
Opening Extract from...

A Line of Blood

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Crappy is the name given by North Londoners to the very worst parts of Finsbury Park. People start using the name ironically, but it very quickly sticks.

PART ONE

The Man Next Door

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The precarious thinness of his white arms, all angles against the dark foliage.

'Max.'

Nothing. No response. He was half-hidden, straddling the wall, his body turned away from me. Listening, I thought. Waiting, perhaps.

'Max.'

He turned now to look at me, then at once looked away, back at the next-door neighbour's house.

'Foxxa,' he said quietly.

'Max-Man. Bed time. Down.'

'But Dad, Foxxa . . .'

'Bed.'

Max shook his head without turning around. I approached the wall, my hand at the level of his thigh, and reached out to touch his arm. 'She'll come home, Max-Man. She always comes home.'

Max looked down at me, caught my gaze, then looked back towards the house next door.

'What, Max?'

No response.

'Max?'

Max lifted his leg over the wall and disappeared. I stood for a moment, unnerved.

In the early days of our life in Crappy we had bought a garden bench. A love seat, Millicent had called it, with room only for two. But Finsbury Park wasn't the area for love seats. We'd long since decided it was too small, that the stiff-backed intimacy it forced upon us was unwelcome and oppressive, something very unlike love.

The love seat stood now, partly concealed by an ugly bush, further along the wall. Standing on it, I could see most of the next-door neighbour's garden. It was as pitifully small as ours, but immaculate in its straight lines, its clearly delineated zones. A Japanese path led from the pond by the end wall to a structure that I'd once heard Millicent refer to as a bower, shaped out of what I guessed were rose bushes.

Max was standing on the path. He saw me and turned away, walking very deliberately into the bower.

'Max.'

Nothing.

I stood on the arm of the love seat, and put my hands on top of the wall, pushing down hard as I jumped upwards. My left knee struck the head of a nail, and the pain almost lost me my balance.

I panted hard, then swung my leg over the wall and sat there as Max had, looking towards the neighbour's house. Seen side by side, they were identical in every detail, except that the neighbour had washed his windows and freshened the paint on his back door.

A Japanese willow obscured the rest of the neighbour's ground floor. A tree, a pond, a bower. *Who builds a bower in Finsbury Park?*

Max reappeared.

'Dad, come and see.'

I looked about me. Was this trespass? I wasn't sure.

Max disappeared again. No one in any of the other houses

seemed to be looking. The only house that could see into the garden was ours. And I needed to retrieve my son.

I jumped down, landing badly and compounding the pain in my knee.

'You aren't supposed to say fuck, Dad.'

'I didn't say it.' *Did I?*

'You did.'

He had reappeared, and was looking down at me again, as I massaged the back of my knee, wondering if it would stiffen up.

'And I'm allowed to say it. You are the one who isn't.'

He smiled.

'You've got a hole in your trousers.'

I nodded and stood up, ruffled his hair.

'Does it hurt?'

'Not much. A bit.'

He stared at me for a long moment.

'All right,' I said, 'it hurts like fuck. Maybe I did say it.'

'Thought so.'

'Want to tell me what we're doing here? Max-Man?'

He held out his hand. I took it, surprised, and he led me into the bower.

The neighbour had been busy here. Four metal trellises had been joined to make a loose arch, and up these trellises he had teased his climbing roses, if that's what they were. Two people could have lain down in here, completely hidden from view. Perhaps they had. The grass was flattened, as if by cushions.

Now I noticed birdsong, distant-sounding, wrong, somehow.

Max crouched down, rubbed his right forefinger against his thumb.

From a place unseen, a small dark shadow, winding around his legs. Tortoiseshell, red and black. Max rubbed finger and thumb together again, and the cat greeted him, stood for a moment on two legs, teetering as she arched

upwards towards his fingers, then fell forwards and on to her side, offering him her belly.

'Foxxa.'

It was Max who had named the cat. He had spent hours with her, when she first arrived, whispering to her from across the room: *F, K, Ks, S, Sh*. He had watched how she responded to each sound, was certain he had found the perfect name.

'Foxxa.'

The cat chirruped. Max held out his hand, and she rolled on to her back, cupped her paws over his knuckles, bumped her head gently into his hand.

'Crazy little tortie,' he whispered.

She tripped out of the bower. Crazy little tortie was right. We hadn't seen her in days.

Max walked out of the bower and towards the patio. I followed him. The cat was not there.

From the patio, the pretentious absurdity of the bower was even more striking. The whole garden was no more than five metres long, four metres wide. The bower swallowed at least a third of the usable space, making the garden even more cramped than it must have been when the neighbour moved in.

The cat appeared from under a bush, darted across the patio. Too late I saw that the back door was ajar. She paused for a moment, looking back at us.

'Foxxa, no!' said Max.

