

The Silt Verses

Chapter III: Then I'll Speak Of Champions

INTRO

The radio scratches.

SID WRIGHT:

(Over the radio)

That is six o'clock, and good morning to all of you faithful listeners!

The signal is strong today - and I am Sid Wright, starting your day right, hopefully with your first cup of mellow ground in your hand, and if you're just tuning in, I am now on day four of my hosting vigil.

If you hear my voice strain or crack, spare me a thought through my suffering, but I will promise you this, listeners; I will continue this broadcast as long as I'm able.

And don't worry; the station has my lucky successor lined right up because the signal will not end, this Daily Grind of ours will not cease, and our work is never done.

These are the Silt Verses, and today I'd like to give a shout-out to the following disciples, in order of their appearance:

David S Dear as Sid Wright,
Jimmie Yamaguchi as Hayward,
Mintaka Angell as Felix,
An Derrick Hill as Mister Finch.

Created by Jon Ware and Muna Hussen
Audio production by Sammy Holden.

As before, SID lists the cast and crew, and offers up any content warnings for the episode.

SID WRIGHT:

Next up after these messages - it's time for some classic rhythm 'n' blues, 'All My Long And Dying Days', by Toni LaValle-

The radio scratches and fades out again.

CAR, INT, DAY

The sound of driving.

We hear HAYWARD reach over and pick his police radio receiver up.

A click as he activates the mike.

He's smart, a little self-satisfied, and has a weary amusement in all things.

He's our antagonist, although he doesn't know it yet.

On the other end is FELIX. The banter between them is light-hearted and affectionate.

HAYWARD:
Felix? You there?

FELIX:
(Crackling)
This is Felix, live and receiving. To comply with operational safety procedures, we will remain on mute until we hear a recognised greeting signal.

You have been heard.

It's said like 'over'. Smoothly and decisively.

HAYWARD:
(Amused and annoyed)
You already know it's me.

Felix. I'm too tired for this.
(Annoyed, drawn-out)
Felix?

Silence.

We can hear HAYWARD rolling his eyes as he tries again.

HAYWARD:
Felix, Felix, receiving Iris 9. You have been mustered.

FELIX:
(Crackling)
Iris 9, this is Felix. You have been heard. What can I help with today?

HAYWARD:

Well, Felix, I just wanted to wish you a very good morning and call you an horse's arse.

FELIX:

(Crackling; cheerfully ignoring him)

Good morning to you, Investigating Officer Hayward.

Can I offer you a hosanna to the Cloak today?

HAYWARD:

That's all right for now, thank you. Can you confirm the address of the farmhouse I'm headed to? I'm just crossing the dam now.

FELIX:

(Crackling)

Of course. You're heading to...41 Silk Wood Drive, on the Upper Rows.

HAYWARD:

(Vaguely)

Silk Wood Drive. Like something out of a dream.

FELIX:

(On the tannoy)

Still sleeping, Hayward?

HAYWARD:

More than possible.

FELIX:

(On the tannoy)

Call for back-up if you need it. Maybe get a coffee en-route.

And don't forget your gun this time.

HAYWARD:

(Annoyed that he's been condescended to)

Well, thank you so much, Felix. You have been heard.

A click. He replaces the tannoy.

For a moment, we only listen to the roar of the car.

Then-

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

If there's a wider societal problem out here that needs to be addressed, for me it comes down to this: country people just take their gods too seriously.

I suppose it comes naturally with being so exposed to the elements.

I was called out once, years ago, to a farm just outside the Giant's Rest. They had this little boy, maybe six or seven, and he lived on the top floor of the house. And every night when the storms came and he was lying in bed, he'd hear thunder, raging over him.

Clap. Clap.

It sounded like something huge was coming over the hills, sweeping towards his window, getting closer and closer - and then, slowly, fading away again, as if it didn't have permission to enter.

And the little boy would begin to whisper,
'It's all right. You can come in. I'm not afraid of you. You can come in. I want to see your face.'

