

Monday morning, a day most dreaded by workers and children alike. The air of grogginess is occasionally punctuated by giggles and shrieks as the students all recount their weekend experiences. On top of the monkey bars and away from the groups and cliques sits a young boy all alone. He sits and reads, content with his solitude. As the bell peals, he returns to the ground with an air of annoyance. Students line up single file and trickle into the classroom one at a time. The boy heads to the back of the room, trying to not get in the way of any pre established group. The boy overhears the girls gossiping about the recent incidents. He finds it tasteless and rude. 'Imagine if the children who'd been disappeared were here to witness this, what would they say to those who treat them like a horror story' the boy thinks. The door opens, the teacher enters, the room falls silent. There is someone standing by the door, someone unrecognisable. The stranger stands perfectly still, unnaturally so, like his heart wasn't even beating. 'Hes new' the teacher says, 'please be kind to him'. The stranger sits in the only available seat, the one right next to the boy.

The stranger isn't so strange anymore, at least to the boy. The stranger calls himself Seth, and unlike the others Seth talks to the boy. He goes on and on about pointless things but the boy doesn't talk back. The boy wants to like him, but something is off. Maybe it's the way he drags his feet when he walks, or how his mouth stretches far too wide when he talks, showing his pink gums. Every so often the boy sees something leak out of Seth's mouth. He didn't think saliva could be such a dark colour. The boy hears Seth speak, 'Arthur!' he says, 'do you wanna come over?'. The boy can't bring himself to look at Seth's face. Seth's words don't match his mouth, it was as if a voice actor had started their lines just a minute too late. Seth gives up asking and turns around to talk to other classmates. The boy stares at the back of his head. Hairless patches stood out against Seth's dark hair. Was Seth's hair always so thin?

Seth doesn't participate in sport. When asked about it he likes to go on long winded tirades about Osteoporosis and other health conditions affecting bone health. The boy doesn't understand and neither do his classmates, but Seth has always had too much knowledge on the human body. When listening to Seth's speeches, the boy starts to notice something. Seth likes to use the word human, but never the word people. As winter comes the air gets cold and frigid and the halls are filled with students shivering in their uniforms. The boy loves to watch as his warm breath sends puffs of white fog into the air. It makes him feel like a dragon out of a fairy tale. Looking across the muddy playground he can see Seth chatting with some classmates. 'Seth must have a very cold body' the boy thinks 'to not make any smoke when he breathes'.

The bell tolls and Seth is looking worse for wear. When the boy gets closer he can see his pale skin has gone a sickly grey, and his teeth look stained with coffee. Seth's movements are stiff and he moves like clockwork. The more the boy looks at him the more he's reminded of an old porcelain doll that had been left and forgotten in a dark room to rot. Seth's dull green eyes are glassy and unfocused and his hair is patchy, and his cheeks are devoid of colour or life. Seth says

something to his friends, an excuse most likely, and walks out of the classroom with a brisk but deliberate pace. The boy wants to ask, he wants to be there for his only friend, but can not bring himself to say anything. Even as class drones on, Seth never returns. The boy asks to leave, curious as to if Seth was okay. As the boy approaches the bathroom he hears something, something foul. A wet squelch and the sound of something falling on the floor. The boy opens the door. The first thing he sees is what he can only assume to be a wetsuit of some kind lying in a puddle of water on the floor. The poor lighting makes it hard to make out but it looks rubbery and human shaped. But something is wrong. The puddle doesn't smell like water. Then he sees it, past the object on the floor. The thing is awful to look at. A writhing mass of long, grey tendrils that wriggle all over the floor. Thousands of tentacles ensnared with each other, covered in a red, sticky liquid. He stares at it, it stares back at him. Dull green eyes stare back at him. The boy freezes, he can't breathe. The pungent smell is giving him a headache. The object in the corner, the liquid surrounding it, it's all clear to him now. It wasn't water, it was blood. The hollow corpse in the corner taunts him. Seth is lying next to him, but Seth is also right in front of him. The boy's vision falters, his head spinning. He can feel something wrapping around his leg. Something cold and wet.

Issy Corcoran