

SYMPTOMS OF DECAY

Written by
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INT. BECKFORD NURSING HOME - RECEPTION - DAY

LONDON, 1943.

Eyes open.

PETER HAYWARD (12) lays flat on a collection of loose foldable chairs, waking up from a brief moment of rest.

Peter is a thin boy, blissfully unaware of the splotch of dirt on his nose. He rubs his eyes unenthusiastically.

MARTHA (O.S.)

Sit up, Peter!

Peter turns towards his mother. MARTHA HAYWARD (32), a slender woman with a perpetually nervous fidget, stands sternly by the reception desk. She wears tinted sunglasses despite being indoors.

Martha is speaking with the head nurse, ELEANOR GOODMAN (48). Eleanor stands with perfect posture; her chin held high and her arms behind her back. Impossible to get a read.

Both Martha and Eleanor stare at Peter disappointingly. He composes himself and sits up straight. Martha resumes her conversation with Eleanor.

MARTHA (cont'd)

(stuttering)

I just-- I can't deal with this behavior any longer. He has no regard for his actions. None. And-- and I am afraid that he is not maturing quite fast enough. With everything going on...

ELEANOR

Of course, Martha. The boy needs a stern hand. And, quite frankly, We could use the help. Beckford has seen better days.

Peter rolls his eyes and looks elsewhere, getting a better sense of his new environment. A converted Victorian workhouse, the Beckford Nursing Home is in rough shape.

Beige brick walls give way to an endless corridor, the paint scratched and stained. The hallway is tight and narrow, the sides converging but never quite meeting. A high ceiling that's discolored and damp, an imminent threat of collapse. With dust rising from the wooden floor, illuminated by harsh hanging lights. A hospital-like atmosphere -- there's a sickness in its attempted sterility.

MARTHA

Thank you, Ms. Goodman. I-- I do really appreciate it.

ELEANOR

Pleasure is all ours, dear. We are happy to put the boy to work.

COUGH! COUGH! COUGH!

Peter is distracted by the distant sound of someone's cough. He stands up from his seat and seeks out the wretched source.

As Peter makes his way across the hall, Eleanor and Martha can be heard faintly in the background.

MARTHA (O.S.)

Has Beckford been effected much by the war?

ELEANOR (O.S.)

Oh dear, yes. Most of our nurses have been called on to aid in the war effort. *Some* have been moved to local hospitals. *Others* sent to base camps to serve in medical tents. There's only a few of us left here, at the moment.

Peter approaches a resident's room. He puts his ear to the door. The sound of a sickly, haggard old cough grows louder. The kind that's accentuated by a breathless wheeze.

Curious, Peter nudges open the door. He peaks inside through the crack. There's a SICK OLD LADY strapped to a rocking chair. She coughs uncontrollably as she sways back and forth. No effort to cover her mouth, her retching pollutes the entire room.

Eleanor and Martha continue to talk in the background:

MARTHA (O.S.)

I see. That must be very difficult. And as-- as far as the residents here at Beckford?

ELEANOR (O.S.)

More than we can manage, I'm afraid. Wounded soldiers have taken priority at all our hospitals. Them and other victims of the air raids. Yes, all the elders have been displaced from their medical care.

(MORE)

ELEANOR (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Where else for them to go but here?
And we haven't hardly the space
anymore.

Peter begins to analyze the Sick Old Lady's features: she's got thin white hair that only barely conceals her scalp; loose skin comparable to that of a rotted prune; frail arms with each pronounced vein twisted like a spider's web; makeup carelessly smeared across her dejected face. And that cough...

She is decaying.

INTERCUT with images of Peter's own physical features. His hands. His hair. His face. His body-

MARTHA (O.S.)
Peter! Get back here! NOW!

Peter is startled.

He takes one last horrified look at the Sick Old Lady before returning to his mother. He immediately employs his best attempt at puppy-dog-eyes.

Martha walks to the open lobby doors. Finally, she turns around to face Peter as she spastically adjusts her scarf.

MARTHA (cont'd)
(stern)
Now, you are to stay here all day and
do whatever Ms. Goodman tells you.
Understood?

PETER
Yes, Mum. But-

MARTHA
No "buts." I don't want to hear it,
Peter.