And he'd fancy that the sound was changing in response to his words - great long bursts and short cracks - as if the thunder in the night was speaking to him.

So the little boy would try and answer back, clapping his hands together in sequence.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

Speaking the language of the thunder in the night, willing it to have meaning.

Come in.

You can come in.

I want to see your face.

When we finally came to the farm, it looked as if a bomb had struck it from within.

Windowpanes shattered. The walls torn and dangling, stray bricks rolling down the hillside. The mother and father were lying in bed together, blood and insides of their heads pooling down onto the pillows from their shattered ears.

The echoes continued for months afterwards. Deafening rolls of thunder, shaking the hillside and snapping the police tape. Coming, now, from somewhere deep inside the house.

The boy was deaf, but it'd left him alive. He was traumatised, of course. Spent the next seven years in a ward, wracked with guilt and shock.

He couldn't understand how his own imaginings - his private dreamspeak with the thunder in the night - had led to this.

This is what I mean. Everyone wants a personal relationship with the divine, but none of us are really equipped to handle the consequences.

Myself, I get up and I go to the coffee machine every morning, and it's already stamped with a prayer for the Saint Electric, beseeching her for a coffee that's nice and hot.

And most days it's good coffee, but some days it's not, and I just spare her a thought and think,

'That's OK. You probably had other things going on.'

But out here? You'd think it'd kill them to show a little insincerity.

And the crazy thing is that if it's sacrifice they need, any civilised society is willing to make concessions.

Every new tower they build in Glottage, every new housing development that's constructed in the Slag King's name, begins the same way: with two condemned criminals who are dragged out before the cheering crowds and tossed down into the foundations, and the cement is sluiced over them as they struggle and kick, and all of us understand that this is a necessary thing.

It's just these damned hicks who refuse to play by the rules.

I already know what I'm going to find at 41 Silk Wood Drive.

Because I've been here before, and I know the signs.

I know it as I pull in at the muddy track, beside a printed sign that is hung with oyster-shells upon strings and marked with white-painted symbols that I do not recognise. I know it as I see the thick razor wire hung from the boundary fence.

I know it as I come to a halt before the crumbling facade of the farmhouse, and catch a glimpse - just a glimpse - of an unhappy, wrinkled face glaring down at me.

The curtain twitches. Then is decisively drawn.

Beside the driveway stands a grand and fetid chickenwire coop, crudely assembled, perhaps once home to hens or rabbits. Empty now, other than for the droppings.

Nobody, it seems, is coming out to meet me.

We hear the sound of the car engine being turned off.

Silence.

Then Hayward sighs, and we hear him click the tannoy.

HAYWARD:
Felix?

He waits. No answer.

HAYWARD:
(*Brusquely*)
Hey - Felix, you up?

FELIX:
(*On the tannoy, clearly annoyed*)
How can I help, Investigating Officer Hayward? Over.

HAYWARD:
I've arrived at the...
(*Vaguely*)
...is it a domicile? How would you define a domicile?

FELIX:
(*On the tannoy*)
Any house is a domicile.

HAYWARD:
Not this one. I don't think it's much of anything.

FELIX:
(Impatiently prompting him)
You're at the farm, Hayward.

HAYWARD:
I am. And they're not coming out.

FELIX:
Think it might be trouble?

HAYWARD:
Yes. But let me remain open to the possibility that I'm mistaken.
(Sighing)
I think I'd like a hosanna of determination, please.

FELIX:
(On the tannoy)
You have been heard. Stand by for the Cloak.

(In a calming, prayer-like tone)
I will stand with you, partner.
Outside the silent door, partner
My stout nod matching yours.
Your courage defines me, partner.
Your firmness completes me, partner.
Together, we shall not fail.

HAYWARD seems to be taking this in.

HAYWARD:
(Feeling better)
Thank you, Felix. You have been heard.

A click as he replaces the receiver. He takes a breath.

We hear the car door open, and slam as he crunches away across the gravel.

Silence.

