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Opening Extract from...

Spook Street

Written by Mick Herron

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SPOOK STREET

MICK HERRON

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JOHN MURRAY

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To Juliet and Paul
(in lieu of a wedding present)

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I

So this was what springtime in London was like: the women in knee-length dresses of blue-and-white hoops; the men with dark jackets over sweaters in pastel shades. Both sexes carried shoulder bags with more flaps and fastenings than necessary, the females' either red or black, the males' a healthy, masculine buff colour, and caps made an occasional appearance too, alongside headbands – let's not forget the headbands. Headbands, in rainbow stripes, lent the women an overeager look, as if they grasped too keenly at a fashion of their youth, though the genuinely youthful sported the same accessory with apparent unconcern. Feet wore sandals or flip-flops, faces wore wide-eyed content, and body language was at once mute and expressive, capturing a single moment of well-being and beaming it everywhere. They were both uplit and downlit, these plastic springtime celebrants, and a piano tinkled melodious background nonsense for their pleasure, and a miniature waterfall drummed an unwavering beat, and Samit Chatterjee watched all of it through narrowed eyes, his thin features alert and suspicious.

Outside, the first working day of the year ground miserably on, heaving its bloated, hungover weight towards mid-afternoon, but inside Westacres – a cavernous retail pleasure dome on London's western fringe – the theme was of the spring

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to come, though by the time it arrived the window displays would be redolent of lazy summer outings instead. In its almanac of images, on a page already turned, the New Year had been represented by sledges and scarves and friendly robins, but reality made few compromises, and life this side of the windows bore little resemblance to that enjoyed by the mannequins. Here, jaded shoppers trudged from one outlet to the next, their passage made hazardous by the slick wet floor; here, the exhausted paused to rest on the concrete ledge surrounding the water feature, in which a styrofoam cup bobbed, froth scumming its rim. This fountain was the centre-piece of a hub at which corridors from each point of the compass met, and sooner or later everyone using Westacres passed by it. So naturally it was here Samit mostly lingered, the better to scrutinise the punters.

For whom he had little fondness. If Westacres was a temple, as he'd heard it described, its worshippers were lax in their observations. None of the truly faithful would dump takeaway litter in their cathedral's font, and no one who genuinely sought to uphold their religion's tenets consumed a six-pack of Strongbow by 9.30 a.m., then upchucked on their church's floor. As a devout Muslim, Samit abhorred the practices he daily bore witness to, but as one of Westacres' dedicated team of Community Regulation Officers – or Security Guards, as they called themselves – he forbore from calling down divine retribution on the ungodly, and contented himself with issuing stern warnings to litterbugs and escorting the inebriated from the premises. The rest of the time he offered directions, helped locate wandering infants, and once – he still thought about this, often – chased and apprehended a shoplifter.

There was no such excitement this afternoon. The air was damp and miserable, a tickle at the back of Samit's throat suggested an oncoming cold, and he was wondering where

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he might cadge a cup of tea when they appeared: three youths approaching along the eastern corridor, one carrying a large black holdall. Samit forgot his throat. It was one of the great paradoxes of the shopping centre experience that it was imperative for profit and prosperity to get the youngsters in, but for the sake of harmony and a peaceful life, you really didn't want them hanging around. Ideally, they should turn up, hand over their money, and bugger off. So when youth turned up in threes, carrying a black holdall, it was wise to suspect foul motives. Or at the very least, be prepared for high jinks.

So Samit did a 360-degree scan, to discover two more groups coming down the northern avenue, one of young women who appeared to find the world a source of unending hilarity; the other a mixed bunch, all saggy-crotched jeans and unlaced trainers, broadcasting the usual Jamaican patois of the London-born teenager. And towards the west was the same story, oncoming teens, any number of them, and suddenly the groups didn't appear to be separate but a mass gathering, governed by a single intelligence. And yes, it was still the holidays, and you had to expect a high youth turnout, but . . . In case of doubt, call it in, Samit had been told. And this was a case of doubt: not just the kids, the sheer number of kids – more appearing all the time – but the way they were heading towards him; as if Samit Chatterjee were about to witness the first flowering of a new movement; the overthrow, perhaps, of this colossal temple he was here to guard.

