

THE UGLY MAN

P.D. Viner

Also by P. D. Viner:

The Last Winter of Dani Lancing

Summer of Ghosts

The Sad Man

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Part

One

Prologue

He does not dream. It is the drugs, they knock him out, and each night there is just a black slab in his brain, a hole where his imagination should be. That part of him was burned away long ago. Except... when he awakes this morning there is a whiff of something, the tip of his tongue is scratchy, there is an echo of a name...

He tries to reach out for it, but it has gone. A dream? The sensation is so strange he barely recognises it. He cannot remember back to a time before the darkness, to a time when he did dream, when he could imagine anything but this ache. He sits up, his head swims. He reaches for the glass of water by his bed and takes a sip. It is disgusting. He wonders how long the glass has stood there.

In the bathroom he splashes water on to his face and brushes his teeth. His right hand trembles slightly. As he spits the white foam into the sink, he can see the whirl of blood mixed in. He runs the tap and watches it spin away. He feels his jaw, rough with many days of stubble, he should shave but there are no batteries in the razor and he keeps forgetting to buy some. There is a disposable in the back of the cupboard, but wet shaving is too difficult without a mirror. He does not keep one in the house; he hates to see his own face.

He pulls the curtains aside and looks out on a beautiful day. It is only 6 a.m. but already he can feel the heat start to build. Nausea scratches at his gullet as he thinks about what that will mean later. The stench of the blood when he kills, it will...

He needs some air. Maybe today is the perfect day to go to the graveyard.

It is not a long walk to the cemetery but he feels unwell. His gut is gassy and uncomfortable, last night's beer sits heavy in his stomach, like it has been cut open in the middle of the night and filled with rocks. As he walks little niggles and pains dart through his

legs and hips, the price he pays for being in work. They tell him he is lucky – ha, lucky. What a joke.

He walks through the arid landscape, the air thick and torpid, already pushing down on him like guilt. At the cemetery he swings the pack off his back and immediately can feel the sticky patch on his shirt where it had been, sweat trickles down his back. Inside the bag is a thermos of coffee, a pair of secateurs, a tin of weed killer and a small pot of lavender. He stands there, outside the gates for a few minutes, looking into the clear blue sky and preparing himself... this is hard, even after all this time. Finally he dredges up enough shreds of courage, and walks inside, making directly for her grave. His mother's grave is there too. He has not visited that in years, in fact only once since she died – and then he spat on it. But he visits Jessica often. Today he plans to cut away any overgrowing foliage, prune the rose bush he planted five years ago and plant the little pot of lavender he has brought with him. It should scent the air all summer. He has tended her grave for almost twenty years now, it has made him closer to her. It is the least he can do as—

He sees her stone in the next row. Unlike the others, which are stippled with moss and lichen, her stone is clean and well cared for. Last time he was there, maybe a month ago, he used weed killer on the marble and scrubbed it until his calloused, leathery hands were raw. Then he had lain down on the grave, directly above where she lay, and he had cried. For her and for him, both of them long gone, leaving Mark alone. So alone. Anyone who had seen him would have been shocked, nobody would believe Mark Radix could cry and yet he could not stop. And today, will he weep again today? A part of him wants to, it is the only time he can let go of the rage and disappointment. The only time he can dislodge the dark weight in his mind and remember the happier times with...

He stops. Something is wrong. He sees the stone:

Jessica Angela Caxton 1942–1958

An angel lost to us

Lying on the grave is a bouquet of flowers. Roses and carnations. They are not the type of flowers you can get around here, there isn't a florist for miles and miles. Who could have left them? He can only think of the doctor's wife but she would have said. Maybe they have been placed on the wrong grave by accident. Maybe. He stands for ten minutes, watching the flowers, thinking they might offer up a clue. He sees them start to wilt in the sun, the leaves curling at the edges. Finally he steps forward. He picks the flowers up, like you might a rattlesnake, there is a card stapled to the underside. He pulls at it, feeling paper tear as he removes the note.

Jessica,

Still in my thoughts

'Is this some sick fucking joke?' he thinks.

One

Thursday 1 July 1976

Patty lies naked on the bed, a sheen of sweat covers her body. Next to her, Jim tosses and turns like a rotisserie chicken – waves of heat roll off his searing flesh. She keeps away from him. It is 3 a.m. She feels drained and tired, nine days of stifling heat is taking its toll. She wants so much to fall into sleep, but she can't let consciousness go.

‘Mum.’ Dani calls sluggishly from the next room.

Patty slides off the bed and on to the floor, grabbing the flimsiest of robes and dragging it on. It sticks to her skin, moulding to her contours. It is barely more discreet than being naked. She pads towards her daughter's room, walking as lightly as she can on the hot wooden slats. By the time she gets there Dani is asleep once more. She has kicked her bedclothes on to the floor and taken her pyjamas off. Her hair is damp, stuck to her head in clumps. Patty reaches for her hand – it is hot and clammy with sweat. Patty purses her lips into an O and blows softly all over her daughter's body. There is a sleepy little gurgle that sounds like happiness. Patty kisses the sticky little mitt and lowers it back to the bed. All of the windows on the first floor are open, but they do no good. The air does not move, it is set like aspic, and there is not a drop of wind.

‘Dream of tropical storms and princess-hating-pirates,’ Patty whispers to her eight-year-old daughter and heads downstairs.

In the kitchen she pours herself a glass of water from a bottle in the fridge and sits at the kitchen table. She lights a cigarette, even though she keeps telling Jim she won't smoke in the house any more, and thinks.

‘Bloody thinking,’ she thinks. She does too much of it, when what she really needs is to sleep – but that seems a vain hope tonight. Too much whirrs around in her head. She sighs heavily and takes a long pull on her cigarette, exhaling and watching the smoke corkscrew up.

She feels anger broil in her stomach, she is full of resentment over the trial. That is what is keeping her awake at night. Even though the decision was made some time ago, she still feels deeply aggrieved. Instead of sitting agitated and angry at her kitchen table at 3 a.m. she should be in a two-and-a-half star guesthouse in Oxford crafting insightful reports into how a man can starve and torture a young woman – someone he doesn’t know – to death. But she isn’t there, the job went to Tait and Richardson. Those useless fucking... Men. It should have been her trial. She had filed the early stories, she had followed him from petty bank-robber to murderer and she... she had sat every day at that poor girl’s inquest and... bastards. They were all bastards – even the ones who weren’t. All bastards and it was so fucking unfair, fucking unfair to her – and to Leslie. Davie Tait was never going to do right by her. He was only good for mediocre reporting, his stories were always full of half-truths, dodgy facts and missed opportunities. Damn him.

She drops the cigarette butt into the dregs of the water, listens for that little hiss it makes, then swirls it around in the cup. The dog end breaks down until it is just a swirl of tobacco and paper mush. She pours it down the sink, then rinses the glass. She must remember to brush her teeth before she gets into bed – she doesn’t want Jim to smell the smoke on her. She looks out of the window into the darkness. It is an abnormally dark night. She likes it; she is a night owl after all. Happiest when she can wake up at noon and get to bed at 5 a.m. She sighs. There is a shift in the sky, perhaps a solitary breath of air – and for a second there is a sliver of silver. Then it is gone.

He opens his switch knife, the blade curved slightly. He presses it into the skin – it pierces it with a pop and then into the flesh. He makes two deep incisions – both to the core, then removes the section. He offers Patty the slice of apple. Her look is glacial.

‘You’re still angry with me,’ he says. It is a statement rather than a question. She narrows her eyes and ignores the forbidden fruit.

He shrugs and takes the piece himself – it crunches satisfyingly and he slices himself another.

Patty has a file in her hand, she drops it on his desk next to the framed pictures of his wife and his long dead son. He eyes the file, but does not lean across to take it.

‘What’s that? Just give me the headline.’

‘I want to do a story on Leslie Whittle and her family’s need to understand what happened.’

He calmly eats another slice of apple. ‘The trial is going on now – probably will be for another few weeks. I sent Richardson for the news and Tait for the profile and editorial.’

‘Tait is Cro-Magnon.’

‘And he has written very well about Mr Nielson.’

‘She was starved – he made her stand in a noose until she collapses—’

‘Patty, this is a newspaper. This trial is news; the outcome is news. That poor girl’s death is last year’s chip paper.’

‘Please, Jack?’

Jack Coleman shrugs. ‘Patty, you’re a fine writer, but you need to work a bit harder at being a good journalist. News. News and news... you have to understand there is a hierarchy here. Tait is the senior crime writer.’ He lifts the file off of his desk and hands it back to her.

‘Give me this again in three months and I’ll talk with—’

‘—forget it.’ She spits over her shoulder as she storms off.

She leaves his office and heads out on to the floor. Jack's office had a fan that makes the air bearable. Here in the newsroom it is heavy and damp. She can feel the way her shirt sticks to her body and hugs her curves, she doesn't like it, she feels ogled – even though many of the men have bigger breasts than she does. The heat wave has brought out some of the baser urges in the men around her. She has been propositioned four times in the last week – and she is not talking about offers of a romantic dinner with candles. Four married men have offered her a lunch-time fuck in the stationery cupboard or on their office desks. She doesn't even bother to say anything any more, she can't even raise the energy to tell them to piss off, just ignores it. She prefers the vocal stuff though, she can cope with men verbalising their desires even when they are crude and perverse. It is the physical stuff that makes her angry – the way men stand too close to her, how they 'accidentally' brush against her – push their pelvises against her and sometimes have little hard-ons. If it wasn't so unpleasant it would make her laugh. Sometimes.

But there have been little victories. She has been here for two years. When she started there were five topless calendars in the newsroom. All five are now gone – though one additional calendar has been put up. Davie Tait bought one just to annoy her. It hasn't worked, she doesn't get annoyed like she used to. At the *Echo* she had stabbed a man – well, that makes it sound more melodramatic than it actually was. He had grabbed her breast. No guile, no accidental shimmy – he had just reached out and felt it. She took the scalpel on her desk – she had been trimming Letraset – and stuck it in his hand. Boy was he a screamer. It had cheered her up greatly – but guess which of them had their wages docked for a week? And guess who was up on a disciplinary hearing? That's right – give the woman a cigar.

It is almost 3.30 a.m. The alarm goes off in two hours. She has sat back down at the table, that was not the plan. She should be sleeping – letting the brain run down and... who is she kidding? Anger washes back in and her brain is zero to 60 mph in a second.

She knows her reporting is a hundred times better than Tait's. He will get the facts, probably in the right order, and he will rant and rail at the viciousness of the man, demand the maximum prison term – flirt with the idea of bringing back the death penalty. But he will miss the real story. Leslie will just be a footnote to the story of the Black Panther. *Damn Davie Tait and Jack Coleman and...* she feels goose bumps run across her flesh – even in this heat. She was going to add *damn Jim and Dani too*. That thought makes her nauseous. And guilty as hell. Lying underneath her anger at Coleman for not giving her the trial is always, always, always that resentment at her husband and daughter. Always the feeling she should not have put her career on hold to have a child. Always... She peels her legs and backside off the chair and walks back upstairs. She stands over Dani's bed and watches her, so small and needy.

'I didn't mean it,' she tells the sleeping child.

'Oh, yes you did.' Patty tells herself. 'You would be senior crime writer now if it wasn't for her.'

It is true. Sometimes she hates the house and her husband and their child. She looks at her colleagues and finds them ludicrous. She hates that Jim didn't freeze his career when they had Dani. When he was offered his dream job they didn't turn it down so she could continue to... what?

She feels so tired all of a sudden – she can't keep a hold of all that anger, it is too slippery. With a sigh she lets it go. Maybe Jack is right, he is a damn good news man after all. Maybe she should just go to bed and... except there is something else to exercise her brain. A question from earlier that day, which now bubbles up, demanding she answer it.

‘What about Little Longstone? What about the dead barmaid?’

It was only a small story, just four or five lines in a *stop press*. A barmaid, Sally Matthews, was killed in a tiny Yorkshire town. She was bludgeoned to death by a regular customer, Mark Radix. He entered the bar and pulled her out from behind the counter, then beat her to death with a hammer. There were four witnesses. All of that was pretty run-of-the-mill, but there was a detail tucked away in the story. A fact that sang to Patty, that made this case something special. She thinks back to that afternoon.

She sits at her desk, not really doing anything except stew in her anger. She wants to go to the toilet but can't face the walk down four flights of stairs. The toilet on this floor is used by twenty-five men who piss testosterone-fuelled beer all day long. She had used it in the early days but the only stall was always filthy and covered in the most crude and cruel writing. She learned that Barbara in accounts could suck for Britain and two of the typists... it was foul. So now she walks all the way down to the secretaries' floor and uses the toilets there. They are clean and they don't smell. And in one of the stalls she had learned that Davie Tait can't get it hard – and that had made her happy.

She is pulled out of her daydream by a cough. Out of nowhere, Jack Coleman is by her desk, standing over her. He drops a small pile of clippings down before her.

