothers joining him, he set aside the loss of his loving twin brothers for a while and jumped off the bed. He rushed to eat his corn soup for breakfast, then headed over to Hubert as he finished.

'Dad! Dad! Get up! Guess what today is!'

But his father didn't respond. He always pocketed his head underneath the bed sheets, ever since the day the fatal insomnia first attacked him. Every night, his eyes would stare at the ceiling, legs persistently beating the mattress, nightmares and awful

thoughts invading his damaged brain. His eyes remained open; it was impossible for him to stop panting and moving in his bed. Usually when Orion went to greet him, he usually bade him good morning but that day he didn't. His body remained motionless like a mannequin. Total silence hovered the barn; a silence that created the perfect harmony for a sleep. Was Hubert enjoying a sleep for once? Had the fatal insomnia finally calmed down?

As Orion took the sheets off his father head, he excavated a lifeless face. His eyes were still open, visionless, and dry; his pulse had stopped. Orion's enthusiasm and gullible joy quickly stabbed him in the heart. The child stopped breathing, eyes blurring. He fell onto his knees beside the bed and drowned his eyes in tears, clasping his hands onto his face, his head shaking in disbelief. He had known the day would soon come; who would've thought it would coincide with his birthday ... *his lucky birthday* ... Nothing came from Hubert. He was gone, adrift in peace, resting from the damnation he'd lived alone.

To his surprise, Orion found an envelope resting timidly on his father's chest; it was perfectly sealed, with writing saying, '*To my son Orion, read this on your lucky birthday*' Maybe he'd written it just before his last breath? Orion tore open the envelope and pulled out a fresh, water-stained vellum, containing Hubert's familiar handwriting, written in Portuguese. Orion read the whole passage, surmounting the difficulty as his tears blared his vision with every word read:

To my dearest son Orion,

Son, the day of my final rest is knocking on the door as I'm writing this. I might be dead as you are reading my last piece of writing. I know, son, I know what you're feeling ... You are crying, my

soul is weeping next to you, in pure sorrow that life has had to be cut short for me. But know this – I am not dead. My body may be dead, but my soul still lives on, living in your bloodline ... Orion, I love you so much. Nothing can express what I would have done if something ever were to happen to you. You're the apple of my eye, the only thing that kept me battling and moving on ... Nothing can measure the pride of being a father of three, one of them being you :)

Alas, the fatal insomnia has defeated me, broke me down to my knees; I couldn't even close my eyes without hurting ... Every nightmarish thought would infect my brain, making me stare at the eyeless ceiling before me, breathing inside a coffin, seeing life uglier than death. It literally forced me to ignore the fact that I'm living in this world, making me only an alien roaming on its land. I partly blame this on the trauma of sailing on that ocean, all by ourselves ... Remember? I'm sure you do, son! You were so damn strong! :) Do you remember when I lifted you up when you were tired as we began walking towards Ohio? Good times, indeed... Now, as a father doing his job, I'm finally being called off. My line ends here, my deed is done; to finally be rewarded with the ability to close my eyes peacefully, for eternity. The sun has finally stopped shining and the glowing moon has replaced it. The insomnia never lost hold of me.

Orion, I want to share something with you, now that we're here. Life is like a mountain; you must prepare all equipment to climb to the peak. You must be armed and prepared to reach your

goals – whatever they are, whatever steps in your way. The journey to the top is never easy. Never. The seas always try to break the shore with their waves, be it sand or rock. The same happens to us, son – you will, and I'm sure you will, find your allies, but no less, enemies. Be aware of who you surround yourself with, because they can pull you down from your climb and make you fall down the whole mountain, to surpass you in order to take the view from you. But know this: those same people will never fall down with you. No one ever wants you to be better than them. Upon reaching the top, you must never stop and never EVER give up. There is no turning back after the starting point. You must Keep Looking Forward. Never backwards. Never be a shadow of the man you wish to become, Orion.

I strongly wish that you keep focusing on the future. Never ever stop dreaming, son. Society is never kind. They'd rather see the man with a hundred cents than the man with a dollar. The same, right? But people prioritise quantity over quality. You must show what you are made of, your true self, show them your bite. Your skin must be the best thing you possess. I would be proud if you found yourself a wife, or else you'll be lonely. Grow a family, work like a dog and feed your little ones, explore the world, and you will be the man I have always wished to become. Life begets life. Your mother, Samira, would be as exultant as I am now, son. But now she's on my side, within the skies, along with your two brothers, Mordecai and Victor. We all miss you

very much, yet we are still watching you, every step you take and every move you make, waiting eagerly till the time comes for you to join us and we become the five we were always destined to truly be!

