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Opening Extract from...

The Pure

Written by Jake Simons

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1

Uzi – that was his name now, Uzi – had been living quietly in London for three months. He had no strong feelings about it. It was just a place. As grimy, as vicious, as glittering as any other city. The main thing was, it wasn't Israel. It wasn't home. That was why he came. His old self – the man who was part of a band of brothers – had become nothing but a distant memory. And he could barely even remember the man who had once had a wife, a child. Now he was alone, renting a dive in a poor part of North London. An ugly flat – he felt he deserved ugliness. And it was a good place for business.

It was Saturday night, and he needed to forget everything. The voice in his head, for once, didn't complain. He got on a bus, and as it fumed through the traffic, the sun began to die. The evening was humid, gripping the passengers with suffocating fingers. He didn't get a seat, didn't want one. Automatically he became invisible, became alert, turning his back to the staircase, watching the other passengers. There: three teenagers, stoned, on the back seat. A man standing three paces away, carrying a backpack, with callouses on the knuckles of his right hand – a fighter. Behind him a pair of pickpockets, though tonight they weren't on the job. All these things he saw, he couldn't ignore them. And there was more. He could tell you the make and model of the mobile devices that everyone on the bus was carrying. He could tell you which passengers were suffering from ill health, and what their complaints might be. He could tell you their nationalities, their temperaments, their heights and weights; he could tell you which ones had noticed him. He could tell you which of these people, under pressure, would buckle, and who would hold out till the end. None of this was psychic. It was his training.

Darkness fell, and the crawling traffic groaned. When he arrived in Camden, hunger was making him light-headed and he couldn't stop thinking about sex. He didn't want to eat in a proper restaurant. There was a stall he knew that sold falafel, but he didn't want a falafel. He wanted something English. He had studied English culture – and American culture, Canadian culture, Persian culture, Russian culture, and the rest – he knew what people ate. He remembered a café that looked pretty cheap. A greasy spoon. He ate bacon and eggs, with chips and a slice of bread. £2.99 all in. He went back into the street and lit a cigarette.

He hung around for a while, smoking, feeling like some sort of ghost. He regularly went to clubs round here, ones filled with teenagers, places where he, as a forty-year-old man, would never fit in. Somehow it was easier around young people; at least he had a reason to be an outsider. On the streets, it was more complicated.

He moved to check his weapon, but there was no gun there. Just an empty space. Of course. He smiled bitterly to himself; he just couldn't get used to this. He shrugged, flicked his cigarette into the gutter. Then he entered the Underworld.

The music was loud, it lodged itself in the ribcage. He pushed his way to the bar. The place was busy, groups of teenagers – children, really. Back home, everything would be shrouded in a thick fug, like teargas. He liked it that way, felt less exposed. But in England smoking had been banned.

At the bar he quickly drank two beers and a shot of vodka. Then, grabbing a bottle of Heineken by the neck, he pushed his way into the crowd. He needed a release. A group of teenagers were in the middle of the dance floor, grinding. In the corner, the pushers. Nearer at hand some older revellers, professionals who, he thought, worked in the finance sector, their hands describing arabesques in the air. And several feet away was a large group of people of all nationalities, foreign students perhaps, bopping around self-consciously. He had a

sudden sense of dread, as if something terrible was about to happen. What could he do? He danced.

Someone jostled him from behind, but he could tell from the nature of the contact that it was accidental. A new song started playing, with a repetitive high-pitched shriek. There – six paces away – a girl he recognised. Short and slim, with a dead-straight fringe that brushed her eyelashes. Hungarian, he thought. They had spoken drunkenly a few nights ago, but he couldn't remember her name. She had thrown herself at him then, and he had rejected her. But tonight, in the whirling coloured light, she looked like a different person. She was dancing woodenly, self-consciously, and there was something compelling about that. He caught her eye and she looked away, then recognised him and smiled. He moved closer and danced to the rhythm in his ribcage.

'Hi,' he said, his voice fighting with the music. She shrugged, and he put his mouth close to her ear.

'Hi,' he repeated.

'Hi,' she shouted back, and giggled.

'What's your name?' he yelled. 'I can't remember. Sorry.' The girl said something he didn't understand. He bent his head low and she repeated it into his ear; she did not flinch as he rested his hand in the small of her back.

'Mariska.'

'What?'

'Mary.'

