

Is It Just Me and Other Stories

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Is it just me?

I can remember what she'd said to me as clear as day and it really hurt. 'You drink too much, you're narcissistic, you always wear too much aftershave, you're tight-fisted and what's more...'

I did not mind any of these things. They were fine. In fact, I rather took them as a compliment. Narcissistic? Well, she would say that. I was always too good-looking for her and she knew it. Too much aftershave? You could never wear too much aftershave. Tight-fisted. I was always spending money, new shirts, male grooming products, bar bills, gym membership. No, it was the last part that shook me.

She said 'I wouldn't touch you with the longest barge pole in the whole of the British Isles.' How dare she say that? How dare she put a chink in my ego armour? I used to like her, too. In fact, once or twice I might have gone as far as to say that she had been the like of my entire life. And there weren't many women I'd said that about. So it took me longer to recover from her brush off than it would have done with others - a record thirty-five

point nine seconds. I couldn't see any point in pining any longer. James 'Bond' Fisher did not waste time on lost causes, so many women, so little time and all that.

No, I didn't let the grass grow under my feet. In my view a metrosexual man like me slapped on some moisturiser, a little man makeup, donned his sharpest threads and display the results for all to see like the peacock he was. It could be a costly exercise, but worth it when everything you're buying is for you.

The only problem with going out more was that I kept bumping into Rebecca – and Lee. Lee was my best friend and drinking pal. At least he was until he told me he and Rebecca were engaged. I used to like Lee until then. Now I could see he was ugly. Not only that, he was chubby and slightly bald. He came in useful at times, though: when we stood, together at the bar, it was even more obvious to all and sundry which one of us was the looker and which one was Quasimodo.

Therefore, I had to drink on my own and that wasn't good because it led to me drinking even more.

The trouble was I ended up liking it even more. The fizzy, tingling feeling I got as the world melted around

me was incredible. The fact that whatever it was I said and whomever I said it to, there wasn't a single person who wouldn't be hanging on my every single word with utter fascination. They called me the bore, and I was flattered. Obviously, they were referring to the drill attachment. Hey, James Fisher the love machine! I would thank them with a knowing wink and strut off feeling like a sex god.

Then I discovered that there was a downside to this party superstar lifestyle. The heavy drinking became a surreal mystery game, the where was James Fisher going to wake up tomorrow morning game? I started waking up in the weirdest places; people's gardens, shop doorways, under bridges and even behind plastic wheelie-bins. I hated that part. It was so unhygienic and uncool and that wasn't me at all. Only I thought that the nights before made it worth the suffering. That particular morning was completely different.

With the loud music, the shouting, and the clinking of glasses still in my head, I awoke on a cold, damp pavement with my head in the gutter. That wasn't the worst part. There were these beer and kebab stains all

over my shirt, and I couldn't do a thing about it. In the corner of my eye, I could just make out the church spire, which meant that I was lying approximately 1.5 miles away from my wardrobe.

I never could bear the idea of spending another moment looking less than perfect, but there didn't appear to be anybody about and so I thought I could probably get away with it if I used my head. I think I managed to get to my feet with a minimum of wobble. My head was throbbing, as if it had a heavy metal band jamming on it. That twentieth pint of lager I had must have been off.

Apart from that, it was remarkably quiet and this wasn't normal. As soon as I had inhaled a couple of lungs full of fresh air and cleared my head a little, I glanced at the time on my mobile phone. It was fast approaching noon. I rubbed my eyes and squinted in all directions and there was not a soul about.

Odd, I thought. If it had been a Sunday I could have understood why the streets were empty, but it wasn't. This was 11.55 on a Saturday, so unless I had somehow managed to sleep through a whole day there should have been some noise and people at least, so, I decided to

investigate.

Fastening the top two buttons of my shirt (well, I still had to be presentable) I headed off into the heart of the town. Each time I got to a side street or a turning I stopped and called out. I did this until I reached the shopping arcade and that looked just as dead. On the way, I noted a number of badly parked cars at the roadside. All of the doors were open as the drivers and their passengers had got out in a hurry and made a run for it. I stopped for a moment by an electrical store and viewed the static on the display TVs. What the hell was going on?

I carried on walking around the mall listening to the whispering sound that my fine Gucci shoes made on the ceramic floor tiles as I went. I was thirsty by then. There was a coffee machine on the third floor and it was calling to me. So, I jogged up the frozen escalator and up the stairwell to get to it. What a waste of time that was, the damned thing was lifeless. I plugged it in at the wall and although it did eventually spit me out some latté into my cardboard cup, it was stone cold. At least I could go into the adjoining multi-storey car park and I

would I get a good view of the town from the top level. From there I would be able to see where everybody had gone. My next thought was had I been caught in the middle of some national emergency where everyone had to be evacuated. Though if that was the case, then why didn't somebody wake me up and get me to safety? It was all very odd and very worrying. I stayed in the car park for ages scanning the ground for signs of life and feeling dizzy at times – heights not being my thing.

As my eyes scrutinised the pavements for movement certain things started entering my mind like uninvited guests at a private party. I wondered if I had ever been alone before. Me? The man? Of course, I hadn't. Guys like me are never alone. I couldn't believe that I could be the only person left in town.

About three o'clock, just as I was giving my eyes a rest I thought I heard something. It was like an eerie whistling sound as if somebody had given a quick blast through a wooden flute in an echoing corridor, or perhaps an owl. I had to see, but where was it coming from? My head couldn't tell it was too confused to think. Then I saw it. I didn't know what the hell it was; it was there for a

second for sure and then it wasn't. What? I couldn't be sure. My mind told me it was about man-size and black, and that it went in the direction of the Square. It's surprising how fast a person can run if he is desperate for somebody to talk to. I was a blur as I left the car park.

As I was getting closer to the end of the street, a weird sensation came over me. I had stopped thinking about my appearance. What if this other person was a tabloid journalist? I envisaged the headlines.

**JAMES FISHER SPOTTED IN DANGER ZONE
WITH LAGER STAINS ON SHIRT SHOCK.**

I would never have lived it down. People would point at me as I passed. There goes James. He used to be the most beautiful man on the planet, but now he is just a job who sleeps in dustbins.

So, before I went any further I thought a little shopping was in order. I dipped into a men's fashion outlet and swapped my shirt with the one the mannequin in the doorway was wearing. So that it wasn't stealing, I put the right money in the till with a note, explaining that I was correcting a serious wardrobe disaster.

I carried on to the Square. For a few minutes there was nobody. I thought about looking for somewhere to sit and wait. I don't know what it was, a voice in my head, a hunch or what but something told me to stay put and to turn around. I did this very slowly. What I saw gave me a start. About twenty or thirty feet away from me was a man in black robes. At least I had assumed it was a man, it looked like a man. He was quite tall and slim. He was standing outside the newsagents' waving at me, as if he wanted to tell me something.

'Me?' I yelled in his direction. 'You want me? What do you want?'

I expected him to shout something back, but he didn't. He just carried on giving me the same hand gesture, which was a sort of ghostly 'come hither' thing.

'Not until you tell me what you want,' I called back at him. 'Are you with the police?'

Now that was stupid. Quite obviously, he wasn't a copper. He wasn't exactly dressed like one, unless he was from the undercover evil wizard division. I moved closer to him, just another foot or so. I wasn't altogether sure I wanted to trust somebody who dressed like that in

broad daylight.

‘Just tell me what’s going on,’ I said. ‘Where is everybody?’

I don’t know what kind of a response I expected to get from such a mysterious being, but he wasn’t keen to say anything. Perhaps it was intentional; maybe he was to freak me out a little. He slowly shook his head. I couldn’t see his face, as the hood of his cape obscured it. He was like some black monk of doom.

‘What happened then?’ I said. ‘All I know is, that I went out last night, possibly had a little too much to drink and when I woke up there was this, no-one. Is this something to do with you?’

There wasn’t even a gesture this time. He raised his head and I caught a little of his face, his pointed white chin.

‘What are you?’ I asked him, it. I have to confess I was a little scared, although I think I hid it well.

Then he looked at me, straight in the eye. I couldn’t see anything much, a tunnel of darkness, but somehow I knew he was staring straight at me. It was suddenly very cold. There I was standing in the middle of the street

with the rays of the sun beating down on a July afternoon, yet I was shivering inside. How stupid was that? That was it. My mind was made up. From that moment on this thing, whatever it was, wasn't a person but a thing.

And it was now moving slowly towards me.

'Stop there! I cried. 'Stop there right now or I'm running away' (as if I could.) I have to confess here that the second part of that sentence wasn't supposed to come out. Not that it mattered. The thing ignored me anyway. Another stupid move, I closed my eyes. A natural reaction when you are afraid. I hoped that it would have gone by the time I opened them again. I felt a blast of cold air from the movement of his cape against my cheek, so I knew it was close. Then to my surprise, he didn't kill me. He pulled my hand open and put something in it. Furtively, I tilted my head downwards and had a peak. It was a newspaper.

Now why, I thought would he want to give me a newspaper? Did he want me to finish the crossword? Did it want me to give my thoughts on what was going on in the Middle East? I couldn't anyway. It was the

Daily Telegraph and I never could understand all the long words in it. I raised my head to tell him this and that was a massive mistake because as soon as it caught me looking it threw the hood back so that I could get a proper view of it.

