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Omega Place

written by

Graham Marks

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1

Monday 21st August, Gosforth, Newcastle Upon Tyne

The doorbell *bing-bonged* in the hallway as Sandra Tennant was about to pour boiling water into the two coffee mugs on the work surface. Her husband, Mike, looked up from the paper, glanced at his watch – 5:50 p.m. – and frowned as he started to get up.

'Wonder who that can be at this time?'

'Well, it's not the postman, is it?' Sandra put the cordless kettle back down on its stand. 'Don't worry, love, I'll go . . .'

Through the open kitchen door, down at the end of the hall, she could see what looked like two figures, men, through the reeded glass. For a second she'd thought – hoped – it might be Paul. That he'd finally decided to come back home. But she could see it wasn't him as these people were wearing suits, and it occurred to her that it was probably Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons. Someone selling something she didn't want, that was for sure. Getting to the end of the hallway she twisted the Yale lock and opened the door.

'Mrs Tennant?'

Sandra nodded, looking at the two men, one standing slightly behind the other. The boss and his assistant. Funny how you could always tell. She noticed their car, a dark blue Vauxhall saloon, parked in the drive; not the religious nuts,

then, they always seemed to walk everywhere.

'Yes . . . What can I do for you?'

'My name's Detective Sergeant Maynard.' The man briefly held up and flipped open what looked like a black credit card holder. 'And this is Detective Constable Chambers. May we come in?'

'Who is it, Sandra?' Mike called from the kitchen.

'It's . . . it's the police, Mike . . .'

The atmosphere in the front room was one of anxious, almost fearful anticipation. As the two police officers had walked into the house, Sandra leading them down the hall, she could tell they'd brought bad news. It came in with them, along with the smell of stale cigarette smoke.

She'd immediately gone into delay mode, insisting on making the two men tea and leaving Mike to sit, uncomfortably, with them while she was in the kitchen. And now the tray – cups, saucers, side plates, teapot, sugar bowl, milk jug, biscuits and spoons – was on the table and she was sitting next to Mike. Nothing left to do. Time for the axe to fall.

DS Maynard looked at the biscuits but didn't take one. 'Is your son called Paul Hendry, Mrs Tennant?'

'Yes, yes he is . . .' Sandra looked at Mike. 'He never changed his name when I, when *we* got married.'

'Is something wrong, officer?' Mike took Sandra's hand.

'How long has he been missing?' DS Maynard appeared to be directing the question to both Mike and Sandra.

Sandra took a deep breath. 'Four . . . five weeks?'

'Why didn't you report it, Mrs Tennant?'

Sandra, chewing her lip, looked at the silent detective constable, who appeared to be making notes of everything that was said.

'Mrs Tennant?'

Mike shrugged. 'Look, officer, we thought he . . . we thought Paul was staying with friends, or maybe his dad.'

DS Maynard picked up the cup of tea Sandra had poured for him and took a sip. 'You didn't check?'

'It's been, I don't know, things have been . . . you know, *difficult*, haven't they, Sandra?' Sandra, staring at the floor, nodded slightly. 'I've tried, but we just don't get on. And he's a teenager, seventeen and some, but still a teenager, and you must know how they can be, officer: rows, unreasonable behaviour, acting like the world revolves around them . . . After the last shouting match he walked out with his rucksack. Broke the glass in the back door slamming it.'

'Why are you here, Detective Sergeant?' Sandra's voice was hushed, but had a distinct 'cut the crap' tone to it.

DS Maynard put his cup and saucer down. 'There's been an . . . incident . . . in London. And the information we've received, Mrs Tennant, indicates that it's possible your son has died.'

The words hung in the air like dust motes.

They made so little sense it was almost as if they'd been spoken in a foreign language. Sandra felt the breath sigh out of her and she thought for a moment that she was going to faint. Mike, picking up what might happen, moved closer to her and put an arm round her shoulder as she felt her eyes fill with tears.

Sandra shivered, even though it wasn't cold, and hugged herself, the words 'it's possible your son has died' echoing in the distance as the tears spilled down her cheeks.

'London? What was he doing in London, for Pete's sake?'

