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Acid Row

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Extract

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THE RIOT LOST MOMENTUM as news of the butchery spread through the estate. The details were vague. No one knew how many had been killed or how, but castration, lynching and a machete attack were all mentioned. The streets began to empty rapidly. Collective guilt was felt, if not openly expressed, and no one was inclined to face retribution for murder.

The youths on the barricades who had held the police at bay with petrol bombs took a similar view. They would argue afterwards, and with some justification, that they hadn't known what was going on, but when word of the frenzied attack filtered through they, too, melted away. It was one thing to fight an honourable battle with the enemy, quite another to be accused of aiding and abetting insanity in Humbert Street.

The headlines the next morning – 29 July – were lurid. '*Drink-crazed lynch mob goes on the rampage*' . . . '*Sex pervert butchered*' . . . '*5 hours of savagery leaves 3 dead, 189 injured*' . . . The outside world gave a shudder of disgust. Leader-writers lined up the

usual suspects. Government. Police. Social workers. Education chiefs. Across the country, morale in the vocational services reached an all-time low.

But of the two thousand rioters who jostled for a view of the killing spree, not one would ever admit to being there . . .

From the Director of Social Services –
Tuesday 10 July 2001

Official Notification to Health & Social Workers

Highly Confidential – Not for public release

Rehousing: Milosz Zelowski, 23 Humbert Street, Bassindale – previously of Callum Road, Portisfield.

Reason for move: Targeted by Portisfield residents after publication of photograph in local newspaper.

Status: Registered paedophile. Convicted of sexual assault – 3 counts over 15-year period. Released May 2001.

Threat to the community: Minimal. Nature of offence suggests watching brief only.

Threat to offender: Severe.

Police warn that Zelowski may become the target of vigilantes if his identity and status become known.

One

19–20 July 2001

ONLY A HANDFUL of staff at the Nightingale Health Centre ever read the memo referring to the presence of a paedophile on the Bassindale Estate. It vanished under a pile of paperwork in the central office and ended up being filed by one of the clerical workers, who assumed it had done the rounds. For those who did see it, it was an unremarkable document, recording the name and details of a new patient. For the rest, it was irrelevant since it wouldn't – or *shouldn't* – affect the way they treated the man.

One of the health visitors tried to have the issue raised at a staff meeting, but she was overruled by her supervisor, who had responsibility for setting the agenda. There was a history of hostility between the two women – neither believing the other was up to her job – which may have prejudiced the way the supervisor handled the matter. It was the summer and everyone wanted to be home in reasonable time. In any case, even if the doctors agreed that it was

dangerous and irresponsible to house a paedophile on an estate full of children, there was nothing they could do about it. The decision to move him had been taken by the police.

The same health visitor approached Dr Sophie Morrison in a blatant attempt to have the supervisor's decision overturned. By that time she was less interested in the paedophile than in scoring points, and Sophie Morrison, being naive and inexperienced in office politics, was easily intimidated. Such, at least, was Fay Baldwin's interpretation of the cheerful young woman who had joined the surgery two years before.

Fay waited until the end of evening surgery, then gave her signature tap on Sophie's door – a rat-a-tat-tat of brittle nails that produced identical reactions in all her colleagues. 'Time for a chat?' she asked brightly, poking her head into the room.

''Fraid not,' said Sophie, launching herself manically at her keyboard and typing 'the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog' repetitively into her monitor. 'Catching up on some notes . . . and then home. *Sorry*, Fay. How about tomorrow?'

It didn't work. It never did. The dreadful woman eased herself inside anyway and perched her scraggy bottom on the edge of the desk. It was encased, as usual, in an impeccably tailored skirt; and, as usual, there wasn't a dyed hair out of place. Both were outward and visible signs that she considered herself a

model of efficiency and professionalism, but they were in inverse proportion to what was going on inside her head. It was Catch-22. She was desperate to cling to the only thing that gave her life meaning – her job. Yet her hatred for the people she dealt with – patients and professionals alike – had reached disastrous proportions.

