

Not Dead Enough

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Darkness took a long time to arrive, but it was worth the wait. And besides, time was not a problem for him. Time, he had come to realize, was one of the things you have plenty of in life when you have little else. He was time-rich. Near on a time billionaire.

Shortly before midnight, the woman he was following turned off the dual carriageway and drove into the lonely glow of a BP filling-station forecourt. He halted his stolen van in the unlit slip road, fixating on her brake lights. They seemed to be getting brighter as he watched them. Glowing red for danger, red for luck, red for sex! *Seventy-one percent of murder victims were killed by someone they knew.* The statistic was whizzing round and round inside his head, like a pinball looking for a slot. He collected statistics, squirrelled them carefully away, like nuts, to sustain him through that long hibernation of the mind that he knew, one day, would come to him.

The question was, *How many of those 71 percent knew they were about to be murdered?*

Do you, lady?

Headlights of vehicles flashed past, the slipstream of a lorry rocking the little blue Renault, making some of the plumbing implements behind him rattle. There were just two other cars standing by the pumps, a Toyota people-carrier that was about to drive off and a large Jaguar. Its owner, a plump man in an ill-fitting tuxedo, was heading back from the pay window, cramming his wallet into his jacket. A BP tanker was parked up, the driver in a boiler suit uncoiling a long hose, getting ready to refuel the filling-station tanks.

So far as he could ascertain in a careful sweep, there was just one CCTV camera scanning the forecourt. A problem, but he could deal with it.

She really could not have picked a better place to stop!

He blew her a silent kiss.

2

In the warm summer-night air, Katie Bishop tossed her untidy flame-red hair away from her face and yawned, feeling tired. Actually, beyond tired. Exhausted – but very, very nicely exhausted, thank you! She studied the petrol pump as if it was some extraterrestrial creature put on Planet Earth to intimidate her, which was how she felt about most petrol pumps. Her husband always had problems figuring out the instructions on the dishwasher and the washing machine, claiming they were written in some alien language called ‘Woman’. Well, so far as she was concerned, petrol pumps came with an equally alien language, the instructions on them were written in ‘Bloke’.

She struggled, as usual, to get the filler cap off her BMW, then stared at the words *Premium* and *Super*, trying to remember which one the car took, although it seemed to her she could never get it right. If she put in premium, Brian criticized her for putting in petrol that was too low-grade; if she filled up with super, he got annoyed with her for wasting money. But at this moment, nothing was going in at all. She held the nozzle in one hand, squeezing the trigger hard, and waved with the other, trying to attract the attention of the dozy night attendant behind the counter.

Brian irritated her increasingly. She was tired of the way he fussed about all kinds of stupid little things – like the position of his toothpaste on the bathroom shelf, and making sure all the chairs around the kitchen table were exactly the same distance apart. Talking inches, not feet. And he was becoming increasingly kinky, regularly bringing home carrier bags from sex shops filled with weird stuff that he insisted they try out. And that was really causing her problem.

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts, she didn't even notice the pump jiggling away until it stopped with an abrupt *kerlunk*. Breathing in the smell of petrol fumes, which she had always quite liked, she hung the nozzle of the pump back up, clicked the key fob to lock the

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car – Brian had warned her cars often got stolen on petrol station forecourts – and went to the booth to pay.

As she came out, she carefully folded her credit card receipt, and tucked it into her purse. She unlocked the car, climbed in, then locked it again from the inside, pulled on her seat belt and started the engine. The *Il Divo* CD started playing again. She thought for a moment about lowering the BMW's roof, then decided against. It was past midnight, she would be vulnerable driving into Brighton at this hour with an open top. Better to stay enclosed and secure.

It was not until she had driven off the forecourt and was a good hundred yards down the dark slip road, that she noticed something smelled different in the car. A scent that she knew well. *Comme des Garçons*. Then she saw something move in her mirror.

And she realized someone was inside her car.

Fear caught the inside of her throat like a fish hook; her hands froze on the wheel. She jammed her foot down hard on the brake pedal, screeching the car to a halt, scrabbling with her hand on the gear lever to find reverse, to back up to the safety of the forecourt. Then she felt the cold, sharp metal digging into her neck.

