

DREAMS OF THE LOST CHILDREN

by James Miller

I was nine years old when my brother disappeared. He was twelve. He disappeared one week before his thirteenth birthday. I remember that summer. Hot and still, the endless blue expanse of the sky, the hiss and chip of crickets in the long grass. The corn in the fields beyond our house grew so tall, the stems swaying slightly in the faintest of breezes. The strong, sticky smells, the seeds that clung to my socks and shirt as we ran through the fields. The corn would rub and scratch my bare arms and legs, covering me in faint red marks, like the memory of a language I'd almost forgotten to speak. I remember watching the sky for UFOs, but we never saw any, just the high trails of aeroplanes and large black birds circling on endless currents and swirls of hot air. I remember that summer, the heat like a vibration, a white-noise hum like the dry rustle of insect wings, a pulse in tune to the warm blood rush in my head.

The night before he disappeared, my brother – Jason – that was his name, he came to my room and sat on the edge of my bed. It was still early, I remember, still light outside. Mummy and Daddy had friends for a dinner party and we could hear their voices, in the garden, the odd burst of laughter. They always sounded funny, Mummy and Daddy, the grown-ups, when they were together, talking to each other when we weren't there, when they thought there were no children to hear them. Their

voices were different. Part of me was scared of what I might hear them say.

Jason sat on the edge of my bed and he looked at me. "I'm going away tomorrow William," he said, his voice sad and serious.

"Why?"

He didn't say anything for a while and then he said, "I just have to."

"Where are you going?"

"I can't really tell you." He picked up one of my teddies and held it for a moment. "I just know that I have to go. The lost boys want me now. It's better this way. No one is ever sad, in this place, and no one ever gets hurt or gets old. You mustn't worry about me." He put Teddy down and hugged me. "One day you'll be able to join me, I promise." He waved goodbye and closed the bedroom door. In the morning, he was gone, the imprint of his body fading in the tangled sheets of his bed.

Daddy was out most of the next day, walking around the village, going through the fields with a stick. "Jason, Jason," I could hear my Daddy, shouting his name, his voice and my brother's name getting fainter and fainter. I sat in the kitchen with Mummy. She started crying and it upset me. I loved Mummy and she wasn't supposed to cry. I held out my hand to try and stop her crying, but she knocked my hand away.

One day became two and two soon became a week. Still Jason didn't come back. The days grew hotter. A stillness seemed to fill the

house, a tension, objects somehow closer and tighter, on the verge of becoming something else.

There had been no rain for so long that the river that ran through the middle of the village became very low, a single muddy trickle, and people started finding things that they'd lost, or thrown away, washed up in the dirty banks. They would come, each morning, with trolleys and sacks, wading through the mud, loading up everything they found and taking the objects home to be cleaned and returned to their rightful places: odd bits of furniture that had belonged to a dead grandparent, the wardrobe given as a wedding present, years ago, heavy old televisions with broken screens, a globe bought from an antiques market years ago, exotic carpets from an almost forgotten holiday, broken china inherited from a distant uncle, all sorts of things, pictures of first loves, books signed by school friends. People would cry, when they found certain items, falling to their knees and grovelling in the mud, shouting and weeping, as if they'd found the most precious thing in the whole world, even if it was just a vase for flowers, an old coat or hat.

I wanted to go and look for Jason, in case he was in the river, in case he had been washed up in the mud and sat there, on the riverbank, dirty and alone, waiting for us.

Mummy and Daddy wouldn't hear of it. They had started to take things from his room. Small things at first – one of his toy cars, bits of his clothes, a school book – burning them in the garden as the sun went down. Each day, another item was burnt. Eventually, everything was gone

– all of his clothes, his posters of cars and dinosaurs, his books and comics – and there was nothing left in his room but a bare bed, an empty wardrobe, a desk with nothing on it, a chair in the corner. Soon those things were gone as well. My parents never spoke about him anymore and I think they wanted me to forget him. All the photographs of him were gone too, just empty spaces now in the family albums, empty frames on the mantelpiece.

Mummy would kiss me each night, as I lay in bed. “I love you William,” she would say, her lips brushing the top of my head.

Grandma and Grandpa would come for lunch. Grandma gave me sweets when Mummy wasn’t looking. We ate lunch in the garden and talked about the sunny weather.

Sometimes I dreamed he was in the garden, playing with the other children, moonlight white on their skin. I wish they would let me join them, but whenever I sat up and ran to the window, whenever I did, the lawn was always empty. Even his old football was gone.

All that summer children kept disappearing. Later, much later, they started to find the bones, in drained reservoirs and dark spaces deep in the woods, in broken down houses and trash filled garages, they found the bones.