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Capital Punishment

Written by Robert Wilson

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CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Robert Wilson



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11.15 P.M., FRIDAY 9TH MARCH 2012
Covent Garden, London

The leaving party's last team effort: climb out of the tapas bar basement, up through the bottle-neck of the spiral staircase, everyone off their faces. Alyshia, their twenty-five-year-old manager, caught her heel in the grid of the cast iron steps. The scrum below, sensing a blockage, surged upwards to force it out. The rubber on Alyshia's expensive heel was ripped clean off as she was belched out of the stairwell, the room above reeling as the ragged band staggered out of the bowels. Bar stools rocked as they ricocheted through the savage crowd of baying drunkards, voices pitched louder than traders in the bear pit.

They were out in the street, Alyshia clip-clopping around in Maiden Lane like a lame pony, the freezing night air cooling the patina of sweat on her face. Was it the extra oxygen doubling her booze intake? Focus, refocus, as faces of atrocious ugliness loomed in and out of the sickeningly flexible frame of her vision.

'You all right, Ali?' asked Jim.

'Lost my heel,' she said, her knees buckling. She hung onto him.

'She's *pissed*,' said Doggy, always on hand to tell you the obvious. Jim shoved him away.

'We're *all* pissed,' said Toola triumphantly, whose legs went as if felled and she dropped hard on her bottom, legs akimbo.

'I told you,' said Jim in Alyshia's ear, 'you'd end up in Accident & Emergency if you went out with this lot. Last piss-up before jobseeker's allowance.'

It was the only decent thing to do, she thought, as the street tilted up and her head felt as huge and tight as a barrage balloon.

'You all right, Ali?' asked Jim, holding her shoulders, his face frowning in her pulsing vision.

'Get me out of here,' she said.

'Where's Doggy?' said Toola.

Doggy got pinballed towards her.

'Give us a hand here, amigo,' said Toola as she staggered to her feet.

'Give us a kiss,' said Doggy, pulling her up, tongue out.

A cry of disgust as the group stumbled down the street, hollering like school kids.

Alyshia grabbed Jim's arm, the street now a heaving deck.

'Find me a cab,' she said, neon blinking and blurring in her tearful eyes.

Bedlam in the Strand. Barking in Charing Cross.

'It's kicking off!' screamed a voice in the distance.

Teenage kids were running riot, careening down the street, running up and thumping off shop windows, taking down passersby. Hoodies doled out kickings. Two girls tottered on stilettos in the gutter, fists in each other's hair. A shout went up, the crowd split, shadows in all directions. Across the Strand, back to a pillar of scaffolding, a black boy on his arse, legs out, head bowed, hands on stomach, holding it all in.

'That kid's been stabbed,' said Alyshia.

'Come on,' said Jim. 'You're not going to get a cab down here.'

'Got to call the police.'

She fumbled in her bag for her mobile, asked for police, ambulance, the lot, through lips gone fat and rubbery, refusing to form the words.

Sirens hurtled through the night. Jim swiped her mobile, clicked it off, chucked it in her handbag.

'Let's go,' he said. 'They're onto it.'

'We should *do* something.'

'We're too *pissed*,' said Jim savagely.

He took her arm. Not a cab to be seen on Wellington Street. He led her up towards the Royal Opera House.

Glad you're here, Jim, she thought to herself. Older than the

others. Did I drink that much? A gin and tonic before. Wine with the paella. Doggy had flaming Sambuca. He would. What's up with this pavement? Got a steep ridge down the middle. Am I going to be sick right outside the temple of opera? The paella yawn in the cruella dawn. My head's coming untethered from my shoulders. Breathe deep.

Out of the corner of her eye, a floating orange light in the drunken blur.

'Taxi!' she yelled, flinging out an arm. It swerved in to the pavement.

She wiped her cheeks. Sucked in air. Hung onto the window ledge. Tried to look like someone who wouldn't projectile vomit. Gave the cabbie her address: Lavender Grove. Near London Fields.