'Just keep driving, Katie,' he said. 'You really haven't been a very good girl, have you?'

Straining to see him in her rear-view mirror, she saw a sliver of light shear off the blade of the knife, like a spark.

And in that rear-view mirror he saw, reflected, the terror in her eyes.

3

Marlon did what he always did, which was to swim around and around his glass bowl, circumnavigating his world with the tireless determination of an explorer heading into yet another uncharted continent. His jaws opened and closed, mostly on water, just occasionally gulping down one of the microscopic pellets which, Roy Grace presumed from the amount they cost, were the goldfish equivalent of dinner at Gordon Ramsay's.

Grace lay slouched in his recliner armchair in the living room of his home, which had been decorated by his long-vanished wife, Sandy, in black and white Zen minimalism, and which until recently had been filled with memorabilia of her. Now there were just a few funky 1950s pieces they had bought together – the one taking pride of place was a juke box they'd had restored – and just one photograph of her, in a silver frame, taken twelve years ago on holiday in Capri, her pretty, tanned face grinning her cheeky grin. She was standing against craggy rocks, with her long blonde hair flailing in the wind, bathed in sunlight, like the goddess she had been to him.

He gulped down some Glenfiddich on the rocks, his eyes rooted to the television screen, watching an old movie on DVD. It was one of the ten thousand his mate Glenn Branson *just so totally* could not believe that he had never seen.

And recently it hadn't been a question of Branson's one-upmanship getting the better of his competitive nature. Grace was on a mission to learn, to educate himself, to fill that vast cultural black hole inside his head. He had slowly come to the realization, during the past month, that his brain was a repository for pages and pages of police training manuals, rugby, football, motor-racing and cricketing facts, and not much else. And that needed to change. Quickly.

Because at long last he was dating – going out with – in lust with – totally smitten by – maybe even in love with – someone again. And he could not believe his luck. But she was a lot better educated than

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he was. It seemed at times that she'd read every book that had ever been written, seen every movie, been to every opera and was intellectually acquainted with the work of every artist of note, living or dead. And as if that wasn't enough, she was halfway through an Open University course in philosophy.

Which explained the pile of philosophy books on the coffee table beside his chair. Most of them he had recently bought from City Books in Western Road, and the rest from a trawl of just about every other bookshop in the whole of Brighton and Hove.

Two supposedly accessible titles, *The Consolations of Philosophy* and *Zeno and the Tortoise*, were on the top of the pile. Books for the layman, which he could just about understand. Well, parts of them, anyhow. They gave him enough at least to bluff his way through discussions with Cleo about some of the stuff she was on about. And, quite surprisingly, he was finding himself genuinely interested. Socrates, in particular, he could connect with. A loner, ultimately sentenced to death for his thoughts and his teachings, who once said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.'

And last week she had taken him to Glyndebourne, to see a Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Some parts of the opera had dragged for him, but there had been moments of such intense beauty, in both the music and the spectacle, that he was moved almost to tears.

He was gripped by this black and white movie he was watching now, set in immediate post-war Vienna. In the current scene, Orson Welles, playing a black marketeer called Harry Lime, was riding with Joseph Cotten in a gondola on a Ferris wheel in an amusement park. Cotten was chastising his old friend, Harry, for becoming corrupt. Welles retaliated, saying, 'In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed – but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love; they had five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.'

Grace took another long swig of his whisky. Welles was playing a sympathetic character, but Grace had no sympathy for him. The man was a villain, and in the twenty years of his career to date, Grace had never met a villain who didn't try to justify what he had done. In their warped minds, it was the world that was skewed wrong, not them.

He yawned, then rattled the ice cubes in his empty glass, think-

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ing about tomorrow, Friday, and dinner with Cleo. He hadn't seen her since last Friday – she been away for the weekend, for a big family reunion in Surrey. It was her parents' thirty-fifth wedding anniversary, and he had felt a small pang of discomfort that she hadn't invited him to go with her – as if she were keeping her distance, signalling that although they were dating, and making love, they weren't actually an *item*. Then on Monday she'd gone away on a training course. Although they'd spoken every day, and texted and emailed each other, he was missing her like crazy.