Then we hear him coming crunching back, and open the car door again-

HAYWARD:

(Under his breath, mockingly)
'Don't forget your gun', Hayward-

And the door slams once more and he retreats.

FARMHOUSE, EXT

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

It was some comrades of mine in the Greater Glottage Police Officer's Union who first raised the question, twenty years back - why should law enforcement not have a god of our own?

Other marginalised and misunderstood groups were allowed gods, after all.

And even our nation's frontline troops could mutter their pleas to The Kind-Eyed Colonel With The Bushy Moustache when they were feeling lonely or afraid.

(Mock-indignantly)

Really, what ungrateful sort of message were we sending...what did it say about the misplaced sympathies of our society... if there was no recognised and licenced god to watch over our brave boys and girls in uniform?

Petitions were written. Politicians were asked questions about it. They agreed with us, inevitably; that something had to be done, that whoever was holding us back (presumably some kind of intellectual elite) had to get a taste of their own medicine for once.

And so, out of spite and self-importance, we gave birth to the Cloak.

A silent partner who could walk with you in those dark places. An authority who could reassure you that the decisions you were making were the right ones. A friend who could provide you with that sense of unshakeable righteousness that every police officer needs.

At first, the top brass didn't much care other than it was popular and kept the unions busy - but then they realised that religion could make

for one hell of a cost-saving measure, because why should a detective need a partner in the car with them when they had the Cloak on their side?

Like I said, I don't take these things too seriously.

But sometimes, all the same, it helps to hear that voice.

The sound of HAYWARD rapping at the door.

No response.

He sighs, and then knocks again.

After a moment, we hear fumbling with locks before the door is finally opened by MISTER FINCH.

Throughout the conversation, MISTER FINCH is sullen and unforthcoming.

HAYWARD:
Mister Finch?

My name's Hayward. I'm a Special Investigating Officer with the Greater Glottage Police Authority, specialising in religious criminality.

MISTER FINCH:
(Pretending not to understand)
Huh?

HAYWARD:
I'm a policeman, Mister Finch.

MISTER FINCH:
Could see that from the car.

Silence.

HAYWARD:
(Sourly)
Mm-hm.

Did you happen to hear about the body that was found in the road about a mile from here, around three months back? A teenage boy. He was part of a group of four ramblers that had been reported missing.

He was heavily emaciated, with autophagic marks around the fingers and the palms of his hands.

MISTER FINCH:
(Again, being difficult)
Autophagic?

HAYWARD:
He'd begun to eat himself, Mister Finch.

I know you'll remember this body, because local law enforcement visited every farm in a six-mile radius to conduct enquiries, including this one.

They would have carried out a thorough sweep of every property, searching for the other three rambles.

MISTER FINCH:
I didn't say I didn't remember. I remember.

The copper came around didn't know what he was doing. He was young, too. Younger than you, even.

HAYWARD:
Are you saying that he didn't conduct a thorough sweep, Mr Finch?
Should we look again?

MR FINCH:
Didn't say that.

They stare at each other in silence.

HAYWARD:
Anyway, this boy.

The thing is, we'd all but written it off, until last week...we got a fresh tip. Anonymous source.

I know. I'm excited too.

Silence again as they stare at each other.

HAYWARD:
How are your crops doing this year, Mister Finch? Looks like wheat you're growing here.

MISTER FINCH:
That's right, wheat.

HAYWARD:
So you must worship, um, Sweet Jolly Crunchtooth.

MISTER FINCH:
That's right. Sweet Jolly Crunchtooth.

HAYWARD:
(Goads him)
You know, I can't imagine how it must feel to have to prostrate yourself before a, a cereal mascot.

I've met farmers down south who just refuse to go along with it. They bankrupt themselves, but they will not do business with the corporations, they will not build the shrines.

And can you blame them?

I know it's a hard choice to make when it's your livelihood at stake, but...I'd find that entire way of life demeaning.

A long, hard silence.

MISTER FINCH:
Out here, we do as we're told.

HAYWARD:
No other gods on your farm that I should know about?