Happy birthday, Orion. I can't even imagine myself seeing you how you were back in Sagres! You were so cute ... Now, please, do understand me ... I know it's horrible for you to be all alone, but you must get up on your feet. Chin up, steel yourself and be strong. I raised you so that you can climb the tallest mountains, taught you the lessons only a father could. I gave you all my dignity. Everything. A tear is sliding down my cheek as I'm writing this. Life had just begun, but it ended so quickly. But I'm feeling it coming, and I must hurry now and end ...

Goodbye, Orion. I love you so much. May God give you all his love and blessings, to help you in every trial you must face to achieve your purpose. Never be depressed, especially by my departure. You are the arrow of the bow. You must find the path that suites you best. Turn tears to joy, war to peace, hate to love, and everything good. Good luck. May my soul live in you and rest in peace ... I love you since the dawn of time ♥

Your biggest supporter,
Papa xxx

CHAPTER 3

Hubert was truly beside him, almost hearing him read his last words. The cadaver's eyes were still wide open; on his pale face was that pair of lips still red and hinting at a little smile, almost belonging to a sleeping prince in a coffin. The smile was innocent, purer than crystal, almost angelic. Unpolluted. The room, exhibiting nothing other than grim and darkness, faded every colour away with each passing second, until it became a dimensionless void of despair. Orion wailed like a stray kitten, tears showering his face without a break. His head dropped, resting on his father's rigid chest. He just cried, his strength evaporating, slowly drowning in a sea of his own tears.

When he found the strength to straighten up, he touched his father's face, impaled by the frost of his purpling skin. Hubert's soul almost formed a part of the room, circling around Orion in the spiritual world. But Orion didn't even know what he was feeling, exactly – either depressed at being the only one left in his family, deprived of his future, or proud of his father's final wishes and blessings. He wiped off the last teardrop from his soggy eyes and stood up strongly. Near the bed, he saw a vase filled with healthy, mesmerising roses; all of them seemed to stare at him, giving him the scent of life. They were abloom, showing off nature's beauty, cheering up any beholder's doldrums. As he folded the letter, his eyes squinted at another little note on the back, reading,

To find your settling, pack everything up and go to Sir Attswire. He already knows of my situation and agreed to take care of you. Tell him your name and enjoy your new home. Godspeed and may God bless you ♥

He couldn't understand. Gordon Attswire? Wasn't he the man who had given them their house? Why him? Of course, he thought. His father and he had become the best of friends since then. Orion shrugged his shoulders, packing everything from the house and, before leaving, he kissed Hubert's cold forehead one last time. He did not consider what would have to be done to Hubert's corpse.

But he couldn't just leave him there to rot, could he? It would've been a discourteous act to do. So, the obvious thing the orphan could think of was to bury him. Being still a young boy, he moved the corpse the way his body could've let him – the weight made him crab weakly. The familiar scent hanging on the poor man forced Orion to cry even more, trembling in his pace – just like in the Passion. The same man who had fed him when he felt hungry, who had put a mattress underneath him to sleep on, who had worked hard just to see him laugh ... The only person who made him feel loved.

Going out of the backdoor was like opening a forbidden gate – he had never seen the lawn so grey, the blades of grass frowning at the boy burdened by a man atop of him, almost pleading with him not to engulf the load within their soi. With an unstoppable flow of tears, he looked at nothing else but the shovel, looking attentively at his hands while labouring. He dug open a rectangular hole in the middle of the fenced lawn.

As he finished, Orion looked at Hubert's lifeless body one last time. He looked so beautiful. Why had nature chosen to take his soul away from him? Why was it that cruel?! He kissed his father's face one last time, later pushing the body onto the layer of sedimented soil; he fell flat on the grass, screaming in his cry, hitting the earth with all four limbs, disorientated from his senses. It was the worst birthday ever. Where did all those promises go? Hubert had sworn that he would take him to Columbus and gaze at the city lights for his birthday. Look how that turned out.