And tomorrow he had an early meeting with his unpredictable boss, the alternatively sweet and sour Alison Vosper, Assistant Chief Constable of Sussex Police. Dog-tired suddenly, he was in the process of debating whether to pour himself another whisky and watch the rest of the movie or save it for his next night in when the doorbell rang.

Who the hell was visiting him at midnight?

The bell rang again. Followed by a sharp rapping sound. Then more rapping.

Puzzled and wary, he froze the DVD, stood up, a little unsteadily, and walked out into the hall. More rapping, insistent. Then the bell rang again.

Grace lived in a quiet, almost suburban neighbourhood, a street of semi-detached houses that went down to the Hove seafront. It was off the beaten track for the druggies and the general nocturnal flotsam of Brighton and Hove, but all the same, his guard was up.

Over the years he had crossed swords with – and pissed off – plenty of miscreants in this city because of his career. Most were just plain lowlife, but some were powerful players. Any number of people could find good reason to settle a score with him. Yet he'd never bothered to install a spy hole or a safety chain on his front door.

So, relying on his wits, somewhat addled by too much whisky, he yanked the door wide open. And found himself staring at the man he loved most in the world, Detective Sergeant Glenn Branson, six foot two inches tall, black, and bald as a meteorite. But instead of his usual cheery grin, the DS stood all crumpled up and was blubbing his eyes out.

4

The blade pressed harder against her neck. Cutting in. Hurting more and more with every bump in the road surface.

'Don't even think about whatever it is you are thinking about doing,' he said, in a voice that was calm and filled with good humour.

Blood trickled down her neck; or maybe it was perspiration; or both. She didn't know. She was trying, desperately trying, through her terror, to think calmly. She opened her mouth to speak, watching the oncoming headlights, gripping the wheel of her BMW with slippery hands, but the blade just cut in deeper still.

They were cresting a hill, the lights of Brighton and Hove to her left.

'Move into the left-hand lane. Take the second exit at the roundabout.'

Katie obediently turned off, into the wide, two-lane Dyke Road Avenue. The orange glow of street lighting. Large houses on either side. She knew where they were heading and she knew she had to do something before they got there. And suddenly, her heart flipped with joy. On the other side of the road was a starburst of blue flashing lights. A police car! Pulling up in front of another car.

Her left hand moved from the wheel on to the flasher stalk. She pulled it towards her, hard. And the wipers screeched across the dry windscreen.

Shit.

'Why have you put the wipers on, Katie? It isn't raining.' She heard his voice from the back seat.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. Wrong fucking stalk!

And now they were past the police car. She saw the lights, like some vanishing oasis, in her mirrors. And she saw the silhouette of his bearded face, shadowed by his baseball cap and further obscured

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by dark glasses although it was night. The face of a stranger but at the same time a face – and a voice – that were uncomfortably familiar.

‘Left turn coming up, Katie. You should slow down. You know where we are, I hope.’

The sensor on the dash would automatically trigger the switch on the gates. In a few seconds they would start to open. In a few seconds she would turn into them, and then they would close behind her, and she would be in darkness, in private, out of sight of everyone but the man behind her.

No. She had to stop that from happening.

She could swerve the car, smash into a lamppost. Or smash into the headlights of a car that was coming towards them now. She tensed even more. Looked at the speedometer. Trying to work it out. If she braked hard, or smashed into something, he would be flung forward, the knife would be flung forward. That was the smart thing to do. Not *smart*. It was the only option.

Oh, Jesus, help me.

Something colder than ice churned in her stomach. Her mouth felt arid. Then, suddenly, her mobile phone, on the seat beside her, began to ring. The stupid tune her stepdaughter, Carly, who was just thirteen had programmed in and left her stuck with. The bloody ‘Chicken Song’, which embarrassed the hell out of her every time it rang.

‘Don’t even think about answering it, Katie,’ he said.

She didn’t. Instead, meekly, she turned left, through the wrought-iron gates that had obligingly swung open, and up the short, dark tarmac driveway that was lined by huge, immaculately tended rhododendron bushes that Brian had bought, for an insane price, from an architectural garden centre. For privacy, he had said.

Yep. Right. Privacy.

The front of the house loomed in her headlights. When she had left, just a few hours earlier, it had been her home. Now, at this moment, it felt like something quite different. It felt like some alien, hostile edifice that was screaming at her to leave.