The cabbie looked jaundiced in the street lighting.

'All right, love,' he said, tongue flickering between grey lips, 'in you get. Madhouse back there, innit? You coming, too?'

Jim shook his head, swung the door shut, waved her off.

The driver checked his mirror, pulled out, wheeled round in a tight U-turn. The doors' locks shunted to, startling her. The lights dimmed, went out. She sank back into the darkness of the cab, tried to stop her head from lolling.

Don't black out. Tell him the route and he'll know you're all right.

'Down here, left onto Tavistock Sreet, left again onto Drury Lane. Straight on … yeah, keep straight …'

'You're all right, love, we know where we're going.'

Couldn't wet her lips. Flinched at the swish of lights overhead. Her heartbeat was in her head. Her breathing in her ears. Never been drunk like this before. Her head tilted. Throat tightened. Nodding dog on the back shelf. Come on, blink, suck in the air. She lurched to the side, clicked on the intercom and thought she said: 'My drink's been spiked.' But the words, shapeless, fell to her feet.

'Don't worry, love,' said the cabbie. 'You're all right.'

I'm all right? she thought, face crushed into the seat, staring at the carpet, mouth slack. If I'm all right, what do ill people feel like? Dad? What's that, Dad?

'Always take a cab in London after eleven o'clock, a black cab,

mind, none of those furry dashboard minicabs driven by those Bangladeshi bastards.'

What do *you* know? You're in Mumbai. I'm here in the Smoke. In the black …

Coffin dark. The only light from the demi migraine splitting her cranium. She blinked twice, confirming eyelid mobility and a total absence of illumination. She ran her hands over the seat; it was the same ribbed seat of the cab she'd taken, but it wasn't moving. She couldn't see the hands of her Cartier watch. No idea how much time had passed. She felt for the door. Stuff slopped to and fro in her head. It was locked. She fingered around the window for cracks. Knelt on the floor, spidered her hands over the sliding window of the driver's compartment. Shut. Immovable. The first tremble of panic fluttered beneath her rib cage. The other door. Locked. Window shut.

She listened, eyes wide open, trying to tune into the faintest sound. Nothing. She put her hand to her mouth; the fingers trembled on her lips and her breath pattered with the hyperventilation of phobia. A sudden surge of adrenaline through her system cleared the mess from her mind. She was no longer drunk. Her thighs quivered in her kneeling position. She tried to calm what was building inside her but couldn't. It was multiplying too fast, rapidly becoming unmanageable, bursting up from her lungs, screeching in her ears, and with a bright flash of light that illuminated nothing, she hurled herself at the window, threw herself to the other side, lashed out with her feet and fists and screamed so loud her larynx shredded.

Four cracks of light appeared around a door next to the cab. It must be in a garage joined to a house. The door opened. Light flooded into the dark interior and froze her solid. She waited, transfixed. Two silhouettes. Male. Heads shaved. One of the men split to the other side of the cab. She leaned back, sat up on the seat, clenched her fists, got her high heels ready. Knees up to her chest. Elbows braced against the back of the seat. Lips tight across her sharp white teeth. The faces floating outside were wearing white plastic smiling masks. She'd seen them before somewhere and they terrified her.

The doors' locks shunted back. Hands came in from either side.

She kicked out with one leg, then the other. Heard one of them grunt with pain. It motivated her. Until she felt her foot in the other man's hand, a terrible grip which twisted her ankle so that she had to roll with it or have it torn off. He dragged her towards him. Her other leg trapped beneath her. He got her face down on the floor of the cab, both ankles secured, knees bent and heels jammed against her buttocks. He leaned over and grabbed her hair, pulled her head back until her throat was stretched so tight she couldn't even squeak. She lashed out with her fists. One was caught and then the other and forced behind her back. A man's crotch was now in her face. He pinned her wrists with one hand, reached into a pocket, put a handkerchief to her nose and mouth and her world narrowed and collapsed.

