Ian Rankin

Watchman

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Miles Flint wore glasses: they were his only distinguishing feature. Billy Monmouth could not help smiling as he watched Miles leave the club and head off towards his car, which would be parked some discreet distance away. Miles and Billy had joined the firm around the same time, and it had seemed inevitable that, over the years, they would become friends, though friends, in the strictest sense of the word, were never made in their world.

Miles was feeling a little heavy from the drinks. Billy had insisted on buying – 'the prerogative of the bachelor's pay-cheque, old boy' – and Miles had not refused. He fumbled now at the buttons of his coat, feeling a slight and unseasonal chill in the London air, and thought of the evening ahead. He had one more visit to pay, a few telephone calls to make, but apart from that, Sheila and he would have their first full evening together for a whole week.

He did not relish the prospect.

As suspected, his car had collected a parking ticket. He ripped it from the windscreen, walked around the car once as though he were a potential and only half-informed buyer, and bent down as if checking for a bald tyre or broken silencer. Then, satisfied, he unlocked the passenger door. The Jaguar's interior, pale hide complementing the cream exterior, looked fine. He slid across into the driving seat and slipped the key into the ignition, turning it quickly. The engine coughed once, then roared into life. He sat back, letting it idle, staring into space.

That was that then. He was not about to be blown up today. He knew that the younger men in the firm, and even the likes of Billy Monmouth, smiled at him behind his back, whispering words like 'paranoia' and 'nerves', going about their own business casually and without fear, as though there were invisible barriers between them and some preordained death. But then Miles was a cautious man, and he knew that in this game there was no such thing as being too careful.

He sat for a few more minutes, reflecting upon the years spent inspecting his car, checking rooms and telephones and even the undersides of restaurant tables. People thought him clumsy because he would always drop a knife or a fork before the meal began, bowing his head beneath the tablecloth to pick it up. All he was doing was obeying another of the unwritten rules: checking for bugs.

The car was sounding good, though it was a luxury much detested by Sheila. She drove about in a battered Volkswagen Beetle, which had once been orange but was now a motley patchwork of colours. Sheila did not think it worthwhile paying a garage to do repairs, when all one needed were a handbook and some tools. Miles forgave her everything, for he too had a quiet liking for her car, not so much for its performance as for its name.

Miles Flint's hobby was beetles, not the cars but the insects. He loved to read about their multifarious lifestyles, their ingenuity, their incalculable species, and he charted their habitats on a wall-map in his study, a study filled with books and magazine articles, and a few glass cases containing specimens which he had caught himself in earlier days. He no longer killed beetles, and had no desire to exhibit anyone else's killings. He was content now to read about beetles and to look at detailed photographs and diagrams, for he had learned the value of life.

He had one son, Jack, who built up tidy overdrafts during each term at university, then came home pleading

poverty. Miles had flipped through the stubs in one of Jack's famished chequebooks: payments to record stores, bookshops, restaurants, a wine bar. He had returned the chequebook to Jack's second-hand tweed jacket, replacing it carefully between a diary and a letter from a besotted (and jilted) girlfriend. Later, he had asked Jack about his spending, and had received honest answers.

Miles knew that his kind did not deal in honesty. Perhaps that was the problem. He examined the large-paned windows along the quiet street, the car's interior warming nicely. Through one ground-floor window he could watch the silent drama of a man and a woman, both on the point of leaving the building, while by running the car forward a yard or two, he might glance into another lit interior. The choice was his. For once, and with a feeling of abrupt free will, he decided to drive away completely. He had, after all, to visit the watchmen.

Somewhere behind him, in the early evening twilight, came the sound of an explosion.

Miles stopped outside the Cordelia, a popular *nouveau riche* hotel off Hyde Park. The receptionist was listening to her pocket radio.

'Has there been a newsflash?' he asked.

'Yes, isn't it awful? Another bomb.'

Miles nodded and headed for the lifts. The lift was mirrored, and, riding it alone to the fifth floor, he tried not to catch a glimpse of himself. Another bomb. There had been one last week, in a car parked in Knightsbridge, and another had been defused just in time. London had taken on a siege mentality, and the security services were running around like so many ants in a glass case. Miles could feel a headache coming on. He knew that by the time he reached home, he would be ready for a confrontation. It was not a good sign, and that was part of the reason for this short break in his journey. He wanted, too, however, to

make a few phone calls on the firm's bill. Every little bit helped.

