In the Dark

Mark Billingham

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Extract

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2 AUGUST

It's a dry night, but the road is still greasy from the shower a few hours before; slick as it's sucked under the headlights, and there's not too much traffic rattling across the cracks in a main drag that's probably the worst maintained in the city.

It's morning, of course, strictly speaking; the early hours. But to those few souls on their way home, or struggling out to work in the dark, or already about business of one sort or another, it feels very much like night; the middle of the bastard.

The dead of it.

It's a warm night too, and muggy. The second of what's shaping up to be a pretty decent August. But that's not why the passenger in the blue Cavalier is leaning his head towards the open window and sweating like a pig.

'Like a kiddie-fiddler on a bouncy castle,' the driver says. 'Fuckin' *look* at you, man.'

'There no air-con on this thing?'

'Nobody else sweating that much.'

The three men in the back are laughing, shoulders pressed together. Staring out between the front seats at the traffic coming towards the car. When they light cigarettes, the driver holds out a hand, demanding one. It's lit for him, and passed forward.

The driver takes a deep drag, then peers at the cigarette. 'Why you smoking this rubbish, man?'

'Friend got a few cases, man. Owed me.'

'So why not pass a couple my way?'

'I was thinking, you smoke that strong shit. Marlboro, whatever.'

'Yeah. You was thinking.' He yanks at the wheel, taking the car fast around a bin-bag that has blown into the middle of the road. 'Look at this shit up here, man. These people living like pigs or something.'

The shuttered-up shops and restaurants slide past the passenger window, Turkish places, or Greek. Asian grocers', clubs, a one-room minicab office with a yellow light. The shutters and security doors are all tagged: letters swooping against the metal; red, white and black; indecipherable.

The territories, marked.

'We got no beats?' One of the men in the back starts slapping out a rhythm on the back of the head-rest.

'No point, man.' The driver leans down, waves a hand dismissively towards the audio controls on the dashboard. 'Pussy-arsed system on this thing.'

'What about the radio?'

The driver sucks his teeth; something small dropped into hot fat. 'Just men talking foolishness this time of the night,' he says. 'Chill-out shit and golden oldies.' He reaches across and lays a hand on the back of the passenger's neck. ''Sides, we need to let this boy concentrate, you get me?'

From the back: 'He needs to concentrate on not pissing in his panties. He's shook, you ask me. Shook, big time.'

'*Se*-rious . . .'

The passenger says nothing, just turns and looks. Letting the three behind him know they'll have time to talk later, when the thing's done. He shifts back around and faces front, feeling the weight on the seat between his legs, and the stickiness that pastes his shirt to the small of his back.

The driver pushes up tight behind a night bus, then pulls hard to the right. Singing something to himself as he takes the Cavalier past, and across the lights as amber turns to red.

She'd turned onto the A10 at Stamford Hill, leaving the bigger houses behind, the off-street Volvos and the tidy front gardens, and pointed the BMW south.

She takes it nice and easy through Stoke Newington; knows there are cameras ready to flash anyone stupid enough to jump a light. Watches her speed. The roads aren't busy, but there's always a job-pissed traffic copper waiting to spoil some poor sod's night.

Last thing she needs.

A few minutes later she's drifting down into Hackney. Place might not look quite as bad at night, but she knows better. Mind you, at least those slimy buggers at the local estate agent's had to work to earn their commission.

'Oh yes, it's very much an up-and-coming area. Gets a bad press for sure, but you've got to look behind all that. There's a real *sense of community here; and, of course, all these misconceptions do mean that house prices are* very *competitive . . .'*

I mean, however the hell you pronounce it, De Beauvoir Town *sounds* nice, doesn't it? Just talk about Hackney Downs and Regent's Canal and don't worry about little things like knife crime, life expectancy, stuff like that. There's even the odd grassy square, for heaven's sake, and one or two nice Victorian terraces.

'Stick a few of them, what d'you call it, leylandii at the back end of the garden, you won't even be able to see *the estate!'*

Poor bastards might as well have targets painted on their front doors.

She's across the Ball's Pond Road without needing to slow down; Kingsland to one side of her, Dalston spreading like a stain to the east.

Not long now.

Her hands are sticky, so she puts an arm out of the window, splays her fingers and lets the night air move through them. She thinks she can feel rain in the air, just a drop or two. She leaves her arm where it is.

