Skin Lane

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Extract

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"Under certain very particular circumstances, there may be some dispute as to who has jurisdiction over the body itself."

The Coroner's Office: An Introduction
Corporation of City of London Publications, 1967

The stories we are told as children do, undoubtedly, mark us for life. They are often stories of dark and terrible things, and we are usually told them just before the lights are turned out and we are left alone; but we love them. We love them when we first hear them, and even when we are grown, and think we have forgotten them entirely, they never lose their power over us.

The man who is the subject of this story had, when he was a little boy, one particular bedtime favourite. This was despite the fact that the old-fashioned book of fairy tales which contained it had only one picture, and that a small steel engraving printed in black and white. He would ask to be read this particular story again and again – every night, in fact. The voice that read him the story was, on some nights, calm, reassuring – as warm as lamplight; on other nights his father (for it was to his widowed father, and not to either of his older brothers, that the duty of the bedtime story fell) would be tired, and eager to get downstairs to his dinner, and could not conceal his irritation at being asked to rehearse the words of the story for the fourth time that week. The boy never especially paid attention to his father's mood, or tone of voice; he was rapt whether the sentences of the story were repeated clumsily or well. The first few pages never particularly interested him, but he never asked for them to be skipped; he would lie quite still, and wait patiently for the two moments in the telling of the story that he loved the most. The first was when the Beast, having lured the famished Beauty to his table with the promise of fine wine, and finer food – chickens with meat as white as milk, jellies as red as rubies – suddenly says out of nowhere "Beauty, will you

be my wife?" and she, weak with hunger and terror, faints dead away; and the second was the story's very end. It wasn't the odd music of the final words about living in happiness "for years and years and many years to come" that he always looked forward to (he was of course too young to understand why his father sometimes read that sentence too quickly, as if eager to get to the full stop and back downstairs); nor was it the fireworks, or the strange sound of the invisible orchestra that played when the Beast's place at the dining table was suddenly taken (disappointingly, he always thought) by "the loveliest prince that ever eye beheld" – no; it was the quiet noise that the paper of the last page of the little book always made as his father turned it – a whisper meant for his ears only – because that meant that there, at the bottom of the last page of the story, there, at last, was the picture. He would always ask to see it. "Show me, show me—" he'd say, "I'm not frightened; show me."

According to the picture (– yes, I have the book here in front of me), the Beast is a small and oddly wounded-looking creature; small, dark and indeterminate. It snuffles, half in wonderment, half in ignorance – half bear, half boar – at the exposed neck and breast of a swooning, Empire-dressed Beauty, who has fallen backwards across a bed. Whether she is really asleep, or has fainted, or is merely playing dead, the little boy is never quite sure; but he can see that her eyes are firmly closed.

The story over, and the picture inspected, the boy lets himself be told to go to sleep; he enjoys lying back on the clean white pillowcase and feeling his father's big hands tucking the weight and warmth of his very own paisley-printed eiderdown firmly down around him. Then he lies straight and still, with his feet together and his arms down by his sides, like he's been told (like a good boy), and listens for the three last sounds that he hears his house make each evening; the soft, satisfying click of the bedroom light switch; the gentle shutting of the bedroom door; and then, finally, his father's footsteps making their way across the landing and down the stairs. He lies there in the dark, and counts the steps

(seven, eight) – watching the strip of light under the bedroom door (thirteen, fourteen); waiting for the moment when his father will reach the bottom of the stairs and turn the landing light out. Then, and only then, when both the darkness and the silence are complete, will he prepare to close his eyes.

Before he closes them, there is something that he has to do. First, he pulls down the eiderdown; then he unbuttons the top two buttons of his pyjama jacket, uncovering his chest to the air. Next, he twists his whole body slightly to one side, rearranging his legs and arms under the covers so that he is now lying just as Beauty is lying in the picture – eyes closed, breast exposed, head thrown back to one side, luxuriant black ringlets spread across the pillow. And then he waits, just as he knows she must have waited all those nights. Waits, for the first sound of snuffling in the dark. For the first touch of bristle or guard-hair on his cheek. For the first hot, stinking breath to brush against his neck.

Here it comes.

one

Since this story is to be so much about bodies, I should probably start by describing Mr F's as well as I can.