But the gates were closing behind her.

5

Roy Grace stared at Glenn Branson for some moments in shock. Usually sharply dressed, tonight the Detective Sergeant was wearing a blue beanie, a hooded grey tracksuit top over a sweatshirt, baggy trousers and trainers, and had several days' growth of stubble on his face. Instead of the normal tang of his latest, macho cologne-of-the-month, he reeked of stale sweat. He looked more like a mugger than a cop.

Before Grace had a chance to say anything, the DS threw his arms around him, clutching him tightly, pressing his wet cheek against his friend's face. 'Roy, she's thrown me out! Oh, God, man, she's thrown me out!'

Somehow, Grace manhandled him into the house, into the living room and on to the sofa. Sitting beside him and putting an arm around his massive shoulders, he said lamely, 'Ari?'

'She's thrown me out.'

'*Thrown you out?* What do you mean?'

Glenn Branson leaned forward, elbows on the glass coffee table, and buried his face in his hands. 'I can't take this. Roy, you've got to help me. I can't take this.'

'Let me get you something. Whisky? Glass of wine? Coffee?'

'I want Ari. I want Sammy. I want Remi.' Then he lapsed into more deep, gulping sobs.

For a moment, Grace stared at his goldfish. He watched Marlon drifting, taking a rare break from his globetrotting, mouth opening and shutting vacantly. He found his own mouth opening and shutting also. Then he got up, went out of the room, cracked open a bottle of Courvoisier that had been gathering dust in the cupboard under the stairs for years, poured some into a tumbler and thrust it into Glenn's meaty hands. 'Drink some of that,' he said.

The DS cradled the glass, peering into it in silence for some moments, as if searching for some message he was supposed to find

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written on the surface. Finally he took a small sip, followed immediately by a large gulp, then set the glass down, keeping his eyes gloomily fixed on it.

'Talk to me,' Grace said, staring at the motionless black and white image of Orson Welles and Joseph Cotton on the screen. 'Tell me – tell me what's happened?'

Branson looked up and stared at the screen too. Then he mumbled, 'It's about loyalty, yeah? Friendship. Love. Betrayal.'

'What do you mean?'

'That movie,' he rambled. '*The Third Man*. Carol Reed directed. The music. The zither. Gets me every time. Orson Welles peaked early, couldn't ever repeat his early success, that was his tragedy. Poor bastard. Made some of the greatest movies of all times. But what do most people remember him for? The fat man who did the sherry commercials.'

'I'm not totally on your bus,' Grace said.

'Domecq, I think it was. Domecq sherry. Maybe. Who cares?' Glenn picked up his glass and drained it. 'I'm driving. Screw that.'

Grace waited patiently; there was no way he was letting Glenn drive anywhere. He'd never seen his friend in a state like this.

Glenn held the glass up, almost without realizing.

'You want some more?'

Staring back down at the table, the DS replied, 'Whatever.'

Grace poured him four fingers. Just over two months ago, Glenn had been shot during a raid which Grace had organized – and which Grace had felt guilty as hell about ever since. The .38 bullet that hit the DS had, miraculously, done relatively little damage. Half an inch to the right and it would have been a very different story.

Entering his abdomen low down beneath his ribcage, the low velocity, round-nose bullet managed to just miss the spinal cord, the aorta, the inferior vena cava and ureters. It nicked part of his loops of bowel, which had needed to be surgically resected, and caused soft-tissue damage, mostly to his fat and muscle, which had also required surgery. He had been allowed home after ten days in hospital for a lengthy convalescence.

At some point during every single day or night in the following

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two months, Grace had replayed the events of that raid. Over and over and over. Despite all the planning and precautions, it had gone badly wrong. None of his superiors had criticized him over it, but in his heart Grace felt guilty because a man under his command was shot. And the fact that Branson was his best friend made it even worse for him.

What made it even worse still was that earlier, in the same operation, another of his officers, an extremely bright young DC called Emma-Jane Boutwood, had been badly injured by a van she was trying to stop, and was still in hospital.

One quotation from a philosopher he had come across recently had given him some solace, and had taken up permanent residence in his mind. It was from Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote, 'Life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backwards.'

