Beyond Black

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Extract

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ONE

Travelling: the dank oily days after Christmas. The motorway, its wastes looping London: the margin's scrub-grass flaring orange in the lights, and the leaves of the poisoned shrubs striped yellow-green like a cantaloupe melon. Four o'clock: light sinking over the orbital road. Teatime in Enfield, night falling on Potters Bar.

There are nights when you don't want to do it, but you have to do it anyway. Nights when you look down from the stage and see closed stupid faces. Messages from the dead arrive at random. You don't want them and you can't send them back. The dead won't be coaxed and they won't be coerced. But the public has paid its money and it wants results.

A sea-green sky: lamps blossoming white. This is marginal land: fields of strung wire, of treadless tyres in ditches, fridges dead on their backs, and starving ponies cropping the mud. It is a landscape running with outcasts and escapees, with Afghans, Turks and Kurds: with scapegoats, scarred with bottle and burn marks, limping from the cities with broken ribs. The life forms here are rejects, or anomalies: the cats tipped from speeding cars, and the Heathrow sheep, their fleece clotted with the stench of aviation fuel.

Beside her, in profile against the fogged window, the driver's face is set. In the back seat, something dead stirs, and begins to grunt and breathe. The car flees across the junctions, and the space the road encloses is the space inside her: the arena of combat, the wasteland, the place of civil strife behind her ribs. Heart beats, the tail lights wink. Dim lights shine from tower blocks, from passing helicopters, from fixed stars. Night closes in on the perjured ministers and burnt-out paedophiles, on the unloved viaducts and graffiti-tied bridges, on ditches beneath mouldering hedgerows and railings never warmed by human touch.

Night and winter: but in the rotten nests and empty setts, she can feel the signs of growth, intimations of spring. This is the time of Le Pendu, the Hanged Man, swinging by his foot from the living tree. It is a time of suspension, of hesitation, of the indrawn breath. It is a time to let go of expectation, yet not abandon hope; to anticipate the turn of the Wheel of Fortune. This is our life and we have to lead it. Think of the alternative.

A static cloud bank, like an ink smudge. Darkening air.

It's no good asking me whether I'd choose to be like this, because I've never had a choice. I don't know about anything else, I've never been any other way.

And darker still. Colour has run out from the land. Only form is left: the clumped treetops like a dragon's back. The sky deepens to midnight blue. The orange of the street lights is blotted to a fondant cerise; in pastureland, the pylons lift their skirts in a ferrous gavotte.

TWO

Colette put her head round the dressing-room door. 'All right?' she said. 'It's a full house.'

Alison was leaning into the mirror, about to paint her mouth on. 'Could you find me a coffee?'

'Or a gin and tonic?'

'Yes, go on then.'

She was in her psychic kit now; she had flung her day clothes over the back of a chair. Colette swooped on them; lady's maid was part of her job. She slid her forearm inside Al's black crêpe skirt. It was as large as a funerary banner, a pall. As she turned it the right way out, she felt a tiny stir of disgust, as if flesh might be clinging to the seams.

Alison was a woman who seemed to fill a room, even when she wasn't in it. She was of an unfeasible size, with plump creamy shoulders, rounded calves, thighs and hips that overflowed her chair; she was soft as an Edwardian, opulent as a showgirl, and when she moved you could hear (though she did not wear them) the rustle of plumes and silks. In a small space, she seemed to use up more than her share of the oxygen; in return her skin breathed out moist perfumes, like a giant tropical flower. When you came into

a room she'd left – her bedroom, her hotel room, her dressing room backstage – you felt her as a presence, a trail. Alison had gone, but you would see a chemical mist of hairspray falling through the bright air. On the floor would be a line of talcum powder, and her scent – Je Reviens – would linger in curtain fabric, in cushions and in the weave of towels. When she headed for a spirit encounter, her path was charged, electric; and when her body was out on stage, her face – cheeks glowing, eyes alight – seemed to float still in the dressing-room mirror.

In the centre of the room Colette stooped, picked up Al's shoes. For a moment she disappeared from her own view. When her face bobbed back into sight in the mirror, she was almost relieved. What's wrong with me? she thought. When I'm gone I leave no trace. Perfume doesn't last on my skin. I barely sweat. My feet don't indent the carpet.

'It's true,' Alison said. 'It's as if you wipe out the signs of yourself as you go. Like a robot housekeeper. You polish your own fingerprints away.'