As he put the soil back in place – the dirt piles blotching all over Hubert's skin, still dressed in his house-clothes – he stared at that dirt patch with a horrible grimace, all hints of that prior excitement

buried with the corpse itself. Of course, he didn't have anything to decorate that burial spot with other than a big rock laid by the tree. He added one of those beautiful roses in that vase onto the patch, gently, discharging its liveliness on such a departed subject. The boy waved his last goodbyes, the dirt patch unresponsive. He packed everything up and left the haybarn at once.

He walked down the road and travelled along the county's streets, as he descended down the hills after a ten-minute walk. On his way to Attswire, he reminisced about the beautiful past he'd lived through all the wonderful times back in Sagres, the pioneer of the most blissful time of his life; playing with his brothers; the times when he drafted poems for his dad; walking with him along the coast, rejoicing in the sweetest time of his life. And later, here in Holmes County, the numerous times Hubert had been patient in teaching Orion to grow independent. But everything had faded. Nothing remained, other than embracing a life of pure abandonment.

He rose his head up and saw the place as he arrived. It hid the whole sky behind it, diminishing the boy's height by its giant extents. Perhaps he had retained a good memory of this house, as he felt the same awe he'd gasped with seven years back. He sighed and walked through the garden, knocking on Gordon's finely polished wooden door. It opened slightly slower than he'd thought it would, by a man much older than he'd expected. His skeletal figure disinterred every line of wrinkle that made his face look like an old, barked tree. 'Orion Pettsburgh, I presume?' The adolescent nodded slowly, Gordon leaning over him for a hug. 'I remember you so much younger. I'm terribly sorry for your loss. Say, let us sit down on the couch and have a nice cup of coffee, shall we?'

'Sure ... Where can I leave my belongings, please?'

'Oh, leave them to me!'

And the old man took Orion's things and placed them beside his red couch as they entered the first room. He poured a cup of black coffee and sat down on the couch.

‘Join me,’ he said gently, and the boy sat down beside the old man, sipping the coffee. ‘So, let us begin, shall we? Well, I knew your dad was going to leave this world very soon. What a pity, it had been the golden age of my business, that time. One of a kind, he was, truly. Anyway, I shall be your guardian until you find your own path soon enough. This house of mine is big, so a companion would be delightful. So – make yourself at home, son.’

Orion finished drinking his coffee a moment later and stood up. ‘Where can I place the mug, Mr Attswire?’

Gordon gulped his mouthful and whispered, ‘Please, son. Call me Gordon.’ Orion nodded, giving a sad smile. His life had just been destroyed, but at least he had somewhere to live.

‘So, Orion – let me give you a little tour of your new home. It won’t take us too long. You can furnish your room in any way your heart desires – well, *anywhere*, practically,’ the guardian said with a broad smile.

The house was a real jewel. It was colossal and as large as life, with about thirty rooms and two gardens; a flower haven in the front and one in the back, which had a little turbine rotted with vines, unused because its canal had gone desert dry. The rooms were a pleasing delicacy, all of which had the same tall ceilings looming over gothic furniture, golden plates, jewellery and original artworks.

One room was truly remarkable, distinguished from the others – a large, decrepit room with pillars surrounded by ivy and roses. It was literally crypted, almost like a temple, as it was some kind of an armoury, filled with a vast collection of guns and swords. Some of them had been bought from yard-sales, some even from auctions across the states. There were golden-plated guns, sharpened knives engraved with ancient hieroglyphs, bows used in the Indian era, and even a set of fishing equipment from naval wars. Undoubtedly, the room was Sir Gordon Attswire’s treasury, displaying all his wealth under one roof.

The tour took about twenty-five minutes to complete, with fifteen minutes of them taken up by Gordon's delicate, slow pace. He had become terribly old, although his taste for fashion seemed to have remained unblemished, as he wore a golden chain with a diamond flower on its top collared around his cragged neck, not to mention the fine clothing made of leather. It was crystal clear that the man was prosperously affluent. How had he become this rich? Did this mean that one day he would inherit the wealth of this old man once he dies, too? Certainly not. He wasn't a relative of his. And even if he were, Orion had never liked such exorbitant muck, considering his background.

