Black Maps

Peter Spiegelman

WARNING: THIS EXTRACT CONTAINS EXPLICIT LANGUAGE!

The Present Day
Monday
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Kerry was running, her long legs a blur as she pounded up Newbottle Street, past the site of Houghton Pit which was now a reclaimed grassed-over area, and on towards Grasswell.

All of her papers were delivered now, and the two bottles of milk she'd nicked banged dangerously together every time the newspaper bag bounced off her hip.

She reached the garage at the top of the hill and headed downwards, into Grasswell. Turning at the fish-and-chip shop on the corner, she ran down the terraced street to her goal, the last house. Without breaking stride, she snatched the bottle from the step just as old Mrs Holland's groping fingers felt for it.

'Well, fuck-a-duck, Blackie,' Mrs Holland said. 'I could have sworn I heard the bloody milkman.'

Pulling her baggy green dressing gown around her thin frame, she squinted and looked blindly up and down the deserted street. The cat, a ginger stray which had taken the real Blackie's place two days after he'd been squashed flat by a double-decker bus, wrapped his body around her legs.

'For God's sake, Blackie, don't say me ears is going the same way as me eyes.'

The cat purred.

Shooing him in, Mrs Holland closed the door and felt her painful way down the hallway. She patted a piece of wallpaper that was coming loose. 'Have to tell our Jack to get this clagged back on, Blackie. Can't afford no new wallpaper, not on the measly pension the government expects us poor folks to live on. Anyhow,' she patted it again, 'this is pretty enough.' She had no idea that the once bright flowers had now faded to the depressing colour of late November leaves.

Around the corner, Kerry stood with her back against Mrs Holland's wall. She had already downed two thirds of the pint and was taking a breather before finishing the rest. Raising her leg and putting her foot against the bricks, she rested the hand holding the bottle on her bare leg, and with her other hand brushed her dark ponytail away from her shoulders. Her blue eyes peered out from beneath a fringe in dire need of cutting, and studied the Seahills Estate neatly laid out in front of her. It stood a field away from the rest of the town, as if the planners had left room for

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something else. Or more likely, as Kerry always thought from this viewpoint, so that the bloody place was quarantined from the rest of Houghton.

Kerry hated the Seahills, every bit as much as she hated her near breastless chest. She hated it as much as she hated her mother, who was having a long-term affair with the bottle – although it wasn't as if she was faithful to a certain kind. Oh no, not her; any bottle would do. Kerry hated her siblings – well perhaps not Robbie so much – and she certainly hated every bugger else who lived on the damn estate. In fact, at the moment Kerry hated everyone and everything she came into contact with. She especially hated anyone who had even the slightest hint of breasts. Jesus, Jason Smith had bigger breasts than she did and he was a bloke.

All she was interested in was her dream of one day running for England. God, then she would be miles away from the fucking Seahills.

From here she could see the rooftops of Tulip Crescent, where her used-to-be-friend Andrea lived. Kerry snorted. They'd been friends until Andrea decided she liked boys; Andrea and the rest of them in her class, like a bunch of bitches in heat. Thank God Kerry was now sixteen and would only have to put up with their blatant eyelash-fluttering and lip-licking for a few months longer.

She raised the bottle to her lips, and suddenly a voice she despised over all others said, 'Give us a drink then, Kerry.'

Turning her head, she glared at the pair standing there and curled her lip.

'In yer dreams, Pig Face,' she said, resisting the urge to spit the rest of the milk at them.

Stevie Masterton's face slowly turned a violent shade of red, which contrasted beautifully with his silver nose- and eyebrow-rings – two in one eyebrow, and one in the other. Not so long ago, Kerry had ripped the missing one out. Stevie had not forgotten.

Martin Raynor, whose face was permanently red anyhow because of the raging case of acne he was cursed with, grinned. At seventeen, he was a year older than Kerry and a year younger than Stevie.

Stevie moved closer. 'Just trying to be friendly, like. Got a fucking problem with that, have yer?'

