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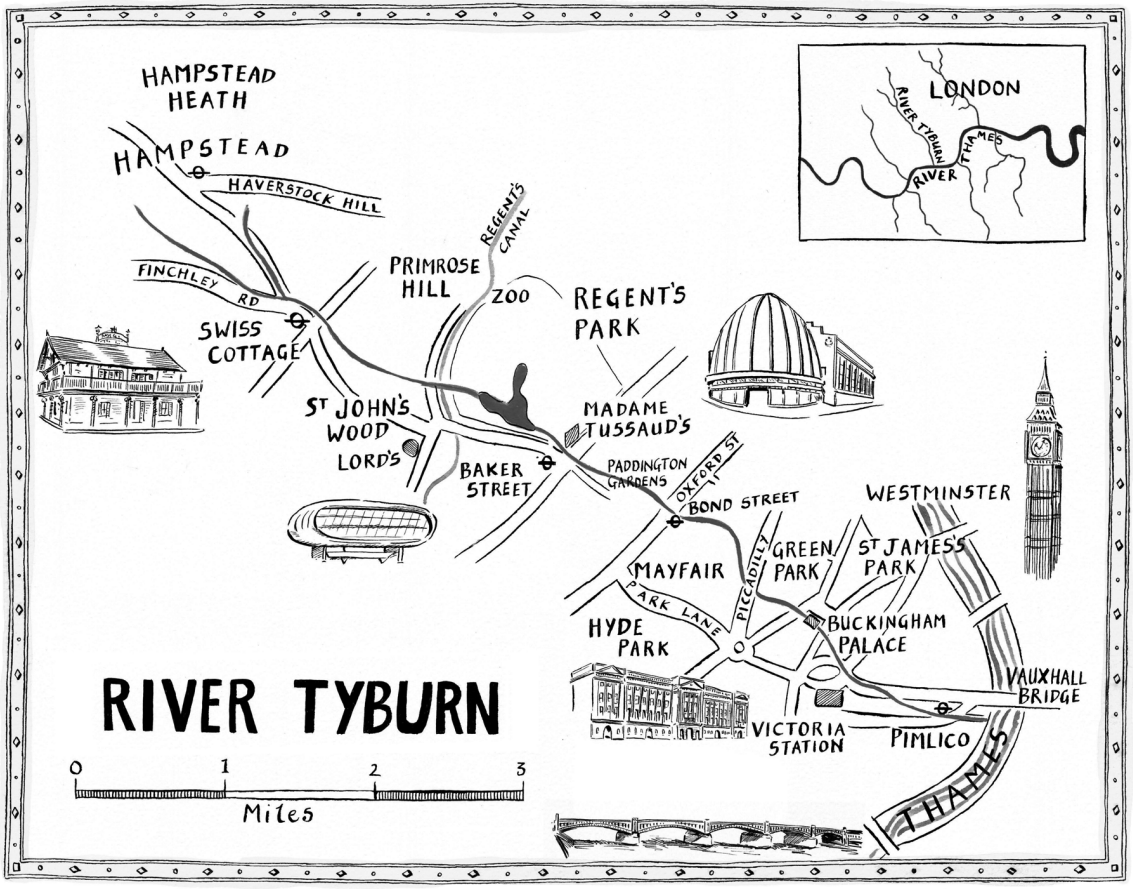
Tuesday's Gone

Written by Nicci French

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Tuesday's Gone

NICCI FRENCH



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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

To Francis and Julia

One

Maggie Brennan half walked, half ran along Deptford Church Street. She was talking on the phone and reading a file and looking for the address in the *A–Z*. It was the second day of the week and she was already two days behind schedule. This didn't include the caseload she had inherited from a colleague who was now on permanent sick leave.

'No,' said Maggie, into the phone. She looked at her watch. 'I'll try to get to the meeting before you finish.'

She put the mobile into her pocket. She was thinking of the case she'd just come from. A three-year-old with bruises. Suspicious bruises, the doctor in A&E had said. Maggie had talked to the mother, looked at the child, checked out the flat where they lived. It was horrible, damp, cold, but not obviously dangerous. The mother said she didn't have a boyfriend, and Maggie had checked the bathroom and there was no razor. She had insisted that he had fallen down the stairs. That's what people said when they hit their children, but even so, three-year-olds really did fall downstairs. She'd only spent ten minutes there but ten hours wouldn't have made much difference. If she removed the child, the prosecution would probably fail and she would be disciplined. If she didn't remove the child and he was found dead, there would be an inquiry; she would be fired and maybe prosecuted. So she'd signed off on it. No immediate cause for concern. Probably nothing much would happen.

