A Child's Game

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Extract

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ONE

Stijn could feel the man shivering. After they had poured the petrol over him the look in his eyes had changed. He had known then that there was no point in trying to shout or struggle. Shouting just meant the gag would be tightened until he choked, and Stijn doubted he had strength left to struggle. Akhtar, the *kaffir* he had been told to use as local help – the man now cursing and swearing from the far corner of the apartment – had beaten the man so badly he might die anyway. Akhtar had used a broken chair leg, lashing out at the man's head and face before Stijn could get it off him.

Stijn had asked him if he could handle violence before they set off. Akhtar had smirked, as if insulted by the question. That was three or four hours before they got here. But within seconds of it starting, Stijn had known he had made a mistake.

He doubted Akhtar had hit anyone in his life. His movements were too full of fright – thrashing around without aiming, anxious to get it over with. Stijn had told him not to cause injuries that would bleed. Yet he had picked up the chair leg and struck the man's head, retching as he did it.

There was a lot of blood coming from a gash at the crest of the man's skull. Some of it was running over Stijn's hand, irritating him. The man was going into shock; his breathing was rapid and shallow, his pulse slowing. Shock alone would kill him, if they left him to it. But that wasn't what he had been told to do.

So now everything reeked of petrol fumes and he would have to discard all his clothing, scrub down and bathe to eliminate the odour and the evidence. It was a typical *kaffir* thing, he thought, to want the man burned. In this case there was good reason, but he had heard they went for it anyway, regardless of reasons. In Pakistan the favoured form of political violence was pulling people off trains and setting fire

to them. He didn't like burning people. The odours were unpleasant. But in South Africa he had smelled worse things in common jails.

As a child he had watched roebuck in the veldt, caught in metal snares, struggling for hours on end, dislocating their bones, tearing apart sinew and muscle as they tried to escape. But when the time came to take them out and kill them they would just lie there, a helplessness in their eyes, completely calm; partly because they were exhausted, partly because they were just animals. Because they had no real conception of death they could reach a point where there was no longer any fear, just the waiting. That was where this man was now. Waiting.

He had been an animal when they had first bound him – something mad, without any capacity for reason or ability to control his fear. It had sickened Stijn to witness the loss of dignity – the pleading and begging, the whimpering as they struck him, calling out someone's name. *Susie* – maybe she was his wife, or his mother. He had read that dying people shouted for their mothers, though he had never seen it before and couldn't imagine doing it himself. But he had hardly known his own mother.

The petrol fumes had put things in perspective. Now the man was just shivering; he knew what was going to happen. To fight was pointless – Stijn had his hand on the back of his neck, a hand so large he could practically close it around the throat. The man had been overpowered even before Akhtar had botched it with the chair leg. Stijn looked down at him. He was small, perhaps half his size and weight, with the same soft, helpless eyes he had seen on the roebuck.

It made Stijn uneasy. Perhaps he should say something to the man – to help him out. But that was impossible. The man was alone now; no one could help him. Besides, it might start him struggling again. Sympathy weakened people. The man stank – of sweat, fear, piss, of blood and desperation, of petrol. He needed putting out of his misery.

'You should have paid your debts,' Stijn said to him, regretting it immediately. The bastard probably couldn't even hear him. He was slumped on a high-backed chair, legs bound tightly at the ankles, hands tied behind his back. The gag was a dishcloth of some sort. Where it was pulled into his mouth there was blood bubbling over it, a bright frothy blood that must have been coming from his lungs.

Akhtar had stamped on his chest with both feet, long after he had been capable of doing anything to protect himself.

Stijn looked over to Akhtar, angry with him. He was at the sink, panicking, trying to stop his hand from bleeding. Somehow or other he had cut himself as he struck the man. It would need stitches. Stijn had already told him that, expecting him to just wrap a rag around it and leave it at that. But Akhtar was running water on it, looking for medicines or bandages in the cabinet above the kitchen sinks. He had already pulled the bathroom apart to no avail.

Stijn checked his watch. It was 3.57 a.m.

'We have to go,' he said quietly. 'You've messed around for long enough.'

Akhtar looked over to him, fear in his eyes. 'I am leaving my blood all over this place—'

'It's too late to worry about that. We will burn it as we leave. Write the note, like I told you to.'

'Burn the place? But what about him?' Akhtar pointed at the man.

'Write the note,' Stijn said. He had told Akhtar the bare minimum, but the *kaffir* was afraid of him. He would do as he was told.

When the note was in the metal safe in the bedroom closet Stijn told Akhtar to watch the man. Then he walked through the main room of the apartment and opened the sliding doors leading to the narrow balcony. He stood for a moment in the freezing night air, looking out at the city. Intermittent traffic noises mingled with the sounds of drunken youths.

It was a penthouse apartment and they were nine floors up. Below him the place called Leeds lay in an asymmetrical pattern of light. To the north low wedges of darkness cut into it. He guessed they were hills, but the night was too black to be sure. The sky was thick with low cloud, obscuring the moon. The building he was in was one of the highest in the city centre.