‘You offered me a story – it seems only fair that I offer you something in return,’ he tells her.

‘What are these?’ She pushes at the clippings with her finger, cautiously as if they might contain scorpions or snakes, her voice fairly buzzing with mistrust. He sighs and grabs a chair and pulls it toward the desk and sits alongside her, it makes her feel like she's at a doctor's appointment.

‘I’m not going to let you cover the Nielson trial – so stop banging on about it. But you are right, there are deeper stories there. I think Leslie deserves more—’

‘—so let me go to Oxford.’

He shakes his head, a little sadly. ‘Tait is going to get *a* story – maybe not *the* story, certainly not *your* story, but a perfectly serviceable news story.’ He pauses. ‘Most things we cover are pretty straightforward, something a good newsman...’ he sees her mouth harden, ‘... or good newswoman will get in 500 words. That’s the bread and butter of any newspaper.’

‘I underst—’

He holds up his hand to stop her. ‘And there are other stories that are like those Chinese paper swans. They unwrap and unravel, revealing deeper levels... not news necessarily but... you get me?’

She nods.

‘This is not the time for you to tell Leslie’s story. Wait a while and the public will be ready for the deeper narrative. Okay.’ He smiles. ‘Do you know what got me into the newspaper game?’

‘No.’

‘A kid trapped down a well.’

‘Oh.’ She is intrigued. ‘What happened?’

‘He was my age, nine. And I don’t just mean the same year but the same day – within half an hour of each other I found out later. He was in Leeds and I was in Manchester. The papers were full of it for three days. How he was trapped and whether he could be rescued alive. It was touch and go, the walls had collapsed on top of him and he was in a little air pocket. It was a race against time to get him out before he died. I remember there was an all-night vigil. In my bedroom I lit a candle that we kept in case of power cuts. I didn’t tell my

mum, she would not have been happy to have a candle burning all night. Everyone was really scared for him. Food and water were lowered into the well but he couldn't reach it without more of the wall falling down. Will he live, will he die – I'd never taken any interest before, not in the world outside my town – no, probably my street. I had my little universe: our house with me, me sister and Mum and Dad. My grandparents lived in the next street and the cubs were in the church next to them. I walked to school – didn't even have to cross a road to get there: that was my whole world. But that poor trapped boy... I got really interested in that boy with my birthday.'

He pulls a pack of cigarettes from his waistcoat and taps two out. Patty takes them both and lights them, then hands one back to Jack.

'Thanks.' He sucks the smoke in long and hard. 'On the third day, they decided to drill another hole down the side of the well and then try and get him out through that. It was risky as the whole thing might have collapsed. I was at school all day, thinking about him. Wondering if he would be dead or alive when the final bell rang. When I got out I ran right down to the newsagent's. Outside, on the side of the shop were the headlines for the evening edition.' He stops and takes a long pull on the cigarette.

'And... was he dead?'

He pauses, a little theatrically. 'No, no he was all right.'

She nods. 'And that was what made you want to be a reporter?'

'No.' He smiles a rare smile. 'I went straight back to playing with cars and bikes, forgot about the outside world and about the kid. I went right back to my own little world.'

She frowns. 'I don't—'

'Be patient,' he stubs the cigarette out. 'It were years later, when I was fifteen, almost sixteen – and it was time to decide on a career. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but my Dad got me an interview with a civil engineering company in Leeds. I put on my best suit –

no, I tell a lie, it was me only suit and we got it second hand from a dead man's wife. I went along to the interview. I got there in good time and sat in a waiting room before the appointment. In the room there was a table full of magazines, not the kind I'd normally see at home, and one had a picture on the front that caught my attention. It was a well with a young man standing next to it. The title of the article was something like *the bullies of the well...* or something that had bullying in it. I read it. It was him.'

'The same kid?'

'The half an hour older than me kid. He had been thrown down that well by bullies at his school.'

'You're joking?'

'No. Those bastard kids had almost killed him, and you know what? Nothing happened to them, and within a month they were back to bullying him again. He ended up leaving the school and his family moved away. It was never reported in the news at the time – but the child had been born in India, he was half Indian. That was why they picked on him.'

She nods. She can imagine the teenage Jack, fuming at the unfairness of it all.

'That racism made me want to be a newspaperman – and I like to think my paper wouldn't hide a fact like that.'

'No. No, we wouldn't.'

'I learned then that sometimes *news* is bigger than just reporting the bare facts, it can have roots that can worm down and down for miles. Sometimes it's important to tell those deeper stories – sometimes.' He points to the papers on her desk. 'These are today's stories from the wire. Look at them and see if any are worth following up on. Do we have a "well" story today.'

'But I would like to tell Leslie Whittle's story.'

'Too close, too fresh. Maybe one day – but right now, look at these.'

He walks off and Patty starts to read.

She stands in the doorway of Jack Coleman's office an hour later. 'I want to cover this.' She holds up the wire report.

He doesn't look up. 'That the killing in Derby?'

She stands for a moment, unnerved by the magic trick. 'You knew I would pick this, didn't you – is this some kind of test?'

He doesn't answer, instead asks another question. 'What is it that intrigues you most about it?'

'The man beat her to death with a hammer. But the witnesses all agree that he entered the pub already covered in blood.'

Jack Coleman looks up, a big smile on his face and his eyes glittering. 'Exactly. Whose blood was that?'

Two

Once she leaves the outskirts of London she can put her foot down. The wind fills the car, teasing out her hair and making it fly around her face. She wants to put her head out of the window and scream – she feels like a child on an exciting school journey, away from her parents for the first time. She feels like she is playing hooky from life.

She stops at a service station, at around about the halfway point, to get more petrol and buy a drink. She steps from the car and immediately feels her arms start to sizzle. She misses the wind in her hair from the speed of the car. Without it nothing moves, there is no breeze just a thick funk of air bearing down on her. She could fry an egg on her arm – not that she would want to – but it's that hot. She goes into a Little Chef. Inside it's stifling, the food limp and inedible. She buys a supposedly cold – but in reality tepid – drink, has a pee and then returns to her car. In the metal box, the air has already turned rancid and musty. The steering wheel is red hot and the leather upholstery is gluey.

‘Are we there yet?’ she asks herself.

She pulls out of the services and back on to the motorway. As soon as the air begins to move through her hair once again, she relaxes – she loves this. She hasn't been alone on a long drive for years. She cranks the windows and the eight-track. Bryan Ferry belts out ‘Love is the Drug’ and all seems right with the world. Really! Isn't that a bit weird – to be going to a murder scene and yet be so happy? That is a bit sick, she thinks, and yet... She feels free for the first time in many, many months – she puts her arm out of the driver's side window and feels the air rush through her fingers. Freedom.

It is just after 2 p.m. when she parks her little Cortina behind the Packhorse Inn – at the heart of the hamlet of Little Longstone. She already knows the three small rooms above the pub are full, she called yesterday evening after Coleman had given her the go-ahead to drive up to Derbyshire. She asked about other hotels – nothing for miles.

‘It’s the murder – the place is full of bloody ghouls,’ the landlord had said. So she had packed pillows and sheets on the back seat of the car.

‘You’re not going to sleep in there, are you?’ Jim had asked the night before, worried about her. ‘You’ll roast.’

‘I’ll open the doors.’

‘How safe is that going to be?’

‘Safe.’ She said in a far more convincing way than she felt. She hadn’t told him there was a murderer at large. A killer with a hammer.

‘What time are you leaving?’ Jim had asked. She wanted to say before 6 a.m. – she could feel the pull of the mystery and would have liked to have been up and out with the dawn – but instead she told him, ‘I want to walk Dani to school, say a proper goodbye.’

‘That’s really nice,’ he had said. She knew he had meant it.

She examines herself in the rear-view mirror. The wind has done quite a job on her hair so she brushes it and pulls it into a ponytail with an elastic band. She needs to look presentable but not glam. She wears no make-up, well... maybe a tiny bit of lippy would be a good idea. She leans across to her bag and pulls out the small tube. She dabs a little on and then declares herself presentable. Inside the bag lies her notebook, a new notebook. There is nothing like new stationery to show intent. This is her plan now, to be a senior crime writer within two years – either at the *Mirror* or somewhere more willing to go deeper into a story. She opens the notebook. Inside, on page one, are a few notes taken during a disappointing call to the local newspaper. All she got was a list of drunk and disorderlies, a couple of public

affrays and a GBH that was later dropped. The allegation had been that Mark Radix had head-butted another man, breaking his nose. There was no photo on file, not even an arrest shot, which surprised her. No biographical detail at all except for date of birth. He was a big question mark who just sounded like a rough drunk. There were millions of them, scattered along this sceptred isle. Men who liked to slap a woman on a Saturday night, or piss around some other cavemen's territory until they attacked, happy to fight to prove they were a man. Was this an accurate portrait of Mark Radix? A mean, hard-drinking, angry man whose violence had escalated to such a pitch that he had bludgeoned a young barmaid to death. And he had done so while covered in blood. Whose blood? Had he already killed? Would he do it again?

Patty sighs, all questions and no answers. She had even telephoned an *ex-Mirror* reporter in the hope there might be some gossip. She spoke to him for almost an hour and all her notebook contained from that call was a doodle of her shooting herself in the head and a single line she had underlined. *If I ever get like that kill me.* Christ, what a whining old bastard. She hoped she was never that lonely when she got old. She hoped she'd always have Jim and Dani around her. Dani could look after them both in their dotage, that was the point of having kids.

She lights a cigarette and sits watching the smoke curl. She hums to herself the tune from 'Love is the Drug'. When her cigarette is finished she stubs it into the dirt. Time to meet the locals. She goes to the pub.

The main bar is closed – a police banner is tacked over the door. NO ENTRY, POLICE INVESTIGATION. Patty pokes her head under it and sees an incredibly flustered man carrying a heavy-looking keg. His face is florid, a mix of sun, strain and blood pressure.

'Excuse me,' she calls to him.

‘Garden,’ he replies in a strained voice and disappears through another door.

She walks around to the side of the pub and is amazed to see that the small beer garden is absolutely packed with people. A temporary bar has been set up close to the side door and the red-faced man and a petite woman are doing a roaring trade. Patty sidles through the crowd until she gets to the front.

‘What can I get you?’ Red-faced asks.

‘Are you the landlord?’

‘That’s me.’

‘I’m Patricia Lancing, *Daily Mirror*. I wanted to—’

‘Three pints, Terry.’ A short man pushes Patricia to one side and talks straight to the landlord, no hint of an ‘excuse me’.

‘I were talking to the lady, Barry.’

‘And I been here ev’ry bloody day for twen’y years and this lot’ll be gone tomorrow.’

He scowls at the man.

Patty nods. ‘Serve him, I’ll come and talk to you when the rush is over.’

The landlord smiles at her as she moves away, Barry makes no move to thank her for her consideration, instead he slams some coins down on the bar. Patty moves back through the crowd hearing snatches of conversation as she walks.

‘... face to pulp... blood all over... St-Tropez is lovely... heard he’s always been violent... ’

She stops on the edge of the melee and watches the short man take his three pints and weave a path through the crowd away from her, heading to the very edge of the beer garden and a stone wall. Suddenly two hands appear from the other side of the wall, and all three pints disappear. With some difficulty the short man heaves himself up and over it. Patty is amazed, she wants to see where he’s gone.

‘Excuse me.’ She uses her elbows to cut a path through the crowd. ‘Please... sorry,’ she tells at least four people as she levers herself through the shifting mass of bodies – trying to follow the same route Barry took to the wall. At the back of the beer garden she looks over into a very old-looking churchyard. Ancient gnarled trees pepper the walled area and tombs and headstones fight for space. Tree roots have forced themselves under the graves and slabs of marble and stone undulate in the ground, tipping this way and that. Three men, including Barry, are sitting on a large slab of grave marker, drinking their pints. They look like hobbits, each of them short and dumpy with large beer bellies that stretch their T-shirts to reveal flabby white bands of flesh. Patty allows herself a sneer of disgust, then wipes it off her face and plasters on a huge smile. She pulls herself on to the top of the wall and jumps down into the long grass.

‘Good afternoon, gentlemen.’

They ignore her.

‘I understand you’re—’

In unison they down their pints and hand their glasses to Patty.

‘Same again?’ she asks.

‘And some crisps,’ one of them says with no hint of politeness. She nods and climbs back over the wall with the pint glasses. It has been a day of rudeness so far.

‘Why do you need to go?’ Dani had asked her as they walked to school that morning.

‘It’s work,’ she replied, avoiding her daughter’s eye.

‘When will you be back?’

‘Maybe Saturday.’

‘What time?’

‘I don’t—’ Then she remembers. ‘I probably won’t be home in time for your show.’

‘Oh!’ Dani looks hurt. She throws her bag down on the pavement. There is the sound of glass breaking.

‘Dani!’

They both watch as a puddle of milk collects under the bag.

‘You promised,’ Dani mumbles, her head down.

