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The Killing Joke

Anthony Horowitz

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ONE

There's this guy, goes into a bar . . .

TWO

His name was Guy Fletcher. He was thirty years old, reasonably good-looking and thoroughly pissed off. You'd have to be pretty pissed off to choose the Cat and Fiddle, one of the most inhospitable pubs in North London if not the entire world. This wasn't a cheery riverside inn with a smiling landlord and a choice of real ales. It wasn't even a place to come for a quick half-pint and a chat after work with your mates. The Cat and Fiddle was a dark, dirty hell-hole situated in a street of garish plastic signs, garbage toppling out of bins and graffiti scrawled across the walls, just round the corner from Finsbury Park tube station. The building looked as inviting as a butcher's shop and smelt like one too, thanks to its neighbours, both of which *were* butcher's shops, with windows full of grey, damp meat hanging on improbably large hooks, being gently cured by the exhaust fumes from the passing traffic.

A lot of the local pubs had been prettified over the years – given stripped pine floors and almost edible food – but not this one. The Cat and Fiddle wore its brass horseshoes, fake flintlock pistols and collection of antique beer mats with pride. The carpet was quite possibly the original, Victorian or even Georgian, discoloured and made rancid by generations of spilled drinks. The pebbledash wallpaper was nicotine yellow. The sort of people who came to the Cat and Fiddle never went anywhere else. Indeed, to look at them, you'd think they never went anywhere at all. They had a hopeless sort of look, as if they had been trapped there for ever.

Guy was different. He had chosen to come here, wandering down from the more elevated surroundings of Muswell Hill, because he wanted to be alone and because he knew with certainty that there was no chance at all that he would bump into any of his friends. He was going to get drunk. And here was another

advantage of the Cat and Fiddle. If he did manage to get so pissed that his speech blurred, he wet himself on the way to the toilet and vomited over the fruit machine, he would blend in nicely with the crowd. They might even invite him to join the darts team.

There was just one problem. Guy didn't terribly like alcohol. He never had done, not since, aged eleven, he had shoplifted a bottle of cherry brandy with two friends and wound up winning the Edgware General Hospital (under-thirteen) record for the longest time attached to a stomach pump. He had learnt the obvious lesson: that cherry brandy, like almost everything containing cherries, is either naff (Black Forest gateau) or (Coca-Cola) just nasty. But since then he had failed to find any alcoholic drink that appealed.

He ran an eye over the various pumps that stood to attention behind the sodden towels laid over the bar. Adnam's or Waddington's? He drank beer occasionally but not with any real pleasure. In truth, he didn't really understand it.

Here was something that began life as a spiky, alien-looking and otherwise useless plant, then had to be put through a series of bizarre, almost ritualistic processes to produce – what? A liquid that came with the colour of cold tea, tasted of chemicals and required a massive, bladder-stretching intake before it had any effect. Bottled beer – German or Belgian – with its fanciful names and even more fanciful prices was worse. As far as Guy was concerned, it was just a little bit sad that the Germans, who had produced Bach and Goethe, were still capable of holding summer festivals where they dressed up in leather trousers and braces and made complete fools of themselves all on account of a cold drink.

He didn't mind a glass of good wine, although how he hated the po-faced language of that. 'A good wane'. It was impossible even to say it without sounding middle class. And it bothered him that he didn't actually know what a good wine was. He hated going into off-licences where the rows and rows of bottles seemed to sneer at him quite wilfully, just like the imported French shop assistants. The labels told him nothing. One bottle might come with a picture of a poplar-lined avenue and distant *château* – but the stuff inside had probably been pressure-hosed into a huge silver juggernaut. Some transport company from an industrial zone outside Paris that carried diesel or fertiliser Mondays to Thursdays and then, after a quick rinse, wine for the rest of the week. And what about the people who could judge a wine by its legs, its

bouquet, its robustness? They were all, invariably, complete wankers. Guy had never been able to detect honeyed undertones or the scent of gooseberries in anything. He sometimes wondered if the whole thing hadn't been invented by the French (typically devious and underhand) to sell what was, at the end of the day, only a fermented grape.

Anyway, wine was out of the question at the Cat and Fiddle. Anything served here would have the delicate bouquet of white spirit and would be corroding the inside of the cardboard box it came in even as it was poured.

He glanced up at the spirit bottles, hanging upside-down in a row. The Cat and Fiddle specialised mainly in cheap brands he'd never heard of. Who would have suspected there was a vodka called 'Shooting Tsar'? He decided to give it a miss. His eye travelled past the Bailey's to the gin, and for a moment he was tempted.

