

Prologue to INTOXICATED

Moorlands. Gomersal, near Leeds.

George Brookes, small for his age and as blond as an angel, is upside down. He feels the chill of an unmown lawn on the crown of his soft, ten year-old head. Then it vanishes, leaving a stain of dampness in his hair. A second later, thdump... his skull slams into the grass again.

"Out!" his mother cries. "Out!"

Her fingers dig hard into his ankles. With each word she lifts him up, then, with the next one, drops him.

"Get... out!"

He watches, wide-eyed and helpless, as the world falls then rises in front of him. The apple trees at the bottom of the garden have linked arms and dance in a line, their branches charging down into the sky; then they disappear, replaced by a vision of grassy heaven, evening dew a-twinkle; somewhere in the distance his brother is doubled over, falling forwards?or is it backwards??landing at the top of the grass-green world.

"No, no... no!" she screams.

George can feel his mother's desperation through his legs, which she pulls hard into her breast. She begins to jump. His shoes hit her in the face, and mud mixes with the tears and dribble on her chin. Yet she hugs his legs tighter still, until the shins might snap against her ribs. Jumping, jumping...

"No... no!"

A worm of green froth appears at the corner of his mouth. It creeps out from between the lips, moving down towards the nose, which, like

the rest of his astonished face, is heavy with blood. When the bright sputum reaches his nostrils, which are crimson at the edges, it crawls back inside him, back into the warm young head of George Brookes.

His mother sees the emerald drool. She turns delirious at the sight of Deliverance and starts to spin like a dervish, his ankles still in her hands. The child is powerless to resist, and as she turns and turns, steadily gaining speed, his body lifts, anchored at the mother-son fulcrum of (her) chest and (his) ankles, spinning outwards, rising under the centrifugal force of maternal love.

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Sarah Brookes had discovered her sons quite by accident. They were sitting on the lawn in the garden. In front of them was the rhubarb, half a dozen sticks of it, like parasols squashed flat, the shafts a rich ruby-red, and on each one a single leaf, large and floppy, dark green, almost black in the fading light of dusk.

Tom dipped sticks of the rhubarb into a bowl of sugar which he had between his knees, then crammed them into his mouth. He was hunched over the bowl, his heavy arms and legs guarding it jealously, keeping the sweetness to himself, a big, beady-eyed spider clinging to its prey. One after the other he grabbed the pink shafts and stuffed himself with them; the rhubarb, it seemed, was all for him.

At his side was George, five years his junior, though so thin and delicate that he might have been younger still. He was eating the leaves, which Tom tore off and passed to him, each one the size of a dinner plate. He took them without question and ate, his mouth going like a caterpillar's, fast and systematic, nibbling its way across the top of a leaf then back again.

Poisonous leaves? George would have done anything his brother

told him to. As for Tom, he couldn't have cared less.

More poisonous than a rhubarb leaf, though, is the idea of its poison. When Sarah Brookes saw her son eating rhubarb tops, she was seized by a dread of those leaves, by the very idea of their destructive, murderous juices. Poison. The word turned lethal in her mind, and fear took hold of her guts.

She wailed and screamed as if she were being twisted to death from the inside. Her voice sent crows beating up into the darkening sky. Tom and George looked up, startled, their jaws falling open, the contents tipping silently out, pink from one mouth, green from the other. For a long moment Sarah found herself unable to move. Grass cooled the skin between her toes; she had come outside to walk bare-foot in the garden, to feel the evening dew on her feet, but now her toes curled down into the turf like frightened talons.

Then she ran to her son. She pulled him up by the hair and cuffed his head. She thumped him on the back twice, three times, battering the air from his lungs. She got his small white head under her arm, and with her other hand (elongated, the fingers pressed together, so that it looked like the head of a plucked goose) she reached down into his throat, pushing hard, until his lips stretched wide around her wrist, his face purple, his arms beginning to wave. Sarah?whimpering, tangled hair falling across her face and into her mouth, which bubbled with saliva?collapsed to the ground, and took her son with her.

Out came the hand. George retched, panting for air. There seemed little doubt now that the poison must emerge from the boy's throat. But it didn't. In desperation she looked around for an antidote, a saviour, a time-machine... The fear in her stomach was so intense that she wished only to die, to die in his place, there on the lawn.

Meanwhile, there was the other son. Now he took charge, grabbing George by the ankles and hoisting him into the air. Sarah groaned, as if

this must surely be the last chance. She scrambled up to help, and between them they held the boy upside down, one leg each, and peered at the ground beneath his inverted body, waiting for the inevitable gastric emission. They waited in vain, for nothing came out.

Tom soon lost interest. Like all country boys, he knew that a few rhubarb tops were not deadly, and that his weakling brother was in danger of nothing more than a stomach ache. But why tell her, just when things had got interesting? So he gave his mother the ankle and stepped back to enjoy the show.

Sarah took the second ankle readily. She began shaking her son's little white body, which flapped in her hands like an empty sack. Tom looked on, delighted at the scene of mother and child: the one like an oversized rabbit, dead and ready for the pot, hung from the hind legs and swung about for no clear reason; the other doing the swinging, as if (to complicate the metaphor) the dead, oversized rabbit were also an enormous soiled nappy that she was washing in an imaginary tub. Best of all, though, was that as the poor boy was being shaken up and down, his head was being smashed into the ground.

"Get... out...!" she cried. Then, seeing the green appear at his lips, she began to spin.

That little worm was shaken loose, though it stuck like a limpet to the boy's innards, doing its best to smear them with the noxious green dye. Out came the rhubarb tops, all neatly and conscientiously chewed up, dissolved in pint after pint of frightened bile. Out it came, flying from his mouth in a great, looping arc as he spun around in the air.

May, the young maid, now appeared at the kitchen door. She couldn't get much closer, though, because the stream of vomit flew ten, fifteen feet clear of George, who was horizontal in the air, moving as fast as a carousel, with his mother at the centre of it; and she, seeing the bright green miracle being sprayed across the lawn, went faster and

faster, pirouetting wildly, jabbering to herself, consumed by the ancient spirits of son-spinning. May, fearing the mysterious green spew, danced around the edge of the lawn, wondering what to do, wondering what, in fact, she might later be charged with having failed to do, and at the same time trying to dodge the luminous flow which threatened to cover her shoes each time mother and son made a new revolution. Tom staggered further off, choking with laughter, gripping his own throat, his eyes filled with tears of pure joy; he rolled on the ground, kicking his legs in the air.

This was the scene which greeted Isaac Brookes as he came around the side of the house that evening. Isaac Brookes, father, husband, paterfamilias; woolman, pioneer, internationalist; who arrived home from France and found his family all together on the lawn of the old house at Gomersal.