The tour finished in a spacious room, consisting of two large gothic-style windows, and a queen-sized bed, robed with the finest quality of silk, coloured an elegant white. The sun brightened up the room, making it look like a king's quarters. Gordon turned to Orion and said, 'Well, son, I do hope you like your new house,' he said, smiling at the boy. 'This is your new home from now on and this lovely room is yours to dominate. Now, let me get you everything. Go on, go on – relax! It is your room, after all!' he added, leaving the room to snail down the stairs.

Orion sat down on the massive bed, glancing at the finely glazed tiles, thinking aloud. He took out the letter and read it, this time speaking in his inner voice. The old man came back as he began the second paragraph, terribly burdened by Orion's belongings. His bones were evidently still healthy enough to lift two heavy luggage and to climb up the spiralled stairs alone, surprisingly. He placed the delivery down on the carpet and left, saying, 'Home sweet home, Orion. If you need anything, do be kind enough to let me know.'

The orphan customised his room just the way it had been back at the barn, except this one was about ten times bigger. He placed his favourite books on the shelves, his written poems in a box, his drawings and cooking recipes in an envelope – everything organised just the way he liked. As he drew open the curtains,

he was welcomed by a vast view of the county and the farmlands drawing up the whole panoramic view, and if he looked closely, he could also spot the county's school. It was a bit farther away now than it had been from his old room.

The night after his arrival, Orion went to the grand library downstairs, beholding a massive room choked by furniture, spilling books and pages. There was a large red couch in front of a fireplace so big it heated the room with just one wooden log. Orion gazed upon the high walls and shelves, navigating through the books Gordon owned – art, history drama, even medicine. Everything was placed in order. But Orion stumbled upon a thin book titled **Lethal Weapons and their History**, which caught his eye as he saw the faint golden lining embroidering its title. It was a hardback, its cover brown, the smell of antiquity wafting from its pages.

Orion pulled it out and sat down on the couch in front of that cosy fire, beginning to read the first page. It was nothing other than a list of firearms throughout whole eras of time, from the North American prehistoric clubs and axes, to the Medieval cannons. But midway through the book he encountered a recipe for sodium cyanide, with which they used to execute large counts of death row inmates in a chamber just by its salt form. The young Orion became obsessed with such an infamous chemical – he had never read about anything like it at school. He read it all bit by bit, using the English knowledge he had acquired, *“a hundred grams of sodium is mixed with two ounces of cyanuric acid, extracted from the seeds of a ripened apple ... It is scientifically upheld that the mixture's toxicity is enough to kill a lab rat in a matter of ten seconds and, as Dr Anthony Baubon states, an ounce is enough to kill a pair of cows ... In its gaseous form it can wipe out large groups of inmates at once ...”*

The recipe captivated the young teenager and he blinked in amazement. He read it over ten consecutive times before placing it back, because it was past his bedtime, and it seemed useless, anyways.



I got up and helped myself to a biscuit to nibble on while reading. My mum was still fidgeting about the house; she was now in the living room. She murmured something to herself, but as she saw me, she repeated herself loudly, 'Oh, hiya, Andrew, I'm just going to continue the laundry, dear; I really must do it before dusk. Oh, don't worry, no need to help me, I got it!'

I was enjoying the story quite a bit, and I somehow found myself reading between the lines; why am I reading such a story about a kid's life? I mean, he did nothing wrong in his childhood, so far. It comprised of nothing other than poor misfortunes. To be perfectly honest, I could never imagine myself being the only one remaining in a family of five – the only remaining child out of triplets! What a tragedy it was.

The next section compelled me to continue reading, as it seemed to be about school.



Holmes County School, 1987

By now, Orion had started ninth grade, at the age of fourteen, as the new scholastic year commenced five months after moving to Gordon's. Needless to say, he had been attending the same school ever since he was six years old, a year after he had arrived with Hubert in America. As expected of him, the child proved to be a prodigy, genius enough to attain full marks in every subject – so intelligent he was the only child ever to correct teachers' mistakes, sometimes. English was most definitely his favourite subject, especially when it came to literary analysis and word etymology.