Gin and tonic. Here was a drink with echoes of Noël Coward and faded royalty. He liked the fact that it was a collision of two mysteries. The recipe for Beefeater gin, he had read once, was a closely guarded secret, known only to the most senior member of the Beefeater family. He could imagine a terribly old, white-haired man on a life-support machine in some private clinic, lifting his head to address the waiting family.

'You add juniper berries, the zest of three lemons and . . . and . . . and . . .'

Tonic water – that was the other mystery. Didn't it contain quinine, a drug that the Victorians had taken to combat malaria until they discovered that it was even more lethal than the disease itself? Gin and tonic. A drink redolent of scandal and depravity and yet, to the whole of suburban England, there was nothing nicer.

But it was out of the question at the Cat and Fiddle. Ask for a gin and tonic in the wrong tone of voice and he could end up with a broken nose.

In the end, he went for a Scotch. That was safe. A single, gruff syllable. 'Scotch.' Then: 'A double.' He liked the sound of that. It made him feel better already.

Guy was getting drunk because he felt his career was going nowhere and because his girlfriend, Kate, had just gone somewhere . . . that is, out of the house and his life. He was drinking to forget that although he was now thirty and had been thirty for the

last eleven days, he was living in a cramped flat only half a mile away from the street where he had been brought up. Three decades and he'd only managed to make it up Park Road, left at the traffic lights and left again into Mapletree Close. Some progress!

He threw back his first double, noticing that the glass had not been washed. Or maybe the dishwasher had managed to fuse somebody's lipstick into the rim. He gestured at the barman, who was bald and drab with a face that would have done him well if only he'd considered a move into the funeral industry. 'Another.' It came in the same glass. There was something faintly depressing about the way the optic measured out the right amount, down to the last drop. Maybe he should have chosen a cocktail bar where the bottles were thrown and spun and where this self-pitying descent into oblivion would at least have been given the colourful veneer of a circus act.

He looked around him.

The lounge bar of the Cat and Fiddle was crowded. This wasn't difficult as the room was very small. Guy could make out fifteen or twenty people through the clouds of cigarette smoke that hovered over them like ectoplasm. It was the usual mix of London Underground workers, aggressive builders, dead-eyed old-age pensioners, tarty girls and tattooed boys. A man with a fat lower lip and a Popeye arm was throwing a dart at a board. Thunk! Double twenty. Like all darts players, he just looked bored. Three of the long-term unemployed were playing pool on a table whose green baize had worn to the consistency of old paint. There was a fruit machine in a corner, its lights flashing and endlessly rearranging themselves. Come on. Play me. Win twenty pounds. An old woman with bright red lipstick was feeding it with pound coins. So far she hadn't won anything. Perry Como was playing on the sound system.

Guy (on his third double) fitted in well enough. In his faded jeans, plain T-shirt and very old leather jacket, he could have been a drug-dealer, a minicab driver, a dozen things rather than the moderately successful actor that he actually was. Successful in the sense that he was seldom out of work. Moderately, because he didn't get the work he actually wanted. His clear blue eyes, roguish smile and fashionably untidy fair hair would have made him a perfect hero or even the perfect hero's best friend who tragically gets mown down just when you think everything's going

to be all right. Unfortunately, these parts were never offered to him. Too often, the parts that did come his way had the word 'bit' attached to the front end. He was the suspect who never had anything to do with the crime, the messenger upstaged by his own message, the love interest who was neither loved nor particularly interesting.

It should have been otherwise. Guy was well-built, with a square face and broad shoulders. He looked as if he could look after himself, which, in fact, he couldn't. That is, he couldn't cook, couldn't sew, couldn't programme a video or sort out a glitch in a computer, couldn't even maintain the Kawasaki 600cc motorbike he had bought at a knock-down price from a friend who had, indeed, been knocked down. (There was an opportunistic side to him – but at least he had the good grace to feel guilty about it.) All in all, he did not look like an actor, which, in the Cat and Fiddle where acting was almost certainly synonymous with homosexuality, was probably a good thing.

'The fuckers don't know a fucking thing.'

'Fuck 'em.'

'Fuck the lot of them.'

The conversation in the pub was a soft, semi-incoherent babble punctuated by fucks. Somebody spoke to the old woman at the fruit machine and she screeched, briefly, with laughter, then added another coin. A very thin man with a grey, twisted face, as lifeless as an old tea-towel, slumped forward on to his table, a cigarette trailing out of his lips. Another dart thudded into the board.

'Same again.' Guy had reached his fourth double and the room was beginning to spin.

