

# Tabula Rasa

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## Kapitel 3: God's Work

He had been all too ready to assume all this had just been a bad dream when he woke up, eyes still closed and trying to make himself believe he was at home in his own bed. But as he had looked around to find himself still in the hospice, he had known there was no way to escape. The nurses had helped him up and made sure he was alright before sending him on his way again.

Like a sleepwalker, he had shuffled through the streets of his hometown. Only a few weeks ago, he had wanted to return to this place so much. Now he could not even lift his eyes from the pavement. His head was empty. He had not been able to grasp what had happened. He did not want to understand it. Every single part of his brain had seemed to struggle to accept the inevitable.

Eventually, he had stopped moving, like a passenger in his own body that had brought him here without his control. Daniel had looked up to see where his feet had led him. It was his parents' home.

The next thing he knew, he sat at their table, his spoon in a stew, mother and father across from him.

"Eat something, dear", his mother said with a weak smile and gesticulated towards his plate.

He lifted the spoon to his mouth and swallowed, but it felt more mechanical than necessary. He could not even tell whether the stew was particularly hot or not.

His father put aside the cutlery and wiped his mouth. Without looking up at Daniel, he asked, "So how was your little adventure." Gruffly, he added, "It's been months since we last heard of you."

Daniel tried to speak, but no word came out, only a suffocated squeak.

"For heaven's sake, pull yourself together, Daniel!", his father barked at him.

Daniel winced. As if he had just woken from a deep sleep, he stared at his father in surprise. "What did you say?", he asked, and when he saw his father furrowing his brow, Daniel quickly mumbled, "I'm sorry."

His father harrumphed and gave him a short glare. "We heard you have been to Prussia. Mrs Dinges told us, bless her soul. Without her, we would not know the least thing about you."

"I'm sorry", Daniel repeated, facing his plate again.

For a moment, only the sound of silverware against china could be heard.

"When did it happen?", Daniel asked, following a sudden impulse.

"What?", his father asked.

"When did Hazel...", he could not even finish the question. The lump in his throat was back. The stew seemed to look way more interesting than his parents' faces.

His mother gave a sudden, choking noise, and his father pressed his lips together. "Do not speak of it, Daniel", he growled.

"But..."

"Daniel!" His father all but shouted at him. Daniel jumped in his seat and stared at him. There it was, that face, these piercing eyes staring at him with anger and Daniel could almost feel himself shrinking, shrinking, until he was so small that his father could have just picked him up and thrown him to the ground.

He quickly glanced at his mother, who did not return the look. Her hands were clenched into the fabric of her dress. Even though they were hidden by the table, Daniel knew.

"You will eat your mother's stew, and you will be grateful that we still welcome you into our home." His father had straightened up to full height in his seat and glowered down on Daniel. Daniel cast down his eyes, sucked in his lips and bit down on them to hide their trembling. He felt afraid, ashamed, and unbearably upset. His intestines hurt as if knotted together, so much that he wanted to scream. Just scream all his pain into his parents' faces so they could not ignore it any longer. Scream until his mother looked up at him, scream until his father had to cover his ears.

But under his father's fearsome gaze, he was paralyzed.

"I'm sorry", he said one last time.

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This numbness did not leave him, not when he returned home and not the morning after. Hazel was gone. Even though it was hard to grasp it in its entirety, in its finality, there was the knowledge like a constant weight on his mind.

It took away any enthusiasm he had for resuming his work, but he forced himself to

sit down at his desk and at least continue with his task of putting down his remarks and additions to Herbert's account, in hope it would distract him.

Even though reading through Herbert's journal had proved to be no problem for him before, now he could hardly bear looking at it without a creeping feeling of dread. He decided to leave the rest of the journal for another day and that he should rather go through his own notes again until he was in a less agitated state of mind.

Expanding his descriptions of the ancient corridors and chambers would be simple enough, so he sorted through his papers scribbled with notes and took the pen to hand to add some more. He still recalled the stone walls in the light of the flickering lamps, the darkness in front of him spreading down the corridors that went down, down to the chamber.

