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Rupture

Written by Simon Lelic

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RUPTURE

SIMON LELIC

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PICADOR



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rupture [noun]: *an instance
of breaking or bursting
suddenly and completely*

I wasn't there. I didn't see it. Me and Banks were down by the ponds, pissing about with this Sainsbury's trolley we found on the common. We were late already so we decided to ditch. Get in, Banks says. You get in, I say. In the end, I get in. I'm always the one getting in. He pushes me for a bit over the field but the wheels keep seizing up, even though the grass is short and it hasn't rained in a month. Sainsbury's trolleys are shit. There's a Waitrose just opened up where the Safeway used to be and their trolleys are built like Volkswagens. Sainsbury's get theirs from France or Italy or Korea or something. They're like Daewoos. Although Ming says Daewoo means fuck yourself in Chinese, which is the only reason I'd ever buy one.

How many was it in the end? I heard thirty. Willis said sixty but you can't trust Willis. He reckons his uncle played for Spurs, years ago, in the eighties or something, and that he can get tickets whenever he likes. He never can though. I've asked him like four times but he always comes up with some excuse. Not cup games, he says. He can't get tickets for cup games. Or I asked too late. Says I have to tell him weeks in advance. Months.

SIMON LELIC

Not the day before, even though it wasn't the day before, it was a Monday or a Tuesday or something and the game wasn't till Saturday.

So how many was it?

Oh. Really? Oh.

Just five?

Oh.

Well, anyway. That's where we were when we heard: down by the ponds. There's this track that runs round the edge. It's made of planks. There are gaps where the wheels can get wedged and it feels like you're off-roading in a Skoda but you can get up some speed. You have to watch the flowerpots. They stick out into the path and you can't move em cos the council have nailed em to the floor. I dunno why they bothered. They're full of Coke cans now, not flowers.

When I say we heard, I don't mean we heard it happen. School was half a mile away, back across the railway tracks. But these year eights turn up just as Banks decides to have a go in the trolley. He gets his foot caught and sort of falls, not arse over gob but enough to make me laugh. I shouldn't of. He gets pissed and starts having a go. And then the year eights turn up and even though they haven't seen him trip, Banks decides to have a go at them.

It was weird though. They're crying, the year eights. Two of em are, any rate. The other one just kind of stares. Not at anything in particular. Like he's watching TV on the inside of his glasses.

So anyway, Banks starts having a go but the year eights just kind of let him. They don't run or mouth off or try to fight

or anything. I recognise one of em. Ambrose, his name is. My sister, she's in year eight too, she knows him and says he's okay so I ask him what's going on. He can't speak. His words come out all squashed and stuck together. Banks turns on him but I tell him to leave it. In the end one of the others tells us. I don't remember his name. Spotty kid. Normally I'd say shut the fuck up but he's the only one making any sense.

Banks wants to take the trolley with us but I tell him there'll be police and that there so he shoves it in a bush and says to the year eights if they take it he'll shit in their mouths. They don't look much interested in the trolley, to be fair. The spotty kid nods just the same, all wide-eyed like, but the other two don't look like they've even noticed the trolley.

I've never run to school in my life. Neither's Banks, I guess. I remember we were laughing, not cos it was funny, just cos it was something, you know?

I say to Banks, who do you think did it?

Jones, Banks says. It was Jones, I know it.

How do you know it?

I just do. He was pissed all last week after Bickle made him sing on his own in assembly.

Bickle, that's Mr Travis, the headmaster. That's what we call him cos basically he's mental.

You won't tell him I said that, will you?

Anyway, I don't say anything for a moment. Then I say, I bet it was one of them Goths. One of them kids with the hair and the jeans and the boots they wear in the summer.

Banks sort of scrunches his nose, like he doesn't want to admit it but he thinks I'm probably right.

SIMON LELIC

Have you seen *Taxi Driver*, by the way?

You should.

We hear the sirens before we see the school. We've heard em already I expect but we haven't noticed em. And when we get there I count ten police cars at least. Shitty ones, Fiestas and that, but they're everywhere, all with their lights going. But I guess you know that. You were there, right?

But you got there later?

Thought so. Cos it's your case, right? You're in charge.

Sort of? What does that mean?

Well, anyway, there are ambulances there too and a fire engine for some reason. Some are still moving, just arriving I guess. The rest are all across the street and halfway up the pavement like someone's asked my mum to park em.

I'm sweating and I stop and I hear Banks panting beside me. We aren't laughing any more.

Everyone's going the opposite way. They're leaving the building, any rate. At the pavement everyone's sort of gathered, hanging together in groups. There are some year sevens near the teachers, just outside the gates. The sixth-formers are furthest away, across the road on the edge of the common and just along from me and Banks. I can't see any of our lot but people keep blocking my view. It's like three-thirty or parents' night or a fire drill or something, or all of them things at once.

