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The Optimists

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Part One

'It was unlike any other event I have reported on and in different ways it changed everybody – the survivors most of all, but also the doctors, the aid workers, the priests, the journalists. We had learned something about the soul of man that would leave us with nightmares long into the future. This was not death as I had seen it in South Africa, or Eritrea, or Northern Ireland. Nothing could have prepared me for the scale of what I witnessed.

Fergal Keane, *Season of Blood*

I

After the massacre at the church in N— Clem Glass flew home to London. He put his boots and the clothes from his case into a black bin-liner. He carried the bag down to one of the dustbins in the basement courtyard, then came in and scoured the skin of his hands. The next morning he heard the shouting of the dustmen as they worked their way up the street. When he looked out later he saw the empty bins lined up by the railings. He lay on the floor, watching the light shift across the ceiling. He seemed to be lost in the space between two thoughts. A whole day passed. A night. A whole week he could not have begun to account for.

It was May, and already more summer than spring. The leaves on the roadside trees were dustless, vivid, part luminous. Until late into the evening cars crawled in the traffic, windows down, music thudding. Children out of school squabbled in the street, kicked balls against a wall, sang singing games their grandparents must have known – 'Un-der the ap-ple tree, my boy-friend said to me . . .' The people in the house next door were substance abusers. They played tinny radios. In the small hours of the morning they sounded as though they were being dragged down to hell. Occasionally they threw stuff out of the windows. A fortnight after Clem's return they threw a ten-litre tin of purple paint from an upstairs

window. The tin split and an inch-deep purple slick spread across two square yards of paving-stones and gutter. The sun put a crust on it but the paint below stayed moist. Soon there were purple footsteps, each print a little fainter than the last. There was even a set of purple dog tracks that circled a lamp-post and disappeared towards the Harrow Road.

The substance abusers were delighted. They gathered on the steps of their house waving bottles and laughing like the troops of some victorious rebel army. A week later they threw out a tin of orange paint, a huge broken egg bolk. Clem's Domke bag was by the door. The Nikon was in there, the Leica, leads, flash units, lenses, twenty or thirty rolls of film. Looking at the egg yolk cooking on the purple pavement he thought of how he would capture it: the response was automatic, a professional reflex, nothing more. The cameras would stay in their bag until he had the energy to decide what to do with them. Vaguely, he imagined taking them back to Kingsley's and selling them. The Leica was worth a lot; the Nikon, his old workhorse, worth something, a month's rent perhaps.

On an afternoon at the turn of the month the substance abusers were evicted. Two police vans arrived, then council workers came with steel screens and began to seal up the building. They covered the wooden door with a steel skin. The bay windows were wound in steel. By the front railings they left a small pile of personal belongings – a sleeping-bag, a hairdryer, some plastic flowers, a crutch. The substance abusers, the women in particular, roared and shook their fists. Clem watched them from his window on the first floor. He admired their passion; he wondered if they knew how futile it was,

or if it was that, the pointlessness, that was the root of their passion. When it was over, the council workers left and the police climbed back into their vans. The evicted abusers, still gesticulating frantically, stumped off in twos and threes towards the various shelters and off-licences of the parish. A few of the locals came out and there was some laughter. At dusk, Clem went down to the street. The Grove was almost quiet. He looked at the house, then crouched and ran his fingers over the remains of the paint. Its surface now was smooth and hard as varnish, slightly uneven, mostly smooth. Then, at the edge of the slick, where the paint gave way to the mid-greys of paving-stone, he noticed the faint but very precise skeletal outline of a leaf and, using the flame of his lighter, found others there, scattered around it, thread-delicate prints of dead leaves, half hidden, like drawings under tissue paper. He tried to work out how such images could possibly have been fixed there. Last autumn's rain; last autumn's sun. The weight of thousands of pressing feet. The energy released by decaying matter. The slight absorbency of stone. He examined them until his lighter was too hot to use any more. He remembered Fox Talbot's calotype of a leaf; a world-amazing picture: calotype from the Greek for beauty. He knelt. Ahead of him the metal house glittered in the lamplight. He bowed his head. Would something happen now? Could something be let go of? It was like waiting to be sick. He clenched his teeth, touched the stubborn dryness of his eyes. Behind him, a pair of children spying on him from between two parked cars began to giggle. He struggled to his feet, went up the stairs to his flat, and lay again on the living-room carpet.

At some point after nightfall the phone on his desk started to ring. After five rings the answer-machine came on. His message said he was out of the country. The machine bleeped. There was a pause in which Clem thought he could hear the crying of seabirds, then his father said, 'It's just me. Call when you're back, will you?' Another pause, then: 'Thank you.'

