



The Sensitive
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I live in an old house, all alone.

The house is wrecked beyond repair and stands in a garden of nettles and dying trees, neglected and almost forgotten on the outskirts of the bay. The walls, sagging now, are blotched with damp and mould and cling jealously to their last tattered scraps of wallpaper. Weeds have grown through the rotten floorboards, and the rafters are open to the sky so when it rains the water pours down the stairs and collects in puddles on the floor. I don't mind the rain, though. Why should I? At least it doesn't hurt.

The sun hurts.

In deadly summer, when the sun's brilliance invades every corner of the house, I retreat into the cellar where it is dark and damp and safe. The cellar is my refuge from the blinding agony, my one true haven, my only sanctuary. Strange, then, that the mere thought of it should fill me with such unspeakable dread. Why, you ask? Because it reminds me of a tomb, that's why. Because the loneliness affects me badly down there, and solitude can be the worst kind of pain, believe me.

Just now, the sky is iron grey, which allows me freedom enough to wander the house. Storm clouds filter the sun's rays and make them tolerable, thank God.

"Mind the broken glass."

A boy's voice in the garden.

"Ow!"

And another. Visitors at last. It's been so long since anyone came to the house.

"What's up, Stupid? Cut yourself?"

"No – stung my hand on a nettle."

The stung boy sounds like a stranger to me, but the other is easy to recognise – his name is Philip and he has been to my tumbledown house several times. He thinks of it as his secret den (the way boys have done before him and will continue to do after he has gone), and usually he comes here alone.

Philip doesn't know that I exist, of course. How could he? To his kind, I am nothing: a shadow, a mist, a memory, that is all. If I stand before him, he looks straight through me. If I touch him, his only reaction is to shiver as if a cool draught has brushed his skin.

"In here," says Philip.

He clambers in through the kitchen window – the only window on the ground floor not boarded up – while his friend watches nervously in the garden, rubbing his nettle-stung hand. The window was smashed long

ago. Beneath it is a low stone sink which contains dirt, spider's webs and broken glass. An elderly water pump stands to one side, rusted rock solid. Philip places one foot expertly on the edge of the sink, rests his hand on the pump and leaps to the floor.

The boys appear to be perfect opposites. Philip is sturdy and weathered and has a mass of thick, black hair. His friend is pale and slender by comparison; his hair is milk blond and his eyes are a diluted shade of blue.

Philip turns around. "Come on, Stupid. It's easy."

The pale boy takes holds of the window frame, wary of the jagged teeth of remaining glass, and climbs awkwardly into the kitchen; he stumbles, almost falling off the edge of the sink. "Bugger!" he says, quickly faking a smile and trying to make light of it. "Nearly broke my neck, then." Surprisingly, his breath escapes as mist, and his smile evaporates. "Oh, it's freezing in here... "

Philip shrugs. "It feels all right to me."

"Is this place safe? I mean, it's supposed to be derelict, isn't it? What if it collapses?" He rubs his goose-fleshed arms to try and warm himself.

"Scare-baby."

"Who is?"

"You are. I knew you would be."

I watch all this from the kitchen door. The pale boy has his back to me, so I can't tell whether he is afraid or not, but he is clearly trembling and the back of his neck seems drained of blood.

"Look," says Philip, pointing at the sink, where his name is etched crudely into the damp stone. I remember the day when he did that. He spent the best part of an afternoon scratching out the letters with an old pen-knife — the blade broke twice before he had finished the inscription. "If you pass the test," he explains, "you can add your name under mine. That'll make you a founder member of my gang — you're not shaking, are you?"

"No, shivering... it's so cold. Can't you feel it?"

Judging by the look of disgust on Philip's face, he can't. He goes down on one knee and scours the floor with his fingers. Then he prises up a loose section of floorboard. "The test," he announces solemnly. "I want you to shut your eyes, and keep them shut. If you open them you'll spoil everything." The pale boy does as he is told, and Philip reaches into the dark gap under the floorboards, delving blindly up to his shoulder, fumbling through the dirt and dust until his fingers finally touch...

OH... oh, please, no... not that...

Philip gets to his feet, holding before him the awful relic he has unearthed. He grins. It is a badly rotted human skull - a foul-smelling, dirt-encrusted, long-dead hunk of bone. He gives it a shake and wood-lice tumble out and scatter in confusion on the floor.

