

THE
*Rest
of Us*
JUST
LIVE
HERE

PATRICK
NESS

WALKER
BOOKS

CHAPTER THE THIRD, *in which indie kid Finn's body is discovered; Satchel – who once dated Finn – asks Dylan and a second indie kid also called Finn to skip school and help her talk to her alcoholic uncle, who is the lead police officer investigating the death; meanwhile, the Messenger, inside a new Vessel, is already among them, preparing the way for the arrival of the Immortals.*



Our town is just like your town. Schools, family-themed restaurants, lots of cars. There's a bunch of huge churches clustered together, trying to blend in with all the family-themed restaurants, because salvation is as easy as chicken wings, I guess. We've got fire stations with signs that tell you when burning season begins and ends. We've got sheriff's offices

with signs that tell you to Buckle Up. We've got a lumber yard with signs that tell you angry right-wing puns. We've got RV lots, banks, a Walmart, a couple multiplexes.

We've got trees. So many trees. Everything here used to be a forest, after all.

And yeah, so fine, our part of town has more than its fair share of trees and less than its fair share of multiplexes, but don't look down on us. It was just as bad here as it was for you when the indie kids were battling the undead in our neck of the woods (though that was just after I was born, so I only know about it from my Uncle Rick, who doesn't get invited around very much any more). We had the same amount of heartache when a new round of indie kids exorcized the sorrow from all those soul-eating ghosts eight years later (that was the year they blew up the high school, a heretofore unknown part of the exorcism ritual, I guess). And don't even get me started on when the indie kids fell in love with and then defeated all the vampires a few years back. Henna's older brother Teemu got mixed up with them and pretty much vanished one day. They haven't seen

him since, though he writes the occasional email. Always at night.

And we *dream* the same in my town as you probably do in a city. We yearn the same, wish the same. We're just as screwed-up and brave and false and loyal and wrong and right as anyone else. And even if there's no one in my family or my circle of friends who's going to be the Chosen One or the Beacon of Peace or whatever the hell it's going to be next time around, I reckon there are a lot more people like me than there are indie kids with unusual names and capital-D Destinies (though I'm being mean here; they're often quite nice, the indie kids, just ... they've got a clan and they're sticking to it).

Me, all I want to do is graduate. And have a last summer with my friends. And go away to college. And (more than) kiss Henna (more than) once. And then get on with finding out about the rest of my life.

Don't you?

"Did you get in trouble?" Jared asks the next morning as we sit down in the back row of a Calculus class

that he's already got so much extra-credit in he could skip the final and still get an A.

"Just the weekly lecture on how keeping a united family front is more important than usual in an election year, blah blah blah." I glance at him. "You were mentioned."

He grins. "I bet."

The school bell goes as the classroom door opens a last time, and Nathan comes in.

"Sorry," he says, flashing a smile at Ms Johnson, the Calculus teacher. She's this really smart, funny older lesbian so the smile totally shouldn't work on her. Somehow it still does.

I count out the four corners of my desk. Seven times.

"Dude," Jared whispers. "It's just a guy. He's not the Devil."

"Henna likes him."

"She said he was pretty. He is."

I stop counting.

"Well, he is," Jared shrugs. "Just calling the facts."

"Yeah, but why would you transfer into a new school five weeks before—"

The intercom system crackles. *Attention students,*

I guess, says our Principal. He's French Canadian and no matter what he says, he always sounds like he's dying of boredom. I have some troubling and sad news that some of you will have already seen on social media, no doubt. I am afraid that the body of one of our seniors, Finn Brinkman, was found this morning. There are, as yet, no leads to the cause of his death, but we urge all students to take extra care, to not travel alone, and to report anything suspicious to the authorities. Counselling is available in the office should you need it or something.

Calculus has fallen silent. I turn to Jared. I know he's thinking the same thing I'm thinking.

"We should tell someone," I say.

"Yep," he says. "Won't do any good."

No. No, it probably won't.

"Well, that was a waste of a morning," Mel says, as we gather for lunch. We've taken senior privilege and all piled into my car to go to the Mexican fast-food place around the hill next to the school, even though we're lucky to have gotten a lunch break at all.

