

The Meanest Flood

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Extract

'The magician is quicker and his game
Is much thicker than blood and blacker than ink
And there's no time to think'

Bob Dylan

'Everything that deceives may be said to enchant'

Plato

'There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune'

Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

'When the waves of death compassed me,
the floods of ungodly men made me afraid'

2 Samuel, 22:5

'It's gonna be the meanest flood
That anybody's seen'

Bob Dylan

As a professional he wore false cheeks and a wig together with a dark and shiny Van Dyck beard. Tan makeup to set off the sapphire blue of his eyes. The dinner jacket was compulsory, as were the patent-leather shoes, the top hat and cape, the white kid-gloves and his silk cane. Diamond Danny Mann sparkled in the footlights.

'I need another volunteer,' he said, eyeing the Nottingham audience, producing a fanned deck of cards from the ether. 'Perhaps a lady this time?' He walked to the edge of the proscenium, descended the steps and chose a short young woman from the second row of the stalls. Her warm damp hand in his, Diamond Danny returned to the boards and offered her a chair, using his considerable charm to ensure her breathing and heartbeat rapidly returned to normal. 'You're going to need both hands,' he told her. 'Please put your bag under the chair.' His concern for the lady's welfare was palpable and the audience warmed to it and to the magician himself.

Danny asked her to pick a card from the pack and when she drew the eight of spades he gave her a pen and asked her to sign her name on the face of it. Marilyn, for that was her name, used Danny's back as a desk and returned the card to the pack.

The magician shuffled the cards and handed them to his dimpled volunteer. 'Now find your card.' He passed his hand over the pack and threw back his head. '*Katha*,' he said, pulling out and extending the final vowel. 'A word to conjure with, given to me by a humble magician

at Pak Nam Pho in Thailand. We did a little trade in spells and talismans.'

A murmur of soft laughter went around the audience but the magician didn't smile and neither did the woman with the pack of cards. Rings on every finger of one hand, Danny noticed.

Marilyn looked through the pack and shook her head. She looked through again. 'It isn't here,' she said. 'You didn't put it back.'

Diamond Danny smiled. A remarkable smile when it came, with all the clarity and innocence of a child. 'You're right,' he told her. 'I put it in your purse.'

Marilyn, flustered now, reached beneath the chair for her handbag, which had been in full view of the audience while she was on stage. She snapped open the clasp and looked inside. She shook her head. 'It's not here.'

'In the purse,' Danny said, 'next to your driving licence.'

The lady withdrew a wallet from the handbag. The wallet was black pigskin and fastened with a zipper. When she opened it, Marilyn's lower jaw dropped. 'Oh, no, I don't believe it,' she squealed.

She withdrew a card, folded twice. She straightened it and waved it towards the audience. 'It's the one I signed,' she said. 'How did you do that? It's impossible.'

The magician returned the lady to her seat while the applause resounded around him. He returned to the stage to take his bow before withdrawing into the wings. He had the unsettling feeling that he had not chosen the lady at all, that in some strange way she might have chosen him.

When the ASM delivered his cape and caddy to the green room she hesitated before leaving. 'How is it that the

magician always knows which card you've chosen?' she asked.

'It's magic,' Diamond Danny told her with a twinkle in his eye. 'I could introduce you to the black art if you ask the right question. Or perhaps you will decide to leave well enough alone. Many an explanation turns out to be an illusion in itself.'

The wheel was running on wet tarmac illuminated by streetlights. It had a new radial-tread Bridgestone tyre, slightly warm from the journey. Rubber and carbon black designed to perform with low noise and to grip the road in all weathers. Some time ago, when the vehicle was new, he had fitted chrome wheel-well trim but this was peeling now, as was the black paint it had been designed to protect.

The wheel veered to the right and came slowly to a halt a couple of centimetres from a white stone kerb. An owl hooted softly in the distance. Apart from the contractions of the cooling engine there were no other sounds.