I ran away. I had never done that in my life until then. I have strutted in my time, I have cruised and I have even swaggered along, but never had I run from anything. It was not a cool thing to do. My thinking is that if girls ever saw you doing it, they would never fancy you.

It was the face, which made me run, that bony, white face like a skull. Not that you could call it a face. It had eye sockets, no eyes, though, nothing, that might have at one time been a nose, a sort of mouth, or rather a jagged crescent hole like a Halloween pumpkin. I ran until I was around the corner and stopped to catch my breath. As I have already said, running wasn't something I did. I rested my back against the wall of the bookies and when I felt better, I checked to see if the creepy thing was following me. It was gone.

So why was I given a newspaper? That was a curious thing for deathly spectre to give a man. I had to see why,

and the words on the front page hit my chest like a sledgehammer.

MYSTERIOUS SUPERBUG WILL ANNIHILATE
THE ENTIRE POPULATION OF EARTH.

This was too much for my mind. I slid down the wall and my bottom hit the pavement. No, I couldn't believe it, everybody gone. That was a disturbing thought.

The best thing to do, would be to try to phone somebody, but who? I checked through the directory on my phone and it was empty. Of course it was. I was a lone wolf, a predatory peacock, a ship that passed in the night. I didn't have any friends to call. Lee wasn't even listed. Every time I had asked him for his number, he said he would give it to me later. I had an idea. I dialed a number at random, any number, the first eleven digits that came into my head,

I let it ring much longer than I usually did and to my relief there was a voice.

'Thank god!' I said, 'then it isn't true, there is somebody else.' I was so relieved to hear another human voice.

Then I caught what she was actually saying,

'But I assure you that your call is very important to us.

If you would like to stay on the line one of our trained customer advisers will be happy to assist you with your query...’

But, there was no giving up for James Fisher. I actually tried a few numbers before I gave up, third time lucky et cetera, and then fourth time and fifth time. For my efforts, all I got was endless annoying ringing noises.

That’s it then, I thought. I really was alone. Suddenly I didn’t feel so cool or so attractive. The previous night I had been James the man. No matter where I went in, town someone would say, there’s James and he’s looking good.

Not now. There was not another soul left to talk to... to chat to... to chat up... to laugh with... to drink with and worst of all, nobody to tell me how great I was, or how much they wanted to be like me.

I felt so depressed. I carried on walking, without a thought about which direction I was going in. Where was I going? Just moving, just putting one foot in front of another until I ran out of ground to put my feet on. As I considered my situation, I thought about the things that were in my head earlier at the car park. I had been alone

many times and never knew it. When you thought about it, it was entirely possible to be in a crowded room and still be all alone. Had I been kidding myself all this time? I'd been to hundreds of drinking places in my time and always thought the reason nobody wanted to talk to me was because I looked too special, that they were weighing me up to see if I would find their company insulting. This was something to think about if nothing else.

I ended up by a bridge and stopped to look at the muddy-brown river rushing beneath me. How inviting it looked, how cold and deep. I thought it wouldn't really matter now if I threw myself in and disappeared like all of the others on the planet and the human race would be no more. Would the last one out of the building, turn off the lights! Goodnight and thank you!

So I climbed onto the ledge and closed my eyes again. Now there was a thought, do I keep them closed when I jump in or do I keep them open? I hadn't committed suicide before and didn't know what the proper protocol was.

What I did know was that, if you were going to do it,

then you should do it quickly, without thinking about it too much. I could have been standing there all night and still not decided. I started counting, backwards like they used to do at Cape Kennedy. Only where should I start? Ten was too soon. No, a hundred? Too far away. Twenty would be a perfect number, just as long as I counted slowly.

I must have counted down from twenty, ten times before I realised it was a hopeless cause. My legs had not stopped wobbling and it was putting me off. I kept losing my place and needed to start again. Maybe this wasn't a good idea after all. It would have taken me ages to die anyway. I was a strong swimmer so drowning would've been extremely difficult.

I also had a vision of all the old footage of corpses in police that had been dragged from lakes and beaches. Apparently your body soaks up the water, and you balloon to unrecognisable proportions. No way was I going to put on a few pounds even if I wasn't going to be alive to feel bad about it. What if somebody found me? What if it was someone who knew me? I couldn't take that risk.

Then – hang on a pigging minute!

Of course, none of this was going to be a problem. I didn't have to die, because it was all complete and utter garbage.

God, I was thick! Why didn't I see it before? What I'd been holding in my hand all along was a newspaper, that very mornings edition to be precise. So if everybody else in the world was dead who printed it?

What was going on? I knew damned well what was going on, it was Lee. Sometimes we would play tricks on our colleagues at the office. Grand things like printing off fake lottery tickets and tell people they'd won or posting them out letters from the clap clinic. Once we even put together a TV news bulletin and fed it into someone's TV telling him there was a cholera epidemic and he would have to stay indoors and not eat or drink anything for three days, and it was his birthday. We never saw a grown man cry so much. I believed that things like that made you incredibly popular with folk, as they know in an instant you were such a fun person to spend time with.

Yes, this was Lee's doing, although how he'd managed

to empty the town was anybody's guess. I stormed back towards the town to have it out with him. I didn't have to look very far. He'd been following me all along, watching me get stressed out no doubt, waiting to catch a glimpse at the horror on my face so he could laugh about it. I guessed Rebecca wouldn't have been too far behind him. When I caught up with him, he was standing by the fountain outside the town hall, waiting for me to say something, to say that he'd got me and that my reputation was now ruined. Thanks.

'The game's up mate,' I said, pushing him on the shoulder. 'I knew what you were up to from the start so I win, you can take that stupid mask off.'

But it wasn't Lee. I'd been right the first time. I was close enough to tell and it definitely wasn't him. There was nothing human about him at all. If I had to compare him to anything I would have to say that up close he was like a robot or an animatronic figure like the ones in Disney World. It was watching the way his head floated around on his neck that made me think that. Like there should be some sort of whirring sound to go along with it.

And so I did something even more stupid. I was so convinced that my deductions were right this time that I tried to pull off his cloak with several determined and awkward jerks. Another mistake, a bony hand gripped my throat, another disappeared inside its garb and went it came out again it was holding a scythe.

This time, to my horror it spoke. ‘Now you must die,’ it said with a croaky whispery voice. I whimpered like a frightened child, ‘W-why?’

‘Because I am Death and I have come for you, James Fisher, the last of the human race.’

‘I’ll run away again,’ I croaked in its grip. ‘You won’t catch me next time!’

‘Yes, I will,’ said Death. ‘You cannot escape me. This has been a busy time for me, but now it is over.’ Then he told me that we were going to count together and not to fear anything because it would be all over soon, and we did.

‘Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...

I really didn’t want to die. I pleaded with him like a feeble old woman, and was quite ashamed to say my eyes were welling up with tears. To someone like me

that was the equivalent of wetting yourself.

‘Five... four... three... two... awake!’

Awake, what did he mean awake? I was sure whatever death was, it must have been something completely opposite to that. My eyes were still closed, I was still afraid to open them. I detected changes in my environment. It wasn't cold any more it was quite warm. My forehead was soaked in sweat and so was my chest and there was the strong smell of stale beer. And then to my amazement a roomful of people started clapping.

No, it wasn't the end of the world at all, or a mad dream, but me standing on a wooden stage in a working men's club like an idiot. It was Lee's stag do and I remembered then that he'd dared me to volunteer myself for the hypnotist.

And on that night I surprised myself. Usually I would have had a go at Lee for doing this, for making me lose my cool in front of so many people, but I didn't. What I actually did was to walk calmly off the stage and into the audience. Lee was sitting in the front row and when I approached him, he looked concerned for a moment. I held out my hand and he took it gladly.

'I really deserved that, didn't I?' I said confidently.

Resurrection

I think they call it Groundhog Day, when every day is the same. That's what it's like for me. Something over my head, dishing out the same cold plate of Hell. I get my stuff together, pick up my weapon, get on the truck with the rest of the guys and we are dropped off in our designated zones, to go through the same garbage. The skies over Iraq will be the same dirty brownish grey they always are, and nothing like the clear blue of Wyoming I long for. Blue skies hold promises of beautiful days. There is no possibility of one of those for me, but I don't complain much, there is little point. I know how this day will end. I will die and this is how. I can never remember sleeping, like I never remember eating. But I guess I must do both sometimes, even if my numb brain doesn't register it.

In all of the parts, of my life, my head plays out for me, it is always daylight. When my existence comes into realization, I am standing in the armoury picking out what I am going to need for the day. A soldier in that part of the world fights many enemies and all of

them are silent and faceless. Your body needs to be protected from every possible angle. Sniper's bullets can come from anywhere and at any time, so body armour is more important than a rifle, even an automatic one. That's the first thing I pick up and attach to my torso. Then there is my combat helmet with night vision mounted plate, my folding knife, bayonet, dog tags, ID card, iodine tabs, ball ammo and basically anything else the sweltering heat will allow me to carry. As usual, I would forget to put on my shades like an idiot. Then I look in a full-length mirror to see if I look enough like a US soldier. Only then, is it worth me walking out of the door. The next thing I know, I am standing on a dusty road in some Arabic ghost town, scanning doorways and rooftops for insurgents. It sounds unfair, but it's best to treat everybody as if they have a concealed weapon, or an explosive belt. The latter, is usually a set of tubes containing acetone peroxide with shrapnel, often nails. Thanks to the Internet you can learn how to kill people with practically anything these days. I find myself searching the same people regardless. There is the merchant who stumbles out of the shop doorway with

handfuls of CDs and tee-shirts. All with my favourite rock bands are on them. It would be tempting to get a closer look. I know the guy is clean, he is every day, but I aim my rifle at him anyway and he shows me there is nothing under his tunic but his bare chest. I check his ID papers and tell him to move along. Then a little further along the road there are the kids who insist on surrounding me, like I was some movie star. They do this every single day, and somehow I'm always a novelty to them, the young GI with the pale skin.