Uzi smiled and moved away. She held his gaze, then looked down coyly. He understood – and was surprised – that there were no hard feelings. Last time they met the chemistry had been there, but she was simply too young, too innocent, too pathetic. It had all been too easy; she had been absurdly impressed by his world-weariness, his stories – all lies – about being a Russian presidential bodyguard. There had been no thrill of the chase.

He thought back to the stories he had told her last time, trying to remember the details. Russian presidential

bodyguard – yes, that's right. But for how many years? Eight? Ten? Had he admitted to having a son? Had he told her his age? He was getting sloppy. But it was instinctive, this lying. Even now that he had left his old life behind, he found it hard to tell the truth. His training had left an indelible mark, had changed him irreversibly. It had been designed to. For weeks on end they had assigned him a false identity, sent him out into the streets, then arrested and interrogated him, violently; then immediately assigned him another false identity and released him on to the streets again, only to pick him up and interrogate him once more; and then there would be another identity, and another, all day, for days at a time, until he had become used to maintaining a cover story, and withstanding torture for it. Until he had almost forgotten who he really was. Until his true identity had become irrelevant.

Mary, he recalled, was studying English in the mornings, working in a Hungarian café in Soho in the afternoons. She had been heading to some sort of music festival, he couldn't remember which one. She was nothing but a child, really. They existed in different worlds.

A new song was playing now, something with a thudding bassline, blow after blow to the heart. Again he felt that something bad was going to happen, but he shrugged it off. A mist grew in his abdomen, rising to his chest, intensifying, and suddenly he wanted this girl. Fuck the consequences. He began to dance like a beast in a mating ritual. A few of the other students glanced at them, then turned away. Mary smiled in the blue-and-pink light and he found himself smiling back, feeling physical pain at her innocence. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing everything he was not.

He was sweating. As one song bled into another and the dance floor became more and more crowded, they became separated from Mary's friends, who were now dancing in a knot twenty-five paces away. Uzi was jostled – again, he thought, by accident. He bent low to speak to her.

'How was the festival?'

She looked at him, wide-eyed, and smiled. Now their bodies were touching.

'You remember.'

'Of course I remember.'

'Festival was very nice.'

'Good.'

'Your name – it was Tommy?'

'That's right, Tommy.'

'From Russia?'

'That's right. Tomislav.'

She laughed, and suddenly, in the flashes of coloured light, she looked powerful, like a goddess. Uzi felt sick. For a while they continued to dance, and he felt the blood rush into his neck and drain again.

'Shall we get a drink?' she shouted. He nodded. She took his hand and led him from the dance floor. The lamb leading the wolf, he thought, the rabbit leading the huntsman.

The air was close and humid as they left the club and stepped into the blackness of the night. Mary was tottering slightly, holding on to his arm, and he was supporting her, his hand straying on to her hip. He was drunk; nothing concerned him any more. Sweat had plastered his hair to his forehead. One-handed, he lit a cigarette and the girl laughed at something. She had her phone out – it had cartoon stickers on it – and she was trying to send a text. Under the orange light from the streetlamps, she looked different. Her hair wasn't as good as it had looked in the club, she had a few spots on her cheeks, and she wasn't slim at all. She was bordering on plump, and that inflamed him. She was visceral. She waited while he finished his cigarette, then they got into a cab.

'Give the driver your address,' he said. 'We're going to your place.' On the way he started to kiss her, which she accepted unhesitatingly, and then he began to knead her breast, pushing himself against her thigh, smelling her. She

made not a sound, accepting everything, instigating nothing. He no longer cared where he was, or what he was doing, or to whom. It was just him, the taxi, and a girl; nobody to see or hear him.

By the time they arrived at her house, a long, grey dawn was beginning to break, fat with moisture. Uzi paid the driver and followed her to the door. He didn't know where they were, he hadn't been paying attention. He felt intoxicated, reckless. She fumbled with her keys in the lock.

'I have night-blindness,' she said, 'sorry.' Unusual phrase, he thought. In a strange way, it moved him. And then they were in, through a brief catacomb of hallways. She was shushing him; he had his hand on her hip, he wouldn't take it off. His other hand was straying unconsciously to the empty space where his weapon used to be.

