

Migrations

Nick Antosca

Desmond tried to watch TV, but every program was preempted by baffling newsbreaks. Weather patterns shifting, whales *eating people?*

He began to drink.

Earlier in the afternoon, his dog had bitten him and the last of eight law school rejections had arrived, so he thought he was entitled to a little merriment. But once he was drunk, things got confusing. Apparently he left his apartment. Somehow he ended up in a neighbor's bathroom, huddled cackling in the shower stall while an elderly couple beat at him with a broom. Then he fled to the elevator and made it down to the lobby, where he collapsed on the marble floor, groaning like an injured moose, head bleeding. The doorman rushed over.

"Get away from me!" Desmond screamed, "I'm fine!"

He managed to get back into the elevator and up to his own apartment, where his dog—a boxer-bull he never, ever walked, since the building didn't allow pets—bit him again.

"Get away!" he screamed, delivering a kick. The dog retaliated. By the time Desmond, reeling and bloody, managed to get into his bedroom and lock the door, he was horribly mauled. He considered calling for help, but, it being his nature to ignore problems, however severe, he swaddled himself in a blanket and passed out. Shortly after daybreak, he woke thinking, *is it true? Did I really not get into law school?* Then he sat up and saw the blood, the bulging violet bite marks on his arm. His left pinkie finger was gone. It was time to quit drinking.

He rose, light-headed. Twisting the doorknob provoked a fearsome volley of barks from outside. The dog, which had been his father's until his father got too sick to care for it, was waiting out there. Desmond called 911.

Because of the dog, he was told to vacate his apartment by month's end. The apartment, on New York's Upper West Side, had been paid for with his trust fund.

He had gotten twenty-nine stitches (forearm, hand, finger-stump, and scalp), a blood transfusion, and a ton of Vicodin that made him constipated. They hadn't been able to find his pinkie. The dog had been destroyed, but its stomach gave up nothing. Even now, packing up the place, combing the rooms, he found no sign of that finger. Where had it gone?

Another bewildering thing was sobriety. He seemed to have emerged from a soft, dark cave into eternal and cheerless light. The edges of tables were hard. Walls gave nothing when you pushed on them. Everything was so unyielding.

And was he only imagining it, or was there a strange, unpleasant electricity in the air, like before a lightning storm?

He called his uncle.

"August Falklander," said his uncle's research assistant. There was a strange yawning white noise behind her voice; it made him think of wind on the moon.

"This is his nephew, Desmond. Can you put him on?"

She did.

"Ah, hello, Desmond," said Uncle August, sounding uncomfortable. "I meant to call you yesterday, but with the weather and everything that's been ... happening, well, you know. You heard, then?"

"No," said Desmond, confused. "I don't know. The thing is, I decided to move out of my apartment, and I need a place to stay, so I was wondering if I could come to Glimpskill."

There was a pause. "Desmond," said his uncle gently, "I meant had you heard about your father."

"What about him?"

"He broke a collarbone and three ribs and punctured a lung trying to escape. Now he's under restraint. They say he's been seeing Oswald more than usual."

“Oh,” Desmond said.

“Yes,” said Uncle August carefully, “in fact, I was going to call you to suggest you go up. To see him. I’m in Louisiana right now, researching my book, but Brendan’s there.”

Glimpskill was Uncle August’s house and the surrounding seventy acres of dense Adirondack countryside just north of Amsterdam. The Bruening Institute, where Desmond’s father was a patient, lay farther north. Brendan Falklander was Desmond’s cousin.

“That works, then,” said Desmond, relieved. “I’ll go tomorrow.”

He called Brendan to make arrangements, but it turned out

Brendan was in Manhattan anyway and planning to drive back upstate after attending a wedding. Brendan was four years older but also adrift.

They planned to meet at 72nd and Central Park West. The benches were empty and it was a cool day, with the wind tossing wrappers and newspaper scraps around like leaves—New York weather had been strange and schizophrenic lately, full of brief uncertain rains and skies like wet tissue—but to Desmond things still seemed bright and hard, and he wished for a drink.

