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MICK
HERRON
NOBODY
WALKS

BY THE AUTHOR OF
CWA GOLD DAGGER WINNER DEAD LIONS

Down Cemetery Road
The Last Voice You Hear
Why We Die
Reconstruction
Smoke & Whispers
Nobody Walks

The Slough House Series
Slow Horses
Dead Lions

NOBODY WALKS

Mick Herron

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CRIME**

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PART ONE



The news had come hundreds of miles to sit waiting for days in a mislaid phone. And then it lingered like a moth in a box, weightless, and aching for the light.

The street cleaners' lorry woke Bettany. It was 4:25 A.M. He washed at the sink, dressed, turned the bed's thin mattress, and rolled his sleeping bag into a tight package he leaned upright in a corner. 4:32.

Locking the door was an act of faith or satire—the lock would barely withstand a rattle—but the room wouldn't be empty long, because someone else used it during the day. Bettany hadn't met him, but they'd reached an accommodation. The daytime occupant respected Bettany's possessions—his toothbrush, his sleeping bag, the dog-eared copy of *Dubliners* he found on a bus—and in return Bettany left untouched the clothing that hung from a hook on the door, three shirts and a pair of khakis.

His own spare clothing he kept in a duffel bag in a locker at the sheds. Passport and wallet he carried in a security belt with his mobile, until that got lost or stolen.

Outside was February cold, quiet enough that he could hear water rinsing the sewers. A bus grumbled past, windows fogged. Bettany nodded to the whore on the corner, whose territory was bounded by two streetlights. She was Senegalese, pre-op, currently a redhead, and he bought her a drink one night, God knew why. They had exile in common, but little else. Bettany's French remained undistinguished, and the hooker's English didn't lend itself to small talk.

A taste of the sea hung in the air. This would burn off later, and be replaced by urban flavours.

He caught the next bus, a twenty-minute ride to the top of a lane which fell from the main road like an afterthought, and as he trudged downhill a truck passed, horn blaring, its headlights yellowing the sheds ahead, which were barn-sized constructions behind wire-topped fences. A wooden sign hung lopsided from the gates, one of its tethering chains longer than the other. The words were faded by weather. Bettany had never been able to make them out.

Audible now, the sound of cattle in distress.

He was waved through and fetched his apron from the locker room. A group of men were smoking by the door, and one grunted his name.

“Tonton.”

What they called him, for reasons lost in the mist of months.

He knotted his apron, which was stained so thick with blood and grease it felt plastic, and fumbled his gloves on.

Out in the yard the truck was impatient, its exhaust fumes spilling out in thick black ropes. The noise from the nearest shed was mechanical, mostly, and its smells metallic and full of fear. Behind Bettany men stamped their cigarettes out and hawked noisily. Refrigerated air whispered from the truck's dropped tailgate.

Bettany's role wasn't complicated. Lorries arrived bearing cattle and the cattle were ferried into the sheds. What came out was meat, which was then ferried away in different lorries. Bettany's job, and that of his companions, was to carry the meat to the lorries. This not only required no thought, it demanded thought's absence.

At day's end he'd hose down the yard, a task he performed with grim diligence, meticulously blasting every scrap of matter down the drains.

He switched off, and the working day took over. This was measured in a familiar series of checks and smells and sounds, the same actions repeated with minor variations, while blurred memories nagged him uninvited, moments which had seemed unexceptional at the time, but had persisted. A woman in a café, regarding him with what might have been interest, might have been contempt. An evening at the track with Majeed, who was the nearest he'd made to a friend, though he hadn't made enemies. He didn't think he'd made enemies.

Thoughts became rituals in themselves. You plodded the same course over and over, like any dumb beast or wind-up toy.

At about the time citizens would be leaving their homes in clean shirts Bettany stopped for coffee, pitch black in a polystyrene cup. He ate a hunk of bread wrapped round cheese, leaning against the fence and watching grey weather arrive, heading inland.

From three metres' distance Majeed detached himself from a group similarly occupied.

"Hey, Tonton. You lose your mobile?"

It spun through the air. He caught it one-handed.

"Ou?"

"*La Girondelle.*"

The bar at the track. He was surprised to see it again, though the reason why wasn't long coming.

"*C'est de la merde.* Not worth stealing."

Bettany gave no argument.