Then the action starts. Bullets rip into the wall behind me. Single shots, four in all. The last, shattering a window by my face. I throw my body to the ground, and crawl quickly under the red pickup parked by the side of the road. I strike the button on my chest radio and call for backup. There is no response at all. Just an annoying crackle from a dying battery pack. I am on my own again. Instinct tells me to return fire, only how can I do that, when it is impossible to determine where the shots are coming from? A helicopter gunship, casually passes right over, as if nothing is happening. It fills the air with echoes. I treat it as a distraction, and risk exposing my

cover by pulling myself away from the vehicle, where I let off a volley of shots from my automatic rifle. God knows if I actually hit anything. I was firing at the sun, maybe I killed that.

I carry on along the street. Suddenly, I am aware of a rifle sticking out of the window of laundry house. I'm on the ball now. I fire a round in that direction. There is a scream, as I hit my target, no surprise. I stop by the lamp post and wait for my next one. A woman comes out of her house yelling. She is holding a baby. As she gets closer I see that it isn't a woman at all. As she moves a scarf falls from the neck to reveal a beard, and it isn't an infant, but a pistol wrapped in a blanket. I discharge my rifle, before he gets the chance to use it and my bullets tear into his chest and he falls to the ground. I continue along the street until I get to a crossroads. It doesn't matter which way I go, as everywhere, looks pretty much the same. I pick left. I always do, perhaps because am left-handed, my mistake. I don't see the tripwire, I never do. Next thing I know it all goes black, there's strange music in my head and I am back in the armoury picking out my stuff. I don't feel dead, and have no

memory of being blown to smithereens. Just that I'd made the same old mistake and triggered the mines. On this day, however, things are very different. I don't know why they are but they are. I am looking in the mirror and there is a different version of me staring back, angrier, more determined. Not the drained face I see each time I dress myself for combat. There is more fight in me, more desire to make today stand out from all the rest in my life. I take stock realising that I have done all of this four hundred and seventy-eight times so far. No more, not today. I decide that if I was going to die this time, then it would be the last. The mines were not going to get me anymore. 'This time,' I say to my reflection. 'I gonna get that guy on the roof before he gets me. I am gonna ignore anybody who approaches me, who I know isn't armed, and best of all I am gonna turn right and not left.'

I am reborn, not a zombie, but a man with a solid will of iron, with fire in my veins, and not ice. I pick out my sunglasses from my locker and put them on. I take out a pen and write a large letter R on my right hand to remind me of what I must do. I step out into the daylight

a bigger man. The truck drops me off on my street and I stand there again scanning the vicinity. With my shades to cut out the glare, I have a better view of the rooftops. I make a rough guess about where I think the sniper might be, and look again. This time, I think I can see something moving. It is a man's head. I run for the cover of the truck once more, this time, resting the barrel of my rifle on the roof. I line my victim up in my sights, getting his forehead lined up in the cross hairs, and with one squeeze of the trigger pick him off like a Jack rabbit on a hunting trip. I ignore the gunship passing over the merchant and the kids, and I run to the end of the street, picking off the sniper above the laundry house with great ease, as well as the woman with the baby, before she reveals herself to be any other gender. Then, I reach the crossroads. I lift my right hand and stared at it with a grin. Now, this is the turning point for everything, a crossroads in every sense of the word. I turn my body around so that I am facing the right-hand turning and move forward to change my destiny. But I can only take a few stupid steps, before something damned crazy happens. Unexpectedly, my whole body freezes and I

can go no further. What is wrong with me? I think. I can't even take a right turn instead of a left one. Is that what being left-handed is all about? I try and I try feeling like an idiot and still I can't get my body to go that way. It seems I am doomed to live my life in one big circle for the whole of eternity. Starting in the armoury, and ending with my body ripped to shreds by a freak explosion, I could do nothing about. So I face my fate and turn left. I have no choice in the matter. This time I wait first before I step to my death. It is just a minute later when four, five, six men appear from nowhere with machine guns, which they clumsily fire over my head. I have an idea. Sometimes a soldier has to think fast. I am about twenty feet away from the trip wire, maybe further. I begin backing off from it to maintain a safe distance. I lower my rifle and open fire on the ground at the mines. By then the men have gotten in range. Several small explosions rip craters into the street, sending clouds of sandy brown dust into the air. The next time I look, to my relief, there is no-one there. What happens next is the strangest thing of all. There is a loud fanfare with brass horns and electric guitars and

drums.

And there are some words in the sky now and numbers
which read...

46862 points - LEVEL 1 CLEAR.

As my body begins to dissolve away before my eyes, I
wonder what it is that is ahead of me. The game
continues.

Bad Actors

When the theatre closed down, we were all at a loose end. After all, actors need somewhere to act and without that, we are just ordinary people sitting in a chair waiting for our mobile phones to make a noise.

Tony Gordon made the announcement at seven o'clock on a Friday afternoon, just as we had all turned up to rehearse his new murder mystery play, *The Maid Did It*. 'I'm sorry luvls!' his voice echoed through the rafters, 'I've been looking at the books, and basically we're screwed.' He apologised to Nicola and Mary, The Abattoir Street Players, two women members for the bad language.

Nicola, the leading lady to my leading man, was due to play the aging, but still glamorous, Lady Butterwell in the new production. The news meant, that not only was I not going to be out of the gaze of any future talent-spotting activities, but was not going to get that long awaited snog in Act 2 Scene 3. Mary was going to play the maid, as she had done in every play we had ever performed in that building since we'd been together in

1996.

Young Lee and Kirk said nothing, as expected. Merely had the same faces as still and expressionless as in any performance we did. They were always happy doing anything, just as long as there weren't too many lines. Lucky for them both, Tony wasn't going to be putting any more words in their talentless mouths.

We had all invested money into that company. Every piece of wood one could see, every stitch in every item of costume, the seats in the stalls that had to be recovered before they saw a bottom, The scenery, paint, props, makeup (I'm sure I've no need to go on) had all come from our savings accounts, our children's inheritance funds, bank loans. Further to that, we also worked in the foyer before we started, took ticket money, ushered punters in and sold them ice-cream – which we also paid for during the intervals.

So when Tony Gordon announced that we weren't going to get any of it back we were annoyed to say the very least.

'The coffers are dry darlings, you have to believe me,' Tony pleaded.

‘They can’t be,’ I said, ‘Mary’s studying to be an accountant and she’s done the sums. The money can’t all be gone like that.’

‘I can show you the safe, if you don’t believe me.’

We didn’t need to. I certainly knew that the twisted old fool would have already shoved it in the bosom of a bank somewhere, in a nice little safety deposit box.

Graham, our aging gigolo took a puff from his French cigarette. ‘What are we supposed to do now,’ he said in his usual cool, calm manner, ‘now, that are you going to throw us all on the scrap heap old boy?’

Tony leapt through us all, desperate to land a reassuring hand on the man’s shoulder, ‘Try not to look at it like that Graham, I’m sure that a talent like yours won’t go to waste.’

‘Thanks!’ said Nicola, ‘so what are us bits of wood supposed to do then?’

‘I meant that in the plural sense.’

I didn’t mince words, I never did. ‘Give us our money you twister!’

My words were echoed by the others. Tony waved his hands in the air as if to attempt to disperse them. ‘Look!

I didn't want to say anything but there is something I think I ought to tell you.'

On stage there was a long table that we'd been using for script readings. He instructed us to sit down while he gave us his sob story. I couldn't wait to hear it myself. What was it going to be? Perhaps his mother needed an operation, or he had given our money away anonymously to help the poor.

He began. 'I've been keeping this to myself because I've been embarrassed about it. I mean, you all know me. I may be a harsh director when it comes to getting the best out of my actors, but I'm not stupid.'

Some of us nodded to that.

'So when I tell you that I did a stupid thing, then the first thing you are going to think of me is, that it is completely uncharacteristic of me.'

There was a pause for effect here. The silence was broken by Nicola. 'Spit it out man! Don't leave us all hanging. Let's hear this sorry excuse for losing all our hard-earned cash.'

'I was approached by this man,' Tony continued, 'he was a tough-looking sort but he seemed OK. I was

talking to him at the open market. He said his name was Bryant, Timothy Bryant. Anyway, we got talking about the theatre and he was saying what a dump it was. I had to agree. I mean, we've all invested a lot in this place, but look at it. The place needs pulling down and rebuilding.'

'True, it's old,' I said, 'then it used to be a cinema, before that, in the 1900's, they performed music hall here.'

'Exactly!'

'But surely that's part of the charm?'

'Nobody wants to come and watch a play in a flea pit like this,' Tony went on, 'we've had it decorated over and over again, to make the place more appealing. It's done nothing. Tim said what I was thinking. We need to relocate to somewhere more modern if we want to get bums on seats again.'

'Don't tell me,' said Nicola, 'he said he would give you a loan to buy somewhere else?'

'Not as such,' said Tony, 'he said he was one of these chaps that do the stock exchange. You can make an absolute mint on that, if you know what you are doing.'