MISTER FINCH:
Husband's got a mural up in the lavatory to the Flush Divine.

Don't think that's a matter for the police, though.

HAYWARD:
I think I'd like to see your fields, Mister Finch.

MISTER FINCH:
Got nothing to hide.

HAYWARD:
Yes, I'm sure.

FIELDS, EXT, DAY

The sound of feet crunching over dry earth.

Two people - Hayward and Finch - walking out over the fields.

HAYWARD:
(Narrating)
Sweet Jolly Crunchtooth.

I don't even know how they come up with these names. There are a hundred thousand different forms of harvest worship across the Peninsula, and for a very long time nobody knew how to keep track of them, least of all how to monetise it.

So this cereal conglomerate, it decides to go about it backwards. You design the god on the shredded wheat packets, you sell it in to consumers with a catchy multi-channel advertising campaign("we heap our praises upon Sweet Jolly Crunchtooth for the gift of a nutritious breakfast!").

You put the mascot on the lorries, and you blanket the farms with flyers, explaining that their old gods of the harvest - grinning scarecrows, leafy green-men and faceless corn-dolls - are now this guy. This sentient parcel of shredded wheat with the bulging eyes and the grinning toothed mouth that takes up most of his body, and he eats shredded wheat even though he is of course made of shredded wheat. I mean, it's a nightmare.

But the funny thing is, it worked, for the most part.

Farmers spat when they said Sweet Jolly Crunchtooth's name, but they still said it. And eventually, with the long years and decades, they stopped spitting.

By and large, the new status quo settled over the fields.

But of course you'll always get some reckless son or daughter of the harvest who decides that things were better the way they were before, or they wonder if they'd just do better making a sacrifice to Old Jack Of The Thousand Ears, like their forefathers used to...

When that happens, there are always signs left behind.

Prayer-signs woven in wheat-tails. Offerings of blood and bone in baked clay jars, half-buried in the soil.

Sometimes the sign of a god's favour is only in the crops that have grown higher and thicker than nature should allow.

Although, I have to say...that doesn't seem to be the case here.

The wheat ears are hanging above us and around us, thick and plentiful, but...there are brown tufts of rot here and there upon the stalks and the tips are drooping unhappily in the heat.

I can no longer hear the chatter of birds.

And the funny thing is - the further we go, the worse it gets.

The feet crunch over the dirt in thoughtful silence for a moment.

HAYWARD:

(Calling out)

Don't walk too fast, Mister Finch!

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

There are no farmhands in sight, I realise.

No other signs of life.

Occasionally we pass a parked tractor or thresher tipped into the dirt, but this abandoned machinery wears a forlorn veil of dust and glistening dew that suggests it hasn't been used in quite some time.

By all appearances, we're alone, the old man and me, amongst the dying ears of wheat.

My stomach gurgles with discontent.

I should have had that coffee, I think, and I glance back over my shoulder, then once more to the right and left to check that we aren't being followed.

That's when I see the shack.

Far off in the distance, buried amongst the wheat rows, the tin roof just barely visible in the glint of the sun.

My guide is striding away in the opposite direction, leading me deeper into the fields with what now seems very much like deliberate haste.

HAYWARD:
(*Calling*)
Mr Finch!

MR FINCH:
Mm?

HAYWARD:
I'd like to see what's in that outhouse, please.

MR FINCH:
(*Sullenly*)
Thought you wanted to see the fields first.

HAYWARD:
I'm mercurial, Mr Finch. I'm like the ocean.

Let's make a detour.

HAYWARD:
(*Narrating*)
He glowers at me, his fists clenching.

Like he wants to hit me, or yell something defiant.

But then he nods, and turns, and as he catches me up we stroll together in silence. Back through the fields, towards the hidden shack.

The crunch of footsteps.

HAYWARD:
(*Narrating*)
The building is large, and squat, set into a low hollow within the earth to conceal its true size.

The windows have been boarded up with wood and there's a thick iron padlock on the door.

HAYWARD:
Mr Finch.