The piece of shit, not worth stealing, was barely worth ringing either, though still had a flicker of charge. Four missed calls in nine days. Two were local numbers and hadn't left messages. The others were from England, unfamiliar streams of digits. Odds were they were cold calls, checking out his inclinations vis-à-vis internet banking or double-glazing. He finished his coffee undecided whether to listen or delete, then found his thumb resolving the issue of its own accord, scrolling to his voicemail number, pressing play.

"Yes, this is Detective Sergeant Welles, speaking from Hoxton police station. Er, London. I'm trying to reach a Mr. Thomas Bettany? If you could give me a ring at your earliest convenience. It's a matter of some importance." He recited a number slowly enough that Bettany caught it the first time.

His mouth was dry. The bread, the cheese, grew lumpy in his stomach.

The second voice was less measured.

"Mr. Bettany? Liam's father?" It was a girl, or young woman. "My name's Flea, Felicity Pointer? I'm calling about Liam ... Mr. Bettany, I'm so sorry to have to tell you this."

She sounded sorry.

"There's been an accident. Liam—I'm sorry, Mr. Bettany. Liam died."

Either she paused a long while or the recorded silence dragged itself out in slow motion, eating up his pre-paid minutes.

“I’m sorry.”

“Message ends. To hear the message envelope, press one. To save the—”

He killed the robot voice.

Nearby, Majeed was halfway through a story, dropping into English when French was obscene enough. Bettany could hear the creaking of a trolley’s metal wheels, a chain scraping over a beam. Another lorry trundled down the lane, its grille broad, an American model. Already details were stacking up. More blurred snapshots he’d flick through in future days always associated with the news just heard.

He reached for the back of his neck, and untied his apron.

“Tonton?”

He dropped it to the ground.

“*Ou vas-tu?*”

Bettany fetched his duffel from the locker.

The crematorium was single-storey, stucco-clad, with a high chimney. On one side creeping plants swarmed a cane trellis that bordered an array of small gardens divided by hedges. Japanese stones neighboured ornamental ponds and bonsai trees peered from terracotta pots. Other patches echoed formal English styles, orchards, terraced rosebeds, any of which you might strew the ashes of the departed, supposing the deceased had expressed a preference.

Bettany imagined Liam saying, *When I'm dead, scatter me on a Japanese garden. Not in actual Japan. Just anywhere handy.*

A mild English winter was turning chill, but all that remained of the morning's frost was a damp smudge on the pavements. The imprints of vanished leaves were stamped there to look like the work of a graffiti artist who'd run out of things to say.

Bettany's once-blond shaggy hair was now streaked grey, like his ragged beard, and while his eyes were strikingly blue, their expression was vague. His hands, large and raw, were jammed in the pockets of a cheap raincoat, and he rocked slightly on feet cased in work boots that had seen better days. Under the coat he wore jeans, a long-sleeved crew-neck tee and a zippered top. These were the spare clothes from his duffel bag, but three days' wear had taken their toll. The duffel itself he'd abandoned in a bin, he couldn't remember which side of the Channel. For all the hours he'd spent on buses, he'd managed little sleep. His only conversation had been a brief exchange on the ferry, when a French trucker lent him the use of a phone charger.

His first stop on reaching London had been Hoxton Police Station.

Detective Sergeant Welles, once located, had been sympathetic.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Bettany nodded.

"Nobody seemed to know where you were. But there was an idea you were out of the country. I'm glad you got back in time."

Which was how he discovered the cremation was taking place that morning.

He'd sat in the back row. The chapel of remembrance was quarter-full, most of the congregation Liam's age, none of them known to him, but an introduction contained a familiar name, Felicity Pointer. Flea, she'd called herself on the phone. She approached the lectern looking twenty-five, twenty-six, brunette and lightly olive-skinned, wearing black of course. Hardly looking at the assembled company, she read a short poem about chimney sweeps, then returned to her seat.

Watching this, Bettany had barely paid attention to the main object of interest, but looking at it now he realised that what he'd been feeling these past three days was not grief but numbness. A pair of curtains provided the backdrop, and behind them the coffin would soon pass, and there the remains of his only son would be reduced to ash and fragments of bone to the mess of clinker you'd find in a grate on a winter's morning. Nothing of substance. And all Bettany could make of it was an all-consuming absence of feeling, as if he was indeed the stranger his son had made of him.