She led him into a studio flat, incredibly neat, with a faint smell of plastic, like a toyshop. She offered him a drink but already he was on her. He pushed her to her knees, pressed her face into his crotch. He had a feeling like clouds of insects were being released from his brain, and he gasped and looked up at the ceiling. She made no sound, just knelt there, face in his crotch, not moving. Her phone was still in her hand. He pulled off his shirt and fell awkwardly on the floor, pulling her on top of him. The bed seemed untouchable, so neat, he couldn't do it. He rolled over, trapping her beneath his body. He wanted her to moan, to make a sound, to respond to him. But she did not; she simply accepted him, whatever he did, and it made him want to fuck her desperately. One of her hands slid over his shoulder, and she did not flinch when she felt the cyst on the bridge of the muscle. He clawed off his jeans but before he could penetrate her he came, and they lay side-by-side on the floor, the white mess strung over them both. For a while there was silence as the dawn began to hum outside.

He thought about a battle from the Lebanon campaign. His unit had been staging a counter-attack. As they advanced

he had felt so strong, part of a single massive being made up of air support, artillery, tanks, infantry units. Invincible. Together they had gone forward, firing like madmen, scattering the enemy, reducing them to the occasional flash of machine-gunfire here, a cluster of isolated silhouettes there, a solitary truck trying to turn back. But then – suddenly – at a certain indefinable moment, the tables had turned. He had looked around and found that he was alone. His comrades, his air support, were nowhere to be seen; his artillery was nothing but a distant thudding. And all around him swarmed the enemy. The flashes of machine-gunfire had become unified, coordinated, and figures with RPGs were materialising everywhere. He had stumbled backwards, firing as he retreated, ducking to protect his head, his eyes, his jaw, as bullets whined past him, kicked up the ground beneath his feet. On his own, disorientated, dislocated from his system of support. No comrades, no back-up, no security. This was how he felt now, with a girl he didn't know, in a flat somewhere in London.

'Let's get into bed,' she said quietly.

'I'm fine here.'

He looked at her, this woman from another world, this person he did not know, her breasts splayed and her pubic hair a dark tangle against his leg. He wondered who her parents were, if she had siblings. He wondered how her life would end. Her fringe was at all angles, she looked ridiculous. Her hand was cupped over his belly, and like this she fell asleep.

When her breath was deep and rasping, Uzi got silently to his feet. He felt sorry. He went into the bathroom and washed among the unfamiliar toiletries, all covered in Hungarian script. The toyshop smell was stronger in here, perhaps it was shampoo or something. For a long time he looked at himself in the mirror, his grizzled, worry-furrowed face with its sandpaper smudge on his cheeks and neck. He examined the cyst on his shoulder. Outside, cars went past. Israel felt a million miles away. The alcohol

lay hot and heavy in his belly and his mouth was dry. He tiptoed back into the bedroom. The girl had turned on to her front, hugging herself like a child. She must have been quite drunk, to fall asleep like that. She was lying in front of the door. He thought of moving her into the bed, but he didn't want to wake her. He gathered his sweaty clothes together, dressed and nudged the door open. She sighed and rolled over, but didn't wake up. He kissed her gently, incongruously. Then he slipped out the door, through the catacombs and into the street.

The morning was humid and he did not feel as if he was entering fresh air. Already he was out of breath. He took a cigarette out of his pocket but he didn't light it. His fists were clenched. He still had a feeling of dread, and almost turned back to check that the girl was still alive. His vision became blurred; he could feel tears on his cheeks. Then his inner ear began to itch, and he knew the voice was coming.

'Good morning, Uzi. How are you today?' it said – as always – in Hebrew. He thought it had a sarcastic tone. He thought it knew what he had just been doing, thinking, feeling. But he couldn't be sure.

'Leave me alone,' he replied. 'Just leave me alone for today, all right?'

The voice fell silent. It could be respectful like that.

The sky was swollen and dark with humidity. Uzi pulled out his phone – no missed calls, no texts, and the time was 07:23. How stupid he had been to think it was possible to forget. London. Another day. He saw a bus stop and walked to it. Rain began to fall.

2

When Uzi awoke later that day, it was 2.30 p.m. and his body was covered in bars of sunshine. His ears were still ringing from the music in the club, and he had a hangover. There had been no nightmares – a pleasant surprise. He fumbled on the floor beside the bed, found his cigarettes. He smoked one, screwed it into the porcupine of butts in the ashtray. Then he turned on to his side and tried to go back to sleep. But his ear began to itch again.

'Uzi, we need to talk.'

'I told you, leave me alone,' he mumbled into his pillow. 'I haven't got the strength to talk to you today.'

There was a pause while the voice considered.

'OK. I'll give you a break. For today. Believe in yourself.'