Brendan pulled up, and Desmond got in the car. His cousin was a dark-haired, charming, evasive man who liked to spend money on jackets. They’d been good friends since childhood.

“What happened to your face?” Brendan said.

“Daisy attacked me. I had him put down.”

“How the f—”

“Don’t ask. I’ve also stopped drinking. And been evicted.”

“Are you missing a finger?”

“Daisy did that.”

Brendan shook his head.

“Have you really stopped drinking, Des?” he said after a moment.

“Yes. I’m sticking to it this time.”

They didn’t speak for a while, until they were out of the city, driving upstate. The radio said that barometric pressure had risen

everywhere and that disappearances were increasing, especially in the cities. Brendan turned it off.

“How was the wedding?” Desmond asked.

“The ceremony was fine. But at the reception, Michael’s mother gave him and Gina a guinea pig. Gina’s niece was playing with some balloons and tying the strings together. Then she ties those strings around the guinea pig. Boom—it’s off. It drifts up in the sky, everybody screaming and pointing, until it’s only a little black speck in the sky, then gone.”

“I wonder,” said Desmond, “does the animal suffocate?”

“I don’t know.” Brendan shook his head, craning forward. “Storm coming.”

Drops of rain smacked the windshield. They drove in silence again, until just outside Garnet Falls, when a large black animal loped out of the gray, rainy woods in front of the car. They hit it, a glancing impact that nevertheless knocked the creature ten feet down the road, where it staggered to its feet.

They got out of the car. The beast stood in the road, hunched, gathering its wits or just glowering.

“What is that, a bear?” said Desmond.

“Is it?” said Brendan.

It watched them. Among the dark, thick fir trees, dusk was beginning to spread.

“Get back in the car,” said Brendan.

They did, hurriedly. When they looked back, the animal had fled; the road was empty. Brendan started driving again.

“What was that thing?” asked Desmond.

Brendan said, “What am I, Ranger Rick?”

Growing quiet, Desmond rubbed at the bandaged stump of his little finger, thinking that if he could only have a whiskey, the world would make sense again.

They arrived at Glimpskill after nightfall and got out of the car.

The moon hung over the black hills like an eye rolled back in its

socket.

Inside, Brendan locked the door and, as Desmond set his bags down in the kitchen, slipped furtively away. “What room am I in?” Desmond yelled. From another room, Brendan called back, “Whatever one you want.” Under his voice, Desmond detected the clink of glass; Brendan was pouring himself a quick drink, out of sight.

Later, upstairs in bed, Desmond lay awake. The pain in his missing finger was intense; his stitched-up scalp and arm hurt, too. He sighed. The bed was too small for his lanky frame; he curled in a fetal position for a while, then finally splayed his legs defiantly out. That was another thing about sobriety: It kept you awake.

After a night of fitful dreams in which he was menaced by a sort of goat-man, Desmond staggered downstairs. He had a desultory breakfast of milk and Wheaties, then stepped outside under a sky full of geese, which seemed to be fleeing something. A low, bulgy cloud carpet hid the sun.

Brendan appeared. “Nice day for a trip,” Desmond said, as they got into the car. Brendan started the engine and backed down the driveway.

The radio was on, more news—*reported sighting the beast more than once, saying it followed the ocean liner for almost—until* Desmond flipped to another station—*increasingly cloudy and there is a winter storm warning in...*

“Winter?” said Brendan.

He turned the radio off. Magnificent pines rumbled by.

The Bruening Institute was a chilly complex of buildings on a hill. The grounds sloped upward behind it and met the forest, and the mountain in the background towered gloomily over everything.

An old woman attended the front desk.

“I’m here to visit my father,” Desmond said. “Martin Falklander. I was told he had an accident.”