He rose and slipped out of the door.

Waiting by the trellis, it struck him that it was seven years since he'd been in London. He supposed he ought to be noticing differences, things being better or worse, but he couldn't see much had changed. The skyline had altered, with new towers jutting heavenwards from the City, and more poised to sprout everywhere you looked. But that had always been the case. London had never been finished, and never would be. Or not by dint of new construction.

Seven years since London, three of them in Lyme. Then Hannah had died, and he'd left England. Now Liam had died, and he was back.

Welles had given him a lift here. There might have been a hidden agenda, pump the father for information, but Bettany had none to offer and the flow had gone the other way. How that had happened, for instance. Up through France, across the choppy Channel, Bettany hadn't known the how. Of the various possibilities some kind of traffic accident had seemed most likely, Liam driving too fast on a fog-bound stretch of motorway, or a bus mounting the pavement, Liam in the wrong place. He could have called and spared himself conjecture, but that would have been to make imagination fact. Now he learned that there had been no car involved, no buses. Liam had fallen from the window of his flat.

"Were you in close contact with your son, Mr. Bettany?"

"No."

"So you wouldn't know much about his lifestyle?"

"I don't even know where he lived."

"Not far from here."

Which would make it N1. Not somewhere Bettany was familiar with. He gathered it was trendy, if that word was used any more, and if it wasn't, well then. Cool. Hip. Whatever.

Had Liam been hip? he wondered. Had Liam been cool? They hadn't spoken in four years. He couldn't swear to any aspect of his late son's life, down to the most basic details. Had he been gay? Vegetarian? A biker? What did he do at weekends, browse secondhand shops looking for bargain furniture? Or hang around the clubs, looking to score? Bettany didn't know. And while he could find out, that wouldn't erase the indelible truth of this particular moment, the one he spent outside the chapel where Liam's body was being fed into the flames. Here and now, he knew nothing. And still, somehow, felt less.

Overhead, a stringy scrap of smoke loosed itself from the chimney. Then another. And now here came the rest of it, billowing and scattering, a cloud for only a moment, and then nothing, and nowhere, ever again.

The chapel had both entrance and exit, and fresh mourners were congregating at the former. Leaving them, Bettany wandered round to the back, where those who'd come for Liam were dispersing. He was the only blood relative here—there were no others. Liam, a only child, had been the son of only children. And his mother was four years dead.

Loitering under a tree, he watched Flea Pointer emerge. She was talking to an older man himself flanked by another—flanked, as if the second man were a minder or subordinate. The first man was mid-thirties or so, and while dark suits were the order of the day his seemed a different cut, the cloth darker, the shirt whiter. A matter of money, Bettany supposed. His short hair was fair to the point of translucence, and his wire-framed glasses tinted blue. As Bettany watched Pointer leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, her arm curling round his back for a moment, and the man tensed. He raised his hand as if to pat her on the back but thought better of it. Releasing him, she brushed a palm across her eyes, sweeping her hair free or dabbing at tears. They exchanged inaudible words and the men moved off, down the path, through the gate into the street, and disappeared inside a long silver car, which pulled off with barely a noise. Flea Pointer still hadn't moved.

She was the same age as Liam had been, though unlike Liam was petite—Liam had been a tall boy, gangly, with arms and legs too spindly to know where their centre of balance lay. He'd filled as he'd grown, and had maybe kept doing so. He might have barrelled out since then. Bettany didn't know.

As he stood thinking such things, the girl looked round and saw him.

Flea Pointer watched Vincent Driscoll climb into the limo and pull away, Boo Berryman driving. She had felt him flinch when she put her arm round him—Vincent wasn't much for human contact. She had forgotten that in the emotion of the moment, or else had thought that he might forget it in that same emotion. But he hadn't, so he'd flinched, and she was left feeling gauche and adolescent, as if there weren't enough feelings washing around her now. Tears were not far away. The world threatened to blur.

But she blinked, and it shimmied back. When vision cleared, she was looking at a man standing under a tree like a figure in a fable. He was tall, bearded, shaggy-haired, inappropriately dressed, and she wasn't sure which of these details clinched it, but she knew he was Liam's father. With that knowledge slotted in place, she approached him.

"Mr. Bettany?"

He nodded.