The magician sat in the driving seat. He was wearing his other face. He was still, composed, a silhouette. An observer might have noticed the regular rise and fall of his chest, the blink of an eyelid. But there was no observer present; only the moon and the stars.

Several minutes passed and the silence was broken by the mechanism of the driver's door opening and the slight but erect figure of the magician emerging.

It was late, well after midnight. He locked the vehicle and walked along the street, a thirty-five-year-old man wearing a neat black overcoat, a soft hat with a brim and polished shoes. He walked with his head erect and it was only when he passed those junctions with closed-circuit cameras in operation that he pulled the brim over his

eyes and let his shoulders slump forward to hide his features.

He had taken this path several times before. He knew everything there was to know about it. Magic needs to be rehearsed. It involves manipulating and controlling the environment. When it is completely successful nothing has been left to chance.

This is how gods work. The magician was not a god but that didn't mean he couldn't emulate one. Magic is available to some people. Handed down through the centuries, through the long ages of man's journey. Before the Magus and beyond Houdini the brotherhood extends over the furthest stretches of the universe.

As he walked Diamond Danny pulled on two pairs of latex gloves.

God encourages the things that please Him, and those that He doesn't favour He destroys. This is how He is. Remember the flood? The magician had little time for people who believe that God is kindness and light. God is a planner and an engineer; He is an ambitious magician and He doesn't mind too much if some of His tricks go wrong. He can rest on His laurels for a while, on His reputation. He was in the right place at the right time and He managed to pull off a few stunning illusions. But you must have heard?

The house was nothing, a between-the-wars construction of red brick. Since it was built all the woodwork had been replaced at least once. It had single-glazed windows and no damp-course to ensure that it met the English standard of cold and draughts and a tendency to mould around the skirting boards.

The front door was painted red and the upper half was a single pane of glass. But at the rear of the house it was dark and whoever wanted to enter could do so undetected by one of the neighbourhood insomniacs.

The magician, of course, knew this already. He had been at the back door of this building twice before. Once during the day and once at the dead of night. There was a simple lever lock which the magician could open with a matchstick in a few seconds. There were bolts on the inside of the door, at top and bottom, but both of them were stiff from lack of use and a couple of attempts to paint them out of existence.

The occupant of this house had no worries. She didn't imagine that someone would wish to enter her home and harm her. She slept soundly. She slept as soundly at night as she did during the day. Her life was a dream.

We are all magicians now. Even the plodding policeman is a sorcerer these days. Recently Danny had seen on the news that a twelve-year-old rape case had been solved through the extraction of DNA from a speck of dandruff. Truly amazing. The perpetrator of the rape was now a fifty-year-old grandfather, but at the time of his crime he was only thirty-eight. For the years between he was a card hidden in the pack until – hey, presto – the conjurors of the forensic department found him curled up in a test tube.

The magician was not particularly interested in this woman. The female in the house, sleeping in the front bedroom. She was not the trick, only a component of it. He needed her but she was not an end in herself. She was neither the rabbit nor the top hat. She contributed to the illusion by the way she distracted the eye. She was a cipher who only took on the appearance of reality when she was removed from it.

The streetlights sent a pale glow through the windows of the house. The magician had a torch but he didn't need to use it. The kitchen was neat and tidy, all the surfaces had been wiped clean and there was a suggestion of pine disinfectant in the air. The living room had a

fitted carpet and floral curtains that were closed against the night. There was still enough residual light to see the photographs on the mantelpiece: a studio portrait of an old couple, probably her parents, and one of the old woman alone, taken some time later with an Italian mountain in the background. There was another of a small girl with pigtails, something old-fashioned about it, perhaps the silver frame.

The magician removed his overcoat and laid it on the worn Chesterfield. He slid his weapon from the inside pocket and weighed it in his hand, took a moment to wonder at the balance and beauty of the polished hilt.