This performance, this one-man adaptation of *The Lost Weekend*, was pathetic. He knew it. But what else was he to do? Kate had left him. After four years – well, three and a half anyway – Kate had told him . . .

'I'm sorry, Guy. I really am. But I just feel that the way we are together . . . our relationship . . . it isn't going anywhere.'

'Kate . . . what do you mean? What are you talking about?'

'I can't breathe. I do love you. It isn't your fault. I just feel I need my own space.'

'No, Kate. I can't accept that. I don't believe that.'

'Guy . . .'

'Tell me the truth!'

'I've told you . . .'

'Kate . . .'

'All right. I'm shagging Martin.'

Was that what she had said? They'd both been a little drunk when they'd had that final, stale row. But sometimes, when he played it back in his head, it sounded like a bad sit-com with himself, uncharacteristically, in the main part.

And how had Martin got into it? Martin of all people! His best mate five years before at the Clairemont Theatre School! Guy was dumbfounded. Martin Mayhew was a slob. That was what Kate had always said. He had no idea about personal hygiene. And Kate couldn't stand him. At least, that was what Guy had thought. In fact, the two of them had been seeing each other while he had been in the middle of the worst job he'd ever had: a three-month stint in a daytime soap where the sets were as shaky as the scripts and the director – well into his sixties – was often shakier than either. He'd actually rung her once. He was shooting a steamy scene with an actress and he was worried about it. He wanted to tell Kate that he was only doing it because it was in the script, that he didn't fancy the actress and that there wouldn't be any tongues. And all the time . . .! It wasn't fair.

And, while he was thinking about it, what did it all say about his career? Three months shooting total dross in a suburb of Manchester had certainly been the low point of the millennium – but work had been thin on the ground and his agent had persuaded him that it wouldn't do him any harm. Since nobody watched the programme, nobody would know he had been in it. And it had been no more demeaning than waiting in a restaurant or a stint in telesales . . . both of which he'd done in his time. Hadn't they all? And yet he'd had a good year up until then. Guest spots in *E for Emergency, Policemen's Wives* and *The Manchester Murders*: all prime-time shows. Two fairly substantial scenes in an English film, which was being pitched as the next *Full Monty*. Even a series of advertisements for a new coffee.

A good year. Or so it had seemed at the time. Now, savouring the suddenly acrid taste of the whisky, he wondered. Just how solid a career was he building if its high spot was his role as the hero of a Nescafé commercial? And as for the film – who did he think he was kidding? Every English film was pitched as the next *Full Monty*. At script stage, in casting, production and right up to the release. It was only when it finally crawled onto the smallest screen at the local Odeon, met a barrage of venomous reviews and

retired, hurt, to the bottom shelf of the video shop that anyone would admit that it was actually a pile of crap. But by then, of course, the producers would have moved on. Working on the next *Billy Elliott* . . .

Moderately successful or barely successful?

On the set of the *Full Monty* fiasco he had stood next to Ewan McGregor – who had managed to be both cocky and dull – and had felt the distance between them. At that moment he had experienced an uncharacteristic surge of . . . well, it was professional jealousy, really. Envy. Bitterness edging on psychopathic hatred. He was never going to make it to Hollywood. He was never going to be paid millions for making movies as irredeemably awful as *Attack of the Clones*. He was just going to have to stay in Muswell Hill with Kate.

Without Kate. She had gone.

He became aware of the group of builders nearest to him. Why did he automatically assume they were builders? Oh, yes. They were dressed in overalls and had quite enormous buttocks. They were standing at the bar, smoking, drinking, telling jokes.

'. . . and so the man's zipping up his fly and suddenly he's feeling guilty, so he says, 'I think there's something you should know. I'm not really Jesus Christ.' And the nun says, 'I think there's something *you* should know. I'm really the bus conductor.'

And they all laughed. Big, retching laughs that spilled the beer and turned a few heads round them. Even the thin man with the cigarette woke up briefly. For his part, Guy just felt depressed. He had never understood jokes. Of course, he'd swapped stories with other actors. Bad directors, worse scripts, terrible disasters involving inexperienced stuntmen or special effects that had gone horribly wrong . . . There were plenty of laughs in that. But that was real life. Shared experience. Jokes were something quite different.

Why did people tell jokes? Mainly because they were pissed. After a certain amount of alcohol – cherry brandy or whatever – normal conversation became difficult and jokes more or less looked after themselves. People who didn't know each other told jokes. They were useful to fill in awkward silences at dinner parties. Guy had had an uncle who was always telling jokes. Dear old Uncle Sid lived on his own in a single room in Battersea and was still laughing the day they cremated him.