"I'm Flea—"

"I know."

He sounded brusque, but why wouldn't he? His son had just been cremated. The emotion of the moment, again. She knew this could take different forms.

On the other hand, he'd never responded to her phone call. She'd dug his number out from a form at work, Liam's next-of-kin contact. Couldn't recall exactly what she'd said. But he never called back.

What he said now, though, was, “You rang me. Thank you.”

“You live abroad.”

This sounded disjointed even to her own ears.

“Liam told me,” she added.

How else would she have known? She was coming adrift from this exchange already.

“I’m so sorry, I hated to tell you like that, but I didn’t know what else to do—”

“You did the right thing.”

“I know you hadn’t been getting on. I mean, Liam said you didn’t—hadn’t—”

“We hadn’t been in touch,” Bettany said.

His gaze left hers to focus on something behind her. Without meaning to, she turned.

A small group, three men, one woman, still lingered by the chapel door, but even as she registered this they began to move off. Instead of heading for the gate they walked round to the front, as if heading back inside. One of the men was carrying something. It took Flea a moment to recognise it as a thermos flask.

Liam’s father asked her, “Who was that you were talking to?”

“When?”

“He just left.”

“Oh ... That was Vincent. Vincent Driscoll?”

It was clear he didn’t know who Vincent Driscoll was.

“We worked for him. Liam and I did. Well, I still do.”

She bit her lip. Tenses were awkward, in the company of the bereaved. Apologies had to be implied, for the offence of still living.

“So you were colleagues,” he said. “Doing what?”

“Vincent’s a game designer. *Shades*?”

Bettany nodded, but she could tell the name meant nothing.

Distantly, music swelled. The next service was starting. Flea Pointer had the sudden understanding that life was a conveyor belt, a slow rolling progress to the dropping-off point and that once you’d fallen you’d be followed by the next in line. An unhappy thought, which could be shrugged off anywhere but here.

If Tom Bettany was having similar thoughts you wouldn’t know it from his expression. He seemed just barely involved in what had happened here this morning.

“Thank you,” he said again, and left. Flea watched as he headed down the path.

He didn’t look back.

In the car leaving the crematorium Vincent Driscoll felt one of his headaches coming on, the designation his late mother had coined to distinguish Vincent's headaches from anyone else's. It seemed to fit. There was no denying whose headache this was. It felt like a bubble was squeezing its way through his brain.

He found his Ibuprofen, dry-swallowed a pair, and asked Boo to drive more slowly, or at least as slow as he thought he did, and sank back. Had he actually spoken? The world through his tinted glasses softened, passed by at the same speed.

Left to his own devices, he'd have avoided the service. He hated gatherings, and this one had changed nothing. Liam Bettany remained dead. Which was the kind of thing he most remembered not to say aloud, but there was no rule he couldn't think it. Probably everyone else had thoughts like that, the whole notion of "polite society" being little more than a hedge against honesty. Normality was rarely what it appeared. This much Vincent knew.

And this time, he definitely spoke out loud. "Boo? Could you ..."

He mimed a movement, a gesture with no obvious correlation to any of the actions involved in driving a car, but which Boo Berryman, watching in the rearview mirror, interpreted correctly. He slowed down. Vincent closed his eyes.

A succession of pastel-coloured characters drifted past, walking down perfectly straight streets, lined with traditional shops. Each was armed with a shopping list, and carried a basket under an arm, and each popped into every shop in turn, in a perfectly choreographed retail ballet ... A round yellow sun rose and fell in the sky behind them.

Vincent, who had dreamt up *Shades* when he was twelve, sometimes wondered how many others there were who could ascribe their entire life story to one moment, one striking thought. Einstein, perhaps. Maybe Douglas Adams. Anyway. He'd been playing Tetris, in the semi-catatonic way it induced, when he'd had the sudden sense of things having flipped—that he was the game, not the player.

That had been the spark. Everything else had taken years. But years were what he had had, and this being an advantage of having your big idea young.

The car purred to a halt. Traffic lights. Various noises, muffled by thick windows, sprayed past as if fired from a shotgun. Heavy beats and pitched whistling. Sounds of metal and rubber, of the forces that drove everything. If he had ever found a form of music he enjoyed, this was when he would listen to it ...

