

## One Word

One word is all it takes,  
to cage your soul,  
or free your heart.  
One word can seize your life,  
let it flow free,  
rip it apart.

A single word is all it takes,  
to make you smile,  
to make me cry.  
A single word can leave you lost,  
scared and confused,  
or tell you why

We understand the power of words,  
and yet we speak,  
without a thought.  
Uncontrolled freedom of speech,  
no matter what,  
the chaos wrought.

Hold your thoughts.  
Stop your words.  
Remember still.  
Loaded words,  
like loaded guns,  
can kill.

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## Of Deadlines and Microsoft

Another deadline rears its ugly head,  
Another essay barely started;  
ten hours is time enough,  
I will not panic, yet.

The word count slowly rises  
until, with fifty words to go  
the screen goes blank.

Fatal error,  
must close, a small grey box informs me.

Uttering a silent prayer  
To the God of Autosave, I  
half laugh, half curse,  
the oxymoron,  
Microsoft Works.

## A work in progress: Chapter One

They say that death is a defining moment in a person's life... that you can learn a lot about yourself in that moment. Of course for most this moment of enlightenment is short lived and mostly followed by an 'oh dear' or words to that effect. For Phoenix Barr, it was not the moment of death that was most profound, it was the distinct lack of it. The car rapidly disappearing into the distance should have killed her, an assumption confirmed by the rather disconcerting stare of several passers-by who had witnessed the incident. It wasn't that she wasn't thankful to be alive, but sometimes she wished her life could be a bit less weird.

She picked up her backpack as the gathered crowd dispersed; suddenly unsure they had witnessed anything unusual, assuming they must have imagined it.

"Sorry I'm late..." someone behind her started to say then stopped abruptly.

Phoenix turned to face the man who had spoken and gasped, "OH!"

"You're not dead," he said with too much disappointment for her liking.

"No," she replied taken aback, "but you are."

"Well, technically I'm not but it's very complicated. This is rather embarrassing. I'm sure the paperwork was correct," he said pulling out a thick wad of papers from within his cloak. "Phoenix Barr. 7th August. 13.53 exactly. Main Road. You are Phoenix Barr?" he asked, glancing at his watch and the road sign.

"Yes, I am."

"Well that's odd," he said, a skeletal hand emerging to scratch where Phoenix assumed his head to be. "I must have missed something."

Phoenix watched him flick through the papers again before stopping and tapping a page,

“What is it?” she asked.

“I think I may have found the problem, do you have a copy of your birth certificate?”

She shook her head, “Birth certificate? Do you usually need to see that when someone dies?”

“You’re not dead though, and your birth is not on record.”

“Why is my birth so important? You’re death.”

“Actually I’m the Reaper. Death is stuck in the office 24/7 sorting the paperwork, death administration you know? As for the importance of birth... you can’t die if you haven’t been born... if there’s no record of your birth then technically you don’t exist.”

Phoenix stared at the Reaper in confusion,

“But I’m alive, I’m here. I must have been born; people don’t just appear out of nowhere.”

“I did,” the Reaper said matter of factly.

“OK, humans don’t just appear. I am human aren’t I?” she asked.

The Reaper frowned,

“Wrist!” Phoenix held out her hand to him, “You’re warm and you have a pulse, always a good start.”

He whistled shrilly and pointed,

“What’s under the tree?”

Phoenix stared, wondering if it was a trick question,

“Err... grass?”

“Human!” the Reaper declared with a smile.

“Because I see grass?”

“No, because you can’t see the dog.”

“What dog?” Phoenix asked, wondering whether the Reaper could have gone mad.

“The one you can’t see.”

He whistled again and bent down patting thin air.

“Who’s a good girl then? Who’s a super doggy?”

he cooed as Phoenix watched the apparently one sided interchange in amusement.

“Does Rainbow want a bone?” he continued.

Phoenix assumed that Rainbow did indeed want a bone as the Reaper promptly snapped one from his forearm for her. She stared in shock as it was thrown about for a few moments before disappearing. The Reaper noticed her expression,

“Don’t worry, she’ll bring it back later.”

“Oh, Good.”

“Now where were we? Ah yes, your non-death.”

“The one following my apparent non-birth.”

“Yes, that. Would you be so kind as to hold these papers while I flick through?” he asked passing them to her.

“I gave away a rather important bone and forgot to pack a spare.”

## Styx and Stones

It had been an exceptionally bad morning by all accounts. The toast had first refused to toast, then overcompensated to provide an unappetising breakfast of hot buttered charcoal, the milk had gone off and worst of all was the discovery that the cat flap had been wedged shut all night. Alfie, in his desperation, had shredded the wallpaper by the door before wandering off to do his business somewhere secret, which Jamie noted, was beginning to smell.