2

In T-shirt, jeans, old brogues, he went on walks that lasted most of the day. The direction was not important. Turn left and he came to the houses of the rich; to the right was the railway bridge, the canal, the council blocks, the supermarket. Under the green girders of the bridge the rails ran like a firebreak through the heart of the city. In the moments when no trains were passing the scene was oddly tranquil. There were young trees at the verges of the track, and tough-looking bushes with gaudy flowers that grew out of the embankment walls or thrust their leaves through the ballast stones. It was not unusual to look down on a half-dozen butterflies, drifting over the tracks like wastepaper.

The canal he learned to avoid. The water was too still, too black: he was afraid of what might appear in it. It would not take much. A plastic bag crumpled into the form of a face. A piece of driftwood mistaken for a hand.

He ate wherever he happened to find himself, whatever was near. A Portuguese place just off the Grove, a Turkish café in Notting Hill, a couscous restaurant on Golborne Road. He ate, paid, spoke to no one other than the waiters. Each afternoon he went to a newsagent to look at the front pages of the papers. In the time before – and this was how he thought of his life before the church at N—, 'the time before' – he had read two, sometimes

three newspapers a day, valuing the sense that he knew what was going on in the world and that it was possible to know. Since coming back the news did not convince him as it used to, not because he imagined they were making it up (though he had been around journalists long enough to know that that was not unusual) but because the world they described no longer matched the one he carried in his head, a place it was hard to say anything rational about at all. He looked now only to see if there was a story from Africa, from the aftermath of the killing, from the fall-out. If there was, he scanned for a mention of the Bourgmestre, but was always more relieved than disappointed when he found nothing. He wasn't ready yet for Sylvestre Ruzindana. He was a long way from being ready.

He became one of the people who go to the cinema in the middle of the day. He had an ideal film in mind, something with a few songs, an unimportant ending. At the cinema in Shepherd's Bush they were showing *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and he went to see it, sitting among pensioners and the unemployed, content until Hepburn, strumming her little guitar, sang 'Moon River' in a voice that was awkward and beautiful and piercing. He stumbled out, blundering past the dreaming usherette and hurrying home, astonished at himself. He had more luck at the Coronet in Notting Hill. An American high-school comedy, like an update of *Happy Days*. He watched it three times on three consecutive afternoons. There was nothing in the film to attend to, nothing that needed to be followed or admired. After each showing the swing-door of the cinema scraped the whole thing

from his mind like bones from a dinner plate, leaving only a memory of sitting and the knowledge that for ninety minutes he had been safe.

On fine days he sometimes went to the park and dozed on the grass or sat on a bench observing, without lust, the girls tanning their legs, the young nannies, Scandinavians, Filipinas, playing with the children of their wealthy employers. To be without desire – as he had been now for weeks – was disorientating. He watched women as perhaps he would watch them in his dotage when desire had burned down to a spoonful of warm ashes (if that's how it was for old men. Was it?). But at his age – he had turned forty in January – to live without desire was like the dream he had had throughout his teenage years in which, belonging neither quite to the living nor entirely to the dead, he slowly faded, each moment a little less visible, less able to make himself heard above the world's noise, a kind of drowning in air. It was another symptom, of course, though not one he had been expecting. Was it time he looked for help? Time he spoke to someone? He had not even called Frank Silverman in New York, though they had exchanged home numbers, writing in the back of a careening taxi on the way to the airbase. Silverman was older, more experienced. Different. Tougher? A veteran with a half-inch of grenade casing in his back, a souvenir of the Lebanon. No stranger to chaos then, to human savagery, but a man who had seemed – seemed before they went to the church that night – inured to it by depths of cynicism extraordinary even for a journalist.

And he had a wife, a writer called Shelley-Anne, who,

he said, wrote novels about lonesome women, books that sold by the container load. In the bar of the Bellville Hotel, drinking at a table with Clem, Major Nemo and two Egyptians from UNHCR, Silverman had boasted that her entire career was a rebuke to him for his wandering over the face of the earth, his philandering. Would she help him if he needed it? Would she want to? Despite the picture he had drawn, the marriage had sounded good, worn-in in the right way, and exactly the kind of refuge that he, Clem Glass, had so recklessly failed to provide for himself. His neediness now disgusted him a little. The longing for tenderness, for what had been opened (a view, a wound) to be closed with the stroke of a hand. It was becoming harder and harder to recognise himself, and each twilight as the street-lights came on and the air hung blue and orange between the dirty buildings, he struggled to regain comfortable understandings that he knew in his heart were gone for ever.