An orderly—a short man with stress creases like whiskers reaching

out from his mouth and eyes—led Desmond down a long hallway and up a flight of stairs. There seemed to be no other visitors.

On the second level, the orderly unlocked a door, waving away a young nurse who stood vigilantly beside it, and said, “I’ll wait here—someone always stays outside his door now. If you want Dr. Stergopoulos, let me know.”

“All right,” Desmond said. He went into his father’s room. He saw at once that his father’s death wasn’t far off. Loosely shriveled skin was molded to the old man’s skull, which looked about the size of a small coconut. He resembled a balding, underfed rhesus monkey.

“Hi, Dad,” Desmond said.

“Desmond,” his father said, pleased. His father was strapped to the bed. He was bandaged and a medical brace of some kind was visible under his pajamas.

Approaching and taking his father’s hand—so bony, and the loose skin, good Lord—Desmond was suddenly breathless: This was it, this was the end.

“I’m sorry it’s been so long, Dad.”

“*Has* it been a long time?”

“How you doing? They treat you well?”

“Oh, yes, yes. Desmond, sit. You make me nervous.”

Desmond looked unhappily around the room—which he saw had been recently cleaned, the bedpans emptied—for a place to sit, but saw no chairs.

“Move down, Oswald,” his father ordered, speaking to the edge of the bed. “Make room.”

Oswald, presumably, scooted down. This was the child, supposedly about nine or ten years old, who Desmond’s father claimed to have adopted and to be raising; it had been a deciding factor in his institutionalization. Oswald, as far as Desmond or anyone else could tell, had some sort of crippling deformity that required constant care, attention, and unconditional love. Desmond’s father’s dedication to providing these things had put Desmond in the unenviable position of having a sibling rivalry with a handicapped child who didn’t exist.

But all that was behind him; he resolved just to make the best of what time he had left with his father. “Wouldn’t want to sit on Oswald, would I?” he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You aren’t,” said his father, “but he’s afraid of you. Why do you have bandages all over your face and your arm?”

“The dog attacked me,” Desmond said. “Don’t worry. It’s nothing.”

“Desmond,” mumbled his father, “Desmond, that’s terrible. Where is Daisy?” He didn’t really seem to register the extent of Desmond’s injuries.

“I found a home for him. A nice big farm.”

“That’s good,” said his father with innocent relief. A moment later, he added, “Sorry about the odor.”

“Oh,” Desmond said, embarrassed. “I don’t actually—”

“They keep me tied like this. I can’t bathe Oswald. I can’t do anything but hold his hand.”

“Ah,” Desmond said. “Well, don’t worry. I don’t smell anything.”

There was an awkward silence. After a while, his father said, “Oswald, don’t pick at your scabs.”

The exact nature of Oswald’s disability was not known to anyone but Desmond’s father, but apparently it was pretty severe. The child had to be bathed, fed, constantly comforted, and sometimes carried from place to place.

“So, Dad,” Desmond said tenderly, “you broke some bones, you collapsed your lung—what happened?”

“I was trying to get out of here,” his father said.

“Uncle August said you were trying to climb something.”

“Yes. I fell.”

“I see.”

“Everyone is leaving.”

Desmond scratched his head, suddenly exhausted. “Who’s leaving?”

“My friends here.”

Not sure whether his father was referring to imaginary friends or fellow patients who had recently been released—or died—Desmond

decided not to press the issue. He stood up.

“Wait,” said his father. “Are you leaving? Please, before you go, if you could—”

“Yeah?”

“Would you bathe him?”

“Oswald?”

“He’ll get sick. He’s only a child.”

“Yeah,” Desmond said. “Yeah. I can do that.”

And so, using a nonexistent basin of warm water and soap and an imaginary sponge, he undressed the crippled boy, bathed him, dressed him again, and combed his sparse hair.

Brendan was waiting outside under a great force of blue-black thunderheads.