He reckoned he had some inside news about oil, that it was going to go through the roof.'

'Let me finish that story for you,' I said, 'you gave him our money and took the risk. However, things didn't exactly go to plan. The oil shares sank and you both got broke.'

'One way of putting it! It wasn't the oil I had in mind anyway, it was olive oil.'

There was a chorus of negative sounds around the table.

'So what happened next?' I ventured, 'I take it things didn't end there.'

Tony nodded pathetically. 'He returned the next day with a couple of heavies. He offered me a loan to cover what I'd taken from you guys and gals, only it came nowhere near. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that the interest on the loan was astronomical to say the least.'

'So big, that you had to pay back what you borrowed before you could put it to any use?' I said. 'Precisely!'

We all left him with sunken hearts, as anyone who'd lost their very livelihood, would have done. Everyone, even me, went back and sunk our heads back into real life.

Mary put her face back into her study books. Nicola was

a traffic warden during the hours of daylight. I imagined she would have handed out more fines the next day. I heard that Graham was working longer hours at the gentleman's outfitters and Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum had gone back to DJing. Any one of us that ever said that there wasn't anything missing from our lives would have been lying. To me personally, Fridays were always something for me to focus on, something to look forward to, and a portion of my daily life that transcended the boring reality of sitting in front of a computer twenty-four seven, updating customer information for the electricity board. The flickering screen became even more irritating.

Then, one day my irritation turned into something else. I couldn't afford to run the car and so I'd been taking the bus to and from work. My eyes, no longer having to be watchful of the road, would wander the sides of the passing buildings and shops. We stopped outside a shoe shop on the High Street to let some pensioners off. There, on a small plastic billboard next to the stop, was a poster, that nearly poked my eyes out. It was a standard A4 sheet exploding with colours and words. In

the centre of it surrounded by the tackiest looking star shapes were the words Tony Gordon Presents... The Maid Did It. Needless to say my heart sank into my trousers, especially when I noted the date of the first performance, which was next month.

The swine, had been rehearsing with another cast. Closing down? That was just a ruse to get rid of us and not have to pay us.

I rang Nicola as soon as I got in.

‘Tell me you’re joking!’

‘I can’t – it’s true!’ I had the poster in my hand as I was speaking into the mouthpiece. So annoyed was I, I’d ripped the offending article from the post.

We went to the theatre to confront him, and there he was in full flow in the middle of the second act. The actor had Nicola’s character in his arms on the sofa and was going in for the kiss that should have been mine.

When he saw us standing in between the rows of seats, he decided to greet us in a very false manner.

‘Nicola, Michael, how marvellous to see you both again!’ He then told his replacement troupe to take an early break.

‘I doubt that very much,’ said Nicola, ‘I’m not happy about this at all, and unless you can give us a very good explanation as to why these people are here, you will find your car is going to be very illegally parked tomorrow afternoon.’

‘Please,’ he pleaded stupidly, ‘it was true what I said.’

Nicola held both of her palms out angrily. ‘Hand over the money now!’

‘I need it Nicola,’ said Tony, ‘can’t you see the production is going well. I was going to give you your money back, as soon as the play had finished. These guys and gals are fantastic, RADA material if ever I saw it.’

I had to say what I was thinking, ‘Why isn’t that us up there Tony?’

Tony gave us both an awkward sort of smile. He waved his hands in our direction and at the empty stage, as if we were some sort of sign language we haven’t had the privilege of learning.

‘Spit it out man!’ roared Nicola.

‘You’re...’

‘Crap?’ I suggested.

‘Thank you Michael!’ said Tony. ‘That’s why we hadn’t been doing very well.’

‘You low life!’ Nicola formed a fist and threw it in Tony’s direction. I caught it before it reached his face.

‘Nicola is a bloody good actress,’ I said, in a lame attempt to calm her down, ‘I nearly went to RADA...’

There was that awkward grin again. Tony knew as well as I did, I only filled an online form in. I didn’t hear anything from them. ‘Just give us our money back Tony,’ I said, still holding Nicola’s wrist, ‘and we’ll say no more about it.’

Tony dipped his head in shame. ‘I haven’t got it Michael. That part about the heavies was true. They are coming back the day after tomorrow. The interest is doubling every visit. I just have enough to send them packing.’

‘And may I ask,’ I said, ‘your new troupe, are you stinging them for cash too?’

Tony nodded. ‘Whatever you can do to me, I swear there are people after my blood, who can do so much worse. Hit me if you want to, not the face, though, and be gone.’

I looked Nicola in the eyes and shook my head at what she was thinking. When we left I was sure there was steam coming from her nostrils. Nicola wasn't even five feet tall, she wasn't bulky by any stretch of the imagination, yet when she was angry, she could come across as a complete Minotaur.

We returned to my house, where I immersed her in a calming cup of Chai tea.

We were sitting side by side at the kitchen table, sipping away and not saying a word, until I said what was on my mind again. 'Maybe you should channel that anger of yours,' I said.

'What do you mean?'

'I've been thinking, why do you think these creeps are going to get their hands on our money and not us?'

She shrugged.

'Think about it. Think about when you were back in school. How do you think the school bully got all your dinner money? Because he or she was scary.'

'I was the school bully,' Nicola reminded me.

'No matter,' I said, trying to ignore my obvious clumsiness, 'what I am saying is, these bullies – present

company excepted, were nothing behind it all. They were all just noise and posture.'

'What are you saying?'

'We have the proper skills,' I said, grinning now like a maniac on helium, 'not like these baboons. They are just bullies too, fakes. Surely we can come across more menacingly and get our money back. Let's get our dignity back from this horrid man.'

Nicola slurped noisily at her cup, and slammed it down on its saucer. 'That'll be good! I want his balls in my hands first though.'

'No, not that!' I insisted, 'getting our money back will be triumph enough. However, there is a snag.'

'What snag?'

'You heard the man. We have to get to him before these thugs do.'

And so we had a master plan. Nicola stayed overnight, and we went through all of the acting techniques we had learnt over the years. We focussed hard on the things deep inside that made us angry, pinned them down and logged the feelings into our mental databases, for use later. After we were both happy with that, we watched

gangster films on my DVD player. We carefully noted the use of voice, and how you could come across as a complete psychopath, without even raising the volume a single notch.

Then, through sleepy eyes, we looked at wardrobe. We went for dark colours, that were slightly shabby and discussed how we were going to make ourselves up. We even went a bit method actor-ish, and made up some background for our sudden rage.

Nicola had gone into work the next day and punched a customer. The customer it turned out, was suffering a terminal illness and so she had to go home with the thought that she will be henceforth hated by the whole of society for evermore, her family was going to completely disown her. She went home and rummaged for a publicity photo of Tony. She put said poster on the wall and threw sharp and heavy objects at it.

I, on the other hand, discover that I have deep seated feelings for her, and become so overwrought with emotion, that my mind is wracked with all thoughts of revenge.

I didn't tell her, that bit was true.

When we arrived at the theatre door, our faces obscured with our collars, we got into character. Nicola had done a marvellous job on the makeup, we both looked like Hell. She certainly scared the Hell out of me.

‘Reach for those feelings,’ I said.

‘I’m already there!’

‘Get the anger, feel the menace, that is not blood coursing through your body right now, but fire!’

‘I’m feeling it Michael!’

We walked up the steps and into the building with all the swagger of East End gangsters. The reception area was clear as expected. We walked on to the main theatre, throwing the doors open fiercely as we moved.

‘Gordon!’ Nicola screeched at the top of her voice and apologised when she saw me wincing.

All of the props were there on the stage ready for use. They were set up for a run through of Act One, Scene One, the library scene. Apart from that, not a soul about, no noises off.

‘The cast hasn’t arrived yet. He must be in his office!’ I said.

We doubled back through the doors and took the stairs

to the next floor. There was another set of stairs going up to the staff area. Our way was blocked by a thick red rope over two brass poles, two feet off the ground.

‘What do we do?’ I asked.

‘Wuss!’ Nicole kicked the poles down angrily and made one of those gorilla whooping noises. She was really getting into the part. Far removed was this, from silent, austere yet alluring Lady Butterwell.

We proceeded up what remained of the stairs, where we were met with the red carpet on the landing. On the other side of a brass railing was a row of heavy wooden doors baring shiny silver plaques. One was shinier than the other, the only one still in use, Tony Gordon’s office.

‘Right!’ Nicola whispered loudly, ‘feel the anger!’

‘Got it!’ I said assertively and ‘so who is going to knock?’

‘Forget that!’ Nicole twisted the knob and gave the door panel a hard kick. The door flew open to reveal Tony, bound and gagged and tied to a chair. A smallish man, and I must add dressed much more effectively than we were, placed himself in the door frame. He had very

heavily stubble, and thick leather gloves on. I assumed that inside them, were very broad hands. He was wearing dark glasses and a long heavy coat.

‘Come in,’ he said in a broken glass, cockney accent, ‘I trust you know Tony.’

‘H-how do you know that?’ I asked nervously.

‘I saw your production of Run For Your Trousers,’ he said, ‘you were bloody awful.’

‘I think we should come back later,’ I said.

‘No chance,’ he almost spat out the words, ‘you’ve seen too much.’ He signalled to someone we couldn’t see.

Two more men, equally nasty revealed themselves.

‘Cutter and Ice!’

‘Nice names!’