‘I know.’ Patty clenches her jaw and desperately wishes she could light a cigarette. Bloody guilt trips. Bloody family commitments. She bends down and picks up Dani’s lunch bag. She shakes it, glass tinkles. ‘I’ll take this home. You’ll need to tell Mrs Gerr what happened.’ She fishes in her pocket to find some change for lunch money. ‘Here.’ She hands it to Dani.

‘It’s pork and apple pie at school. I hate it.’

‘You shouldn’t have thrown your bag down.’

‘I didn’t.’

Patty doesn’t want to argue. Instead she walks on and after a few seconds Dani catches her up. They walk in silence until the school appears, like a shabby Camelot in the mist.

‘Will Dad take me to my show?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will we go for Chinese food after?’

‘I am sure he’ll do anything you want.’ There is a barb in the comment, but Dani does not pick up on it.

‘Ice cream too?’

Patty sighs. ‘Yes.’

‘Can Izzy come?’

‘Talk to your father.’

They are at the school gates. ‘Okay then.’ Dani stands on tiptoes and stretches up to kiss her mother. ‘See you on Saturday,’ and she runs off.

Patty is left behind, watching her sprint to the playground. Around her, mothers and their children pass by, heading to the classroom doors to say their goodbyes. They used to do that, wait until the final moment to say goodbye. Used to. She watches Dani turn into a smudge in the crowd, then she heads home.

She gets back to the three men about ten minutes later, now laden down with a tray. On it are seven pints, two each for them and one for her, plus a mound of cheese and onion crisps. When she gets to the wall, Barry walks over and takes the tray. There is no thank you. By the time she clammers over and gets to their ghoulish table, most of their first pint has gone.

She touches the stone of the grave marker with one fingertip – it almost burns her, even cold stone heats up in this weather. She turns the tray upside down and sits on that. ‘I’m Pat. *Daily Mirror*.’ She holds out her hand. They still ignore her. ‘I’m here to write a story on the girl who was murdered.’ Nothing. ‘Barry, it’s Barry right?’ No response. ‘I heard the landlord talking with you.’ She pauses – they drink. ‘And you said to him, that you came here every day – you must have known the woman who was killed. The barmaid?’ Nothing. ‘And the man who did it – he was a regular too. That is what I heard.’ They move on to the second pint. ‘Mark Radix, that was his name.’ She is ignored.

Patty swings herself round on the slippery tray to look out at the beauty of the view, past Little Longstone and on to the rolling landscape that curls away from her – the Peak District. She shields her eyes from the glare of the sun. The vision before her is stunning, even with the grass browned by the withering heat. It is a fabulous spot. They are lucky: their little community nestled at the mouth of one of the most glorious spots in England, in Britain, in Europe. Beauty all around, as far as the eye can see. Then she notices something. There is

a speck on the horizon, then another and another. Slowly she sees them grow. From insects crawling around in the soil they transform into men. Policemen. At least 20 officers are in the fields, some with dogs, all searching, beating the ground and not leaving a stone unturned. A manhunt.

She turns back to her three companions, they could be brothers. Idiot brothers. Each rounded head beading with sweat and under their arms sweat stains mushroom, slowly spreading out like an oil slick from a beached tanker.

‘This is a beautiful spot. Untainted by the modern world.’ She says in a reasonably loud voice, so they could not fail to hear her. The second pint is almost gone. ‘Blood-splattered beauty spot,’ she articulates with precision. ‘That would make a great headline – probably keep the ghouls coming for weeks. Or maybe: Local killer – is he a lone murderer or is village of Little Longstone a den of vice and crime.’

Barry swings round, almost spitting the last mouthful of his beer at her. ‘You better not be thinkin’ of writing a story like that.’ He grabs her arm and looks at her with menace. ‘This is a quiet place.’ She returns his look with one of steel.

‘And I’m sure that it will return to being quiet. All these tourists could be gone in a couple of days if certain journalists get to report the real story.’ She smiles. ‘If not, then newspapers will be forced to speculate about motives, whether there were others involved with the crime, the possibility of a gang. This could be a ritual murder, Satanists in sleepy village – sex crimes...’ she watches all three men shrink at this. ‘Before you know it, the whole thing spirals out of control and the village is turned into some kind of circus – could last for weeks or even months.’ The three of them steal glances at each other, obviously very unhappy at the prospect.

‘That is the problem of journalists being forced to rely on their own imaginations, rampant speculation will do no one any good. Without witnesses coming forward and telling

us the truth we have to rely on gossip and... ’ she leaves it hanging in the air. ‘How about I get some more pints while you talk it over?’ she tells them breezily and gracefully scales the wall and walks back to the temporary bar to buy another seven pints.

‘John fuckin’ Merrick.’

‘Ugliest fuckin’ bastard you will ever see.’ They all nod. They have introduced themselves now, the alcohol has lubricated them to the point at which they are happy to share their names and begin to share their memories of a killer.

‘But surely—’

‘There ain’t no exaggeration. Ugly man. Ugly to look at and even more ugly on the inside,’ John tells her. Internally she has bet herself that he gets called Little John by the other regulars, but now is not the time to test her theory.

‘He were like a fuckin’ animal. Do you remember when he head-butted that surveyor?’ asks Mike, who she expects is called big Mike.

‘Five years ago and I heard he still has operations to remove bits of bone. Otherwise one of ’em will float up to his brain and... ’ Barry slides his fingers across his throat. ‘Goodnight Vienna.’

All three shake their heads sadly. Patty sees fear in their eyes too. Fear when they speak of Mark Radix.

Barry holds up his glass. ‘To Sal.’

The others copy his action. ‘Poor Sal.’ They drink to her in silence. Then they tell the story of that night and... well to be honest, Patty cannot, does not believe a word. She has

seen how alcohol can affect and twist a story; build and build in somebody's mind until it's a bloated monster with merely a kernel of truth left at its core. That's half the problem of Fleet Street, most journalists are smashed at least half of the time and their stories cannot be trusted. But these three men don't seem to be off their heads. Considering how much they've drunk, they seem amazingly lucid and they do corroborate each other's version of events – but how can they possibly be telling the truth?

'So, let me get this right.' She looks down at her notebook once again. 'This Mark Radix has lived here all his life?'

'His dad were the estate manager over at Tennone before the war. Lived in the estate cottage until he went to war. East Africa, he got blown to bloody kingdom come. They found fuck all to bury.'

'Probably lucky. Gone like that.' John clicks his fingers.

'Bloody stupid,' says Mike. 'He didn't even 'ave to go fight – protected profession 'e 'ad, but he signed up like a fool.'

'Running away from that ugly fuckin' son. That's my bet.'

'Course he was, I remember when it were born. The nurse who took it out almost 'ad heart attack – she were dead within the year. I heard it were the shock of seeing that fuckin' devil come out,' Barry laughs.

'Hang on.' Patty holds up her hands. 'Mark Radix was born at the estate cottage – there was something wrong with him at birth?'

'Wrong with him? Nothin' was right with him.'

'He were born like an experiment gone wrong – half human.'

‘Half human?’

‘A troll.’ They all agree and chink their glasses together on pint six – at least six that Patty has bought them.

‘Then what happened?’

‘Must ‘ave been 1941? Soon as he were born, his dad went to war and didn’t come back. Boom. The widow got the cottage and later it passed to the son. He still lives there. No work on the estate, though. The war did for all that. Fucked everything up.’

‘So what does he do, what work?’

‘Whatever he can. Not easy with a face like bloody Frankenstein and less brains—’

‘He can’t read nor write,’ Mike sneers.

‘He does some dry stone wallin’ for the Mitchells, fruit picking when he can – labourer on farms out and about. But his main job is at the abattoir. He’s a slaughterman,’ Barry says it with such obvious distaste.

‘I heard he’d take a shine to a sheep and fuck it before he killed it,’ John says without thinking... and then looks as if he regrets it. The pint slips through John’s fingers, falling and striking the stone of the grave and shattering into a thousand shards. Patty watches his face, it burns with anger and shame. She can tell he is reliving the murder – the film winds back through his head, the thud of the hammer into her face – like a butcher tenderising meat. It will haunt him. He will remember it on his deathbed. Remember he sat there quaking in his boots and praying he wasn’t next: ‘Kill her but not me.’ He didn’t lift a finger to stop the violence.

Now all he can do is drink that memory away.

‘I can get another drink for you.’ Patty tells him. He looks like he will cry with gratitude. Patty leaves them and, as she does so, she hears the insistent whispers threading between the three of them. She walks to the bar. The worst of the day’s heat has gone but it’s still hot. She has only drunk one pint – the second sits barely untouched, warming. She needs to keep her wits about her but she is thirsty. At the bar she orders their pints and a tonic water with ice for her. She drinks it down in one. The ice feels good in her throat.

As she stands at the bar, she watches the landlord in conversation with a policeman. The landlord is gesticulating wildly, looking upset, he keeps pointing to the police sign that covers the door to the bar. NO ENTRY, POLICE INVESTIGATION. She strains to hear them through the crowd.

‘This is ruining my business...’ That is what she thinks she hears. The policeman is unmoved, even in the heat he looks cool. He is tall and quite handsome. The landlord’s shoulders finally sag and he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wad of cash. ‘Oh,’ thinks Patty. She watches the landlord count out some money and hand it to the policeman who smiles and removes the sign.

‘Not quite so untainted as I thought,’ she thinks and turns with the pints to see Barry at her shoulder.

‘Inside,’ is all he says and then runs in.

It smells of fresh paint and a section of carpet has been cut away. Probably the police removing the blood splatter for testing. Patty looks around and finds the three regulars in the corner fighting with a German couple. Barry keeps repeating ‘This is our table, we always sit ’ere’ slower and louder until the Germans crack and slink away. He grins, like he just won the war single-handed. Patty finds it hard to keep a smile on her face when she is close to

him, he makes her skin crawl. But needs must. She puts their pints on the table and pulls up a small stool to perch beside them.

‘Tell me about her, about Sally.’

They pause. ‘She didn’t deserve what happened.’

‘She were life and soul.’

‘She treated you well?’ Patty asks.

‘If you were good to her—’ John starts.

‘—she were good to you.’ Mike finishes. A slight smile plays around his mouth. It makes Patty wonder just how friendly Sally might have been to men who *treated her right*.

‘Was she good to Mark Radix?’ Patty asks.

Barry bangs his fist down. ‘Not him—’

‘Fucking ugly freak.’ The three men glare at Patty, protective of the dead girl’s memory.

‘Did he proposition her?’ she asks. All three look blank. She tries again. ‘Did he ask her out?’

‘She said he did once. Got short bloody shrift. “Not even with two bags – one over his head and one over mine”,’ Barry laughs. ‘That’s what she said.’

They laugh at the memory. Patty tries to keep her distaste for them out of her eyes.

‘Was there anyone in the village who knew Radix well, was a friend?’

‘Friend o’ the Ugly Man. No, no one. He were a loner – I probably saw him every night of the last ten years and never said a bloody word to him. He were the most miserable fucker on this planet.’

‘And look what ’e done. Killed poor Sal – it were vicious. He’s a fuckin wild dog and you know what should be done with a wild dog?’

‘Bastard should get put down,’ Mike says with bile.

‘Hope they find him and fry his brains good and proper this time.’

‘What do you mean, this time?’ Patty turns on John.

‘He’s fuckin’ crazy – proper madman. Years ago, when ’e were young ’e were in and out o’ loony bins. Electro-shock they give him. He were bad before he went but ’e was fuckin’ scary when he got out.’

‘They should never ’ave let him out. Fuckin’ crazy.’

The three of them nod together. ‘Fuckin’ crazy.’

She sips at her warm bitter pint. ‘What about her. Did Sal have any good local friends?’

In unison they each point to a slight figure standing behind the bar. ‘Jen – she and Sal were best friends.’

Patty turns to watch the woman serving behind the bar. She looks like a breath of wind would snap her in half. Okay, she has enough information from the three stooges.

‘Thank you, gentlemen.’ Patty opens her bag and takes out a ten-pound note. ‘Keep drinking on the *Mirror*.’ She lays it on the table – each of them snap at it. John is the

quickest. She stands and looks towards the bar for a few seconds, watches Jen serve one of the ghouls, and then Patty leaves.

Outside it is warm, close with no air. She realises she still carries her pint glass – it is almost full. She doesn't like it, the yeasty taste in the back of her mouth is unpleasant. She pours it on to the hard baked earth. It does not seep into the hardened ground, instead it forms little rivulets that snake down and away to the few remaining clumps of dried grass. It is 4.30 p.m. She sees the policeman from earlier leaving the churchyard and walking down to his car. She runs after him.

‘Officer,’ she calls. ‘Officer, wait.’

He turns, and his hand goes to the pips on his shoulder. ‘Sergeant, I’m a sergeant.’ There is a mixture of annoyance and pride in his voice.

‘Sorry – sergeant. I’m Patricia Lancing, *Daily Mirror*.’ She draws level with him and reaches out her hand. He takes it, and keeps hold in what he clearly thinks is a charming and sexy way, and which she thinks is a little creepy and annoying.