'Fuck off, shit for brains. Yer wouldn't know friendly if it stood up and slapped yer right in yer ugly mug. And you, Fartin' Martin, on yer bike.'

Stevie sneered, while Martin ground his teeth together. A joke in assembly a few years ago had landed him with a nickname he hated.

Quickly, Kerry downed the rest of the milk. Then, menacingly, she raised the bottle over her head. She wasn't frightened of them. Like most bullies, they were cowards

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at heart. Anyhow, if push came to shove she could have another one of Stevie's rings out and be off before they knew it. Outrunning these two creeps would be easy.

Stevie took another step towards her then, remembering the pain he'd gone through the last time, said, 'Fuck you, bitch. Come on, Martin, she's not worth the hassle. Are yer, titless?'

Kerry raised the bottle higher. 'Fuck off before I stand on yer.'

Laughing, they broke into a trot and headed up towards Houghton.

Kerry was fuming; her breasts, or rather the lack of them, were a very definite sore point. These days it seemed that every girl she knew was, if not already fully formed, most definitely sprouting.

Sighing, she looked down at her chest. Her very flat chest. Not that she hadn't already checked this morning, but she lived in hope.

Nothing.

'Bastards,' she muttered.

With a face guaranteed to scare the hardiest of folks, she threw the empty bottle over Mrs Holland's wall. Gleaning a small shred of satisfaction from the sound of breaking glass – but fervently wishing it had been Stevie's head – she headed for home.

'Hope there's some of that left for me,' said Kerry's eighteenyear- old brother Robbie, as he walked into the kitchen yawning and scratching his bare armpit. It wasn't hard to see that he was Kerry's brother. With their brilliant blue eyes and black hair, and the same long legs and lean frame, both of them favoured their mother in looks and build.

Seven-year-old Suzy giggled; she too had the same build, but that was as far as the resemblance went. Robbie patted her fair head affectionately as he reached for the milk and she giggled some more. Eight-year-old Emma – small, chubby, and by everyone's account born anti-social – moved her head towards Robbie for the same pat, then pushed her red curls back into place. Meanwhile, eleven-year-old Darren threw his brother a don't-you-dare look. Darren was thick-set and football mad: if Kerry dreamed of running for England, Darren's own fantasy was to play for Sunderland. His black hair was gelled into a spike, and his eyes were even darker than his hair. His skin was also a shade or two darker than that of the rest of the Lumsdon tribe.

Thirteen-year-old Claire wafted in on a cloud of cheap perfume, immediately setting off Emma's asthma. Her almostwhite hair was covered in pastel-coloured butterfly clips. She too had the family's long legs, but with more weight to her frame, and she looked and acted with the confidence of someone way beyond her age. Claire was strikingly beautiful, and she knew it. She'd been thrilled when she passed two of the

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Seahills' gossips the other day and heard them call her jailbait. She studied her wheezing sister with supreme indifference.

'For Christ's sake, Claire.' Kerry rummaged in the drawer for Emma's inhaler. 'You're stinking the whole bloody room out.'

Claire glared at Kerry with venom in her eyes before snapping, 'Well, if there was ever enough hot water in this shithole for a bath every day, I wouldn't have to cover meself in this cheap stuff, would I?'

Robbie cringed and looked away. Claire was seriously courting trouble, and lately she'd been pushing Kerry more and more. He knew it was only the fact that Kerry was out training most days for the county running championships that had stopped her from going for Claire by the throat.

He looked back at Claire when she threw a letter at him and said sarcastically, 'Giro day at last. I thought it would never come . . . I take it we'll have more than stinking tomatoes on dry toast today.'

Turning from Robbie, she picked up one of the remaining glasses from the bench and swallowed the milk. Then, with all the arrogance of a thirteen-year-old who knows it all, she left without a goodbye for any of them.

Robbie pulled a face at Kerry that raised a half smile. 'Wow, was that a skirt, or was that a skirt?'

Kerry shrugged. 'I think the silly cow puts another hem in every week.'

Her eyes, however, had not been on her sister's hem, but on her chest, where she was sure she'd seen signs of growth. 'Damn.'