Jamie lounged on the sofa idly flicking channels with the sound off, while his sister played her music as loud as it would go before making the floor vibrate. Max fidgeted beside him, occasionally glancing wistfully out of the window.

“It’s too wet mate,” Jamie said as the dog whined. “Maybe in a bit.”

Max turned round and rested his head on Jamie’s knee, staring up at him. Jamie glanced out of the window.

“Okay, okay, ten minutes, no more. Got it?” he said switching off the TV. He grabbed the lead and his coat, stuffing a ball into the pocket. Ellie’s music stopped abruptly and she appeared on the stairs as he bent to clip on Max’s lead.

“Where you going?” she asked, pulling her long brown hair into a ponytail.

“My God it speaks to me!” he said without looking up. She waited for him to answer the question.

“I’m taking the dog out, obviously,” he said shaking the lead.

She looked at him for a few moments before nodding, “I’m coming too,” she said and grabbed a coat and hat.

“It’s raining. You’ll get wet.”

“No wetter than you, so shut up and walk,” she said pushing him towards the door.

Max danced excitedly on the doorstep while Ellie grabbed the spare set of keys from the coat hook and scribbled a quick note for their father. Not that he would be likely to read it, Jamie thought, he probably wouldn’t even notice they were out. The rain was heavier than he had thought and within minutes, the water resistance on his coat gave in and rain began to seep through to the layers below. Max seemed oblivious to the weather, darting from side to side until Jamie

got annoyed and unclipped his lead. He sped down the lane towards the woods, pausing occasionally to let the others catch up.

“So how come I’ve been graced with your presence?” Jamie asked glancing at his sister who had been strangely quiet since they left the house.

“I needed the fresh air.”

“You honestly expect me to believe that?”

She shrugged, “Believe what you want.”

They walked in silence until they reached the entrance to Barkhurst Forest. Max sat patiently until they reached him, distracted by something in the trees. Ellie shivered and pulled her coat tighter. She took off her hat, which had started to drip water. “This is madness,” she said looking at the grey clouds above.

“You didn’t have to come,” he said bitterly.

“Look, Jay, I know we don’t always get along so great...”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

She grabbed his arm, “Hey, stop a moment!”

“What?” he yelled, taking the ball from his pocket and throwing it into the forest for Max.

“You hate me; I understand that, really I do but...”

“I don’t hate you,” he admitted. “I just don’t understand you.” He picked up the ball Max had dropped and threw it as hard as he could. “Things were good ‘til mum left, then dad got this stupid job that he won’t tell us anything about and you started disappearing all the time.”

Ellie stared at him. “Sorry.”

“What for?”

“Not thinking,” she said following Max into the forest. “I thought I was doing you a favour not getting you involved, it never occurred to me you might feel neglected. You’re my little brother, you know? I wanted to protect you.”

Jamie quickened his pace, “Protect me from what?”

“I don’t know. Monsters.”

He stared at her trying to work out whether or not she was serious, “You’re kidding...monsters? I haven’t needed protecting from monsters since I was little and even then they weren’t real.”

"You have no idea," she said watching the gap Max had disappeared through.

"So tell me."

She put her finger to her lips, "Do you hear anything?" she whispered.

"Nothing. Why are you whispering?"

"Because I don't hear anything either," she said still staring at the gap. "No birds, no animals."

"No Max," he finished for her.

"There's something even worse than that," she said turning around. "I don't hear the rain."

Jamie held out his hands, "It's stopped."

Ellie shook her head, "No it hasn't, not out there."

Turning round, Jamie saw what had alarmed his sister. Several feet away, the rain was falling heavily, stopping abruptly just outside the forest. "What's going on?" he asked.

"We need to get out of here."

"We need to get Max."

"Max will have to fend for himself, we have to leave."

Jamie stood resolutely in the middle of the path, "I am not leaving without him. If it isn't safe for us it isn't safe for him."

"Jay..."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Not now, please not now," she begged trying to pull him back towards the rain.

"Not without Max!"

Ellie spun round in exasperation and pulled him through the gap in the trees. "You have to do exactly what I say."

"Okay."

"Promise me!" she said turning on him suddenly.

"It's not like it's a matter of life and death," he said surprised by the desperation in her voice. "Is it?" he added when she didn't reply.

"Just promise you'll do whatever I tell you to do."

Jamie nodded, "I promise."