Check it out, says Banks and he's pointing at Miss Hobbs. She's carrying some kid in her arms, crossing the playground towards the gates. There's blood on em but I can't tell whose.

Are you sure it was only five?

Well, whatever. So Miss Hobbs is crossing the playground,

wobbling and swaying and looking like she's about to drop this kid but no one helps her, not till she reaches the gates. All around her kids are buzzing about and the police, they're going the other way, into the school. Then Miss Hobbs yells, she's got quite a yell I can tell you, like the time she yelled at Banks for flicking his sandwich crusts at Stacie Crump, and one of the ambulance men spots her and legs it over with a stretcher. They disappear after that, behind the ambulance, and that's when I see Jenkins with the others by the lights.

I tug at Banks and I point and we weave in and out the cars and over to the crossing.

Where you been? says Jenkins.

What's happening? I ask him.

Someone went loony tunes. In assembly. Shot the whole place up.

What, with a gun? I say and right away wish I hadn't of.

Jenkins looks at me. Either a gun, he says, or a fifty-litre bottle of ketchup.

Who? says Banks. Who did it?

Dunno. Couldn't see. People were up and running and that before we knew what was happening. Someone said it was Bum-fluff but it couldn't of been, could it?

Then Banks says, where's Jones?

Didn't I say? says Terry, who's standing right beside Jenkins. Didn't I tell you it was Jones?

Jenkins gives Terry a punch on the arm. Banks doesn't know it was Jones, does he? He was just asking where he was.

Well, where is he? Terry says but Banks is already moving away.

Where you going? I say but he ignores me. I run to catch up and hear Jenkins behind me. You won't get in, he says but Banks doesn't even look back.

We try the main gates first but there's these policemen there dressed in yellow, they look like stewards at White Hart Lane. They turn us back. Banks tries again and has to scarper when one of the policemen shouts at him and tries to grab him. We go round the back instead, to the side gate by the kitchens, and there's a policeman there as well but he's talking to a woman with a pushchair, pointing at something across the street. He doesn't see us.

I've never been in the kitchens before. I've seen em from the other side, from the counter, but only the main bit and even then you can barely see past the dinner ladies, they're like sumo wrestlers in a scrum. Not that you'd want to. It's fucking disgusting. The main bit, where they serve the food, it's not too bad but in the back, with the cookers and the bins, it's rank. I see what I had for lunch the day before, a pile of pork all glistening with fat like it's been run over by a herd of slugs, just left on a tray in the sink. And there's stuff all over the floor, lettuce gone soggy and brown, and peas with their guts splattered and smeared all over the tiles. I almost throw up. I have to swallow it back down. But I'd rather eat vomit than eat in the canteen again, I swear. Banks, though, he doesn't hardly notice. He lives in a council. I live in a council too but a better one.

We're trapped in there for a bit. We can't find a way out cept for the way we've just come in. In the end we jump up over the counter. I kick at a tray of glasses with my foot, not on

purpose, but some of the glasses fall and they break. Banks starts having a go, tells me to be quiet, but no one hears. No one would of cared.

From the canteen we go out into the passageway and along into the entrance hall and that brings us right up to the main doors and there's a crowd there and who should we run into but Michael Jones himself. And we know just by looking at him that it can't of been Jones.

He spots us but doesn't say anything and he's as pale as a custard cream. He's trying to get out by the looks of him but he's stuck behind a wall of sixth-formers. The sixth-formers, they're standing there, waving their arms about and bossing people where to go but it seems to me like they're only making things worse. Bickle's there too, Mr Travis, he's standing by the doors, telling the kids to keep moving to settle down to maintain order to move along. That's one of his phrases that: maintain order. As in, I'm sitting in on this class today to help *maintain order*. Or he'll be marching the corridors, whacking kids on the head, yelling, order children, *maintain order*. He calls us children even though we're like thirteen. The sixth-formers are eighteen some of em. Anyway, it should be our school motto – *maintain order* – not that thing we have in Latin. Something about helping yourself or helping others or doing one but not the other. Something like that.

Bickle spots us too and he looks like he's about to collar us but he's distracted, there's kids pushing past him, banging against him, on purpose some of em I bet, and Banks and me slip past and into the main corridor, the one that leads to the stairs and the classrooms and at the bottom, at the end, the

hall, the assembly hall. That's where it all happened, right? The assembly hall.

We almost make it. We almost see it. The whadyacallit. The aftermath. I'm glad we didn't. Banks wanted to but I think I'm glad we didn't. Do you know what I mean?

It's a woman that nabs us in the end, a policewoman and they're the worst. All bossy and up themselves.

Oh.

No offence.