Packed with students due to its small size, the school educated five hundred pupils, who were rich enough to even enlist themselves as part of its dense population. Despite being as poor as dirt, Orion entered the school thanks to his father, who gave up all his savings from the drudgery of farming. He had always wanted to have his

only child inspire others with his wits and charming charisma. It was a shame Hubert passed away so young; he would never get to see his beloved son wearing the academic dress and holding the neatly scrolled diploma clasped proudly in his hand. Orion had always wanted to be an architect, the main reason being was that he was a living calculator and an enlightened artist – the centre of attention for all teachers, all of whom were baffled by the kid's natural brilliance.

Summertime passed in a blink, with autumn following it, the trees shedding their leaves from tip to root, leaving only their branches hanging weakly in mid-air. Leaves snowed the grounds, leaving a scent that fulfilled any polluted lung. The skies were blushing red, the hills turning faintly yellow and orange, the soles of one's shoes crackling with every step. And now that the scholastic year had started on the very first day of autumn, the school opened its doors wide open for the herd of students to key themselves in. Alas, although Orion started the year on a strong note, his fears were proved true just the same day – the bullying already began to occur. And it occurred in its worst form.

He had been dealing with this problem ever since he was in fifth grade. It had never been serious, though, more like a little annoyance Orion could deal with, moving on about in his bliss. But now the problem intensified and the reason was no other than the news that roamed the whole school – that Orion had become an orphan. The entire town had inevitably found out about his new status over the summer, and from the first day of the new school year, boys of his age or even older – the same few that had been bothering him for the past four years – now gathered around him in frighteningly large groups, forcing Orion to imagine himself the mouse in an owl's nest. His lunchtime never fed him well, everyday it consisted only of punches and kicks to the stomach. His efforts in dodging the strikes always proved futile; he tried to flee from the beasts as soon he smelled the trouble coming and attempted to tell

a teacher, just as the posters along the corridors told students to do in such circumstances. But all was hopeless, each time and each day. The gang was just too potent for his feeble body; it seemed effortless for them to bruise an innocent child and feast upon his timid character, waiting desperately and holding their laughs in. He would cry futilely, holler for help and whine for mercy, but they would merely respond with the filthiest words their mouths could spout.

To add to this elusive suffering, the teachers were shamelessly passive, staring at a showdown, standing at a distance from the blows inflicted upon him, steering clear of any involvement. Plump, self-confident, and proud, they were either afraid to confront the hordes or just found the spectacle somehow entertaining. Every day they would just sit, relax, and witness the crimes as they sipped their warm coffee on their breaks, leaning against the wall. Some of them pretended to talk to the gang members, but that was just about it, really. And the problem was never resolved. The shoal of fish never beat the shiver of sharks – or a single fish in Orion’s case, as no one really ever dared to at least console him. And the teachers certainly defined the meaning of hypocrisy; once the admirers of his talent, they were now the audience of the bullies’ circus on the solitary, lonely boy.

One time he got so hit hard in the stomach that he threw up the lunch he’d eaten onto the floor, which was followed by him being pushed into his own vomit whilst overhearing the laughter, the taunts about him being useless, unloved, ugly, weird. Setting foot in the school canteen was a guaranteed torment. It certainly wasn’t a place suited for the timid and good-hearted. Orion’s introverted personality evolved day by day as the reckless torture continued unabated. How was it possible to let those dogs off their collars for four years?

Gordon Attswire became worried sick, of course, seeing the evidence of foul play on the poor boy every time he went home.

He would just stand there, cane in hand, ogling at the boy who was becoming nothing but a poor, zombie-like figure that could only be pitied, instead of befriended. No matter how many times Gordon asked him what the matter was, Orion would just turn his back on the old man and run into his room, crying loudly and shouting unfathomable words.

It was like this every single school day – he would arrive home, go to his room, avoid conversation, and hold back tears until he'd locked himself away, with solitude as his imaginary friend. Why was he the one being picked on? Was he the perfect target to be made fun of? If that was the case, why, though? He wasn't so sociable, but why push him back so hard? Why push him so hard to see him stumble upon a backpack, fall in the middle of the canteen, prey to fists flying about like butterflies? Why? He'd always wanted to be a normal, friendly boy. But it seemed as if he wasn't destined to have a friend. Orion felt his heart dampening like a sponge. He saw nothing of purpose in his life anymore. It had simply lost its worth ever since he'd become an orphan; just dust in the wind and a raindrop in a lake.

