

The Big Brother.

He sits, head slightly bowed, gloved hands folded neatly in his lap. The room is quiet, austere; dark, but for the single shaft of sunlight that the shutters let in. He feels its warmth, like a reassuring hand laid upon his shoulder. Within, the only sounds are of his breathing and of muffled voices somewhere beyond the thickness of the door. Without, more sounds: distant shouts, barked orders, the rev of an engine – all seem far, far away, drifting in and out of his consciousness, like something from a dream. His eyes remain closed, but still, he looks – a fixed, inward, stare. He's on the final leg of a journey - a voyage of discovery – and he's shining a light into the darkest recesses of his soul...

But, how has it come to this?

He remembers happy childhood days: playing chase with his mother, brothers, and sisters; the German Shepherd; walks in the country; climbing oaks; and tearing the wrapping from the paintbox and brushes, a precious Christmas gift. The faintest of smiles plays across his lips and, for a moment, he's relaxed. He shifts slightly in his seat, watching the scenes flick and jump across his inner lids, like a Thirties' Hollywood film, of the sort he loves. But it quickly fades; and with it, his smile.

Don't all young men fall out with their fathers? Isn't it part of nature's plan?

'I tried,' he thinks. *'I tried to meet your expectations. Tried to be the son you always wanted. I steeped myself in culture, joined the church choir – once thought, even, about the priesthood.'* At this, he shifts again and rolls his shoulders, feels his chest lift and fall as his breathing becomes more laboured.

Another memory floats into view. It's a tiny bed. A ragged teddy leans drunkenly at its foot. But that apart, it's empty.

How could I have let you die? My favourite. My baby brother. It was my job – my duty – to keep you safe. And yet...

Baby Edmund, vermillion and pink, the rash of measles like a veil of small flowers on a field of snow, lies still – his small eyes pleading until a doctor’s hand smooths them closed and the crying finally stops.

Now, a quarter of a century late, the big brother sits, alone, and finally allows the tears to flow.

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The door creaks open and his eyes flicker. He raises his head and blinks, sensing the figure at his back. A quiet cough, deferential, and then:

‘It’s time.’

The shutters are pulled wide and the room floods with the bright air of a glorious Bavarian spring day. He steps forward, bends his elbow, and raises his right arm to his shoulder.

‘Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!’

The chanting scares the birds from the trees.

The ocean of faces stretches as far as his reddened eyes can see.

It has begun.

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