We'd all met in the office and told the Vice Principal – who, like all Vice Principals, is genetically Nazi – what we'd seen. He eventually called *one* cop whose breath was as thick with booze as my father's is in the evening. That cop proceeded to not believe a word we said about seeing Finn running through the Field, the glowing girl running after him, or the blue pillar of light that rose and then faded. He basically yelled at us for wasting his time.

Okay, fine, so Finn's body wasn't found anywhere *near* there, but I just can't believe the things that people won't believe. Or the things people won't even *see*. I was in the ninth grade when the vampires came. But even though people started dying, even though people disappeared and stayed gone, even though you could point at one and say, "That's a vampire," most people, most *adults*, still don't believe it ever happened.

What happens to you when you get older? Do you just *forget* everything from before you turned eighteen? Do you *make* yourself forget? I mean the cop was old enough to have been a teenager when the whole soul-eating ghost thing was happening, so did

he just block it out of his mind? Did he talk himself into not believing it actually happened? Convince himself it was a virus, that the explosion at the old high school was a gas leak? Or is it that he thought what happened to him was so original, so life-changing and harrowing and amazing, that there's no way he could ever imagine it happening to anyone else?

It's not every adult, I know, but still, we see a guy the day he dies and the half-drunk policeman in charge threatens to arrest *us*.

Honestly. Adults. How do they live in the world?
(Or maybe that *is* how they live in the world.)

"I told you we shouldn't bother," Henna says, sitting next to me, thinking nothing of it. "When Teemu disappeared, the police did exactly nothing. Said he was old enough to make his own choices."

"At least you still hear from him," Mel says, gently. "Once in a while."

Henna shakes her head, like that doesn't help, which of course it doesn't. "I think it's why my mom and dad go on all these mission trips. Try to beat some of the darkness out of the world with their bare hands."

She makes this sound both impressive and a sad, sad waste of time. There's also pity. They did lose their son. The Silvennoinens are as complicated as anyone else. More, if you count trying to say their last name out loud.

I touch all of the pointed ends of the tortilla bowl they've fried to put my taco stuff in. There are twelve, just like on a clock, which is so pleasing, I only have to count it once. I glance over at Mel's plate. She's got some salad and some plain chicken, so that's fine, and I heard her order a Diet Coke, also good. She hates having people watch her eat, though, so I make a point to look away, as do Henna and Jared.

"I just hope whatever it is gets finished by graduation—" Jared says.

"Weird about that dead kid, huh?" says a voice.

Nathan's standing there with a tray. And surprisingly, he looks genuinely spooked.

"Hey," Henna says, a little too brightly. "You want to join us?"

Mel and Jared scoot up to make room, so now I'm sitting across from him. Hooray. "I don't think

we've really met," he says to me. "Nathan."

"I know who you are," I say, but I do shake his hand. I'm not *that* rude.

"This guy who died, though," he says, and his eyes are still slightly wide. "Did any of you know him?"

"He was an indie kid," Mel says, "so not really."

Nathan stares down at his enchilada for a second. Henna and Jared watch him, openly. Mel takes the opportunity to eat more of her chicken. I study Nathan, too. I can't see what Henna likes at all. His hair's that stupid forward swoosh-mess that looks like it's eating his brain. His clothes are a kind of non-committal faded blue. His eyes are dark enough to be black and his earlobes, when he brushes his hair out of the way, are scarred from where he obviously once had sprocket earrings before having them sewn up again.

Idiot. Moron. I hate you.

"So you're from Tulsa?" Henna asks, and I start tucking into my lunch.

"Yeah," Nathan says, smiling faintly. "Before that, Portland. Before that, Fort Knox, Kentucky—"

"Army dad?" Jared asks.

“Army mom,” Nathan answers. “Dad stayed in Florida. Five postings ago.”

“Must suck,” I say, trying to keep any heat out of my voice. “Moving to a new school five weeks before graduation.”

He runs a hand through that mop of hair. “Little bit,” he says, meaning a lot. “And a kid dies my first week.” He glances around the table. “Not that that’s in any way suspicious.”