Satisfied, Ellie turned and sprinted down a narrow track Jamie would have missed if he had been alone. "Elle, you need to tell me what's going on. What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know what it is but there's something odd happening in Barkhurst. There's a... place, just down here," she panted twisting to the right and a wider path leading downhill. "It might be too late for Max."

"What do you mean too late?" he shouted. He skidded on a patch of mud but managed to save himself before hitting the floor. "How do you even know he came this way?"

"The weather," she replied.

Ellie slowed to a walk and signalled for Jamie to do the same. The path curved to the left just ahead of them. She pulled the keys out of her pocket, handing them to Jamie who had paused to look around. "Just around this corner is the place I was talking about; make sure you keep out of sight. Whatever happens, don't let anyone see you."

Jamie nodded and pocketed the keys, "When we get home you have to tell me everything."

Ellie looked away and slipped something from her pocket, keeping it hidden from Jamie. She tapped it as they walked carefully down the mud path. "Okay we have five minutes," she said as they turned the bend, "so we better be quick."

Jamie stopped in shock. "What the heck is this place? I mean, how could you build something this size in secret?" he said staring at the 12ft high steel fence ahead. A large concrete building, partially obscured by trees, stood in the centre of the enclosure, with surveillance cameras and floodlights mounted at intervals along the walls.

"Five minutes," Ellie reminded him and walked towards the fence. She stared into the compound distracted by something to the right of the building. "Looks like there's something happening round the back."

Jamie moved closer to take a look, "I don't see anything unusual."

"By the tree."

"Yeah, 'cause that helps narrow it down. Oh, I see where you mean. It looks like they're pointing at something," he said, pressing his face closer to the fence.

Ellie held up her hand for him to be quiet, as something else caught her attention. "Someone's watching us," she whispered and squatted slowly.

“Where?” Jamie asked, crouching beside her.

“Over in that guard house,” she said nodding towards a small hut he hadn’t noticed.

A man was staring out of the window in their direction, “Why isn’t he doing anything if he can see us?” Jamie said unsure it was them he was watching.

“Wait,” Ellie whispered just as the man stood and opened the door. He paused to sling something over his shoulder before walking towards them. The trees offered some protection for the moment, but Ellie knew the closer the man got, the harder it would be to return to the track unnoticed. “Jay, you need to get back to the path, I’ll wait here until it’s safe to follow. As soon as you get across stay hidden.”

“But...”

“You promised,” she said turning back to the man.

Jamie sighed and crept away, keeping behind the trees as much as possible. He glanced at his watch and guessed they had about 2 minutes left; what would happen then he didn’t know. The seconds seemed to stretch into hours as he moved carefully from tree to tree, closer to safety but further from his sister who was watching his progress anxiously. He risked a backwards glance and caught sight of the man, almost at the fence now; Ellie was only feet away from him. The object on his back shone as it caught the light and Jamie realised with growing terror it was a gun. He tried to signal Ellie but she was watching the man, who now longer seemed to be looking towards her hiding place. He slipped back into the thicker woodland and pushed his way through the undergrowth until he came to the edge of the path. Crouching down between a tree and several holly bushes, he turned back to the fence. Ellie had seized the opportunity to crawl to freedom but hadn’t noticed the man’s target stalking towards her, hackles raised and teeth bared. She looked up as Max growled and froze. Jamie’s heart pounded as he glanced at his watch again. One minute and counting, he thought.

## Preterm Birth

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A fragile seedling,  
premature veins betray you.  
Life's frost came too soon.

## The Fish

Hidden in the silty depths  
you bide your time,  
allowing life's current  
to guide you where it chooses.  
In, perhaps, a moment of clarity  
you rejoice in your freedom  
Breaking through,  
if only for a moment,  
your watery confines.  
Ripples form  
concentric circles in your wake,  
the only sign of your existence.  
Then they, like you,  
are gone.

## **Nature's Beauty**

In fields, the cows with calf in tow  
low softly as they pluck the  
untamed grass and buttercups,  
chewing contentedly.

Swarms of mayfly hover silently.  
Kamikaze motions with  
fast beating wings, an  
impromptu ballet of the air.

Robins, blackbirds, moorhens, crows, all  
join voices; a discordant choir.  
Swifts glide and swoop, embrace the day with  
death defying acrobatics.

If trees had voices, they too would sing;  
give voice to all they witness.  
For I am here, but for a moment and  
when my watchful eyes have gone  
they remain. The mute narrators  
of nature's beauty.

## **For Sale**

One soul.  
Good condition  
minus packaging.

Sold 'as-is'  
No warranties  
No refunds.