Her tail curled around the edge of the door, then she had disappeared inside.

Max was staring at the back door. I wondered if the neighbour was there behind its wired glass panels, just out of view. Max approached the door, pushing it fully open.

'Max!'

I lunged towards him, but he slipped into the kitchen, leaving me alone in the garden.

'Hello?' I shouted. I waited at the door but there was no reply.

'Come *on*, Dad,' said Max.

I found him in the middle of the kitchen, the cat at his feet.

'Max, we can't be in here. Pick her up. Let's go.'

Max walked to the light switch and turned on the light. Thrill of the illicit. We shouldn't be in here.

'Max,' I said, 'out. Now.'

He turned, rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, and the cat jumped easily up on to the work surface, blinking back at us.

'She likes it here.'

'Max . . . Max, pick her up.'

Max showed no sign of having heard me. I could read nothing in his gestures but a certain stiff-limbed determination. He had never disobeyed me so openly before.

Light flooded the white worktops, the ash cupboard fronts, the terracotta floor tiles. It was all so clean, so bright, so without blemish. I thought of our kitchen, with its identical dimensions. How alike, yet how different. On the table was a pile of clean clothes, still in their wrappers. Two suits, a stack of shirts, all fresh from the cleaners. No two-day-old saucepans stood unwashed in the sink. No food rotted here, no cat litter cracked underfoot, no spider plants went short of water.

From the middle of the kitchen you could see the front door. The neighbour had moved a wall; or perhaps he hadn't moved a wall; perhaps he had simply moved the door to the middle of his kitchen wall. Natural light from both sides. Clever.

Max left the room. I looked back to where the cat had been standing, but she was no longer there. I could hear him calling to her, a gentle clicking noise at the back of his throat.

I followed him into the living room. Max was already at the central light switch. Our neighbour had added a plaster ceiling rose, and an antique crystal chandelier, which hung too low, dominating the little room. The neighbour had used low-energy bulbs in the chandelier, and they flicked into life, sending ugly ovoids of light up the seamless walls. What was this? And where was the cat?

Max found a second switch, and the bottom half of the room was lit by bulbs in the floor and skirting.

'Pick up the cat, Max-Man. Time to go.'

He made a gesture. Arms open, palm up. Then he held up his hand. Listen, he seemed to be saying, and listen I did. A dog; traffic; a rooftop crow. People walked past, voices low, their shoes scuffing the pavement.

These houses should have front yards, Millicent would say: it's like people walking through your living room. You could hear them so clearly, all those bad kids and badder adults: the change in their pockets, the phlegm in their throats, the half-whispered street deals and the Coke-can football matches. It was all so unbearably close.

But there was something else too, a dull, rhythmic tapping that I couldn't place, couldn't decipher. Max had located it, though. He pointed to the brown leather sofa. A dark stain was spreading out across the central cushion.

I looked at Max. Max looked at me.

'Water,' said Max.

Water dripping on to the leather sofa. Yes, that was the sound. Max looked up. I looked up. The plaster of the ceiling was bowing. No crack was visible, but at the lowest point water was gathering: gathering and falling in metronomic drops, beating out time on the wet leather below.

Now I could see that cat. She was halfway up the staircase, watching the tracks of the water through the air.

Max and I looked at each other. I could read nothing in my son's expression beyond a certain patient expectancy.

'Maybe you should shout up to him, Dad. Case he's here.'

Maybe I should. Maybe I should have shouted louder as I'd skulked by the back door, because standing here in his living room, looking up his stairs towards the first floor, it felt a little late to be alerting him to our presence.

'Hello?'

Nothing.

'It's Alex. From next door.'

'And Max,' said Max quietly. 'And Foxxa.'

'Alex and Max,' I shouted up. 'We've come to get our cat.'

Nothing. Water falling against leather. Another street-dog. I looked again at Max.

'You go first, Dad.'

He was right. I couldn't send him upstairs in front of me. I had always suspected overly tidy men of having dark secrets in the bedroom.

'Maybe he left a tap on,' I said quietly.

'Maybe.' Max wrinkled his nose.

'All right. Stay there.'

I saw the cat's tail curl around a banister. I headed slowly up the stairs.

A click, and the landing light came on. Max had found that switch too.

Two rooms at the back, two at the front: just like ours. At the back the bathroom and the master bedroom, at the front the second bedroom and a tiny room that only estate agents called a bedroom. The cat was gone. The bathroom door was open.

The neighbour was in the bathtub, on his back, his legs and arms thrown out at discordant angles, as if something in his body was broken and couldn't be repaired. His mouth was open, his lips were pulled back.

His eyes seemed held open by an unseen force; the left eye was shot through with blood. Blood was gathering around his nostrils too.