Two men, both tall, well-built, mid-thirties, eerily lit in the cab of a white transit van, crawled the streets of East London. The taller, slimmer one, who called himself Skin, was baby-faced, blue-eyed, with a shaved head. He was getting testy, kept straightening his white cap, which had panels of the Cross of St George on its sides and the West Ham United crest on its front. He was staring down at the map in the A-Z guide, which was flashing orange and black as they passed under the streetlights. The spider in the middle of the web tattooed on the side of his neck and up his right cheek seemed to be crawling into his ear. Dan, the driver, was a different breed: short hair, side-parting, blandly good-looking and neither pierced nor painted. It was only their second time working together.

'We're late,' he said calmly, looking left and right at street names.

'I know we're fucking late,' said Skin. 'What are we on now?'

'It looks like … New Barn Street.'

'New Barn Street?' said Skin, perplexed. 'Where the fuck is that?'

'I can only tell you what it says on the street sign,' said Dan equably.

'Nobody likes a smart arse; remember that, Dan.'

'Just tell me where the fuck to go. We're coming up to the end of it now. Straight on? Left? Right?'

'Fuck should I know?'

'You're the one with the map.'

'How come we got no SatNav?'

'Give it here.' Dan ripped the book out of Skin's hands. 'You're not even on the right fucking page.'

'Once I'm east of Limehouse, I'm lost.'

Dan chucked the book into Skin's lap, eased across the road, carried on for a few hundred yards and turned left.

'Grange Road,' said Skin, as if it was hardly a miracle. 'I wasn't that far off.'

'What number?'

'The one with the cab outside it.'

'You didn't bring the number with you, did you?'

'Just look for the fucking cab.'

'The cab's going to be in the garage,' said Dan. 'That's what Pike told us.'

'Fuck. You fuck …'

Skin started rooting around in his pockets, came up with a piece of paper, gave the number. It was an end-of-terrace house. They reached the driveway. Dan reversed up to the garage door, turned off the lights.

'Right,' said Dan. 'Let's chill for a few minutes.'

'Put this on,' said Skin, throwing him a hood, chucking his West Ham cap in the glove compartment. 'Make sure you get the eye and mouth holes facing the right way.'

'Thanks for the instructions.'

'And cop hold of that.'

Dan looked down at a handgun with the fattened barrel of a suppressor attached.

'I thought we were just going to pick up the girl?' said Dan.

'You're the one asked Pike to work with me,' said Skin.

'He didn't say anything about *guns*.'

'This is what I do.'

'What?'

'Take care of things.'

'We don't need *guns* to pick up the girl. How am I going to hold a syringe *and* a gun?'

'You'll work it out,' said Skin. 'Take one of these 'n' all.'

He handed Dan a ligature.

'Jesus Christ.'

'And put these on,' said Skin, handing him a pair of latex gloves.

'What's this all about?' said Dan, dangling the ligature.

'If we get any trouble, the guns'll shut them up, make them concentrate and, if we have to, you know, Pike said he didn't want any noise or mess, so we use these.'

'Them?' said Dan. 'I thought Pike said that we were going to meet the cabbie. He hands over the girl, I sedate her and we leave. Give him five grand down and the other five to come later.'

'That's what he said to *you*,' said Skin, snapping on the gloves. 'What he told *me* was that he hadn't done business with the cabbie before and we should take precautions in case he's got other ideas.'

'Other ideas?'

'Other friends who don't want to give us the girl and want to hold out for more money. The cabbie is connected … know what I mean?'

'Shit,' said Dan, seeing the whole thing reeling out of control.

'Take it. Stop being a fucking fairy.'

Dan stuffed the ligature in his pocket, put the gun inside his jacket. They pulled on the hoods, got out the van and walked down the side of the garage to the back door.