We were escorted in, if you could call it that, into the office. Tony looked awful. You could tell that nobody had laid a finger on him, yet his face said otherwise. I had seen this man run up and down the boards like a man possessed on a sunny afternoon in a woolly jumper. He was sweating even more than that now. I sort of felt sorry for him.

‘S-so why is he tied to a chair?’ I asked, ‘if he has the

money to give you.’

‘He tried to pull a fast one,’ said the angry man. ‘Thought he could get away with giving us half, said he needed the other half to live off. I ain’t having that. Gotta teach him a lesson somehow, or else it might happen again.’ He leaned right into Tony’s face. ‘Might it!!?’

‘I gave them what they asked for Michael, Nicola, they said they wanted double.

‘That money is ours!’ Nicola cried out, ‘he owes it to the company.’

‘Tough titty!’

‘So what are you going to do with us? You can’t just let us leave.’

‘He can if he wants to,’ I said shaking.

The man nodded at the two accomplices stood silent like menacing trees. They gave each other a simultaneous nod and pulled out pistols.

‘Good grief!’ I exclaimed.

‘Insurance,’ said the man, ‘you’re coming with us. We can’t risk you blabbing to the cops.’

‘You’re going to knock us off?’

‘Clever man,’ he turned to the two gorillas, ‘take ‘em down an alley. One shot each to the back of the head! Use silencers.’

‘Alright boss!’ they said together.

‘Wait!’ Nicola said to my utter relief as they approached us, ‘use your head.’

‘Explain!’

‘If you shoot us how long do you think it would take for the police to get to you? There are all sorts of testing they could do to get DNA evidence. They could have you three banged up in days. You’ve got your money. Untie him and let us go. There is nothing we have to give the police. We don’t know what your names are, and I take it Cutter and Ice aren’t on the electoral register.’

The air in the room froze. The man’s face was still as rock, expressionless, while thoughts flew about. If there were any clues as to what was going to happen next, then I wasn’t seeing them. Suddenly his face dropped, and was replaced by what I had to say was a worrying smile.

‘Clever girl,’ he said finally, ‘you will go far!’ The thugs

left leaving us to untie Tony.

My mind was numb over the following days. I didn't want to leave the house and when I did through complete necessity and desperation, I did so while looking over my shoulder. I stayed in at night and viewed the dark shadows from the safety of my living room window.

Then, one morning I had a visitor. I was of course very cautious about opening the door, but did so as soon as I realised who it was, Lee from the company.

'Hello Michael,' he said, 'I'm not stopping. I was sent by Graham.'

'Why,' I replied wittily and nervously, 'is he setting up a company of his own?'

'No,' he said not getting my joke, 'he wanted to give you this.'

Lee reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a pleasingly thick brown envelope.

'What's that?'

'Your share of the money, from Tony.'

'Tony said he didn't have any left. He gave it all to those loan sharks.'

Lee giggled as if attempting to hold back a private joke.

‘That was us!’

‘What?’ I said, bemused, ‘do you mean that it was you who’ve been harassing Gordon all along?’

‘No,’ said Lee, ‘we turned up before the real ones did. We just said we bought the debt and his mind filled in the rest. Graham had this great idea about frightening Tony into giving us back what he owed us.’

‘So who was the other guy?’

‘Mary!’

‘She was really good, frightened the Hell out of me!’

‘She said sorry about that. Said she was sick of playing the maid all the time, and she thoroughly enjoyed it. She regretted that you two got in the way.’

I was a bit confused after that, about who it was who really got their comeuppance. That brief moment in the office seemed to last for an ice age, surely it was us for not letting sleeping dogs lie. But it did make me think. Over the coming days an idea buzzed around my head like an annoying bluebottle I couldn’t quite reach with a rolled up newspaper. Perhaps if something interesting came up it would be possible to put our acting skills into

good use. We could make even more money.

I shook the idea free. It was even suggested that we pooled the money and start up another company. That idea too was rejected rapidly. I did begin to worry about Tony Harper and paid a visit to the theatre. When I got there I found a heavy iron padlock on the doors. The windows were boarded up and there was a demolition notice for all passing bystanders to see. When I asked someone in a neighbouring shop what had happened to him, my fear for the worst went away. I was told by the woman, a Mrs Tingle that he had moved abroad with his sister. She showed me a postcard to that effect.

These Walls

I have never been accustomed to making speeches, no matter what the subject. I have always been one to keep themselves to themselves. However, there are some things that should never remain unsaid. I was the only witness to a horrific murder.

I have resided in Willow Crescent since the very beginning of the century. The one I speak of, is the twentieth. There were more trees on the road back then, hence the name, and in the autumn the pavements were sheeted with golden brown leaves, that made crackling sounds when they were trodden on by feet. How envious I was, to be able to make that sound with limbs.

I cannot walk.

Things were quiet around the area for years with the exception of horses and motor cars. Then silence does not last forever, and on the twelfth day, of eighth month of the year of nineteen-hundred and six, I was most unfortunate to meet, or rather have thrust upon my company, one Percival Fitzlang.

The aforementioned person and I, exchanged not one

word, on his arrival. I was not bothered by this, as he was not by all descriptions, a pleasant man. I was pleased that he was only to occupy the ground floor of the accommodation.

Percival, and I shall try not to mention his name too much, was a scrawny man with a pointed nose. Not that I wanted to observe him a lot, but he had this tendency to move about the place in rodent-like fashion, with hunched shoulders and furtive movements of the feet. It was as if, no matter how large the spaces were, he was always trying to fit himself into a smaller one. As for his face and I am in no position to judge, he didn't exactly possess the looks of stage idol, so it came as something of a surprise when he left the house one morning and returned with a wife.

The recently entitled Olivia Fitz-Lang, was the mirror opposite of her rat-like spouse, in the way that she glided about the place with confidence and beauty, and filled every square inch of every room she occupied, with light. She also had a very pleasant odour about her, a cross between oranges, honey and apple blossom, the three very scents I had always held with such affection.

I felt that they were ill matched at first, and then as the days went by, I began to change my view slightly. She seemed to be good for him. There were times when smiles on his face, as well as hers, as if she had successfully infected him with some of her sunshine. But as the months went on, things began to work in reverse. I noted a slowness about her step and a curvature of her posture. Gone, was the dancing in her bare feet and her singing. Tones changed, and voices went up and down, and it cut through me like a cold sabre. Suddenly, one of them was gone, and I was deeply saddened.

My ears, as those like me, have them, traversed the walls and the floors in search of this sweet music, for evidence that my sweet Olivia was still there, then one day I found her voice, and it was to my dismay, her sobbing. I longed to reach out and comfort her. At least I knew that she was alive then.

Then all I could hear was him...

‘Why will you not bear me a child? I shall get more satisfaction from a whore! Why is my home not clean? Have you no pride woman? I shall be going out, I will

be back and we shall see who won't be responsive!'

And then, he began to bring other women to the house, and left his wife locked up in a room all alone.

I swore, if I could move, then I would get to him, kill him. The raucous laughing, and drunken caterwauling that followed, filled me with such rage. The thought that he, could be happy at this time.

Then, on one dreadful day, things all come to a head. The air was polluted by such a blood-curdling scream which shook me from my slumber. And I saw her. She was running up the stairs in such desperation to get away from him. She was running to me, I knew she was, but there was no time to help her. I saw the blade penetrate her elegant back, between the shoulder blades and she fell. Blood spilled from her mouth, as she shuddered with pain. Still, she tried to move and with her elbows attempted to climb. I wanted to call out, but couldn't. The knife hit her again, this time, in the small of her back, and then in her neck. Then it was all too late. She fell again and this time she would never move again.

Fitz-Lang vanished, and I was left to watch her lifeless

form as helpless and sad as anyone could ever be.

He buried her under the floorboards in the dining room of all places, as I assumed that he didn't want to risk being seen in the garden with a spade prior to his wife's disappearance. He returned to scrub away the blood from the carpet. This was the first time I'd seen him do manual labour. He never paid any attention to me though, and this I felt would be his downfall.

Over the next few days he began to have callers. These included a constable by the name of Finchly, all of which were asking after Olivia. First, he told them, that she hadn't been feeling well, and so she had gone to stay with her sister in Margate, in order to recover in the sea air. After that, he told them she had found a flat for them both, and he was only staying, in order to tie up his affairs before seeking other employment on the coast.

All of these words filled me with bile. One day PC Finchly returned, and I was hopeful, but it was only to follow up a neighbour's complaint about an odd smell that had been seeping through the walls.

Fitz-Lang told the constable, that it was the drains. He had been on a very strict diet of meat which had been

clogging up the pipes. He'd been meaning to get them unblocked of all the rotting substances.

I saw what a golden opportunity for my new found rage. I began, by slamming the front door shut, hard. This made them both jump from their seats and the young PC spill his tea over his uniform. I drew the lock across, turned the key and threw it down the cellar. Then, I began to make the walls shake. Pictures rattled and fell to the ground, as if in the middle of an earthquake. The floorboards too rattled under the carpets, furniture which had been so happy where they were before moved with the intense vibration.

Fitz-Lang attempted to run for the doorway and fell to the floor of the dining room. He didn't know this, but his face was directly over the face of that lovely, poor lass he deprived of life. With another blast of my wrath, I was able to split the wood to reveal her.

Suddenly, to his utter horror, he was staring straight her into her still, lifeless, bloody eyes.

Reaching for the stability of the mantelpiece, Finch got to his feet in horror.

