

# Slaughterhouse Heart

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Extract

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# 1

In London it's raining mulch, and James Hallow is being moved from St Dymphna's Hospital to St Margaret's Hospice. He lies in a nervous no man's land between the two places, not sure of anything but the drizzle on the ambulance windows. He sees ghosts outside the glass, suspended in a purgatory of rain, like dead rats pickled in laboratory jars. Like gobstoppers in jars on shelves.

It's dark, five p.m. winter dark, dark as the middle of the night. Streetlights pus pools of neon yellow; the evening is lit by cheap institutional light, is one big hospital.

James expects his breath to form a cloud above him, but it doesn't, and he remembers in a small voice that he is not outside. He is inside – an ambulance – strapped – to a bed on wheels – covered – in blankets. He pulls at a blanket, to be sure of it.

Oh. Oh. Something is coming for him, he knows it. There's a stranger's hand pressed into the small of his back, he can feel it. Darklings in the night, shadows in the day, waiting for him, wanting him.

This is the thing: James's brain is determinedly dying. His body resists, clutching at blankets at life in an unthinking panic. But his brain? – great clods of it are breaking away and squashing themselves against the inside of his skull.

The jigsaw of his brain has for some time been loose like this, faulty, jangling like a bunch of caretaker's keys. But in days past this only showed itself behind the closed doors of home, only pressed its angry thumbs into the flesh of those who stood inside, wife and child. Outside, for the most part, nobody could tell, nobody would know. There were bills paid, waste cans emptied, a job done. Only in the corridors of home did the loose brain lash out, and wound, and pull, and tyrannise.

For this James, the landscape has largely been a fog. There was the rare clear day, when eyes opened to the unexpected and blinding brilliance of the sun, to the filigree of leaves on branches, teeth in smiles, glistening like pearls, fresh from the water in the mouth of his son. Then the world pushed its glory in on him, every mote, every gravel of it, each song of the ice cream van, each whisper as a fingertip brushed over the gossamer pages of a bible. Good God, it was a spectacle

of incense and heather those days, a riot of retina, a carousel of loud, shouted life.

But then the mists would spectral back over the gorse, tendrils back through the damp Edwardian walls of the suburbs, and the party was over, the shapes receded back into their coffins, and life was, largely, a fog.

Why was this mould creeping up James's soul? Where did this damp rot start? After all, nobody's born this way.

Well. Here is a fat paramedic, a sorry advertisement for the health industry. Beside him is a folder, closed, and a clipboard, the clip of which holds down a form, all about James. We can read: TRANSFER FROM: *St Dymphna's Hospital*. TRANSFER TO: *St Margaret's Hospice*. PATIENT DETAILS: SURNAME: *Hallow*. GIVEN NAMES: *James Meredith*.

Then times, dates, smudges of glob from the biro.

OCCUPATION: *Retired*.

Retired.

Retired how? Retired from what?

A retired butcher is a different man from a retired baker or candlestick-maker. A retired tinker will not be the same person as a retired tailor, or soldier, or sailor.

*Retired* tells us nothing, and the fat paramedic's paper tells us nothing worth more. But the face tells. It's evident when you look at this face, dented and scuffed, what it has retired from. It is pummelled, poleaxed –

James Hallow has in his history taken some smacks. Bones broken many times over, bones almost flattened. His muscles have taken mashings, punches, splittings, and inflammations. His nose has been pressed hither, thither, sideways, and into its cavity.

James was, for too long, a boxer. Even though it's not, as they say, *rocket science*, no one official has yet put their finger on it – that this is what started the brain bawling and falling apart: the thumps to the head. From the guy in the other corner, with the gloves, the fists. Those cranial smashes – merciless – ding-ding-ding. Howling knuckles, crunching through the air. It seems obvious – Disney could not have drawn a cartoonishly clearer boxer's face than James's – and yet no doctor has thought to question the reasons for his craziness, to take a good look at the battered mug of him and do some sums.