He walked to the parapet – about two feet wide – and looked over the edge, feeling the tingling in the backs of his knees which had once signalled a fear of heights. The drop was straight into a narrow alleyway, filled with garbage containers. Not high enough to guarantee death, as he knew from the mistakes of others. People had lived and spoken of it after dropping from almost double this height.

There was a short ladder fixed to the wall beside the sliding doors,

leading up onto the flat roof. He climbed it and looked over the top, just to make sure no one was there. Then he went back in.

'Take one,' he said to Akhtar, pointing at the three plastic petrol containers standing by the door. 'You do the office downstairs. I'll do up here. Douse the desks and paperwork. Don't bother with the walls. Lead a line up the back stairwell into the bedroom through there.'

'Is it safe to do this?' Akhtar's voice was high-pitched. Stijn knew he wanted to ask about the man again, but didn't dare.

'Don't light it yet. Just spread it. And be quick – the fumes are noxious.'

He watched until he had disappeared through a doorway leading to a short stairwell, then checked the man. His eyes were closed now, the breathing irregular. He left him, unscrewed a cap from a container and began to lay thick lines of petrol from all the combustible objects in the room back towards the doorway. The floor was expensive parquet and the liquid spread quickly across the varnished surface.

The flat was in a development which Stijn guessed would count for prestigious in this part of the world. In the heart of the city centre, the single tower overlooked a relatively new shopping complex with a glass atrium, through which he could see crowds of young people still busy with alcohol, even at this early hour. The top floors of the block were office space for the financial and legal sectors in the city. He knew because he had checked the place carefully. The flat they were in was connected to one such office on the floor below, but was the only residential letting in the building. It would have come at a price.

Yet there were few items of furniture for Stijn to set alight: an austere leather sofa; a wide-screen TV; the chair he had sat the man on, another he had broken during the struggle, a couple of tables, a wooden double-bed in the bedroom – without sheets or quilt – a set of wardrobes containing only the (empty) safe and some old newspapers; on the walls there was just one picture – ironically, a view of Cape Town and Table Mountain at dawn; in the bathroom no toilet roll, soap or toothpaste. There weren't even pot plants or bookshelves.

He finished before Akhtar and took hold of the man by the legs, pulling him off the chair and onto the floor. The back of the head banged sharply off the ground. Stijn dragged him by the feet to the sliding doors, then bent down and took out his clasp knife. He pressed the point gently against the man's throat, getting no response at all. Quickly he cut the plastic ties binding the hands and feet, then sawed

through the gag and pulled it from the mouth. He carefully pocketed all three items. The man began to gasp a little, but his eyes were closed now. Stijn took hold of his feet again and dragged him onto the balcony.

The outside air already felt fresh by contrast. As a precaution against the fumes Stijn pulled the sliding door shut behind them. Then he hoisted the man by the shoulders until he was leaning forwards, over the parapet, bent at the waist. He thought he could hear him saying something, but the mouth was too damaged for it to make sense. His arms dangled over the side.

Stijn stepped back, took out his zippo and lit it. Without pausing he held it to the jacket the man had on, waiting a second for it to catch. It ignited with a percussive rush, like a gas ring lit after being left on, the blue flames flashing momentarily into his face before blazing yellow and orange, so hot Stijn felt his eyebrows singe. He stepped back and watched, fascinated.

The flames spread quickly. They had caught the layers of clothing beneath the jacket and were wriggling through the man's hair before he began to react. As he tried to move Stijn quickly picked up his legs and heaved him forwards. The torso caught on the parapet and Stijn saw the head twist towards him, eyes open. The expression was one of confusion, not pain. Stijn could see him trying to focus even as the flames raced around his head. He opened his mouth, gasping at the air like a goldfish. The flames had caught in his trousers now – within seconds he would be completely engulfed. His arms came to life, flailing at the air around his head. Stijn stepped back and kicked him. The body jerked backwards, tilting over the edge. The hands were still slapping at his burning hair as he went over. There was no attempt to stop the fall, no noise, no screaming. Just one moment he was there, the next he was gone. Where he had been leaning against the parapet he left a small cloud of acrid smoke and a whiff of burnt skin.

Stijn didn't look over the side to check. Ducking quickly back through the doors he ran into Akhtar coming in the other direction, terror on his face. He was shouting at him: '*What have you done?*'

Stijn walked past him towards the door. 'You started this,' he said. 'These are *your* consequences.'

Akhtar looked paralysed, torn between wanting to go out onto the balcony to verify what he had seen and the urge to run from Stijn.

'We have to get out of here fast,' Stijn said. He checked that the

door back down to the office was pulled open, checked the line of petrol that Akhtar had trailed through it. It would be better to set the fire on both floors, but he had no time now. He opened the main door to the room – the one leading to the fire exit and lifts – then took out the zippo again. In the room the petrol fumes were suffocating. He stepped out into the hallway and called back to Akhtar.

'It's going to get uncomfortable in here. You coming?'

When Akhtar was past him he slid the burning lighter across the floor.