'Ari,' Glenn said suddenly. 'Jesus. I don't get it.'

Grace knew that his friend had been having marital problems. It went with the territory. Police officers worked insane, irregular hours. Unless you were married to someone also in the force, who would understand, you were likely to have problems. Virtually every copper did, at some point. Maybe Sandy did too, and she never discussed it. Maybe that was why she had vanished. Had she simply had enough one day, upped sticks and left? It was just one of the many possibilities of what had happened to her that July night. On his thirtieth birthday.

Nine years ago, last Wednesday.

The Detective Sergeant drank some more brandy and then coughed violently. When he had finished he looked at Grace with large, baleful eyes. 'What am I going to do?'

'Tell me what's happened?'

'Ari's had enough, like, that's what's happened.'

'Enough of what?'

'Me. Our life. I don't know. I just don't know,' he said, staring ahead. 'She's been doing all these self-improvement courses. I told you she keeps buying me these books, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, yeah? *Why Women Can't Read Maps and Men Can't Find Stuff in Fridges*, or some crap like that. Right? Well, she's been getting

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angrier and angrier that I keep coming home late and she misses her courses, 'cos she's stuck with the kids. Right?'

Grace got up and poured himself another whisky, then found himself, suddenly, craving a cigarette. 'But I thought she'd encouraged you to join the police in the first place?'

'Yeah. And that's now one of the things pissing her off, the hours. You go figure a woman's mind out.'

'You're smart, ambitious, making great progress. Does she understand that? Does she know what a high opinion your superiors have of you?'

'I don't think she gives a shit about any of that stuff.'

'Get a grip, man! Glenn, you were working as a security guard in the daytime, and three nights a week as a bouncer. Where the hell were you heading? You told me that when your son was born you had some kind of an epiphany. That you didn't want him having to tell his mates at school that his dad was a nightclub bouncer. That you wanted a career he would be proud of. Right?'

Branson stared lamely into his glass, which was suddenly empty again. 'Yeah.'

'I don't understand—'

'Join the club.'

Seeing that the drink was at least calming the man down, Grace took Branson's glass, poured in a couple more fingers and delivered it back to his hands. He was thinking back on his own experience as a beat copper, when he had done his share of *domestics*. All police hated getting called to domestic 'situations'. It mostly meant turning up to a house where a couple were fighting hammer and tongs, usually one – or both – drunk, and the next thing you knew you were getting punched in the face or whacked with a chair for your troubles. But the training for these had given Grace some rudimentary knowledge of domestic law.

'Have you ever been violent to Ari?'

'You're joking. Never. *Never*. No way.' Glenn said emphatically.

Grace believed him; he did not think it was in Branson's nature to be violent to anyone he loved. Inside that hulk was the sweetest, kindest, most gentle man. 'You have a mortgage?'

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'Yeah, me and Ari jointly.'

Branson put down his glass and started crying again. After some minutes, faltering, he said, 'Jesus. I'm wishing that bullet hadn't missed everything. I wish it had taken my fucking heart out.'

'Don't say that.'

'It's true. It's how I feel. I can't fucking win. She was mad at me when I was working twenty-four/seven cos I was never home, now she's fed up cos I've been at home for the past seven weeks. Says I'm getting under her feet.'

Grace thought for a moment. 'It's your house. It's your home as much as Ari's. She might be pissed off with you, but she can't actually throw you out. You have rights.'

'Yeah, and you've met Ari.'

Grace had. She was a very attractive, very strong-willed lady in her late twenties who had always made it abundantly clear who was boss in the Branson household. Glenn might have worn the trousers, but his face poked out through the fly buttons.

*

It was almost five in the morning when Grace pulled some sheets and a blanket out of the airing cupboard and made up the spare bed for his friend. The whisky bottle and the brandy bottle were both nearly empty, and there were several crumpled cigarette butts in the ashtray. He had almost stopped smoking completely – after recently being shown, in the mortuary, the blackened lungs of a man who had been a heavy smoker – but long drinking sessions like this clobbered his willpower.

It seemed it was only minutes later that his mobile phone was ringing. Then he looked at the digital clock beside his bed and saw, to his shock, that it was ten past nine.