At the age of forty-six (three months short of forty-seven, in fact) it is well preserved, but largely unused – by which I mean that there is nothing very conspicuously athletic about it. Not that he was thin, or worn-out-looking; in fact he was rather a large man, nearly six foot, with broad shoulders and the sort of build that most people would describe as *sturdy*. He had the usual pale skin of a city-dweller, and the conventionally cut short dark hair of his period, with only the expected shading of grey. His blue eyes, on the rare occasions when he looked directly at anybody, could give the impression of being rather strikingly pale. He had rather fine, strong arms, lightly dusted with black hair on the forearms, and a still almost hairless back; this he always carried consciously upright when he walked, perhaps because he spent so much of his working day standing stooped over a bench. A slightly military edge to his stride – but only when he hurried, which was rarely. A perfectly reasonable waistline for a man of his age – in fact, rather trim. Rather large feet. Though he looked as though he would still be well capable of, say, rowing a boat, you wouldn't have said that it was a body well suited to dancing. His physical demeanour was, well – self-effacing, I suppose, describes it best. Contained.

If there was anything unusual or distinctive about him, it was his hands. Always framed by an impeccably clean pair of cuffs (fastened with his one pair of plain gold-plated

cuff-links) they were also large, but not at all rough or conventionally masculine. They were not at all the sort of hands you would have expected to find on a man who had been using them to earn his living for over thirty years. The long, tapering fingers were white, except for the nicotine staining on the index and forefingers of his right hand, and well manicured; there were no calluses. He wore a wristwatch, but no wedding ring. The fine, slightly perfumed and almost uncreased skin of the palms would have told anyone who inspected them closely – anyone who might have kissed them, for instance- that these hands were not only scrubbed, but also cared for, every night.

Not that anyone ever did, of course. Inspect them closely. Or kiss them.

Every morning of the working week, at twenty minutes past six, Mr F got promptly out of bed, knotted a plaid dressing gown over his pyjamas, used the bathroom, returned to his bedroom, took off the robe and his pyjamas, hung up the former and folded the latter, and then proceeded to conceal this middle-aged body of his beneath a well-ironed white cotton shirt and a three-piece medium-weight brown worsted suit. He wore this same suit all year; if it was cold, he only needed to put on a cotton vest under his shirt to be warm enough – and if it was one of South London's rare days of high summer sunshine, and already a touch too warm for comfort at a quarter past seven in the morning, the fabric was still lightweight enough to allow him to make the brisk ten minute walk to the station without sweating. Even with the waistcoat and all four suit-buttons done up, and his tie tightly knotted.

This was important to him.

With its double-breasted jacket and two-inch turn-ups, this brown worsted ensemble of his could have been tailored at almost any time in the middle thirty years of the last century. On a younger man, it would have seemed markedly

out of date by the time this story takes place – but this Mr F was of a generation and a class for whom the idea of fashion in men's clothes didn't really exist. In fact, he was still in effect wearing the same suit to walk to work in in 1967 as he had been in 1938. When that first suit, the one he'd bought for himself to mark his eighteenth birthday, had finally given way (unsurprisingly, after spending the whole five-and-a-half years of the war tightly folded in a damp tin trunk) he'd seen no reason to change his mind about either cut or fabric when replacing it. This meant that it was in a more or less exact copy of what he'd worn at eighteen that he stood bareheaded at first his father's funeral and then to watch the cold, rain-drenched funeral procession of King George VI. When that second suit in turn had finally given up the ghost, and he'd gone out shopping for its third and current incarnation, he had been briefly tempted by something in a chalk-stripe and what he was assured, by an eager young sales assistant on Oxford Street, was a much more modern cut – but then he had found a gentleman's outfitters on Camberwell High Street who still stocked brown worsted, and in his usual style, and once again, he had seen no reason to change.

Mr F was a man who didn't often change his mind about things.

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Having put on the suit, tightly tied his laces, checked his wristwatch against the kitchen clock and collected his trilby from the hallstand (together with an overcoat or umbrella if the day threatened rain), Mr F always left his flat at more or less exactly five minutes past seven. He took some pride in the fact that he was never late for work, and would often make a point of completing his whole journey into town without once needing to look at his watch; like most people