'What?' Darren said, as he passed her and reached for his glass.

'Nowt . . . Anyhow, who was talking to you, Nerd.' She slapped the back of his head.

'Ow.' Darren rubbed his head, and checked with his fingers that his hairstyle had not been messed. 'What was that for?'

'For being a horrible nosy little rat. That's what for.'

Darren pulled a face behind her back before downing his milk. He glared at Emma's grinning face, threatening her with a fate-worse-than-death look if she told Kerry on him. Emma sniffed loudly, and stuck her tongue out.

Kerry glanced quickly at the clock and realised they were all going to be late again. She turned to Robbie. 'Finish sorting this lot out, will yer? I'll go up and change. Make sure,' she pointed at Darren, 'our scruffy here gets washed. He seems to think that if he gels his hair nobody will notice his dirty little mug.'

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Darren was just about to come back with a quick retort when he got a slap round the ear from Robbie. 'Ow, what was that for?' he asked indignantly. In his book, he hadn't done anything wrong. Not this time.

'Guess . . . Come on now, move it.'

Grumbling, Darren moved to the sink, where he washed his hands and face.

Five minutes later, Kerry had changed into her school uniform – which was becoming far too small, in all the wrong places. But with only a few months to go before she left, there was no point in buying a new one. Like there's even a fat chance of that, she thought, hurrying down the stairs.

Ushering Darren and her two sisters out the door, she slammed it hard enough to raise the whole street. Her sole intention, though, was to get the attention of her mother.

Robbie winced when the door slammed, knowing full well who it was aimed at. His mother and Kerry had not got on for a long time now. Sometimes, when he heard Kerry having a go at her, he thought she hated their mother, and more often than not lately he found himself unable to blame her.

He closed his eyes, then tore open the envelope he was still clutching. Holding it at arm's length he counted to ten, then opened his eyes. The usual amount, thirty-nine quid, mocked him. 'Once again you have not miraculously changed into a grand in the post,' he muttered, as he threw the Giro in disgust on to the brown, chipped coffee table.

The coffee table wasn't the only chipped item in the 4-by- 31/2 sitting room. Everything Robbie looked at seemed to have a chip in it somewhere, from the fake brown wood running up the sides of the green three-piece to the stained skirting boards and the window ledge, although the floorlength green and brown curtains hid most of those. The plastic red flowers in the mottled green vase in the window were a joke. He'd thrown them out once but Suzy had rescued them from the bin.

He shook his head; he tried to keep on top of things, but seven people constantly bumped off each other in the tiny council house, making it practically impossible to keep it even vaguely tidy.

Picking up the TV remote, he thought of Suzy's face when she'd squashed her feet into her shoes earlier; it seemed she was growing faster than any of them. Looks like a job for the lifters, he nodded to himself. With a bit of luck she might have a new pair to come home to. Red ones, Suzy loved red. Have to see what's going on in the food department as well. It'll cheer them all up, even Madame Muck Claire, if there's something tasty for tea.

The old TV set finally warmed up. Kilroy was on his soapbox again, and muggings seemed to be the order of the day. Robbie hated muggers, especially the cowards who picked on people who couldn't fight back. He was always amazed at the folks

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who bared all when appearing on these shows. The Americans were the worst. Last week, one cheeky slapper with half of her head shaved, and a face full of gold studs, openly admitted to the world that she'd slept with not one brother but three.

He listened as a young skinhead wearing the latest Nike gear casually admitted to mugging an old woman and shook his head in disgust, remembering a few months ago when he'd bought himself a whole load of trouble by stopping Stevie and his sidekick, Fartin' Martin, from mugging old Mrs Holland when she'd left Newbottle post office on pension day. Now that had been weird all right. Seeing what they'd been about to do, he'd stepped between them without thinking, and old Mrs Holland and her jam-jar glasses had sauntered on past, blissfully unaware that she'd very nearly been attacked. He'd faced up to the snarling pair, knowing full well that he was not, and probably never would be, the fighter that Kerry was. Kerry would have launched herself at them first, then asked questions later; she'd been doing the self same thing since she could walk.

