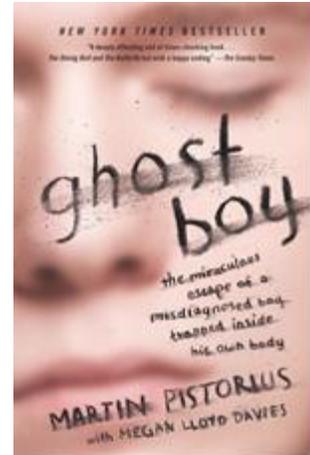


Excerpt from *Ghost Boy*

By Martin Pistorius

Chapter 4: The Box- Pages 13-15



Even as I became aware, I didn't fully understand what had happened to me. Just as a baby isn't born knowing it can't control its movement or speak, I didn't think about what I could or couldn't do. Thoughts rushed through my mind that I never considered speaking, and I didn't realize the body I saw jerking or motionless around me was mine. It took time for me to understand I was completely alone in the middle of a sea of people.

But as my awareness and memories slowly started to mesh together, and my mind gradually reconnected to my body, I began to understand I was different. Lying on the sofa as my father watched gymnastics on TV, I was fascinated by the bodies that moved so effortlessly, the strength and power they revealed in every twist and turn. Then I looked down at a pair of feet I often saw and realized they belonged to me. It was the same with the two hands that trembled constantly whenever I saw them nearby. They were part of me too, but I couldn't control them at all.

I wasn't paralyzed: my body moved but it did so independently of me. My limbs had become spastic. They felt distant, as if they were encased in concrete, and completely deaf to my command. People were always trying to make me use my legs— physical therapists bent them in painful contortions as they tried to keep the muscles working—but I couldn't move unaided.

If I ever walked, it was to take just a few shuffling steps with someone holding me up because otherwise I would crumple to the floor. If I tried to feed myself, my hand would smear food across my cheek. My arms wouldn't instinctively reach out to protect me if I fell, so I'd hit the ground face first. I couldn't roll myself over if I was lying in bed, so I'd stay in the same position for hours on end unless someone turned me. My limbs didn't want to open up and be fluid; instead they curled into themselves like snails disappearing into shells.

Just as a photographer carefully adjusts his camera lens until the picture becomes clear, it took time for my mind to focus. Although my body and I were locked in an endless fight, my mind got stronger as the pieces of my consciousness knitted themselves together.

Gradually I became aware of each day and every hour in it. Most were forgettable, but there were times when I watched history unfold. Nelson Mandela being sworn in as president in 1994 is a hazy memory while Diana's death in 1997 is clear.

I think my mind started to awaken at about the age of sixteen, and by nineteen it was fully intact once more: I knew who I was and where I was, and I understood that I'd been robbed of a real life. That was six years ago. At first I wanted to fight my fate by giving some tiny sign, a movement or a look that, like

the pieces of bread Hansel and Gretel left behind to help them find their way out of the dark woods, would guide people back to me. But gradually I came to understand that my efforts would never be enough: as I came back to life, no one fully understood what was happening.

I was completely entombed. The only person who knew there was a boy within the useless shell was God, and I had no idea why I felt His presence so strongly. I wasn't exposed to the rituals and traditions of worshipping Him at church and knew that I hadn't been before my illness because my family, although they believed in God, didn't attend. Yet somehow I instinctively knew that He was with me as my mind knitted itself back together. At times it felt confusing to be surrounded by people, utterly alone and yet aware that God was my companion. Yet my faith didn't waver. He was as present to me as air, as constant as breathing.