REGINALD HILL

Good Morning, Midnight



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by the waters of Babylon

The war had been over for three weeks. Eventually the process of reconstruction would begin, but for the time being the ruins of the plant remained as they had been twenty-four hours after the missiles struck. By then the survivors had been hospitalized and the accessible dead removed. The smell of death rising from the inaccessible soon became intolerable but it didn't last long as the heat of the approaching summer accelerated decay and nature's cleansers, the flies and small rodents, went about their work.

Dust settled, sun and wind airbrushed the exposed rawness of cracked concrete till it was hardly distinguishable from the baked earth surrounding it, and a traveller in this antique land might have been forgiven for thinking that these relicts were as ancient as those of the great city of Babylon only a few miles away.

Finally, with the smells reduced to a bearable level and the dogs picking over the ruins showing no signs of turning even mangier than usual, some bold spirits living in the vicinity began to make their own exploratory forays.

The new scavengers found a degree of devastation so extensive that even the most technically minded of them couldn't work out the possible function of the plant's wrecked machinery. They gathered up whatever might be sellable or tradable or adaptable to some domestic purpose and left.

But not all of them. Khalid Kassem, at thirteen counting himself a man and certainly imbued with a sense of adventure and ambition

which was adult in its scope, hung back when his father and brothers departed. He was small for his age and slightly built, factors usually militating against his efforts to be taken seriously. In this case, however, he felt they could work to his advantage. He'd noticed a crack in a collapsed wall which he felt he might be able to squeeze through. Earlier while scavenging in the ruins of an office building he had come across a small torch, its bulb miraculously unbroken and its battery retaining enough juice to produce a faint beam. Instead of flaunting his find, he had concealed it, and when he spotted the crack and shone the light through it to reveal a chamber within, he began to feel divinely encouraged in his enterprise.

It was a tight squeeze even for one of his build, but eventually he got through and found himself in what looked to have been a basement storage area. There was blast damage here as there was everywhere and much of the ceiling had been shattered when the floors above had come crashing down, but no actual explosion seemed to have occurred in this space. Among the debris lay a scatter of metal crates, some intact, one or two broken open to reveal cuboids of some kind of lightweight foam cladding. Where this had split, Khalid's faint beam of light glanced back off dully gleaming machines. He broke some of the cladding away to get a better look and discovered the machine was further wrapped in a close-clinging transparent plastic sheet. Recently on a visit to relatives in Baghdad, he had seen a refrigerator stacked with packets of food wrapped like this. It was explained to him that all the air had been sucked out so that as long as the package remained unopened the food inside would remain fresh. These machines too, he guessed, were being kept fresh. It did not surprise him. Metal he knew was capable of decay, and machinery was, in his limited experience, even harder to keep in good condition than livestock.

There was unfortunately no way to profit from his discovery. Even if it had been possible to recover one of these machines, what would he and his family do with it?

He turned to go, and the faint beam of his torch touched a crate rather smaller than the rest. A long metal cylinder had fallen across it, splitting it completely open, like a knife slicing a melon. It was the shape of its contents that caught his eye. Obscured by the cylinder

1
dropping the loop

It was the last day of winter and the last night of Pal Maciver's life.

With only fifteen minutes to go, he was discovering that death was even stranger than he'd imagined.

Until the woman left, he'd been fine. From the first-floor landing he had watched her come through the open front door, trailing mist. She tried the light switch. Nothing happened. Standing in the dark she called his name. After all these years she still almost had the power to make him answer. Now was a critical moment. Not make-or-break critical. If she simply turned on her heel and walked away, it wasn't disastrous. Getting her there could still be made enough.

But he felt God owed him more.

She turned back to the open door. Winter, determined to show he didn't give a toss for calendars, had rallied his declining forces. There had been flurries of snow on the high moors but here in the city the best he could manage was a denial of light, at first with low cloud, then as the day wore on with mist rolling in from the surrounding countryside. But still enough light seeped in through the narrow window by the door for her to see the stub of candle and book of matches lying on the sill.

His fingers touched the microcassette in his pocket. Without taking it out he pressed the 'play' button. Two or three bars of piano music tinkled out, then he switched off.