MR FINCH:

Mm.

HAYWARD:

I sense that developing between us is something of a mutual understanding, perhaps even mutual respect. Wouldn't you agree?

MR FINCH:

(Noncommittal)

Hm.

HAYWARD:

Then let me be clear with you that if you open this outhouse door and inside we discover the victim or victims of an illegal ritual killing, I will be *really very annoyed*.

Do we understand one another?

MR FINCH:

I never killed anyone, copper.

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

He unlocks the door, and pushes it ajar.

We spend some time standing before the threshold, making impatient faces at each other and gesturing in silence that *no, you go first, really*, until finally he gives up, turns, and steps into the shack ahead of me.

I follow him in.

Perhaps disappointingly- the shack interior looks to be mundane.

Shelves stacked with paint cans. Hanging tools on the walls, instruments of earthcraft.

But then, a second later, I feel the floorboards quiver - and from somewhere beneath my feet, I can make out the steady rhythmic *chukka-chukka-chukka* of some great and complicated machine.

The noise is endless, and it maintains its volume and pitch.

Mr Finch is watching me. Not even glaring any longer.

He looks...immensely resolved. Nothing more, nothing less.

Let's go downstairs, I tell him, and I watch as he nods, peels back the tatty rug in the corner of the shack, and leans down to twist the hidden iron hatch upwards.

The sound of the great underground chorus fills my ears. It's everywhere.

I don't ask him what that noise is. He doesn't tell me.

MR FINCH:
I'll go first. Like you told me to.

HAYWARD:
(Narrating)
He swings his legs down into the hole, and clammers down, descending rapidly from view.

I realise my mistake straight away - but by then it's already too late.

It's pitch black down there.

I can't see where he is or what he's doing, and the only sound is the churn of the infernal machine.

Fuck.

HAYWARD:
(Calling)
Mr Finch! Mr Finch! Could you come back up here, please?

Mr Finch?

Silence.

HAYWARD:
(Narrating)
He doesn't hear me, or he pretends not to hear me.

I have no option. I turn and swing my own legs down onto the creaking ladder, and descend into black.

I don't unholster my gun. At this point I'm not sure it'd help.

After eight steps, my feet tentatively find ground. Dirt, I think.

The machine is somewhere before me. Or...all around me.

Chukka-chukka-chukka.

MR FINCH:

(Calmly, ominously)

The light-switch is behind you.

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

The voice echoes back out at me from somewhere in the darkness.

My stomach, illogically and absurdly, is growling. A sudden stabbing pain that makes me wince.

Keep it together, idiot.

My hand fumbles, finding the wall. Reaching too high and too low - finally locating something hard and plastic that compresses with a click.

The lights blink twice, and then the cellar is illuminated.

The walls are writhing.

The earth around the cellar is packed with life.

Pale, emaciated bodies, so tightly packed that they're pressed up against the chickenwire, their yellowing buck-teeth feverishly, unceasingly gnawing at the metal. At each other.

Tearing through flesh, pulling at fur, swallowing, gasping with relief, biting down again.

These were rabbits once. Hundreds, if not thousands, of rabbits.

An impenetrable, twisting mass of hunger.

The sound is unceasing.

Chukka-chukka-chukka.

I take a step back, turn - and come to a halt.

Mr Finch has found a shotgun.

He's pointing it at me.

MR FINCH:

(Desperately)

You were right, copper. There *is* a god in these fields.

Would you like to meet it?

HAYWARD:

I don't think so.

MR FINCH:

(Taunting)

Not far from here.

Just a walk through the wheat. Then a crawl.

Or perhaps we stay here.

I'll lock you in with the bunnies and as they gnaw at you, you'll gnaw back at them, and in their retching hunger and in yours, you'll come to understand it.

HAYWARD:

Mr Finch, I'd like to help. But you're going to have to stop threatening me.

MR FINCH:

The first copper wasn't so curious. Didn't even come this far out.

We thought it was protecting us. Perhaps it just wasn't hungry enough.