She looked more closely at the *A–Z*. Her hands were cold because she'd forgotten her gloves; her feet were wet in their cheap boots. She'd been to this hostel before, but she could never remember where it was. Howard Street was a little dead end, tucked away somewhere towards the river. She had to put her reading glasses on and move her finger around on the map before she found it. Yes, that was it, just a couple of minutes away. She turned off the main street and found herself unexpectedly next to a churchyard.

She leaned on the wall and looked at the file on the woman she was going to see. There wasn't much at all. Michelle Doyce. Born 1959. A hospital discharge paper, copied to the Social Services department. A placement form, a request for an evaluation. Maggie flicked through the forms: no next of kin. It wasn't even clear why she had been in hospital, although from the name of it, she could see that it was something psychological. She could guess the results of the evaluation in advance: just sheer general hopelessness, a pathetic middle-aged woman who needed somewhere to stay and someone to drop in just to keep her from wandering the streets. Maggie looked at her watch. There wasn't time for a full evaluation today. She could manage a basic check-up to make sure that Michelle was not in imminent danger, that she was feeding herself – the standard checklist.

She closed the file and walked away from the church into a housing estate. Some of the flats were sealed up, with metal sheets bolted on to the doors and windows, but most were occupied. On the second level, a teenage boy emerged from a doorway and walked along the balcony, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his bulky jacket. Maggie looked around. It was probably all right. It was a Tuesday morning,

and the dangerous people were mostly still in bed. She turned the corner and checked the address she'd written in her notebook. Room One, 3 Howard Street. Yes, she remembered it now. It was a strange house that looked as if it had been built out of the same materials as the housing estate and then had decayed at the same rate. This hostel wasn't a proper hostel at all. It was a house rented cheaply from a private landlord. People could be put there while the services made up their minds about what to do with them. Usually they just moved on or were forgotten about. There were some places Maggie only visited with a chaperone, but she hadn't heard anything particular about this one. These people were mainly a danger to themselves.

She looked up at the house. On the second floor a broken window was blocked up with brown cardboard. There was a tiny paved front garden and an alley that went along the left side of the house. Beside the front door a bin bag had burst, but it had only added to the rubbish that was strewn everywhere. Maggie wrote a one-word note. There were five buzzers next to the front door. They didn't have labels next to them but she pressed the bottom one, then pressed it again. She couldn't tell whether it was working. She was wondering whether to knock on the door with her fist or look through the window when she heard a voice. Looking round, she saw a man right behind her. He was gaunt with wiry ginger hair tied back in a ponytail, and piercings right across his face. She stepped to one side when she saw the man's dog, a small breed that was technically illegal, though it was the third she'd seen since she'd left Deptford station.

'No, he's a good one,' the man said. 'Aren't you, Buzz?'

'Do you live here?' Maggie said.

The man looked suspicious. One of his cheeks was quivering. Maggie took a laminated card from her pocket and showed it to him. 'I'm from Social Services,' she said. 'I'm here to see Michelle Doyce.'

'The one downstairs?' the man said. 'Haven't seen her.' He leaned past Maggie and unlocked the front door. 'You coming in?'

'Yes, please.'

The man just shrugged.

'Go on, Buzz,' he said. Maggie heard the clatter of the dog's paws inside and up the stairs, and the man disappeared after him.

As soon as she stepped inside, Maggie was hit by an odour of damp and rubbish and fried food and dog shit and other smells she couldn't place. It almost made her eyes water. She closed the front door behind her. This must once have been the hallway of a family house. Now it was piled with pallets, tins of paint, a couple of gaping plastic bags, an old bike with no tyres. The stairs were directly ahead. To the left, what would have been a door to the front room was blocked up. She walked past the side of the stairs to a door further along. She rapped on it hard and listened. She heard something inside, then nothing. She knocked again, several times, and waited. There was a rattling sound and then the door opened inwards. Maggie held out her laminated card once more.

'Michelle Doyce?' she said.

'Yes,' said the woman.