It hit him all at once. There was a sudden strike of panic as the tomb swallowed him and he was trapped. The darkness closed in on him, and he gasped, helplessly tearing at the collar of his shirt. He could not breathe, the darkness was too thick. And while he was desperately struggling for air, he was all too aware of what was waiting beyond it, quickly approaching with an unearthly cry—

Daniel jerked at the sound of a door closing loudly downstairs and his eyes darted through the room. It was his study, with the books and dictionaries, his journals, notes and drawings, all crammed into the tiny space of the small room, and the autumn sun was still shining through the curtains. There was nothing unusual about it, yet Daniel's heart was pounding in his chest and he clenched his fingers into his shirt as he tried to catch his breath.

His notes were covered in ink, as he had pressed down his pen with too much force and it had bled on the paper, the dark spot spreading slowly.

Daniel felt horribly sick. He tried to get up, yet his legs gave in and he had to catch himself on the table before he could stumble to the door and barely made it to the bathroom in time.

He did not dare to enter his study again, so he lay on his bed, wiping the cold sweat off his brow and tried to calm his nerves by downing half a bottle of laudanum.

As he was lying there, dazed but not calmed, his heart beat sluggish but still loud in his ears, he watched Alexander scramble about with his little ball made of cloth. Daniel had bought it for him as a small present so he would have something to play with while Daniel was preoccupied with his work. Usually, he enjoyed the happy display of Alexander pushing the ball around and chasing it, until the boy sat down and contently attempted to gnaw on it with his little teeth, drooling all over the blue cloth. Yet despite Alexander's presence, Daniel's mind was racing with dreadful thoughts. We have escaped, Daniel reminded himself. He did not dare to close his eyes but kept them on Alexander, who was lying on the floor and completely taken in by his toy – this child was the living proof that it was off their trail.

The most frightening thought, however, was that even though he was safely back in

London, the nightmares that had haunted his mind in Brennenburg might have followed him, waiting to resurface at night. It was this fear that kept him from finding any sleep.

The next day was not treating him any better. In addition to his lack of sleep, he was feeling rather ill. The dizziness did not leave him and it was hard to force down his breakfast.

"You look dreadful", Mrs Dinges commented.

Daniel mumbled something about staying in bed for the day and excused himself from supper.

Back in his bedroom, he discovered to his dismay that he had already taken all that was left of his opium tincture, and hectically searched for another bottle in his bedside cabinet. The lamp on top of it, which he would always have within a hands reach to light in the night, fell to the floor as he rummaged about inside of the cabinet with shaky hands and increasing desperation. Daniel jerked at the sound to quickly check if there was any crack in the glass. To his relief, it was still whole.

He sat back on the floor and rested his throbbing head on the mattress. So very tired was he that he inevitably drifted off into an uneasy dream of impenetrable darkness filled with ominous noises and unknown terrors. In the distance, he spotted someone. A little girl in a dress so bright it was almost glowing. He called out for her, but she turned and ran, and Daniel quickly realized why. The pitch black sky above him was crumbling, a deep chasm spreading quickly towards him. He tried to flee but he could hardly run for the ground was shaking beneath him. All of the sudden, the floor was no longer solid but strangely soft and unstable, sucking his feet in so he could no longer move forward. He could still see the girl. She was too slow. The muddy ground sucked her in as well, he could see her terrified face. It was Hazel! Daniel reached for her, struggled to get free, but in vain. He sank quickly into this warm and moist thing—

Daniel woke with a choked scream and found himself lying on the floor, disoriented and trembling.

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As the days went by he was almost sure that he was truly ill. His hands kept shaking and no matter how tightly he wrapped the blanket around himself, he still shivered. Whenever he got up, he almost tumbled over, as his legs were wobbly and his mind was swimming. There was a dull ache in his bones that made moving around rather tedious. It reminded him of when he had been terribly sick as a child, with his head hurting, nose running and his body shaking from fever. He felt vulnerable like this, restless yet helpless, and he did not dare to leave the apartment anymore.

