lovereading.co.uk

Nocturnes

John Connolly

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

Extract is copyright of the Author

I



The rutted track was playing hell with Jerry Schneider's shocks. He could feel every cleft and furrow ramming hard into the base of his spine and shooting up to the top of his skull, so that by the time the farmhouse came into view he already had the beginnings of a raging headache. Migraines were his affliction, and he hoped this wasn't about to be the start of one of them. He had work to do, and those damn things left him near puking on his bed, just wishing to die.

Jerry didn't much care for the detour to the Benson farm at the best of times. They were religious nutcases, the whole bunch of 'em: a family of seven, living pretty much apart from the rest of the world, keeping themselves mostly to themselves except when they headed into town to buy supplies, or when Jerry made his twice-weekly call to pick up a load of free range eggs and a selection of their homemade cheeses. Jerry thought the cheeses stank to high heaven, and he only ever ate his eggs scrambled and with enough salt to empty the Dead Sea, but the new wealthy who flocked to the state during both summer and winter swore by the taste of the Bensons' cheese and eggs, and were prepared to pay top dollar for them at Vern Smolley's place. Vern was a smart one, Jerry would give him that: he'd spotted the gap in the market straight off, and transformed the rear of his general store into a kind of gourmet's paradise. Jerry sometimes had trouble even finding a space in which to park, Vern's lot being filled to the brim with Lexuses, salesroom-polished Mercedes convertibles and, in winter, the kind of

snazzy 4WDs that only rich people drove, with a smattering of designer mud on them for that authentic country look.

The Bensons would have no truck with folks like that. Their old Ford was held together with string and faith, and their clothes were thrift store when they weren't hand made by Ma Benson or one of the girls. In fact, Jerry sometimes wondered how they squared selling their produce to the kind of people they regarded as being on a one-way express ride to hell. He wasn't about to ask Bruce Benson himself, though. Jerry tried to avoid having much conversation of any kind with Bruce, seeing as how the old man used any kind of opening as an opportunity to peddle his own particular brand of God-hugging. For some reason, Bruce seemed to believe that Jerry Schneider could still be saved. Jerry didn't share Bruce's faith. He liked drinking, smoking and screwing around, and last he heard those pursuits didn't much enter into the Bensons' scheme for salvation. So twice weekly Jerry would drive his truck up that migraine minefield of a track, pick up the eggs and cheese with the minimum of fuss or talk, then head back down the track at a slightly slower pace, since Vern would take breakages of more than ten per cent out of Jerry's fee.

Jerry Schneider never felt as if he had quite settled back into life in Colorado, not since he'd come back from the east coast to look after his mother. That was the curse of being an only child: there was no one to share the burden, nobody to take some of the strain. The old woman was becoming forgetful, and she had taken some bad falls, so Jerry did what he had to do and returned to his childhood home. Now it seemed like every week some new misfortune befell her: twisted ankles, bruised ribs, torn muscles. Those kinds of injuries would take some of the steam out of Jerry, and he was near thirty years younger than his momma. Inflict them on a woman of seventy-five, with osteoporosis in her legs and arthritis in her elbows, and it was a miracle that she was still standing.

Truth to tell, things had slackened back east since 9/11, and Jerry was working short time before he made the decision to move home. If he hadn't moved, then pretty soon he would have been working a second job in a bar to make ends meet, and he was just too beat to consider putting in seventy-hour weeks simply to live. Anyway, he had no real attachments in the city. There was a girl, but they were coasting. He didn't figure she'd be too cut up when he told her he was leaving, and he was right. In fact, she looked kind of relieved.