Three men sat around a table: two plastic horror masks on elastic, a clogged ashtray, a thermos flask and two Styrofoam cups of crap coffee. The cabbie didn't allow drinking on the job. Things always went wrong, especially with a pretty girl involved. He'd caught the younger one having a good look up her skirt and got the older one, who spoke a few words of English, to explain that he'd have none of that. He looked at them now in silence. They were illegals, these two. Tough, stocky little bastards from Fuckknowswhere-istan. They had round, shorn heads, all scarred and dented, probably from some mad horse game they played on the steppes or, more likely, prison violence. The younger one looked unconcussable – a word he'd invented for the numbskulls that found their way to his door.

'Long time?' said the one who spoke a little English, cracked plaster caked down the front of his sweatshirt.

The cabbie didn't answer. Glanced at his watch and the curtained window. Yes, late.

The young one nudged his mate. The older one leaned forward, rubbed thumb and forefinger together in the cabbie's face. The cabbie licked his lips with a white-coated tongue, which did not darken them. He held up his forefinger. The gesture dumbfounded them and they communicated in gobbledygook for a full minute. The cabbie sat back, certain now that 'bollocks', minus its vowels, was the same in their two wildly differing languages. He batted his hands down as if calming a couple of kettle drums.

'They'll be here in a tick and you'll get what's coming to you,' he said, smiling, grey teeth all crossed at the bottom. 'More moolah than you've seen since your sisters' weddings.'

The words fell onto their nicked and dented heads like debris from a shattered piggy bank. They searched the fragments for valuables and found nothing. They talked at length. The cabbie looked from one to the other with a face of practiced cheer. He'd learned to love listening to foreigners over the past two decades in London, fascinated by how each race dug the words out. Arabs reaching down their throats as if they might gag on them. Indians bubbling away as if speaking Welsh underwater. Chinese fizzing, popping and wowing like indoor fireworks. These two sounded like goats farting in a field.

'Money,' said the older one, reaching out a hand, beckoning the cash forward.

A van pulled up outside. After some minutes, two doors opened and shut, footsteps down the side of the house. The cabbie got up, pulled the door to behind him, but it eased open, so that the backs of the two illegals were visible from the kitchen, where he unlocked the rear door.

'All right?' said Skin, face now hooded, with just eye and mouth holes.

'Took your time,' said the cabbie, taking in their white latex gloves.

'Any trouble?' asked Skin.

'Who from?'

'Who do you think?' said Skin, looking down the corridor, seeing the illegals. 'And who the fuck are *they*?'

'The help for when you're late.'

'Pike didn't say anything about … help.'

'I know he didn't, but I couldn't carry her on my own and she went nuts when she came round.'

'Where is she?' asked Skin.

'In the back room.'

'*How* is she?' asked Dan.

'Haven't looked for the last fifteen minutes,' said the cabbie. 'She was asleep.'

'Did you use chloroform on her?'asked Dan.

'I had to. She went nuts. Must be claustrophobic or something.'

Dan kept glancing up the corridor at the two illegals, who were talking.

'I'm going to have to call Pike,' said Skin.

'Fucking hell,' said Dan, under his breath.

Skin pulled Dan out with him, made the phone call, had a muttered conversation, Dan waiting, looking as if he wanted a piss. Skin hung up, drew a finger across his neck. Dan felt his guts shudder, mouthed: 'Fuck'.

They eased out the silenced hand guns from inside their black coats, went back into the house, holding them down by their sides.

'What the fuck is this?' said the cabbie, seeing them immediately.

'Wake the girl. Get her ready,' said Skin, taking him by the arm, pushing him up the corridor.

'Ready for what?'

'To go. What do you think?'

'What are you going to do with the guns?' he asked.

'You didn't follow the fucking instructions,' said Skin, red lips from within the black cloth hole. 'Now we've got our orders. Wake the girl.'

