

Creative Writing inspired by 'The Signalman'

Describe a mysterious, disturbing setting.

Describe a person that exists within that setting.

Why are you (the narrator – who can be anyone) there?

The person who exists here explains to the narrator that something bad occurs whenever something specific happens. Describe the first instance.

Describe the second instance after a pause. Maybe the narrator comes back from somewhere.

The specific thing happens again. The person that exists here is terrified.

The narrator witnesses the specific thing.

How does the person that exists here die? – They must die.

How does the narrator react?

The Caretaker

Two men were sat at a sturdy table in an office block on an industrial estate. One was dressed in a blue uniform; he was a police officer. The other was dressed sombrely in a dark suit and black tie.

‘Just tell me as much as you can, sir.’ The police officer opened his notebook. The other man nodded his head, took a breath, and began.

The old school was shrouded in darkness. Heavy clouds glowered overhead and the long shadows that were cast by the tall trees surrounding the decaying blocks looked like claws. Heavy hills rose above the hollowed valley where the school was situated and for many hours of every day, the sun was entirely absent. It always rained here and damp permeated every crack and crevice. It was surprising that this place hadn’t been condemned and demolished already. Unfortunately for the children that were forced to attend, it remained entirely open. The busy road that cut through the valley, and the business that it brought to the town, maybe had some part to play in this. They couldn’t close the school; they’d have to close the road. Simply, the town couldn’t afford it.

For many years, maybe even decades, this school had been looked after by a silent caretaker. His eyebrows were bristly and his nose was hooked. His hair had been allowed to grow untamed and I understand that he was often seen prowling through winding corridors, muttering and grumbling to himself. I hear that he carried a stick, which he used to whip cobwebs sharply from the high walls and clear the drifting leaves and twigs that threatened to overwhelm the paths and passageways.

I serve as a consultant for the town council and it had fallen to me to pay an extended visit to the school for purposes of inspection. It was imperative that I spoke with the groundsman; there could have been funding available for refurbishments and maybe even a rebuild of the property.

As the day progressed, I must admit that I found the caretaker to be a more amenable character than had been suggested previously. It was true that he wasn’t a talkative fellow and he did have a tendency towards pessimism. The vigour of the hedgerows and the bright blooms that decorated their flanks paled in his mind when compared with the obstinate weeds that burst through the flagstones at the back of the building. A crack in a window occupied him to the point of distraction but, as I pointed out, the hard work that he had put in to replace the glazing in numerous classrooms did him credit.

As morning turned into afternoon, it became apparent that the caretaker, whose name was Doyle, was eager to reveal something to me. It soon transpired that this information contributed towards his morose nature and taciturn manner.

‘You don’t hear it, do you?’ Mr Doyle said to me when we sat down in his office to review our initial paperwork.

‘Hear what?’ I replied. He inclined his head upwards. I could hear the shrill, discordant song of the birds outside, the rattle of the wind on the old windows and the distant roar of traffic from the busy road nearby.

‘The fire alarm,’ he muttered with a grimace. I looked at him questioningly.

'The fire alarm?' I raised my eyebrows. 'My friend, I hear nothing.'

'It fills my head; it has done for a year.' His hand was shaking as he revealed this to me; perhaps he realised that it made him sound unstable. There was clearly no fire alarm to be heard. 'I heard it for the first time, when the crash happened on the road outside.'

'The crash?' It happened that I did have some recollection of an incident near here some months before. 'Ah, yes. I think I remember. Was a child killed?'

'Yes. One of the younger ones. She was mowed down in a hit and run, the poor thing. They've never found the driver.' The fire bell sounded then; nobody heard it but me. I asked several colleagues but they wouldn't believe me. It was a pointless exercise.'

'And you've heard it again?'

'Three months ago,' he replied. He wiped his eye with his sleeve, unburdening himself. 'Three months ago,' he continued. 'Just before the next one.'

'The next one?'

'They called it a suicide. Our Latin teacher: Miss Harkins. Apparently, she leapt from the bridge over there. Into the traffic. She didn't stand a chance.'