Maybe it lured you here because you're exactly what it's been looking for.

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

He's distracted.

I could definitely lunge forward and make it halfway across the distance towards him before he pulls the trigger and shoots me dead.

Instead I stoop, and I sit cross-legged in the dirt.

MR FINCH:

(Taken aback)

G-get up.

HAYWARD:

Shan't.

MR FINCH:

(Getting angry and unnerved)

Think I won't shoot you right there on the floor?

HAYWARD:

No, but you're a foot shorter than me and I'll be a bastard to move.

(Emphatically)

Mr Finch. Tell me about the god that's in your fields.

Old family deity? A harvest god, perhaps? Those can be the hardest.

MR FINCH:

Not that. Never that.

HAYWARD:

What, then? Because you told me earlier that you never killed anyone, and it's a little strange to begin by shooting a police officer because he finds your secret pet collection.

MR FINCH:

(Simmering with anger and agitation)

I meant that, copper.

Never killed anyone.

HAYWARD:

You understand it's just semantics if you're going to tell me your shotgun killed them, don't you?

MR FINCH:

It was an accident. That's what I mean, you bloody fool.

It was all just an accident.

HAYWARD:

Can you tell me more? I think I might understand.

MR FINCH:

You don't understand anything, copper. You just want me to talk.

Silence.

HAYWARD:
(*Sympathetic*)
Do you really *not* want to talk?

What are the rabbits for, Mr Finch?

MR FINCH:
(*Distractedly*)
Only thing that breeds quickly enough, out here.

I refill 'em once a month.

Feed 'em twice a day.

A few of them starve, but when the others get hungry enough, they'll eat the bodies of the ones that came before, so I don't even need to worry about clearing out the tunnels.

It's a system that works.

Feeling a little weak too, are you?

I don't need to shoot you, copper. We can just wait here and talk while it eats us both.

This far out, it'll take a while.

HAYWARD:
It's a god of hunger.

MR FINCH:
It's the bastard that ruined us.

HAYWARD:
Does it have a name?

MR FINCH:
Harold called it the Hollow. We didn't mean to give it significance, that's just what it was.

A hollow out in the fields where nothing grew.

We made a joke of it, you know? We'd go out and stand on the edge of it together and we'd toss in the seed and we'd whisper, "Grow, grow, barren soil, empty earth, grow."

But nothing did grow.

The Hollow grew instead.

We began marking the boundaries of it as it expanded. The wheat kept dying.

More and more of it, around the indent of the Hollow, and the earth sank as it died. Getting wider and deeper.

Before long we couldn't even approach it without our bellies growling.

Few months later we couldn't approach it at all.

You could see the warblers spinning and swirling in the sky, gorgeous little dark bodies in flight, and when they crossed over the Hollow they'd drop out of the sky.

A rain of birds, withering as they struck the dead earth.

The closer you got, the more you could feel it, tearing away at your insides. Draining you dry.

And the closer you got, the more things seemed to shift.

The soil became sky and the sky became soil, and everything was fodder for the great dark mouth that was rising up out of the heart of our fields.

Harold said we hadn't prayed enough to Sweet Jolly Crunchtooth, we should have signed the premium contract where the monks come around with the pesticide censers, but it wasn't anything to do with anybody else.

This was something new, and we'd called it into being.

We'd willed it into life, the two of us, and it was our responsibility.

The rabbits were Harold's idea. You have to, um, 'achieve equilibrium', he said.

"There's no selling this place now, so we need to find a way of living with this thing.

The god is hungry, so it's moving outwards.

If we feed it enough, maybe it'll stop growing, at least until it's finished."

So - the rabbits.

We tried our best to contain it. We thought we could outlast it.

HAYWARD:
And the ramblers?

MR FINCH:
You saw the barbed wire, didn't you?

We tried to keep people out. Stupid bastards climbed right over it so they could take a shortcut across the old footpath.

They tried to walk right through the middle of it.

Get close enough and you can still see their rucksacks. Down there in the Hollow. The rest of them's all gone.