Shades had started small, in the sense that it was a one-man show. The team he had now for marketing and packaging and all the rest—he'd had nobody then. Design had happened in his bedroom. Production, outsourced piecemeal to half a dozen tiny companies, had swallowed every penny of his mother's legacy. The result resembled an arcade giveaway, a game fated to be bundled up with others and sold as a lucky dip. Even the small independent he'd hired to mastermind distribution tried to talk him down. The number of titles coming onto the market, if you didn't get traction in the first quarter, you were history. He'd be better off using it on a CV, blagging his way into a job with one of the big boys. But he'd insisted on going ahead.

And it had started small, too, in the sense that not many people bought it. Turned on in the head, though—the way Vincent liked to look at things—what this meant was, it was bought only by those who bought everything, which was fine by him. A steady trickle diminishing to a drip, but fine by him. Because, monitoring the comment boards, Vincent knew nobody had cracked it. If that happened and the trickle remained a trickle, he'd know he'd failed. But until then, everyone else had.

Besides, Vincent knew gamers. Gamers were essentially kids, and didn't throw games away. They swapped them and left them gathering dust and stacked them in towers twenty jewelcases high, but they didn't throw them away because that was an adult trait. And games that didn't get thrown away eventually got played again, once they were old enough to have regained novelty value.

The big danger was the format would become extinct, and that had given him a bad night or two, had tempted him to nudge events himself, and post his own message.

But not long after the game's first birthday, everything changed.

Vincent picked it up on a gamers' board.

anyone cracked Shades?

When he'd read this, something shifted inside him.

Home. Sometimes Vincent waited for Boo to open the door, but today he was out of the car before the electronic gates whumped shut. In the kitchen he ran the tap to make sure the water was cold, then filled a glass. This he drained without turning the tap off. He filled a second, and drank that too. Then a third. His headache decreased to a background grumble. He filled a fourth glass and carried it back into the sitting room, which covered most of the ground floor. Boo was just coming in, and flashed him a concerned look. Vincent shook his head, meaning leave him alone. Boo carried straight on into the kitchen, where Vincent heard him turn the tap off. Vincent loosened his tie and sank into a chair.

Above another sofa was a picture, seven foot by four, of a cartoon dog. Some cartoon dogs look intelligent, others dim or violent. Some manage sexy. This one pulled off the relatively simple trick of being nondescript, an expressionless brown mongrel, captured in the act of walking against a two-tone background, the lower half grey, the upper yellow. Those who knew the dog recognised these shades for what they were, which was pavement and wall. And nobody who didn't know the dog had ever seen the picture, so alternative interpretations had never been offered.

follow the dog

That had been the clue offered by that first gamer, the one who'd "cracked" *Shades*. By the time Vincent had revisited the board, it was in meltdown.

holy shit

that is awsum!

way!!!

Shades had been written off by serious gamers, as Vincent had expected. They demanded high-spec graphics, way beyond his budget at the time, and this was just another kitsch time passer, whose animated figures echoed BBC kids' programming from the '80s, all big heads and fixed smiles, wandering round in a *Truman Show*-like daze, collecting shopping. It was a speed-trial, in which the player had to gather the various items on a list faster than the game

generated characters managed. If you changed the order in which you visited the shops, you could shave seconds off your total, but ran the risk that by the time you got to, say, the butcher's, he'd be out of sausages. There was—so the rules governing such games dictated—a perfect schematic, if the player could only discover it, one which took into account all the other characters' purchases, and the order in which they did things. These days, it might be one of fifty games stored on a phone, something to while away a journey. Even then it was nothing special, a different league from the Lara Crofts, the FPSs.

Nothing special unless you followed the dog.

The dog was a jerky-looking mutt, and if you played the game four times on the trot, it appeared briefly on the main street, ambled round a corner and up an alley, and paused halfway to piss on a lamp post. Most players who'd stuck that far had assumed that was it, a little reward for persistence. An animated dog taking a cartoon piss. After which it trotted round another corner and out of sight.

But if, instead of heading into a shop to collect the next item on the list, you followed the dog round that corner, and kept on following it until it dug its way under a bush on a scrappy piece of wasteland which didn't appear to have been there until that moment—because it hadn't, in fact, been there until that moment—and scabbled down the resulting hole after it, well, once you'd done that, you were in a whole new world.