His eyesight turned colourless, parallel lines joining together, the sunlight turning to moonlight. Nothing was pretty anymore; the grass turned grey. His mind died with depression a week after school had begun. Gordon never saw him eating dinner with him in the kitchen anymore. He never saw him during the day, save for the glimpses he got when Orion left for school and arrived back.

Orion's grades dropped. Teachers started stamping the big, gruesome F sign on every test; homework was never done; every shard of Orion's talent dimmed. He just didn't care anymore. In fact, he began to loathe his own name, his reflection in the mirror, how he talked – he just simply hated himself being alive. If society didn't want him to be alive then why bother living? He even heard one of the bullies saying, 'Why don't you just die already? You're worthless and weak, nobody loves you and nobody even cares that you're living! Everyone hates you!'

One night, at midnight sharp and wide awake, Orion reached towards the bedside table to read the letter Hubert had given him. Those words always made him happy in times of despair. But this time, he whimpered and cried to himself, ‘Sorry, dad. But I have to leave this cruel world and join you in heaven. I failed in living here. I’m weak – I cannot take it anymore!’ The moon lit his room, spitting and mizzling a very faint light through the colossal window.

Orion stood wearily on his bed, feeling his knees tremble with a queer sense of fear. He somehow felt an edge of guilt creeping towards him; why couldn’t he just ignore them and let time surpass his current state? The number of times he’d tried had always ended in the situation getting worse. It was no use.

Orion had thought long and hard about whether he should do it. But that night was the one. He had prepared for the worst and took out a golden-plated six-barrel revolver, which he’d secretly stolen from Gordon’s armoury display in the garage. His eyes were incapable of further tears. He stood still, raised his head towards the ceiling, grazed his left eye with the barrel, reloaded the bullet, and placed his finger over the trigger. The muzzle, though as cold as death, was comforting in comparison to the endless stream of tears he cried daily. It was the key to a better life, anyways – a better life in death. His eyes emptied themselves, tunnelled by a void of everlasting hollowness. He straightened himself up, rested his head gently against the wall, and held a deep breath before exhaling from his mouth, pulling the trigger at once.



The midnight crows fluttered their wings away, moving their feathers to fly up high in the dark sky, as the gunshot made everything jump in fright from the silence the hills fostered. Gordon woke up with two beats from his heart missing, clumsily putting his slippers on to shuffle out of his bedroom, with his nightgown hanging on his wrinkled body, to try and figure out what the commotion was.

The old man clasped his cane hastily, scurrying a bit faster to the stairs, heart pounding and heart throbbing. Half asleep, half awake, he opened Orion's bedroom and – the old man froze, unable to walk a step further from the door's entryway. The old man wasn't breathing at all; his teeth were chattering hard, his whole body gone cold with all the icy shivers coursing through his aquiline spine. He saw Orion's face drenched in a thick splatter of terribly red blood, the glint of one of his revolvers catching the midnight light, the bed beneath changing its colour from that elegant white to rich red.

The old man lost his balance upon seeing such a horrific scene, and his shocked body crawled on the floor. He wheezed for breath as he saw the orphan's face – it was petrifying; the left side of his face had vanished, turning into a cratered residual of bone, lost in infinite inhumane gore, indescribable by words. Gordon's forehead began trickling a sliver of cold sweat, his head about to explode. He rushed to the telephone in the corridor, navigated through the telephone directory, and found the number for the Ohioan doctor, Nathan Marlow. He was panicking, and rotated the numbers quickly, giving him a ring. The doctor was the first person he'd thought of, and he had no time to waste. The doctor promptly responded, despite that time of night:

'Yes, Doctor Nathan Marlow speaking, what is your emergency?' And Gordon stuttered, 'H-hello. You n-n-need to c-c-come quick! M-my boy – my boy ... he's sh-shot! Can you p-please c-come n-now? Do be quick, he's losing much blood right now!'

'Yes, sure, right away. What's your address, sir?'

'I-it is no. 31 here in Wooster Street.'

'Ok. Stay calm and wait. Place a warm blanket on the wound – don't stop pressing till I arrive – I'll be there in a minute.'

The doctor briskly hung up, and the nobleman raced to the bathroom, grabbed a towel, and pressed it onto Orion's face. Gordon cried and cried; he knew the boy was dead. There was just no chance that the doctor would find a pulse, surely not after losing that much blood. It was hopeless. Only a miracle could save him.