Not really knowing what to do, he'd stood watching them advance on him and then, as if someone up there had finally answered one of his prayers, a huge black man with a glinting gold tooth had appeared out of nowhere, and yanked the pair of creeps right off their feet.

He smiled to himself. That had been good to see all right; the man had shaken them like a terrier shakes a rat, then after banging their heads together, he'd thrown them into the gutter as if they'd been less than shit on his fingers.

While they'd floundered around in the gutter the man had looked at him, smiled, and said, 'Go.'

He hadn't needed to be told twice; he'd legged it for home, and sworn when he'd got there that he'd beaten Kerry at her best. Stevie and Martin hadn't bothered him since, but he had a feeling it was coming sometime soon. Their very silence was threatening.

'Still an' all,' he murmured out loud as he focused back on the TV screen, 'I bet Kilroy can live on thirty-nine quid a week.' He sniggered. 'Why aye, in a pig's arse he could.'

'Who yer talking to?'

Robbie looked up as his mother dragged herself into the room.

'Kilroy,' he answered, his eyes scouring her from head to foot.

'Answered yer back yet, has he?'

He watched as she lit up a cigarette and immediately began coughing her lungs up. The white bathrobe which swamped her, a present he'd bought last Christmas via the shoplifters, was a dirty grey, full of thrown-up dinner medals. He loved his

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mother to bits, but looking at her today he had to agree with Kerry: Vanessa Lumsdon was one hell of a mess.

He sighed inwardly, but she sensed his disdain.

'What's the matter, sourpuss?' Vanessa pulled her robe tighter, then took another draw on the cigarette, this time managing to keep the coughing at bay. 'Well?' she demanded.

Robbie felt like ignoring her and tried for a moment, but he couldn't. 'What's the point, Mam? Yer keep asking, and we tell yer, but it makes no difference, does it? Whatever me or our Kerry say, yer dry out for a week tops, then yer back in the same mess yer in today.'

Then, feeling lousy when he saw the hurt look on her face, he rummaged for the remote which had worked its way into a pile of dirty washing on the seat next to him. Finding it, he held it like a gun and shot Kilroy, pleased to be rid of him. He didn't know who was doing his head in the most, Kilroy or his mother.

But she was a mess, and if she wasn't careful the drink would kill her. She had been beautiful once, his mam, but now . . . What the hell, he couldn't take her looking at him like that any longer. Jumping up, he ran upstairs and quickly washed, then shrugged into some semi-clean jeans and rubbed at a spot on his blue shirt until the stain could hardly be seen, before racing back down. Last time he'd left the Giro on the coffee table it had mysteriously gone missing, with no one in the room but his mother.

To his relief, the Giro was still where he'd left it, and so was she, idly blowing smoke rings.

'Er, son . . .'

Robbie frowned. He knew what was coming next, it was the same thing week-in week-out. He waited though, still feeling awful about what he'd said a few minutes earlier.

'I . . . I need some cash. Just till I get me money on Friday. There's not much left, and the kids need . . .' Her voice was wheedling now. He hated for her to be like this, he hated having to look after his mother as if she was the child and he the adult, but she did the same thing every time, as if it was just a one-off. And he would do the same as he always did too.

'Mam, yer know I'll get some grub in.' Walking over to her he patted her shoulder. Her hair, which was long and in desperate need of styling, felt lank and greasy under his hand. He could have cried at the state of her. The booze and the fags, which seemed to be a permanent extension of her fingers, had done this to her. She looked easily twenty years older than she was. The shame of it, though, was that if she made the effort, she still cleaned up real good.

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'Look, Mam, I'll get yer tabs, and a half bottle from one of the smugglers. I think Dixie's lot just got back. But . . .'

She looked up, wondering what he was going to say, and knowing without a doubt that whatever it was, she was not going to like it.