‘Sergeant Baines. Sam – call me Sam.’ He shakes her hand but speaks to her chest.

‘Oh great,’ she thinks. It is not easy to attempt a professional interview when you can't see the eyes of the man you're talking to.

‘Sally Matthews, I’m here looking into her murder. I wonde—’

‘No comment,’ he grins, pleased with himself. His head bobbing up to make eye contact for about a second, before it sinks back down to her breasts. ‘I have always wanted to say that. No comment.’

‘Book him, Danno. Murder one.’ Patty says. ‘That’s what I have always wanted to say.’

Eye contact... and down. ‘Yeah.’ He seems to be chewing gum. Patty can’t tell if he actually has chewing gum or it’s an affectation to seem like a hard-boiled cop. ‘Throw the book at ’im.’ He raises his eyes to hers and winks. He actually has nice eyes – but wet lips. ‘Live from Norwich – it’s the quiz of the week.’

‘Sally Matthews. She was beaten to death by a pub regular Mark Radix.’

His eyes flick up from her chest and stay there. ‘Hang on, hang on. That is all guesswork—’

‘I assure you, sergeant. My research—’

‘Leave it to the professionals, we know—’

‘I have just spent two hours with three eyewitnesses. Mark Radix entered the saloon bar of the Packhorse Inn at 8.45 p.m. Tuesday night. He went straight to the bar and grabbed Sally, dragged her over it and threw her to the floor. He then took a hammer from his pocket and beat her to death with repeated blows to her fac—’

Sergeant Baines turns green and looks like he might faint.

‘Are you...?’ She reaches over to steady him. ‘You saw the body?’

He nods but there is a look of horror in his eye... and maybe something else. Patty wonders if Baines had been one of the men who Sally had treated well. Maybe he had kissed that mouth or caressed the cheek that no longer exists. She squeezes his arm.

‘Thank you.’ He takes a deep breath.

‘Do you need to sit down?’

‘No, no I’m fine now. Not something we get a lot of here – murder.’ He digs about in his pockets and finds a dubious-looking hanky. He dabs at his face and then returns it to his pocket. He breathes long and deep. His skin is waxy but slowly the colour starts to fill back in. Patty waits until she thinks he is ready... okay.

‘What can you tell me about Radix, about the manhunt. Have there been any sightings?’

He looks uncomfortable. ‘I can confirm that at this time we are pretty close to uncovering his whereabouts. In fact, I will be staking out his cottage later tonight, if you would like to join me. We have a surveillance van, very comfortable for two.’ A leery smile creeps over his face.

‘Do you have a photo of Radix?’ she asks.

‘I’m afraid—’

‘We could pay for its use, make some contribution to the retired policemen’s fund or some such thing?’ She smiles and lets the idea chug around his head for a second and then, like she’d yanked on a one-armed bandit, three lemons snap into place behind his eyes, each one covered in pound signs.

‘How much?’

‘Fifty pounds?’

He smiles and then walks to the car and opens the back seat. It is covered in papers and empty food cartons. In the footwell she thinks she spies a used prophylactic. The entire car smells of... she really doesn’t want to think about it.

‘Here.’ He takes out a small black and white photograph and hands it to Patty with a slight shudder. She looks at the image, a custody shot, she wonders why the local paper didn’t have it. She squints a little, at first she thinks it is out of focus, then sees that the backboard at the bottom of the photo has chalked numbers on it that are crystal clear. The face—

‘He was arrested for grievous bodily harm, this was taken then. Not too recent but...’

His face is smudged, as if watercolours have been dabbed and run together – swirling the features into something almost human but not quite – the result is grotesque. The face is elongated and the chin and jaw twists – his mouth reminds Patty of a shark. The jaw doesn’t look like it would fully close and the teeth twist and point, like razors. His jaw extends down and is scooped, like a spoon. Yet it is the eyes that really disturb her. One looks human but the other is far lower, it looks as if it has melted. In fact, Mark Radix looks like a half melted waxwork. The asymmetry makes Patty’s brain fight to make sense of what it sees – she feels a little woozy and...

The police radio inside the car squawks. Sergeant Baines opens the driver’s door and grabs it from the dashboard. Patty is thankful for the distraction; the photograph has shaken her up.

‘This is Baines. Go on.’

‘Sarge. We found an abandoned car, it were pushed into the old pond out at Thaxton’s and covered with branches.’

Baines winks at Patty. ‘Had Radix used it?’

‘We don’t know – it’s got weird number plates. Foreign. Billy thought France.’

‘European,’ his face lights up. Patty thinks she can see ambition there, he’s probably thinking about the glamour of foreign travel, she bets that he’s never been abroad – unless you count Newcastle. ‘Good work. We need to get fingerprints taken and maybe some photos – did Jock ever bring the camera back after his stag night?’

‘Dunno, Sarge but – there’s something really important about the car... ’

Baines waits but the radio remains silent. ‘Well, spit it out.’

‘It’s... it’s full of blood. And... I think we found an eyeball.’

‘Holy fuck!’ He throws the phone back into its holder on the dashboard. In a single movement he slides into the car and slams the door closed. Patty leaps forward and grabs the open window. ‘Can I come?’ she asks hopefully

‘No, move!’ he yells and throws the car into first gear, pulling away as quickly as possible. The wheels squeal. Patty steps back as he grinds the accelerator down as fast and as furiously as possible. The car shoots off like a rocket.

‘An eye!’ She stands there for some time, watching the car turn into a dust-ball and then the cloud settles back into the road until there is nothing to show what had happened. With a short whistle she turns back towards the pub. Past it, fanning out across the peaks, a few miles off, she can see the bank of policemen moving slowly toward her, checking every inch of ground for Mark Radix.

Three

The sky is so big, it envelops her. Purple, blue and black as far as the eye can see with discs of orange and gold spinning in the darkness, millions of miles in the distance. Lighting her way is the big fat moon – gorged on the rays of the sun it shimmers like a disco ball. Midday at midnight. She can almost make out the greens in the trees, see the yellow of the corn.

‘Bloody get back here,’ he calls out, the whisky slur is lessened now, but still there.

She’s on her stomach, serpentine deep into the meadow, following the path the moon sketches out for her.

‘Come back. Come back,’ he calls.

‘Daddy didn’t mean it,’ her mum shouts. It echoes all around her, bouncing in the woods from tree to tree, up into the sky and down again off the face of the moon. Her mother’s words sound hollow. She wonders – not for the first time – if her mum is really her mum, or did a pod fall from the sky and absorb her. Take away her kind and loving mum and leave this thing that does not keep her safe. Her parents head into the meadow where the corn is as high as an elephant’s eye. They are getting closer, she needs to move, to crawl again and—

‘There she is,’ he booms like Ahab spotting the whale.

She is up and running, the corn stalks grab at her as she races forward.

‘I see her,’ the pod mummy shouts.

Patty flies, her heart beating faster and faster – she is scared, she wants to escape them, to keep going until she—

‘Agh.’ A corn stalk trips her, she hits the earth and rolls, her ankle flames as if it has been burnt. She lies there on her back, the moon fills her vision, then it is blotted out by his craggy angry face. She rolls on to her stomach, tries to scramble away but he grabs her leg and pulls her.

‘Stop this stupid—’ he shouts and tugs. Her nails break as she is dragged backwards, she feels skin shear away on her chin and earth slides into her clothes, small stones bite at her, fill her hair and force their way up her dress and tear at her thighs. Something lights up by her face just for a second, a glow-worm. She wants to touch it, reaches...

‘Come on!’ He pulls again, hard – she feels blood bubble through the torn skin on her palms.

‘Leave me alone,’ she screams at him. He pulls up his hand to slap her.

The palm hits the glass.

‘What!’ She is awake. Her throat is raw, sweat running off her entire body like a waterfall – the inside of her little car is stifling. She is wearing just a T-shirt and knickers. She had a sheet – where the fuck is it? She tries to pull the hem of her T-shirt down as far as she can to cover her.

‘Half-naked in a car on a dirt road behind a pub – that isn’t safe,’ Jim shouts in her head.

‘I’m sorry!’ Did she say that out loud, damn?

‘I didn’t mean to scare you.’ A voice calls through the glass.

‘Who?’

‘I didn’t.’ A face comes into focus. ‘I just wanted...’ It is Jen, the barmaid.

Patty opens the door, the sheet falls out. ‘Could you pass me that?’

‘Yes, of course.’ Jen bends down and picks up the sheet and hands it back to Patty who wraps it around herself.

‘I’m usually more professional than this,’ she jokes.

‘That’s debatable.’ Jim, Davie Tate and Jack Coleman all say in her head.

‘I’ll...’ Jen turns around and gives her some privacy. There is a spill of light from the interior of the car, enough to dress by. Patty finds yesterday’s skirt and steps into it. Then she closes the car door and throws them both back into the darkness. It is pitch. Slowly Patty’s eyes adjust and she can see a million pinpricks of light in the sky like sequins glinting in the night. There are pencil strokes of light, far away, out in the peaks, like shooting stars falling to earth. But they are torchlight – men still hunting for Mark Radix.

‘Thank you,’ Patty tells Jen’s back.

The young woman turns. ‘You’re a journalist, aren’t you?’

‘Patty. Patty Lancing, I’m with the *Daily Mirror*.’ She holds out her hand. Jen isn’t sure what to do, she just looks at it. ‘How can I help?’

‘I...’ Jen starts but everything is stuck and twisted in her head. Instead she looks out at the moving lights far off. She speaks softly, ‘They’re hunting the Ugly Man.’

‘Mark Radix?’

Jen laughs. ‘Don’t hear him called that much round here. Only the doctor’s wife says his name – to everyone else he’s Ugly Man.’

‘And to Sally?’

Jen looks scared. ‘Can I ’ave a cigarette?’ she asks.

‘Yes, of course, I...’ Patty replies. They are in the car so she opens the door and finds them in the yellow light. She pulls two from the packet and hands one and a lighter to Jen, who takes it and puts the cigarette to her lips. With shaking fingers she brings the flame up to light it. She takes a long hard drag on the cigarette. The tip glows an angry red in the darkness, it looks like a sun gone super nova for a second, then dies away. Jen hands the lighter back to Patty to light her own.

‘What did you want to tell me?’ Patty asks softly.

Jen doesn’t respond, just watches the torchlights move across the valley as the police continue their search. Patty waits for a while, hoping Jen will start talking, but she doesn’t. She seems lost in the dark.

‘You were friends – you and Sally?’ There is no reply. ‘Can you tell me about her?’ Patty asks gently.

The young woman sighs. It is hard to tell in the dark but Patty thinks she sees a glistening tear slide from the corner of her eye and sail south. ‘She were going to London. That was Sally.’ She proclaims it like a rehearsed speech, or something that had been repeated so many times it had become lore. Maybe it was something she planned to tell her grandchildren one day – the story of her exotic friend who went to London and became famous. A story she would now never tell.

‘When? Soon? Had she a ticket?’

Jen sniggers a little like a child caught in a lie. ‘When she could. She thought a few months... still needed more money. Soon though, she almost had it... ’ There is a long pause. ‘She were in a band. She were the singer – pretty good.’ Jen continues, staring out into the

night. ‘There was talk of ’em doing festivals, maybe even Glastonbury... but they split up.’ She sighs. ‘Over her. The band were two brothers and they both wanted her. They had a fight – she was beautiful.’

‘And she didn’t want either of them?’

‘She were far better than anyone from round here. Everyone is too—’ She frowns, clearly looking for the right word. ‘—pro-vin-shal.’ She smiles, seems proud at the demonstration of her vocabulary.

‘She wanted the bright lights of a big city?’

Jen nods. ‘She saved everything – she was always getting tips and having men buy her drinks. Then, instead of taking the drink she charged the money and drank water – it were supposed to be vodka. She took the money out of the till later. She were building up a nest-egg cos London is expensive, you know. She didn’t wanna go there and six months later come back with her tail between her legs. You know?’

Patty nods, she knows exactly.

‘Was Sally flirty?’

‘Not... oh bloody hell. What do you.... not in that way, she didn’t... ’ her face flushes with anger and she throws the end of the cigarette down and walks off.

‘No I didn’t mean... Jen, come on, talk to me. Tell me about Sally – I know there was nothing improper.’ Jen walks a few yards and slows. Patty can see she is dying to talk – needs to get things off of her chest.

‘She weren’t no prossie – it weren’t nothing like that. She just smiled, she was friendly. The regulars loved her. They brought her drinks, there were nothing else – I don’t care what anyone says.’

Patty can imagine how irresistible she was to Barry and the lads. ‘But what about Ra... the Ugly Man?’

Jen stops and turns, her eyes wild. Patty thinks for a second she has seen him lumbering out of the darkness towards them. Then her face crumbles and she looks like a little girl – like Dani after a bad dream. Patty walks to her and opens her arms. Jen collapses into them and Patty hugs her waif-like body.