Sophie had argued that the kindest course would be to retire her early and set her up with psychiatric help in order to cope with the emptiness of her life. The senior partner – a great deal less sympathetic towards elderly, frustrated virgins whose only talent was for stirring – preferred to let sleeping dogs lie. It was less than three months before they'd be shot of her for good, was his view. If she was one of their patients it might be different, but she had coquettishly eschewed the Nightingale's doctors in favour of the competition on the other side of town. 'I couldn't *possibly* take my clothes off in front of people I know,' she'd said.

As if anyone cared.

'I'll only be a minute,' trilled Fay now in her little-girly voice. 'You can spare me sixty seconds, can't you, Sophie?'

'As long as you don't mind my packing up at the same time,' said the doctor with an inward sigh. She shut down her computer and slid her chair backwards, wondering which of her patients had just had typing exercises added to their notes. It was always the same

with Fay. You found yourself doing things you didn't want to do, simply to escape the wretched woman. 'I'm meeting Bob at eight.'

'Is it true you're getting married?'

'Yes,' said Sophie, happy to be on safe ground. 'I finally got him up to the mark.'

'I wouldn't marry a reluctant man.'

'It was a joke, Fay.' Her smile faded before the other woman's downturned mouth. 'Ah, well, it's hardly earth-shattering news.' She pulled her waist-length plait from behind her shoulder and started to comb it out with her fingers, quite unconsciously drawing attention to her unaffected youthfulness.

'It was Melanie Patterson who told me,' remarked Fay spitefully. 'I would have mentioned it last week but she said it was supposed to be a secret.'

Damn! Damn! Damn! 'I didn't want to tempt fate in case Bob changed his mind,' said Sophie, concentrating on her plait. It was a gross slander against her amiable fiancé, but if it prevented another row with Fay about Melanie Patterson it would be worth it. They had almost come to blows the week before and she didn't want a repeat.

'She said you'd invited her to the wedding.'

Damn! Damn! And more damns! Sophie stood up and walked across to a mirror on the far wall. Anything to avoid the reproach in the woman's face. 'It's not for ages yet,' she lied. 'The invitations won't be going out for another four weeks.' There was a slight

softening of Fay's expression in the glass. 'What did you want to talk about?' she asked her.

'Well, in fact Melanie's part of it, so it's a good thing her name's come up,' said the woman smugly. 'Claire simply refuses to listen to me on this . . . keeps saying it's not a matter for discussion . . . but I'm afraid I can't agree with her. Firstly, I take my job rather more seriously than she does. And, secondly, in view of the way Melanie lets those children of hers run wild in the street—'

Sophie cut her short. 'Don't do this, Fay,' she said with uncharacteristic sharpness. 'You made your views on Melanie very clear last week.'

'Yes, but—'

'No.' The young woman turned round and there was considerable anger in her eyes. 'I will not discuss Melanie with you again. Can't you see Claire was trying to do you a favour by making that clear to you?'

Fay bridled immediately. 'You can't avoid it,' she said. 'She's my responsibility, too.'

Sophie reached for her case. 'Not any more. I've asked Claire to assign one of the younger visitors to Melanie. She was going to tell you on Monday.'

Retirement must have taken a sudden step closer, because the woman's highly powdered face lost colour. 'You can't reduce my list just because I disagree with you,' she said fiercely.

'Calling one of my patients a slut and a whore and

then losing your temper when I took you to task about it is rather more serious than disagreement,' said Sophie coolly. 'It's unprofessional, Fay.'

'It's what she is,' the woman hissed. 'You come from a good family . . . you ought to be able to recognize it for yourself.' Spittle flew from her mouth. 'She sleeps with any man who shows an interest . . . usually when she's drunk . . . then she swans around like Lady Muck, saying she's pregnant again . . . as if it's something to be proud of.'