Deciding that something drastic had to be done to stop the slide she was on, Robbie took a deep breath and tried to be stern. 'Mam, I . . . we want yer to clean yer act up.' He looked into her dark eyes and at the darker skin underneath them, skin that looked almost bruised. Then, as if someone else, someone like Kerry, was inside his head telling him what to say, he cried, 'For God's sake, Mam, have yer seen the bloody state of yerself? Yer couldn't blame anybody for thinking yer was a hundred and ten. Yer look like a bag lady, an old scruffy bag lady that hasn't got anybody. But you have, Mam, you've got us.' Desperate to make her understand, he left her staring up at him as he turned and ran upstairs to the bathroom, returning a moment later with a cracked mirror. 'Look!' He thrust the mirror into her hands.

His own hands were shaking as he took hold of Vanessa's chin and raised her face up to look at him. 'If yer don't sort yerself out, Mam, you're gonna die and leave us all. And how can me and our Kerry manage the kids, Mam? How can we? They'll take them away. Put them in different homes, and none of us will ever see each other again. Then we'll all be up shit creek. Can yer imagine our little Suzy with a bunch of strangers? Can yer, Mam? She'd never cope.' He shook his head in despair, as his voice rose higher. 'And what about Emma, eh? How long do yer think Emma would last? She aggravates the life out of us, for God's sake, let alone folk who aren't even family . . . And Darren, imagine him miles away in a new school, when he's already made his friends? Think about it, Mam.'

He wanted to shake her, anything to make her see sense. Unused to allowing himself such outbursts, but knowing that every word he'd said was true – they were words he'd wanted to say for a long time but hadn't had the heart, nor the courage – he practically whispered when he said, 'Do yer want that to happen, Mam? Do yer?'

'But, but—' Vanessa started to say.

'There is no buts, Mam!' Robbie slammed his fist down on the coffee table, then felt like a right bastard when his mother jumped in fright. But there was no going back, not when he'd gone this far. 'Bottom line, Mam. If yer don't start today, yer getting nowt from me. We can't go on like this any more. It's like us kids is watching yer kill yerself . . . Like it's suicide or something. This time I mean it, Mam. We've all just about fucking well had enough.'

Face burning, and blinking hard to stop the tears, he turned and walked out. He'd said what he had to say and it had been a long time coming, but that hadn't made it any easier, nor made him feel any better. He was tempted to slam the door on his way out of the house the way Kerry often did, but he'd never possessed Kerry's temper, nor the power to sustain it.

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For a long time after Robbie had gone, Vanessa stared into the mirror.

He's right, she thought, as her features slowly swam into focus and she looked at the ravages the booze had caused. She tried to smooth the deep lines that ran from the inside corners of her eyes to her mouth. Her face was so thin. Jesus, she'd always had high cheekbones, but now they stood right out, and were horribly sharp. Her hands started to shake and she threw the mirror down. Its fall was cushioned by one of Suzy's cuddly toys, a red monkey that lived under the television.

She bit her lip to stop herself crying, but the tears came thick and fast anyhow. He's right. For God's sake, he's right. Look at me, look at the fucking grey hair. Jesus Christ, I'm thirty-nine and I look more like fucking fifty-nine. How long have I binged this time? A week? A fortnight?

The shakes got worse, and her thoughts more frantic. She knew she needed a drink.

Where the fuck did I hide the last bottle?

Did I finish it?

There's got to be some left somewhere. Got to be.

Got to find it.

Trembling, Vanessa went upstairs. Frantically, she began to tear the few items of clothing she possessed out of the wardrobe in case she'd stashed something there, but found nothing. She yanked hard at the top drawer of her cheap dressing table, splitting a nail right to the quick but not feeling it as she desperately pulled the other drawers out, scattering their contents all over the place. Crawling on all fours to the old battered pink wicker chair in the corner, she practically tore the cushions off it, then crawled back to search under the bed.

Nothing.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she began rocking back and forth as she hugged her arms around herself. God, if only she could blot out the pain. But whenever she was sober the floodgates opened and the hated memories poured back. She wanted to tear at her hair, and had to grip her elbows hard to stop herself, her fingernails biting into her flesh.