3

'Hi! Shelley-Anne and Silverman can't get to the phone right now. Leave your name and a number and we'll get back to you just as soon as we can.' There was a four-second choral burst of 'Canada Oh Canada!' – Silverman's drollery – then the tone. Clem replaced the receiver. The wife had a young voice and the message sounded as if she had recorded it in a hurry between doing interesting things. He didn't think she had sounded lonely or angry.

He tried again an hour later. 'Hi! Shelley-Anne and Silverman can't get to the phone right now . . .'

4

An incident:

Walking on Portobello Road, a Sunday evening around eleven, eleven thirty, he heard a woman in one of the unlit doorways on the far side of the street, a choked lamenting that grew louder as he passed, abruptly ceased, then started again, the sound directed now to the middle of his back. From the instant he became aware of her, his mouth had dried and his heart begun a pounding that made it hard to breathe. But what was he afraid of? Half the streets in London were haunted by the grief-stricken, the chronically lost, yet he found her noise unbearable and quickened his step. She followed him, gaining on him and calling piteously until he stopped. They were outside a kebab and chicken shop. The men inside were wiping down and getting ready to shut. By the glow of a neon sign, a rooster, he saw that she was in her late teens or early twenties. She stood in front of him, trembling, her hands out-held, the mascara in a black web beneath her eyes. She was trying to explain something, what had happened to her. At first, so broken was her speech, he didn't know what language she was using, then realised it was Spanish. Several times he heard her say '*violar*' or '*violada*'. She was holding out her phone to him. He took it from her, called the police and told the operator that a young woman had been

attacked. He gave the address of the kebab and chicken shop. When he was asked for his name he finished the call and gave the girl back her phone. She seemed to be sinking. She stood as a child stands when it needs the toilet, or like someone who has been struck hard in the belly. The men from the food shop were watching now, two of them in long grey aprons. Clem tried to think of the Spanish for 'They are coming', but after a few seconds remembered the verb to go. '*Me voy*,' he said, and turned from her. He thought she might come after him again but she didn't. Perhaps she couldn't.

At Faraday Road he stopped and looked back along the track of street-lamps. The place he had left her was beyond the curve of the road and impossible to see. He looked at his watch, looked up at the blank houses around him. How long would the police take to reach her? The nearest station was only a few minutes' drive away. Should he not have heard a siren by now? And what if they didn't come? If he had garbled the address or they thought he was a hoaxer? His blood was calmer now and it struck him clearly for the first time that he had abandoned her, a violated girl. He, who had once assumed himself to be sided with the decent and the brave, what was he to think now? What duty could be plainer than the care of a stranger attacked in the street? He began to run, but when he arrived at the shop the lights were off and the street outside deserted. He went on towards Westbourne Grove, looking carefully down the cross-streets. Several times he heard footsteps or saw someone striding quickly away from him, but no one who resembled the girl. Had the men taken her in? Done what he had failed to do? He went back and pressed his

face to the window. A shape – one darkness erupting from another – moved across the floor towards him. He froze, called 'Christ!', then saw it was a dog, squat, black-pelted, watching him through the glass of the door, its eyes flecked blue and yellow as though the sockets were blunt holes down which the creature's electricity were dimly visible.

He went home. There was a moon up: a bright half-moon reflecting off the steel front of the empty house. He stood on the steps of his own house and smoked a cigarette. A night bus went by. An ambulance. He thought about little Odette Semugeshi, a survivor of the Massacre whose photograph he had taken at the Red Cross hospital when Silverman interviewed her. Her head had been heavily bandaged, the wound betraying itself in a watery pink line that ran from her forehead to the middle of her skull. She spoke French in a slow, toneless voice. '*Et puis . . . et puis . . .*' The doctor, fearing the child was still concussed, had been reluctant to let them speak to her and stood beside them ready to end the interview should Silverman push too hard. It was a beautiful morning. Through the open door of the office a dozen other children sat quietly in the dust beneath an oleander tree. When the interview was finished Odette went out to join them. 'Doesn't she ever cry?' asked Silverman.

'In time,' said the doctor. He was Swiss and had been in the country for ten days. 'Too much sorrow makes the heart like a stone.'

'It's how the heart survives,' said Silverman.

The doctor agreed, and had looked at them then, at Clem and Silverman, knowing – for Silverman had told

him on the walk from his office – that they had been the first journalists at the site. Fleetingly, it seemed he might take an interest in them, go through some questionnaire on trauma, check them over, but he was visibly tired and already, perhaps, doing more than he knew how to properly manage. He shook their hands, raised an arm in wry farewell, and left them to find their own way out.