‘She looked after me... she were my friend,’ that is all the young woman says before the tears come. Patty manoeuvres her back a little and the two of them sit on the hard earth and lean against the car. Patty strokes the young woman’s hair and feels a vibration in her chest as Jen begins to hum to herself – a song she seems to know but she can’t make out the words. Patty remembers that when she was a child, if she ever felt afraid, then she would hum herself a happy tune and it would make everything feel better – blot out her father’s drunken yelling, and her mum’s tears. There, under the canopy of stars, the two women sit together and hum a little tune. After a while Patty feels the young woman cease her song and become still.

‘Jen?’ She whispers softly. ‘Jen.’

‘We worked alternate nights,’ the barmaid says a little sleepily. ‘All except Saturday, when it were both of us. When it were just me, he sat and drank his pint – he were quiet. When it were Sal, he watched her like a hawk all night. It freaked her out sometimes. She

asked him once outright. “What is your fuckin’ problem?” she shouted, in the middle of the pub.’

‘What did he say?’ Patty asks.

‘It were one of the few times I ever heard him speak. He said: “You look like her.”’

‘Who?’

‘Dunno. That was all he said.’

‘When was that?’

‘Few months back, maybe six – not sure. But that night he were hanging around after we closed up. Waiting for her. Walk her home – that’s what he said. She was fucking scared of what he might do, she said no and called the landlord. He came and walked her home. That Ugly Man were scary.’ She shivers.

‘Did he try anything – I mean before he... ’

‘He didn’t hurt her – not before... ’ her shoulders begin to shake.

‘Don’t worry, take it slowly,’ Patty strokes her hair once more.

‘After that he did keep to himself, but I saw him watching her sometimes and once...’

‘What?’

Jen wrinkles her forehead. ‘Well, I thought he was sketching her. I tried to see but he covered it up.’ The two of them are quiet for a while. Patty offers another cigarette and Jen accepts. Her hand still shakes as she lights it.

‘What about this last week or two. Had there been any trouble – had he shown any extra interest in her?’

‘Well...’ she pauses. ‘Two days before it...’ she takes a deep breath.

‘What happened, Jen?’

Jen looks up into Patty’s face. Her face hardens – the eyes dance with a cold inner light. ‘Do I get any money?’

‘I’m sorry?’ Patty pulls her arms from around her, feeling goose bumps spread up her spine.

Jen twists slightly and pushes herself up to standing. ‘For the in-for-mashon.’ Jen says slowly and deliberately. ‘I’ve seen papers giving out rewards and such.’

Patty stands, lacing her arms in front of her chest. ‘I can talk to my editor – though I have to say, Jen, that—’

‘The stranger.’ She blurts out and then waits.

‘Stranger?’

‘There were a stranger in the pub.’

‘When was this?’

‘The Sunday night, two nights before he killed her.’

Patty thinks for a second. Jen kicks at the ground, raising a small dust cloud that rises between them. ‘And why is this worth money?’

‘The stranger sat at the bar. He came in early...’

‘Hang on. Were you working?’ Patty asks.

‘No. Not that night but I came in at closing time to get me money for the week and Sal told me all about it. She were so buzzy, said she’d finally ’ave enough to get to London real soon. She even had a vodka to celebrate, and paid for it.’

‘What had happened?’

‘She said there was a stranger in the bar that night, tall and handsome, she said. They talked, he brought her a drink and he said to her – “This place has hardly changed from when I was a kid.”’

‘Go on.’ Patty says intrigued, wondering where this will go.

‘What about my money?’

Patty sighs, ‘So far, Jen, it isn’t really worth anything – a stranger who visited as a child.’

‘He didn’t just visit, he said he lived ’ere. And when the Ugly Man came in later they spoke.’

Patty feels the hairs on her arms stand up, fizzing. ‘About what? What was said.’

‘I dunno exactly... Sally just said they spoke, only for a minute.’

‘I’m sorry Jen but—’

‘He called him Mark, the stranger called him Mark Radix. At first the Ugly Man said he weren’t no Mark Radix. Then, when the stranger left, Ugly Man went out behind him. He never came back.’

Patty hugs her arms around herself – a chill catching in her chest and rattling around in there like dice in a cup. ‘Is that everything?’ she asks.

‘No. Sally followed them out. She said something happened.’

‘‘What?’’

‘I... I don’t exactly know.’

‘Oh, Jen.’ Patty’s annoyance slips out even though she tried to hold it back. ‘This is worth nothing.’

‘Sal said she saw something that would make her a lot of money.’

‘How?’

‘She said the stranger had a car, a big black expensive one with foreign number plates. France. She said he dressed fancy, said he was rich.’

‘I don’t...’

‘Sal watched them. She said something happened between the two of ’em and it would give her enough money to get out of this place.’

‘But what did she see?’

‘She saw the Ugly Man knock the stranger down and put him into the boot of his car. Then drive him off.’

‘Oh.’ Patty feels the adrenalin start to pump. ‘That might be worth something.’

Four

Friday 2 July 1976

Morning breaks at 5.07 a.m. She does not welcome it, she hasn't had nearly enough sleep and all her joints crunch. She feels like a dry old sponge. She gets out of her car – swearing she will not spend another night in it – and walks around to the front of the inn. It won't be open for hours but yesterday she noticed a tap for dog water. She turns it on and uses her hands as a cup. The water is cold and reviving. She drinks as much as she can and sprinkles it on to her face and arms. Even this early the sun dries her in moments. It is going to be another scorcher.

She digs around in her pocket and finds the little map. It is folded very small. She opens it and examines the route. Jen had drawn it for her – what? Three hours ago. God! Patty's stomach rumbles but she knows she won't find breakfast for quite some time. The first stop on her map is Thaxton's Pond. No time like the present. She heads off.

The pond is in a pretty pathetic state. She can see from the silt mark that it was normally four times as wide and so much deeper. In the centre is a willow tree, it must be a beautiful spot when it isn't dried up and has a car in it that has been covered in branches. There is a rope cordoning the pond off with a big sign that reads: *police stay away*. It is hand-written in a child-like script and the lack of punctuation makes it hard to understand.

Patty ducks under the rope and walks closer to the car. Hard earth stretches almost all the way to the back of the car. When it starts to look a little softer she stops, she knows enough not to leave footprints, that would contaminate the evidence. She is close enough that

she can see the back of the car. A blanket has been placed over the number plate. Damn. She walks around until she finds a long thin branch – then she goes fishing. If Jack Coleman could see her trying to hook the blanket off of the number plate, she doubted he would be pleased. He would tell her to talk to the sergeant – but the police would talk to him while looking at his face and not his chest. So she fishes. It takes about 20 attempts but finally... eureka. She notes down the registration number and then throws the branch a long way from the car and heads back to the centre of Little Longstone.

She has to wait until 8 a.m. before she can get to a phone. There is a brewery delivery to the inn and the landlord comes out to supervise. He lets Patty in to use the phone and agrees to sell her breakfast. Bacon, eggs and fried toast. It is heavenly. The newsroom takes the car registration and tells her to call back later for the results. A good morning so far. She has a coffee and plans the rest of her day.

‘Can I help you?’ A voice calls out but Patty can’t tell where it’s coming from, it seems to merely float in air. Before her is a gravel path leading to a rather impressive cottage that would not have looked out of place in a Hammer film. She looks up to see if she can see anyone in the windows – there is no one, not even a woman in black.

‘I hope so,’ she begins, calling out into the air. ‘I’m looking for...’ she pauses, she can’t say: the old doctor’s wife, can she, but that was all Jen told her.

‘I’m round the back – trying to save some lives,’ the voice replies.

‘Oh.’ Patty walks around the house and sees a woman on her hands and knees stabbing at the hard earth with some kind of long fork. Nearby a hosepipe bubbles away.

‘Banned, of course – hoses. I hope you won’t tell on me.’

‘No, no of course not. Your secret is safe with me.’

The woman stands. She is tall and thin like a willow with long waving grey hair that she has loosely tied into a ponytail. She is probably eighty years old but seems to have the flexibility and energy of a much younger woman. Just being in her presence makes Patty feel tired and slovenly.

‘Lillian King.’ She holds out a strong, rather calloused hand.

‘Patricia Lancing. Patty.’ They shake hands.

‘You’re a journalist, aren’t you – *Daily Mirror*?’ She smiles.

Patty pulls back slightly. ‘Clairvoyant or master detective?’

Lillian King chuckles delightedly. ‘Nothing nearly so exciting, my dear – just a curator of local gossip. There’s no way to escape it, and you are the local celebrity du jour.’

‘Alongside Mark Radix.’

Patty is amazed at Lillian King’s reaction to his name. Jen seemed petrified by it, as did all the regulars in the pub, and yet Lillian’s face softens. ‘Yes, poor poor Mark.’ For a few seconds she seems lost in the haze of a memory and then her eyes re-focus on Patty. ‘Please, won’t you come inside?’ She points the way and Patty steps along the path into the house. She is immediately struck by the coolness of the house as she steps over the threshold. The floors are slate and the ceilings low with heavy, dark-wood beams – the windows are small and the glass in them seems to slope, thicker at the bottom as if it is slowly draining down with gravity. Lillian King points to a chair at the heavy wooden table by the Aga and Patty sits while two glasses of elderflower cordial are poured.

‘Cake?’ Lillian King asks. ‘It’s homemade.’

Patty gets the distinct impression that to say no will cause great offence. ‘Lovely, thanks.’

She wants to ask if there are walnuts in it as she is a little allergic to them but doesn’t. She can live with a swollen tongue as a trade for some information.

Lillian King places a fruit cake on the table, and lies two plates and a cake slice next to it. ‘This just won first prize from the WI,’ she says with pride.

Patty forces a smile, she misses home suddenly. The countryside is far scarier than the city. Patty opens her bag and pulls out her notepad, this is business after all. ‘You spoke about Mark Radix as if you had a real fondness for him, is that true? Nobody I have spoken to so far has a good word to say about him. And no one has addressed him as Mark. They have all called him...’ she breaks off.

Lillian King’s face spasms with distaste. ‘Small minds.’

‘You’ve known Mark Radix a long time?’ Patty asks.

Lillian King smiles and cuts two slices of the cake, which she puts on to the delicate porcelain plates. She places one before Patty, who can see large chunks of walnut. ‘Lovely,’ she tells her host with a big smile, all the while hoping she can get away with just a bite or two. The older woman smiles and places two small forks on the table as she sits opposite her.

‘I have known Mark since his birth. My husband brought him into the world and, it sounds silly but there is a part of me that.... we were not blessed with our own children.’

‘I heard a story about his birth—’

‘The nurse was scared to death?’ she asks with an eyebrow arched.

‘Well, yes.’ Patty nods.

‘Idiotic gossips.’ She looks angry for a moment. ‘I heard the same story weeks after he was born. Of course I corrected them, told them all that he was born at home and it was my husband who delivered him – the cottage hospital wasn’t even open back then. But do they listen to the truth?’ She breaks off a small piece of cake and pops it into her mouth. With a forced smile, Patty follows suit. ‘No, people like that stick to their petty superstitions and old-fashioned outlook. They turn this poor boy’s misfortune into a tale of terror. Make him a bogeyman to scare the kids – behave yourself or you’ll grow up like Mark Radix – the Ugly Man. So the story stuck and the truth faded.’ She shakes her head sadly. ‘When I die there will be no one to recall the truth – there will just be the stories, the lies about him. Poor Mark.’

There is quiet in the room. Patty is a little thrown by this, it contradicts everything she knows – thought she knew – about this man.

‘So, what is the truth about his birth?’

Lillian King sighs and hangs her head a little. ‘Mark’s birth was a traumatic one. For him and for everyone who was there. It was a home birth, most were then, and my husband was the doctor in attendance. He was very experienced. He was very good in extracting children who were twisted or stuck. There are many you know – they can do more with them now – but back then it was so often a death penalty. But Anton was good. Mark was wedged in the birth canal – both lives were at risk and so Anton used all his experience to deliver the baby. Possibly it would have been better if he was a little less conscientious.’ Her eyes mist over as the decades fall away. ‘He used forceps to deliver Mark. Both lives were saved but there was damage to the infant’s facial nerves...’

‘Due to the forceps?’

‘It was never clear,’ she takes a deep breath. ‘But Mark was born with a severe facial palsy that could not be corrected.’

‘Can I... Mrs King. Do you have any doubt that Mark Radix killed Sally Matthews?’

‘Absolutely. Mark Radix did not kill anyone.’

The two women set off. Patty still feels a little flummoxed by Lillian King’s declaration. She had told her that there were numerous eyewitnesses who have sworn that Mark Radix killed the barmaid. Lillian King quietly listened to Patty’s words and at the end, asked Patty to go for a walk with her.

‘Where?’

‘Please come.’