I did not retch, or cover my eyes, or cry, or any of the thousand things you're supposed to do. Instead, and I say this with some shame, I heard and felt myself laugh. Perhaps it was the indignity of the half-erection standing proud from his lifeless body; perhaps it was simply my confusion.

I looked away from his penis, then back, and saw what prudishness had prevented me from seeing before. Lying calmly

in the gap between the neighbour's thighs was an iron. A Black and Decker iron. Fancy. Expensive. There were burn-marks around the top of his left thigh. The iron had been on when he had tipped it into the bath.

Did people really do this? The electric iron? The bath? Wasn't it a teenage myth? Surely, you would think, surely the fuse would save you? Surely a breaker would have tripped?

Apparently not.

The bath had cracked. The neighbour must have kicked out so hard that he'd broken it. Some sort of fancy plastic composite. The bath would have drained quickly after that, but not quickly enough to save the neighbour from electrocution. Poor man.

'Dad.'

Max. He was standing in the doorway, the cat in his arms. I hadn't heard him climb the stairs. Oh please, no.

'Is he dead?'

'Out, Max.' *Surely this needs some sort of lie.*

'But Dad.'

'Out. Downstairs. Now.'

'But Dad. Dad.'

I turned to look at him.

'What, Max?'

'Are you OK, Dad?' said Max, stepping out on to the landing. I looked at him again, his thin shoulders, his floppy hair, that unreadable look in his eyes. You're eleven, I thought. *When did you get so old?*

'Dad. Dad? Are you going to call the police?'

I nodded.

'His phone's downstairs in the living room.'

He was taking charge. My eleven-year-old son was taking charge. This had to stop. This couldn't be good.

'No, Max,' I said, as gently as I could. 'We're going to go back to our place. I'll call from there.'

'OK.' He turned and went downstairs.

I took a last look at the neighbour and wondered just what Max had understood. The erection was subsiding now; the penis lay flaccid on his pale thigh.

I heard Max open the front door. 'You coming, Dad?'

I went home and rang the police and told them what we had found. Then I rang Millicent, though I knew she would not pick up.

Max and I sat at opposite sides of the table in our tired little kitchen, watching each other in silence.

After I had called the police I had made cheese sandwiches with Branston pickle. Max had done what he always did, opening his sandwiches, picking up the cheese and thoughtfully sucking off the pickle, stacking the cheese on his plate and the bread beside it. He had then eaten the cheese, stuffing it into his mouth, chewing noisily and swallowing before he could possibly be ready to. Normally I would have said something, and Max would have ignored it, and I would have shouted at him. Then, if Millicent had been with us, she would have shot me a furious glance, refused to speak to me until Max had gone to bed, then said, simply, 'Why pick that fight, Alex, honey? You never win it anyway. You're just turning food into a *thing*. Food doesn't have to be a *thing*.'

Tonight I simply watched Max, wondering what to do, and what to tell Millicent when she came home.

A father leads his son from the world of the boy into the world of the man. A father takes charge, and does not without careful preparation expose his son to the cold realities of death. A father – more specifically – does not expose his son to the corpse of the next-door neighbour, and – most especially – not when that corpse displays an erection brought on by suicide through electrocution.

The tension in the limbs, that rictus smile, they were not easily erased. What did Max know about suicide? What could an eleven-year-old boy know about despair? I had to talk to

him, but had no idea what to say. This was bad. Wasn't this the stuff of full-blown trauma, of sexual dysfunction in the teenage years, and nervous breakdown in early adulthood? And though I hadn't actively shown Max the neighbour, I had failed to prevent him from seeing him in all his semi-priapic squalor. What do you say? Maybe Millicent would know.

'Can I have some more cheese, Dad?'

I said nothing.

Maybe I should ring Millicent again. The phone would go to voicemail, but there was comfort in hearing her voice.

Max went to the fridge and fetched a large block of cheddar, then took the bread knife from the breadboard. He sat back down at the table and looked directly at me, wondering perhaps why I'd done nothing to stop him. Then he cut off a large chunk. I noticed the bread knife cut into the surface of the table, but said nothing.

The cat was at the sink. She looked at Max, eyes large, then blinked.

Max went to the sink and turned on the tap. The cat drank, her tongue flicking in and out, curling around the stream of water.

'Can I watch Netflix?'

I looked at my computer, at the light that pulsed gently on and off. *No*. Seventy hours of footage to watch, and a week to do it. *I have to work*. I really should say no.

'Dad?' said Max.

I nodded. Work seemed very distant now. Max stared.

'I'm not taking a plate,' he said at last.

'OK.'

At eleven thirty I heard Millicent's key in the lock. I was sitting where Max had left me at the kitchen table, my own sandwich untouched; the tap was still running.

I heard Millicent drop her bag at the foot of the stair. For the first time I noticed the sound of the programme on the

computer: helicopters and gunfire; screaming and explosions. Millicent and Max exchanged soft words. The gunfire and the screaming stopped.