It was difficult for Maggie to define even to herself exactly what was strange about her. She was clean and her hair was brushed, but perhaps almost too brushed, like that of a small child who had wetted her hair and then

combed it so that it lay flat over her head, thin enough to show the pale scalp beneath. Her face was smooth and pink, with a dusting of fuzzy hair. Her bright red lipstick extended just a little too far off her lips. She wore a baggy, faded, flowery dress. Maggie identified herself and held out the card.

'I just wanted to check up on you, Michelle,' she said. 'See how you are. Are you all right? All right in yourself?'

The woman nodded.

'Can I come in?' said Maggie. 'Can I check everything's OK?'

She stepped inside and took out her notebook. As far as she could tell from a glance, Michelle seemed to be keeping herself clean. She looked as if she was eating. She was responsive. Still, something felt odd. She peered around in the shabby little anteroom of the flat. The contrast with the hallway of the house was impressive. Shoes were arranged in a row, a coat hung from a hook. There was a bucket with a mop leaning against the wall in the corner.

'How long have you been here, Michelle?'

The woman frowned. 'Here?' she said. 'A few days.'

The discharge form had said the fifth of January and today was the first day of February. Still, that sort of vagueness wasn't really surprising. As the two women stood there, Maggie became aware of a sound she couldn't quite place. It might be the hum of traffic, or a vacuum cleaner on the floor above, or a plane. It depended on how far away it was. There was a smell also, like food that had been left out too long. She looked up: the electricity was working. She should check whether Michelle had a fridge. But, by the look of her, she'd be all right for the time being.

'Can I have a look round, Michelle?' she said. 'Make sure everything's OK?'

'You want to meet him?' said Michelle.

Maggie was puzzled. There hadn't been anything on the form. 'Have you got a friend?' she said. 'I'd be happy to meet him.'

Michelle stepped forward and opened the door to what would have been the house's main back room, away from the street. Maggie followed her and immediately felt something on her face. At first she thought it was dust. She thought of an underground train coming, blowing the warm grit into her face. At the same time the sound got louder and she realized it wasn't dust but flies, a thick cloud of flies blowing against her face.

For a few moments she was confused by the man sitting on the sofa. Her perceptions had slowed and become skewed, as if she were deep under water or in a dream. Crazily, she wondered if he was wearing some sort of diving suit, a blue, marbled, slightly ruptured and torn diving suit, and she wondered why his eyes were yellow and cloudy. And then she started to fumble for her phone and she dropped it, and suddenly she couldn't make her fingers work, couldn't get them to pick the phone up from the grimy carpet, as she saw that it wasn't any kind of suit but his naked, swollen, rupturing flesh and that he was dead. Long dead.

Two

'February,' said Sasha, sidestepping a puddle, 'should be abolished.'

She was walking with Frieda along a street lined with modern office blocks, whose height blocked out the sky and made the dark day seem darker. Everything was black and grey and white, like an old photograph: the buildings were monochrome, the sky chilly and blank; all the men and women – but they were mostly men – walking past them, with their slim laptop cases and umbrellas at the ready, wore sober suits and coats. Only the red scarf around Frieda's neck added a splash of colour to the scene.

Frieda was walking swiftly, and Sasha, although she was the taller, had to make an effort to keep up.

'And Tuesdays,' she went on. 'February is the worst month of the year, much worse than January, and Tuesday is the worst day of the week.'

'I thought that was supposed to be Monday.'

'Tuesdays are worse. It's like . . .' Sasha paused, trying to think what it was like. 'Monday's like jumping into ice-cold water, but you get a shock of excitement. On Tuesday you're still in the water but the shock has worn off and you're just cold.'

Frieda looked round at her, noticing the winter pallor that made her seem frailer than usual, although there was no hiding her unusual beauty, even bundled up in a heavy coat, with her dark blonde hair tied severely back.

'Bad morning?'

They turned past a wine bar and briefly out on to Cannon Street, into the blur of red buses and taxis. Rain started to spit.

'Not really. Just a meeting that went on longer than necessary because some people love the sound of their own voices.' Sasha suddenly stopped and looked around. 'I hate this part of London,' she said, not angrily, but as if she'd only just realized where she was. 'When you suggested a walk, I thought you were going to take me along by the river or to a park. This is just unreal.'

Frieda slowed. They were walking past a tiny patch of fenced-in green, untended and full of nettles and overgrown shrubs.

