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Looking Good Dead

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Extract

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1

The front door of the once-proud terraced house opened, and a long-legged young woman, in a short silk dress that seemed to both cling and float at the same time, stepped out into the fine June sunshine on the last morning of her life.

A century back, these tall, white villas, just a pebble's throw from Brighton's seafront promenade, would have served as weekend residences for London toffs. Now, behind their grimy, salt-burned facades, they were chopped up into bedsits and low-rent flats; the brass front-door knockers had long been replaced with entryphone panels, and litter spewed from garbage bags onto the pavements beneath a gaudy riot of letting-agency boards. Several of the cars that lined the street, shoehorned into not enough parking spaces, were dented and rusting, and all of them were saturation-bombed with pigeon and seagull shit.

In contrast, everything about the young woman oozed class. From the careless toss of her long fair hair, the sunglasses she adjusted on her face, the bling Cartier bracelet, the Anya Hindmarsh bag slung from her shoulder, the toned contours of her body, the Mediterranean tan, her wake of Issey Miyake tanging the rush-hour monoxide with a frisson of sexuality, she was the kind of girl who would have looked at home in the aisles of Bergdorf Goodman, or at the bar of a Schrager hotel, or on the stern of a fuck-off yacht in St-Tropez.

Not bad for a law student scraping by on a meagre grant.

But Janie Stretton had been too spoiled by her guilty father, after her mother's death, to ever contemplate the idea of merely *scraping by*. Making money came easily to her. Making it from her intended career might be a different matter altogether. The legal profession was tough. Four years of law studies were behind her, and she was now in the first two years as a trainee with a firm of solicitors in Brighton, working under a divorce lawyer, and she was enjoying that, although some of the cases were, even to her, weird.

Like the mild little seventy-year-old man yesterday, Bernie Milsin,

in his neat grey suit and carefully knotted tie. Janie had sat unobtrusively on a corner chair in the office as the thirty-five-year-old partner she was articled to, Martin Broom, took notes. Mr Milsin was complaining that Mrs Milsin, three years older than himself, would not give him food until he had performed oral sex on her. 'Three times a day,' he told Martin Broom. 'Can't keep doing it, not at my age, the arthritis in me knees hurts too much.'

It was all she could do not to laugh out loud, and she could see Broom was struggling also. So, it wasn't just men who had kinky needs. Seemed that both sexes had them. Something new learned every day, and sometimes she didn't know where she gained the most knowledge from – Southampton University Law School or the University of Life.

The beep of an incoming text broke her chain of thought just as she reached her red and white Mini Cooper. She checked the screen.

2night. 8.30?

Janie smiled and replied with a brief *xx*. Then she waited for a bus followed by a line of traffic to pass, opened the door of her car, and sat for a moment, collecting her thoughts, thinking about stuff she needed to do.

Bins, her moggie, had a lump on his back that was steadily getting bigger. She did not like the look of it and wanted to take him to the vet to get it checked. She had found Bins two years ago, a nameless stray, scrawny to the point of starving, trying to lift the lid of one of her dustbins. She had taken him in, and he had never shown any inclination to leave. So much for cats being independent, she thought, or maybe it was because she spoiled him. But hell, Bins was an affectionate creature and she didn't have much else in her life to spoil. She would try to get a late appointment today. If she got to the vet by 6.30 that should still leave plenty of time, she calculated.

In her lunch break she needed to buy a birthday card and present for her father – he would be fifty-five on Friday. She hadn't seen him for a month; he'd been away in the USA on business. He seemed to be away a lot these days, travelling more and more. Searching for that one woman who might be out there and could replace the wife, and mother of his daughter, he had lost. He never spoke about it, but she knew he was lonely – and worried about his business, which seemed to be going

through a rough patch. And living fifty miles away from him did not help.

Pulling on her seat belt and clicking it, she was totally unaware of the long lens trained on her, and the quiet whirring of the digital Pentax camera, over two hundred yards away, not remotely audible against the background hubbub of traffic.

Watching her through the steady cross hairs, he said into his mobile phone, 'She's coming now.'

'Are you sure that's her?' The voice that replied was precise, and sharp as serrated steel.

She was real eye candy, he thought. Even after days and nights of watching her, 24/7, inside her flat and outside, it was still a treat. The question barely merited an answer.

'I am,' he said. 'Yes.'

2

'I'm on the train,' the big, overweight, baby-faced dickhead next to him shouted into his mobile phone. 'The train. T-R-A-I-N!' he repeated. 'Yeah, yeah, bad line.'

Then they went into a tunnel.

'Oh fuck,' the dickhead said.