He removed his remaining clothes, folded them neatly and placed them on top of his overcoat.

When he was naked he ascended the stairs and waited for the instant when he would hear the woman's breath for the first time. She lived alone but all possibilities had to be taken into account. She could have a friend with her, a man or a woman. Either possibility would increase the night's workload but nothing would distract Danny from his main purpose. He had waited a long time for this. He was committed. Professional integrity was at stake. *Abracadabra. Katha.* Behold the woman; first you see her, then you don't.

Her bedroom door was ajar. On the landing there was a red dressing gown draped over the handrail of the banister. The magician stood in the open doorway and surveyed the scene. She was sleeping with the bedside lamp on, perhaps over-concerned with bogeymen and things that go bump, nyctophobic. Her dressing table was by the window. There was a chair on one side of the double bed and her clothes had been placed on it, neatly folded. Oh, symmetry.

On the other side of the bed there was a small cabinet with a couple of books on its polished surface. There was

a picture on the wall, a reproduction of one of Hockney's swimming pools. Below it there was a small television on a black metal trolley.

This was not an impressive room. If you could choose, you would not choose to die here. But all the choices that this lady had ever had were finally tumbling down to zero.

She was lying on her side with her arms out of the quilt. Her hair was cut short and had been freshly washed, auburn with subtle highlights. Her shoulders were covered by a peach-coloured nightgown. There were freckles on her chest. She was breathing deeply and there was some activity going on beneath her eyelids. Over the area of the bed there was a canopy of confined bodily odours, something the woman unknowingly shared with the world. If she were awake she would open the window.

The magician brought her to life by pushing her on to her back and climbing on top of her. He straddled her chest, pinning her arms by her sides with his knees. There was a moment when they were face to face. An instant of awareness that she was not dreaming. Her eyes were the size of fists and her mouth opened wide to scream for help. The messages bombarding her brain and the rush of adrenalin combined to throw her system into chaos. What should have been a scream fluttered to a whimper. She begged for reason and to be spared pain. 'Who are you? What do you want? Please don't hurt me.'

The magician had bought the bayonet in an antique shop in Finchley years before. At the time he'd thought vaguely of incorporating it in his act. It had only been used once since the war, as far as he knew. It was forty centimetres long with a wooden handle which was engraved with the German eagle. The blade came to a sharp point and had a blood groove that spanned its entire length. It was a functional tool but it had a certain

elegance and was originally used as an accessory to a dress uniform. If it had had the original scabbard it would have been worth serious money as the blade was mirror-bright.

The woman's initial wriggling and pleading gave way to more violent movements as she realized that her salvation was entirely in her own hands. The magician gripped her tighter. He took her spare pillow and covered her head and chest.

Diamond Danny held the bayonet aloft with both hands. Bringing it down forcefully he stabbed her once through the pillow, correctly estimating the point at which her heart lay pounding.

He ran the cold tap in the bath and rinsed the gore from the blade of the bayonet. He used her hand-towel to dry it, glancing at the bottles and containers of shampoo and conditioner, the nail varnish and lipsticks, powder and eye-shadow. The tricks of the feminine trade. Three different brands of perfume and an economy bottle of green makeup remover from the Body Shop. He looked in the mirror where her face appeared each morning and evening and the glass reflected his own image without a hint of sentimentality.

He washed away the blood that splattered his upper body and he put the plug in the bath and blocked the overflow with what was left of the woman's cotton-wool pleats. She wouldn't need them anymore and she'd possibly be pleased that someone had found a use for them. He turned on both taps and one by one emptied the bottles and containers of lotions into the bath.

He didn't return to the bedroom. All was quiet in there. He descended the stairs and dressed himself. He buttoned his overcoat against the night air. He placed his hat on his head and had a look around. There was the

sound of water splashing into the tub, must be getting close to the top by now. And all those essential oils mixed together, filling the house with their aroma; they reminded him of his mother, not close to the end when she was old, but when she was younger, while Danny was still a boy. Lovely smell, delicious, made you picture tropical climates, soft fruits, birds of paradise and a life of magical ease and everlasting enchantment.