He knocked twice on the door of room 514, and it was opened by Jeff Phillips, looking tired, his tie hanging undone around his neck.

'Hello, Miles,' he said, surprised. 'What's up?'

Inside the room, Tony Sinclair was busy listening to something on a headset. The headset was attached to a tape recorder and a small receiver. He nodded in greeting towards Miles, seeming interested in the conversation on which he was eavesdropping.

'Nothing,' said Miles. 'I just wanted to check, that's all. There's been another bomb.'

'Where?'

'I don't know. I heard it go off as I was driving here. Somewhere near Piccadilly.'

Jeff Phillips shook his head. He poured some coffee from a thermos, gesturing with the cup towards his superior, but Miles waved away the offer.

He flicked through his tiny notebook, which was filled with telephone numbers and initials, nothing more. Yes, he did have a couple of calls to make, but they were not that important. He realised now that his reason for coming here was simply to defer his going home. There did not seem to be any good nights at home now, and mostly, he supposed, that was his fault. He would be irritable, pernickety, finding fault with small, unimportant things, and would store up his irritation deep within himself like the larva of a dung beetle, warm and quickening within its womb of dung. Jack had given him a year's adoption of a dung beetle at London Zoo as a birthday present, and Miles had never received a more handsome gift in his life. He had visited the glass case, deep in the subdued light and warmth of the insect house, and had watched the beetle for a long time, marvelling at the simplicity of its life.

What his colleagues did not know was that Miles Flint had found counterparts for them all in the beetle world.

He felt the pulse of the headache within him. A few whiskies often did that. So why did he drink them? Well, he was a Scot after all. He was supposed to drink whisky.

'Do you have any aspirin, Jeff?'

'Afraid not. Been on the bottle, have we?'

'I've had a couple, yes.'

'Thought I could smell it.' Phillips sipped his tepid coffee.

Miles was thinking of James Bond, who was a Scot but drank Martini. Not very realistic, that. The resemblance between Miles and James Bond, as Miles was only too aware, stopped at their country of origin. Bond was a comic-cut, a superman, while he, Miles Flint, was flesh and blood and nerves.

And headache.

'It's been quiet here,' said Phillips. 'A few phone calls to his embassy, made in Arabic, just asking about the situation back home and if they had any of this week's newspapers, and a call to Harrods, made in English, to ask what time they close. He went out for an hour and a half. Bought the *Telegraph*, would you believe, and a dirty magazine. Tony knows the name of it. I don't go in for them myself. He also purchased two packets of Dunhill's and one bottle of three-star brandy. That's about it. Came back to his room. Telephoned to the States, to one of those recorded pornographic message services. Again Tony has the details. You can listen to the recording we made if you like. Tony reckons our man got the number from the magazine he bought.'

'Who's he speaking to just now?'

Phillips went across to check the notepad which lay on Tony Sinclair's knees.

'To Jermyn Street. Arranging a fitting. These people.' Phillips shook his head in ironic disbelief.

Miles knew what he meant. The watchmen seemed to

spend half their lives trailing men and women who did little more than buy expensive clothes and gifts for their families back home.

'He's making another call,' said Tony Sinclair, the section's most recent recruit. Miles was watching him for any signs of weakness, of hesitation or misjudgement. Tony was still on probation.

'Speaking Arabic again,' he said now, switching on the tape recorder. As he began to scribble furiously with his ballpoint pen, Jeff Phillips went to his shoulder to watch.

'He's arranging a meeting,' Phillips murmured. 'This looks a little more promising.'

Miles Flint, attuned to such things, doubted it, but it gave him a good excuse not to go home just yet. He would phone Sheila and tell her.

'Mind if I come along on this one?' he asked. Phillips shrugged his shoulders.

'Not at all,' he said. 'Your Arabic is as good as mine, I'm sure. But isn't this supposed to be your night off?'

'I'd like to stick with this one,' lied Miles. 'I'll just make a quick call home.'

'Fine,' said Phillips. 'I'll go downstairs and fetch the car.'

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Having put his car into the hotel's basement garage, Miles began to unwind in the firm's gleaming Rover.

Miles Flint was a watchman. It was his job to look and to listen, and then report back to his section chief, nothing more. He did not mind such a passive role in life, but was aware that others did not share his meticulous pleasure in sifting through the daily affairs of those he was sent to watch. Once or twice, to his certain knowledge, Billy Monmouth had tried to induce his promotion laterally