Hunched on his seat between the dickhead on his right and a girl wearing a sickly sweet perfume on his left, who was texting furiously, Tom Bryce suppressed a grin. An amiable, good-looking man of thirty-six, in a smart suit, with a serious, boyish face lined with stress and a mop of dark brown hair that flopped incessantly over his forehead, he was steadily wilting in the stifling heat, like the small bunch of flowers, rolling around on the luggage rack above him, which he had bought for his wife. The temperature inside the carriage was about ninety degrees and felt even hotter. Last year he had travelled first class and those carriages were marginally better ventilated – or at least less jam-packed – but this year he had to economize. Although he still liked to surprise Kellie with flowers once a week or so.

Half a minute later, emerging from the tunnel, the dickhead stabbed a button, and the nightmare continued. 'JUST WENT THROUGH A TUNNEL!' he bellowed, as if they were still in it. 'Yeah, fucking INCREDIBLE! How come they don't have a wire or *thing*, you know, to keep the connection? Inside the tunnel, yeah? They got them on some motorway tunnels now, right?'

Tom tried to tune him out and concentrate on the emails on his wobbling Mac laptop. Just another shitty end to another shitty day at the office. Over one hundred emails yet to respond to, and more downloading every minute. He cleared them every night before he went to bed – that was his rule, the only way to keep on top of his workload. Some were jokes, which he would look at later, and some were raunchy attachments sent by mates, which he had learned not to risk looking at in crowded train carriages, ever since the time he had been sitting

next to a prim-looking woman and had double-clicked on a PowerPoint file to reveal a donkey being fellated by a naked blonde.

The train clicked and clacked, rocking, shaking, then vibrating in short bursts as they entered another tunnel, nearing home now. Wind roared around the edges of the open window above his head, and the echo of the black walls howled with it. Suddenly, the carriage smelled of old socks and soot. A briefcase skittered around on the rack above his head and he glanced up nervously, checking it wasn't about to fall on him or crush the flowers. On a blank advertising panel on the wall opposite him, above the head of a plump, surly-looking girl in a tight skirt who was reading *Heat* magazine, someone had spray-painted SEAGULLS WANNKERS in clumsy black letters.

So much for football supporters, Tom thought. They couldn't even spell *wankers.*

Beads of sweat trickled down the nape of his neck, and down his ribs; more trickled down all the spaces where his tailored white shirt wasn't already actually glued by perspiration to his skin. He'd removed his suit jacket and loosened his tie, and he felt like kicking off his black Prada loafers, which were pinching his feet. He lifted his clammy face from the screen as they came out of the tunnel, and instantly the air changed, to sweeter, grass-scented Downland air; in a few minutes more it would be carrying a faint tinge of salt from the English Channel. After fourteen years of commuting, Tom could have told when he was nearing home with his eyes shut.

He looked out of the window at fields, farmhouses, pylons, a reservoir, the soft, distant hills, then back at his emails. He read and deleted one from his sales manager, then replied to a complaint – yet another key customer angry that an order hadn't arrived in time for a big summer function. Personalized pens this time, printed golfing umbrellas previously. His whole ordering and shipping department was in a mess – partly from a new computer system and partly because of the idiot running it. In an already tough market this was hurting his business badly. Two big customers – Avis car rentals and Apple computers – lost to competitors in one week.

Terrific.

The business was creaking under the weight of debts. He'd expanded too fast, was too highly geared. Just as he was over-mortgaged

at home. He should never have let Kellie convince him to trade up houses, not when the market was moving down and business was in recession. Now he was struggling to stay solvent. The business was no longer covering its overheads. And, despite all he told her, there was still no let-up in Kellie's obsession with spending money. Almost every day she bought something new, mostly on eBay, and because it was a bargain in her logic it didn't count. And besides, she told him, he was always buying expensive designer clothes for himself, how could he argue? It didn't seem to matter to her that he only bought his clothes during the sales and that he needed to look sharp in his line of work.

He was so worried he'd even discussed her spending problem recently with a friend of his, who had been through counselling for depression after his divorce. Over a few vodka martinis, a drink in which Tom was increasingly taking solace in recent months, Bruce Watts told him there were people who were compulsive spenders and they could be treated. Tom wondered if Kellie was bad enough to warrant treatment – and if so, how to broach it.

The dickhead started again. 'Hello, BILL, it's RON, yeah. Ron from *PARTS*. YEAH, THAT'S RIGHT! JUST THOUGHT I'D GIVE YOU A QUICK HEADS-UP ON— Oh fuck. BILL? HELLO?'

Tom raised his eyes without moving his head. No signal. Divine providence! Sometimes you really could believe there was a God. Then he heard the wail of another phone.

His own, he suddenly realized, feeling the vibration in his shirt pocket. Glancing surreptitiously around he pulled it out then, checking the caller's name, answered it in as loud a voice as he could muster. 'HELLO, DARLING,' he said. 'I'M ON THE TRAIN! T-R-A-I-N! IT'S RUNNING LATE!' He smiled at the dickhead, relishing a few moments of deliciously sweet revenge.