Below in the hall it must have sounded so distant she was probably

already doubting she'd heard it at all. Perhaps indeed he'd overdone the muffling and she really hadn't heard it.

Then came the sputter of a match and a moment later he saw the amber glow of the candle.

God might not pay all his debts, but he kept up the interest.

Now the candle's glow moved beyond his range of vision but his ears kept track of her.

Ever a practical woman, she went straight down the passage leading to the kitchen where the electricity mains box was situated high on the wall. He pictured her reaching up to it. He heard her exclamation as the door swung open, releasing a shower of dust and debris. She hated being mussed. He heard the mains switch click down, could imagine her growing frustration as nothing happened.

The glow returned to the entrance hall. Lots of choice here. The two big-bayed reception rooms, the dining room, the music room. But her choice had been preordained. She headed for the music room. The door was locked but the key was in the lock. She tried it. It wouldn't turn. She tried to force it but she couldn't make it move.

She called his name once more, nothing uneasy in her voice and certainly nothing of panic, but with the calm clarity of a summons to supper.

She waited for a reply that by now she must have guessed wasn't coming.

He would have bet her next move would be to cut her losses and walk away. Even if she had the balls for it, he doubted she'd find any reason to come up the gloomy staircase with an uncertain light to confront the memories awaiting her there.

Wrong!

That was exactly what she was doing.

He almost admired her.

As she advanced, he retreated to the upper landing, matching his steps to hers. Would she want to visit the master bedroom? He guessed not and he was right. She went straight to the study door and tried to open it. Oh, this was good. When it didn't budge, she stood still for a moment before stooping like a comic-book gumshoe to apply her eye to the keyhole. By the vinegary light of the candle, he saw her steady herself with her left hand against the central oak panel.

This was better still! God was truly in a giving vein today.

Suddenly she straightened up and he took a step back into the protection of the black shadows of the upper landing. Now she was nothing to him but the outermost edge of the candle's faint aureole on the landing below. But the way she'd stood up had been enough. So had she always signalled by some undramatic but nonetheless emphatic movement – a twist of the hand, a turn of the head, a straightening of the shoulders – that a decision had been reached and would be acted on.

He saw the glow float down the stairs, wavering now as she moved with the swiftness of decision. He heard her firm step across the tiled entrance hall, then out on to the gravelled drive. She didn't close the door behind her. She would leave it as she found it. That too was typical of her.

He waited for half a minute then descended to the hallway. She'd blown the candle out and left it where she'd found it. He pulled on a pair of white cotton gloves and relit the stump, slipping the book of matches into his pocket. He went to the music-room door, removed the key and carefully folded it in a fresh white handkerchief. From the top pocket of his jacket he took an almost identical key, unlocked the door and replaced the key in the same pocket before moving into the kitchen. Here he opened the electricity supply box and reset the mains switch to off. Then he levered off the cover of the fuse box. From his pocket he took the household fuses and replaced them and clicked the mains switch on.

Immediately below the electricity box was a narrow glass-fronted key cupboard, each hook neatly labelled. He opened it, removed the key from his top pocket and hung it on the empty hook marked *Music Room*.

Some of the dust and debris she'd disturbed from the supply box had landed on top of the key cupboard, some had drifted down to the tiled floor. He took a dustpan and brush from under the sink and carefully swept the tiles but the cupboard top he ignored. He tipped the sweepings into the sink and turned on the tap, letting it run while he opened a wall unit and took out two cut-glass tumblers. From his hip pocket he took a silver flask and a small prescription bottle. From the former he poured whisky into both tumblers into one of which

he broke two capsules removed from the latter. He shook the mixture up before tossing it down his throat. He downed the other whisky too before lightly splashing water inside the tumblers, which he then shook and replaced upside down on the cupboard shelf.

Now he made his way back to the entrance hall and mounted the stairs. He inserted the key he had wrapped in his handkerchief into the study door. It turned with well-oiled ease. He wiped the handle clean with his glove and pushed open the door.