There is a moment of hesitation before Patty agrees. And they walk. It is hot and Patty starts to drag after only a couple of minutes, forcing the older woman to slow down. The air is so hot that Patty feels as if her throat is burning. After about ten minutes Lillian King begins to talk. ‘Let me tell you the truth about Mark Radix.’ She seems not to address Patty, but to be talking to herself in some far-off time – seeking permission from her younger self, maybe. ‘Let me tell you something other than the lies and half-remembered truths of superstitious fools.’ She stops and bends down at the side of the pathway. She picks a small bunch of wild flowers and then stands again and strides on. ‘He was born at the start of the war. An evil time, the war took many of our young men and kept them for ever, but it didn’t reach into Little Longstone itself, not like in the cities. We had no bombs, no rationing – well, maybe petrol.’ She pauses, memories playing in her mind. ‘His parents were nice, his father had a good job on the estate – he was older, maybe fifteen years older than the girl he

married. She was a bit silly, I thought, but a nice girl all the same. The pregnancy was normal, until the birth itself and... well the child was rotated in the womb. My husband had to pull Mark out. My impression was that a lot of force was used at the end,' she throws Patty a brittle half-smile. She seems glad to finally talk about it. 'The right side of his face was... it looked as if it had collapsed in on itself. It was as if two faces were put together – one perfectly normal and the other...'

'I have seen a photo.' Patty says, remembering the melted eye. 'Was it painful for him. His face?'

'No, no he seemed... it was the parents. The pain was theirs. The father refused to hold him, the mother...' tears fill the older woman's eyes. 'We know so much more now, about depression, the baby blues... but then,' she sighs. 'We forced a mother just to get on with it. I think the poor thing had a breakdown. Then of course the father left for war and never came back. It was a truly terrible introduction to life for Mark, and a terrible tragedy for a mother and her son.' There is silence between the two women for a while. Patty remembers the joy she felt when Dani was born... but soon after there came the feelings of being stuck with her – stuck in a rut – soon after the birth. Baby blues? Were they, and did she still have them?

They walk a little further until they reach an old church with a small graveyard around it. There is a small, plain gate, which Lillian King opens and ushers Patty inside before following herself. Down a small twisting path they reach a large black marble stone.

Anton King

1896—1974

He always helped others

‘I thought the graveyard was in the village, behind the inn.’

‘Oh, that was full more than a century ago. No, this is where we bury our dead now. Though most people seem to want to be cremated these days – but then you have no place to go and sit with them do you?’

‘Good morning Anton,’ his wife pats his headstone affectionately. ‘Another scorching day I am afraid. The garden is suffering but it’ll pull through. I have brought someone for us to talk to, she thinks I’m mad.’

‘No, not mad,’ Patty says, though she actually does think this is pretty crazy.

‘She wants us to tell her about poor Mark Radix. I think it’s all right, she seems quite sympathetic to the poor boy. I have told her about the birth and its difficulties. I know you always felt so bad about that.’ She reaches out and touches the stone, as if she were caressing her husband’s face. Patty watches her. Is this grief? Is this how a lifetime of love ends? She can imagine Jim sitting on her gravestone and talking to her every day, stroking the stone as if he were caressing her cheek. He would tend to her final resting place, wouldn’t he, keep it beautiful and loved. The other way around, if Jim were to die first? No. No she would not sit with his rotting corpse and talk to him as if he were still there. More likely, is that she would have him cremated and shoved in a box in the attic. If anyone is to keep his memory alive it will be Dani. Dead is dead, Patty thinks. Let it go and move on. She watches as the widow plucks at desiccated leaves and scrabbles in the dry dirt at the foot of the grave.

‘You said you did not believe he killed Sally Matthews. Why?’ Patty asks

Lillian King half turns from the stone and looks up at Patty. ‘Do you have children?’

‘One. A girl. Eight.’ Patty isn’t used to being the one answering questions.

‘How very modern of you. You have kept your own name, I expect.’ A note of resentment creeps into her voice.

‘I...’ Patty hesitates. ‘No, I took my husband’s name – Lancing is his.’

The widow smiles and then begins to talk as she works on plucking weeds from Anton’s grave. ‘He was a sweet boy. Shy of course, very conscious of his face and he was bullied terribly. He was lonely. He came to visit us often. We were like his grandparents – no, actually we were not like his grandparents. His biological grandparents wanted nothing to do with him. On his father’s side they blamed Mark’s birth for their son going to war, and on his mother’s side – well, they were just plain simple cretins, superstitious bumpkins. His grandmother actually told me she thought the boy may be the Antichrist,’ she snorts at the memory of it. ‘He would not have hurt a fly.’

Patty recalls the way Sergeant Baines turned green as he remembered Sally’s face. ‘So you say,’ Patty says. ‘But I still have a room full of people who saw him beat a woman to death with a hammer three nights ago.’

The older woman looks up sharply. ‘Yes. Yes, I was forgetting for a moment.’ Patty thinks she sees a tear. ‘Our door was always open for him and for many years he came to see us a great deal – when life became too much for him, or he just wanted to rest with people who did not judge or stare at him as if he were a freak.’

‘Mrs King, why do you think he didn’t kill—’

‘I think when we brutalise a man, sometimes he has no option but to become brutal.’ The tear falls and strikes the black marble. The first rain in days. ‘I do not mean to deceive you, Mrs Lancing.’ Patty hates being called Mrs Lancing, but she bites her tongue. ‘I do not think anyone else killed the poor girl. It is more that...’ the tears begin to flow more freely

now, spiralling down through the air and on to the black marble. ‘The man who bears the name of Mark Radix is not the boy we knew. Mark Radix died a long time ago, his spirit – soul, if you will – is gone. What was left inside that corrupted body was heartless, some might say wicked. I would probably just say damaged.’

‘What happened to that sweet boy who used to visit you?’ Patty asks.

Lillian King sighs. ‘He survived a mother who didn’t love him. And a father who ran away to war. He even survived the bullies who shouted names and threw stones at him... but what he couldn’t survive was falling in love.’

‘Oh, it’s that old cliché,’ Jim-in-her-head begins. ‘Ugly boy meets beautiful girl, beautiful girl rejects ugly boy, ugly boy grows into Ugly Man and beats woman to death.’

‘Shut up Jim.’ She tells him.

‘When Mark was eight years old, another boy came to Little Longstone. His name was Glenn, Glenn Eastern. I think Mark may have seen him as some sort of an angel.’ Patty curls her mouth. ‘You see, Glenn was an extraordinary boy who accepted Mark as a human being and not a monster. Glenn had his own very deep problems and the two of them... well, they became everything to each other. I think having Glenn in his life was the best thing that could have happened to Mark but later, years later, someone joined them and... ’

‘Who?’

‘Her name was Jessica.’

‘What happened? Where are Jessica and Glenn?’

‘Gone. Long gone.’ There are more tears now as the past rolls across Lillian King’s face – she is back there, in the midst of the tragedy. ‘The girl, Jessica, lies just over there.’

She points to an oak tree that dominates a corner of the cemetery. ‘It was a stupid stupid accident. And Glenn... he was taken away after she died. After what he did...’ a cloud crosses her face. Patty cannot tell if it is anger, sadness or disgust. ‘There was such an uproar from the village – he was lucky to escape.’ She pauses. Patty can almost see the poor young man reflected in the widow’s eyes – he is so real to her at this moment. ‘He never returned. In those early days Mark pined for him, he was like a dog that had lost his owner. He was overwhelmed by the loss and didn’t understand... but then nobody did, I still don’t.’ She pauses, lost in thought. ‘I think that was the worst thing that could have happened to Mark, to lose them both.’

‘What was the trag—’

‘Please, I... ’ Lillian King suddenly looks so old and raw with the pain of remembering. ‘There will be records you can look at. I will talk to you again, perhaps tomorrow. I feel so...’

‘How can I find Glenn, are you in touch is he—’

Lillian King seems to turn grey, like a statue. ‘Dead. He’s dead. We heard he was dead, maybe six months later.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know the full facts. I heard it was suicide, while he was held in an asylum.’

Patty feels herself deflate. ‘Can you at least tell me when all this happened?’

‘It was another awfully hot summer. 1958. It was even hotter than this I think. Mark would have been about 15 or so. I...’ She looks as if she has drifted off for a second, her face

so tired. With supreme effort she drags her attention back to Patty. 'Her gravestone – it will have a date.' Then her head sags and she drifts away again.

'Thank you.' Patty tells her, and she rises as quietly as she can, turning away to search for the girl's grave – but the old woman starts to talk again, though not really to Patty; perhaps to the memory of herself all those years ago. Patty listens.

'Afterwards... that was when Mark was put into those awful places. Where they shocked him, poisoned his mind. The sweetness was taken away, cut away and... I hate to think what was left. I saw him sometimes after that, he was polite but he never came to visit us again. Not again.' She leans against her husband and rocks gently. Patty nods to her and leaves her alone with her husband. She heads in the direction of the great oak. She has a gravestone to find.

Five

The research team at the paper have come up with the goods by the time she gets back to the Packhorse Inn. It is lunchtime. She is pretty clear that she doesn't eat liver, heart, kidneys, tongue or anything made with congealed blood. That only leaves fish and chips. She orders it with mushy peas and a half pint of bitter. As she waits for her meal, she considers what she will do. Burning a hole in her pocket is a name and an address, courtesy of the *Daily Mirror* research team. Threading through her brain are a whole series of thoughts that are starting to come together. She looks down and sees she is drumming on the table. She is excited – so excited. Across from her a blue smudge moves into her line of vision and a chair is pulled out. Sergeant Sam Baines sits down opposite her.

‘Yes, please join me, Sergeant,’ the sarcasm flies far above his head.

‘Good afternoon, Mrs Lancing.’

‘Patricia, please,’ She smiles a fake smile.

‘I wanted to catch up with you after I ran off yesterday.’

‘The bloody car, with the eyeball.’

‘Yes – the eyeball. That...’ he trails off looking a little embarrassed. ‘It turned out to be a plastic eye on a wire spring – the kind that boings out of joke glasses.’

Patty has to try hard to suppress a snort. ‘Was the blood really tomato sauce?’

‘No, no the blood was real.’ He gives her an embarrassed half-smile. ‘That was what I wanted to talk to you about. Yesterday you became privy to information we do not want to be made public, not just yet.’

‘You want me to keep quiet about the car being full of blood and the plastic eyeball.’

He smiles. ‘Yes... well the blood. The plastic eyeball isn’t really a secret, but... could you keep it under wraps until we’ve caught him.’

‘You want to gag the free press?’

‘Not gag, just... you know...’

She would quite enjoy watching him squirm, but time is pressing. ‘I understand,’ she tells him. ‘I will agree to keep this information out of the public domain – but quid pro quo.’ He looks at her blankly. ‘I want what you have on the car owner and how you think this is tied to the murder of Sally Matthews.’

Just then her lunch arrives and is placed on the table in front of her.

‘Any sauces or condiments?’ the landlord asks.

‘No,’ says Patty.

‘Tartare, ketchup, vinegar and HP,’ Baines replies. ‘And an extra fork.’ The landlord mutters something unflattering about the policeman and walks off to get them.

‘This is my lunch.’

‘I know,’ Baines says, grabbing a chip.

The landlord dumps a wicker basket full of condiments and sauces on the table, plus the extra fork. They both start to eat – racing to see who can get most.

‘We don’t have much, right this second, on the car,’ he talks while he chews a mouth full of chips and mushy peas. ‘Interpol are being slow and...’ He throws her a smile that seems both a little pathetic and apologetic at the same time. She imagines that they sent

Interpol the wrong licence number, or sent it to a bakery in Budapest or just lost it altogether. 'On the blood, it seems to be human and belongs to two people. We took multiple fingerprints from the interior and I can reveal...' he does a drum roll on the table with his index fingers '... Mark Radix's prints are on the steering wheel. He did drive that car.'

'And you have an ID on the owner?'

'Nope.' He squirms slightly.

'The other prints?'

'Em... Nope.'

'At least the blood type?'

'Nope. Should have all that soon, though. You could come to the station and wait for it with me.'

Patty shivers at the thought of what a *wait* with Sergeant Baines could mean.

'Sorry, I need to get on the road. But I will keep all this hush hush and not print anything until Mark Radix is apprehended,' she smiles and thinks 'That will be by me, because you don't have the address of the car owner or have any idea who he is. I know both.'

An hour later she is ready to leave. Her clothes are on the backseat in a disorganised pile. The passenger seat is loaded with maps, a bottle of milk and a sandwich – cheese, ham and piccalilli – which the landlord kindly made for her. She slides into the driving seat and grabs the map book. She takes a pen and circles the place she is heading for, then she waves Little Longstone adios – she hopes never to be back – and begins to drive. This time there is no

Bryan Ferry, she has too much to think about. It is only a little over forty miles but the roads are not much more than tracks to begin with and poorly signposted. She drives slowly and carefully along a B road that should be a Z. She is heading to Manchester.

‘P-p-prestwich, actually.’ Gregory had told her with a little stammer that she could never be sure was there all the time or only when he talked to women. ‘It’s in G-G-Greater Manchester. It’s an old town, you know c-c-cobbles and flint – old church, tr-tr-traditional English.’