'We don't know for sure, Mrs Tennant. We were only

contacted last night, and I'm sorry, but we don't have very many details.'

'He's *dead*?' Sandra whispered.

Mike patted her shoulder as he gave her a couple of serviettes, the nearest thing to a tissue within easy reach. 'He just went, officer, never called us or anything . . .'

'Um . . .'

Silence. All heads turned to look at Sandra.

'I, um . . .' Sandra blew her nose. 'I had a text. You know, just saying he was OK?'

'Why didn't you say, love? Why didn't you tell me?'

There was no reply and the room fell silent again, this time for longer than was comfortable, no one knowing quite where to look; certainly not at this woman, trying to deal with the unthinkable. Then DC Chambers coughed and began checking back through his notes.

Sandra hugged herself tighter. 'I thought, you know, he'd be home any time . . .' She looked across at the senior of the two policemen. 'Are you *sure* he's dead, that it's him?'

DS Maynard turned, making a 'give it to me' gesture at DC Chambers, who handed over a buff-coloured A4 envelope. Opening it, the detective sergeant took out two inkjet colour prints and put them side by side on the table facing Sandra and Mike. One showed a close-up of a silver ring with a distinctive Celtic design, the other a small, gold shark's tooth on a gold chain.

'Do they belong to Paul, Mrs Tennant?'

Sandra Tennant nodded silently, collapsing against her husband.

DC Chambers backed the dark blue, unmarked Vectra out into the road, braked, and flicked the gear stick down,

across and up into first. But instead of driving off he waited for a moment, looking back at the house, with its neat garden and trimmed hedges. In the sitting-room window he thought he could make out a figure looking back out at him.

'Doesn't seem like such a bad place to come from.'

'True.'

DC Chambers accelerated away. 'Didn't think the stepdad gave much of a shit.'

'Probably right there.'

'Maybe we should get him to do the ID, when the body comes up.'

'Maybe we should.'

'Why'd you just show them the two pictures, then?'

DS Maynard opened the buff envelope and pulled out a couple more prints of the scene-of-crime pictures they'd been emailed. The top one showed the naked torso of a young man, his head, what was left of it, lying in a dark pool of blood. The harsh lighting did nothing to lessen the brutal evidence of extreme violence against the person. The second picture was no easier to look at.

'I couldn't've shown a mother these, man . . .'

Standing back from the window, Sandra Tennant saw the police car finally drive off, aware that Mike was on the settee behind her, watching. She felt numb with shock, unable to make sense of the information she'd been given, of what those two men had come into her house and told her.

Paul – *little Pauly . . . her baby* – was dead?

It could not be.

She didn't want to turn round and have to deal with Mike, who was going to want her to reassure him that he'd had

nothing to do with what had happened to Paul. Except that, if the man had only tried a *bit* bloody harder to get the boy to just tolerate him, he wouldn't've stormed out and gone and got himself killed. Would he, Mike?

And then Sandra's mobile on the dresser started to ring. Some annoying tone Paul had downloaded and installed on to her phone and she'd never got round to asking him to change, because she didn't know how to do it herself.

'Want me to get that for you, Sandra?'

Sandra shook her head as she walked over to pick it up. It wasn't a number she recognised. She never took those calls and put the phone back down.

'I don't want to talk to anyone right now.'

They both stayed where they were, waiting for something – neither of them knew what and neither of them wanted to be the first one to talk about what they'd just been told. It was an event, a cataclysm, that showed up and magnified all the cracks in their relationship.

And then the house phone, the one in the hall, began to ring.

Sandra took a deep breath, turned round, glanced at Mike and started walking out of the room.

'Where you going?'

'To answer the phone, you never know . . .'

2

Tuesday 25th July, Gosforth, Newcastle Upon Tyne

Paul Hendry was standing, waiting for a bus, still jumpy and hyped from the massive, face-to-face shouting match he'd had with Mr Mike Bloody Tennant.

That was it.

The absolute and final straw.

Jee-*zus*! He'd had enough . . .

He was not going back to that house.

Ever.

Nervously twisting the silver ring on his little finger, Paul checked back in the direction he'd come, half expecting to see his mam's car driving his way, looking for him so she could persuade him to come home. He knew she'd forgive him. Even though he'd called Mike every name he could think of, and had then managed to break the window in the kitchen door when he'd slammed it on his way out.