Two hours later Danny edged his car into the garage and went into his house. He took the bayonet from his pocket and placed it back in the cabinet with his other little-used accessories. He drank a glass of cold water while standing at the sink and walked upstairs to the bedroom.

Jody was sleeping on her side of the bed and the magician stripped off his clothes and crept in beside her, pulling her towards him. He wrapped his arms around her. 'Flawless,' he said. 'Went like a dream.' He nuzzled down and took her designer nipple between his teeth, letting his eyes close and the world fade away around him.

Diamond Danny Mann, whacked after a busy day.

That morning Ruben Parkins finished his milk-round at 7.50 and went back to his flat to clean up and change his clothes. Ruben was going to spend the whole day with his girlfriend and when he got in the shower he sang 'Everything I Do, I Do It For You', modulating his voice like Bryan Adams, crooning away in a deep bellow with the water from the sprinkler splashing around his head and shoulders.

Ruben was a good guy and he was feeling good about it. What made him feel so great, apart from the woman and the fact that he was in love, was that being a good guy was something he hadn't been before. Well, not for a long time.

He'd been cute as a kid. There were photographs his mother had kept and his auntie Sarah had a couple still, showing Ruben as a toddler, maybe a bit older, up to the time he started school. Dumb little kid with big eyes like a bush-baby, looking around wondering what the world was all about. When he saw those photographs Ruben could remember what it was like back then, when eye-level meant just above his mother's knees. There was an overhang to the Woolworth's counters in those days and little Ruben used to walk under it without banging his head. If he wanted to see what the grown-ups were looking at on the counter his mother'd have to lift him up.

The violence had started when he got to school. Ruben wasn't bigger than the other kids but one of the first

things he'd learned was that if he was going to hold his own he'd have to pack a hefty punch. He had a talented straight-right. The gym teacher said he could be a fighter if he wanted. He'd have to learn to block other people's punches, and do the little dances that pro boxers did, but he'd always have that killer punch. No one could teach him any more about that. It was a gift from God.

There'd been times after he'd left school when Ruben had wished he'd listened to the gym teacher and taken the fighting lessons. The main time he'd wished he'd listened was when he got himself banged away on a GBH count for breaking a nightclub bouncer's neck. What was unfair about that whole eighteen-month stint was that none of it was Ruben's fault. The guy had been a jerk-off. *Anybody* would have broken his neck if they'd been in Ruben's position that day. If they'd drunk the same amount of booze, if they'd lost half their wages on the last race at Kempton Park and if the slag they were supposed to be getting married to had run off with her own cousin. And then, to cap it all, they'd had to listen to a load of garbage coming out of the jerk-off's mouth, saying the place was full when he was ushering his own mates through the door on the QT. Fuckin' Italian into the bargain; nose like a parrot's perch.

So. Feeling good. Eighteen months banged away all done and finished with. The milk-round in the bag. Nicely showered and padding around his bedroom buck naked, freeing a new pair of leopard-skin skimpies from their cellophane bag.

Ruben nodded at his reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of the wardrobe door. Not an ounce of fat on him; all muscle and bone. Those black hairs on his chest and forearms and on his thighs and legs. He half-turned to see the same hair spread over his back, glistening across his shoulders. He adjusted his lunch-

pack inside the skimpiers, enough in there to keep a harem happy. Or a convent if they wanted a holiday from chastity.

What he'd planned was to get to Kitty's house around 9, 9.30, by which time she'd have dolled herself up and be waiting on the doorstep. They'd drive over to Harrogate and have breakfast in one of the posh cafés there. Then they'd shop, which was what Kitty liked to do more than anything else. They'd spend a couple of hours wandering round buying new clothes, whatever took the woman's eye. She'd see he wasn't a skinflint, which was the reason she'd got rid of her last boyfriend, and she'd see he had some earning power. That he could earn legitimate money from the milk-round, didn't need to go back to a criminal lifestyle.