Sophie shook her head. It was pointless arguing. In any case, she hated face-to-face confrontations with this woman, because they invariably became personal. Fay's life had prejudiced her views. She should have been working in the days when illegitimacy was frowned on and girls 'who were no better than they should be' were hidden away in hostels and treated with scorn. That way, her status as a virtuous woman would have counted for something instead of making her an object of pity or amusement. The mystery was why she had ever chosen health visiting as a career, although, as the senior partner was fond of pointing out, lecturing, scolding and training the unwashed masses were probably what health visiting had been about when she started.

Sophie opened her office door. 'I'm going home,' she said firmly, standing back and making it clear she expected the other woman to leave first.

Fay stood up, her mouth working uncontrollably

like an old lady's with dementia. 'Well, don't say I didn't warn you,' she said tightly. 'You think you can treat everyone the same . . . but you can't. I know what these beasts are like . . . seen the kind of damage they do to the poor little souls they abuse. It's all so secretive . . . done behind closed doors . . . filthy, disgusting men . . . silly women who close their eyes to what's really going on . . . and all for what? *Sex!*' She spat out the word like a vile taste. 'Still . . . at least *my* hands are clean. No one can say I didn't try.' She walked stiff-legged from the office.

Sophie watched her go with a frown of concern. Dear God! *Beasts . . . ? Filthy, disgusting men . . . ?* Fay had lost the plot completely. It was bad enough to accuse Melanie of being a slut. A hundred times worse to accuse her and her men of child abuse.

But then Sophie had no idea that a paedophile had been housed just one door away from four-year-old Rosie and two-year-old Ben Patterson.

*

The term 'sink estate' might have been invented for Bassindale, which stood as a sprawling monument to the social engineering of the 1950s and 1960s, when planners had cut into the green belt to provide subsidized housing for those on low incomes. In this case, two hundred acres of broadleaf woodland bordering Bassindale Farm had been put to the axe and replaced with concrete.

It should have been idyllic. A worthy project in the post-war push for equality and opportunity. A chance for improvement. Quality homes surrounded by open countryside. Fresh air and space.

But all the roads on the perimeter bordering the fields were culs-de-sac. Like bicycle spokes, they ended at a solid rim – houses with block-built garden walls – to protect the surrounding crops and herds from thoughtless estate dwellers and their dogs. The only two thoroughfares, Bassindale Row and Forest Road, looped back on themselves in an unconnected, inverted W to provide four points of access through the concrete belt that kept the estate hidden from the busy traffic on the main road. From the air, Bassindale and Forest looked like the anchoring strands of a section of cobweb, with a tracery of streets and dead ends providing the transverse threads. From the ground – as recognized by the police – they were the potential redoubts that could turn Bassindale into a fortress. The estate was a concrete-clad pressure bomb.

And why not?

Demand for housing following the baby-boom after the war had led to poor design and sloppy construction. The inevitable result was costly maintenance with only the most glaring problems being addressed. Ill health was endemic, particularly among the young and the old, for whom the cold, wet

conditions, coupled with poor diets, weakened constitutions. Depression was common, as was addiction to prescription pills.

Like the road to hell, Bassindale had begun with good intentions but it was now little more than a receptacle for society's rejects. A constant drain on the public purse. A source of resentment to taxpayers, irritation to the police and unmitigating despair to the teachers, health and social workers who were expected to work there. For the majority of the inhabitants it was a prison. The frail and frightened elderly barricaded themselves inside their flats; desperate single mothers and fatherless children steered clear of trouble by living their lives behind locked doors. Only angry, alienated youth flourished briefly in this barren landscape by stalking the streets and controlling the traffic in drugs and prostitution. Before they, too, found themselves in prison.