Now *that* was what you called an exit, man!

That was goodbye in anyone's language.

He put his backpack on the pavement and leaned against the bus stop, letting what he'd said and done properly sink in. He really did not want to go back home – to the house he'd grown up in, *his* house, not that bloke's – as his mam was sure to try and make him apologise. And that was just not going to happen. But if he wasn't going to go back,

where was he going?

Dave's would be no good as he'd been getting the distinct impression his mam was getting fed up of him and how much time he'd been spending there. Turning up at Dave's with a stuffed backpack wasn't going to work. And neither was going to his dad's right now, not since he'd got the new girlfriend. Cheryl. Blonde, young, only twenty-three, or something. Wait till his mam found out! Anyway, bunking over there in his dad's one-bedroom flat wasn't going to be on the cards until the gloss had worn off the old man a bit. Which left what?

In the distance he could see the bus approaching. The one that went past the Metro station, from where he could get right into town. It was too late in the day to put into action the plan he and Dave had been talking about, on and off, it seemed like for ever. The one about hitching down to London, the two of them. Except he kind of knew Dave was never really going to be up for it, not really. He was, though. *Now* he was.

The bus slowed to a halt, pulling up next to the stop. The doors hissed open and the driver looked down at him and then away again. A couple of old dears took their time getting off the bus, giving Paul a few more seconds of make-your-mind-up time. What the hell. He picked up his backpack and stepped up into the bus, paid the driver, took his ticket and made for a vacant double seat down the back. He'd rough it for the night. Just the night, mind. And tomorrow, in the morning, he'd get himself on to the London road, the A1(M) – he and Dave had spent hours looking at maps and stuff and he knew the route by heart now – and he'd get a lift. All the way to the Smoke.

Simple.

He'd spend the summer down south, get a job doing anything, find somewhere to kip. Maybe come back for the start of the autumn term, maybe not, he'd see how he got on. Why not? Ever since his parents had split, and then divorced, and what with his mam remarrying, it had been all about his parents doing things for themselves, to suit themselves, and nothing to do with him. Although they always said, whatever it was they were planning on doing, that it was for the best. Always for the best.

Paul stared out of the window, looking into the middle distance, somewhere between the glass, inches from his face, and the horizon. Thinking. Thinking that 'the best' was when his parents had been together and they were a proper family, and who cared if there were a few arguments? Everyone argued. Not everyone got divorced and then married some jerk called Mike Tennant. Or lived with a girl not *that* much older than their son. So now was the time for him to do something for himself. Make a clean break, have a fresh start of his own. For a bit, anyway. He could always come back, when and if he wanted to. On his own terms.

The bus pulled up at a stop and Paul, lost in thought, refocused on where he was. The Metro already! He grabbed his backpack from the seat next to him, made a dash for the exit doors, swung round the pole and jumped through the opening down on to the pavement. First step of the journey . . .

It was late now. He could tell without even looking at his watch, just something about the way the streets were. Empty. Echoey. Paul, wrapped in his sleeping bag and using his backpack for a pillow, turned to look over the flattened cardboard box he'd used to lie on and cover himself. Out on

the street, from the narrow but quite deep entrance-way he'd chosen to bed down in, he couldn't see what or who had made the noise that must've woken him. He was about to roll back and try to get some more kip before he had to get up when he heard voices and what sounded like glass breaking.

Curiosity got the better of him, even though he knew he should probably mind his own business, and he quietly pushed the cardboard flat and shuffled as silently as he could to the edge of the shadows, towards the steps that led down to the pavement. He stopped when he saw the first figure. Standing, back to him, wearing black jeans and a dark hoodie with the hood up. Male? Female? He couldn't tell.

This person was a little way away, hands in pockets and weight on one leg, looking upwards. Paul followed where they were looking and saw a second hooded person, looked like a guy, making their way down a seven-metre-high post, on top of which were the smashed remains of a CCTV camera. He was using what looked like a wide leather belt to 'walk' down the post in small jumps, making it look so easy anyone could do it. As he reached the ground and unbuckled the belt, the second person took something out of the bag that was slung over their shoulder. Paul watched as they went over to the post and slapped a sticker on it, then dropped what looked like some pieces of orange paper on to the ground.

