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One Good Turn

Kate Atkinson

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HE WAS LOST. HE WASN'T USED TO BEING LOST. HE WAS THE KIND OF man who drew up plans and then executed them efficiently, but now everything was conspiring against him in ways he decided he couldn't have foreseen. He had been stuck in a jam on the A1 for two mind-numbing hours so that it was already past the middle of the morning when he arrived in Edinburgh. Then he'd gone adrift on a one-way system and been thwarted by a road closed because of a burst water main. It had been raining, steadily and unforgivingly, on the drive north and had only begun to ease off as he hit the outskirts of town. The rain had in no way deterred the crowds - it had never occurred to him that Edinburgh was in the middle of 'the Festival' and that there would be carnival hordes of people milling around as if the end of a war had just been declared. The closest he had previously got to the Edinburgh Festival was accidentally turning on Late Night Review and seeing a bunch of middle-class wankers discussing some pretentious piece of fringe theatre.

He ended up in the dirty heart of the city, in a street that somehow seemed to be on a lower level than the rest of the town, a blackened urban ravine. The rain had left the cobbles slick and greasy and he had to drive cautiously because the street was teeming with people, haphazardly crossing over or standing in little knots in the middle of the road, as if no one had told them that roads were for cars and pavements were for pedestrians. A queue snaked the length of the street - people waiting to get into what looked like a bomb hole in the wall but which announced itself, on a large placard outside the door, as 'Fringe Venue 164'.

The name on the driving licence in his wallet was Paul Bradley. 'Paul Bradley' was a nicely forgettable name. He was several degrees of separation away from his real name now, a name that no longer felt as if it had ever belonged to him. When he wasn't working he often (but not always) went by the name 'Ray'. Nice and simple. Ray of light, Ray of darkness. Ray of sunshine, Ray of night. He liked slipping between identities, sliding through the cracks. The rental Peugeot he was driving felt just right, not a flashy macho machine but the kind of car an ordinary guy would drive. An ordinary guy like Paul Bradley. If anyone asked him what he did, what Paul Bradley

did, he would say, 'Boring stuff. I'm just a desk jockey, pushing papers around in an accounts department.'

He was trying to drive and at the same time decipher his A-Z of Edinburgh to work out how to escape from this hellish street when someone stepped in front of the car. It was a type he loathed - a young dark-haired guy with thick, black-framed spectacles, two days of stubble and a fag hanging out of his mouth, there were hundreds of them in London, all trying to look like French existentialists from the Sixties. He'd bet that not one of them had ever opened a book on philosophy. He'd read the lot, Plato, Kant, Hegel, even thought about one day doing a degree.

He braked hard and didn't hit the spectacles guy, just made him give a little jump, like a bullfighter avoiding the bull. The guy was furious, waving his fag around, shouting, raising a finger to him. Charmless, devoid of manners - were his parents proud of the job they'd done? He hated smoking, it was a disgusting habit, hated guys who gave you the finger and screamed, 'Spin on it!', saliva flying out of their filthy, nicotine-stained mouths.

He felt the bump, about the same force as hitting a badger or a fox on a dark night, except it came from behind, pushing him forward. It was just as well the spectacles guy had performed his little paso doble and got out of the way or he would have been pancaked. He looked in the rear-view mirror. A blue Honda Civic, the driver climbing out - big guy, slabs of weightlifter muscle, gym-fit rather than survival-fit, he wouldn't have been able to last three months in the jungle or the desert the way that Ray could have done. He wouldn't have lasted a day. He was wearing driving gloves, ugly black leather ones with knuckle holes. He had a dog in the back of the car, a beefy Rottweiler, exactly the dog you would have guessed a guy like that would have. The guy was a walking cliché. The dog was having a seizure in the back, spraying saliva all over the window, its claws scrabbling on the glass. The dog didn't worry him too much. He knew how to kill dogs.

Ray got out of the car and walked round to the back bumper to inspect the damage. The Honda driver started yelling at him, 'You stupid, fucking twat, what did you think you were doing?' English. Ray tried to think of something to say that would be nonconfrontational, that would calm the guy down - you could see he was a pressure cooker waiting to blow, wanting to blow, bouncing on his feet like an out-of-condition heavyweight. Ray adopted a neutral stance, a neutral expression, but then he heard the crowd give a little collective 'Aah' of horror and he registered the baseball bat that had suddenly appeared in the guy's hand out of nowhere and thought, shit.

That was the last thought he had for several seconds. When he was able to think again he was sprawled on the street, holding the side of his head where the guy had cracked him. He heard the sound of broken glass - the bastard was putting in every window in his car now. He tried, unsuccessfully, to struggle to his feet but managed only to get to a kneeling position as if he was at prayer and now the guy was advancing with the bat lifted, feeling the heft of it in his hand, ready to swing for a home run on his skull. Ray put an arm up to defend himself, made himself even more dizzy by

doing that and, sinking back on to the cobbles, thought, Jesus, is this it? He'd given up, he'd actually given up - something he'd never done before - when someone stepped out of the crowd, wielding something square and black that he threw at the Honda guy, clipping him on the shoulder and sending him reeling.

He blacked out again for a few seconds and when he came to there were a couple of policewomen hunkered down beside him, one of them saying, 'Just take it easy, sir,' the other one on her radio calling for an ambulance. It was the first time in his life that he'd been glad to see the police.