The Beemer sounds good – just a low hum, and a whisper under the wheels; and the leather of the passenger seat feels smooth and clean under her hand when she reaches over. She's always loved this car; felt comfortable from the moment she first swung her legs inside. Some

people were like that with houses. Whatever the sales pitch, sometimes it just came down to that vibe or whatever when you walked inside. Same with the car; it felt like hers.

She sees the Cavalier coming towards her as she's slowing for lights. It's going a lot faster than she is and pulls up hard, edging across the white lines at the junction.

It has no headlights on.

She feels for the stalk behind the steering wheel and flicks it twice; flashes the BMW's top-of-the-range xenon headlamps at the Cavalier. Better than the landing lights on a 747, she remembers the salesman saying. They talked even more crap than estate agents.

The driver of the Cavalier makes no acknowledgement; just stares back.

Then switches on his lights.

She urges the BMW across the junction and away. The first drops of rain are spotting the screen. She checks her rear-view mirror and sees the Cavalier throw a fast U-turn a hundred yards behind; hears a horn blare as it cuts across oncoming traffic, pulling in front of a black cab and moving fast up the bus lane towards her.

Feels something jump in her guts.

'Why that one?' the man in the passenger seat asks.

The driver shifts the Cavalier hard up into fifth gear and shrugs. 'Why not?'

The three in the back seat are leaning further forward now, buzzing with it, but their voices are matter-of-fact. 'Fool selected her-*self*.'

'You interfere with people, you asking for it, proper.'

'She was just trying to help.'

'The way we do it,' the driver says.

The passenger seat is feeling hot beneath him as he turns away, like it's all OK with him. Like his breathing is easy enough and his bladder doesn't feel like it's fit to explode.

Fucking stupid cow. Why can't she mind her own business?

They pull out of the bus lane and swing around a motorbike. The

rider turns to look as they pass, a black helmet and visor. The man in the passenger seat glances back, but can't hold the look. Drags his eyes back to the road ahead.

The car ahead.

'Don't lose her.' Urgent, from the back seat.

Then his friend: 'Yeah, you need to floor this piece of shit, man.'

The driver flicks his eyes to the rear-view. 'You two boying me?'

'No.'

'You fucking *boying* me or what?'

Hands are raised. 'Pump down, man. Just *saying* . . .'

The eyes slide away again, and the foot goes down, and the Cavalier quickly draws to within a few feet of the silver BMW. The driver turns to the man in the passenger seat and grins. Says: 'You ready?'

The rain is coming down heavier now.

His chest thumping faster than the squeaky wipers.

'We doing it,' the driver says.

'Yeah . . .'

The Cavalier eases to the left, just inches away now, forcing the BMW across into the bus lane. The three on the back seat hiss and swear and snort.

'Any fucking second, we *doing* it.'

In the passenger seat, he nods and his palm tightens, clammy around the handle of the gun against his knee.

'Lift it up, man, lift that thing up high. Show her what you got.'

Holding his breath, clenching; fighting the urge to piss right there in the car.

'What she *gettin'*.'

When he turns he can see that the woman in the BMW is scared enough already. Just a couple of feet away. Eyes all over the place; a twist of panic at the mouth.

He raises the gun.

'Do it.'

This was what he wanted, wasn't it?

Kissy-kissy noises from the back seat.

'*Do* it, man.'

He leans across and fires.

'Again.'

The Cavalier pulls away at the second shot, and he strains to keep the silver car in sight; leans further out, the rain on his neck, oblivious to the shouting around him and the fat hands slapping his back.

He watches as the BMW lurches suddenly to the left and smashes up and over the pavement; sees the figures at the bus stop, the bodies flying.

What he wanted . . .

A hundred feet from it, more, he can hear the crunch as the bonnet crumples. And something else: a low thump, heavy and wet, and then the scream of metal and dancing glass that fades as they accelerate away.

THREE WEEKS EARLIER

PART ONE

LIE, LIKE BREATHING

ONE

Helen Weeks was used to waking up feeling sick, feeling like she'd hardly slept, and feeling like she was on her own, whether Paul was lying beside her or not.

He was up before her this morning, already in the shower when she walked slowly into the bathroom and leaned down to throw up in the sink. Not that there was much to it. A few spits; brown and bitter strings.

She rinsed her mouth out, pressed her face against the glass door on her way through to get the breakfast things ready. 'Nice arse,' she said.

Paul smiled and turned his face back to the water.

When he walked into the living room ten minutes later, Helen was already tucking into her third piece of toast. She'd laid everything out on their small dining-table – the coffee pot, cups, plates and dishes they'd bought from The Pier when they'd first moved in – carried the jam and peanut butter across from the fridge on a tray, but Paul reached straight for the cereal as always.