'I heard this great joke the other day . . .'

Guy had always found it just about impossible to laugh at jokes. Laughter surely comes from the unexpected and yet a joke both demands and expects laughter. It is therefore by its very nature self-defeating. And yet he always felt the dreadful need, the obligation to tell one back, like a missionary exchanging beads with a tribe of cannibals. He'd heard a joke and so – God help him – he'd have to tell one, which meant searching desperately through his memory for any joke he could remember while at the same time knowing he would mangle whatever it was he happened to find, screwing up the opening and probably forgetting the punch-line. He was an actor. He could speak funny lines . . . even those written by Shakespeare or Shaw. But jokes defeated him. And so he listened to these braying voices with a growing sense of annoyance. Didn't these people have anything else to talk about?

But now that they'd started, they meant to go on. He looked at them over the top of his whisky glass. The leader was a man in blue overalls that were struggling to hold the various contours of his body – like a badly stuffed duvet. He had a spatchcock nose and narrow, watery eyes. The other was an apprentice, about eighteen, with a single earring and acne. The third had his back to Guy. All he could see was a thick neck, more blue overalls and those overripe buttocks.

It was this man – the third man – who told the next joke.

'Why is Selina Moore like a Ferrero Rocher?'

For a moment, Guy experienced a sense of total clarity, the taste of the whisky and the sting of the cigarette smoke snatched away.

They were telling a joke about Selina Moore!

Of course, they didn't know. There were very few people in the world who knew the truth about him and Selina Moore, England's most successful and most glamorous Oscar-winning actress. He had never met her but she was everything to him: the centre, the very pedestal of his life. She was everything he had ever aspired to be. He loved her.

And, for that matter, he was also rather fond of Ferrero Rocher. He had actually appeared as the youngest of the guests in the original advertisement for the oversized chocolate, the now notorious ambassador's party, which had become a laughing stock in every country it had been shown, curiously without doing any harm to sales.

Just one week ago, Selina Moore had died. She had been killed

when her plane crashed into an orphanage in south-west France. And now these men were telling a joke about her.

'Why is Selina Moore like a Ferrero Rocher?'

Guy waited with a sense of dread. Could it be something to do with the gold paper, the layer of wafer, the hazelnut in the middle?

The answer came.

'Because they both come out of France in a box.'

Haar, haar, haar, haar. The joke wasn't even slightly funny but it got the same, ponderous laughter. And weren't Ferrero Rocher made in Switzerland anyway?

'Excuse me. I knew Selina Moore.' Guy looked round to see who had spoken and realised, with a queasy sort of thrill, that it was himself. He had stepped forward and now he was right among the three men, in their face, so to speak. He had accosted them. It was incredible. He had only drunk eight whiskies, surely not enough to bring on a death wish.

'You what?' the youngest one asked, putting down his pint. There was a moustache of froth on his upper lip. The other two were looking at him curiously, as if he was something unhygienic.

'She was a brilliant actress. She was fantastic. Did you see her Desdemona at the RSC?'

'What the fuck do you want?' the man who had told the joke asked. Now that Guy could see his face, he was a nightmare. Twisted nose, crooked teeth and cauliflower ears. Guy realised he had probably seen very little of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1989 season.

But he couldn't stop himself now. He was too drunk to negotiate his way out. 'She was a great actress,' he said. 'She did a lot of charity work. She was someone who tried to make a difference.' And then, insanely, 'Eleven children got killed in that plane crash. I don't think it's something you should be making a joke about. That's all.'

'Who the fuck gives a fuck what you think?' the leader asked.

'Wait a minute! Wait a minute!' The joke-teller, whose sense of humour had rapidly evaporated, held up a hand. Guy noticed that he had knuckles like oyster shells. 'I'm talking to my mates. Who said you could fucking eavesdrop?'

'It's just that Selina was—' Guy began.

The joke-teller hit him. Not with his fist. He simply leant forward and Guy felt something unbelievably hard smash into the side of his face. He jerked back, knowing that he had been head-butted.

Warm blood cascaded over his lip. His knees crumpled – fortunately, for if he had remained standing he might have been hit again. He fell on to the floor, taking a bar-stool with him, and the crash brought a few seconds' silence to the Cat and Fiddle though not to the juke-box, which was now playing 'Stand By Your Man'. The three builders finished their drinks and walked out together, heads held high, obviously pleased with themselves. The barman shook his head wearily. The woman at the fruit machine laughed again. Life went on as normal.