Colleagues were arriving now, dragged along by the undertow. Samit waved urgently, and unclipped his radio just as the original trio came to a halt mid-arena and placed their holdall on the floor. While he was pressing his transmit button they were unzipping the bag and revealing its contents. And as he spoke, it started – at the same precise moment the whole crowd, dozens upon dozens of kids, milling by the fountain,

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blocking the entrances to shops, climbing onto the water feature's surround; every single one of them, it seemed, stripped off their jackets and coats to reveal bright happy shirts beneath, all lurid primaries and swirls of colour, and that was when the boys hit buttons on the retro ghetto-blaster they'd unpacked, and the whole shopping centre was swamped by loud loud noise, a deep bass beat.

Living for the sunshine, woah-oh

And they were dancing, all of them, arms thrown over heads, and legs kicking high, hips swaying, feet going every which way – nobody had taken dance lessons, that was for sure, but these kids knew how to have fun, and fun was what they were having.

I'm living for the summer

And didn't it feel good? A flash mob, Samit realised. A major craze eight or ten years ago, rediscovered by a new generation. Samit had seen one before, at Liverpool Street: he'd been on the outskirts, longing to join in, but something – something? Teenage embarrassment – had held him back, and he could only watch as a crowd unfurled in joyous, planned spontaneity. This one, of course, was happening on his watch, so ought to be stopped, but for the moment there was nothing he could do – only dogs and megaphones could break this up now. And even adults were letting their hair down, tapping away to a summertime beat; one of them, right in the middle, unbuttoning his overcoat. And for one blind moment Samit too was washed away in the swelling joy of being alive, despite the cold, despite the damp, and he found his lips twitching – whether to smile or sing along with the chorus, *living for the sunshine woah-oh*, even Samit himself wasn't sure, and he had to raise a hand to his mouth to disguise his reaction. This gesture helped shield his teeth, by which he was later identified.

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For the blast, when it came, left little intact. It shattered bone and pulverised mortality, and reduced all nearby life to charred stubble. Windows became shrapnel and the fountain hissed as flaming chunks of masonry, brick, plastic and flesh rained into it. An angry fireball swallowed the music and the dancers both, and sent a wave of heat and air pulsing down all four avenues, while the springtime dummies in their pristine clothing were blown away behind a memory of glass. It lasted seconds, but never stopped, and those it left behind – parents and families, lovers and friends – would ever after mark the date as one of unanswered phone calls and uncollected cars; a day when something like the sun bloomed in all the wrong places, searing its indelible image into the lives of those it found there.

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Part One

Something Like the Sun

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2

HEAT RISES, AS IS commonly known, but not always without effort. In Slough House, its ascent is marked by a series of bangs and gurgles, an audible diary of a forced and painful passage through cranky piping, and if you could magic the plumbing out of the structure and view it as a free-standing exoskeleton, it would be all leaks and dribbles: an arthritic dinosaur, its joints angled awkwardly where fractures have messily healed; its limbs a mismatched muddle; its extremities stained and rusting, and weakly pumping out warmth. And the boiler, the heart of this beast, wouldn't so much beat as flutter in a trip-hop rhythm, its occasional bursts of enthusiasm producing explosions of heat in unlikely places; its irregular palpitations a result of pockets of air straining for escape. From doors away you can hear its knocking, this antiquated heating system, and it sounds like a monkey-wrench tapping on an iron railing; like a coded message transmitted from one locked cell to another.

It's a wasteful, unworkable mess, but then this shabby set of offices – hard by Barbican underground station, on Aldersgate Street, in the borough of Finsbury – isn't exactly noted for its efficiency, of equipment or personnel. Indeed, its inhabitants might as well be banging on pipes with spanners themselves for all their communication skills are worth,