After a whole five minutes of Gordon's diligent pressing of the towel on Orion's face, the doctor finally rang the bell, loaded as a truck with all his equipment. He'd brought a briefcase full of bandages; tweezers, carefully assorted by size; plasters; medicine; and a whole lot of other tools. The man was unregretfully ready for the job, prepared for the worst. The nobleman, shivers taking control of his spine, led the professor up to Orion's bedroom, trying his best to conceal some of his alarm.

As they entered, the doctor gasped hard, enough to say the case was serious. He wasn't to blame, as he couldn't have expected such horror in a prosperous mansion standing alone in the fields of the county.

'Right – call the emergency, stat!' he shouted, leaping away from the entryway in shock. 'Oh my gosh – what happened?!'

'Um ... I don't know! Here –' He fumbled for the telephone just outside. 'Y-yes, hello? Send an ambulance, quickly; m-my boy has been shot in the head a-and needs – needs help! Um, what's that? Ah, yes – No. 31, Wooster Str– Yes, um – Doctor Nathan Marlow ... Okay? Alright, please be quick!'

While the old man was on the phone, the doctor came close to Orion, putting his head closer to the boy's face, hiding his revolt at the gore. Gently raising Orion's left arm, he slowly checked for a pulse. He frowned – there was no heartbeat. He plucked out a pair of plastic gloves and began pounding on his chest. Seven hard beats, pressing his ribcage against his heart, and still, no pulse. A sour expression gave away that the efforts made so far had proved to be of no use. Although his obstinacy hadn't run out; he stood beside Orion's bed, and with the weight of his shoulders he pounded on his chest ten more times, each beat harder than the others. The doctor blinked and checked his pulse. This time, his eyes suddenly lit up, and with the most relieving expression, he beamed at the old man and remarked,

'He ... H-he is still ... *Alive!*' he exclaimed in surprise.

Mr Attswire blinked heavily and replied, having hung up the phone, 'How in the world is he alive?! Are you sure?'

The doctor didn't give him a reply; he started a new chore to keep the adolescent alive, to prevent him from losing his life at such an early, innocent age. Orion was swimming in a pool of his own blood, his face covered with carnage, leaving only his right ear untouched by gore. The doctor kept his calm, fabricating it almost, as deep inside one would have discovered the chilling tremors that rushed down his spine as he witnessed such carnage.

He started by wiping Orion's face with a thick cloth; it took a while, as the blood wasn't going to stop anytime soon, making the cloth soggy than a sponge. When he finally uncovered the face, the left eye was still bleeding, but the doctor could see that its orbit-bone was cracked, the ravine ranging from his forehead all the way to his cheekbone. Doctor Marlow could even see a part of his oculi muscle naked. He clenched his jaw and covered Orion's left eye with a wide bandage, to keep the bleeding inside – the crack showed nothing less than a hollow pit in the boy's tarnished skull.

Gordon just stood there and watched, still astonished by the miracle that kept Orion alive. He was thinking out loud, questioning why he was shot in the first place.

Amidst the gore, Doctor Marlow noticed some scars on Orion's neck. The scars were oddly ... *fresh*. The doctor's curiosity was piqued tremendously – he soon saw that Orion's hands, feet, and belly were full of bruises, scars, contusions, and even fricking lumps. He rubbed his bespectacled eyes and questioned Gordon,

'Do you know how this happened?'

'Oh, I do n-not kn-know, doctor ... I really don't!'

The doctor sighed, turning away from the old man, and then placed a pillow underneath Orion's head, just in place for him to be able to see the back of the boy's skull. He gawked at what he saw; the skull was cracked wide open, almost like a mousehole, as Orion's brain could easily be seen from the clear opening. The

left part of his brain had some damages, although minor from the nature of the shot. But as he checked deeper inside, he realised that, miraculously, most of his brain could be salvaged under special attention.

All of a sudden, the doctor spotted something glinting. ‘Oh, hold on – what’s that?’ he murmured, grasping a tweezer in a tight grip, holding his breath. He flickered on a small light he sported just beneath his collar and, cautiously, plunged the tool in. If it were a bullet, it would definitely need to be removed as quick as possible, but, sadly, this could only be done in exceedingly rare cases. As the doctor deemed that the coast was clear, he breathed, building up his focus to its max, and he pinched the metal object just shy from the brain itself. He heard the slight clink of metal-on-metal, and he pulled his arm out delicately. Indeed, it was a revolver bullet. It wasn’t the first time that the doctor had conducted such an eerie surgery at the hospital. But he had never thought he would carry it out on a living patient minutes after a deliberate headshot.