We didn't know a damn thing until we heard them crying.

'Help me. I need to eat.'

'Help me, please. I need to eat and I don't know where I am.'

You could see them lying out there. Too starved to move. Their legs as thin as bone. Reaching out their arms for anything - soil, flesh - within their grasp.

We couldn't reach them. Not without the Hollow taking us as well.

Soon enough they stopped.

HAYWARD:
One of them got out.

MR FINCH:
I'm the sorriest for him of all.

If we'd realised one of them crawled back out, we'd have...I don't know. Driven him to the hospital. Put him out of his misery, perhaps.

Nobody deserves what happened to them.

But the funny thing was - afterwards, for the first time since it started, the Hollow drew back.

Not by much, just a couple of feet, but you can imagine what a relief that was.

We'd figured out the rules of it. We'd found a way to drive it back and save the farm.

HAYWARD:

But you'd need to keep feeding it.

MR FINCH:

I wouldn't have done it. But you had to consider the possibility, didn't you?

Just intellectually, what if we took down the barbed wire and opened up the footpath again, and if people chose to come that way, that was their choice, not ours?

You had to consider it, if only to say it out loud.

HAYWARD:

They'd have caught you quicker.

MR FINCH:

Harold thought I was a damned fool as well, when I asked him what he thought.

Worse than that. He was ashamed of me.

We spent thirty years building this farm. We grew it together.

If we wanted to keep it, we had to find a way to adapt. We had to find a way to live with it. I...thought he understood that.

I thought we understood each other better.

HAYWARD:

Where is your husband now, Mr Finch?

MR FINCH:

Woke up one morning and the bed was empty. Clothes were gone.

He didn't leave me a note. I thought people were supposed to leave notes for each other. So you know where they've gone.

Car was still in the driveway. He'd taken his keys. I went out and drove around, looking for him.

Spent all day at it, but then I had to get home.

The Hollow needed to be fed.

I still don't know if he walked out into the hills, or if he went the other way.

Out into the fields.

The sorrowful silence hangs between them.

HAYWARD:

I'm so sorry, Mr Finch. This isn't something you should have needed to deal with.

This isn't something anyone should have to deal with.

A long, thoughtful silence.

MR FINCH is making up his mind. And when he finally speaks, his voice is filled with hate.

MR FINCH:

You're one of them nice coppers, aren't you?

I had a farmhand like you once. He said the nice words and good morning and thank you. He meant every word he said, and it was a bonus that talking so sweetly led us to trust him with the storehouse keys so he could pilfer from our paybox each morning.

He even apologised nicely when the police led him off, but there was no reflection in it. He just liked the shape of the words.

You, copper, you'll say your nice, sympathetic words, and I'll put my gun down, and then you'll cuff me and haul me off to the jailhouse in Ees to be tried for - what?

Manslaughter?

HAYWARD:
(A little shaken)
Yes, but I promise you I'll be nice about it.

MR FINCH:
You're the worst of 'em, then.
(Decisively)
Rather it than you.

HAYWARD:
(Narrating)
This is when he takes a step forward, swings his arm down, and
knocks me in the side of the head with the butt of his shotgun.

The shock is instantaneous. The pain comes a moment later.

I fall back, clutching at my head, screaming.

And the second blow comes down upon my foot. Something cracks.

I hear the shotgun fall, tossed idly aside.

I hear the clank of his footfalls upon the ladder.

One small mercy. He doesn't slam the hatch shut after me, but leaves
it open.

Perhaps this just means that he doesn't want another death on his
conscience. Or perhaps we really did have a rapport.

In the moment, regrettably, I take it as evidence that he wants to be
saved.

FIELDS, EXT

Hayward dashes out of the shack. We hear him breathing, choking, spitting.

HAYWARD:
(Desperately calling)
Mr Finch! Mr Finch, come back!

HAYWARD:
(Narrating, calm)
I turn, and flail around - and I see the old man's back, already some
distance away from me, vanishing into the wheat.

