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Opening Extract from...

Never Apologise, Never Explain

Written by James Craig

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NEVER APOLOGISE, NEVER EXPLAIN

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ONE

Finding himself once again locked out of the Parker House hostel, Walter Poonoosamy, the drunk known as 'Dog', walked round the corner, into Drury Lane and headed north. His destination was the warren of streets around the British Museum. A tourist magnet, the area boasted plenty of all-you-can-eat restaurants, so the pickings were usually good.

Big Ben could just be heard chiming one o'clock as Dog turned into Great Russell Street. At this time of night the street was empty, just the way he liked it. He eyed the black refuse sacks that had been left out on the pavement, waiting for collection by Camden's heroic bin men. The morning's first collection truck would be along at around 7 a.m.; by then, most of the sacks would have been opened, and the rubbish strewn up and down the street. Dog knew from bitter experience that it was the early dosser that got the leftovers. Hunger was poking through his inebriation and he had to get in quick before the competition for the street buffet – the dossers from Tottenham Court Road and Russell Square – turned up. Now was the prime time to forage for leftover food, clothes and whatever other useful bits and pieces the locals had thrown away.

After considering various options, Dog stepped up to a collection of refuse sacks piled by a street lamp on the east side of the street, outside an Indian restaurant called Sitaaray. Pulling a Stanley knife out of his jacket pocket, he bent down and carefully slit open the nearest bag. A couple of minutes of careful

rummaging yielded some decent leftovers: lamb shaami and chicken masala, as well as a couple of peshwari naan. As a meal, it was better than anything that he would have got at the hostel, and would go perfectly with the remains of the two-litre bottle of Diamond White cider that he had saved from earlier in the day. Checking up and down the road to make sure that no one had spied upon his good fortune, Dog gave a silent prayer of thanks for the city's endless bounty before retreating into the darkness of a nearby alleyway at the rear of a huge block of mansion flats to set about his feast.

TWO

Still dressed, unable to sleep, Agatha Mills stood at her living-room window and gazed out at the floodlit splendour of the British Museum. The view was the best thing about the flat, especially at night; she often spent time contemplating its Ionic columns and the sculptures on the pediment over the main entrance, depicting *The Progress of Civilisation*.

Progress indeed, Agatha thought sadly, shaking her head.

This view had been the thing that had made her fall in love with the flat when they had first seen it, almost forty years ago. She had badgered Henry to pay the asking price immediately, even though they couldn't afford it. He had been very grumpy about it at the time, something that still made her smile, even now. Over the years, however, as it became clear that the flat was the one sound financial investment they'd made in their entire lives, her husband had relented and graciously accepted that she had been right.

For Agatha, however, their joy in Great Russell Street had always been tinged with sadness. From that first visit, she had dreamed of taking her own children down the stairs, across the road and into the Museum. She had daydreamed of picnics in the courtyard, lost afternoons spent among the Egyptian mummies or the Roman treasures. If, at the time, she had known that there would be no children, she would have felt utterly crushed. Even now, there was a sharp stab of regret that she knew would never go away.

However, a stoical pragmatism ruled the Mills household: you have to live with your regrets – and they had done so. Life went on. They had found other things to occupy their time and their emotions. Sometimes she wondered if Henry was as disappointed as she was – being a man, after all – but ultimately that didn't matter. They weren't having some kind of competition to see who could wear more of their heart on their sleeve.

She thought of him now, asleep in their double bed and smiled. He was a good man who had taken on her struggles and made them his own. Over the years she had realised that he was a truly remarkable companion and she was lucky to have him.

A movement in the street below caught her eye. Stepping closer to the window, she gazed down on a tramp going through the rubbish, looking for something to eat, or maybe some discarded clothing. For Agatha, at her window at this time of night, it was a fairly common sight and no longer elicited much of a response other than the gentle voyeuristic thrill of spying on another human being going about their business. Having spent much of her life working in poorer countries, she was used to human scavenging. Indeed, she had seen much worse than London had to offer. Here, however, Agatha had found that she was less sympathetic to the plight of others. Maybe it was just that she was getting older, but she wondered if it was the city making her harder.

Like the other residents of Ridgemount Mansions, Agatha was infuriated by the rubbish that was strewn across the pavement most mornings, once their carefully sorted and bagged waste had been methodically dissected by the homeless ghosts who stalked the empty streets in the middle of the night. Occasionally, someone would call the police but it was a complete waste of time; if they ever turned up at all, the officers invariably failed to hide their disinterest in such a minor matter and made only the most perfunctory attempts to move the miscreants on.

She watched as the man collected a selection of items from one of the bags put out by the restaurant situated a couple of doors

down the street, before disappearing into the shadows to enjoy his meal. A gust of wind sent some empty foil containers spinning into the road. Otherwise, nothing moved on the street below.

Stepping away from the window, Agatha heard a noise from the kitchen. Henry was clearly having trouble sleeping again. Until recently, it had been unusual for him to get up in the night but now, it was an increasingly frequent occurrence. As he got older, he was becoming more restless.

'Henry?' She padded out of the living room and peered along the hall. The kitchen light was on. 'Are you all right?' The noise in the kitchen stopped, but there was no reply. He's becoming deafer by the day, she reflected. We're both getting on. That was another thing about not having kids: who would look after them when things got too much? Agatha's mother had ended up in a home; not much of a home, more a kind of modern-day bedlam. For Agatha the guilt and the shame of leaving her there was bad enough, but it was as nothing compared to her steely determination that the same thing would not happen to herself, nor to her husband. Her father had keeled over from a heart attack while out buying a loaf of bread one day. At the time, it had been a terrible shock but, on reflection, that was a far better way to go than wasting away in a loony-bin.

'Henry?' she repeated sharply, annoyed by her own morbid musings. 'What are you doing? It's really rather late.' Agatha stepped into the kitchen and frowned. There was no one there. Sighing, she turned for the light switch, before catching a movement out of the corner of her eye.

'What the devil?'

The first blow caught her on the shoulder rather than on the head, but it was enough to send her crashing to the floor.

'Henry!' Agatha whimpered, trying to use a nearby chair to pull herself up. She had just managed to get herself into a kneeling position, when the second blow came. This time it did catch her squarely on the back of the head, sending her down for good.