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Blue Lights and Long Nights

Les Pringle

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Extract

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‘I’ve been drinking vodka all my life, sir, and I’ve never seen a reindeer before. Honestly I haven’t.’

Chapter One

In the grey light of early morning it was difficult to make sense of what I was looking at. A man, clad in a dressing gown, appeared to be kneeling on the end of the bed. His body leaned forward slightly with both arms hanging in space. It was a position that defied gravity, making the figure look as if it had been frozen in the act of falling. The chalky whiteness of his skin glowed dully from the shadows but equally unsettling was the utter stillness of the scene. I moved closer and tentatively reached out to take his wrist: it was as cold as a block of marble. I tried to move the fingers, but they were stiff and unyielding. Reluctantly, I looked properly into his face. The eyes and mouth were half open and the lips, white on the edges, had turned a deep purple.

A taut line of cord emerged from somewhere behind his neck, stretching upwards to a hook embedded in a door near the foot of the bed. His knees were resting on the bed but it was the noose that had taken most of his weight. The cord had bitten deep, disappearing into the folds of flesh under his chin and forcing his head slightly to one side. I glanced at Paul, but he just shrugged; there was nothing to be said.

The dead man's landlady had let us into the bedsit a few minutes earlier. She'd been nervous and after pushing open the door had retreated back into the hallway, refusing to go any further. I cast an eye over the little room. What light there was filtered through a solitary window, under which stood a small wooden dining table with a single chair drawn up beneath it. A half-used bottle of tomato sauce sat on a garish tablecloth. On our left was a sideboard with nothing on it save an unused ashtray and a clock. Next to the sideboard was a sink and next to that a two-ring cooker. There were no pictures, not even a mirror hanging against the tired wallpaper; no ornaments, no newspapers or books lying around, no television or radio, not so much as a dirty cup in the sink. The sauce bottle was the only indication that the place might be inhabited. It was more a prison cell ready for inspection than a home.

The dead man's resemblance to Paddy struck me from the start. He was about the same build and height, and had similarly angular features. In fact, the similarity was so uncanny that I made a mental note to tell Paddy when I saw him in the pub later that night. It would be the blackest of humour, but I could picture his wry smile if I were to go one step further and suggest that, for a moment, I had thought it was him hanging there. Then the sound of Paul rummaging through a drawer in the bedside table distracted me and I turned to see what he'd found. He was flicking through the pages of a building society passbook, looking for a clue to the man's identity.

'This has to be him, I suppose.' He read out a name. It didn't mean anything to me, but I wasn't paying attention. Something was wrong. Something was gnawing at the back of my mind, leaving me feeling slightly sick. I moved closer to the body and looked carefully into the face for a second time. Paddy? No, surely not. It was too silly. I stepped back and checked from a different angle and, as I did so, my stomach turned to water.

'Oh God. Paddy . . . what have you done?'

This couldn't be happening. Paddy, the Aston Villa fan, would be in the pub tonight as usual. This was a dream. In desperation I looked to Paul, as if hoping he would tell me that it was all a big mistake. He stared back.

'What's wrong? Did you know him?'

His use of the past tense broke the spell and I sank heavily on to the wooden chair by the table. I tried to focus on the tomato sauce bottle.

'Yes, I know him.'

The darkest thought lurking in the mind of anyone working for the ambulance service is that one day you may be called to a friend or relative. Paddy wasn't a close friend, but close enough.

The pub was the only place we ever met. He would always be in the same spot, propping up the bar with a pint of Guinness at his elbow. From this vantage point he could survey the room and nod and smile at people as they came and went. He never seemed tempted to sit down with the regulars for a chat. Not that anyone took offence; it was accepted without comment that that was the way he was. It was enough for him to hear a chorus of 'Hello, Paddy' when he arrived, and 'Good night, Paddy' when he left. When someone did engage him in a snatched conversation at the bar, he would straighten up his tall, gaunt frame, smile and be perfectly affable. Yet, despite his easy-going disposition, there was no mistaking the loner in him. He was at one with the bustle and camaraderie the pub provided, albeit on his own terms.

In the three or four years I'd known him, I'd grown to like him, and had come to enjoy our brief conversations about football or whatever else took our fancy. But now guilt crept through my shock as I thought back to when I had last seen him, only a couple of days earlier. Had there been a clue? Something I'd missed? There must have been. Then again, if I had noticed something, what could I have done or said that might have

stopped him doing this? There were no answers. I would never know why he found death preferable to life but perhaps the small, empty world of his bedsit spoke for him. The pub was his real home. It was probably the only place in the world that offered him a sense of belonging, with the public bar the closest thing to a living room he'd known in adult life. But even there he was effectively anonymous. To my shame, I hadn't even known his real name.

I was calmer now but couldn't shake off the despondency that had enveloped me. What was I doing here? Why had I chosen a career that would inevitably lead me to confront events that most rational people would do anything to avoid? Years of asking myself the same question has delivered precious few answers, and none of them satisfactory. If I look back to my life before joining the ambulance service there are no clues to what motivated me, only a chain of thoughts that can be traced to a freezing afternoon in Edinburgh a lifetime ago.