

Under The Midnight Sun

By Christian Fennell

Oh fuck no.

He lifts his head from a thick and darkening pool of his own blood and the pain rushes forward.

He spits dirt and gravel from his mouth and he brushes away bits of it stuck to the side of his face and he sits up and rests his arms on his knees and leans forward and closes his eyes and exhales.

He opens his eyes—RVs are driving by. A long line of em.

He hangs his head and pukes, mostly blood. He lifts his head—there's a car, a dribble of spit and blood hangs from his lower lip.

A man with dark hair is driving, a woman with long dark hair sitting next to him, and there's a young girl and a young boy in the back.

The girl presses the flat of her hands to the glass. "Oh, Momma, look."

The woman looks.

And he can see the woman's beautiful blue eyes.

"Don't look."

"But, Momma, look."

"Tell her, don't look."

"I did. Don't look."

"But, Momma, look."

"Tell her—"

"Don't look."

He flicks away the spit and blood and hangs his head and pukes again.

He looks up and takes his smokes from his shirt pocket and tips the box over his hand and half a joint falls out. He lights it up and smokes it down watching the RVs driving by.

Writing Raw

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The pain is sharp and throbbing and another joint would help. He'd like to stand, but he's not sure if he can. He'd like the RVs to stop, but they won't.

A pickup pulls off the road and stops and a thin kid with long dark hair walks to the back of the truck.

"You got somethin' to smoke?"

"You mean, like—"

"Yeah."

The kid reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a joint. "Right here and ready to go." He fires it up and takes a pull. He holds the smoke. He exhales. "Dude, you look so totally fucked up."

He reaches up.

The kid steps forward and hands him the joint.

He closes his eyes and inhales.

The kid looks back at the distant outline of the big town lights. Poor fucker, I wonder what the deal is? He looks again at the man. "I'd take you back there, but I don't got the time."

"You got anything to drink?"

"I gotta couple beers in the truck. You want one?"

"Yeah."

He closes his eyes and takes another hit. He opens his eyes and the kid is there, standing before him with a cold can of beer.

He reaches up and takes it. "Thanks." He tips back the beer and tries to swallow. It hurts like hell. He lowers the beer and takes a last hit on the joint and drops the thin stained nub of rolling paper to the ground and looks back up at the kid. "You need to be careful."

"What the fuck are you talkin' about?"

"A road like this can be dangerous."

"Whatever, dude. Later."

"I'm just sayin—" He watches the kid get back in the truck and wait to cut back into the

long line of RVs.

The beer and the joint have helped and the pain seems to have receded and his mind moved forward.

Try and stand.

His legs are unsteady and he widens his stance to brace himself against the rushing air of the passing RVs. The front of his white shirt ruffling in the moving air, the back of it soaked with blood. He lifts his head and closes his eyes to feel the wind against his face and his equilibrium drops out and he falls.

He wakes and runs the back of his hand over his mouth.

In the back pocket of his jeans his phone vibrates.

He tries to sit, but he can't, and so he digs his hands into the dirt for a purchase by which to pull himself up, and he does. He drags his feet over the ground and he leans forward resting his arms on his knees. His breathing is slow and thin, his heart is racing. He desperately wants to stand again—and he tries, over and over, draining the last of his strength, increasing the pounding pain in his head.

On his knees resting against the heels of his boots with his hands spread on his thighs he looks back towards the lights of the big town and farther south of that, back to where he once was among the slash and burn of so many sharp declines, the going heavy with the darkness there, always coming, and then the certainty of it coming, with little to do, he realized soon enough, but wait and keep walking.

He closes his eyes and in his mind he can see the RVs stretching out on the road as far as his mind can see.

He opens his eyes.

A biker pulls off the road and stops. He is an older man with long gray hair tied in a ponytail. "Everythin' all right?"

He doesn't answer.

The biker turns the engine off and sets the kickstand. "Is there anythin' I can do?"

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His phone vibrates.

"I think your phone is ringin'. Can you get it?"

He looks at the biker. His eyes are almost closed.

"You want some help?"

He tries to speak, but he can't.

The biker walks towards the man. "Where is it? In your pocket?" He hears it vibrate again and he walks around to the back of the man and before he reaches into the man's pocket he looks at the fresh blood trickling out of a small hole in the back of the man's head, just below his skull, to the right of his spine, pushing out past darkened blood mixed with bits of dirt and gravel. Fuck me, would you look at that. He sees a gun on the road. "You really fucked this up, didn't you?" He reaches into the man's pocket and pulls out the phone. It vibrates in his hand. "Do you want it?"

The man turns his head and looks at the phone and he falls from the heels of his boots.

The biker catches him and helps him sit upright. "Jesus Christ, you're just about stone cold dead, aren't ya?" He looks at the phone. "Fuck," he says and he squats down onto the balls of his feet and tilts his head so that he can look into the man's eyes. "Hey, can you hear me? Are you still there? Would you like me to read it?"