When Mrs Dinges, who brought him soup he could eat in his drawing room, suggested he should go see a doctor or let her sent for one, the thought alone made him tense up. He declined with a rather blunt, "No, thank you."

"But what if you caught some strange disease on your travels, Mr Mayfair?", she insisted, slightly insulted by his rudeness, but no less worried. "Be responsible."

Daniel cut her off by claiming that he was already feeling better – a blatant lie that she did surely not believe, because she was rather cross with him from then on, especially when he did not show any signs of recovery.

It was his decision whether to see a doctor and none of her business, and Daniel remained adamant about his choice not to send for one. The truth was that something about it made him feel very uncomfortable, afraid even. How he was feeling now reminded him too much of the awful state he had been in during his stay in Brennenburg. The last thing he wanted to do is confess to a doctor his dreams and fears. No one must know, and with this in mind, he kept hiding in his home.

Daniel spent his time mostly in bed, in a half-awake state, trying to keep warm by curling up in his blankets. When he could not bear the threat of nightmares creeping up at the corner of his consciousness any longer, he got up to settle in his armchair in the drawing room.

He took Alexander with him when the boy was awake and making loud protesting noises when Daniel left the room, calling for his attention. In hopes that it would keep Alexander entertained, Daniel gave him his ball so he could play with it while he tried to read something to occupy his mind. Despite his continued efforts, he did not succeed in immersing himself in his books. It was impossibly hard to concentrate and his eyes were awfully tired.

Almost dozing off over his reading, Daniel jerked awake when Alexander suddenly grabbed onto his trouser leg. The boy's tiny fingers were clinging to the fabric as he pulled himself up to stand, a bit uncertain still, supported by the chair and his grip on Daniel's leg.

It was not the first time Alexander had achieved this using the chairs as support, even though he could not walk more than a few steps. As Alexander looked up at him now, eyes wide, waiting for a reaction, Daniel forced a smile.

Apparently content, Alexander took a clumsy step and then let go to take another. Suddenly he stopped, as if in wonder over the fact that he had not fallen over yet, and immediately dropped on his behind. Daniel, who feared the boy would now cry, out of shock or because he was unhappy about his failure, quickly rose from his chair. His head hurt, and the room swam before his eyes as he bent down, so he hurriedly grabbed one small arm to pull Alexander up again. Maybe his movements had been too uncoordinated, for the boy cried out and tumbled over again.

Daniel let himself fall back into the armchair, his hand pressed to his aching forehead as Alexander started to wail softly. "Get up on your own", Daniel said weakly, burying his face in his hands to ease his pain and nausea. "I cannot help you."

The crying swelled on to a louder whining, a noise that was torment to his aching

skull.

When the nursemaid finally arrived around noon, Daniel withdrew to his bedroom again.

As it turned out, she was rather excited about Alexander's attempts at walking. Before she left in the evening, she reported them to Daniel, who was sitting in his bed, propped up by pillows. He was still attempting to concentrate on the pages of his book and really wanted to hear none of it.

"Stop talking so loudly", he snapped at her. "I am sick. I need my quiet. And why were you not here in the morning?"

She did not even argue against this quite unjust accusation, because he had never asked her to be here any sooner, but retreated with a softly whispered apology.

However, she did remember his words and came a lot earlier from then on, which was probably for the better. With his nerves raw like this, Daniel could not handle the child at all.

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Daniel had lost track of time. He had been out once or twice, wrapped in a cloak and a scarf to ward off the cold, slightly disoriented as he stumbled hurriedly through the streets like a madman. He found the way to the pharmacist through the haze of his sleep-deprived mind, and once he was back home, the laudanum let him finally find some rest.