'For fuck's sake,' said the cabbie.

'Just do it,' said Skin, and pushed the cabbie towards the bedroom door.

The illegals turned and stood as Skin and Dan came in, to have their expectations suddenly reduced to a small black hole in a fat barrel, which kept coming until it was the eye's whole universe. White latex hands collared them, hauled them away

from their chairs. They kicked the illegals to their knees, denting the undulating lino floor, the fat barrels pressed hard into the fuzz of their shorn heads. The illegals looked up, eyes desperate, lips drawn bloodless across their teeth, breathing quick as they realised their true value in the system that had brought them to the black, glittering mouth of the insatiable metropolis. Skin and Dan pulled the ligatures from their pockets, slipped the guns back inside their coats and looped the cords over the shorn heads of the men kneeling before them, tightened them around their necks. The cabbie closed the bedroom door behind him.

Alyshia was still asleep. The noise from the next room woke her. The fear came alive in her as soon as she saw the cabbie. The whites of her eyes quivered at the edges as she looked at the door. The animal noise of a terrible struggle came through it. She started as something thudded against the other side. The cabbie held onto his head with both hands, looking at the ceiling.

'What's going on?' she asked, her voice barely audible.

The cabbie didn't answer. Through the grunting and gasping of effort came the noise of heels clawing against lino. Then a rigid, pent-up silence, followed by a collapse. The cabbie let his hands drop to his sides, shook his head. Alyshia, back against the wall, stared unblinking at the door. No sound.

'All right,' said the cabbie, who couldn't wait any longer. 'Let's get you out of here.'

He opened the door. The room had filled with a shocking stink.

'Not yet, you fucking moron,' said Skin.

Alyshia saw the hooded men, looked down at the dead illegals' swollen faces, their new horror masks. She vomited. The cabbie pulled her back into the room.

'Get her cleaned up,' said Skin. 'Got anything we can roll these two up in?'

'In the garage,' said the cabbie. 'There's some plastic tarps.'

Dan left the room, staggered to the garage, dazed by what he'd just done. He came back with the tarpaulins. They rolled the illegals into them, secured them at both ends, coughing against the stink in the room. They took them into the garage. Dan went out the back and down the side of the house, checked the street. Empty. He tapped on the garage, opened the rear of the transit.

They lifted the bodies into the back, closed the doors, went back for the girl.

The cabbie had opened the window in the room and the stink was leaving, but slowly, because of the thickness of the blinds.

'Shouldn't have done that 'n' all,' said Skin. 'You're not paying attention to the fucking instructions.'

'Yes, well, I didn't know that was on the cards, did I?' said the cabbie. 'You got my money?'

Skin handed him a fat envelope. They went into the bedroom. Alyshia's skirt and blouse were on the floor, streaked with vomit and topped by a brown blur of tights. She looked up from the bed in bra and knickers, the fear streaming out of her.

'You got the alarm code to her flat?' asked Dan.

The cabbie shook his head, counting the money. Skin and Dan looked to Alyshia. She gave them the code. Skin made a call, gave the number, hung up.

'Get us a plastic bag for her things,' said Dan.

The cabbie went to the kitchen, came back with a bag, put Alyshia's discarded clothes in it. Dan removed a small black box from his pocket, took out a capped syringe filled with a clear liquid. Alyshia pressed herself against the wall and whimpered as he flicked the air out of it, eased off the cap.

'You done this before?' asked the cabbie, looking over Dan's shoulder.

'First time,' said Dan, rolling his eyes.

'I'll be quiet,' said Alyshia. 'Just don't …'

'This'll keep you nice and relaxed,' said Dan, and then to the cabbie, who was now looking at him intently: 'You fancy a vodkatini 'n' all?'

'Who's going to clean this shit up?'

'There wouldn't have been any shit to clear up,' said Skin, hooded face up close to the cabbie's, 'if you'd done what you was fucking told.'