He'd like to stand.

The biker looks at the phone. "It's from Mackenzie." He looks at the man. He looks back at the phone. "She says, 'Hey Dad, Cael's with me, we're here for the call. Dad? Are you there?'"

But he can't.

"She wants to know if you're still coming home for her graduation? She says, 'it's in two weeks.'" He looks at the man. "Fuck, buddy, whaddaya want me to do?"

He'd like the RVs to stop.

The phone vibrates.

The biker looks at the phone.

But they won't.

"Fuck it." He places the phone on the man's lap. "It's there if you want it." He stands. "I'll tell you what, I'll call 911, but that's it, that's all I can do. They won't get here for a while, but at least you won't be left out here dead at the side of the road."

He gets back on his bike and takes his phone from his jacket pocket and makes the call. He gives his name and the reason for his call and he hangs up. He puts the phone away and looks at the man. "Listen, brother, I'm sorry about your troubles, I really am, but I gotta go." He takes the bike off the kickstand and starts it up. He rides down the side of the road and tucks in behind an RV disappearing back into the conformity of their long line that rolls on over these high hills without trees in perfect sync and harmony until fading away somewhere just beyond the farthest reaches of the midnight sun.

He's cold and he'd like to lift his head, but he can't.

The RVs are still coming—he knows they are, he can hear them. And he can taste the gravel, and he can feel a thin line of warm blood rolling down his back.

He's an old man riding a horse. He stops and looks down at the man on the road. The old man's eyes, milky white and nothing more.

On the other side of the road a wolf stretches out and places its head on its front paws, watching the old man.

The old man dismounts and walks to the fallen man. He bends to one knee and places two fingers on the man's neck.

"Yes," says the old man. "I see."

The wolf closes its eyes.

He begins to search through the man's pockets. He opens the backpack next to the man and as he does, he begins to speak: "When I was just a boy, we moved to a little nothin' of a farm. And it was, it wasn't much at all. You'd ride up our long laneway, cross a creek and dog

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leg left to get to the house. And where that laneway bent," he uses his right hand to illustrate a dog's leg left, "there was a slaughterhouse, on the outside of the turn. For horses. Pitiful. Flies everywhere." He holds his hands up before him and indicates a space of about a foot and a half. "Rats this big. It was horrible, all those horse carcasses piled up, one on top of the other till you'd think the wagon was about to tip over. Headless and skinned; butchered with their hooves still on. 'Course as soon as we moved in my father wouldn't have anything to do with it, bein' how he was into horses. He was a trainer, one of the very best."

He stands and reaches out to his horse and strokes the side of the horse's head. "Well, of course, he tore that slaughterhouse down and cleaned everything away, just like you'd never know it was ever there. New sod and everything."

He looks down the long and quiet road. "We had this big pasture to the front of the house, and my father, he'd tell me to go fetch such and such a horse, and I'd run down that long laneway and fetch the horse out of the pasture. And I'll tell ya what, every single time, and I do mean every time, with any horse, over all the years I lived and worked there, that I'd walk a horse up that beautiful laneway with the big willows hangin' over the creek, well, just as soon as I'd start around that dog leg, all hell would break loose. They'd spook, rearin' up and shufflin' back. Now why would that be? Why would a horse, years and years after that slaughterhouse had been torn down, spook. In that very spot. Every horse. Every time?"

He pauses again, turning to the horse, stroking the side of the horse's head. "Just think, if you were a horse, what that place must of seemed like?"

He mounts his horse and leans forward and scratches behind the horse's ear. He looks back at the fallen man. "I've often wondered, what if some people were like that? You know, if they could see beyond what was just there? And if they could, what kinda of darkness would that be? Even just a glimpse, you would think, would be enough."

He gives the horse a kick and starts back up the road. "Imagine," he says, "a look into the slaughterhouse of all man's time. Horrible. Yes, yes, just horrible."

The wolf lifts its head and watches the old man ride up the road. It stands and crosses

the road and stops before the fallen man and looks around. It lowers its head and sniffs the man, and then as if satisfied with what it has found, it crouches and leaps and begins to run, following the old man up the road over these high rolling hills without trees, disappearing somewhere just beyond the farthest reaches of the midnight sun.

The End

Christian Fennell bio: Christian Fennell, having recently completed his first novel, Urram Hill, a 2014 Black Ballon Publishing Horatio Nelson fiction prize finalist, and a William Faulkner - William Wisdom 2014 unpublished novel award semi-finalist, is currently working on his next novel, The Monkey King. His short stories have appeared in a number of literary magazines and collected works, including: Tincture, Spark: A Creative Anthology, Carnival Magazine and Liquid Imagination, among others. His short story, "Under the Midnight Sun", was an Eric Hoffer Award, Best New Writing, 2015, finalist. In addition to writing fiction, Christian is the Fiction Editor at the Prague Revue.