Knowing almost certainly the call was from work, he let it ring a few times, trying to wake up properly so he didn't sound groggy, his head feeling like it had a cheese-wire sawing through it. He was the duty Senior Investigating Officer for this week and really should have

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been in the office by eight thirty, to be prepared for any major incident that might occur. Finally, he pressed the answer button.

'Roy Grace,' he said.

It was a very serious-sounding young civilian dispatcher from the Control Room called Jim Walters, whom Grace had spoken to a few times but did not know. 'Detective Superintendent, I've a request from a Brighton Central detective sergeant for you to attend a suspicious death at a house in Dyke Road Avenue, Hove.'

'What details can you give me?' Grace asked, now fully alert and reaching for his BlackBerry.

As soon as he had hung up, he pulled on his dressing gown, filled his toothbrush mug with water, took two paracetamols from the bathroom cabinet, downed them, then popped another two from their foil, padded into the spare room, which reeked of alcohol and body odour, and shook Glenn Branson awake. 'Wakey-wakey, it's your therapist from hell!'

One of Branson's eyes opened, partway, like a whelk in the safety of its shell. 'Whatthefucksupman?' Then he put his hands to his head. 'Shit, how much did I drink last night? My head is like—'

Grace held up the mug and the capsules. 'Brought you breakfast in bed. You now have two minutes to shower, get dressed, swallow these and grab a bite from the kitchen. We're going to work.'

'Forget it. I'm on sick leave. Got another week!'

'Not any more. Your therapist's orders. No more sickies! You need to get back to work now, today, *this instant*. We're going to see a dead body.'

Slowly, as if every moment was painful, Branson swung himself out of bed. Grace could see the round, discoloured mark on his six-pack, some inches above his belly button, where the bullet had entered. It seemed so tiny. Less than half an inch across. Terrifyingly tiny.

The DS took the pills, washing them down with the water, then stood up and tottered around in his boxer shorts for some moments, looking very disoriented, scratching his balls. 'Shit, man, I got nothing here, just these stinky clothes. I can't go see a body dressed in these.'

'The body won't mind,' Grace assured him.

6

Skunk's phone was ringing and vibrating. *Preep-preep-bnnnzzzz-preep-preep-bnnnzzz*. It was flashing, slithering around on the sink-top, where he had left it, like some large, crazed, wounded beetle.

After thirty seconds it succeeded in waking him. He sat up sharply and, as he did most mornings, hit his head on the low Luton roof of his clapped-out camper van.

'Shit.'

The phone fell off the sink-top and thudded on to the narrow strip of carpeted floor, where it continued its fuck-awful noise. He'd taken it last night from a car he'd stolen, and the owner had not been thoughtful enough to leave the instruction manual with it, or the pin code. Skunk had been so wired he hadn't been able to figure how to put it on silent, and hadn't risked switching it off because he might need a pin code to switch it back on. And he had calls to make before its owner realized it was missing and had it disconnected. Including one to his brother, Mick, who was living in Sydney, Australia, with his wife and kids. But Mick hadn't been pleased to hear from him, told him it was four in the morning and hung up on him.

After one more round of shrieking and buzzing, the thing fell silent: spent. It was a cool phone, with a gleaming stain-less steel case, one of the latest-generation Motorolas. Retail price in the shops without any special deal would be around three hundred pounds. With luck, and probably after a bit of an argument, he'd get twenty-five quid for it later this morning.

He was shaking, he realized. And that black, undefined gloom was seeping through his veins, spreading to every cell in his body, as he lay on top of the sheets in his singlet and underpants, sweating one moment, then shivering. It was the same every morning, waking to

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the sensation that the world was a hostile cave that was about to collapse on him, entombing him. Forever.

A scorpion walked across his eyes.

'FUCKSHITGETOFF!' He sat up, whacked his head again and cried out in pain. It wasn't a scorpion, it wasn't anything. Just his mind jerking around with him. The way it was telling him now that maggots were eating his body. Thousands of them crawling over his skin, so tight together they were like a costume. 'GERROFFFF!' He squirmed, shook them off, swore at them again, even louder, then realized, like the scorpion, there was nothing there. It was just his mind. Telling him something. Same way it did every day. Telling him he needed some brown – or some white. Oh, Jesus, anything.