'There was a church here,' she said. 'It's long gone, of course, and the graveyard as well. But this tiny bit survived, got forgotten about somehow, among all the offices. It's a fragment of something.'

Sasha peered over the railings at the litter. 'And now it's where people come for a cigarette.'

'When I was little, seven or eight, my father took me to London.'

Sasha looked at Frieda attentively: this was the first time she had ever mentioned any member of her family or brought up a memory from her childhood. In the year or so since they had known each other, she had told Frieda almost everything about her own life – her relationship with her parents and her feckless younger brother, her love affairs, her friendships, things she kept hidden from view suddenly exposed – but Frieda's life remained a mystery to her.

The two of them had met just over a year ago. Sasha had gone to Frieda as a patient and she still remembered

their single session, when she had told Frieda, in a whisper and barely lifting her eyes to meet Frieda's steady gaze, how she had slept with her therapist. Her therapist had slept with her. It had been an act of confession: her dirty secret filling the quiet room and Frieda, leaning forward slightly in her red chair, taking away the sting and shame by the quality of her attention. Sasha had left feeling drained but cleansed. Only later had she learned that afterwards Frieda had gone straight from their session to the restaurant where the therapist was sitting with his wife and punched him, creating havoc, smashing glasses and plates. She had ended up in a police cell with a bandaged hand, but the therapist had declined to press charges and insisted on paying for all the damage at the restaurant. Later, Sasha – who was a geneticist by profession – had repaid the debt by surreptitiously arranging a DNA test on a piece of evidence Frieda had lifted from the police station. They had become friends, yet it was a friendship unlike any that Sasha had ever known. Frieda didn't talk about feelings; she had never once mentioned her ex, Sandy, since he had gone to work in America, and the only time Sasha had asked her about it, Frieda had told her with terrifying politeness that she didn't want to discuss it. Instead, Frieda talked about a piece of architecture, or a strange fact she had unearthed about London. Every so often she would invite Sasha to an exhibition and sometimes she would call and ask her if she was free for a walk. Sasha would always say yes. She would break a date or leave work in order to follow Frieda through the London streets. She felt that this was Frieda's way of confiding in her, and that by accompanying her on her rambles, she was perhaps taking some of the edge off her friend's solitude.

Now she waited for Frieda to continue, knowing better than to press her.

'We went to Spitalfields Market and he suddenly said we were standing on top of a plague pit, that hundreds of people who had died from the Black Death were lying under our feet. They had done tests on the teeth of some of the corpses that had been excavated.'

'Couldn't he have taken you to the zoo?' said Sasha.

Frieda shook her head. 'I hate these buildings as well. We could be anywhere. But there are the tiny bits they've forgotten to get rid of, the odd space here and there, and the names of the roads: Threadneedle Street, Wardrobe Terrace, Cowcross Street. Memories and ghosts.'

'It sounds just like therapy.'

Frieda smiled at her. 'Doesn't it? Here, there's something I want to show you.'

They retraced their route to Cannon Street and stopped opposite the station, in front of an iron grid set into the wall.

'What's this?'

'The London Stone.'

Sasha looked at it dubiously: it was an unprepossessing lump of limestone, dull and pockmarked, and reminded her of the kind of uncomfortable rock you perched on at the beach when you were rubbing sand off your feet before pulling your shoes back on. 'What's it for?'

'It's protecting us.'

Sasha gave a puzzled smile. 'In what sense?'

Frieda indicated a small sign beside it. '"So long as the Stone of Brutus is safe, so long shall London flourish." It's supposed to be the heart of the city, the point from which the Romans measured the scope of their empire.

Some people think it has occult powers. Nobody really knows where it came from – the Druids, the Romans. Maybe it's an old altar, a sacrificial stone, a mystical centre point.'

'You believe that?'

'What I like,' said Frieda, 'is that it's in the side of a shop and that most people walk past without noticing it, and that if it got mislaid, it would never be found because it looks like a completely ordinary piece of rock. And it means what we want it to mean.'

They were silent for a few moments and then Sasha put a gloved hand on Frieda's shoulder. 'Tell me, if you were ever in distress, would you confide in anyone?'

'I don't know.'

'Would you confide in me?'

'Perhaps.'

'Well. You could, that's all.' She felt constrained, embarrassed by the emotion in her voice. 'I just wanted you to know.'