‘Thanks. Is there a phone listing for the address?’

‘N-n-not that I can see, could be ex-directory. I can f-f-ferret about a bit more.’

‘Please, Gregory, I would really appreciate it.’

‘Okay. C-c-call back later, if I’m going home I’ll leave it with J-J-Jack.’

‘Great. Thanks.’

She must remember to call the newsroom when she gets to Prestwich and check in with Gregory – he’s the best answers man she has ever worked with and she finds his shyness a welcome change to the other cocksure cretins she has to work with. She drives. For an hour the road is all twists and hairpin bends. She takes it slowly at first, until the road widens and loses its unpredictability. As she gets closer to Manchester itself she sees huge swathes of countryside flattened and covered in plastic signs for new-build estates, affordable housing for families to feed the city’s need for workers. Patty is thrilled by the modernisation of the world. It is all changing.

She remembers that morning, when Lillian King had asked her if she had taken her husband’s name. It had been a pretty simple question – at least on the surface. Yet for Patty it

had a deeper resonance – are you one of us, or one of them, the woman had seemed to ask her. Are you someone of tradition or do you trample down the past in the name of progress? Had that really been Lillian King’s question? Patty had told the plain fact – she had taken Jim’s name on their wedding day, she had become Patricia Lancing. Yet it had not been out of duty or respect for her husband, nor from a sense of tradition either. She took his name to make a break with her own family. It was a *fuck you* to her parents, who were not invited to the wedding. She had spat in the face of tradition she had wanted to tear the past down – she had said none of that to Lillian King.

She pulls up outside the address Gregory gave her, it is a large rambling sixteenth-century cottage just outside Prestwich. It probably would have sat in acres of land when it was built, but over the centuries small parcels have been sold off until all that remains is what amounts merely to a garden area – albeit a large one – on each side, and a wooded area at the back. Once it may have been the house of minor gentry, now it equated to something like a moderately successful investment banker. Times change.

Of course, Gregory had found the address through the vehicle registration of the abandoned car. The police had been right – it had foreign plates and was a rental car. It had been booked in the south of France two weeks before and driven up to Dieppe where it had come over on the car ferry. The rental firm had two addresses on their books, the first was just outside of Nice and the second... she was standing in front of it. And the name associated with the booking? Andrew DeLamater. Who the hell was Andrew DeLamater, and why was a car he hired full of blood and an plastic eyeball?

Patty starts the engine again and drives a little way beyond the house and stops. She parks and then walks back to the house. The approach is a wide gravel drive with large metal

gates at the entrance. From where she stands Patty can see up the path all the way to the house. It looks as if it has been deserted for some time. At least one window looks broken, probably local kids. It is the kind of house that there could be stories about – terrible tales of headless corpses and children disappearing into the maw of the front door never to be seen again. She can imagine the kids daring each other to run and ring the doorbell or touch the wall – to see if they return alive!

She shakes the gates and they rattle but do not part. She turns to walk away and then sees something that stops her dead. There is a footprint, half obscured by the gates. It has been made by a large shoe, size eleven or larger, and it is red, the print is red. Blood red. She kneels down and reaches to the gravel – stretching as far as she can – and snatches a piece of gravel from the centre of the footprint. As she does she hears Jack Coleman tut-tut-tutting in her head. ‘That’s evidence, Lancing. You can’t do that,’ he tells her. She shrugs. ‘Sorry, police,’ she thinks as she scratches her nail into the red. It is not paint or rust or... it’s dried blood. Her heart is beating a samba. She can imagine the scene: a car pulls up and someone gets out to open the gate with a key. The gate opens and he gets back in the car and drives through, then the gate closes behind him and... of course, that is why the print is under the gate. So, the blood-filled car left from here and was ditched in Little Longstone. Why ditched? Because of the blood? And is Mark Radix here or did he run... is he still out on the peaks? There are more questions than answers. She looks down the gravel drive to the house. That may be where she will find answers, it could be where she finds Andrew DeLamater or Mark Radix. She may also discover where all the blood came from. The day is boiling hot, but Patty Lancing feels ice cold.

Six

Prestwich is not a great town for buying supplies for the secret surveillance of a house. The high street yielded almost nothing, just a small old-fashioned toy shop. Patty thought for a while that she would have to buy a pirate telescope and a torch with pictures of the Clangers on, but when she turned it on in the shop, the torch sounded like the Soup Dragon talking to the Clangers and she couldn't turn it off. The shop owner came to help and took the batteries out.

‘Do you have children?’ The shop owner asked with eyes that really said: ‘Are you too stupid to turn off a kids’ toy?’

‘Are there any spy toys? I want something for a grown-up. My grandfather, he was a spy in the first world war and wants to relive it..’

The shop owner did a double take, but was friendly enough to tell her about a junk shop down a side street and there she discovered a treasure chest of military ephemera. She found a pair of heavy metal binoculars that, according to the tag, had been used in the desert to beat Rommell. Single-handedly, probably. There was also a long torch and a balaclava that smelled of old dog. She bought all three. Then she went to a bakery and they made her a cheese and tomato sandwich on bread that was still warm from the oven. Then, at a little grocery, she bought a large bottle of lemonade, some honey and a newspaper. The front page was all about concern over the hostages in Entebbe. Normally she would have devoured the news but today she barely give the paper a glance. She has not bought the newspaper for reading. Then she finds a chemist's where she buys toilet paper, a pack of plasters and a bottle of aspirin. ‘Be prepared,’ she thinks. She takes her swag and walks back to the house.

On the opposite side of the road from the house, there is a bank that rises quite steeply. She climbs it, until she is level with the second floor. There she settles down and makes a camp. The binoculars are heavy to hold up so she sits with her knees bent high in front of her and rests them on top. It means she has to keep taking breaks but she feels like a proper spy. Now what she needs to do is work out what the hell she is doing this for.

As she sits there. It is just after 5 p.m. The sun has begun its long low descent, the worst of the heat is over but it won't get dark until 10 p.m. What is she doing? Is she going to go to the house?

'Don't be stupid,' she hears Jim-in-her-head say. 'Think about Dani.'

'I do, I think about her all the time but...' the but hangs in the air. This is the story of a lifetime. 'Think about it, Jim,' she tells him. The husband in her head. 'Radix drove to Little Longthorne in a car rented by Andrew DeLamater. He was covered in blood, he left the car swimming in it. He dumps the car and goes into the pub and batters poor Sally Matthews to death. Then what?'

'I have no idea, Sherlock.'

'He runs. The police are probably right, he hides in the peaks.'

'But they don't know about this house. Why wouldn't he come back here?'

'Because the dead body of Andrew DeLamater is inside it and he expects it to be found soon. If he was coming back here he would have driven back in the car, but he didn't.'

'All speculation. You can't go in there.'

'Jim, there is a murdered man in there. At least one,' she suddenly imagines the DeLamater family in the house. 'I must go in.'

‘Pat—’

‘Jim! Don’t worry, I am going to watch the house until it gets dark. If I see any sign of someone being in there I’ll call the police. If I see nothing by 11 p.m. then I am going inside.’

‘What! Are you a cat burglar now?’

Deep down she thinks she would make a good criminal. It is why she bought the honey and newspaper. She read somewhere that if she spreads honey on the window, then sticks the newspaper to it and waits a minute, that she can knock the glass through silently. The broken glass sticks to the newspaper because of the honey and you can pull it away. Maybe golden syrup would be better – but honey will do the job.

‘Christ, Patty, it’s crazy.’ Jim-in-her-head tells her. ‘I love you.’

‘I know. Don’t worry. At a bit before 11 p.m. I’ll walk to the pub and call the office. see what Gregory has dug up. I’ll tell him what I’m doing. I will tell him that if I don’t call back in three hours he should call the police.’

‘Call them now, please.’

‘I’m an investigative crime journa—’

‘You’re a wife and mother. My wife. Dani’s mother.’ The voice in her head is so insistent that her stomach cramps. She remembers watching Dani run away from her yesterday morning, through the school gates and gone. Gone.

‘Be quiet now, Jim,’ she tells him and his voice fades from her.

There is nothing, absolutely nothing except a stunning firework sunset that should leave shepherds all over Britain feeling delighted. The house is deserted. There is no movement in the windows. No lights go on as dusk settles, no TV flickers. Nothing.

She waits until 10.30 and then, she packs up her little camp and using her torch, she half slides, half stumbles down the bank to the road and walks to the pub. The last orders bell is ringing when she gets there. She orders a half of bitter and asks for the telephone. Both requests get raised eyebrows from the landlord, but he pulls the drink and takes the phone from under the bar and offers it to her. She dials the number.

‘*Daily Mirror* fact desk.’ A voice she does not know.

‘It’s Patty Lancing, is Gregory there?’

‘No. He left a while ago.’

‘Oh.’

‘Did you say Patty? There’s a message for you. Oh where is...’ She can hear the man sliding papers all over the desk, searching for something that’s probably written on the back of a cigarette packet. ‘Here.’ Finally it is found. Patty feels her stomach clench. ‘Okay, if I can read his scrawl...’ there is a pause during which Patty thinks she’ll explode. ‘It reads: Andrew DeLamater is an assumed name, changed by deed poll in 1971. Real name Glenn Eastern.’

‘But he’s dead,’ she says in little more than a whisper.

‘Anything else I can help with?’

‘No, no.’ She says and the phone goes dead.

‘What about the police?’ Jim asks.

‘I don’t...’ she looks up into the face of the landlord.

‘Are you okay?’ he asks. She can sense that she looks awful. Over his shoulder she can see a part of her face reflected alongside a toucan and a pint of Guinness. She is ghost pale.

‘Can I have a whisky?’

She doesn’t drink the half of bitter, instead she downs the Scotch in one. It makes her shudder. She pays for both drinks and then goes out into the street. ‘Glenn Eastern is dead. Who the hell is...’ she starts to walk back. Back to the house.

‘Surely this changes everything. Call the police,’ Jim-in-her-head asks with a voice that could be described as pleading.

‘I... I don’t know.’

The pull of the house is even bigger than before... and yet. Does she put herself in the firing line when she has a child and... Davie Tait would. John Pilger does... Who is she? A wife, a mother, a crime reporter... or what? She reaches her car. Probably she should get inside and... she doesn’t hear him until it is too late. She is too full of the uncertainty of what to do to see the shadows change – an even darker black move towards her and – the hand is over her mouth. A powerful scent, it immediately makes her feel light-headed. ‘Christ.’ She kicks out, feels her foot connect and there is a grunt of... her second kick is already weaker and the third non-existent. She twists and... a monster has her. Teeth like a shark, eye melted like a burst runny egg and... Darkness kisses her to sleep.

[#]

Mark Radix keeps the chloroform-soaked rag over her mouth until he is sure she is fully under, and then he lifts her into his arms and heads over to the house. To Glenn's house.

Seven

It is dark. No, black, not merely dark. All light has been sucked from the universe. She feels like she has been turned inside out, like the worst hangover multiplied by a thousand. She took LSD at college once with a group of friends. They all had ‘amazing’ trips. One said they grew claws and tunnelled into the earth to a land where dinosaurs still existed, another evolved into a creature that could fly, and soared so high she touched the face of God. A third swam with the dolphins and mated with one, producing a hyper-intelligent and gentle mermaid race. Patty had curled into a corner and screamed that he was beating her, that he would kill her. She screamed for seven hours – the last two were silent as she had wrecked her voice box. That had been the worst she ever felt, until now. Now she feels like her stomach is on the outside of her body and has been dragged over gravel.

It takes some time for her to realise she is lying on stone. She slowly reaches out her fingers and traces them along the floor. Large flagstones, like you might find in an old house. In a cellar. Images return to her, the shark teeth and the eye... Mark Radix. She rolls on to all fours. She is not restrained. She feels her body. Her jacket is gone, her shoes too and belt. She stretches out her hand, feeling in front of her, slowly crawling forward. She reaches some steps, also stone, gets to her knees and then up on her feet. Using her hands to feel the way she climbs up them. She counts each step – there are nine before she gets to a door. Heavy, oak and... unlocked.

Her stomach is broiling, acid sloshing about. She might be sick. Breathe. She could turn back, go and lie down again and wait for—

‘No!’ She must go on. She opens...

‘If this were a horror film...’ Jim-in-her-head starts to say.

‘Not helping,’ she tells him, and turns the handle. A sliver of light builds until it burns her eyes. She opens the door fully with a haunted house creak.

‘No need to be scared. This is just fine,’ she whispers to herself. Fine. Fine. The door opens into another cellar. There is a single bare bulb, the walls are brick, everything smells of damp and mould – it is overpowering. She steps on to it, the brick bites at her bare feet. She hobbles forward, can see two doors. They look identical.

‘Eeny meany...’ Jim says. She picks one and pulls at the handle. It is stiff but gives. Inside the room is dark and...