But returning here had reminded him of a lot of the reasons why he'd left to begin with. Ascension was a small town, dependent for its prosperity on outsiders, and it resented that dependence even while it concealed its true feelings with smiles and handshakes. And it wasn't like Boulder, which Jerry liked because it was a little enclave of liberalism. Most of the time, folks in Boulder seemed just one step away from raising their own flag and declaring independence. People in Ascension, by contrast, were proud to live in a state with enough radioactive material under the ground to make it glow in the night. Jerry figured that, like the Great Wall of China, parts of Colorado could be seen from outer space, the Rockies gently luminescing in the darkness. He suspected that folks in Ascension would be proud to think that their state acted as a kind of radioactive beacon for God or aliens or L. Ron Hubbard. It was worse further south in places like Colorado Springs, down by the USAF academy, but Ascension still remained a bastion of blind patriotism.

Jerry wondered too if people grew stranger as they got closer to Utah, like the Mormons were putting something into the water or the air. That might explain the Bensons, and the other religious types like them that seemed to have gravitated toward the area. Maybe they just got lost on the way to Salt Lake City, or ran out of gas, or it could be they thought they were already in Utah, and that the state was just joshing with them by making them pay taxes to Colorado.

Jerry couldn't figure the Bensons out, but he wished they'd devote a little of that time spent praying to fixing up the road to their farm. The track seemed tougher to negotiate this week, a consequence of the cold weather which had already begun to settle on the state. Pretty soon the first snows would come, and then Bruce Benson would have to plow the route to his house himself if he were planning to continue making money out of cheese and eggs. Vern's other suppliers all made their own deliveries, but not Bruce Benson. He seemed to equate his hatred of sin with a hatred of the town of Ascension, and preferred to keep his contact with the population at large to the absolute minimum. His wife was the same way: Jerry Schneider couldn't recall ever meeting a more hatchet-faced bitch, and he'd been around some. Still, Bruce must have plucked up the courage to fill her purse at least four times (although Jerry would lay even money he'd kept the lights off and the windows blacked out while he did it) because they had four kids, three girls and a boy. Then again, the kids were all good looking, maybe with a little of Bruce to them but not so much that it would bother anyone, so maybe Bruce had seeded up someone better looking than his wife. The old hag probably sent him off with her blessing, grateful not to have to do something she might enjoy.

The boy, Zeke, was the youngest. He had three sisters, the eldest of whom, Ronnie, was beautiful enough to make Jerry listen to Benson's ravings for a time if she happened to be out in the yard doing chores. Sometimes, the sun would catch her just right and Jerry would see the shape of her through her long skirt, her legs slightly apart like a pitched tent inviting him inside, and the rays gilding the muscles on her calves and thighs. Jerry suspected that Bruce knew what he was doing, but chose to ignore it in the hope that Jerry might see the light. Jerry was hoping to see something else entirely, and wondered if Ronnie might be prepared to show it if he got her alone and away from

her daddy's influence for a time. She occasionally smiled at him in a way that suggested she was suffering the frustrations that a good-looking young woman like her would surely feel, cut off as she was from any outlet for her appetites. The children were educated at home by their parents, and Jerry figured that the sexual component of that education could pretty much be summed up as 'Don't do it, and especially not with Jerry Schneider.' Educated at home, their ailments kind of treated at home – Jerry just hoped that nothing serious ever happened to any of the family, because the Bensons didn't hold with doctors or medical intervention – and their lives revolving only around one another and a miserable, distant God; it would be some time before the networks got around to basing a comedy on the Benson family.

One of Bruce Benson's brothers also lived with them. His name was Royston, and Jerry figured him for mildly retarded. He didn't say much, and his head was always nodding like one of those little dogs that some people kept on the dashboard of their car, but he seemed fairly harmless. There was talk around town that he'd once tried to feel up Vern's mother in the store a couple of years back, although Jerry had never worked up the courage to ask Vern – or his mother – if this was true. Maybe that was another reason why Bruce Benson never came down to the store. Nothing sours relations between folk like the dimwit brother of one party coming over all Italian on the upright Baptist mother of the second party.