For a moment he stood there looking in, like an archaeologist who has broken into a tomb and hesitates to confront what he has been so energetic to discover.

And indeed there was something tomb-like about the room. The old oak panelling had darkened to a slatey blackness, heavily shuttered windows kept light and fresh air at bay and the atmosphere was dank and musty with the smell of old books emanating from two massive mahogany bookcases towering against the end walls. On the wall facing the door hung a half-length portrait of a man in rock-climbing gear with a triple-peaked mountain in the background. On one side of the portrait a coil of rope was mounted on the wall, on the other an ice axe. The painted face was severe and unsmiling as it glared down at the huge Victorian desk that loomed like an ancient sarcophagus in the centre of the floor.

Pal Maciver looked up at the man in the portrait and saw his own face there. He drew a deep breath and stepped over the threshold.

It was now that the strangeness started. Hitherto he had been the complete man of action, his whole being concentrated on the working out of his well-laid plans. But as he stepped through the doorway, awareness of that other darker threshold which was getting closer by the minute swept over him like the mist outside, leaving him helpless and floundering.

Then his strong will took command. There was still much work to do. He summoned Action Man back into control, and Action Man returned, but only at the price of a weird fragmentation of sensibility. Far from finding his mind wonderfully concentrated by the imminence of death, he discovered he was split in two, man of action and man of feeling, or rather in three, for here was the strangest thing of all, he found that, as well as the cast in this two-parter, he was

audience too, an independent and almost disinterested observer, floating somewhere near the portrait, looking down with pity on that part of him drifting wraithlike in a shapeless swirl of fear and loss and bewilderment and despair while at the same time noting with admiration the way that Action Man was going about his preparations with the dextrous precision of a maid laying a supper table.

Action Man moved across the study floor, placed the candle on the desk, checked that the heavy curtains were tightly drawn across the shuttered windows and switched on the bright central light. Across the desk lay a six-foot length of thread. He picked it up, took out a cigarette lighter, gently pressed the thumb switch to release gas without giving a spark, and ran the thread through the jet. Then he fed the thread through the keyhole, put the key into the lock on the inside of the door, twisted the internal end of the thread round the head of the key so that about three feet hung down, went out on to the landing, once more clicked on his lighter and put the flame to the dangling end. The flame ran up the thread, vanished into the keyhole, emerged on the inside, and ran round the loops on the key. He let it get within a couple of feet of the end then snuffed it out.

With his gloved hand he cleaned off all traces of the burnt thread from the outside of the door, then he closed it and with great care turned the key in the lock.

Against the wall about two feet from the door stood a tall Victorian whatnot. On the shelf at the same level as the door lock rested a portable record player. Its retaining screws had been slackened so that he could lift out the turntable. He made a running loop at the unburnt end of the thread, dropped it over the drive spindle and pulled it tight. Then he fed the burnt end out through the power cable aperture, replaced the turntable and tightened the restraining screws. He picked up a record leaning against the table leg and placed it on the turntable. He plugged the power cable into a socket in the skirting board, set the control switch to 'play' and turned on the power. The arm swung out and descended, setting the stylus in the groove. For the second time that evening the opening bars of that gentlest of tunes, the opening piece 'Of Foreign Lands and People' from Schumann's *Childhood Scenes*, sounded in the house.

He stood and watched as the rotations of the spindle wound the

thread into the depths of the machine. Just before it vanished he pinched the end between his thumb and finger, held it, pausing the music momentarily, then let it go.

He switched off the light. Darkness surged back, almost tangible, as if it longed to snuff out the candle. But the tiny flame burnt on, filling the hollows of his face with shadow and turning the peaks to parchment as he went behind the desk and sat down in the ornately carved mahogany elbow chair.

He opened a drawer and from it he took a book, which he set on the desk, a legal envelope and a fountain pen. Out of the envelope he took several sheets of heavy bond paper. He held a single sheet over the candle till it began to burn. He let it fall into a metal wastepaper bin by the chair. He lit a second sheet, did the same, then the others one by one. Tongues of fire showed at the bin's mouth, licking the darkness out of the study's gloomy corners before they shrank and died. The record was still playing. He listened and recognized the fourth of the *Childhood Scenes.* With an effort he summoned up its title. 'A Pleading Child'.