I give chase, limping and cursing just as fast as I can.

HAYWARD:

(Desperately calling)

Do you think I won't shoot you, Mr Finch?

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

The deeper he leads me into the fields, the worse the wheatcrop begins to look.

Sagging heads, brown stalks. Dead harvest. At first the wheat is looming over our heads; after a few minutes' walk, it's barely at waist-height.

And then it's gone.

We're walking through dry earth, a great circle of dead dry earth, and the distant waving wheat-heads are visible again in front of us far ahead and to the left and right, but...

...he's leading me forward into a vast and empty circle where nothing grows.

A hole, carrying us downwards.

I cannot see the centre.

HAYWARD:

(Becoming spiteful in his desperation)

They'll never know this was an accident, Mr Finch!

They'll think you killed them! They'll think you killed Harold, too. I'll - I'll tell them-

(Suddenly in awful pain)

I'll - aargh-

HAYWARD:

(Narrating, calmly)

Something in me gurgles; I stoop double.

I can feel it already. The weakness, the agony of starvation.

The juices of my stomach broiling.

The sky wavers, and the ground itself seems to tilt upwards as I walk, until I am lurching forwards and upwards, into the great black mouth lurching up from the earth, its lips puckering delightedly at our approach.

The wilted wheat ears tremble in the wind before me, reaching out haltingly towards me, like the tendrils of some vast ocean anemone.

We're getting too close.

I swear I can see the muscle and flesh stripping away from my quarry as Mr Finch strides, unhesitatingly, into the Hollow.

Flakes of skin, like ash, floating away into the fields.

HAYWARD:

(Yelling)

Mr Finch! Mr Finch!

Don't take another step.

(Pleadingly)

Please - *stop walking*.

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

He doesn't stop walking, and he doesn't turn to look.

Even though his legs are buckling and his emaciated head is drooping now upon an empty neck-

-and then quite suddenly he topples, falling sideways and down into the chasm, and I can no longer see him.

A moment later, the knot of pain in my stomach seems to lighten.

I fall to my knees, and breath, and choke.

When I look up again, sky and ground have reasserted themselves in their usual positions.

The Hollow is just that - a broad, wide dent in the earth, the kind that might be natural or caused by some kind of heavy machinery.

It's fed. And it is sated.

On the far side of the pit, I can make out tattered rucksacks, torn and fluttering in the breeze, like colourful flags.

There's a very long silence.

And then we hear HAYWARD sigh deeply.

The crunch of shoes on dirt as he gets to his feet, and begins to walk back.

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

On my way back through the fields, I stumble across the body of a dormouse.

Tiny and shrivelled, its ribs like a fine comb poking through dried-up skin.

Its gaping teeth caught around its own tail, a perfect little coil of pain and hunger.

I don't know why, but this is what makes me break down.

CAR, INT

The sound of HAYWARD driving.

He's quiet; shaken.

HAYWARD:

(Narrating)

The clean-up crew arrives just before dusk.

I make my report and leave them to it.

They'll attempt to find some way of destroying the Hollow in the fields, whether through explosives or exorcism...

...and if they can't, rabbits are cheap. Sometimes, when you can't put an end to things, it's better just to keep them stable.

It's a system that works.

FELIX:

Rover 9, Rover 9, receiving GL Triple-4, over.

HAYWARD:
What is it, Felix?

FELIX:
How far have you got?

HAYWARD:
About six miles down the road. Do I need to head back to the farm?

FELIX:
No. No, there's something else.

A town further upriver - Marcel's Crossing.

They've found something...honestly, the details I'm getting through are garbled.

Possible false-faith activity.

HAYWARD sighs. He's exhausted.

HAYWARD:
All right. I'll head that way now. Let me know if there's a hotel I can stay at.

FELIX:
Would you like another hosanna, Hayward?

HAYWARD:
Not right now, thank you.
(A little broken)
I think I just want to listen to the music.

We hear him toy with the radio. Click when he reaches the right station.

OUTRO.