PETER
You don't understand, Mum. I-

MARTHA
This is a punishment. There is
nothing more to understand. What were
you thinking? Playing hide and seek
in a crater...

PETER
It wasn't even my idea, Mum. Honest.
Martin put me up to it!

MARTHA

I don't care whose idea it was. It was juvenile and dangerous. Richmond was bombed not two weeks ago. And you thought it wise to play around in its ruins? Who's to say it wouldn't be targeted again?

PETER

It was just a bit of fun, Mum.

MARTHA

People died, Peter.

(beat)

Look around you. These people here- they got to live full lives.

Peter looks around. He catches another glimpse of the Sick Old Lady through the crack he had left in the door. She coughs. He winces.

PETER

Mum, please. I really don't like it here. I want to go home.

Beat.

MARTHA

I will pick you up at the end of the day.

Martha turns towards the door. Peter impulsively reaches for her arm, pulling her in, begging her not to leave.

The sudden jolt causes Martha's sunglasses to fall from her face, landing on the ground by her feet. Frantically, she kneels to recover them.

Before putting her sunglasses back on, she comes face to face with Peter. Their eyes meet. Peter inhales sharply as he discovers what she had been hiding...

Martha's eye is swollen and black.

MARTHA (cont'd)

(angry; under her
breath)

Look what you've done. Now, you listen to me, Peter. Actions have consequences; consequences that can not be forgotten.

(beat)

That is why you are here. I expect you to take something from today.

(MORE)

MARTHA (CONT'D)
Because we all have to grow up
sometime.

Martha looks around self-consciously, making sure no one else had seen her bruised face.

She takes a POCKET MIRROR out from her crochet bag. She opens it and takes a moment to see herself in its reflection. She pauses, as though suddenly hypnotized. A moment of unskewed reality sets in.

Beat.

Finally, Martha puts her sunglasses back on her face and adjusts them. Her injury is properly concealed. She snaps the pocket mirror shut; the explosive sound rings through the long hallway.

Martha stands back up. She walks out the open doors, turning back towards Peter for one last time.

MARTHA (cont'd)
Goodbye, Peter.

Peter takes a few steps forward.

PETER
Please, Mum. Please don't go.

It's no use. Martha continues down the front path. Peter watches longingly as his mother disappears into the thick London fog. A swirling nightmarish mist. She's no longer visible; yet, he can't look away.

Eleanor approaches, slowly closing the lobby doors. They shut forcefully. Eleanor towers over Peter.

ELEANOR
Hello, Peter.

An unnerving smile creeps across her face.

ELEANOR (cont'd)
Please, come with me.

INT. BECKFORD NURSING HOME - SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY - DAY

Eleanor leads Peter down the hall. Her MEDIUM HEEL NURSING SHOES echo throughout the empty corridor.

They walk past door after door after door, all of which are indistinguishable from the next. Peter grows progressively more weary with each passing room.

PETER

Are they...

ELEANOR

Are they what? The rooms?

Peter looks towards Eleanor, frightened.

ELEANOR (cont'd)

Yes, there is one resident per room.
For now, at least.

PETER

And they just stay in there all day?

ELEANOR

We don't quite have the supervision
to let them roam about, now do we?
Most of them are confined to their
rooms, yes. Many of our residents
have a proclivity for wandering about
unwanted places. We tend to strap
those of them down, just to be safe.

Peter's walk slowly comes to a stall as a room draws his attention. The room is no different from the others; yet, there's a mysterious gravitational force pulling him in close. An eerie familiarity...

This is ROOM 23.

Peter approaches cautiously as Eleanor's voice begins to trail off.

ELEANOR (cont'd)

Ideally, with more staff, we'd allow
for some of our residents to spend
time in the recreational rooms but...

Peter brings his face to the door light. A small window into the cold, dark room. Goosepimples form on the top of Peter's arms. He senses something within.

Finally, he's able to make out a dark silhouette. A tall figure. Creature-like. Motionless. Unblinking. Milky white eyes staring back at him from the inside.

The door begins to creak open...

ELEANOR (cont'd)

Is something the matter, Peter?

Peter jumps.

PETER

Oh! No. Sorry, I thought I saw something.

ELEANOR

Ah yes, room 23. I believe those are Mr. Normand's quarters. Pay him no mind. He is completely harmless.

Peter looks back towards the door light. Whatever he thought he saw was no longer there.