Telling him he needed to get out of this stench of feet, rank clothes and sour milk. Had to get up, go to his office. Bethany liked that, the way he called it his *office*. She thought that was funny. She had a strange laugh, which kind of twisted her tiny mouth in on itself, so that the ring through her upper lip disappeared for a moment. And he could never tell whether she was laughing with him or at him.

But she cared for him. That much he could sense: He'd never known that feeling before. He'd seen characters talk about caring for each other in soaps on television, but had never known what it meant until he'd met her – picked her up – in the Escape-2 one Friday night some weeks – or maybe months – back.

Cared for him, in the sense that she looked in from time to time as if he was her favourite doll. She brought food, cleaned the place up, washed his clothes, dressed the sores he sometimes got and had clumsy sex with him before hurrying off again, into the day or the night.

He fumbled on the shelf behind his twice-bashed head, stretched out his thin arm with a rope tattoo coiled all the way along it, and found the cigarette pack and the plastic lighter, and the tinfoil ashtray, lying beside the blade of his flick-knife, which he always kept open, at the ready.

The ashtray spilled several butts and a trail of ash as he swung it across and down on to the floor. Then he shook out a Camel, lit it, lay back against the lumpy pillow with the cigarette still in his mouth,

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dragged, inhaled deeply, then blew the smoke out slowly through his nostrils. Sweet, such an incredible, sweet taste! For a moment the gloom faded. He felt his heart beating stronger. Energy. He was coming alive.

It sounded busy out there in his *office*. A siren came and went. A bus rumbled past, roughing up the air all around it. Someone hooted impatiently. A motorbike blatted. He reached out for the remote, found it, stabbed it a few times until he hit the right button, and the television came on. That black girl, Trisha, he quite fancied, was interviewing a sobbing woman whose husband had just told her he was gay. The light below the screen said then thirty-six.

Early. No one would be up. None of his *associates* would be in the *office* yet.

Another siren went past. The cigarette started him coughing. He crawled off his bed, made his way carefully over the sleeping body of a Scouse git, whose name he couldn't remember, who had come back here with his mate sometime during the night, smoked some stuff and drunk a bottle of vodka one of them had nicked from an off-licence. Hopefully they'd fuck off when they woke up and discovered there was no food, drugs or booze left here.

He pulled open the fridge door and removed the only thing in it, a half-full bottle of warm Coca-Cola – the fridge hadn't worked for as long as he'd had this van. There was a faint hiss as he unscrewed the top; the liquid tasted good. Magic.

Then he leaned over the kitchen sink, piled with plates that needed washing and cartons that needed chucking – when Bethany next came – and parted the orange speckled curtains. Bright sunlight hit him in the face like a hostile laser beam. He could feel it burning the backs of his retinas. Torching them.

The light woke up Al, his hamster. Even though one paw was in a splint, it did a sort of jump-hop into its treadmill and began running. Skunk peered in through the bars to check the creature had enough water and food pellets. It looked fine. Later he'd empty the droppings out of the cage. It was about the only housework he ever did.

Then he jerked the curtains back together. Drank some more Coke, picked the ashtray up off the floor and took a last drag on the

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cigarette, right down to the filter, then stubbed it out. He coughed again, that long racking cough he'd had for days. Maybe even weeks. Then, feeling giddy suddenly, holding on carefully to the sink, and then the edge of the wide dining-area seat, he made his way back to his bunk bed. Lay down. Let the sounds of the day swirl all around him. They were his sounds, his rhythms, the pulse and voices of his city. The place where he had been born and where, no doubt, would one day die.

This city that didn't need him. This city of shops with stuff he could never afford, of arts and cultural stuff that were beyond him, of boats, of golf, of estate agents, lawyers, travel shops, day trippers, conference delegates, police. He saw everything as potential pickings for his survival. It didn't matter to him who the people were, it never had. *Them* and *me*.

Them had possessions. Possessions meant cash.

And cash meant surviving another twenty-four hours.

Twenty quid from the phone would go on a bag of brown or white – heroin or crack, whatever was available. The other fiver, if he got it, would go towards food, drink, fags. And he would supplement that with whatever he could steal today.