Marlow wrapped Orion’s head with another big, velvety white bandage, checking his pulse again. Again, there were long intervals between one heartbeat and the next, but the boy was still breathing.

‘Well,’ he blinked, ‘I gotta say – he’s one hell of a fighter!’

‘B-but I still d-don’t know how he was shot! Please tell me, doctor, oh – oh God! If he dies and it’s because of me, I-I-!’ the old man cried, suddenly falling onto the doctor out of exhaustion.

‘Gordon! Keep yourself together!’ the doctor ordered, who almost lost his grip on the tweezer as he was hit by the old man’s weight. Taking a deep breath, he said, ‘I think he tried to commit suicide. The windows are intact, and the revolver is still clasped in his hand! I mean, it seems pretty clear, doesn’t it? But I honestly can’t believe that he’s still alive after that headshot.’

‘Oh my God ... You mean he shot himself in the eye?!’ Gordon gasped.

‘Indeed, sir. Luckily enough, though, to have shot it in an angle.’

A dagger stabbed Gordon's heart as his ears received that. He had never thought the orphan would think of killing himself. He had treated him well for half a year, giving him his entire mansion to live in instead of leaving him out in the cold. But Gordon was quite aware of Orion's recent change in behaviour. He just never imagined that the boy would resort to such drastic action.

At last, a distant siren came hollering through the streets, once again smashing the dead silence of the night. Gordon clenched Orion's hand, praying to God not to take his life away. The doctor kept checking his pulse as the paramedics swooped in from the hastily parked ambulance outside, the team flying up the stairs with two of them holding a stretcher up high above their heads, careful not to break anything on their way.

The doctor talked to a lady wearing a sophisticated suit, who then started spitting out questions to Gordon and the doctor himself. She identified herself as a homicide detective, but the doctor quickly explained that it was an attempted suicide. In the meantime, Orion was wrapped up on the stretcher and heaved into the shoulders of four paramedics, in a procession towards the ambulance downstairs. The detective only stayed for two minutes before feeling satisfied that it had really been far from a homicide. So, rather abruptly, she left alongside the ambulance in her personal car. The doctor then told Gordon that he, too, was leaving, promising to update him soon.

The next six weeks were nail-bitingly scary, but finally, Gordon's visits to the ITU had finally been made to stop. Doctor Marlow had been appointed as the surgery's leader, throwing himself into working on this sole patient. Undeniably, along with the rest of his skilled team, he did one hell of a job.

'Sir, it took me – and my fellow colleagues – two weeks to secure his brain into a safe place, with the help of numerous operations, of course. As you've probably seen from the previous papers, the chances of him surviving were only ten percent, and that only

because the bullet didn't directly hit the brain itself. I must say this to you now; I myself had never been appointed to carry out such an extensive operation.'

'But ... *what are the odds?* To shoot yourself in the eye -'

'Ah, but here's the thing; the human skull, contrasting the delicacy of its nature, is one hell of a hard nut to break. The bullet, unfortunately, did blow his eye off, meaning he will be blind from his left eye for the rest of his life, but the funny thing is that the bullet *slid* by his oculi bone, right here,' Marlow pointed at his own eye, 'and found its way to the backside of his head! He must have pointed the gun at an angle we can't possibly denote, at the moment. I must say, there's no explaining how lucky the boy was, sir. I'm still flabbergasted by all this. I think it's more common to spot a rainbow lobster rather than to see this; I mean, the bullet even fractured the temporal lobe, and that's really serious - that's where our emotions are processed.'

'With that being said, we did have to take some drastic measures in order to help keep the boy alive.'

Gordon, who hadn't slept for three consecutive nights just to sit outside the boy's room, prompted, 'W-what, doctor?'

'This,' he articulated, almost sadly. He walked slowly towards the opaque plastic curtains surrounding Orion's bed about two feet away. Marlow drew them to the side, allowing Gordon to see a sight so shocking that the old man almost fainted.