In 1954 an idealistic Labour councillor had caused a sign to be erected at the end of Bassindale Row South, the first point of entry off the main road. It said inoffensively: 'Welcome to Bassindale.' Over the years the sign was regularly vandalized with graffiti, only to be as regularly replaced by the local council. Then, in 1990, during the last year of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, the same council, under pressure to reduce its costs, cancelled its budget for the replacement of signs. Thereafter, the graffiti

was allowed to remain, untouched by Bassindale's inhabitants who saw it as a truer description of where they lived.



Acid Row. A place of deprivation where literacy was poor, drugs endemic and fights commonplace.

*

Fay Baldwin, obsessively replaying Sophie Morrison's dismissal of her the previous evening, wrenched four-year-old Rosie Patterson's arm violently to prevent the child wiping her dirty hands and nose on Fay's newly cleaned suit. She had come across her in the street, playing with her brother, and she couldn't resist the chance to give their pregnant teenage mother a piece of her mind, particularly as Melanie wouldn't yet know that Fay was to be replaced as her health visitor.

She felt herself vindicated to find the girl curled upon the settee with a cigarette in one hand, a can of lager in the other and *Neighbours* on the television. It proved everything she had ever said about Melanie's unsuitability as a mother. Rather less easy to cope with was the way Melanie was dressed, in a skimpy top and tiny shorts that revealed long brown legs and a softly rounded tummy with the growing bump of her six-month foetus.

Jealousy ate into Fay's soul while she pretended to

herself that she was shocked to see anyone flaunt herself so shamelessly. 'It won't do, Melanie,' she lectured the girl sternly. 'Rosie and Ben are too young to play outside on their own. You really must be more responsible.'

The girl's eyes remained glued to the soap opera. 'Rosie knows what she's doing, don't you, sweetheart? Tell the lady.'

'Down ply rown cars. Down ply wiv neeles,' the four-year-old chanted, giving her two-year-old brother a gratuitous cuff over the head as if to demonstrate how she kept him in order.

'Told you,' said Melanie proudly. 'She's a good girl, is Rosie.'

Fay had to use every ounce of self-control not to smack the brazen creature. She had spent thirty years in this hell-hole, trying to instil ideas on health, hygiene and contraception into generations of the same families, and the situation was getting worse. This one had had her first baby at fourteen, her second at sixteen and was pregnant with her third before she'd even reached twenty. She had only the vaguest idea who the fathers were, cared less, and regularly dumped the children on her own mother – whose youngest child was younger than Rosie – to take herself off for days on end to 'get her head straight'.

She was lazy and uneducated and had been housed in this maisonette because social services thought she

might develop into a better parent away from her mother's 'unhelpful' influence. It was a vain hope. She lived in unbelievable squalor, was regularly stoned or drunk, and alternated between lavishing love on her children when she was in the mood and ignoring them entirely when she wasn't. The gossip was that 'getting her head straight' was a euphemism for an intermittent (between-pregnancies) career as a glamour model, but as she didn't want her benefit stopped she never owned up to it.

'They'll be taken away from you if you go on neglecting them,' the woman warned.

'Yeah, yeah, blah, blah.' Melanie flicked her a knowing look. 'You'd like that, wouldn't you, Miss Baldwin? You'd have them off me quick as winking if you ever found any bruises. Bet it makes you sick you never have.'

Irritated, the woman knelt down in front of the child. 'Do you know why you shouldn't play round cars, Rosie?'

'Mum'll 'it us.'

Melanie beamed at her and took a drag from her cigarette. 'I've never hit you in my life, darlin',' she said comfortably. 'Never would. You don't play round cars 'cos they're dangerous. That's what the lady wanted you to say.' She flicked Fay a mischievous glance. 'Isn't that right, Miss?'

Fay ignored her. 'You said you weren't supposed

to play with needles, Rosie, but do you know what a needle looks like?'

''Course I do. One of my dads uses 'em.'