'Don't be silly,' Colette said. 'And don't read my private thoughts.' She shook the black skirt, as if shaking Alison.

'I often ask myself, let's see now, is Colette in the room or not? When you've been gone for an hour or two, I wonder if I've imagined you.'

Colette looped the black skirt on to a hanger, and hung it on the back of the long mirror. Soon Al's big black overshirt joined it. It was Colette who had persuaded her into black. Black, she had said, black *and perfectly plain.* But Alison abhorred plainness. There must be something to capture the gaze, something to shiver, something to shine. At first glance the shirt seemed devoid of ornament: but a thin line of sequins ran down the sleeve, like the eyes of sly aliens, reflecting black within black. For her work on stage, she insisted on colour: emerald, burnt orange, scarlet. 'The last

thing you want, when you go out there,' she explained, 'is to make them think of funerals.'

Now she pouted at herself in the glass. 'I think that's quite nice, don't you?'

Colette glanced at her. 'Yes, it suits you.'

Alison was a genius with make-up. She had boxfuls and she used it all, carrying it in colour-coded washbags and cases fitted with loops for brushes and small-size bottles. If the spirit moved her to want some apricot eyeshadow, she knew just which bag to dip into. To Colette, it was a mystery. When she went out to get herself a new lipstick, she came back with one which, when applied, turned out to be the same colour as all the others she had; which was always, give or take, the colour of her lips. 'So what's that shade called?' she asked. Alison observed herself, a cotton bud poised, and effected an invisible improvement to her underlip. 'Dunno. Why don't you try it? But get me that drink first.' Her hand moved for her lipstick sealant. She almost said, look out, Colette, don't tread on Morris.

He was on the floor, half sitting and half lying, slumped against the wall: his stumpy legs were spread out, and his fingers playing with his fly buttons. When Colette stepped back she trampled straight over him.

As usual she didn't notice. But Morris did. 'Fucking stuck-up cow,' he said, as Colette went out. 'White-faced fucking freak. She's like a bloody ghoul. Where did you get her, gel, a churchyard?'

Under her breath Alison swore back at him. In their five years as partners, he'd never accepted Colette; time meant little to Morris. 'What would you know about churchyards?' she asked him. 'I bet you never had a Christian burial. Concrete boots and a dip in the river, considering the people you mixed with. Or maybe you were sawn up with your own saw?'

Alison leaned forward again into the mirror, and slicked her mouth with the tiny brush from the glass tube. It tickled and stung. Her lips flinched from it. She made a face at herself. Morris chuckled.

It was almost the worst thing, having him around at times like these, in your dressing room, before the show, when you were trying to calm yourself down and have your intimate moments. He would follow you to the lavatory if he was in that sort of mood. A colleague had once said to her, 'It seems to me that your guide is on a very low vibratory plane, very low indeed. Had you been drinking when he first made contact?

'No,' Al had told her. 'I was only thirteen.'

'Oh, that's a terrible age,' the woman said. She looked Alison up and down. 'Junk food, I expect. Empty calories. Stuffing yourself.'

She'd denied it, of course. In point of fact she never had any money after school for burgers or chocolate, her mum keeping her short in case she used the money to get on a bus and run away. But she couldn't put any force into her denial. Her colleague was right, Morris was a low person. How did she get him? She probably deserved him, that was all there was to it. Sometimes she would say to him, Morris, what did I do to deserve you? He would rub his hands and chortle. When she had provoked him and he was in a temper with her, he would say, count your blessings, girl, you fink I'm bad but you could of had MacArthur. You could have had Bob Fox, or Aitkenside, or Pikey Pete. You could have had my mate Keef Capstick. You could of had Nick, and then where'd you be?

Mrs Etchells (who taught her the psychic trade) had always told her, there are some spirits, Alison, who you already know from way back, and you just have to put names to the faces. There are some spirits that are spiteful and will do

you a bad turn. There are others that are bloody buggering bastards, excuse my French, who will suck the marrow out your bones. Yes, Mrs E, she'd said, but how will I know which are which? And Mrs Etchells had said, God help you, girl. But God having business elsewhere, I don't expect he will.

Colette crossed the foyer, heading for the bar. Her eyes swept over the paying public, flocking in from the dappled street; ten women to every man. Each evening she liked to get a fix on them, so she could tell Alison what to expect. Had they pre-booked, or were they queuing at the box office? Were they swarming in groups, laughing and chatting, or edging through the foyer in singles and pairs, furtive and speechless? You could probably plot it on a graph, she thought, or have some kind of computer program: the demographics of each town, its typical punters and their networks, the location of the venue relative to car parks, pizza parlour, the nearest bar where young girls could go in a crowd.

