

Jason Charles

Two Stories: A Tiny Band of Hollow and Birthmark

↳ A Tiny Band of Hollow ↵

He looks at me like it is a mistake he is here. Or that I am here. These are eyes that do not want to be looking into mine. Not now. Not again. Not after all that has passed between them.

He swallows. "I haven't thanked you for coming."

I don't know how to reply. He shouldn't have to thank me for this. How inappropriate to thank me for *this*.

I look down into the ceramic bowl of wood shavings by his arm, waiting for him to speak again.

He inhales sharply. My eyes glide to the material of his black coat. "You're making me feel like I should be apologizing to you for something." I cannot help

bringing my eyes back up to his, to see in them something resembling pity. "Is that what you want? An apology?"

Has she done this to him? Because I don't recognize this insensitivity.

You were never this cold.

I should have voiced it, his eyes are beginning to drift. They sail about the coffee shop with its window in the sky. They anchor onto the fireplace beside me, which the endearing waiter gave up attempting to light. "*I don't know why you boys want to sit up here when it's so much warmer downstairs.*"

I wet my drying lips with the circle of coffee at the bottom of my cup, before, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

I hesitate. "Sorry for making you hate me?"

I don't know why it came out as a question. I don't know why it came out at all. For when I look out from his eyes, I know I have nothing to apologize for.

"Why would I hate you, Sam?"

I bring a pinch of the wood shavings to my nose, the smell of potpourri.

"For your past."

I flick the stuff back into the bowl.

He frowns like he is trying to make sense of me. Like my presence before him is a conundrum.

"Samuel, Samuel, Samuel..." He always used to do that when I baffled him. "I don't hate you for my past. My past was my own doing."

"Do you regret it?"

I ask the question like I have asked it so many times before - only half ready for the answer.

His eyes take to my game of distracting themselves with the shavings. "Do I regret it?" he asks them. A finger glides across the rim of the bowl. The gold wedding ring reflecting the light from the window. "No."

I half expect him to continue with "it was a useful experiment" or "it taught me a lot about myself" for I've heard both lines before. But he doesn't, he stays silent.

Something grabs me. "No what? No you enjoyed it? No you loved it? No it was exactly what you wanted? It is exactly who you are?"

Again there is pity.

"It was something I had to go through."

I smile, drumming the syllable of each word in my head. This is a new one and I want to remember it. I bring him to coffee shops, pubs and parks just to hear and record the little ways he summarizes our relationship.

His fingers trace the pattern on his saucer. I think I see a tiny band of hollow encased between his finger and the gold ring.

It seems the more we meet up now the less we have to say. I try to motivate my legs but it isn't their move. For today is different. Today he brought me here.

On reminding myself of this I suddenly feel less guilty about being here with him. About watching him, about recriminating, about forcing myself to remember everything.

He has taken to balancing a dribble of milk on the tip of his wedded finger.

"Do you want another coffee?"

He waits for my answer looking away, sucking the milk into the crevices of his dry lips.

Something has gone out of his eyes. When we first sat down and ordered from the waiter, there was a determination there, some obvious reason for bringing me here. Looking at him now, that could just have simply been the caffeine.

"Have I upset you?"

He shakes his head.

Either this sudden mood flux is the child within him I have grown to know, or something else brewing under the surface.

It's not long before I'm ready to give up on him once again.

"I should go."

I stand up and feel the grip on my hand I somehow expected. He gives me the look he used to give me when he was hurting inside. When something wasn't quite right. But that metal boundary now prevents me from carrying out any compassionate instinct. I turn away, for there is nothing else left to do, and eventually he lets go.

↳ BIRTHMARK ↵

It happened during the time machine game. Concentrate on a century either in the past or in the future that you want to go to, then push the little strawberry birthmark on Andrew's tummy and you are taken there. The little blemish on his skin has many secret powers. It can take you to each of the five continents, even to all the nine planets of the universe.

James knew there were more than nine planets in the universe, but he didn't want to ruin the magic by telling Andrew this.