Raising his glass to his lips, Vincent discovered it empty. He'd drained it without noticing. Still thirsty, though. But perhaps that was unsurprising, given that he'd spent the morning watching a coffin being fed into the flames—which couldn't actually be seen, but was impossible to ignore. The wooden box, with its unnecessarily plush interior, sliding into a hot oven, never to come out. The smoke drifting into the sky ... Another gateway, he thought. A chimney instead of a hole, but still, another gateway into a new world.

And Liam Bettany discovering this one now, just as he'd discovered the other.

anyone cracked Shades?

Liam had been the first to follow the dog. In a way Vincent owed him everything, which had never occurred to him until this moment. It wasn't an important thought, but felt similar enough to grief that he savoured it a while—tended it, to see if it would grow—and even when it didn't, held on to it a little longer, carrying it back into the kitchen, where he poured another glass of water while Boo prepared a late lunch.

The policeman had told him where Liam had lived, a rented third-floor flat, and Bettany had memorised the address but had no idea where it was. He stopped at the first shop he came to and asked the woman behind the counter for help. It wasn't far. She gave efficient directions.

He'd have bought something from her but only had euros, and not many, forty or so. Maybe thirty quid, enough to feed himself at least. He hadn't eaten in how long? Memories suggested a fast-chicken franchise on the ferry, and alongside this image sat another, of oil-flecked water, and big-winged gulls on the watch for spilled food.

The address was one of a terraced row twelve houses long on a quiet street. The row was brick, and the upper windows boasted wrought-iron railings wrapped around ledges no wider than shelves. Greenery sprouted in pots from some, and he could make out a bird feeder on one, small pouches of nuts hanging from its curling branches.

It was accidental. He fell from the balcony, kind of balcony, of his flat.

The windowframes were uniformly white, as if in response to some local mandate, but the doors were vari-coloured, blues, reds, greens and purples. The door of Liam's building was red.

Bettany rang the bell.

The landlord's name was Greenleaf, and the ground floor was where he lived. He was thin, needy-looking man in plaid shirt and baggy trousers, his eyes set far back in his head. On learning Bettany's name he wrinkled with suspicion, as if Bettany were responsible for the aggravation involved in having a fatal accident on the premises.

"I knew nothing about any of this drug-taking," he said.

"I'd like the key."

"It's in the lease. No illegal substances on the premises."

"Noted. The key?"

"What do you want it for?"

Bettany said, "I'm going to collect my son's possessions. Do you have a problem with that?" He didn't think he'd leaned on this especially, but Greenleaf stepped back.

"No need to get aggressive."

He left Bettany hanging in the hall while he disappeared behind a door, emerging at length with a key on a string.

"How long will you be?"

There was maybe a joke there, relating to the piece of string, but Bettany couldn't summon up the interest. Without replying, he took the key and carried on up the stairs.

Was he drunk?

He'd been drinking.

Drugs?

We think that's why he was out on the balcony. Kind of balcony.

The top-floor landing was graced with a skylight, through which grey light fell like drizzle. There was a door on either side. Liam's opened, with his key, onto a small hallway, in

which similar light fell from a companion skylight, this one blazoned with a streak of birdshit. The walls were white and the carpet beige, a little scuffed. The air was stale, but Bettany had known worse.

There were three rooms off the hallway. The first was a cupboard-sized bathroom without a bath, just sink, shower and toilet. The cabinet above the sink was mirrored, and Bettany opened it as much to avoid his reflection as out of curiosity about what it held. Which was the usual. Razor, soap, deodorant, a fresh tube of toothpaste. A bottle of bleach sat next to the toilet, tucked behind the loo brush. The shower was clean, with just the odd speck of mould eating into the grouting. A small print on the wall showed a boat bobbing on an unconvincing sea.

Across the hall was the kitchen, which wasn't much bigger but had room for oven, fridge, sink, washing machine, and overhead cupboards neatly filled with essentials. Tins of pulses, bags of rice, flour, jars of sauces. On a white plastic sink-tidy, a single plate had long since dried itself.

Among the postcards stuck to the fridge was a photo of Hannah from before she grew sick. Unthinkingly he pulled it free for a closer look. But it was no riddle awaiting solution. It was an old photograph, that was all.