He smiles. The others laugh. “But wow, though,” he says, more quietly. “I hope whatever it is this time isn’t too bad.”

My phone buzzes, two seconds before Mel’s does, too. We both look.

BOLTSOFFIREBOLTSOFFIREBOLTSOFFIRE!!!! COMING TO FAIR!!!! I’LL DIE IF I CANT GO!!!! PLEASE CONVINCCE MOM!!! PLEASEPLEASEPLEASEPLEASEPLEASE PLEASEPLEASE!!!!!! Love, Meredith.

“That can’t be right,” I say, showing the others the text. “Bolts of Fire? At our crappy little county fair?”

“Yeah,” Henna says. “I saw it online somewhere.

They're coming for some little girl's cancer last wish or something."

Nathan's staring at us. "You guys aren't ... *fans* or anything?"

"All right," I say, later that night, putting extra slices of cheesy toast on a plate for the really, really fat family at table two. "He *is* pretty."

"And nice," Jared says, dumping sprigs of parsley on our waiting orders. "And a little bit tragic."

"And new." I heap the plates up on my tray. Jared does the same for his section. "I don't stand a chance, do I?"

"You've got the same chance you've always had, my friend," he says, and disappears into his half of the restaurant. We work at Grillers, a steakhouse for cheap dates. The kind of place with all-you-can-eat shrimp, all-you-can-eat fries, and all-you-can-eat cheesy toast, which, to be fair, is really awesome cheesy toast. The restaurant's so old it's still split down the middle when one side was smoking and the other non. Now it's all non, but we still divide the table service that way.

It's Tuesday. It's slow. Jared and I are covering the whole place.

"You know," he says, when we meet back at the waitress station (still called the waitress station even though it's only us two waiters tonight), "this thing with Henna only really came up when she started dating Tony. And now she's going to Africa after graduation. And then *Nathan* comes into our lives to catch her eye when she's single and you're still 'gathering your courage'." He eats a french fry off a plate. "Ever thought you only really like her because there's always something in the way of actually getting close to her?"

"I think that all the time."

"Seven wants more raspberry lemonades," Tina, our manager, says, looming into the waitress station. She sets down the two pots of coffee she's used on her refill run and takes a slice of cheesy toast off one of my plates. "I swear they put crack in these," she says, eating it.

I deliver my plates, I get three more raspberry lemonades for table seven, I bring enough extra cheesy toast into the restaurant to feed the entire population

that has ever lived on this planet. Grillers is high volume, fast turnover, and even if the tips are cheap, there are a lot of them. It's a great job. It keeps gas in my car. It gets me out of the house. I work a lot of shifts with Jared. I'm lucky, too: Mel works the tills at a twenty-four-hour drugstore, fighting off meth heads who've lost track of what year it is, and Henna makes coffee at a drive-in Java Shack that doesn't even have its own bathroom.

It's a great job. I'm lucky. It's a great job.

(But do you have any idea how dirty restaurants are?)

I start washing my hands early in the shift, and five hours later at the end, I'm washing them almost every two minutes, which by then doesn't feel like often enough after touching one of the sponges we use to wipe the crevices of the booths after we close.

"One hundred and thirty-five." Jared counts his money, sitting on the steps down from the storeroom. "One hundred and thirty-six dollars and ... seventy-two cents." He straightens all the bills into a neatish pile and shoves them into his polyester uniform pocket. "Not bad for a Tuesday." He looks over to

where I'm standing at the prep room sink. "What about you?"

"A hundred and seventeen even," I say, rinsing off the soap. I leave the water running. I've washed my hands so many times tonight two of the fingertip pads on my right hand have cracked and started bleeding. The skin from my fingers to my wrists itches and burns because I've washed every bit of natural oil out of it. I grip my hands into fists, bearing the pain.

Then I squirt some more soap on them and start washing them again.

"You guys are the lucky ones," Tina says. She's in the closet-sized office they give to the managers. The door is open, and she's basically sitting next to Jared, her cheek resting on her computer keyboard, volumes of blonde hair splayed out over the desk. "You're so young. You're so lucky and *young*."