The venue manager nodded to her. He was a worn little bloke coming up to retirement; his dinner jacket had a whitish bloom on it and was tight under the arms. 'All right?' he said. Colette nodded, unsmiling; he swayed back on his heels, and as if he had never seen them before he surveyed the bags of sweets hanging on their metal pegs, and the ranks of chocolate bars. Why can't men just *stand*? Colette wondered. Why do they have to sway on the spot and feel in their pockets and pat themselves up and down and suck their teeth? Alison's poster was displayed six times, at various spots through the foyer. The flyers around advertised forthcoming events: 'Fauré's *Requiem*', giving way in early December to '*Jack and the Beanstalk*'.

Alison was a sensitive: which is to say, her senses were arranged in a different way from the senses of most people.

She was a medium: dead people talked to her, and she talked back. She was a clairvoyant; she could see straight through the living, to their ambitions and secret sorrows, and tell you what they kept in their bedside drawers, and how they had travelled to the venue. She wasn't (by nature) a fortune teller, but it was hard to make people understand that. Prediction, though she protested against it, had become a lucrative part of her business. At the end of the day, she believed, you have to suit the public and give them what they think they want. For fortunes, the biggest part of the trade was young girls. They always thought there might be a stranger on the horizon, love around the corner. They hoped for a better boyfriend than the one they'd got – more socialised, less spotty: or at least, one who wasn't on remand. Men, on their own behalf, were not interested in fortune or fate. They believed they made their own, thanks very much. As for the dead, why should they worry about them? If they need to talk to their relatives, they have women to do that for them.

'G & T,' Colette said to the girl behind the bar. 'Large.'

The girl reached for a glass and shovelled in a single ice cube.

'You can do better than that,' Colette said. 'And lemon.'

She looked around. The bar was empty. The walls were padded to hip height with turquoise plastic leather, deep-buttoned. They'd been needing a damp cloth over them since about 1975. The fake wood tables looked sticky: the same applied. The girl's scoop probed the ice bucket. Another cube slinked down the side of the glass, to join its predecessor with a dull tap. The girl's face showed nothing. Her full, lead-coloured eyes slid away from Colette's face. She mouthed the price. 'For tonight's artiste,' Colette said. 'On the house, I'd have thought!'

The girl did not understand the expression. She had never

heard 'on the house'. She closed her eyes briefly: blue-veined lids.

Back through the foyer. It was filling up nicely. On their way to their seats the audience had to pass the easel she had set up, with Al's super-enlarged picture swathed in a length of apricot polyester that Al called 'my silk'. At first she'd had trouble draping it, getting the loops just right, but now she'd got it off pat – a twist of her wrist made a loop over the top of the portrait, another turn made a drift down one side, and the remainder spilled in graceful folds to whatever gritty carpet or bare boards they were performing on that night. She was working hard to break Al's addiction to this particular bit of kitsch. Unbelievably tacky, she'd said, when she first joined her. She thought instead of a screen on to which Al's image was projected. But Al had said, you don't want to find yourself overshadowed by the special effects. Look, Col, I've been told this, and it's one bit of advice I'll never forget; remember your roots. Remember where you started. In my case, that's the village hall at Brookwood. So when you're thinking of special effects, ask yourself, can you reproduce it in the village hall? If you can't, forget it. It's me they've come to see, after all. I'm a professional psychic, not some sort of magic act.

The truth was, Al adored the photo. It was seven years old now. The studio had mysteriously disappeared two of her chins; and caught those big starry eyes, her smile, and something of her sheen, that inward luminescence that Colette envied.

'All right?' said the manager. 'All humming along, backstage?' He had slid back the lid of the ice-cream chest, and was peering within.

'Trouble in there?' Colette asked. He closed the lid hastily and looked shifty, as if he had been stealing. 'See you've got the scaffolding up again.'

'C'est la vie,' sighed the manager, and Colette said, 'Yes, I dare say.'