It was one of the things she still loved about him: he was a big kid who'd never lost the taste for Coco Pops.

She watched him pour on the milk, rub at the few drops he spilled with a finger. 'Let me iron that shirt.'

'It's fine.'

'You didn't do the sleeves.' He never did the sleeves.

'No point. I'll have my jacket on all day.'

'It'll take me five minutes. It might warm up later on.'

'It's pissing down out there.'

They ate in silence for a while. Helen thinking she should maybe go and turn on the small TV in the corner, but guessing that one of them would have something to say eventually. There was music bleeding down from the flat upstairs anyway. A beat and a bassline.

'What have you got on today?'

Paul shrugged, and swallowed. 'God knows. Find out when I get in, I suppose. See what the skipper's got lined up.'

'You finishing six-ish?'

'Come on, *you* know. If something comes up, it could be any time. I'll ring you.'

She nodded, remembering a time when he would have done. 'What about the weekend?'

Paul looked across at her, grunted a 'what?' or a 'why?'

'We should try to see a few houses,' Helen said. 'I was going to get on the phone today, fix up a couple of appointments.'

Paul looked pained. 'I told you, I don't know what I'm doing yet. What's coming up.'

'We've got six weeks. *Maybe* six weeks.'

He shrugged again.

She hauled herself up, walked across to drop a couple more slices of bread in the toaster. Tulse Hill was OK; *better* than OK if you wanted to buy a kebab or a second-hand car. Brockwell Park and Lido were a short walk away and there was plenty happening five minutes down the hill in the heart of Brixton. The flat itself was nice enough; *secure*, a couple of floors up with a lift that worked most of the time. But they couldn't stay. One and a bit bedrooms – the double and the one you'd fail to swing a kitten in – small kitchen and living room, small bathroom. It would all start to feel a damn sight smaller in a month and a half, with a pushchair in the hall and a playpen in front of the TV.

'I might go over, see Jenny later.'

'Good.'

Helen smiled, nodded, but she knew he didn't think it was good at all. Paul had never really seen eye to eye with her sister. It hadn't helped that Jenny had known about the baby before he had.

Had known a few other things, too.

She carried her toast across to the table. 'You had a chance to talk to the Federation rep yet?'

'About?'

'Jesus, Paul.'

'*What?*'

Helen almost dropped her knife, seeing the look on his face.

The Metropolitan Police gave female officers thirteen weeks after having a baby, but they were rather stingier when it came to paternity leave. Paul had been – was *supposed* to have been – arguing his case for an extension on the five days' paid leave he had been allocated.

'You said you would. That you *wanted* to.'

He laughed, empty. 'When did I say that?'

'Please . . .'

He shook his head, chased cereal around his bowl with the back of the spoon as though there might be some plastic toy he'd missed. 'He's got more important things to worry about.'

'Right.'

'*I've* got more important things.'

Paul Hopwood worked as a detective sergeant on a CID team based a few miles north of them in Kennington. An Intelligence Unit. He'd heard every joke that was trotted out whenever *that* came up in conversation.

Helen felt herself reddening; wanting to shout but unable to. 'Sorry,' she said.

Paul dropped his spoon, shoved the bowl away.

'I just don't see what could be . . .' Helen trailed off, seeing that Paul wasn't listening, or wanted to give that impression. He had picked up

the cereal packet and was still studying the back of it intently as she pushed back her chair.

When Paul had gone, and she'd cleared away the breakfast things, Helen stood under the shower for a while, stayed there until she'd stopped crying, and got dressed slowly. A giant bra and sensible pants, sweatshirt and blue and white jogging bottoms. Like she had a lot of choice.

She sat in front of *GMTV* until she felt her brain liquidising, and moved across to the sofa with the property pages of the local paper.

West Norwood, Gipsy Hill, Streatham. Herne Hill if they stretched themselves; and Thornton Heath if they had no other choice.

More important things . . .

She thumbed through the pages, circling a few likely-looking places, all ten or fifteen grand more than they'd budgeted for. She'd need to go back to work a damn sight quicker than she'd thought. Jenny had said she'd chip in with the childcare.

'You're an idiot if you rely on Paul,' Jenny had said. '*However* much free time he gets.'

Blunt as always, her younger sister, and hard to argue with.

'He'll be fine when the baby comes.'

'How will *you* be?'