Jerry passed through the main gates to the Benson farm, instinctively turning down the volume on the truck radio, since Bruce didn't appreciate music much, and certainly not the stuff that was pouring out of Jerry's speakers just now: Gloria Scott's sultry vocals, backed up by the late, great Barry White's production skills. Jerry liked the old Walrus's touch. He might not have been quite as out there as Isaac, and he could legitimately be blamed for setting the tone for the limp, insipid

stuff that passed for modern R&B, but there was something about those massed strings that made Jerry want to find some willing young thing and mess up the sheets with baby oil and cheap champagne. He wondered if Ronnie Benson had ever heard of Barry White. As far as Jerry knew, the Bensons didn't even listen to the crazy preachers at the end of the dial, the ones who testified to the love of God yet seemed to hate just about everyone, or at least the kind of people that Jerry knew and liked. Introducing the Benson kids to Barry White would probably kill the old man stone dead, and drive the daughters into some kind of frenzy.

Discreetly, Jerry turned the volume back up a notch.

The Bensons always moved their chickens into a big barn as soon as winter came. In fact, Bruce had told Jerry last week that they'd be inside next time he came, but as he approached the chicken runs on the right, Jerry could see small bundles of white scattered upon the ground. They lay still. The wind ruffled their feathers some, so that they seemed to be trembling on the ground, but it was only a false impression of life.

The sight made Jerry stop short. Leaving the engine idling, he stepped from the truck and walked to the wire. Close by lay the body of one of the Bensons' chickens. Jerry leaned in to touch it, pressing gently into its flesh with the tips of his fingers. Black fluid instantly oozed from its beak and its eyes, and Jerry withdrew his fingers hurriedly, rubbing them on the seam of his pants in an effort to cleanse them of any potential contagion.

All of the chickens were dead, but no animal had done this. There was no blood upon the feathers, and no damage that Jerry could see. In the far corner of the run, Jerry spotted the Bensons' rooster strutting among his dead concubines, his red coxcomb clearly visible as he pecked at the ground, hunting for the last grains to stave off his hunger. Somehow, he had survived the slaughter.

Jerry leaned in and turned off the engine of the truck. Everything here was wrong. There was desolation on the wind. He walked across the yard. The door to the Benson house was wide open, held that way by a triangle of wood at its base. He stood at the base of the steps leading up to the porch, and called out Bruce Benson's name.

'Hello?' he said. 'Anybody home?'

There was no reply. The door led directly into the Bensons' kitchen. There was food on the table, but even from outside Jerry could tell it was rotting.

I should just call the cops. I should call them now, then wait for them to come.

But Jerry knew that he couldn't do that. Instead, he went back to his truck, tipped open the glove compartment, and took the cloth-wrapped Ruger from under the accumulation of maps, restaurant menus, and unpaid parking fines. The gun wouldn't change anything, not now, but he felt better for having it in his hand.

The kitchen smelled bad. The dinner of chicken and biscuits looked as if it had been there for a couple of days. Jerry recalled the dead fowl in the run, and the black substance that had oozed from the mouth of the bird he'd touched. Christ, if the chickens had somehow become contaminated, and that contamination had spread to the family . . . His thoughts went to the eggs that he had been collecting and delivering to town for the past six months, and to the chicken that Benson had given to him as a Thanksgiving present less than a week before. Jerry almost threw up there and then, but he regained his composure. In all his life, he'd never heard of anyone dying from a poultry disease, except maybe that flu they had over in Asia, and what killed the Bensons' chickens didn't look like any flu Jerry had ever seen.

He checked the living room – no TV, just a couple of easy chairs, an overstuffed couch, and some religious pictures on the

walls – and the downstairs bathroom. They were both empty. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, Jerry gave one more holler before making his way up to the bedrooms. The smell was stronger here. Jerry took his handkerchief from his pocket and jammed it against his nose and mouth. He already knew what to expect. He'd worked for a time in a slaughterhouse in Chicago when he was younger, one that wasn't too fussy about the quality of its meat. Jerry had never eaten a hamburger since.