who make a daily journey to work in London, he always made it by the same route, and so knew exactly how many minutes each part of it took. From his front door to Peckham Rye Station, for instance, took either nine or eleven minutes, depending on whether or not he stopped to buy a morning paper. To save time at the station itself, he liked to always carry the exact change required for the purchase of his ticket in his right-hand pocket, together with that day's clean linen handkerchief. He always travelled in the second, least crowded carriage of the train, if he possibly could, since that minimised delay on arrival at London Bridge. Once there, he always looked to see if the stopped clock on the bomb-damaged façade of the station forecourt still said the time was ten minutes to twelve; it always did. When he crossed the bridge itself, it was always on the western, upriver side; this way, he avoided becoming part of the almost impossibly thick bowler-hatted crowd of office-workers that walked north in silent unison towards the City on the eastern pavement. Once across the river (he seemed not to notice the sudden upward swirl of the breeze, the faintly metallic stink of the water) he again avoided the main flow of the crowd as it surged across King William Street and left towards Cannon Street, choosing to reach his destination by a much less direct, but much less crowded, route. Turning left down Arthur Street, and then cutting down the steps of Miles Lane, he would head down Fishmonger's Hall Street until he emerged out onto the open wharf at its southern end. Before the war, his route from here on had been via a network of narrow riverside lanes and enclosed alleyways, but now at least half his journey was past partly cleared bombsites still awaiting redevelopment. The concrete monolith of the City's first multi-storey car-park was just nearing completion by the river at Swan Lane, and he had to walk right under its scaffolding; the east side of All Hallows Lane, up which he

turned right to join Upper Thames Street just as it disappeared into its dark, roaring cavern under Cannon Street Station, was still a bare-branched scrubland of buddleia bushes. Further on, the ruined churchyard of St Michael's Paternoster was being replaced with a "modern" garden that seemed to consist mostly of concrete paving slabs dotted with wilting, thin-trunked saplings – but Mr F ignored all these signs of redevelopment and disruption. As far as he was concerned, the important thing was that this was the way he had always walked to work.

At the end of the working day, some nine and a half hours later, he would retrace his steps exactly. The only time he would use a different pavement from the one he had used in the morning was if he crossed the street to avoid some noisy crowd of men gathered outside the one of the two pubs he had to pass (they are still always almost all men, those early evening crowds outside the City pubs, even now, nearly forty years later; have you noticed that?). As he turned left at the bottom of All Hallows Lane, he would ignore the anonymous threat tolled out by the river barges moored for the night under Cannon Street rail bridge; the slow, funereal clanging-together of their empty metal hulls, weirdly amplified by the bridge, was too familiar to disturb him. If it was summer he would, as he emerged back up out onto the sudden open space of London Bridge, give a quick backward glance across at the sunset as it flared over the whole of the western city; but the view, no matter how bloody or sulphurous, never detained him. He always knew exactly how many minutes he had before the five-forty nine train departed from platform eleven, or the six-o-two from platform eight – and would have already calculated exactly how much time he would need to stop and buy his nightly copy of the *Evening Standard* at the station kiosk.

The old London Bridge, which was to be demolished just a few months after our story takes place, was famous for

the narrowness of its York stone pavements. They constricted the rush-hour crowds into almost intolerable crushes. But even when the black river of commuters was at its densest – that twice-daily human tide, rolling north at eight, receding south at five, as relentless in its way and thickening and gathering pace just as swiftly as the waters which slapped and surged and came to a rolling boil twice daily against the four great granite piers which supported the bridge – it is extraordinary how rarely any one of them ever bumped into anyone else. Mr F certainly never did. Even when he was forced to queue to go through the ticket barrier – even if he was obliged (on a rainy day) to cram into an overcrowded compartment on his train – he was expert at avoiding contact. If he did find himself having to stand, and the train lurched unexpectedly, he would brace himself with his knees, never reach to share an improvised hand-hold on a luggage rack; he never dropped his umbrella and had to stoop and grope to retrieve it; never accidentally grazed the back of an adjacent hand when attempting to open his evening paper. Since he was tall, there was rarely any danger that anyone's wet hair would brush inadvertently against his face. If the crowding was so bad that contact became inevitable, the combined thicknesses of his suit and his overcoat meant that he would feel at most only a general pressure, never the exact shape or temperature of a specific limb or joint as it was pressed gently against his leg or into the small of his back. And even if his face was only inches from that of his neighbour, he would never look at them. Certainly not in the eye.

Of course, as you will know if you have ever made such a daily train journey yourself, none of this made him in any way particularly unusual.

Once he reached Peckham Rye Station, he would retrace his morning journey exactly, stopping only to buy some milk if he needed it, and would arrive back at the

mansion block which contained his one-bedroomed, third-floor flat at twenty past six at the very latest. Earlier, of course, if it was a Friday night in winter.