I could see that Mr Doyle was struggling to maintain his composure; his chin was firm but his eyes darted from side to side and his lower lip trembled imperceptibly. 'You're troubled, Mr Doyle,' I said softly and placed my hand on his shoulder. That proved to be something of a turning point; he turned to me and his eyes were wide with honesty and trust.

'Thank you, my friend,' he replied. 'The truth is...'. I waited. 'The truth is...'. I gave Mr Doyle time. 'The truth is that I blame myself.' He sighed and his shoulders seemed to straighten; the admission had given him strength. 'I blame myself; I should have stopped them.'

'But how could you possibly have saved them?'

'Because I saw them.' I didn't understand what he meant at all but I didn't want to halt his flow. I motioned for him to continue.

Mr Doyle seemed about to say more but then he stopped. He fixed me with a searching gaze and his eyes never wavered from mine. 'Can I trust you?' he said. He answered himself: 'I think that I can but please, my mind is filled with scorpions.' We shared a knowing smile; we'd both read that play. Can we meet again tomorrow, Sir?'

Of course, I agreed. I took my leave, having established that Mr Doyle was comfortable and not likely to break down in any way. My thoughts raced as I concluded the business of the day and I confess that I willed the hours away until I found myself outside of his office door again. I knocked and was quickly ushered in. Quick pleasantries were exchanged but then silence.

His voice lowered almost to a whisper and what he related then seemed hardly believable. At least then it did; now, I'm not so sure.

'Before the little girl died,' Mr Doyle said. 'I heard the fire alarm, as clear and as pure as it has ever been. Naturally, I made my way to the holding yard as quickly as I could, wondering whether it was a false alarm. There was nobody else on the yard – nobody, except the girl.' Mr Doyle looked up, gauging my reaction. I was impassive; it was important that he felt comfortable and secure, no matter how peculiar his words were.

'The little girl stood in the middle of the yard, dressed in her warm jacket and with her hood wrapped tightly around her head. I remember it like it was yesterday.' There was a slight tremor in his voice. 'Then, she placed her hands up in the air as if to shield herself from something. My eyes seemed to blur and when I refocused, she was gone. I assumed the fire alarm had been called off and went back inside.

'Okay?' I nodded reassuringly. A bitter smile of regret formed in his lips.

'Ten minutes later there was a fearful racket: tyres screeching and screams. We rushed out to the road. There she was, lying on the verge: hood pulled up around her head.

'An accident, surely,' I replied. 'What could you possibly have done?'

'Maybe nothing,' he said. 'Maybe something.'

'You mustn't *punish* yourself.'

'Maybe not,' he said. 'But it happened again. This time, it was three months ago. That accursed alarm rang again. Unconsciously, I followed the same steps to the yard. Again, there was nobody there apart from one. Miss Harkins, our Latin teacher. She was just standing, standing so still: her workbag under her arm and a bright scarf around her shoulders. She didn't seem aware of me until, like the girl had done, she lifted her hands as if to shield herself and then...'

'Disappeared again?' I suggested.

'Correct,' he replied. 'And then, ten minutes later, on the road the same terrible churning and crashing. I didn't want to go but I had to know; I knew what I would find. Sure enough, there she was, scarf spread behind her head, lying in the middle of the road. She'd been hit by three cars and they say she just appeared there, in the midst of the traffic. The drivers didn't see her until it was too late.

'Suicide.' I stated.

'Maybe. Maybe not,' he replied.

'Hm, you have given me a lot to think about here,' I said. 'Please, Mr Doyle, I must urge you to put these tragic accidents from your mind. That's what they are, nothing more than tragic accidents. May I pay a visit to you later on today, once school is finished and the building is clear? We both have work to do. Could I buy you tea, maybe a drink tonight?'

'That would be very kind of you. I would appreciate that but please, allow me to purchase the drinks. You have been more helpful than you could know. Sometimes, just the freedom to speak our mind is a powerful antidote to grief and confusion.'

I agreed to meet Mr Doyle at half past six that evening and spent a pleasant, if distracted, afternoon catching up on some administration and then reading my book for a couple of easy hours.