"You're only twenty-eight," Jared says.

"I *know*," Tina moans.

Jared gives me a quizzical glance as I wash my hands again. "Tell your Uncle Jared what's wrong this time, Tina."

She shoots him a dirty look, her face still moulded

onto the keyboard. But she answers anyway. “I think Ronald’s cheating on me.”

“With *who*?” Jared’s a little too surprised.

“Hey!” Tina says. “Ronald’s an attractive guy!” She hesitates. “A little *short*, but...”

Ronald, who stops by every Saturday afternoon for a free lunch, comes up to Tina’s shoulders. And Jared’s belt.

I’m only slightly exaggerating.

“Is it revenge for your thing with Harvey the Chef?” Jared asks.

Tina sits up, a cluster of keyboard squares embossed on her cheek. “Probably.”

I squeeze another blob of soap on my hands. I can feel my chest start to constrict, actual tears welling up in my eyes. I’m just *burning* with rage at myself.

But I rinse off the soap and start again.

“He’ll come back,” Jared says, standing. “He always does. So do you.”

“He hasn’t *gone* anywhere,” Tina says, locking the safe and picking up her purse. “That’s kind of the problem. If he left, I’d at least be able to clean up the house a little before he came back.” She flicks off

the light in the office. “You know he actually once lost a whole frozen turkey? And not even in the kitchen.”

“Mm-hmm,” Jared says, his eyes on me.

“You guys done?” Tina asks, locking the office door.

“Almost,” I say, hoping she doesn’t hear the crack in my voice.

She doesn’t. “Good. I’m going to go set the alarm and then we’re outta here.” She heads out into the main restaurant where the alarm pad is, disappearing past the walk-in freezer.

In two steps, Jared is behind me, putting his bigger, longer, stronger arms around me to pin my own against my side. He turns it into a kind of imprisoning bear hug, lifting me up and away from the sink. He just holds me there for a second, a few inches off the ground, neither of us saying anything. His forehead’s against the back of my head and I can feel his breathing on my neck. I’m not exactly a small guy, but I’m thin and a bit wiry, while Jared is enormous, tall and broad and just big, big, big.

Thank God he’s not a bully or he’d terrorize the school.

“Okay?” he asks quietly, after a minute.

“Okay,” I whisper, swallowing the huge lump in my throat.

He sets me down and slowly, gently, in the way that he has, he lets me go. I don’t move. He steps around me, turns off the tap and hands me some paper towels. I wince as I grab them, leaving several drops of blood against the white.

Tina yawns her way back to us. She scratches a spot on her scalp with one long fake fingernail. “I wonder what Harvey the Chef is up to these days?” she says.

Jared keeps looking over at me as he drives us home. He’s got a ridiculously tiny (and old) car for such a big guy, but it’s just him and his dad and they aren’t overflowing with money.

They’re happy, though. His dad’s the nicest grown man I’ve ever met.

“It really *has* gotten bad again,” Jared says, a statement rather than a question, as we drive deeper into the dark woods towards our homes.

“I know,” I say. “I’ve been getting stuck in these kind of ... *loops* lately and it’s getting harder and harder to get out of them.”

“Even when it’s hurting you?”

“Even when I know it’s stupid. In fact, knowing it’s stupid, knowing that I’ve already washed my hands a hundred goddamned times, actually makes it worse. Because knowing that and doing it anyway is like...”

I don’t finish. We drive in silence for a little longer.

“Your fucking parents, man,” Jared whispers. He raises his voice. “If you ever need a place, Mikey. I don’t care how mad they get or how it affects her stupid career—”

“Thanks.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

He hits the steering wheel with his fists. I feel kind of shy about how upset he is on my behalf.

But that’s Jared for you.

“Four and a half weeks,” he says.



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First published 2015 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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Cover design by Walker Books Ltd
Endpaper illustration by Richard Merritt

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This book has been typeset in Sabon and Futura

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-3116-5 (Hardback)
ISBN 978-1-4063-6747-8 (Exclusive)
ISBN 978-1-4063-6179-7 (Trade paperback)

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