None of them knew. The things she'd seen, the memories she'd had to live with. The nights were the worst, always had been, that was partly the reason why she'd sought a little company now and then just to ease the nightmares. Someone to hold her when the bottle wasn't enough, just like she'd held Robbie and helped him through the bad years. It was a while since she'd heard Robbie cry out in the night and she was terrified to ask him if he too still had the nightmare. And the fear, always the fear. A tear dripped down the premature lines on her face; she left it, it was one of millions.

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She would never stop crying. For her there were only two ways out: the bottle or death.

She sobbed and let go of her elbow to stuff her hand into her mouth, because the next sound would be a scream, and if she once started screaming, she would never stop.

She was still rocking and biting into her fist ten minutes later when she heard a bang against the window. Gasping, she clutched her robe. Her heart was pounding, burning acid clawing its way up from her frightened stomach, her lungs snatching at air suddenly gone thin.

This was it. She'd waited long enough. For a brief moment she almost welcomed what was coming; it had been a long sixteen years.

The sound came again, and with an almost reluctant intake of breath it dawned on her that it was the window cleaner. As she came back to reality, she finally noticed her nail, which at once started to throb.

'For fuck's sake. The bastards already want a month's money. Fat fucking chance.' She glared at the nail.

Holding her hand to her chest to ease the throbbing, Vanessa rummaged through the pile of clothes on the floor until she found her black skirt and green blouse. She sighed. I suppose it'll look to the kids like I'm at least trying if I get dressed.

She ran a bath and stepped into it, then hesitated a moment. Is it Monday?

Gritting her teeth, she slowly eased her tired body down. Course it's Monday, Robbie got his Giro. She nodded as she sloshed tepid water over her head, then quickly ran a soapy sponge across her breasts, pretending to herself that she couldn't feel her ribs.

Shivering and covered in goosebumps, she got out of the water. 'Damn,' she said out loud, reaching into the airing cupboard. 'The only friggin' clean towel in the house would have to be Kerry's.'

Does she have training tonight? Vanessa wondered, holding the towel up in front of her. Then she shrugged. Gotta fucking use something.

Drying as quickly as she could with one hand, she hung the towel over the radiator. Robbie will probably bring some coal in, she told herself. It'll dry in no time, and Kerry will be none the wiser.

Kerry, Kerry, Kerry. She flopped down on to the toilet. For a moment she'd actually felt a little better, but any thoughts of Kerry always drained her. It seemed that all they ever did was fight. Putting her elbows on her knees and resting her head in her hands she sighed, a deep end-of-the-road sigh.

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Let's be honest, it isn't a teenage thing. Me and our Kerry's been fighting ever since the little cow could talk.

Why couldn't she be more like our Robbie?

Stupid question from a stupid drunk. How the fuck could she? Different dads. Like the rest of them, all by different dads.

'What a fucking mess,' she said to the once pink, now threadbare carpet. 'If me own mam could see me now, she'd turn in her friggin' grave.

'Everything's turned out the way that evil bastard planned. Poor Robbie, the same doors are as closed to you as they've always been to me. Every job, everything you've ever tried for. Poor bairn, the council wouldn't even set yer on as a road sweeper.' She swiped at more tears.

To feed two kids, I had another four, and if it wasn't for them, I'd have ended this stinking existence years ago. I might just do it now. Put meself out of this fucking misery.

'God,' she suddenly said through chattering teeth. 'Got to move now or they'll all come home to find me naked and frozen stiff on the loo. If I'm gonna do it it won't be where the bairns can find me. That would keep the Seahills in gossip for a month at least.'

Quickly she dressed, noting that the blouse could have done with an iron over it. She shrugged. Who's gonna look at me now, anyhow?

Downstairs, she collected the dirty clothes and put them in the washer. Robbie will think I'm really trying. She picked up the soap powder box but, finding it empty, threw it at the wall. 'Damn and blast, there's a fucking shock.'

Stomach churning with the need for a drink, and all thoughts of housework fast drifting away, she slouched into the sitting room, lit her last cigarette and flopped on to the settee. Teeth clenched until her mouth was nothing more than a grim line, so that the scream she felt building up inside of her couldn't escape, she turned the TV back on.

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