ELEANOR (cont'd)

We don't have all day, Peter. Come along. You've got work to do.

Peter moves away from the door and catches up with Eleanor.

PETER

Excuse me, ma'am, but what is it that I am to be doing, exactly?

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. BECKFORD NURSING HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Peter, now sporting a hairnet, looks down the barrel of a big tub filled with mushy porridge. An anemic gruel.

He presses a spoon into the questionable food, watching it slowly sink. Eventually, the spoon firms up, as though pressed into wet cement. He flicks the spoon for good measure, concerned by how sturdy its placed.

PETER

(to himself)

Yuck.

Peter takes a nice hefty scoop of the porridge and messily plops it into one of many laid out Styrofoam bowls.

INT. BECKFORD NURSING HOME - KITCHEN - LATER

Upon completing his task, Peter decides to scavenge. He goes through each kitchen cabinet, looking for something slightly more edible. Most cabinets are empty. As is the fridge.

Finally, Peter kicks over a chair and opens one last cabinet. He discovers a familiar jar pushed to the very far back. His eyes light up with wonder..

He climbs on to the counter and reaches inside, pulling out a sweet he hasn't seen in some time. It's STRAWBERRY JAM.

Without hesitation, Peter tosses the lid to the floor and sticks his fingers directly into the jar. He takes out a hefty scoop of jam and brings it directly to his mouth. His eyes closed, he experiences a moment of pure euphoria. It has been too long.

When his eyes open, he notices a CANDLESTICK TELEPHONE situated on a table near the window. Peter hops off the counter, jam in hand, and goes to make a call.

Peter dials a number and clears his throat. He phones his best friend and partner in crime, MARTIN CROMWELL (12). Martin is a Jewish immigrant from Poland with a discernible accent.

Over the phone, every so often, a THUD can be heard.

MARTIN (O.S.)

Hello?

THUD.

PETER

(deepening his voice)

Is this the Cromwell residence? This is Barry, your gardener. How are your shrubs?

MARTIN (O.S.)

Very good, Peter.

THUD.

PETER

You all right, Martin?

MARTIN (O.S.)

Yeah, you?

Peter looks outside while on the phone, fascinated by the billowing fog. Mysteriously, he can almost make out faint whispers coming from beyond the window.

PETER

Not really. Mum's made me volunteer at some old persons place.

THUD.

PETER (cont'd)

What's that noise?

MARTIN (O.S.)
I'm bouncing a rubber ball against my door.

PETER
Well, stop that. I need you to come rescue me from Beckford Nursing Home.

MARTIN (O.S.)
You're not the only one in trouble, you know? My Mum has me locked in the house.

PETER
It was your fault, to be fair.

MARTIN (O.S.)
Yeah, well, I told my Mum it was yours...

PETER
Brilliant.

Peter takes another big scoop of jam as he notices an AMBULANCE stationed at the entrance to Beckford.

His lips smack as he eats.

MARTIN (O.S.)
Looks like I'm not going anywh-
(beat)
Are you eating?

PETER
Mmhm.

MARTIN (O.S.)
What?

PETER
(mouth full)
Jam.

Now, Peter can vaguely make out the sight of two PARAMEDICS carrying a CADAVER POUCH out of Beckford. It looks heavy.

MARTIN (O.S.)
They have jam over there?

PETER
Mmhm.

MARTIN (O.S.)
It's not for the old folks?

PETER
They've had plenty, I'm sure. Their
taste buds are all rotted, anyways.

MARTIN (O.S.)
Beckford Nursing Home, you said?

PETER
Mhm.

MARTIN (O.S.)
Alright, see you in a bit.

PETER
Thought so.

ELEANOR (O.S.)
Peter!

Eleanor calls to Peter from outside the kitchen before entering. Peter instinctively hangs up the phone and hides the jam behind his back, his mouth still full.

Eleanor approaches Peter.

ELEANOR (cont'd)
What are you doing over there?

Peter shrugs.

ELEANOR (cont'd)
Well go on then.

He gives Eleanor a confused look.

ELEANOR (cont'd)
You can't expect the residents to
come pick up their food, now do you?

Peter's face drops.

**INT. BECKFORD NURSING HOME - SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY/RESIDENT'S
ROOM - DAY**

Begrudgingly, Peter rolls a trolley down the hallway carrying all the bowls of porridge. He stops in front of a room.