'Thank you.' Frieda's voice was neutral.

Sasha dropped her hand, and they turned from the grille. The air had become notably colder, the sky blanker, as if it might snow.

'I have a patient in half an hour,' Frieda said.

'One thing.'

'Yes?'

'Tomorrow. You must be worried. I hope it goes all right. Will you let me know?'

Frieda gave a shrug. Sasha watched as she walked away, slim and upright, into the swallowing crowds.

Three

Detective Constable Yvette Long arrived a few moments before Karlsson. She had got the phone call just fifteen minutes previously but already a small crowd was gathering in the street: children who ought to be at school, young mothers with babies in buggies, men who seemed in no hurry to get anywhere. It was bitingly cold but many of them were not wearing overcoats or gloves. They looked excited, bright-eyed with curiosity. Two police cars were parked in front of number three and a barrier had been put up. Just behind it, a thin stringy man with a ginger ponytail was pacing up and down, up and down, with his barrel-chested dog. Every so often it sat down and yawned, saliva drooling from its jaws. There was another man, enormously fat, ripples of flesh encased in his T-shirt, behind the barrier. He was standing quite still, mopping his shiny forehead, as if it was high summer, not icy February. Yvette parked and, as she opened the door, DC Chris Munster came out of the house, holding a handkerchief to his mouth.

'Where's the woman who found him?'

Munster took the handkerchief from his mouth and put it into his pocket. He made a visible effort to control the working of his face. 'Sorry. It got to me for a bit. She's there.' He nodded towards a middle-aged African woman sitting on the pavement with her face in her hands. 'She's waiting to talk to us. She's shocked. The other woman –

the one who was with him – she's in the car with Melanie. She keeps talking about tea. Forensics are on the way.'

'Karlsson's on his way too.'

'Good.' Munster lowered his voice. 'How can they live like this?'

Yvette and Karlsson pulled on paper overshoes. He gave her a reassuring nod and, for a moment, put his hand on the small of her back, steadying her. She took a deep breath.

Later, Karlsson would try to separate all his impressions, put them in order, but now it was a jumble of sights and smells and a nausea that made him sweat. They walked through the rubbish, the dog shit, the smell, half sweet and so thick it caught in the back of the throat. He and Yvette made their way to the door that wasn't blocked off. They stepped inside, into a different universe of order: it was like being in a library, where everything was meticulously catalogued and stored in its allotted space. Three pairs of ancient shoes, on top of each other; a shelf of round stones; another shelf of bird bones, some of which still had matted feathers stuck to them, a tub of cigarette butts lying side by side, another plastic container with what looked like hair balls. He had time to think, as he passed into the next room, that the woman who lived here must be crazy. And then, for a while, he stared at the thing on the sofa, the naked man sitting upright, in a halo of slow, fat flies.

He was quite slender, and although it was hard to tell, didn't seem old. His hands were in his lap, as if in modesty, and in one of them was an iced bun; his head was propped up with a pillow so that his open sulphurous eyes stared

straight at them and his lopsided, stiffened mouth leered. His skin was a mottled blue, like a cheese left out for too long. Karlsson thought of the acid-washed jeans his little daughter had made him buy for her. He pushed the thought away. He didn't want to bring her into this setting, even in his mind. Leaning forward, he saw vertical marks striping the man's torso. He must have been dead for some time, judging not just from the way his skin had darkened where the blood had puddled on the underside of his thighs and buttocks, but also from the smell that was making Yvette Long, standing behind Karlsson, breathe in shallow, hoarse gasps. There were two full cups of tea by his left foot, which was curled upwards at an unnatural angle, the toes splayed. He had a comb stuck into his light brown hair, and lipstick on his mouth.

'Obviously he's been here some time.' Karlsson's voice sounded calmer than he had expected. 'It's warm in the room. That hasn't helped.'

Yvette made a noise that might have been agreement.

Karlsson forced himself to look more closely at the mottled, puffy flesh. He waved Yvette over. 'Look,' he said.

'What?'

'At his left hand.'

The tip of the middle finger was missing from above the knuckle.

'It could be a deformity.'

'It looks to me like it's been cut off and the wound hasn't healed properly,' said Karlsson.

Yvette swallowed before she spoke. She absolutely wasn't going to be sick. 'I don't know,' she said. 'It's hard to tell. It looks a bit mushy but it could be . . .'