'Finished?' Paul heard the bloke whisper as he saw him stow the belt in a small black backpack, then pull a hammer out of his belt and stuff it in as well.

'Yeah . . .' The figure turned sideways, pushing their hood back. Paul could now see it was a girl, her profile white and stark in the street light. 'Neat work, Robbie!'

Paul rolled himself back into the shadows as they ran past, turning away just in case they spotted him. As their footsteps faded into the distance, he sat up in the dark, looking out into the silent, empty street and wondering who the hell the two of them were and what they were up to. They certainly weren't a couple of lagered-up scallies out for a laugh. They'd come prepared, and everything they'd done looked like it was practised, like they'd done it a few times before.

Paul unzipped his sleeping bag and got up, stretching the kinks out of his back. He walked over to the entrance and looked out left and then right. No one. He went down the steps and over to the post, bending down to pick up one of the pieces of orange paper; as he stood up he noticed the sticker, a white one, about ten by thirteen centimetres in size, stuck on lengthways and with two black letters printed on it. The first was a symbol, Ω, which he recognised as the Greek letter *omega*, and the other a capital P.

ΩP

What was *that* all about? Paul looked at the piece of paper he'd picked up. It was a small folded leaflet. He turned it round so he could read what it said. 'MANIFESTO 3' was printed across the top, in the kind of stencil typeface that made you think of armies and soldiers. Paul shrugged to himself and walked back up the steps to the entrance-way, wondering about what he'd seen, about the girl whose face he'd glimpsed. Fit-looking, with that flat sort of *EastEnders* accent. So different from the way the bloke she was with talked. He sat back down and held the pamphlet to the streetlight so he could read it.

Wherever you look there are cameras looking back AT YOU! There are ***4 million*** *of them.* ***TRUE FACT.*** *More EVERY DAY, spreading out from every town centre, blossoming like weeds on every road, pushing out through the tarmac arterial system across THE WHOLE COUNTRY. Word has it that they're actually using RPAs – remotely piloted aircraft, tiny pilotless drones – SPYPLANES equipped with all the latest tech, to increase coverage. It's a rumour, but with this lot in power, believe this:* ***ABSOLUTELY ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE!***

Supposed to make us all feel SAFER, they say. Supposed to CUT CRIME and CUT ROAD ACCIDENTS, they also say. Except we know it's really all about ***MONEY****. And* ***CONTROL****, of course. You voted for them, you gave them the money and the control, and look what they did with it – put cameras EVERYWHERE, which are supposed to solve crime, but actually only move it elsewhere.*

Paul stopped reading and turned to look at the front of the pamphlet again. Whoever had written it – the two he'd just seen trash the camera? – certainly seemed to think that getting out there and doing what they believed in was better than just talking about it. He started to read again.

Thing is, for too long most PEOPLE DIDN'T LOOK. They had no idea, until it was ***WAY TOO LATE. Now there's ONE CAMERA for every 14 people in the UK!*** *And YOU are being WATCHED 24/7, almost wherever you go and whatever you are doing. There are a lot of things people NEVER NOTICE until it's too late.*

Why aren't people doing anything? Why aren't you complaining, protesting, objecting, SHOWING YOUR DISAPPROVAL? If you don't like something, why just sit there and let it happen? ***What has happened to the politics of the street?***

Paul reread the last two paragraphs, wondering what was meant by 'the politics of the street'. Did that mean rioting, or what? He understood the stuff about the cameras and being watched all the time, though. You saw them all over the place in the town, and his dad was always complaining about how many of them there were on the roads, put there, he said, to make money for fat-cat councillors and bugger all to do with road safety. He turned to the last page.

WE DON'T LIKE IT. And we are the ones who have decided to do something.

We are ***OMEGA PLACE.***

We do not want to live as part of a monitored population. We do not want our faces on the world's biggest database. We want it to ***STOP,*** *and everything has to* ***START*** *somewhere.*

Because there's absolutely no telling where it'll all ***END.***