A fine boxer James Hallow was, but a soft skull, a skull of soft, smashable bone. Crumbly, crashable cranium. His was a human head, made by God. And so, once, twice – three, four times – punches shaved skin away from his brain's surface, scuddering brainskin irretrievably into the puddle of his neck.

Nope, the doctors at St Dympna's, a hospital for the mad where, up until the moment of this ambulance journey, James has been a resident for three, almost four years, didn't think to go deducing. Didn't think to poke in the cracked, scuffed head. They are not as

curious as us. Nor need they be – one well-behaved lunatic is much the same as another, in terms of taxpayers' money. And now James is going to die, anyway. So.

*Parkinson's*, the doctors said, and then *Alzheimer's*, and then a few words were scribbled in the margin, like *paranoid* and *delusional*. When they saw the word *retired*, saw the lopsided, put 'em up face, they didn't think to ask, retired from what?

Were they to have done so, they would have done away with spectator sicknesses, and found that James's is a fighting disease:

Boxer's Dementia, *Dementia pugilistica*. They would have found that James is Punch Drunk.

Thirty-six years ago, before mental hospitals and medication or any such things were a part of his life, James's left foot flops behind him like dead wood as he walks back to the pub table. He sits, with a thump, drinks from his dark beer, and takes his tobacco pouch from his pocket. He must concentrate, now. He places a cigarette paper in his left hand, which is not steady, which is swaying from side to side like a scythe. This will take some attention. He pulls a small wad from the tobacco cluster, and holds it above the waiting, wobbling paper. He focuses, trying to slow the movement of his hand, and lets go of the tobacco pinch. It floats down into his palm and lands a neat centimetre

away from the paper, remaining in the shape pressed by his thumb and index finger. At the touch of it his left hand jumps like a frog, as if it has been scorched. The tobacco and paper drift to the table.

'Fuck it,' says James.

'You're pissed, mate,' says one of his companions. 'Yeah, and after one pint,' says the other. 'The middle-weight's more of a lightweight,' says the first one, and then they laugh.

James feels heat rushing to his face. 'Fuck off, both of you,' he says. 'I may have had a drink, but I'm not drunk.'

'Mate, you can barely walk straight,' says one. 'Yeah, do you want some help with that, mate?' says the other, motioning with his chin towards the unrolled cigarette, the paper and the tobacco resting humiliatingly on the table. And then they laugh.

James doses himself with beer. This shambling of the hand, and shimbling of the foot, it will pass, as it has passed before. It comes, this shameful dragging and quivering, and then it passes. He will cramp his fingers against the pub stool until it does, as it will, it will pass.

The mortification, though, may not pass with it. James's shame is a thing that sticks.

The trembling and bobbing of the left hand and dead wood no good left foot have happened too often now. They are a regularity, every other day. It makes no sense. He's not sick. And although not a boy, he's

nonetheless not yet left his prime – thirty-three and still winning fights. Maybe it's a trapped nerve, like before, when the nerve got pinched on the right side of his back. But that was a whole rage of pain, even into his toes, whereas there's no pain with this.

It will pass. He knows it will pass.

It will pass like urine into the water of his life. Already it has begun to seep.

*Dear God,*

says James before each match, in the dressing room, *I believe in you. Let me win this fight.*

This simple prayer has been said for seven years, and so the words are robotically gibbered. But now there is an add-on. A postscript which James prays more passionately than he has ever prayed anything:

*Dear God,*

says James, Prayer Mark 2,

*Make my hand stop shaking, and my foot stop dragging.*

This is a hard prayer. A fearful, confused prayer.

*Amen.*

Well, the hand didn't stop. The foot didn't stop. Say what you may about prayers prayed hard, but the hand and the foot got worse.

Everything got worse.

Until one morning the second hand finds James alone in the house, as he always is these days, because his wife is dead.



When he wakes, when his eyes open, there seems to be an indentation in the bed next to him, from where Hannah has just got up. There seems to be a curve down into the mattress, which must have held Hannah's body this night past, and now she must be downstairs making the tea and making the toast and opening up the curtains and windows, to get the air in.