The music was getting louder upstairs. She'd tell Paul to have a word when he got a chance. She moved through to the bedroom, sat down to try and do something with her hair. She thought men who described pregnant women as 'radiant' were a bit weird; same as people who thought they had the right to touch your belly whenever the hell they felt like it. She swallowed, sour all the way down, unable to remember the last time Paul had wanted to touch it.

They were well past the 'goodbye kiss on the doorstep' stage, of course they were, but they were well past far too many other things. She wasn't feeling a lot like sex admittedly, but she would have been well out of luck if she was. Early on she'd been gagging for it, like a lot of women a month or so in, if you believed the books, but Paul had lost interest fairly quickly. It wasn't uncommon; she'd read that, too. Blokes

feeling differently once the whole motherhood business came into it. Hard to look at your partner in the same way, to *desire* them, even before there's a belly appearing.

It was much more complicated, their relationship, but maybe there was some of that going on.

'Poor little bugger doesn't want me poking him in the eye,' Paul had said.

Helen had scoffed, said, 'I doubt you'd reach his eye,' but neither of them had really felt like laughing much.

She pushed her hair back, and lay down; trying to make herself feel better by remembering earlier times, when things weren't quite as bad. It was a trick that had worked once or twice, but these days she was having trouble remembering how they'd been before. The three years they'd been together before things had gone wrong.

Before the stupid rows and the *fucking* stupid affair.

She could hardly blame him for it, for thinking that there were more important things than her. Than a place for them to live. The two of them and the baby that might not be his.

She decided that she'd go and have a word about the music herself; the student in the flat above seemed nice enough. But she couldn't rouse herself from the bed, thinking about Paul's face.

The looks.

Angry, as though she had no idea at all how hurt he still felt. And vacant, like he wasn't even there; sitting at the table a few feet away and staring at the back of the stupid cereal box, like he was reading about that missing plastic toy.

As Paul Hopwood drove, he tried hard to think about work; singing along with the pap on Capital Gold and thinking about meetings and stroppy sergeants and anything at all except the mess he'd left behind.

Toast and fucking politeness. Happy families . . .

He turned right and waited for the sat-nav to tell him he'd made a mistake; for the woman with the posh voice to tell him he should turn around at the earliest possible opportunity.

The ghost of a smile, thinking about a lad he knew at Clapham nick who'd suggested they should make these things with voices designed for men with 'specialist interests'.

'It'd be brilliant, Paul. She says "turn left", you ignore her, she starts getting a bit strict with you. "I said turn left, you *naughty* boy." Sell like hot cakes, mate. Ex-public school boys and all that.'

He turned up the radio, switched the wipers to intermittent.

Happy families. Christ on a bike . . .

Helen had been turning on that look for weeks now, the hurt one. Like she'd suffered enough and he should be man enough to forget what had happened, because she needed him. All well and good, but clearly he hadn't been man enough where it had counted, had he?

Mrs Plod, the copper's tart.

That look, like she didn't recognise him any more. Then the tears, and her hands always slipping down to her belly, like the kid was going to drop out if she sobbed too hard or something. Like all this was *his* fault.

He knew what she was thinking, secretly. What she'd been telling her soppy sister on the phone every night. 'He'll come round when he sees the baby.' Right, of course, everything would be fine and dandy when the sodding baby came.

Baby make it better.

The sat-nav woman told him to go left and he ignored her, slammed his hands against the wheel in time with the music and bit the ulcer on the inside of his bottom lip.

Christ, he *hoped* so. He hoped it would all be fine more than anything, but he couldn't quite bring himself to tell Helen. He wanted so much to look down at that baby and love it without thinking, and *know* it was his. Then they could just get on with it. That was what people *did*, wasn't it, ordinary idiots like them, even when it seemed as if they had no chance at all?

Those looks, though; and that stupid pleading tone in her voice. It was killing off the hope a bit at a time.

The voice from the sat-nav told him to take the first exit off the

upcoming roundabout. He bit down harder on the ulcer and took the third. Kennington was programmed in as the destination, same as always. It didn't matter that he knew the route backwards, because it wasn't where he was going anyway.

'Please turn around at the first possible opportunity.'

He enjoyed these trips, listening to the snotty cow's instructions and ignoring them. Sticking his fingers up. It got him where he *was* going in the right frame of mind.

'Please turn around.'

He reached across, took a packet of tissues from the glove compartment and spat out the blood from the ulcer.

He hadn't been doing what people expected of him for quite a while.