He shook the bin to make sure all the paper was consumed and stirred up the ashes with an ebony ruler, reducing them to a fine powder, some of which drifted up on the residual heat and hung in the air.

Now he rose again and went to the left-hand wall where alongside one of the bookcases a glass-fronted, metal-framed gun case was bolted on to the oak panelling. It was empty, covered with a soft pall of dust which he was careful not to disturb as he opened the door. He reached in, took hold of the gun-retaining clip, twisted it anticlockwise through ninety degrees, then pulled sharply. A section of panelling came away revealing a recess mirroring the cabinet in size and in function too. Here stood a shotgun, which unlike most other things in that room showed no sign of dusty neglect. It gleamed with a menacing beauty. Alongside it, on a leather-bound diary embossed with the year 1992, rested a pack of cartridges.

He took the gun and cartridges and returned to the desk. The music had reached piece number seven: 'Dreaming'. He sat down with the weapon across his lap, broke it and loaded it. From his pocket he

took a piece of string about a foot long with a loop at either end. He slipped one of the loops over the trigger, and leaned the weapon against the desk.

He checked his watch. Waited another thirty seconds. Picked up the fountain pen. Wrote in bold capitals on the envelope **FOR SUE-LYNN**. Set the pen down on the desktop. Checked his watch again. Stood up and went back to the gun case.

Up to this point he had done everything with steady purpose. Now he seemed touched by a sense of urgency.

He peeled off the gloves and tossed them into the secret recess, followed by his lighter, the matchbook, the microcassette, the hip flask and the prescription bottle. Next he replaced the panel, twisted the gun clip, shut the cabinet door, and went back to the chair into which he slumped with a finality which suggested he did not purpose rising again. He let the music back into his ears. Piece eleven was finishing. 'Something Frightening'. Then piece twelve began. 'Child Falling Asleep'.

He listened to it all the way through, asking himself, where had they gone, those thirty years?

As the music faded, he drew the book on the desktop towards him.

The final piece began. 'The Poet Speaks'.

He opened the book. He did not need to look for his place. It fell open with an ease that suggested that this was a page frequently visited.

And now the observer saw that other part of himself, that disembodied swirl of feeling, start to drift back into the corporeal chamber from which it had been temporarily expelled. Like Action Man, it had its calmness too, but this was the calm of despair, the acknowledgement that the end was near, a process perfectly captured by the words the eyes stared at but did not need to see.

He scanned it – staggered –
Dropped the Loop
To Past or Period –
Caught helpless at a sense as if
His Mind were going blind –

Feeling Man, the observer saw, was absolute for death, so completely separated from hope and time and sense and feeling and all the threads of experience which tie us lightly to life that he was far ahead of the meticulous preparation of Action Man for that journey from the familiarity of *now* into the mystery of *next* . . .

The music was coming to an end. The observer could hear it but Feeling Man had ears for nothing but the words of the poem as if they were being read aloud by the soft American voice of their creator . . .

Groped up, to see if God was there –
Groped backward at Himself

. . . while Action Man still went quietly about his business, removing his left shoe and sock, bringing the gun between his legs with the stock firmly on the floor, slipping the loop of string over his big toe, grasping the barrel with both hands and holding it steady against the edge of the desk, then leaning forward and pressing the soft underpart of his chin hard against the muzzle.

Now the quiet voice in Feeling Man's mind speaks the final words

Caressed a Trigger absently
and wandered out of Life

while Action Man lowers his left foot, and Observing Man, rather to his surprise, has time to see the ball of shot burn its way up through jaw and palate, squirting blood from mouth and nostrils and punching out the eyes before emerging through the top of his skull in a fountain of bone and brain which spatters floor and desk and open book.

For a millisec reason and sensation and observation are reunited in one consciousness.

Then the empty body slumps to one side, the record dies away, the fine ash from the wastepaper bin slowly settles, the candle gutters.

Pal Maciver exists no longer.

Except in the hearts and minds and lives of those he leaves behind.