'Night, Max.'

'Night, Mum.'

The sound of Max going upstairs; the sound of Millicent dropping her shoes beside her bag.

'So, Max is up kind of late.' Millicent came into the kitchen. She stopped in the doorway for a moment, and I saw her notice Max's plate, the stack of uneaten bread, the bread-knife cut in the table surface. She turned off the tap, then sat down opposite me. She made to say something, then frowned.

'Hi,' I said.

'Hey.' Her voice drew out the word, all honey and smoke.

When Millicent first came to London it had felt like our word. The long Californian vowel, the gently falling cadence at the end, were for me, and for me alone. *Hey.* There was such warmth in her voice, such love. In time I realised *hey* was how she greeted friends, that she had no friends in London but me at the start; the first time she said *hey* to another man the betrayal stung me. Don't laugh at me for this. I didn't know.

'So,' said Millicent. 'I didn't stink.'

I don't know what you mean.

'In fact, I think I did OK. I mean, I guess I talked a little too much, but it went good for a first time. Look.'

A bag. A bottle and some flowers. *There's a dead man in the next-door house.*

I looked up at a dark mark in the wall near the ceiling. *Round, like a target.* Draw a straight line from me through that mark, and you'd hit the neighbour. Seven metres, I guessed. Maybe less.

Millicent looked at me, then reached out and took my hand in hers, turning it over and unclenching my fist.

'You are super-tense.'

'It's OK.'

'You're OK?'

No. I was as far from OK as I could imagine but the words I needed wouldn't form. 'Yes,' I said at last.

'You forgot.' It took a lot to hurt Millicent, but I could feel the edge of disappointment in her voice. The interview, on the radio. Of course.

'No,' I said. 'Radio.' *Why can't I find the words?*

'OK,' she said. She looked at me as if I had run over a deer. 'But you didn't listen to it. I mean, it's also a download, so I get that maybe it's not time-critical, but I guess I was kind of hoping, Alex . . .'

I breathed deep, trying to decide how to say what I had to say. From the look of Millicent, Max had told her nothing of what we'd seen. I wondered where the police were. Maybe bathroom suicides were a common event around here. *What do you say?*

'What is it, Alex?'

From upstairs I heard Max flush the toilet. I thought of the bathroom in the house next door, of the bath five metres from where he was now.

'Alex?'

'OK.' I took Millicent's hand in mine, looked her in the eye. 'OK.'

'You're scaring me a little, Alex. What's going on?'

Three sentences, I thought. Anything can be said in three sentences. You need to find three sentences.

'OK. This is what I need to tell you.'

'Yes?'

'The neighbour killed himself. I found him. Max saw.' Nine words. Not bad.

'No,' she said. Very quiet, almost matter-of-fact, as if refuting a badly phrased proposition. 'No, Alex, he isn't. He can't be.'

'I found him. Max saw.' Five words.

She stared at me. Said nothing.

'I should have stopped him from seeing. I didn't.'

Still she stared at me. She brought her right hand up to her face, rubbing the bridge of her nose in the way she does when she's buying time in an argument.

'I haven't talked to him yet about what he saw. I know I have to, but I wanted to talk to you first.' *Because you're better at this than me. Because I don't know what to say.*

Still Millicent said nothing.

The doorbell rang. Millicent did not move. I did not move. It rang again. We sat there, staring at each other. Only when I heard footsteps on the stairs did I stand up and go to the front room. Max had the door open. He stood there in his lion pyjamas, looking up at the two policemen.

'Upstairs, Max,' I said, trying to smile at the policemen, aware suddenly of the papers strewn across the floor, of Millicent's pizza carton and my beer cans on the side table. 'I'll be up in a minute, Max,' I said, guiding him towards the stair.

'It's OK. Night, Dad.' He kissed me and slipped away from my hand and up the stairs. I nodded at the policemen and was surprised by the warmth of their smiles.

We agreed that it would be easiest for them to enter the neighbour's property through our back garden. Save breaking down the front door and causing unnecessary drama. Better to keep the other neighbours in the dark for the time being.

The policemen weren't interested in explanations; they didn't care what Max and I had been doing in the neighbour's house, seemed completely unconcerned with what we had seen. That would come later, I guessed. They said no to a cup of tea, nodded politely to Millicent, who still hadn't moved from her chair, and disappeared into our back garden. I went upstairs, and found Max in the bathroom, standing on the bath and looking out of the window as the policemen scaled the wall.

'Bed, Max.'

'OK, Dad.'
When he was tucked up, I drew up a chair beside the bed.
'What are you doing, Dad?'
'I thought I'd sit here while you go to sleep.'
'I'm fine, Dad. Really.'

Three heavy knocks at the front door. A dream, perhaps?