But anyway, we're halfway down the corridor and we can see the doors into the hall and we can see there are people inside, police and that mainly, and we don't see her reach for us. She was in one of the classrooms, I guess. She saw us pass and must of figured what we were doing, where we were going, and she doesn't shout or anything, she just comes up behind us and she nails us. Banks yells at her to geroff but in the end we can't really do anything, I mean what can we do? And she marches us up the corridor, back into the hallway, through the doors past Bickle, who just kind of glares, and all the way to the gates. And then she gives us a shove.

Banks tried to get back in after that but I'm pretty sure he didn't make it. By the time we get outside there's tape and more police and TV cameras and everything's being organised. The teachers, they're calling register and forming lines and that sort of thing. I stand on my own, to one side. I sit on the kerb. Then, I dunno. I just watch, like everyone else.

So that's it, I guess. I told you, I don't know anything really. I wasn't even there when it happened.

This time she started where he had started.

There was nothing in the room that gave notice of the violence it had begotten. Several coats on the rack, though not many. There was one overcoat, on a hanger, a relic presumably of the winter. Otherwise just jackets, lightweight, inexpensive, the one on top with an arm turned inside out. There were coffee mugs on the table, the one nearest to her drained completely, the rest finished with but not emptied, milk curdling on the surface of the liquid. On the arm of one of the chairs, an open packet of digestives, and crumbs on the rest of the seats. The seats themselves were stained, ripped in places, comfortable looking.

Lucia May moved from the seating area towards the kitchenette. She opened the door of the microwave and then shut what she found back inside. The smell escaped, though – sweet, artificial, she thought, low calorie. A packet of Marlboro lay next to a yellow Clipper on the worktop. She did not look at them directly. The cupboard next to the sink served as a makeshift noticeboard. There was a Garfield strip bemoaning

Mondays cut neatly from a newspaper and a 'Now wash your hands' sticker and a handwritten note reminding people to please rinse out their cups. The word people was underlined, as well as the word cups. Four mugs sat festering in the basin. The basin smelt of drains.

He would have left this room alone. He would have waited until he was the last.

Lucia drifted back towards the seats and out of the door and into the corridor. Opposite her was the noticeboard proper, half the size of a snooker table and almost the same shade of green. It displayed fire-drill instructions, medical procedures, assembly rosters, break-time regulations. Nothing else. The notices were attached to the board with colour-matched pins, all red on one sheet of paper, all yellow on the next, four pins to a page. She felt an urge to shuffle the pins, to remove a notice and reattach it at a less regimented angle.

She turned to her left and moved along the passageway, down the short flight of stairs and into the entrance hall. She paused, wondering whether he had done the same. She glanced right, towards the canteen, and then the other way, towards the doors. Through the glass she saw two uniforms, and beyond them the playground, and beyond that the road. The policemen were watching her, their arms folded and their eyes shaded by the brims of their helmets.

There was blood on the floor. She had known it was there and she had meant to ignore it because the blood had come after, during, not before. She looked at it anyway. The girl whose blood it was had still been alive when she had shed it. It had run down her arm and to her hand and from her fingers as

the teacher had carried her out. It lay in drops and in several places it was smeared, as if by a toe or a heel or a knee where someone had stumbled.

He would not have stopped, Lucia was sure, and so she carried on, not walking on the blood but not not walking on the blood.

The assembly hall was some distance from the staffroom. The walk would have allowed him plenty of time to think, to reconsider, to change his mind and then back again. Somehow she knew that he had not thought. He had focused on not thinking.

As she paced the length of the corridor she passed classrooms with their doors open and a series of recessed stairwells. She glanced through each doorway and up each flight of stairs, sure that he would have done the same. In her school, she recalled, there had been pupils' work displayed along the corridors: geography projects or charity work or photos from the year-end musical. The walls she passed were bare, breeze-block grey. The only markings were from the paint, a darker grey, that the caretaker had used to conceal graffiti. After every other door there was an alarm switch and at the far end of the hall the alarm itself, higher up and encased in wire.

There was tape across the doors that led into the assembly hall. The doors themselves were locked. Lucia took a key from her pocket, turned it in the padlock and opened one of the doors. She ducked under the tape and stepped inside.

It smelt of plimsolls. Rubbery, sweaty, the yield of scores of scabbling feet. The assembly hall, she knew, doubled as the gym. There were climbing frames, folded to the walls and locked in place.

She shut the door behind her, just as he had done. He would have looked to the front, she assumed, at the stage and whomever had been speaking. The headmaster. Travis. Lucia's eyes, though, caught on the climbing frame opposite her, on the ropes that bisected the rows of bars. One of the victims had hauled themselves upright, had used a rope to try and help them escape the onrush of bodies. There was blood on the knot at the bottom and at intervals for several feet up. At head height the blood marks stopped.