Bruce Benson and his wife were in the first bedroom, lying beneath a big, white quilt. He was wearing his pajamas, and his wife was dressed in a blue cotton nightgown. There was black fluid on their clothing and on the bed, and more of it caked around the lower half of their faces. Bruce Benson's eyes were half open, and his cheeks were streaked with black tears. From their expressions, Jerry figured they'd gone out hard. Even in death the pain remained fixed upon them, as though they were models carefully sculpted by a disturbed artist.

The three daughters were in the next bedroom. Although there were bunks in one corner, the girls had congregated on the big bed in the center of the room. Jerry guessed that this was Ronnie's bed. She held her younger sisters cradled in her arms, one on each side. There was more black blood here, and Ronnie was no longer beautiful.

Jerry looked away.

The youngest child, Zeke, was in a little box room at the far end of the hallway. He had been covered up with a sheet. First to go, Jerry thought, when someone still had enough strength to shroud him after he died. But if there was strength to do that, why not call for help? The Bensons had a telephone, and even with their peculiar beliefs they must have realised that something was very wrong. Whole families didn't die this way, not in Colorado, not anywhere civilized. This was like the plague.

Jerry turned to leave the boy's room, and a hand touched his shoulder. He spun around, the gun raised, and let out a kind of

tortured shriek. Later, he would describe it as a woman's scream, a sound such as he never thought he would make, but he wasn't ashamed. Like he told the cops, anyone would have done the same, they'd seen what he'd seen.

Royston Benson stood before him: poor dumb Roy, who loved God because his brother told him that God was merciful, that God would look out for him if he prayed hard and lived a good life and didn't go around feeling up other people's mothers in grocery stores.

Except God hadn't looked out for Roy Benson, didn't matter how much he prayed or kept his hands to himself. His fingers were swollen and blackened, and his face was covered in dark tumors, red at the edges and dark at the center. One masked the entire left half of his face, closing the eye to a slit and disfiguring his lips so that they turned up at one side in the semblance of a grin. Jerry could make out what was left of his teeth, barely held in place by his rotting gums, and his distorted tongue flicking in the cavern of his mouth. Black fluid flowed like oil from his nostrils and his ears and the corners of his mouth, pooling on his chin before dripping onto the floor. He said something, but Jerry couldn't understand what it was. All he knew was that Roy Benson was rotting away before him, and crying because he couldn't understand why this was happening to him. He reached out for Jerry, but Jerry backed away. He didn't want Roy touching him again, no matter what.

'Take it easy, Roy,' he said. 'Be cool. I'm going to call for help. It's going to be okay.'

But Roy shook his head, the movement causing snot and tears and black blood to spray Jerry's face and shirt. Again, he tried to form words, but they wouldn't come, and then he was jerking and spasming, like something was trying to burst out from inside of him. He fell to the floor, his head banging against the boards with enough force to dislodge his dead nephew's toys from their shelves. His hands scraped at the wood, wrenching

the nails from the tips of his fingers. Then, as Jerry watched, the tumors on his face began to spread, colonising the last fragments of untainted skin, rushing to meet one another before their host died.

And as the last trace of white disappeared from his face, Roy Benson stopped struggling and lay still.

Jerry staggered away from the dead man. He stumbled to the door, found the bathroom, and vomited into the sink. He continued retching until only spittle and bad air came up, then looked at himself in the mirror, half expecting to see that terrible blackness erasing his own features, just as it had consumed Roy Benson.

But that was not what he saw. Instead, he turned and looked at the cigarette in the ashtray by the toilet. The ashtray was filled with butts, but this one was still smoking, the last tendril of nicotine dissipating as Jerry watched.

Nobody in this house smoked. Nobody smoked, or drank, or swore. Nobody did anything except work and pray and, over the last few days, rot away like old meat.

And he knew then why the Bensons had not called for help.

Someone was here, he realized.

Someone was here to watch them die.