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though on this cold January morning, two days after an appalling act at Westacres shopping centre claimed upwards of forty lives, other noises can be heard in Slough House. Not in Jackson Lamb's room, for once: of all the building's occupants, he may be the one most obviously in tune with its rackety plumbing, being no stranger to internal gurglings and sudden warm belches himself, but for the moment his office is empty, and his radiator its sole source of clamour. In the room opposite, though – until a few months back, Catherine Standish's; now Moira Tregorian's – there is at least some conversation taking place, though of a necessarily one-sided nature, Moira Tregorian currently being the room's sole occupant: her monologue consists of single, emphatic syllables – a *tchah* here, a *duh* there – interspersed with the odd unfractured phrase – *never thought I'd see the day* and *what on earth's this when it's at home?* A younger listener might assume Moira to be delivering these fragments down a telephone, but in fact they are directed at the papers on her desk, papers which have accumulated in the absence of Catherine Standish, and have done so in a manner uncontaminated by organisational principle, whether chronological, alphabetical or commonsensical, since they were deposited there by Lamb, whose mania for order has some way to go before it might be classed as neurotic, or even observable. There are many sheets of paper, and each of them has to be somewhere, and discovering which of the many possible somewheres that might be is Moira's job today, as it was yesterday, and will be tomorrow. Had he done so deliberately, Lamb could hardly have come up with a more apt introduction to life under his command, here in this administrative oubliette of the Intelligence Service, but the truth is, Lamb hasn't so much consigned the documents to Moira's care as banished them from his own, out of sight/out of mind being his solution to unwanted paperwork. Moira,

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whose second day in Slough House this is, and who has yet to meet Jackson Lamb, has already decided she'll be having a few sharp words with him when that event comes to pass. And while she is nodding vigorously at this thought the radiator growls like a demented cat, startling her so she drops the papers she is holding, and has to scramble to retrieve them before they disarrange themselves again.

Meanwhile, from the landing below, other noise floats up: a murmur from the kitchen, where a kettle has lately boiled, and a recently opened fridge is humming. In the kitchen are River Cartwright and Louisa Guy, both with warm mugs in their hands, and Louisa is maintaining a nearly unbroken commentary on the trials and tribulations accompanying the purchase of her new flat. This is quite some distance away, as London flats tend to be if they're affordable, but the picture she paints of its size, its comfort, its uncluttered surfaces, is evidence of a new contentment that River would be genuinely glad to witness, were he not brooding about something else. And all the while, behind him, the door to his office creaks on a squeaky hinge, not because anyone is currently using it, but in general protest at the draughts that haunt Slough House, and in a more particular complaint directed at the commotion arising from the next floor down.

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But while his door remains unused, River's office is not empty, for his new colleague – a slow horse for some two months now – sits within, slumped in his chair, the hood of his hoodie pulled over his head. Apart from his fingers he is still, but these move unceasingly, his keyboard pushed aside the better to accommodate this, and while an observer would see nothing more than an advanced case of the fidgets, what J. K. Coe is describing on the scuffed surface of his desk is a silent replica of what's coursing through his head via his iPod: Keith Jarrett's improvised piano recital from Osaka, 8 November

1976, one of the Sun Bear concerts; Coe's fingers miming the melodies Jarrett discovered on the night, all those miles and all those years away. It's a soundless echo of another man's genius, and it serves a dual purpose: of tamping down Coe's thoughts, which are dismal, and of drowning out the noises his mind would otherwise entertain: the sound of wet meat dropping to the floor, for instance, or the buzz of an electric carving knife wielded by a naked intruder. But all this he keeps to himself, and as far as River and the other denizens of Slough House are concerned, J. K. Coe is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, the whole package then refashioned in the shape of a surly, uncommunicative twat.

Though even if he were yodelling, he'd not be heard over the commotion from the floor below. Not that this racket is emanating from Roderick Ho's room, or no more of it than usual (the humming of computers; the tinnitus-rattle of Ho's own iPod, loaded with more aggressive music than Coe's; his nasal whistling, of which he is unaware; the rubbery squeak his swivel-chair emits when he shifts his buttocks); no, what's surprising about the atmosphere in Ho's room – or what would surprise anyone who chose to hang out there, which no one does, because it's Ho's room – is that it's upbeat. Cheerful, even. As if something other than his own sense of superiority is warming Roddy Ho's cockles these days, which would be handy, given the inability of his radiator to warm anything much, cockles or otherwise: it coughs now, and spits fizzily from its valve, spurting water onto the carpet. Ho doesn't notice, and nor does he register the following gurgle from deep within the system's pipes – a noise that would disturb any number of serious beasts: horses, lions, tigers – but this is not so much because Ho is a preternaturally cool character, whatever his own views on that subject, and more because he simply can't hear it. And the reason for this is that the lapping

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and gurgling of the radiator's innards, the banging and clicking of pipes, the splashy rattling of the system's exoskeleton, are all drowned out by the noise from next door, where Marcus Longridge is waterboarding Shirley Dander.