Except, no. Because the curtains were never shut – the light comes in unfiltered, on to James's eyes. If Hannah were still here, she would have closed the curtains last night, so as to open them this morning.

But, no. The curtains are open, as they will be throughout the house.

And these days, now that Hannah is not here, the house feels sticky. The tabletop tacks to your fingers, and to plates and glasses. A few days ago, whenever it was, a glass with a stem stuck to the table, and when James tried to tug it free it snapped – snap! – like that. His fingers closed around the bulb, and it crushed itself. There were bits of the glass on the table, and bits sticking to his palm, although they didn't break his skin. They were just peppered there, like honeycomb.

Today is the same. The sheets feel fatty. The hollow is in the bed next to him, but no one was ever in it.

James goes out on to the street, in his coat. He walks slowly, because he believes that if he walks slowly the breakdown is less likely to come. He will walk to the

corner shop, where there is a nice man with dark skin and a moustache who helps him find his money. What James does is hold out the coins he's got, and the man takes what he needs, and James takes home juice and bread and sometimes a packet of ham.

He walks, sure at least of the steps in front of him, left, right, left, right, and of the fridge in the corner shop that has inside it ham, and cheese, and milk. But then, unexpected and perplexing, a football comes falling, and lands just to James's right, wedged between the pavement and the wheel of a car. James looks at it, and feels slightly afraid.

'Oi,' says a voice. 'Mate. Can you throw us our ball back?'

James sees a head and hands and body of a boy through the mesh of a fence.

The boy has stripes of facial hair streaked across his cheeks. The tip of his nose is raw and pinkish. The rest of his skin is fluorescent, chicken nugget white.

James looks at him, and then further back to the two other boys. One is in a cap. The other is in a football shirt, with vertical black and white stripes.

'Mate,' says the first boy, 'our ball. It's right there by your foot. Next to the car.'

This boy is nothing like his son. This boy is nothing like his Jamie.

'Bloody hell,' he says under his breath. 'Old nutter.' The other two laugh. He puts his hands around his

mouth like a loudspeaker. 'Could – you – throw – our ball – back—'

How different it is, the inside to the out.

James's inside: collects the ball in dread, a hostage to the fits and tremors that come as unpredictably as wasps. The inside wonders how – *how* – it will strike the ball over the fence, that is higher than a man. The inside with desperation chants, *God is beside me, God is beside me*, and thankfully does not stop to count the unanswered prayers of the past.

The outside: picks the ball up slowly, in one arm. Turns to the fence, and looks over it. Pitches the ball into the air, and watches it sail over.

'Nice one, granddad,' says the boy behind, in the cap.

They turn away from James, and begin their game again. Kicking the ball between them, heading it, knocking it with their chests.

James watches this gentle game, that does not seem competitive, even though the boys look so hard.

They are not at all like Jamie.

Why isn't Jamie playing this game?

Why doesn't James's head contain a single memory of his Jamie, playing, kicking, chasing, catching a ball?

James takes his two hands and places them, his fingers spread, on either side of his skull. He presses into his hard head.

One of the boys has noticed, and motions to the others. They look around, until the one with the

loudspeaker hands shrugs. They go back to their game.

James knows he must get home. He can no longer be outside. He cannot make it to the juice ham bread shop.

His hands shake unlocking the front door, but not with the palsy this time – with something closer to his central string. He drops the keys, twice, smatter, on to the ground.

Finally inside, he sits, on the left-hand side of the sofa, where he has always sat, although not always so alone, and the days take on the whitish wash of weeks and months, and everywhere James looks, these days weeks months, he sees flashes of his son.

For his son was in this house, once. Touched everything within it, watching, sitting, quietly, thinking, looking up at James with those eyes, hooded by lashes, but never playing.

He did all those things, but he never plays. Why?

James knows the answer, and he sees his Jamie everywhere.