While he continued talking to Kellie, lowering his voice to a more civilized level, the train pulled into Preston Park station, the last stop before his destination, Brighton. The dickhead, gripping a tiny, cheap-looking holdall, and a couple of others in the carriage got off, then the train moved on. It wasn't until some moments after he had ended the call that Tom noticed the CD lying on the seat beside him which the dickhead had just vacated.

He picked it up and examined it for any clues as to how to reach its

owner. The outer casing was opaque plastic, with no label or writing on it. He popped it open and removed the silver-coloured disc, turning it over and inspecting it carefully, but it yielded nothing either. He would load it into his computer and open it up and see if that provided anything, and, failing that, he planned to hand it in to Lost Property. Not that the dickhead really deserved it . . .

A tall chalk escarpment rose steeply on either side of the train. Then to his left it gave way to houses and a park. In moments they would be approaching Brighton station. There wasn't enough time to check the CD out now; he would have a look at home later tonight, he decided.

If he could have had the smallest inkling of the devastating impact it was going to have on his life, he would have left the damned thing on the seat.

3

Squinting against the low evening sun, Janie eyed the clock on the dash of her Mini Cooper in panic, then double-checked it against her wristwatch. 7.55 p.m. Christ. 'Almost home, Bins,' she said, her voice tight, cursing the Brighton seafront traffic, wishing she'd taken a different route. Then she popped a tab of chewing gum into her mouth.

Unlike his owner, the cat had no hot date tonight and was in no hurry. He sat placidly in his wicker carrying basket on the front passenger seat of the car, staring a tad morosely out through the bars at the front – sulking perhaps, she thought, from having been taken to the vet. She put out a hand to steady the basket as she turned, too fast, into her street, then slowed down, looking for a parking space, hoping to hell she was going to be lucky.

She was back a lot later than she had intended, thanks to her boss keeping her on in the office – today of all days – to help draft briefing notes for a conference with counsel in the morning on a particularly bitter divorce case.

The client was an arrogant, good-looking layabout who had married an heiress and was now going for as much of her money as he could get. Janie had loathed him from the moment she first met him, in her boss's office some months back; in her view he was a parasite, and she secretly hoped he would not get one penny. She had never confided her opinion to her boss, although she suspected he felt much the same.

Then she had been kept over half an hour in the vet's waiting room before finally being ushered in with Bins to see Mr Conti. And it really had not been a successful consultation. Cristian Conti, young and quite hip for a vet, had spent a lot of time examining the lump on Bins's back and then checking elsewhere. Then he had asked her to bring the cat back in tomorrow for a biopsy, which had immediately panicked Janie into worrying that the vet suspected the lump was a tumour.

Mr Conti had done his best to allay her fears and had listed the

other possibilities, but she had carried Bins out of the surgery under a very dark shadow.

Ahead she saw a small space between two cars, a short way down from her front door. She braked and put the car into reverse.

'You OK, Bins? Hungry?'

In the two years since they had become acquainted, she had grown very attached to the ginger and white creature, with his green eyes and huge whiskers. There was something about those eyes, about his whole demeanour, the way one moment he would nuzzle up to her, purring, sleeping with his head on her lap when she watched television, and another moment he was giving her one of those looks that seemed so damned human, so adult, so all-knowing. He was so right, whoever it was who had said, 'Sometimes when I am playing with my cat, I wonder if perhaps it is not my cat who is playing with me.'

She reversed into the space, making a total hash of it, then tried again. Not perfect this time either, but it would have to do. She closed the sunroof, picked up the cage and climbed out of the car, pausing to check her watch one more time, as if somehow, miraculously, she had read it wrong last time. She hadn't. It was now one minute to eight.

Just half an hour to feed Bins and get ready. Her date was a control freak, who insisted on dictating exactly how she looked each time they met. Her arms and legs had to be freshly shaven; she had to put on exactly the same measure of Issey Miyake and in the same places; she had to wash her hair with the same shampoo and conditioner, and apply exactly the same make-up. And her Brazilian had to be trimmed to within microscopic tolerances.

He would tell her in advance what dress to wear, what jewellery, and even where in the flat he wanted her to be waiting. It all went totally against the grain; she had always been an independent girl, and had never allowed any man to boss her around. And yet something about this guy had got to her. He was coarse, eastern European, powerfully built and flashily dressed, whereas all the men she had dated previously in her life had been cultured, urbane smoothies. And after just three dates she felt in his thrall. Just even thinking about him now made her moist.

As she locked the car and turned to walk towards her flat she did not even notice the only car in the street not caked in pigeon and seagull

guano, a shiny black Volkswagen GTI with blacked-out windows, parked a short way ahead of her. A man, invisible to the outside world, sat in the driver's seat, watching her through a tiny pair of binoculars and dialling on his pay-as-you-go mobile phone.