'General decomposition,' said Karlsson.

'Yes.'

'Which is happening at an advanced rate because of the heat.'

'Chris said the bar-fire was on when they arrived.'

'The autopsy should tell us. They'll need to get a move on.'

Karlsson looked at the cracked window and its rotting sill, the thin orange curtains. There were things that Michelle Doyce had collected and ordered: a cardboard box of balled-up, obviously soiled tissues; a drawer full of bottle-tops, colour-coded; a jam jar containing nail clippings, small yellowing crescents. 'Let's get out of here,' he said. 'Talk to her and the woman who found him. We can come back later, when he's been taken away.'

As they left, the forensic team arrived, with their lights and cameras, face masks, chemicals and general air of professional competence. Karlsson felt relieved. They would take away the horror, turn the ghastly room boiling with flies into a well-lit laboratory where the objects would become data and be classified.

'What a way to go,' he said, as they went back outside.

'Who the hell is he?'

'That's where we start.'

Karlsson left Yvette talking to Maggie Brennan and went to sit in the car with Michelle Doyce. All he knew about her was that she was fifty-one years old, that she had recently been discharged from hospital after a psychological evaluation that had come to no real conclusions about her mental health, and that she had been living in Howard Street for a month, with no complaints from neighbours.

This was the first time Maggie Brennan had visited her: she was standing in for someone else, who wouldn't have paid a visit because she had been on sick leave since last October.

'Michelle Doyce?'

She looked at him with eyes that were very pale, almost like the eyes of a blind person, but didn't reply.

'I'm Detective Chief Inspector Malcolm Karlsson.' He waited. She blinked. 'A police officer,' he added.

'Have you come a long way?'

'No, I haven't. But I need to ask you some questions.'

'I have come a very long way. You may well ask.'

'This is important.'

'Yes. I know it.'

'The man in your flat.'

'I've been entertaining him.'

'He's dead, Michelle.'

'I cleaned his teeth for him. Not many friends can say that about their guests. And he sang for me. Like the sounds of the river at night, when the dog has stopped barking and the shouting and crying dies down.'

'Michelle, he's dead. The man in your flat is dead. We need to find out how he died. Can you tell me his name?'

'Name?'

'Yes. Who is he? Was he?'

She looked puzzled. 'Why do you need a name? You can ask him.'

'This is a serious matter. Who is he?'

She stared at him: a strong, pale woman with uncanny eyes and large reddened hands that floated in vague gestures when she spoke.

'Did he die in your flat, Michelle? Was it an accident?'

'One of your teeth is chipped. I am quite fond of teeth, you know. I have all my old teeth under my pillow, just in case they come, and a few of other people's, but that's rare. You don't find them so often.'

'Can you understand what I'm asking you?'

'Does he want to leave me?'

'He's dead.' Karlsson wanted to shout it, to use the word like a stone that would shatter her incomprehension, but he kept his voice calm.

'Everyone goes in the end. Though I work so hard.'

'How did he die?'

She started to mumble words he couldn't make out.

Chris Munster was making a preliminary assessment of the rest of the house. It repulsed him. It didn't feel like a criminal investigation at all: it was about people who were hopeless, who had slipped through the cracks. This upstairs room was full of needles: hundreds, no, thousands of used needles covering the floor so at first he'd thought it was some kind of pattern. Dog shit here too, most of it old and hardened. Bloodstained rags. One thin mattress with nasty stains near the middle. Right now, he didn't care who'd killed the man downstairs. He just wanted to empty everyone out of this house, torch it and get out, breathe some clean air, the colder the better. He felt dirty all over, outside and in. How could people live like this? That fat man with the red-veined eyes and the livid skin of the drunk, hardly able to speak, hardly able to balance his bulk on his small feet. Or the skinny dog-owning one, with his punctured arms and scabby face, who grinned and scratched himself and bobbed around: was this his room and were these his needles? Or maybe it was the dead

man's room. That was probably it. The dead man would turn out to be part of this household from Hell. Fucking landlord. They'd been pushed in here, the hopeless misfits, the ones society didn't know how to deal with, had no money to treat and abandoned so that now the police had to clear up the mess. If the public knew, he thought, his feet in their heavy boots sliding among the syringes, if they knew how some people lived and how they died.