“Let’s go,” Desmond said. He could smell liquor on Brendan and knew that his cousin must have a flask on him. They got in the car. Desmond considered commandeering the keys, but he didn’t feel like driving.

“How was it,” grunted Brendan, backing down the drive.

“Fine.”

“I walked around the grounds,” Brendan said, belching sullenly. “Talked to some guy who was having a smoke break.”

“Really.”

“Eight patients escaped in the last two weeks.”

“Eight?”

Having, with some difficulty, reached the road, Brendan angled the car in the correct direction and started off. “He said something’s gotten into them.” He paused. “Oh. I feel a little sick.”

“Something’s certainly gotten into my father,” Desmond said. Suddenly he didn’t want to think about this at all. He turned on the radio.

—urged his followers to remain vigilant for the Dajjal’s arrival. Also today, civil authorities chided Franklin Graham for fueling public hysteria with his claim that the disappearance of Santo

Antão Island signaled the—

Brendan flipped the radio off.

“What is this?” he said. “Like every station is news now.

Where’s the music?”

“My dad’s going to die soon,” Desmond said. “I could tell. I feel guilty.”

“Why?”

But Desmond couldn’t even answer that to his own satisfaction, thinking only that he wished he had stayed longer.

Later, Brendan left the house, and when he returned at dusk,

he had plunged into a worried sulk. He moved from room to room, drinking relentlessly, pulling at his wavy dark hair, and complaining.

“Why are all the liquor stores closed? What’s going on?”

Desmond pointed out that there was still a lot of liquor in the house, but Brendan shouted at him that it was running low. “And no one’s picking up,” he said, waving his cell phone like a shipwrecked man. “What’s happening out there? Where is everyone?” He pointed out the window. “I hate it here! We’re cut off.” Abruptly, he said, “I can’t take it. I’m driving to Saratoga Springs. *They’ll* have something to drink,” and strode out the front door, slamming it behind him. Saratoga Springs was over an hour away.

Desmond was surprised to hear the car actually start and go down the driveway. He was suddenly overcome by terrible, lonely claustrophobia. Heroically resisting the promises of the liquor cabinet, he went into the bathroom, locked himself in, and huddled in the tub.

Today, he suddenly remembered, was the day he was supposed to have had his stitches removed. Hauling himself up, he discovered nail scissors in the medicine cabinet and began snipping stitches out of his forearm and scalp, severing knobs and lumps of flesh that had healed over them. A door slammed somewhere. “Des! Des!”

Brendan was pacing the living room, flask in hand, gesticulating fearfully. “Keep the doors locked!” he slurred and sobbed. “Locked,

Des! I got a few miles down the road and I saw something in the woods. It was following the car. It moved like a human being but it kept up with the car....”

It took Desmond a long time to get his cousin calm enough to pass out.

In the morning, there was no mention of Brendan’s breakdown or whatever he had seen. Perhaps he had blacked out and forgotten. They drove in silence back to the Institute. Brendan turned on the radio—

—flocking to major urban areas like New York and Philadelphia. And in Campbell County, Virginia, pathologists have used dental records to positively identify the remains of Reverend Jer—

—and abruptly, savagely, flicked it off. Once at the Institute, Brendan parked outside and slumped behind the wheel with a harassed, hunted look. He said, “Maybe I’ll come in later. If not, I’ll be here.”

“All right,” Desmond said. He went in.

A different orderly led him up to his father’s room. No one was waiting outside the door this time.

“Isn’t he supposed to be under supervision?” Desmond said.

“Look,” said the orderly, “I don’t know where Dr. S. is, but somebody can try and find him if you want.”

“Never mind,” Desmond said.

The orderly unlocked the door and Desmond went inside. One of his father’s arms was newly bandaged, and the old man’s breathing sounded difficult. His restraints had been reinforced. He turned his leathery simian head to Desmond.

“What happened?” Desmond said. “Did you try to get away again?”

“They won’t let me go outside,” his father muttered. “I’ve *got* to get out to the woods.”