The Kol was always saying that. The itch in his ear gradually receded and he breathed a sigh of relief. Many people had these kind of voices, he knew they did. But for him, he thought, it was different. He only ever had one voice, and he called it the Kol, meaning 'the voice' in Hebrew. Always it was female, very calm, almost hypnotic, with a metallic edge. Occasionally the voice sounded older, usually when things got serious. Sometimes it would leave him alone for days on end, leave him to his own devices. Other times it would be with him all day, nagging from his left ear like a fishwife. Often it made him crazy. And it always tried to make him talk back.

But the Kol had promised to leave him alone for today, and he was going to make the most of it. He pressed his head into the pillow as deeply as he could and allowed his mind to drift. It didn't take long for sleep to close in on him. That was when the nightmare came. He should have known it. Brussels, gleaming diplomatic Brussels. His hand stretching out before him like a pale trident. The cold slap of his

palm against the girl's sternum as he shoved her with all his strength. Her face, stretched by a languid terror as she fell in slow motion backwards into the road. Her hair flicking in ropes and tendrils against the night sky as her head hit the windscreen of an oncoming Mercedes; the snarl of acceleration, the flinging body, the black bonnet. The single cry. His first kill for the Office.

At 3.30 p.m. he awoke again, and this time he got up. Music was playing somewhere, he could hear it coming through the floorboards. He took a strawberry mousse from the fridge, peeled the lid and spooned it into his mouth. Then he turned on his two televisions; they had to be used together, as one had no picture and the other had no sound. He parted the curtains and looked out into the summer's afternoon, scratching his woolly head. A group of children were clustered around a smashed bus stop, kicking a lump of concrete. He closed the curtains again, lit another cigarette. Compulsively, he placed his foot against a leg of the coffee table and nudged it, feeling the weight; heavy, too heavy for a regular table. There was no sign it had been tampered with. His 'slick' was secure.

In the bathroom, he unscrewed the showerhead and rattled it over the sink, then scraped at it a few times with a spoon. He'd read that dirty showers contain dangerous levels of mycobacterium avium, which if inhaled can rot the lungs. When satisfied, he dropped his cigarette butt sizzling in the toilet and had a cold shower. Snail-like, he slipped back into the shell of his clothes, shaking the moisture from his head.

It was hot in the flat. Something about the quality of the heat made him think back to the summers of his youth. That summer when, at the age of fourteen, he had won the national junior shooting prize, scoring 197 out of 200 with an old Shtutser rifle. His parents told everyone about it; he had been the envy of the entire Gededei Noar Ivri, the Battalion of Hebrew Youth. The beginning of an illustrious career, he thought bitterly.

The kill, the Brussels night, appeared in his mind; he blocked it out. He thought about the Hungarian girl. He had a headache. In the kitchen he swallowed an aspirin without water, then, finding the capsule still sharp in his oesophagus, filled a glass and drank. It was as if a furnace was raging inside him, and the water was turning to steam. He refilled the glass and took a key from a drawer. He was ravenous, his soul was hungry. Leaving the glass forgotten on the counter, he left the kitchen, unlocked the spare bedroom and entered.

The room was filled with an unmoving, fragrant cloud, and the windows were blacked out. He could hear the hum of his small machines. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, a dozen wooden structures were revealed, like balsa wood wardrobes, their walls made of white sheets pinned up with thumbtacks. Concertina pipes looped lazily on to the ground and out the window. Carefully, he opened one of the boxes and dazzling light spilled out, blanching his face. He reached inside.

The plants, set amongst reflective silver sheeting, were full and supple. He inspected the leaves closely, pinching and twisting them in his fingers: the white hairs had begun to turn reddish brown, almost ready to be harvested. Their roots were threaded into a bed of pebbles, through which a mechanical pump sent bursts of chemical solution. Hydroponic cultivation. Complicated but more efficient, and no soil needed. He spent a few minutes going from box to box like a zookeeper, checking the temperature and humidity gauges, then the extractor fans and pumps. He got some chemicals from the bathroom and replenished the plastic reservoir in the corner of the room, checking that the timer was running properly. Finally he opened the airing cupboard in the corner, took out some drying trays, divided a pile of desiccated buds into eighths, and bagged them up. Casting a final eye over everything, he left the room and locked the door behind him.

He put on some aftershave, jeans and a linen jacket, turned off the televisions and went out, carrying his crop in a rucksack. Pickings would be rich tonight. One deal, one thousand pounds. But first there was the matter of that bastard Avner. He checked his phone and there was a text waiting, the first for days. It said: c u 4 ok? Reluctantly, he replied: ok.