"Hold out your hands," he instructs.

The pale boy cups his hands together, eyes still shut.

Philip's grin intensifies. He drops the skull into the unsuspecting hands of the pale boy.

"Now. Open your eyes."

The poor child jolts as though electricity has racked his body. "Christ!" he cries. "It's horrible!"

He clearly wants to throw the skull as far away as possible; but, remembering that his nerve is under test, he keeps a firm grip on it and tries to maintain a pretence of bravery. "Is... is it real?" he asks, his voice wavering.

"Of course it's real," says Philip. "There's a whole skeleton down there, ribs and everything. I reckon it's a murder victim. Look, the neck's broken clean through. It's great, isn't it?"

The pale boy, even paler now, keeps his opinion to himself. "Have I passed the test?" he asks.

"The test? Not yet. You've got to kiss it first."

"What?"

"Kiss the skull."

The pale boy rocks gently on his heels. "I... I don't think... "

"You can't join my gang unless you do it."

This is too gruesome for words. How could Philip have conceived of such a test? I had never suspected him of being so morbid and cruel. The pale boy has all my sympathy, and I enter the kitchen and drift in front of him. If only there were some way to communicate, some way to let him know that I share his revulsion. He appears to be transfixed by the skull: his eyes are wide; his cheeks are waxen and his frail hands are unsteady. The skull waits impassively for his lips - a fat beetle emerges from an eye socket and trips a strange dance over the aged bone.

"Go on, stupid," urges Philip. "Kiss it."

The pale boy stands without moving for what feels like an age, then glances up, almost tearful in his fear and shame.

"I can't..." he says quietly. "I just can't. Look, I don't think I'd be much good in your, gang anyway. I'd only -"

Suddenly, his gaze switches to me. The skull slips through his fingers and crashes to the floor. His face registers total shock - a shock which is

shared by me. It seems impossible, but he is staring at me — actually staring — not through me, but at me. It can't be true... I shift to one side to see if he reacts, and to my astonishment he does.

Oh, how I've dreamed of this moment, how I've craved it, longed for it, prayed for it! My patience, which at times has worn pitifully thin, has finally paid off. This pale, unsuspecting creature, this child with the rarest of souls, is a Sensitive. He has the ability to see where others are blind, and his unusual gift has freed me of my isolation.

I drift towards the boy, radiating all the warmth and affection I can generate; but to my dismay he steps back and gives a low groan, a look of horror on his face. I pause. Something is wrong. Does he see me as a ghoul, perhaps? Please, pale friend, don't be afraid. You have nothing to fear from me. I can't help the way I look. All I crave is contact.

"What's up?" Philip asks. Even he is worried.

The pale boy is too stricken to speak. He watches me as if he is witnessing an incarnation of the Grim Reaper himself.

This is too cruel to bear. I simply want to reassure him, to make him comprehend that my intentions are benign — but how? How can I contact him? I would give everything just to reach out and take his hand.

I move forward again, more cautiously this time, trying desperately not to cause alarm, but something deep inside the boy snaps - panic drives a girlish scream out of his lungs, and he turns and scrambles madly out of the window. He cracks his knee on the window frame and cuts his fingers on the jagged scraps of glass, but knows nothing of the pain.

Panic, like an infection, spreads to Philip, and he chases the pale boy out of the window, also clambering frantically, not having the slightest idea what he is running away from.

The boys thrash through the tangled garden and head for the safety of their homes. In a moment they, are lost from sight.

If only I could follow...

With their passing, the house dies once more.

Silence prevails, a terrible silence which I would sell my soul to break — I long to yell my frustration out loud, to slam the doors, to kick the walls, to create a racket — but that, of course, is impossible. I am incapable of such things.

Now I am alone again.

And I wish I understood the reason why.

If I'm being punished, then I'm sorry but I've forgotten the crime. If I'm being tested, then I don't know what the test requires. But the torment

goes on, year after dark and lonely year. This house remains my prison, and that putrid skeleton, that mouldering wreck of long-dead man, remains my keeper. And only when those earthly remains have been laid to rest will, I be free of their bondage. Until that day, I feed only on hope.

One day, when he has overcome his fear, the pale boy might return. This much is certain - if he should return, or if another Sensitive should come in his place, I will be here.

I will always be here, all alone.

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