The fridge obligingly carried on humming, keeping up the good work of chilling Liam's out-of-date milk and slowly perishing vegetables. An array of bowls, sealed with clingfilm, held leftovers he'd never finish. It was all very clean, Bettany thought. All surfaces wiped. Cutlery in its drawer. Pans in their cupboard, graded by size.

Liam had always been careful about his possessions. Very neat in his arrangements.

Detective Sergeant Welles had told him, "There were effects, odds and ends. What he had in his pockets, I mean."

What he had in his pockets when he'd hit the ground.

"You can collect them from the station. Or ... Where are you staying, can I ask, sir? You've come from abroad, that right?"

Bettany had said, "I'm not sure yet. Where I'm staying."

The other door led into the living room, which would be a nice bright space on a sunny day, with those big windows. A sofa was set against one wall, alongside a nearly full bookcase. On a low table was an electrical contrivance which Bettany guessed was a music system, and a surprisingly small TV set. A rubber plant, scraping the ceiling, lived between the windows, and a small writing desk with a chair occupied a corner. On it was a flat white laptop with the Apple logo.

Another doorway in the far wall presumably led to the bedroom. Bettany checked. Bed, wardrobe and chest of drawers with a mirror propped on top. The bed was made. A small window looked out on the backs of other, similar houses. Below it was a wooden chair, on which lay a folded pair of jeans.

He returned to the sitting room, with its big windows, which didn't quite reach to the floor.

Sort of balcony?

It's just a ledge. A ledge with a railing, meant for putting plants on, so people in upstairs flats can enjoy a bit of garden. What it's not meant for is smoking a joint on. Because there's not much room for being straight, let alone getting high.

The nearest window had a small security lock. Bettany unscrewed it, released the latch.

and heaved the window up as high as it would go. The air that blustered in was cold. Down below, a car was inching into a parking space only marginally larger than itself.

Easing himself through, he stepped onto the balcony not meant for getting high on. It was no more than a foot wide, with a terracotta pot on either end, a dead plant in each. Between the two you could stand, if you were careful, leaning on the brickwork for support. It wasn't somewhere you could grow too comfortable, unless, Bettany supposed, you were young and immortal. When you were young, you could fly, or at least bounce. That was the theory anyway.

He checked the pot to his left, then made a similar examination of the one on his right. Neither had been used as an ashtray.

This was a pretty strong blend. There's a lot of it around lately. They're calling it muskrat. We they'd already used skunk.

Muskrat. Bettany closed his eyes, and imagined the seamless sequence, Liam rolling up, stepping through the window, lighting a joint, and then—what? Losing his balance? Closing his eyes, forgetting where he was? It must have been strong stuff all right. First you get high. Then you come crashing down.

After giving that a little more thought, he climbed back inside.

Pulling the window shut, Bettany noticed he still held Hannah's photograph. He took back to the kitchen and reclamped it to the fridge, then had to lean against the wall while a wave of tiredness struck. He needed coffee. Shouldn't be too difficult to manage.

A cafetière sat by the kettle and there was coffee in the fridge. Bettany boiled the kettle and while the coffee drew, went through cupboards again. Tins, bags of rice and jars of spices. A memory was stirring, but it wasn't until he saw the matching plastic container marked TEA, BISCUITS, SUGAR that he knew what it was. Reaching for the third container he unscrewed its lid. It held sugar, sure enough, but when he dipped his fingers through its temporary glaze they met a polythene bag, the kind banks use for change, rolled into a tight cylinder. Unwrapping it, Bettany counted out two hundred and forty pounds in twenties.

He weighed it in his hand. The sugar tin was where Hannah had hidden small sums of cash. Bettany used to shake his head—the sugar tin? Please. But that's where she'd kept her emergency fund, and where Liam had kept his too. Bettany shook his head again, less at the way things were handed down, and more at the fact that the police hadn't found it. They must have been through the flat looking for drugs, if nothing else. Muskrat. Who thought of these names?

The coffee was ready. He poured a cup, left it black, carried it into the sitting room. Taking his raincoat off at last, he draped it over the sofa, then opened Liam's laptop. It swam into life without complaint but asked for a password. After pondering this for a while, Bettany closed the lid.

A yawn caught him unawares. He hadn't slept in—he couldn't bring himself to perform the calculation. Too many hours. He hadn't slept in too many hours. The coffee would help.