They were in his bedroom and James had never seen Andrew laugh so much. James was tickling him with cold fingers all over his body, trying to get to the birthmark; trying to enter the year 2010. He wanted to have all the things a twenty-year-old has - freedom, money, take-'em-or-leave-'em parents. But when he felt it he wasn't sure if it was what he wanted any more. It wasn't unpleasant, but it was like nothing he had felt before, and frighteningly so. Andrew's wet lips and mouth pressed onto his own. Eyes closed on their own accord and something inside shifted and changed, but in delight or disgust he wasn't sure. Before James could understand what was happening, their mouths parted.

When Andrew stepped back James didn't feel like laughing any more. He grabbed his coat from Andrew's bed. "I need to go home now. Mum wants me to do something for her."

Andrew muttered something back, not lifting his eyes from the Bananaman duvet.

The little shed that was invisible to the entire village except Andrew and him was the first place James thought to run. Until three months ago it most certainly would have been to his mother and her offerings of tea, crisps, spaghetti hoops, Eccles cakes... But that was before Baby. Now he felt his presence at home was more of a hindrance than a help. According to his mother, James was actually small enough to fit in the space between her slipper and the carpet, and he just knew that if he walked in on her breast-feeding one more time, he would throw up. It is not natural, mum, not when Andrew has to see it too.

Sunlight slowly disappeared from the cracked window. In less than an hour total darkness would fall onto the hut with nobody here to spare James from The Voice. The Voice was not one of Andrew and James' inventions, it was real. They had heard it on several occasions, squealing into their ears like some terrified pig. But only at night. Andrew even said he saw it once, but every time James asked him to describe what he saw, its appearance changed. First it was an alien with grey scaly skin, and eyes like dustbin lids, then it became a ghost with hands moving under white sheets. Either way, The Voice was not friendly. Andrew told him that if it ever got close enough it would eat out their brains and replace them with someone else's so that they become a whole new being. Maybe that is what happened to his mother, James wondered.

He didn't know if it was The Voice, but James could definitely hear something. A sharp high-pitched singing came at him from the cracks in the window like one of those strange opera women his granddad sometimes watched on telly. I'm not scared, he told himself, it's not The Voice, it's not a witch, it's not one of those walking zombies we secretly watch when mum has to leave the house to find nan in the high street. He wanted his friend with him right now just to see what he would do to help calm his nerves. Was the image he had in his mind of a comforting arm around him true-to-life?

James pulled the mini radio out from under the pile of girl's magazines Andrew had stolen off his sister. He needed company, he needed music. The newsreader told him it was six o'clock - he was missing his tea. A chill hit him on the back of his neck - he hadn't even told his mother he would be late home from school. By now she would have already rang Andrew's parents. Panic would have set in. She might have even asked to speak to Andrew personally to see if he had any idea why James would have gone off on his own like this. Perhaps the alarm in her voice would have shocked him into confessing the kiss. Would she be angry? Would she be disgusted? As James thought these questions, his mother could be stood on Andrew's kaleidoscope carpet, demanding that he never speak to her son again. Rubber Baby sat bug eyed on his Bananaman pillow.

The image alone of Baby in his bedroom impelled James to leave his sanctuary to face the consequences of their deed, but his limbs would not budge from the dark corner. The news broadcast gave way to a brand new song from a brand new boyband. James hummed along to it shakily, watching the last of the light disappear from the murky glass.

It was too dark, too cold and too scary to be sat in that shed alone. But rather than go home to an electric fire and screaming Baby, James wished he were sat here with the warmth of somebody beside him. Comparing their ever-expanding knowledge of the 'S' word. Singing along to the radio in funny unknown accents. Most of all, James wanted his friend here to play the time machine game with, to go far, far into the future. He wanted to understand everything that he had been told he couldn't and he wanted to understand it now. He wanted Andrew here this very second to find beneath his blazer and shirt the berry shaped birthmark on his skin.

Author Bio

In February 2006 Jason Charles' play *Steam* performed to sold out houses and glowing reviews at the White Bear Theatre in Kennington. The play was revived the following year at the Barons Court Theatre where it did equally well. In April 2007 his play *Rupture* opened at the Kings Head Theatre in Islington, and in January/February 2008 his follow-up *Counterfeit Skin* became one of the fastest selling shows at the Courtyard Theatre in Hoxton. The play was revived there six months later due to popular demand. Charles' play *Estranged* opened there the following year. This was followed by *Beyond Flesh* and *Blood* for the Tabard Theatre.

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