'Blurgh—bleurgh—off—coff—blargh!'

'Yeah, I didn't follow any of that.'

'Blearrrgh!'

'Sorry, does that mean—'

'BLARGH!'

'—uncle?'

The chair to which Shirley was tied with belts and scarves was angled against her desk, and nearly crashed to the floor when she arched her back. A loud crack suggested structural damage, at the same moment as the flannel that had covered her face slapped the carpet like a dead sea creature hitting a rock. Shirley herself made similar noises for a while; if you were asked to guess, you might hazard that someone was trying to turn themselves inside out, without using tools.

Marcus, whistling softly, replaced the jug on a filing cabinet. Some water had splashed his sweater, a pale-blue merino V-neck, and he tried to brush it away, with as much success as that usually has. Then he sat and stared at his monitor, which had long defaulted to its screensaver: a black background around which an orange ball careened, bumping against its borders, never getting anywhere. Yeah: Marcus knew how *that* felt.

After a few minutes Shirley stopped coughing.

After a few minutes more, she said, 'It wasn't as bad as you said.'

'You lasted less than seven seconds.'

'Bollocks. That was about half an hour, and—'

'Seven seconds, first drops to whatever it was you said.

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Blurgh? *Blargh*?' He banged his hand on his keyboard, and the screensaver vanished. 'Not our agreed safety word, by the way.'

'But you stopped anyway.'

'What can I tell you? Getting soft.'

A spreadsheet opened into view. Marcus couldn't immediately recall what it represented. Not a lot of work had happened in this office lately.

Shirley freed herself from scarves and belts. 'You didn't time it properly.'

'I timed it immaculately,' he said, drawing the word out: *im-mac-u-late-ly*. 'It's like I said, no one can cope with that shit. That's why it's so popular with the vampires.'

The vampires being those whose job it was to draw blood from stones.

Shirley lobbed the wet flannel at him. Without taking his eyes from the screen he caught it one-handed, and scowled as water scattered everywhere: '*Thank* you.'

'You're welcome.' She towelled her head dry: a five-second pummel. 'Gonna let me do you now?'

'In. Your. Dreams.'

She stuck her tongue out. Then said, 'So. You'd be prepared to do that?'

'Just did, didn't I?'

'For real, I mean. And keep doing it.'

Marcus looked up. 'If it'd stop another Westacres, hell, yes. I'd keep doing it until the bastard told me everything. And drown him doing it, wouldn't bother me none.'

'It would be murder.'

'Blowing up forty-two kids in a shopping centre is murder. Waterboarding a suspected terrorist to death, that's housekeeping.'

'The philosophy of Marcus Longridge, volume one.'

'Pretty much sums it up. Someone's got to do this shit. Or

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would you rather let the terrorist walk, for fear of violating his human rights?'

'He was only a suspect a moment ago.'

'And we both know what being a suspect means.'

'He's still got rights.'

'Like those kids had? Tell their parents.'

He was getting loud now, which they'd both got into the habit of not worrying about, Lamb not having been around lately. This didn't mean he couldn't show up any moment, of course – his large frame creepily silent on the stairs, so the first you knew of his presence was his nicotine breath and sour outlook: *Having fun, are we?* – but until that happened, Shirley's view was, they might as well keep on skiving.

She said, 'Maybe. I just don't think it's that simple.'

'Yeah, things get simple real quick at the sharp end. I thought you'd have worked that out by now. Anyway,' and he indicated the chair she'd been sitting on, 'better shift that into Ho's office.'

'Why?'

'It broke.'

'Oh. Yeah. Think he'll snitch?'

'Not if he values that bum-fluff he calls a beard,' said Marcus, briefly stroking his own. 'He rats us out to Lamb, I'll rip it from his chin.'

Probably a figure of speech, thought Shirley, but possibly a treat in store.

Marcus being Marcus, it could go either way.

Had he been aware that he was the subject of his colleagues' violent fantasies, Roderick Ho would have put it down to jealousy.

Fact was, he looked *fantastic*.

Don't just take his word for it, either.

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