Desmond opened the door and leaned back into the hallway to ask the orderly what had happened, but the orderly was gone. The

wind blew a dry leaf against the glass, and it occurred to Desmond that the trees should not be losing their leaves for several more months.

“Sit down,” his father said, gasping a bit.

Desmond looked warily at the edge of the bed. “Is he there?” he asked.

His father looked at him like he must be blind. “Oswald *went*. I told him I’d be along soon.”

Desmond sat down, confused. He smelled urine. “How long have you been here like this?” he asked.

“Oh,” said his father, “a long time. Since last night. I call, but...”

“God *damn* it!” Desmond said, getting up again. “What kind of place are they running here?” He opened the door. The corridor was still empty and he had a sense of accumulated dust, of bad air.

“Hello? Orderly?”

Propping the door, he hurried down the hallway (echoes, echoes) and downstairs. The front desk was deserted. Desmond took a look outside and saw only Brendan’s car, his cousin dozing at the wheel. He turned back. Documents littered the front desk, as if the attendant had stepped away only for a moment. After waiting several minutes, Desmond turned over a paper and scrawled on the back: PLEASE SEND SOMEONE UP TO 214 RIGHT AWAY. MY FATHER IS BEING NEGLECTED AND I AM WORRIED ABOUT HIS RESPIRATION.

He went back upstairs.

“I’ll wait here with you, Dad,” he said, sitting on the bed.

“Somebody’ll be up soon to take the restraints off. These fucking people, man.”

His father released a labored sigh. “Who can blame them? I’d go, too. It’s time. I hope Oswald’s all right.” He lay back, his breathing troubled but his face peaceful.

“What’s that mean, Dad? Where is it you’re so anxious to get to?”

“I’ll find out when I get there,” said his father.

Desmond decided his father was talking about death.

“I’m glad to be here with you now, Dad,” he said.

His father, looking annoyed, said, "It would be helpful if you could cut off these restraints."

Desmond tentatively touched them. They were some kind of synthetic material, secured by little latches that appeared to require a small key.

"I'd need a knife or something. I don't know how to undo them," he said. "Somebody'll come soon." A moment passed. Desmond felt something unfamiliar, something like resolve. With great difficulty, he heard himself say, "Dad, for whatever it's worth, I'm glad I'm here with you now. I never knew what you thought of me, and I still don't, and I wish I knew you better. But I'm glad I'm here."

"Des," said his father, nodding at the restraints, "please. Oswald is waiting for me."

There was, in the tone of that statement, such wistfulness and vulnerability that Desmond turned away from his father, hurt.

"Don't worry, Dad," Desmond said. "He won't have to wait long."

"I hope not," said his father. "Something's coming and I need to be with him when it does."

"Someone will come soon," Desmond muttered. Some minutes passed. The sky outside the window was curdled, unlike any weather Desmond had ever seen. Grumbling to himself, wishing for a drink, he fell into a thin, strange doze.

At once he found himself in one of those precarious dreams that is less an imagined world than a cleverly marked transparency pressed onto one's actual surroundings, the differences so subtle that at first you don't know you're asleep. In fact there was only one difference, and it was so obvious and shocking that at first Desmond did not see it. It was this: Oswald was sitting on the dresser.

He was a hunchback with large black mouse eyes set into a sad, elderly face. His deformity was the kind that causes people to avert their eyes in the supermarket. In a pair of old, greyish Fruit of the Looms, the boy sat rocking on the dresser, clutching something in one nervous hand and looking at the wall with slightly parted lips.

Hey, Desmond said.

Oswald didn't respond, looking for all the world like a small and grotesquely dystrophic version of Desmond's father. His spine was curled like a question mark. Finally, he raised a skeletal arm and held out his closed fist.

Did you come back for him? Desmond asked gently, rising.

Oswald held out his clenched fist insistently.

Do you have something for him?