The hall was as it had been all week. Nothing had been moved, other perhaps than by the faltering feet of a photographer. It would have been hard not to bump into something. There was no clear pathway to the stage, nor to the side of the hall across from her. From the rear wall to the podium, chairs lay on their backs, on their sides, any way but the right way up. Many were still laced together so that where one chair had fallen the rest had fallen too, transforming the row into a barrier, the legs of the chairs into barbs. Lucia was reminded of an image of Verdun, of the land and the barricades between the trenches. She imagined children, their eyes bleeding fear, tripping and becoming entangled and then trampled by those behind. She imagined the impact of one of the upended chair legs against a stomach, a cheek, a temple.

On the chairs and under them were jumpers, some books, the contents of children's pockets. A set of keys here, attached to a chain attached to a belt loop torn from someone's trousers. An iPod, black, with its headphones still plugged in and its screen cracked. Mobile phones. And shoes. There was a surprising number of shoes. Girls' shoes mainly but also trainers

and boots. To one side a single brogue, size ten or eleven. A pair of glasses, the lenses intact but one arm snapped off. A handkerchief, white.

She tried to ignore the state of the hall and to picture it as he would have seen it: every seat full, the children silent for once given the circumstances of the assembly, some of them crying and trying not to. The teachers seated in rows flanking the headmaster, jaws tense, eyes downcast or fixed on the headmaster himself. Travis at the lectern, his hands on the corners furthest away from him and his elbows locked, his eyes commanding the attention of his audience, his speechifying relentless despite the late arrival to the hall. Travis would have seen him walk through the doors of course. Some of the teachers would have too, though they could not have made out what he was carrying. Children in the back row may have turned, may even have noticed the gun, but they would have assumed, surely, that it was a prop, that his late entrance was staged to coincide with some aspect of Travis's address. The gun was in keeping with the theme of the headmaster's sermon after all. Violence was the theme of the day.

She traced his steps as best she could, moving across the rear of the hall and then turning at the corner towards the stage. Halfway along the side wall Lucia stopped and faced inwards, in the direction of where the pupils would have been sitting.

He would have had no skill with a gun. His aim was poor and his prey would have started moving and the gun itself did not fire straight. So Sarah Kingsley, aged eleven, was the first to be shot. As it turned out, she was also the last to die. Lucia wondered if it had registered, his mistake, after he had squeezed

the trigger. Whether he had even noticed. Sarah's blood was at her feet. It was Sarah's blood, mainly, that she had followed along the corridor. It was Sarah's blood on the rope.

The first report would have impacted like a brick through glass. The stillness in the hall would have shattered and been displaced by a jagged, piercing panic. The children would have scattered, they would have screamed. He would have tried to remain still, to stand unyielding against the thrashing bodies, to find his aim again. Once more he had fired and once more he had missed his target. Felix Abe, aged twelve, had died instead.

Two from two. The weapon was a museum piece, not a semi-automatic. It was in poor condition. That he killed five, five with six bullets, was in a way a minor miracle. It was the worst kind of luck.

The teachers would have been standing by now, fixated and immobile, like theatre-goers trapped in the circle as chaos consumes the stalls. They would have seen him fire for a third time and they would have seen the third child fall. When he fired again – his fourth bullet, the second one to hit Donovan Stanley, aged fifteen – they might have understood. When he had then looked to them and taken his first step towards the stage, they might finally have run themselves.

Lucia moved to where the final victim – Veronica Staples, the teacher – had fallen, at the base of the steps leading away from the stage. There were more shoes gathered here, piled almost neatly at the bottom step. There was a handbag too, its contents spilled and scattered: a lipgloss with its case cracked; receipts and scraps of paper, marked and muddled by frantic feet; a pen; a whistle threaded with pink ribbon; half a packet of Polo mints.

She turned, checking the ground around her as she did so, and saw where he had fired the sixth round, the last bullet in the barrel, and where his blood had splattered the wall. The plaster, once yellow, was pitted by bullet and bone. There were strands of hair too, clumps of it, where his head had impacted against the wall and slid towards the skirting. She crouched and imagined herself level with him, looking at him, watching the carnage he had created reflected back at her by his unseeing eyes.

Finally she reversed the order, moving to the point where Sarah, the first victim, had been shot. In her mind, the scene unfolded like a DVD playing in reverse. The bullets retreated, the chairs toppled upright, the blood flowed to the place it belonged. Children found their seats, teachers lowered their gaze and Samuel Szajkowski walked backwards and out of the room.

It was warmer outside than in. Stepping out into the playground was like stepping on to a runway in the tropics. The policemen, tall and overweight both, were red cheeked and sweating. They had been chatting, making jokes, and they were grinning as she came through the doors.

‘Find what you were looking for, Inspector?’

Every day the same question. A different uniform but the same question. They thought Lucia enjoyed being here. They thought that was why she kept coming back. But they were asking the wrong thing. She had found what she was looking for – she had found what she had been sent to discover – but she had found out more besides. The question was what to do about it. The question was whether to do anything at all.