She already knew he was a good lover, that he could get to the parts the other guys in her life couldn't reach. And she'd got to him, too. The only woman he'd ever met who had made him sit up and think. The one woman who had made him change his way of thinking about the world. Ruben had always said that he was number one, that no one else even came in close second. But now that he'd met Kitty-Turner he no longer thought like that. She was number one and Ruben was prepared to do anything for her.

He put on his leather strides, sky-blue socks and new black slip-ons. He found his way through the packaging of a white polyester Double Two shirt, removed the pins and plastic clips and slipped it on. A silk tie the same colour as his socks and a brown suede jacket with his snake-skin wallet in the inside pocket made Ruben feel like the master of the universe.

He was out of the door when he had another thought and rushed back to the bathroom to hit the Brut for the second time since leaving the shower.

He left his flat on the Lenton Boulevard and nosed the Skoda into Derby Road, then south to Clifton, over the river and on to the quiet avenue where Kitty should have been waiting for him. He parked outside the house, watching the front door, expecting her to open it and step down the path to join him in the car.

Nothing.

Ruben looked at the upstairs curtains. Maybe she'd slept late and wasn't ready yet? Was that a wave from behind the nets or a trick of the light? His mind juggling with reality?

He drummed his fingers on the leather cover of the steering wheel, furrowed his brow and leant back in the seat.

Expectations fuck you up. You can look forward to something so much that you believe it's a reality before it has happened. That time he walked out of Long Lartin he expected to see a woman waiting for him with some wheels, but he ended up walking the six miles to Evesham station by himself, travelled back to Nottingham by train. The woman had left with a Londoner, guy still in his twenties. She was the gonest little girl in town.

But Kitty was different. She'd be out in a minute. This was a woman's privilege, that's what his mother used to tell him, way back, when he was still in shorts. Being late. They had this idea it set up anticipation in the guy, made them look better because he'd been waiting. Got his juices going so he couldn't see straight.

But what if Ruben had let expectation take over again and Kitty was out on the town with some other guy while he was sitting here outside her house? How would he handle that? Ruben shook his head. He knew he wouldn't handle it well. He wouldn't have the normal, expected reaction that society took for granted. He wouldn't shake his head and carry on as if nothing had happened. He

wouldn't stomach it. There'd be violence involved. Some blood.

Christ, this was what happened if you let the inside of your head take over. Ruben had known it all along, not to entertain the thoughts. Get them out. Keep moving. He opened the car door and stepped on to the tarmac, walked up the path to her front door.

It was locked, but he had a key and she hadn't changed the lock. See? You blame the woman and she's done nothing. She'll be upstairs at the mirror. Ruben didn't shout her name. He knew she was there because of the smell of her. When you entered the house that scent that accompanied her everywhere she went, it pervaded the place.

Taps running in the bathroom upstairs.

He touched the kettle in the kitchen, see if she'd been down to make a drink. It was cold. He switched it on. Maybe she'd want coffee before they left. If she didn't that was OK. Whatever the lady desired.

He crept up the stairs breathing shallowly, a faint smile on his face. He imagined the shriek she'd come out with when he pushed open the bathroom door, the intake of her breath and the realization and relief as she came towards him, her arms outstretched.

The upper landing was sodden, water coming under the bathroom door and soaking into the fitted carpet. His feet squelched as he walked towards the bathroom with growing trepidation.

But she wasn't in there. The radiator was on and there was a pink bath towel hanging on it. A face-cloth lay on the lavatory seat. The taps were running and water was streaming over the side of the bath, flooding the floor. Ruben turned the taps off and fished for the plug. The water gurgled as it ran down the drain. In the mirror on the cabinet Ruben's face stared back at him like one of