Whether it was thanks to the healing properties of opium or maybe due to him finding sleep again, he could not tell, yet as soon as he regularly swallowed a generous dose of laudanum, his body seemed to recover from the aching and shivering. His mind, it turned out, was not as easily cured. He could not get rid of the stupor clouding his thoughts.

Even though he slept at night again and did wake with only crude memories of his dreams, it was hard to get up in the morning and he kept haunting his own apartment like a ghost. Sometimes, on worse days, he did not get up at all.

If he could not bear his own thoughts any more, he drowned them in laudanum. At times, Alexander's screaming pulled him out of his deep dark sleep, yet Daniel would just lay there on his back and not open his eyes, the room spinning about him, his limbs too heavy and his head too light to move.

When he did not feel numb and tired, the weight that rested on his chest grew. It was so heavy that sometimes he feared he would be crushed by it. It pushed the air out of his lungs and made him gasp for breath. He lay in bed, his arms wrapped around himself, and once again he was overcome by the wish for it all to be over.

Every now and then, when despite his fatigue and the consumption of laudanum he

couldn't sleep, he would even ponder how it could be done. His burning eyes would not stay closed and so he stared at the ceiling, and pictures of himself drowning filled his thoughts. He wondered how it might feel, how quickly it would release him.

And while the thought was weirdly comforting, the small part of him that still hurt was surprised by it. Not at the outrageousness of these considerations. There were memories of his childhood, of the priest admonishing the congregation about the sixth commandment: Thou shalt not kill. He had talked about how this rule did not only extend to others, but also to oneself, about how no human had the right to decide over the day of death. Daniel remembered the priest's words clearly, as he had recalled them numerous times just a few weeks back, to reassure himself of the righteousness of his own actions.

Only God had the judgment over life and death, and that fiendish terror definitely had not been under His command. It had only been just for Daniel to defend his own life from this creature of malignity. Those who had been sacrificed for it had been doomed through their misdeeds anyway. Daniel had only done God's work with cleansing the earth of their filth.

But Hazel... she had done nothing to deserve this fate.

It was so unfair.

Daniel choked and rolled on his side. If only he could have cried. But there was nothing but a dull pain in his head. The priest's word did not mean anything compared to this. There could be nothing worse than this.

Then again, had he not been this miserable before? In Algeria, back in London and then in Brennenburg, yet he had never considered ending... it.

Maybe, he pondered, it had been because his whole mind had been set on making it out of this hell alive. He had done all this, he had run and struggled and kicked and screamed to save his own bare life, to be safe, to get home.

But now that he was home, Daniel thought, what had it given him? He had fought so hard for his right to live, he had wrested his soul out of the devil's hands, and for what? To come back to loneliness, to darkness, to nightmares and to loss. If God had allowed him to live through everything he had had to endure, then why had He taken away what meant most to him? Was this supposed to be some kind of cruel, divine joke? But could something be divine and unfair at the same time?

The dull, painful throbbing in Daniel's head became stronger. He groaned and pressed his knuckles to his temples and squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted to stop thinking, but the whirlwind that had started building up in his head could not be stopped.

At once, it was like a sudden shaft of light broke through the tempestuous chaos.

God was not to blame. A being as pure and innocent as his dear Hazel could never

have been taken from this world by God. Somebody else was at fault for this.

The idea had given him a sudden surge of energy. He sat up, far too quickly as his still pounding head reminded him. But he did not care. As he got up on his feet, for a second everything went black before his eyes and he swayed a little, so he held on to the bed post until the room stopped turning. There were still sparks flying before his vision when he got dressed and hurried down the stairs to call for a coach.

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Dark, high skies spanned over the town and its graveyard. The cold wind was pulling at Daniel's clothes and hair, the smell of snow lying heavily in the air. His eyes were stinging, and his hands were clenched to fists at his sides. In front of him the small grave with the even smaller gravestone. Hazel Mayfair, 1824 – 1839, he read for about the fiftieth time.