Beat.

Peter prepares himself. He grabs a bowl. Takes the deepest of breaths. Turns the doorknob. And GO!

He runs into the room. Haphazardly drops the porridge on the nightstand. Avoids looking at the resident entirely. And quickly retreats back to the trolley, slamming the door behind him. Record time.

He exhales.

Relieved, having effectively avoided inhaling any of the elderly fumes within, he pants and catches his breath.

Finally, Peter turns around and plots his next delivery. But he's stopped dead in his tracks. It's not just any room -- It's ROOM 23.

A chill runs down his spine. He grabs a Styrofoam bowl, visible shaking, his knuckles a pale white.

He approaches the door, placing his hand around the doorknob, making a concerted effort not to look through the door light.

He opens the door slowly. He takes a deep breath...

And he enters.

INT. BECKFORD NURSING HOME - ROOM 23 - CONTINUED

Only small beams of light shine through the closed blinds. Peter is able to make out a bed to his side, a large, strapped down lump underneath the covers. The lump rises and falls with each breath. It must be MR. NORMAND.

Peter enters the room, quietly tip toeing. He walks past the bed and places the porridge on the parallel vanity.

Along the vanity, there are a few intriguing knickknacks. Household trinkets and personal items scattered about. Peter is particularly fascinated by a radio, a model of which he does not recognize. He turns a few knobs to no effect.

Peter moves on to the next item of interest; a BOX placed in the center of the vanity. The box is old, dark and ratty. There's a laminated poem on its top:

*"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep."
- Robert Frost*

Peter goes to inspect the box when...

CKSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

The radio suddenly turns on, emitting a loud staticky noise. Peter rushes over to the radio. He turns every knob. Presses every button. It doesn't work. The static only grows louder.

Peter panics. He unplugs the radio. He hits the radio. But the noise continues. He hits harder and harder, until abruptly...

It stops.

Beat.

MR. NORMAND (O.S.)
Why are you here?

Peter spins around, finding that Mr. Normand is no longer strapped to his bed. Mr. Normand stands ominously in the corner of the room, shielded from any sort of light.

Peter is too stunned to speak. That is no man. Whatever it is -- it's like nothing he's ever seen.

Though the room is dark, the subhuman shape of a creature can be made out. Unnaturally tall with a hunch, his spine grazes against the ceiling. His arms are long and sharp, with his skeletal fingers laying flat on the floor. He's covered in cysts. Boils. Blemishes. Skin that looks heavy, dropping off his bones like a thick molasses. And a thin white gown draped over his body.

A gratuitous display of an aging man.

He speaks in stilted sentences, with an old crackly voice:

MR. NORMAND (cont'd)
Why are you here?

PETER
(terrified)
S- sorry, sir. I didn't mean to wake you. I was just-

MR. NORMAND
Been so long.

PETER
I was just- just bringing you some food, sir.

MR. NORMAND
Don't understand.

PETER
Food, sir. I brought you some food.

MR. NORMAND

No. No no no. Why are you here?

PETER

I'm just here to volunteer for the
day...

Beat.

Suddenly, the static from the radio turns on again. It's difficult to make out any particular sounds, but there is a wailing sound muddled behind the static. Almost like a siren.

Mr. Normand looks off, having lost his train of thought.

MR. NORMAND

Where have I gone?

Peter makes slow movement towards the door, walking on eggshells.

PETER

Beckford, sir.

MR. NORMAND

Don't understand.

Mr. Normand begins hitting his head with the palm of his hand. There's panic in his unpredictability.

PETER

Sir?

MR. NORMAND

Don't understand. Don't understand.
Don't understand. Don't understand.

Each blow to his head gets progressively harder. Bang. Bang. Bang. BANG. BANG. BANG.

PETER

Why- why don't I go fetch the Head
Nurse...

Suddenly, Mr. Normand goes completely still. As does Peter.

Beat.

Mr. Normand jolts forward. The light from behind the blinds cut through his grotesque figure. Details of his body seen in quick flashes. He extends his arms, reaching for Peter.

Peter bolts for the door. He narrowly avoids Mr. Normand's grasp. He turns the doorknob, frantically. Mr. Normand's close behind him. He opens the door and steps through...