As I approached the school, a wind had raised itself and the thin saplings along the avenue were twisting in the growing gale. Darkness had come earlier than expected; it was cold too. Nevertheless, I couldn't mistake the invasion of the natural noises by the sharp, strident squeal of the fire alarms. Remembering Mr Doyle's words from earlier that day, I doubled my pace and marched onto the school premises with some trepidation. Mr Doyle wasn't in his offices or noticeable on the corridors. The peal of the alarm continued, reaching under my skin and slowing my heart.

I reached the yard and there hailed Mr Doyle. He was standing alone in the centre of the space and the shadows flickered about him. 'Mr Doyle', I said. There was no answer. 'Mr Doyle,' I repeated. No reply. With no warning, he tipped his head back and lifted his arms, holding them in front of himself as if to ward something away. I stepped forward, driven by a sense of panic. My vision blurred; I dropped to my knees. When I looked up again, he was gone.

The road. I knew I had to get to the road. As if I was being attacked, the sky became black and a deluge was tipped out. I was soaking within seconds and my shoes slipped alarmingly on the grass that had swiftly become mud. The rain became hail and pummelled my hands, arms and head. I wasn't able to stand up straight but ran, hunched down, through the gates and down to where the traffic grumbled and moaned.

Lights were visible in the gloom. Horns mixed with the wail of the fire alarm and the surge of the elements. I could hear raised voices. I slipped across the verges and approached the road but I think I already knew what I would find.

There were six cars and an articulated lorry skewed across the road. A traffic jam was already building up behind. Rubber scars criss-crossed the surface. The rain pooled and glittered strangely under the headlamps of the car. I stopped and stared into the gloom. I didn't see him at first but then, it was obvious.

Bent and broken, half under the heavy wheels of the articulated lorry, the shattered form of Mr Doyle was clearly visible. His blood was mixing with the rain which thrashed triumphantly against the metal bonnets of the cars and fabric cover of the battered old truck.

The fire alarm increased in ferocity behind me and the shrill wind howled through the crooked trees and grim blocks of the school. A policeman, yourself, approached me, grimacing in the teeth of the storm. You were sheltering your notebook in the crook of your arm. 'Good evening, sir,' you said.

'Good evening, officer.' I couldn't offer much more. I felt numb, emotionless and empty inside. 'Can we turn the alarms off, do you think?' I murmured. 'They're cutting right through me.'

'The fire alarms?' You raised your eyebrows. 'Sir, I hear nothing.'

The hailstones gathered on the bleak gravel and thin grass that bordered the road. As the temperature dropped below freezing, I turned and walked away. I remember that your eyes followed me and then you headed back towards your colleagues.

That's what happened. I think about it every day.

The police officer waited for a second but then changed his mind and closed his notebook. He rose and offered his hand to the man in the dark suit. The man stood up and shook the proffered hand, smiling a smile that wasn't a smile. The policeman hesitated and then spoke: 'It was an accident, surely. What could you possibly have done? You mustn't *punish* yourself.'

The man flinched, rocked by something sharp, something inside of his head.

'That's what I said too,' he whispered. 'Maybe. Maybe not.' His eyes were dark pools in the paleness of his face.

He left the room and moved slowly down the white, artificially lit corridors of the police station. Every so often, he muttered to himself and trailed his fingers against the walls, as if he was cleaning something from them. Once he stopped and placed his hands tightly over his ears, bending down almost double before emitting an anguished howl and casting his arms to the air as if to protect himself from some unseen force.

Then he carried on. Towards the road.

Sergeant Sam Percival tapped his pen against his notebook, still blotchy and stained from the rainfall of the last week. He chewed his lip briefly and then moved over to switch the kettle on. As the water bubbled, the first peals of the station fire alarm rang out, growing louder and more demanding.

'Strange,' he said to himself. 'There's no drill due today.' He grabbed his jacket from the chair and left the room, trying to remember where the assembly spot was.

Outside, the clouds tightened, the cold rain fell and the afternoon sun was extinguished.