Alison kept out of London when she could. She would fight her way in as far as Hammersmith, or work the further reaches of the North Circular. Ewell and Uxbridge were on her patch, and Bromley and Harrow and Kingston upon Thames. But the hubs of their business were the conurbations that clustered around the junctions of the M25, and the corridors of the M3 and M4. It was their fate to pass their evenings in crumbling civic buildings from the sixties and seventies, their exoskeletons in constant need of patching: tiles raining from their roofs, murals stickily ungluing from their walls. The carpets felt tacky and the walls exhaled an acrid vapour. Thirty years of freeze-dried damp had crystallised in the concrete, like the tiny pellets from which you boil up packet soup. The village hall was worse of course, and they still played some of those. She had to liaise with village-idiot caretakers, and bark her shins and ankles hauling chairs into the semicircle Al favoured. She had to take the money on the door, and tread the stage beforehand to detect comic squeaks, and to pull out splinters; it was not unknown for Al to kick off her shoes partway through the first half, and commune barefoot with spirit world.

'Is she all OK back there on her own?' asked the manager. 'A large gin, that's the ticket. Anything else she needs? We could fill the place twice over, you know. I call her the consummate professional.'

Backstage, Al was sucking an extra-strong mint. She could never eat before a show, and afterwards she was too hot, too strung-up, and what she needed to do was talk, talk it all out of her system. But sometimes, hours after she had put out the light, she would wake up and find herself

famished and nauseous. She needed cake and chocolate bars then, to pad her flesh and keep her from the pinching off the dead, their peevish nipping and needle teeth. God knows, Colette said, what this eating pattern does to your insulin levels.

I'd really like my gin, she thought. She imagined Colette out there, doing battle for it.

Colette was sharp, rude and effective. Before they joined up, Al was thrust into all sorts of arrangements that she didn't want, and was too shy to speak out if things didn't suit her. She never did soundchecks unless the management told her to, and that was a mistake; you needed to insist on them. Before Colette, nobody had tested out the lighting, or walked out on stage as her surrogate self, to judge the acoustics and the sight lines from the performer's point of view. Nobody had even checked underfoot, for nails or broken glass. Nobody made them take the high stool away – because they were always putting out a high stool for her to perch on, not having realised she was a big girl. She hated having to hoist herself up, and teeter like an angel on a pinhead: getting her skirt trapped, and trying to drag it from under her bottom while keeping her balance: feeling the stool buck under her, threatening to pitch her off. Before Colette, she'd done whole shows standing, just leaning against the high stool, sometimes draping one arm over it, as if that were the reason why it was put there. But Colette just minced the management when she spotted a stool on stage. 'Take it away, she doesn't work under those conditions.'

Instead, Colette asked for an armchair, wide, capacious. Here, ideally, Alison would begin the evening, relaxed, ankles crossed, steadying her breathing before her opening remarks. At the first hint of a contact, she would lean forward; then she would jump up and advance to the front of the stage. She

would hang over the audience, almost floating above their heads, her lucky opals flashing fire as she reached out, fingers spread. She'd got the lucky opals mail order but, if asked, she pretended they'd been left to her family by a Russian princess.

She had explained it all, when Colette first joined her. Russia was favourite for ancestors, even better than Romany, nowadays; you didn't want to put anxiety in the clients' minds, about fly-tipping, head lice, illegal tarmac gangs, or motorhomes invading the green belt. Italian descent was good, Irish was excellent – though you must be selective. In the Six Counties hardly anywhere would do – too likely to crop up on the news. For the rest, Cork and Tipperary sounded too comic, Wicklow and Wexford like minor ailments, and Waterford was too dull – 'Al,' Colette had said, 'from where do you derive your amazing psychic gifts tonight?' Al had said at once, in her platform voice, 'From my old great-grandmother, in County Clare. Bless her.'

Bless her and bless her, she said, under her breath. She looked away from the mirror so Colette wouldn't see her lips moving. Bless all my great-grandmothers, whoever and wherever they may be. May my dad rot in hell, whoever he may be; whatever hell is and wherever, let him rot in it; and let them please lock the doors of hell at night, so he can't be out and about, harassing me. Bless my mum, who is still earthside of course, but bless her anyway; wouldn't she be proud of me if she saw me in chiffon, each inch of my flesh powdered and perfumed? In chiffon, my nails lacquered, with my lucky opals glittering – would she be pleased? Instead of being dismembered in a dish, which I know was her first ambition for me: swimming in jelly and blood. Wouldn't she like to see me now, my head on my shoulders and my feet in my high-heeled shoes?

No, she thought, be realistic: she wouldn't give a toss.

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