Annoyed, Melanie swung her legs off the settee and dropped her fag end into the lager can. 'You leave her alone,' she told the woman. 'You're not the police, and you're not our social worker, so it's no business of yours to quiz my kids about their dads. They're fit and healthy, they've had their jabs and they both get weighed regular. That's all you need to know. Capeesh? You've got no right to waltz in here whenever you bloody feel like it. There's only one person from the Centre's allowed to do that . . . and that's Sophie.'

Fay stood up. Somewhere at the back of her mind an inner voice urged caution, but she was too resentful to take heed of it. 'Your children have been on the "at risk" register since the day they were born, Melanie,' she snapped. 'That means I have the right, *and* the duty, to inspect them whenever I think fit. *Look* at them! They're disgusting. When did either of them last have a bath or a change of clothes?'

'The Social know I love my kids and that's all that fucking matters.'

'If you loved them you'd take care of them.'

'What would you know about it? Where are your kids . . . *Miss*?'

'You know very well I don't have any.'

'Too sodding right.' She pulled her daughter close, mingling her beautiful blonde hair with the child's. 'Who loves you better than anything, Rosie?'

'Mum.'

'And who do you love, sweetheart?'

The child put her finger on her mother's lips. 'Mum.'

'So do you wanna live with Mum or with the lady?'

Tears bloomed in the little girl's eyes. 'Wiv' you, wiv' you,' she howled, flinging her arms around Melanie's neck as if she expected to be torn away from her at any minute.

'See,' Melanie told the health visitor with a smirk of triumph. 'Now tell me I don't care for my babies.'

Something finally snapped inside Fay. Perhaps her sleepless night had taken its toll. Perhaps, more simply, the taunts of an empty life were the last straw. 'My God, you're so ignorant,' she stormed. 'Do you think it's difficult to manipulate a child's affections?' She motioned angrily towards the window. 'There's a paedophile in this street who could take your little Rosie away from you with a handful of sweets because she's never learnt when love is honestly given and when it isn't. And who will society blame, Melanie? You?' She gave a withering laugh. 'Of course not . . . You'll weep crocodile tears while the people who genuinely cared for Rosie – me, and your social worker – get crucified for leaving her with someone so inadequate.'

The girl's eyes narrowed. 'I don't reckon you should be telling me this.'

'Why not? It's the truth.'

'Where's this paedophile then? Which number?'

Too late, Fay knew she'd overstepped the mark. It was privileged information and she'd given it away in anger. 'That's not the issue,' she said lamely.

'Like hell it isn't! If I've got a sicko living near me, I wanna know about it.' She reared up off the sofa and towered over the little spinster. 'I know you think I'm a lousy mum, but I've never harmed them and I never would. Dirt don't kill a kid and neither does a bit of swearing now and then.' She thrust her face into the woman's. 'Sickos do, though. So where is he? What's his name?'

'I'm not allowed to tell you.'

Melanie bunched her fists. 'Do you want me to make you?'

Terrified, Fay retreated towards the door. 'It's a Polish name,' she said cravenly before she fled.

*

She was trembling as she stepped out on to Humbert Street. How could she have been so stupid? Would Melanie give her away? Would there be an inquiry? Had she jeopardized her pension? Her mind was consumed with finding excuses. It was hardly her fault. It was a stupid idea to house a paedophile in Acid Row. There was no way it could remain a secret.

Prison was second home to the men on the estate. Someone was bound to recognize him from his time inside. Her fear began to abate. If anyone asked, she would say she'd heard on the grapevine that it had happened already. Who knew where gossip began in this place? The most ridiculous rumours spread like wildfire. It wasn't as if she'd given Melanie a name . . .

With burgeoning confidence she set off down the road, glancing sideways as she passed number 23. There was an elderly man at the window. He shrank back as he caught her eye, fearful of being noticed, and she felt herself justified. He was white-faced and unhealthy-looking – like a maggot – and her instinctive shudder of distaste smothered any idea of warning him or the police that his life was in danger.

In any case, she hated paedophiles with a passion. She had seen their handiwork too often on the minds and bodies of the children who called them Daddy.