'What is going on?' he cried, 'what kind of house is

this?’

The killer too, was struggling to get to his feet. When he finally managed it, Finch saw Olivia.

Finch put his hand to his mouth, and wretched. ‘You murderer!’ he exclaimed before vomiting.

My work done, I ceased the tumult.

When things had calmed down, several members of the London constabulary came to the house. They had come to see what all the commotion was, why there was suddenly a crowd outside.

Finch apprehended Fitz-Lang and I opened the door, so that the latter could be taken into custody.

I wish that I could have prevented the whole ghastly business from the beginning, but my movement is restricted. I am just a house in Willow Crescent, my walls, filled with the spirits of those who have passed away. It does not mean, that things could go unnoticed by me. Often, it has been said by humans, if these walls could talk...

But these can do so much more.

Me and the Night

I have never really liked the night, but it has always fascinated me, the way it blanks everything out, like a gigantic marker pen, and banishes people to spaces behind locked doors. It came, and waved itself over my head, like a magician's cape. After the blink of a day, there I was, sitting in an armchair, looking out into the street. There, amidst the sudden gloom, the lamps spilled white circles onto the path. In between the pools were oak trees, standing as still as stone deities, with their arms outstretched poised to catch the falling sky.

In some ways, it was like existing in a parallel universe. I had been taken away from the world I knew, and taken to one where I was nothing more than an observer, in place where there was nothing to observe, a voyeur of nothingness.

I only knew, I wished that the day could be like that, peaceful and void of people. I could have believed I was alone on the planet, perhaps I was. No car sounds, no music, no loud TVs from open windows, not even a breeze to blow the leaves along the ground. A moment

frozen in time, need I say more?

Unfortunately, what is left by black the imagination fills with colours. On nights like this, vampires were born, demons lurk in the shadows, and bogeymen seek out children.

Then, just as my mind had wandered farther than I wanted it to, I became aware of footsteps pounding fast in the distance. As they got nearer, they left the street and entered my head in the form of loud echoes.

Someone was in a hurry. It had gone past three in the morning. What a dirty stop-out. Someone's stayed out too late to get a taxi, and is going to get home to a red-faced babysitter.

My next thought, was to investigate. I got up from my warm cushion and pushed my face through the open curtains. I couldn't see the owner of the footsteps, but they had at least stopped. Perhaps they had found their destination. Then, just as I had sat back down, they began again, and this time, I could hear loud panting, and underneath that, distress, a teary whimper.

I got up again, but again, could see nothing. I had begun to wonder if my disturbed mind was playing tricks on

me.

The next sound sent my heart into my throat where it became momentarily lodged, a very loud, sudden and impatient hammering on my front door.

Now, there was a thing. I have always thought of myself as a humanitarian, a helping hand, a do-gooder. Yet for some reason I hesitated.

I heard my letter-box squeak as it was lifted, and a woman's voice in the hall.

'Please! You've got to help me!'

'What's wrong?' I call back, 'are you in trouble?' What a stupid question.

'He's got a knife and he's going to kill me!'

'Who is going to kill you?'

'Let me in!' Bang-bang-bang-bang!

I looked at my door, so many locks. I am so security conscious. I was burgled a year ago and went over-the-top a bit.

Nevertheless, as quickly as I could, I undid them all one by one, the latches, the locks, the chains, eight in all.

With an embarrassing grunt I dragged the stubborn lump of wood towards my chest. I had help. The woman was

pushing from the other side.

In a minute she was behind me, where she was safe. I slammed the door shut again and secured us the best I could.

‘It’s OK,’ I said, trying to sound like a comic book hero, flicking my cape over my shoulder, ‘you’re safe now. He can’t get to you. We’ll call the police,’ I turned around, ‘and...’

I turned to face her and what my fearful eyes met froze solid. I couldn’t believe that fate could be such a cruel mistress. There was a woman standing in my hallway holding a carving knife above her head. Her wide, bloodshot eyes and jagged mouth, didn’t belong to the person I’d allowed over the threshold. In the place of the distressed damsel was an escaped psychopath.

And then as I was just about to ask her why, she plunged a dagger deep into my chest, and that is the point where I awoke.

That’s how it has been for some time, since it was what I did to my wife, when she had the affair.

Skreak

After the accident, Raymond Amrak went to pot, and lost his knack for drawing new and interesting comic book characters. It was as if his head had put a closed sign on the back of the door, and it frustrated him terribly. He had always been flattered about compliments of how his creations came alive.

The bosses at Armageddon comics were quite sympathetic about it, after all, his imagination had been responsible for some of the most popular stories they had ever printed. Such as the Soul-eater, the self-replicating Duploman and Staticus, the silent assassin capable of getting vengeance on evildoers, by entering their homes through their TV screen.

Raymond, thought he was through. He believed that what happened that fateful rainy night, it had wiped away all of his creativity. His editor told him not to be so stupid, to go away to somewhere quiet and ridiculously remote, and come back in a week or so, fresh and reinvented, strong and fighting fit. Raymond was dubious about this ever happening, but went along

with it. He knew better, than to argue with Bryony Baron, the woman who gargled every morning with nitroglycerin, and flossed with barbed wire.

In a matter of hours, he was in a creaky cottage, in the heart of the West Country, cut off from the rest of the world. This suited him very, very much. It was called Rowan Tree Cottage

Even on his first night, he tried to draw something. He ended up with some meaningless squiggles and colours, in no particular shape. He placed his pad by the window, where the shafts of moonlight landed in the room. He had some crazy notion, that it was somehow lucky. There, it remained for for three days and nights, before he tried again.

One afternoon, he went for a walk in the woods to get some fresh air back into his system. For a city guy, he found the winding paths were quite inviting, and the fact that they could lead him just about anywhere, didn't seem to matter to him. It was like life, whichever one you choose, leads to a situation that can dramatically alter your life. The one he chose, or the one that fate seemed to lead him to, lead to a lonely cottage by a

stream. There, a woman with ragged jeans and a green tee-shirt three sizes too large, was wiping the condensation from her windows. She knew he was watching her, without turning around.

‘The water gets into the wood and rots it,’ she said, ‘it’s old like me. It goes to pieces. I try plugging the gaps with chewing gum, but it keeps coming out.’

‘I might have something at the cottage, that might help,’ said Raymond.

‘Ah,’ said the old lady, picking out a rotten piece of wood, ‘so which one might that be then?’

‘The one on the other side of the woods,’ replied Raymond.

‘That’ll be Rowan. How long have you been there, then?’

Raymond told her.

‘And you still feel alright?’ said the woman, ‘you must be made of sturdier stuff, than the last lot that rented the place.’

‘I’m an artist,’ said Raymond, ‘what happened to the last lot?’

The lady stopped what she was doing, and invited

Raymond into the house, to share a pot of tea with her. While she was pouring it out into two cracked china cups on the table, she began.

‘It was nothing much really, just that folks who come from the towns and the cities get funny ideas about places like this. Their minds begin to wander and they start to imagine things.’

‘Like?’ Raymond stirred in some sugar.

‘It’s a different pace out here, less stressful, nothing much to distract you. There ain’t much to look at but trees and rolling hills, and so you start seeing things where there ain’t things. You hear stories and off goes your head, thinking.’

‘What stories?’ said Raymond. ‘Is there anything about Rowan Cottage I need to know?’

‘Hetty Wattle!’

Raymond was puzzled. ‘Who?’

‘She was a witch, or at least they thought she was. She had a shiny black cat, but that was all. She kept herself to herself, lived off the things in her garden, never bothered anyone. She even grew her own medicines for when she was ill, so she would never need to bother the

doctor, unless things got really bad.’

‘And where is she now?’

‘Dead,’ said the old woman in between sips of her tea, ‘died five-hundred years ago or thereabouts.’

‘Dare I ask how?’ said Raymond.

‘They tied her to a tree and set fire to her, a Rowan tree to be exact. That’s why they renamed the cottage.’

‘So why do I need to be concerned?’

‘You don’t,’ said the woman, ‘unless you are the superstitious type. They do say that when she died the spirit was transferred to the cottage. They say sometimes you can hear the place breathing in the night, like it’s got lungs.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Things have supposed to have gone missing, like they’ve come to life and walked off, things have appeared, that weren’t there when they arrived. But like I say it depends on what you want to believe. I think you are a practical, down-to-earth person by the look of you, so you have nothing to worry about.’

Raymond wasn’t so sure he hadn’t. If he didn’t come up with something soon for Armageddon Comics, they

would fire him. There is no such thing these days as job security. So he told the old woman all of this.

‘Dried up have you?’ she said when he finished. ‘Well, there is one thing you can do.’

‘What’s that?’ said Raymond, ‘don’t tell me you’ve got a magic potion?’

The old woman slammed her cup down onto the saucer and glared. ‘Are you calling me a witch?’

‘No,’ Raymond apologised pathetically, ‘I’m sorry!’

‘Cos if you are, you can leave this place, before I shove my broom up your arse!’

Raymond waited for things to settle down, before he said anything else. He finished his tea quickly and got to his feet.

‘Before I go,’ he said in the doorway, ‘what is it I need to do to get inspiration?’

‘Ask her!’ said the woman.

‘Ask who?’

‘Hetty!’

Raymond didn’t know what to think of that, but thanked her regardless. It occurred to him that he might have been the victim of a prank. Perhaps it was a common

notion around these parts, that townies will swallow anything you tell them. Nevertheless, he was so desperate for a result, that he was obliged at least, to give it a try.