TRANSITION TO:

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT - MEMORY

...but he is not in Beckford Nursing Home anymore.

Peter manages a couple extra steps before losing his footing and falling over. A jarring transition from hard floor to the soft mossy ground of the woods.

From the ground, Peter looks up, stupefied by his sudden change in environment. There are trees for as far as the eye can see, shimmering in the dark and windy night.

Peter shivers. His breathing becomes heavy as he questions his reality. His heart racing. Scared and confused. His eyes dart back and forth; scanning the area.

Suddenly, Peter hears approaching footsteps. He jumps to his feet and takes cover behind two tall trees.

Once safely concealed, Peter peaks his head out from the gap between the trees.

Mr. Normand stands perfectly still in the distance. Nude. He stares aimlessly at the ground. Barely illuminated by the moonlight.

HELEN (O.S.)

Oh my God.

Peter turns his head. He sees an elderly woman, HELEN (79), emerging from the woods. She has a cane in one hand, and a bag full of clothes in the other.

HELEN (cont'd)

Are you alright?

Mr. Normand turns around to face Helen.

HELEN (cont'd)

Jesus.

(beat)

You gave us quite the scare. We've been looking for hours.

Mr. Normand stares at Helen blankly.

HELEN (cont'd)
It's me, honey. It's Helen.

Again, no reaction.

HELEN (cont'd)
We brought you some clothes. God, you
must be freezing.

Helen extends her arm with the bag full of clothes. Mr.
Normand hesitates.

HELEN (cont'd)
(emotional)
It's Helen. Please, just come back
home. Don't you want to come back
home?

MR. NORMAND
Home?

HELEN
Yes. Home. Me and you. Don't you
recognize me?

The trees whistle in the breeze.

HELEN (cont'd)
What are we doing out here?

MR. NORMAND
Searching.

HELEN
Searching? Searching for what?

Suddenly, flashlights emerge from behind Helen. It appears
there was an entire search party looking for Mr. Normand,
composed of POLICE OFFICERS and GOOD SAMARITANS.

POLICE OFFICER (O.S.)
Helen's found him!

Overwhelmed, Mr. Normand takes a defensive step backwards.
Helen steps forward, hoping to comfort him. She looks into
his eyes and can finally see...

He hasn't the slightest idea of who she is.

Helen's head drops as a tear rolls down her cheek. Fog begins
to accumulate by her feet.

HELEN
I'll miss you.

The search party surrounds Mr. Normand, their flashlights all pointed at his horrific body. He attempts to shield himself from the light.

Suddenly, the sound of a child's laughter catches Peter's attention. It's a wild, uninhibited laugh. Peter looks behind him, but there's no one there.

Meanwhile, all the commotion surrounding Mr. Normand goes quiet. Peter looks back between the trees and notices that no one is moving. And Mr. Normand is staring right at him.

Mr. Normand scurries out of view. Peter takes a couple steps backwards.

INSTANTLY, Mr. Normand steps back into view; now, right in front of Peter, peaking out from behind the trees.

MR. NORMAND
(whisper)
Found you.

Peter immediately runs, zigging through the trees and letting out sporadic screams. He flies through the woods, checking over his shoulder. But Mr. Normand doesn't chase him. He stands still. Staring.

Nevertheless, Peter does not stop. He continues to run until...

TRANSITION TO:

INT. BECKFORD NURSING HOME - SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY - DAY

...he emerges out of ROOM 23. Peter runs face first into his trolley, knocking over the remaining bowls of porridge.

Peter quickly reorients himself. He turns onto his back, looking into the room. Mr. Normand's silhouette can be made out in the darkness. It approaches.

Peter rushes to his feet, slipping and sliding over the spilled porridge. Finally, he manages to push past the slimy mess and sprint down the hallway.

Coincidentally, Peter runs past Eleanor.

ELEANOR
Peter?

Peter pays her no mind. He keep running.

Meanwhile, Eleanor approaches the spilled food. She shakes her head disapprovingly. She turns towards Room 23.

She sees Mr. Normand and puts her hands on her hips. She speaks to Mr. Normand the same way one might scold a child.

ELEANOR (cont'd)
Mr. Normand, did you scare that poor
boy?

No response.

His hand emerges from the darkness and grabs hold of the doorknob. He slowly closes his door shut.

[...]