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Andrew woke with a head that felt like someone was beating it with the short end of a long stick and a tongue like sandpaper and a mouth of sawdust. His body felt like it had been out partying all night which, in a way, he guessed it had been. But, mercifully the ceiling was back where it belonged and there was no sign of blood, no evidence of the epileptic voyeurism of the night before.

“A dream. A bloody dream,” he said to Mr. Spider who still sat nestled in his web. Mr Spider offered no response. He relief was immediate because, while he could still remember the horror of what he saw, it had only been a dream and a dream was manageable.

Andrew rubbed his eyes, gave another soul-deep sigh and swung his legs over the side of his bed and sat up. Unfortunately, at the same moment, the room decided to tilt uncharacteristically to the side and Andrew dropped to his knees as the his gorge rose to meet him and his mouth suddenly wasn't so dry. Clamping his hand to his mouth, Andrew fought the urge to vomit and crawl-walked to the bathroom making it just in time before bringing up whatever it was he had eaten the day before.

He rested his cheek against the toilet seat, relishing the cool of the ceramic despite the knowledge he hadn't cleaned the thing in weeks. From where he knelt, he could see the single remaining can of the six-pack from the day before, an unblemished totem of promised relief standing next to the crumpled bodies of its fallen brothers. Andrew absently rubbed at his mouth, closing his eyes. It was one of life's bitter ironies that one of the better cures for a hangover was to embrace more of what brought it on.

Unbidden, an image of his mother came to mind, watery eyes

staring at him from between the curtain of lank hair. Words mumbled. Guards waiting at the edges of the room, sedatives at the ready.

He shook his head slowly got to his feet and then stumbled towards the small table where the can stood resolute. He used the headache and queasy slurring in his stomach as motivation for what had to come next.

Quickly, he grabbed the can and the empty husks of the others and swept them into the nearly overflowing garbage bag lying on the floor next to the table. He scanned the room for any other temptations, and spied a nearly empty bottle of Tequila on its side and peeking out from under his bed. He stumbled over, scooped it up and threw it in the bag, pulled the garbage shute open which is to say he pulled the window open above the tiny dining table that was situated conveniently above the large industrial garbage bins that sat at the back of the Takeaways below. It was one of the few luxuries his single room apartment enjoyed. He pushed the garbage bag through and let go, pulling the window shut before he heard the impact below.

Satisfied, he rubbed a hand over his face, and realised he had broken out in a light sweat.

He caught his reflection in the small cracked mirror. Another Andrew stared back at him. And Andrew that looked undernourished and like he hadn't slept in days. Brown hair that needed a trim hung over his forehead, the more youthful version of his mother's though it almost looked like they had the same hairdresser.

He looked away.

One of these days he was going to address the drinking. And one of these days he was also going to get a real job and get a real apartment and start living a real life. He didn't think one of those days was going to be this day. But maybe he could at least start off the process with a shower.

His eyes passed over the digital clock next to the bed. It read twenty past nine.

"Crap!" He yelled to the clock, which responded by lazily blinking over to twenty-one past nine. He was late for work.

He hurriedly slipped on his shoes, grabbed his wallet, and headed out the door.

The shower, and his fresh start, would have to wait.

The bus ride was about as pleasant as bus rides could get, which was

to say it was not that pleasant at all. Too crowded and some kids behind him were laughing and joking loudly in that annoying self-conscious way that teenagers had when they wanted everyone, including themselves, to know that they were having fun and didn't care what anyone else thought.

One girl's voice, a boy had called her Asia which was probably spelt with a 'Z' by the sound of her, was particularly annoying, her voice pitched in a particularly grating teenage girl range. Apparently Jessica was getting with Duncan, even though Duncan was supposed to be with Amy. But, it didn't matter anyway because Amy was a slut and had been working her way around the the year eleven boys so she deserved it. Snigger snigger snigger.

Andrew tried to zone out as the bus rocked and swayed.

What were these kids doing on the bus anyway? School had started nearly an hour ago.

Not that Andrew could talk. Work had started nearly an hour ago too and yet here he was, on the bus swaying along in a cloud of teenage hormones, and the unique musk of the overweight guy sitting next to him.

He had a strange thought as he swayed along, his overweight seat companion's body heat being pressed against him and becoming a bit too intimate for Andrew's liking as the bus went around a bend. The bus could quite suitably represent his life, a journey lead by others and with companions he hadn't asked for going to a place he hadn't ever planned on getting to.

Again, his mother came to mind. A woman he could barely remember before she had been locked up, a crazy woman. A father that he could barely remember before he was murdered. A life that he was sure could have been quite different from the one that he was currently inhabiting.

"Sheesh, depressed much?" Andrew said to himself.

"Sorry?" Overweight guy looked at him over his beefy shoulder.

"Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself."

Overweight guy gave him a quizzical look before returning his attention to the newspaper he was juggling with a meat pie.

He needed to get out of this funk. It had descended yesterday, after leaving his mother. A grey cloud that got deeper and darker as the evening and wore on. A pretty crappy birthday, all in all.

Andrew looked out the window to distract himself. It was actually a nice day, blue sky, sun shining, but nice breeze. But, that janitor in the

basement in his head could be a real prick sometimes, hiding what you wanted, and pulling up what you didn't, so when the bus drove past a stop with a boy sitting in it who had just the right shade of blonde hair the janitor downstairs decided to replay the images from the dream the night before.

Andrew found himself gripping the back of the seat in front, watching the boy at the stop sitting passively, but now a large bone was jammed in his mouth, his eyes were wide with terror and instead of a school uniform he was naked, and bleeding, and coming apart in all sorts of ways.

Andrew squeezed his eyes shut and tried to breath.

Not real. Not real. He whispered in his head, trying to drown out those gears that wouldn't stop turning.

Where had that come from? It was like no dream he had ever had before. The clarity, how long it had lasted, how real it had felt. His dreams usually faded the second he opened his eyes. This one was lingering, carrying with it a feeling of dread that had settled deep in his gut with images that had got caught in the gears in his head and were now getting churned over steadily.

Not real. Just a dream.

Unfortunately, this was only the beginning of the Andrew's journey and life had decided to conspire with the prick in his head so the overweight guy shifted as he turned the page on the newspaper, some pie crust crumbling onto Andrew's lap. As he did so, the front page of the newspaper came into Andrew's view for the first time.

BOY PRESUMED DEAD.

Andrew's eyes honed in on the image, a school photo next to the headline. Blonde hair framing a smiling cherubic face. Blue 'the world's my oyster' eyes staring back at him. Andrew had seen those eyes with a different look, though, and there would be no more oysters in the sea for that little boy.

Andrew's breathing became laboured, his knuckles whitening on the seat in front as he leaned a little closer.

Jeremy Lakeland, 10, missing since last week, is now presumed dead, officers report. His schoolbag, along with some bloodied clothing were found on the shore of XXX yesterday afternoon. The investigation has now been turned over to the homicide squad.

"Buddy, do you mind?" Overweight guy said.

Andrew ignored him, five words repeatedly running through his head, the gears in his head gnawing at them like a fevered dog with a

bone.

Jeremy Lakeland. NOT A DREAM!

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Jeremy Lakeland. NOT A DREAM!

"Huh?" Overweight guy had turned to Andrew now, uncertainty in his face.

"Not a dream," Andrew mumbled.

"You okay mate? You don't look s-" The guy's eyes widened as he saw what was coming while knowing that there was no chance of him doing anything about it.

Andrew brought up the burgers from the previous night, sending it over the rising arm of overweight man, and into the smiling face of Jeremy Lakeland, the boy who hadn't been a dream.