It was getting late when he got back, and he began thinking about it again. He gazed at his pad on the table, practically willing something to appear. He considered throwing it in the bin and going to bed with a good novel. Then something inside him, the warrior draughtsman, came to the surface and he allowed himself to cave in. He'd decided what he wanted, a new foe for Duploman to face.

'Hetty,' he said to the rafters, 'please can you put an evil character on my page?'

He glanced at the pad again and there was no movement.

'Well,' he whispered, 'it was worth a try anyway.'

He tried drawing some basic shapes, an egg shape for a face, and then a rough artist's cross inside it, where the eye-line and the nose would be. But he couldn't develop it any further from there. He gave it a name though, in the sheer hope that it might invent itself, the Skreak, an

onomatopoeia word, that sounded as if it could be something that could sneak out of nowhere and slash your throat.

But looking at it, somehow reminded him of the accident, so he walked away from it and dived into the bottle of Glenlivet, he'd packed for a one person arrival party.

The fine malt, did nothing to drown his thoughts. In fact, his thoughts appeared to be very strong swimmers.

In the night, he saw the boy's face again, so stark and white against the windscreen. He should have stopped and phoned the police. He should have told the truth. He was speeding and rowing with Nadia at the same time. Wanting to know why she wanted to dump him after two years.

In a sweat once again, he went down to the kitchen for a glass of water. Normally when he calmed down it would be perfectly safe to go back to bed. He never had the nightmare twice in the same night. He was thankful for that.

He felt a little better in the morning, somehow, as if all of the bad feelings had been purged from his body. He

didn't even have his usual hangover.

He was even confident that with a good breakfast inside him, he would be perfectly fit to tackle his sketch work.

With a regained smile he developed the face, two piercing eyes; a jutting pointy nose like Jack Frost. He added long, bony arms with not just one elbow, three joints, so that his wonderful new creation would have a slight robotic appearance. It would also make snatching its victims a whole lot easier.

Yes, the Skreak was finally taking shape. He glanced at his phone lying on the sofa where he left it last night and gave a thought to calling Bryony.

'No,' he said to himself, 'not yet, let's hit her with a surprise!'

He soon had it finished, the Skreak, the curious creature who possessed the ability to alter its shape to pass through the least possible spaces.

Pleased with himself, he took a got out his laptop and his portable USB scanner, and made a JPEG image of it to send to Bryony Baron. Then he drove into Taunton where there was an Internet Café and emailed it with some notes about the character's background.

‘One week, in a broken down cottage,’ he muttered to himself, ‘and it all comes back. Thanks Hetty!’

He perused the library and noticed that there were numerous books about the pagan arts and black magic. Suddenly, what the woman had said was ringing true. If there were dark tales attached to the cottage then it was bound to attract interest in these types of things. Neither was there anything about Hetty Wattle. He was surprised that the chap he was renting from didn’t say anything about it.

It didn’t matter now, his time was almost up, and he was thinking about his last night and getting back to work on Monday, fresh and revived like Bryony wanted him to be.

In the morning, he started packing. He pulled out the large travel bag he arrived with, and threw in all of his clothes. He slid his laptop into its case and snatched the scanner from the arm of the sofa. He thought about the picture he’d sent and pulled the sheet with the Skreak on it, but when he looked at it there was nothing there.

‘Surely I haven’t sent a blank page to Bryony?’ he said and rushed to the table where his artists’ pad was still.

He flicked through all of the pages, and they were blank too. He then pulled out the top page and held it to the light to see if the score marks were there.

Nothing.

He tried calling Bryony but all he got was her answering machine message.

‘Damn!’ he exclaimed.

He went through every room in the cottage like a whirling dervish, like the Tasmanian Devil from the TV cartoons. He lifted everything, looked under all of the furniture and there was absolutely no sign of it.

‘I didn’t imagine it did I?’ he said and went through the motions of the previous night in his head. ‘I definitely did it.’

He decided to go and talk to the woman again. He remembered her saying, that things disappeared. But when he tried the door it wouldn’t budge. He turned the key in the lock, both ways and nothing worked.

He pulled the handle with all his might, jerking it roughly. When he had convinced himself that it had probably warped, he tried the back door in the kitchen.

He had the same lack of result there.

Raymond tried the windows one by one, undoing the latches and giving them a shove. Suddenly things were getting mighty claustrophobic.

Then, as he was eyeing the glass panes something weird happened. They all simultaneously became covered with a dark film. The more he stared at it in absolute horror, the more it looked red and sticky, like blood.

He screamed at the top of his voice for help, throwing things at the windows, chairs, vases, ashtrays, anything, everything.

Suddenly the house started shaking. Pictures fell from the walls, rafters became dislodged and cement dust and debris fell onto his head. The ground rumbled and bubbled under his feet, knocking him off kilter. The fireplace too, rumbled and spat out a thick shaft of fiery embers into his face.

Gripping his face and wracked in pain Raymond rushed to the door again, and hammered like mad and screamed for help. Then, he became aware that the hammering on the door, was not his and he stepped back in panic.

The door flew open, as if by some freakish wind and Raymond's heart almost stopped beating, when he saw

who was on the other side.

One slash of razor-like fingernails across his throat and Raymond fell to the floor clutching his neck.

It took Raymond a whole hour to die, and he felt every second of it.

By the morning, the cottage had returned to its original health, not a crack on a wall, not mark on the furniture. The owner arrived at two o'clock to show the next renters around. Raymond's body was nowhere to be seen. It was as if, it had just vanished, just as his drawing did.

When Bryony Baron received the email on Monday morning with the new character in it, she was confused. What she was looking at on the screen of her desktop computer wasn't a drawing at all, but the picture of a small boy with a ghostly white rain-washed face.

Damned Pests

There is an old family saying, our door is always open. It comes from generations of Christians who have always believed that you should be there for others who might need you. We had been burgled nineteen times as a consequence of this. Only recently have I come to the decision that this was the most stupid thing that anybody could have on a family crest.

The first one to commit the act of trespass those final two evenings, was called Matt. I know this, because I heard him say into some handheld device.

‘Hi, it’s Matt!’ he said. ‘I’m here, where are you?’

Matt was about seventeen or eighteen, and arrived with a bag full of beer and was wearing one of those hooded pullovers.

Normally, I’d have gone downstairs and introduced myself, in what is the Henning way, which is to ask him if he would like a cup of tea, and have one in his hands before he could say no. But there was something about him that frightened the life out of me. In hindsight, I should have gone down and asked him what the hell he

wanted. There was something about his eyes that said, come anywhere near me matey, and I'll punch your blooming lights out. I thought it better to wait until he left, and then lock the front door. All I could at the time was, to lie on the landing, and observe what he did through the railings of the banister. Somehow, this was the most natural place in the world for me to go, feeling anxious like that.

Matt, was shining his torch over the walls and the floors, as if he was looking for something. Such an odd thing to do, as far as I knew, the house lights functioned perfectly.

There is a common misconception with people, that as nobody sees me that often, that the place is empty. It is not, I am here. I have always been here. I was born here, in the master bedroom.

The others arrived half an hour later, two girls and two more boys, all the same age.

'Come on, Timothy,' I told myself. 'Grow some balls and go and tell them to leave.' But although I have always been quite good at talking to myself, I'm not a terribly good listener. The sensible thing to do, would

have been to call the police, and had them removed by force. I've never had a mobile phone, never liked them, and The landline was downstairs. There was an extension in the study, but it hadn't been working for years.

One of the boys had brought this noisy plastic box which spewed out sounds normally heard in an iron foundry, bang, bang bang, bang bang. This modern music was beyond me.

It was getting late. I'd been on my way to bed when Matt arrived. So I began shuffling on all fours to my room. Then, as I was passing a small table with one of the house numerous potted plants on, my foot caught the leg and the pot wobbled. A voice from below asked, 'What was that? A girl.

'Rats!' replied one of the other boys, and the cheeky things laughed. There has never been a single pest in this house, until they turned up, that was.

I managed to get to my room, where I spent the night on the floor in my duvet, on the furthest side of the bed, where they couldn't see me.

In the morning, I was delighted to see that they had left.

Although horrid signs of their presence remained, in the form of beer cans, crisp wrappers and cigarette stubs.

The following evening, I relaxed by the fireside. It was always the best place to be with a book. The seats are comfortable, and there is a foot rest so that I can extend my legs to catch the warmth of the lashing flames. But my happiness was to last long, as my comfort was disturbed with laughter at my door, and it was then that I remembered I'd forgotten to lock it, and panic jolted my chest.

I went to the door at first, and peered through the spy hole. Just three people chatting by my gate, two men and a woman. They all had equipment and bags, as if they had come from the station. All the same, I thought I would lock the door. However, the key wasn't in the hole..

'Damned kids!!' I whispered to myself. I ran to the kitchen to find something I could use. Then, just like the rowdy children the night before, without my permission, they came in.

Again, I could have confronted them. They seemed an amicable bunch. Something inside me said to keep a

discreet distance, so I did. Peeking through the kitchen door, I could see one of the men, he had his back to me. The others had gone out to get the bags. This was my opportunity to sneak back upstairs.

Once they were all assembled again, I watched them from the banister. I kept asking myself questions. Why did people like to come into my home? What was so fascinating about it? True, it was a beautiful place, quite grandiose for its size. It had high ceilings and old paintings on the walls. Although it had been years since any of it, had seen a duster.