He waited. He was expecting the grief to overcome him, for his weak knees to finally give in, for his tired eyes to finally start crying. But instead, all that grew inside of him was anger. The more often he read the words that were delicately engraved into the cold and heavy stone, the higher the bile boiled within him, until his teeth were clenched so hard that his lower jaw started hurting.

Where had his parents been? Not just when Hazel had died, but all these years before? Where had they been when the girl had needed them the most? It had been him, Daniel, who had read her stories until deep at night when her coughing and fever would not let her sleep. It had been him who had comforted her, who had tried to give her hope when she was upset. When she had lashed out, desperate in her helplessness, it had been him who had endured it and calmed her. Her distorted little face rose from the depths of his memory, as if through the surface of restless water, and it was like looking into a mirror.

There had always been things that he could have blamed his father for. Yet Daniel had never criticised him, had not even dared to think of it! His own cross, he could bear. But this was for Hazel's sake.

He turned around and stormed off. A man who took care of the graves gave him an indignant glance, but Daniel did not care.

This time, he found his way to his parents' home consciously. Walking through their door this upright, he felt as if he had become a giant. His father came downstairs, already exasperated. "How can you dare to make such an upheaval?", he said, then he looked upon Daniel, and pressed his lips together. "Go into the drawing room and wait there. And stop making such a racket. You know how that upsets your mother."

He did as he was told. A few minutes later, his father joined him. He sat down in an armchair opposing Daniel. "What is it now?", his father asked impatiently.

Daniel took a deep breath. And when that didn't work, he took another one. "I want to know what happened to Hazel."



His father stared at him in bewilderment for a moment, then he said "Well, she died of course."

"But how? When? Why?", Daniel revolted, surprised at his own courage.

His father furrowed his brows again. "She had lived a lot longer than we had all expected, Daniel. We should be grateful she was given so much time."

"But..."

"Gracious goodness, Daniel! She was sick, she has always been sick! There is no sense in denying the undeniable! She was going to die, she did die. And she would be glad too, knowing that she is no longer a burden to us!"

Daniel sat there, motionless, only his hands trembling with badly concealed anger. "A burden to you...?", he started out, trying to keep his voice down. "How could she have been a burden to you when you have never cared about her well being in the first place?" The words had tumbled out of his mouth before he could hold them back.

He stared at his father in shock and saw the muscles in his jaw tensing. His father rose from his chair, towering over Daniel and glaring down on him with these infernal piercing eyes. Daniel knew, he had stepped out of line. What would follow was his punishment. He steadied himself for the first hit. Yet his father did not even raise an arm.

Nothing happened.

Something had changed.

And as Daniel got up on his feet, as if getting ready to run, he noticed what it was. For the first time, he realized that he was taller than his father. He could not pick Daniel up and throw him to the ground. Never again.

Daniel's surprise quickly faded. It had made room for the held back, pent up, aimless fury of a lifetime.

"All you have ever seen Hazel as is a waste of resources!", Daniel yelled. He did not care anymore whether his mother would hear. He did not care whether the whole world could hear. As his father did not answer, he continued. "You have abandoned her to that hospice, even though you knew she never wanted to be there! She could have lived! You are her family, but you have forsaken her!"

There were so many other things whirling around in his head that he wanted to say, but he could not grasp them. He did not know how to put them into words. He thought of the basement, of the darkness, of the darkness everywhere. In the tomb in Algeria, in Brennenburg, in his own apartment. And he thought of his loneliness, the coldness that was left now that Hazel was gone.

It was all his father's fault.

The man slowly shook his head. "You have not been there, Daniel. You did not hold her hand as she slipped away."

Something like icy water began to spread inside of Daniel and smothered his anger beneath it.

"She has always asked for you. 'Where is Daniel', was all she wanted to know." There was no joy, no spite in his father's voice, only exhaustion. "I was there. I was the one to reassure her you would be back soon. We have abandoned her, you say? No, my son. It is you who has abandoned her." With that, he left Daniel to himself without another word.

Daniel could hear his mother sobbing just outside the door.