When the phone rang he at first didn't realise it was his own, and once he had it took him a moment to locate it. It was in his raincoat pocket, and before he'd retrieved it, the ringing stopped. But in moving the coat, or else putting his weight on the sofa's cushions, he released an aroma that hadn't been there before. It wasn't much, a fading scent, but it caught him where he lived, raising hairs at the back of his neck. It was the smell of his son. The ordinary, living smell of Liam, of his soap, and his sweat, and of oils that had seeped from his hair as he sat here, head against the cushions.

The phone rang again.

"Mr. Bettany?"

He didn't reply.

"Mr.—?"

"Yes."

"It's DS Welles, sir. You're at your son's flat, are you?"

"Yes."

"I have his things. His effects."

Effects was a policeman's word.

"And I'm just outside. Should I—"

"I'll come down."

He waited two minutes, then did so. Welles was on the step, offering a brown envelope that might have come from the Revenue, or anywhere else that issued impersonal demands. Bettany took it in his left hand. His right was jammed in his pocket.

“Thanks.”

“Are you going to be all right?”

“I expect so.”

“Is there anyone—”

“I’ll be all right.”

“Of course. Here, I need you to sign this, sir.”

Bettany scrawled his name on the proffered form, *I hereby acknowledge receipt*, and turned back inside. Before shutting the door he said, “How did you know I was here?”

“Couldn’t think where else you’d be.”

Upstairs, he turned the envelope over. Objects inside it slipped from side to side. Eventually he ripped the seal and poured its contents onto the table.

A wallet, holding a little over thirty pounds, two credit cards, a supermarket loyalty card and a library ticket.

A set of doorkeys.

A chapstick.

A packet of tissues.

That was it.

He dumped everything on the desk next to the laptop and finished his coffee. Knowing it wasn’t a great idea, that it would give him the jitters, he poured a second cup anyway, drained it, and poured a third. That was the end of the coffee. He wandered the flat again, cup in hand. Everywhere was clean lines, clutter-free surfaces. A thin layer of dust was forming, exactly measurable, Bettany thought, to the day of his son’s death. There were no candles melting into wax-smear holders, no knick-knacks acquired on holiday to forever take up space. No photographs, other than those on the fridge.

None of which were of Bettany.

He wouldn’t have expected any. He was surprised Liam had listed his number as an emergency contact—wouldn’t have been shocked to learn he was passing as an orphan. A memory Bettany recalled it, that had been the import of their last conversation.

It’s your fault she’s dead.

It’s cancer’s fault, Liam.

And why do you think people get cancer? You made her unhappy. You were a bastard to her and to me.

There was a whole deluded industry dedicated to the notion that cancer fattened on the emotions, and not for a moment had Bettany believed his son had fallen prey to it. It had been a weapon, that’s all. A stick to beat him with.

Had he been a bastard? He’d been called worse.

One of the pictures of Liam was recent, taken indoors. His hair, always darker than his father’s, was cut short, and he wore a white collarless shirt, open at the neck. Half-smiling, half-serious, he seemed to be trying to impress the photographer with both sides of his personality. Twenty-six years old. Bettany unclipped it and carried it into the other room.

On the sofa he closed his eyes, photo on his chest. It was quiet. Caffeinated to the eyeballs.

he didn't expect to sleep but drifted anyway, memories of a much younger Liam overlapping with those of Hannah, distant snapshots that offered no clue to how badly things would go awry. *It's your fault she's dead.* There was no way in the world those words were true, and no way to unremember them.

The light through the windows had weakened when he stood and put his raincoat on. Leaving the flat, he went downstairs. When Greenleaf opened the door he was holding a paper napkin, wiping his mouth. He'd missed a fleck of grease that shone on his chin.

"Did you bring the key back?" he said.

"When was the rent paid up to?"

"I can't remember offhand." Greenleaf's eyes glazed, as if he were engaged in a mental calculation he'd hoped would be overlooked. "I could work it out, refund the balance. Leave your address and I'll post you a cheque."

"No need," Bettany said. "I'll be upstairs. Until the rent's used up."

He didn't wait for a response. Outside, he stood for a while by the patch of road where Liam's life had ended. Nothing distinguished that space from any other. It was just where something had happened. Looking up at the building offered no stories either. Everything carried on doing what it had always done. Bettany put his hands in his pockets, and went walking.

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