These people seemed to have a lot to say. They talked well into the night. Much of the words meant very little to me. Being very old, my ears couldn't absorb a fair percentage of their conversation., and so my eyelids very slowly quivered to a close.

But they weren't closed for long. I heard the sound of my name drifting from downstairs.

'Timothy Hemming!' it was the woman, quite a seductive voice if I am to be honest. I was pleased at least, that although they didn't ask for me at the doorway, they acknowledged my presence.

I slowly got to my feet..

‘Up there on the landing!’ said the man holding an electric box with some sort of metallic cone attached to it by a wire.

The woman looked somewhere in my direction.

‘Timothy, if you are here, please give us a sign.’

So I did. I knocked over the plant with my elbow. This appeared to cause some excitement.

‘I can see him!’ the woman announced, enthusiastically.

‘Speak to him!’ said the one with the microphone.

‘Why are you still here? Is it unfinished business?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I live here!’

‘He says he lives here!’ she told the others, and they giggled nervously. Then to me she said, ‘Why haven’t you passed on to the spirit world?’

‘Because I’m not dead,’ I said, ‘that’s why. What a stupid thing to ask.’

‘Timothy,’ she said, ‘You died in nineteen hundred and one. You fell from that banister. The records say that you were dusting the ceiling, and fell off a ladder.’

This was news to me. The woman related what she’d told me to the others.

‘I can’t be dead,’ I said. ‘I don’t feel dead!’

‘I’ll prove it!’ she said, and opened the front door to its extent. The two men asked her why she was doing that, she shushed them.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked her.

‘When was the last time you were out of this house?’

I was stumped. I couldn’t envisage such a time.

‘If I am dead, how can you converse with me?’

‘I’m Daria Melsh. TV psychic.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

She looked at the others and then back at me. ‘Leave!’

‘Leave?’ the concept was a difficult one.

So, slowly, I descended the staircase.

‘I’m getting a strong reading!’ the man with the cone announced. ‘He must be getting closer.’

As I passed them, they all backed away. One of the men said that the temperature had dropped several degrees.

I stood by the door, willing my body to go out.

‘Go on Timothy!’ Daria smiled.

I smiled back. Now this was the time to be brave. I stepped out of the door, but not a thing changed. The doorstep was where it had always been, The old rusty

gate was hanging off its hinges and there was the street, all so different now.

Then something very odd happened to my eyes. For everything I laid my eyes on began dissolving in the air. I turned and saw the woman, Daria, waving and blowing me a kiss.

Suddenly there was nothing.

I have never been to the house since that night.

Eyes of the World

The optician, stood looking at what could only be described as a perfect indentation of a face in his metal filing cabinet, for a good few moments, finally he spoke. 'It's quite obvious to me, Mr Bryant, that you are definitely ready for your prescription, and not a moment too soon.'

Mr Bryant, still clutching at remained of a bloody nose, found that he had no alternative but to agree with the blur wearing the white coat. This was how John Bryant perceived the world; tall blurs, short blurs, red blurs, blue blurs, like being permanently drunk. As for Mrs Bryant, heaven knew what she looked like nowadays, that adoring angel who had floated down the aisle on the wings of Mendelssohn all those years ago.

Eyeball World, which boasted an excellent Checked and Specked in One Week or Your Money Back, service presented him with the glasses of his choice. When the assistant had finished putting them into position, he glanced hopefully, expectedly at his reflection in the mirror. It displayed such biological correctness that he

fell off his stool with excitement. The eager-to-please assistant rushed to his aid.

‘Do allow me, sir!’ she said as she realigned his frames, with the bridge of his bruised nose. ‘Now that’s better, isn’t it?’

When his image sharpened again, he smiled and nodded his satisfaction with the task, as well as his marvellous looks. The optician suggested he’d go for a walk around the block to wear them in. ‘Come back in an hour,’ he said, ‘you can let me know what you think.’

And indeed he did, with great trepidation, go out to sample the delights of a world, for once, in realistic definition. Immediately what struck him about his new found surroundings was how tall everything actually was. The next thing was the answer to a question that had been on his mind for several years.

Just down the street, and he could see it quite clearly now, was huge, colourful restaurant, where came, a strangely familiar, disgusting aroma, not entirely dissimilar to deep-fried goat’s genitals. As he neared it what came into view were spotted teenagers chewing gum, mouths gaping whilst taking money from children

in silly hats, for god-knows-what in a cardboard box.

Mr Bryant shrugged at the absurdity of it and moved on. 'What is this world coming to?' he muttered under his breath, as he trundled along the footpath. After feeling his feet start to ache, he stopped for a moment by a shopping precinct, he hadn't realised was ever there, for a rest. 'Dreadful!' he muttered. 'Not the world, I thought it was at all.'

Then, as if to underline his statement with a proverbial thick, black marker pen, he glanced over the road, in time to witness a traffic warden being mugged by a six-year-old girl, he had taken the time to save from the jaws of mechanical death.

The worst, however, was yet to come.

As soon as it reached four o'clock, the tarpaulin factory jettisoned its full load of thick smoke into the atmosphere, where it reached up like a ghostly black hand and throttled the sun. As he was taking in this horror a hand grabbed his shoulder. Mr Bryant turned sharply to see a woman of large girth and such muscular arms, that he was sure that if the situation called for it, they could quite happily knit you a jumper out of

telegraph cables if not do worse. He couldn't help but let out a shriek, as well as a little wee. 'Who are you!'

'Who do you think?' the voice was very familiar now. 'Ophelia?'

'Who did you think it would be, you daft bugger?' Then she sighed, 'they don't suit you Herbert. You should have asked for contact lenses.'

'Thank God, it's you!' he panted. 'Ophelia, it's all upside-down and back-to-front and sideways as well. I had never idea it was all like this. Something must be done about it all and quickly!'

Herbert returned to the opticians hastily. Having given the matter serious consideration, he was now an educated man. He was met by the optician at the door who greeted him with a big, service-with-a-smile smiles.

'Well, sir,' he beamed, 'what did you think?'

Herbert let his face fall into a concentrated grimace. Snatching his new glasses from his face and thrusting them into the man's hand where they made an untidy metallic knot he said loudly, clearly, 'You can have these bloody things back, good day!'

The Iffy Man

Each morning I travel to work from Stevenage, platform 1. From there I ride the carriage to Finsbury Park where I get the underground to King's Cross. Then it's a mere ten-minute walk to my office at Carlson and Carlson solicitors.

Usually I'm fine on the land line carriages, but it's the underground which gets me, with it's dark shadows, and silent bodies drifting about like ghosts. I think when things get underground, they move about more furtively, as you can feel somehow that you are away from human eyes, and this is why my head has the impression that this is where all the dark things are, like the criminals.

Normally, I want to say something, such as, who do you think you are looking at? But I never do. I can't wait to disembark, head back to the light and bury my head in all the dreary paperwork.

You can always tell the type, the criminal classes. They sit across from you on the train scanning you from head to toe. It can be quite unnerving, because you know why they are doing that, they are trying to decide if there is

anything of you they can take. These days, nobody wants to work for anything, so they take. I'm not a snob by any means, I just know that in society, there are... types.

They are much easier to spot these days, though, with their hoodie jackets pulled over their twitchy little skulls. This is a culture of rats which scuttle and dart from place to place in order to do the unspeakable to others.

I was sitting in my usual seat one morning and there he was, the chav-rat, the skulker. My briefcase and my laptop were on my lap as usual. My grasp on them tightened, without even thinking about it. You couldn't see his eyes, but just knew that they scanning for easily accessible pockets and handbags, although they mostly go for mobile phones these days.

I turned to the man seated next to me and tried to attract his attention, the way that you do by pointing with your head. However, the gentleman, one such as I, didn't seem to want to bite.

'Hello?' I whispered in the end, 'Over there!'

The man shrugged, and so I tried again.

'Dodgy, you know... iffy!'

This time, he shook his head. 'I don't think so.' He then shuffled away from me a little, and when he did so, the corner of my eye and my ears, noted something hitting the floor.

I gazed down at the floor of the carriage and followed my line of site to where the iffy man was. Yes, just as I thought, he had his eyes on it too.

The damn swine! I thought, bloody typical. Of course you wouldn't miss a thing like that would you. I bet you are coming up with a plan right now, some diversionary tactic which will enable you to snatch it without anyone noticing. I wasn't going to let this happen.

His face suddenly met mine, and then looked away. Very slowly I bent down and picked up the wallet, and before the oily tic had the opportunity to pounce, handed it to my disbelieving friend next door and he returned to me a smile which beamed gratitude.

We disembarked together. The iffy man slunk off towards the awaiting escalator. I tapped the other man's shoulder.

'I'm awfully sorry about that,' I said.

'What about? You returned my wallet.'

'That one I was trying to tell you about, just last week a woman had her handbag stolen. I couldn't help but notice that the ruffian on the train was seated right next to her when it happened. He must have stashed it in his jacket while she wasn't looking.'

'So that was a close call then,' my new friend replied.

'Thanks for that!'

I followed him up the steps back into the light and smiled to myself as he walked away from me to the nearest crossing. Another good job done.

After he disappeared into the crowds, I glanced down at my hands, more specifically, the wallet that was in them, another one for my collection, that'll be another night out on the town for me.

Then I suppose, you can't always tell by looking, you really can't.

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