Sensing that the child didn't have the will or muscle control to open his own fist—the knuckles were white—Desmond gently began to peel back the fingers. They were clenched very tight.

What did you bring? he said. *And where did you bring it from?*
Hm?

He had pried two of Oswald's fingers up, revealing something wrinkled and milk-colored. Acid rose up his throat.

Where did you get this? he demanded. *Where have you been?*

He had Oswald's fist open now. There it lay, on the grimy palm: Desmond's bitten-off little finger, ivory and ruby. The dog's teeth had made glossy red indentations.

Desmond woke up, spitting bile. His father's chest was heaving with sludgy noises. A rope of white foam hung from the corner of his mouth. His father's eyes rolled down and looked at Desmond.

"Take me outside," he gasped.

"I'll get someone," Desmond said, leaping up. He ran down the empty hallway, downstairs. The desk was still deserted and his note untouched. He shouted for help, but only the echo of his voice came back.

Bursting out the main entrance, he found himself in an eerie dusk, though it was only mid-afternoon. He pounded the glass of Brendan's car; his cousin snapped awake and rolled down the window, looking peevish.

"What time is it?" he said. "What's going on?"

"Dad's having some kind of attack," Desmond panted. "I can't find anyone. I—"

Brendan's eyes flicked to something behind Desmond. "What's that?" he said.

The grassy slope that rose toward the woods was teeming with people. Patients, mostly barefoot, clad in pajamas or long white gowns. The old, the slow, the deformed, the deranged. Above, the sky had grown thicker, almost coagulated, and voluminous shadows weighed everything down. The white bodies slowly climbed the hill and disappeared among the forlorn dark trees.

When Desmond returned a minute later, carrying Brendan's pocketknife, his father was dead. An old man's pale corpse, like a huge naked shrimp on the bed.

Dazed, he cut off his father's restraints. His mind kept traveling, avoiding the corpse. He thought of the patients in their white gowns and pajamas moving inexorably into the woods. He dragged the body downstairs on a mattress. When he came outside, only a few stragglers remained on the hill. From the clotted dark clouds he heard a soft rumble, more like growling than thunder.

Brendan rolled down the window. "Is he dead?"

"Yeah. Help me."

"You're bringing the body back?"

"What do you want me to do?" Desmond yelled. "Leave him? There's nobody here! *Help* me."

Brendan got out and, with fearful glances at the sky and the woods, helped drag the body to the car.

At Glimpskill, they unloaded the body on the lawn.

"Why is it so dark?" said Brendan, looking up nervously. "It's two in the afternoon."

"Stop talking about the weather," Desmond said, throwing his arms up. He paused, touching his forehead. "I need to bury him."

"On our front lawn?"

"Do you have any better ideas?" he yelled at Brendan, who flinched.

“There are shovels in the basement,” Brendan said.

Desmond nodded, feeling that a storm was gathering to break on them any second, and they made for the house. Before they reached the door, a thick, glottal growling came out of the knotted clouds, a threat rolling across the treetops. A claw of violet lightning raked the horizon.

Inside, they locked the door. At once the noise ended, and Desmond became aware of total silence, inside and out, heavy, unbending. It seemed to spread across the world like thick cream.

“Do you still want to bury him?” Brendan said.

“Let’s just stay here a minute.”

They stood in the foyer, taking shallow, self-conscious breaths, and then Brendan went into the living room. Desmond followed a moment later and found his cousin drinking bourbon and water.

“Yeah,” Brendan agreed. “We don’t need to go outside.”

Desmond looked out the picture window that framed the front lawn. His father’s body lay on the grass. The air looked like everything was underwater.

“Yeah,” Desmond said. In the brambly darkness, he could hardly see the corpse now. No, he couldn’t see the corpse at all. A colossal growl rolled across the mountains, getting into the timber of the house, making it tremble like the heart of a bird.

“I’ve reconsidered,” he said slowly. “I will have a drink now.”