‘Is someone there – please, is someone there?’ A voice calls out. Patty freezes, her first instinct is to turn and run but the voice sounds so pathetic and needy.

‘Please, please... is that you, Mark? Please let us go, you—’

‘No. No it isn’t him.’

‘Oh God, oh God, are you here to rescue me, are you the police? Have you found my wife, please tell me my wife and kids are safe. He hasn’t killed them, has he, he said he was going to – he said he was going to do awful awful things to them. Please tell me they’re okay. Please.’

‘I...’ What can she say? She can’t see anybody in the room, it is just shadows. The light from the cellar barely reaches its fingers into the room. Patty slides her hand along the wall to the right of the door and finds a switch. She steels herself and... click.

She can see him clearly in the harsh pool of light. He is tethered to the wall. He has a sack over his head, blood pools around him mixed with urine and excrement. Patty is stuck, she can't move – she wants to scream.

‘Please, please – talk to me. TALK TO ME!’ He shouts, his voice full of pain.

‘Patty... I... I’m Patty.’ She stumbles through the doorway and into the room. The stench of it attacks her nose and eyes – they both begin to stream.

He starts to weep. ‘Are they safe? Are my family safe?’

‘I don’t know,’ she tells him. ‘Are you Glenn Eastern?’

‘Who?’ He says but his voice cracks and gives him away.

‘Andrew DeLamater, you were born Glenn Eastern.’

Under the hood he starts to cry. ‘Glenn is dead, he died such a long time ago. I’m Andrew. I’m Andrew.’

‘Andrew,’ she steps into the room, closer to him but she does not want to get close to the blood. ‘Why are you here? Why has he done this, how long has he left you here?’

‘He has my kids, my two girls. He said he’s make me watch when he, he... ’

‘Run!’ her head screams. ‘Patty, get out of there,’ Jim pleads, but she can’t. She takes a step – a baby step – one step at a time. She moves toward the blood, toward the story. She forces her legs to move – to get to him. She steps into his blood and piss, feels the squelch underfoot. He tries to move but she can see one of his legs is twisted, looks broken. She starts to gag – ‘Oh fuck!’ She grips the hood that is over his head, she unties the string around it and pulls. ‘Oh my God.’ His face is a mass of blood and soft raw flesh – he has taken a

massive beating. His cheekbones look broken, two or three teeth shattered. Then his eyes open. Two beautiful deep-blue eyes, in a mass of red and brown meat.

‘I will get you out of here,’ she says to him, though it sounds like a hollow boast.

‘It doesn’t matter about me. What about my family, are they safe?’

‘I don’t know, I’m not the police.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Patty, I’m Patty. I’m a journalist. I went to Little Longstone when Sally Matthews was killed. Mark Radix killed her.’

‘Wha... I don’t know her.’ Panic creeps into his voice. ‘I have no idea who—’

‘The barmaid at the Packhorse Inn.’

‘He killed her? I talked to her... Jesus... are the police coming?’

‘I...’ she starts but sees his eyes widen in fear and his mouth opens. ‘NO!’ he yells.

The warning comes too late. She senses movement behind her but as she spins he catches her – there is a gleam of metal, a shotgun pointed at her chest.

‘I thought you would be out for hours yet.’ His voice is sibilant, like a snake, and raw from years of heavy and hard drinking.

‘Mark, please stop this. Let my family—’

‘You are coming with me.’ Mark spits, his arm shoots out and grabs Patty, pulling her to him. She tries to twist out of his grasp but slips and falls into the blood and piss.

‘MARK!’

‘Shut the fuck up, Glenn.’

‘Glenn’s dead... dead.’ The beaten man cries stinging tears down his crushed cheeks.

Mark Radix grabs Patty’s ankle and pulls her back through the blood to the door and out through it. She tries to rise but he kicks at her. Pushing her down and back into the open part of the cellar. All Glenn Eastern can see, through the doorway, is Mark Radix raise the shotgun and...

‘No, Mark!’ he screams.

The shotgun fires. Glenn sees the barrels erupt fire, imagines the shot striking Patty’s body and ripping her apart. The sound echoes off the stone and his eardrums scream with the echoing horror of it. ‘Why, Mark, why all this death? The journalist... the barmaid...’

‘And your cunt of a wife.’ Mark flips the switch on the wall and the room is plunged into darkness. Glenn Eastern screams.

Gregory Cullenson gets to his desk at a little after 8 a.m. He thinks he might be coming down with something, a summer cold maybe. He looks on his desk to see if there is something from last night. Nothing.

‘Did Patty Lancing call?’ he asks the room in general.

‘You bloody fancy that cold bitch,’ someone calls out.

‘No, I-I-I don’t. B-b-but... did she call.’

There are shakes of the head all round. He thinks for a second, he should go and talk to Jack Coleman. Then the phone rings and someone wants everything he has on Mossad, it

seems like they are going to storm the plane, and Patty Lancing is erased from his mind.
Though for the record, he really does fancy her.

Eight

Saturday July 3rd 1976

She comes to, feeling better than she did the last time. She is lying on carpet, there is a cushion under her head, she tries to move but... ‘Ouch.’ Her arm is tied or shackled behind her. Pins and needles dart across it. She flexes her hand and shifts off that shoulder. Her body feels like it has been crushed... she smells of blood, piss and shit. Jesus.

‘You’re awake.’ Hands slide under her arms and pull her up into a sitting position. She opens her eyes and looks directly into the face of Mark Radix. The Ugly Man. His head is egg-shaped, his hair sparse and fine like a newborn. His chin spoons up and twists, his jaw is like a roller coaster. Patty can see that his teeth don’t meet. Chewing must be a real problem, she thinks. He has small sharp teeth and no upper lip so that he looks like a shark. His left eye is normal and a deep blue, but his right looks as if it has been melted, like his face is wax. It droops far below the level of the other and is like a runny egg. She assumes he is blind in it. His nose is twisted like the worst boxer’s nose, and his ears are tiny, like a rodent’s. She looks into his good eye. He reminds her of a child murderer she interviewed once. His eyes had been dead... so too are Mark Radix’s. He is ugly, hideous, in fact. A face only a mother could love... except his hadn’t.

‘Hungry?’ he asks.

She nods and he walks off. She is handcuffed to a radiator. She is in some kind of sitting room or lounge. The furniture is modern except for the bookcases, which look very old. They do not hold many books – mostly they house photographs of a happy family. Andrew DeLamater and his wife and two children. Girls. From somewhere there is the

unmistakable smell of bacon frying. About fifteen minutes later Mark Radix returns with a plate of bacon sandwiches.

‘Do you need the toilet?’ he asks her.

‘Please.’

He bends forwards and unlocks the cuff, then grabs her arm and twists it behind her back, but not so far it hurts, and walks her to the toilet.

‘There’s no window,’ he tells her when they get there. ‘I shan’t let you lock the door, but I won’t watch.’

She peels her bloody trousers down and sits on the loo. She sobs.

Afterwards, he leads her back to the lounge but pushes a chair against the radiator so she can sit fairly comfortably. ‘Are you right handed?’ he asks. She nods and he handcuffs her to the radiator again, though this time it is her left wrist.

‘You realise the police—’

‘Shut up.’ He passes her a bacon sandwich. They eat together. It is delicious.

‘Good bacon?’ He asks, waiting for her to nod, which she does. ‘I killed it meself. Cured it too.’

‘The ketchup?’

‘Heinz.’

They eat.

When they have finished he removes the plates and disappears once again, returning a few minutes later with two cups of tea. He puts them down and then sits in an armchair close by and sips his tea. ‘This is surreal,’ Patty thinks.

‘What do you want of me?’ Patty finally asks, her voice as level as she can make it.

‘I want you to listen while I tell you a story.’

‘Your story?’

‘It ain’t fucking *Jackanory*. That’s what you want, isn’t it, to tell your readers my story?’

She hesitates, thinking of Jim and Dani, of Glenn Eastern and his wife who may be dead and of Sally Matthews who certainly is. ‘Yes,’ Patty tells him. From somewhere she hears Jim sigh. Shame licks at her. ‘Tell me your story, Mark.’

‘Okay then.’ He smiles a smile that makes her want to scream. He sees the horror flood her eyes and his hand shoots across his mouth, embarrassed. ‘They always told me not to smile, not to laugh.’

‘Who?’

‘Everyone. Me mum, teachers, boss...’

‘Can I have my bag?’

‘Why?’

‘My pad and pen, I will need to make notes.’

He leaves the room for a second and comes back with a dirty carrier bag. Inside are Patty’s bag and coat. He pulls them out and drops them on to the table, then opens the bag

and goes through it. Patty opens her mouth to protest, but in the end says nothing. He finds the pad and two pens. He hands them down to her.

‘I can’t write while I’m chained to this.’

‘You got your right.’

‘It’s a stretch.’

He hesitates, looking warily at her. She jiggles her hand, showing how restrictive the handcuff is. He grunts and releases her.

‘Thank you.’

He pulls the table into the centre of the room, she moves the chair to sit at it, her legs are wobbly and they throb. She sits at the table and opens the pad, smoothing out the first page and jotting three words at the top of the page. *The Ugly Man*. ‘Okay. So where do we start?’ she asks him.

‘How about January 1950. I was eight years old. That was when I met Glenn.’

Part Two

Nine

The Ugly Man

As told to Patricia Lancing by Mark Radix

First draft notes

In 1950 Mark Radix was eight years old. His father was dead and his mother might as well have been for all the attention and care she gave him. He had no other family – at least none that wanted to see him. His grandparents would not allow him in their houses and any uncles, aunts and cousins had made it clear they blamed all the troubles to befall his parents on his birth. The young Mark Radix was seen as a curse upon his family and a blight on the community. The only people who showed him any kindness were the doctor and his wife, Anton and Lillian King. Their house was the only place of sanctuary for the boy and he would spend most evenings there, reading about the world he would never see, in their amazing library. This couple were the only family or friend he had – but that would all change in January 1950 when another child, another outsider, joined Mark's school.

Glenn Eastern was not originally from the area around Little Longstone. He was born in Manchester but his father, Peter, moved them both to the rural area after the death of Glenn's mother, Mary. She had killed herself, soon after his eighth birthday. She was thirty-two years old and she had terminal cancer. She hadn't told Glenn, but he knew something was wrong. He saw the flash of pain like summer lightning run through her, and saw how slow she would become sometimes, holding her breath and counting to a hundred before she could move, counting the pain away.

She killed herself on Christmas Day 1949. She had knitted jumpers for both her son and husband, she made an excellent Christmas dinner, especially given that so many things were still rationed. They had all listened to the radio that afternoon and in the early evening played games. She had seemed happy. At bedtime she had sat with Glenn at his bedside, telling him how she loved him. She hadn't sat with him until he fell asleep since he was a baby. The day had tired him out and he fell quickly asleep. She kissed his head and then left the house. Her husband had fallen asleep on the sofa – too full of food and booze. She walked to the canal and drowned herself. The police fished her out a few hours later. She left a note on the bedside table at home. She said she wanted to leave them after a fun day – not one of pain and misery. She chose the canal as she did not want her son to see her body.

She finished the note: 'Peter, please tell Glenn about my illness. Please tell him that I love him but I can't bear the thought of him seeing me waste away – to turn to dust before his eyes. Please try and explain why I have to do this. I am sorry. I love you both.'

Peter Eastern kept the note but did not show it to his son for many years. In the months after her death he told Glenn nothing about her illness. He thought it unsuitable for a child to know of such things. He did not stop to think about how ignorance and guilt could twist his son's life, he merely told the boy that she had jumped in the canal and drowned. The inference, at least to Glenn, was clear: she had killed herself rather than spend another moment with them, her true killers.

There was a funeral, sparsely attended. A cousin Glenn had never met before and two fat aunts, who squeezed him until he thought he might pass out. They all said she was good – a saint. Afterwards there were a few rounds of tasteless sandwiches and barley water that was so watered down it was more like a homeopathic remedy. When everyone was gone, Glenn and his father folded up the chairs and put them away and walked home in silence as the light

was dying in the sky. That night his father sat at the kitchen table and dived into a bottle of Scotch. There would be many more over the next few days.

When he finally did surface from the bottom of the bottle he found he could not look his son in the eye – he could not bear to see the bed he had shared with his wife. So, they packed up all they had and left, almost like thieves in the night, and looked for somewhere else to live, a place that father and son could start again. They chose Little Longstone.

Glenn started at the local school – a two-room schoolhouse that served a patchwork of children, with widely differing ages, abilities and interests, run by two teachers who were counting the days until retirement. Glenn had been a star at his previous school, already a very confident reader and very good at maths he was already far more advanced than any of the older children – except one. Mark Radix. But the death of Glenn’s mother had drained him of any interest in his studies. Instead he would sit in the classroom and fade away as if he were a ghost. He would float up through the roof and into the sky, then drift in the air looking for his mother’s spirit. Hoping to find her and... what?

Mark had noticed Glenn the first time he saw him. It was the haunted look he had, not just the new-boy-at-school-nerve, but something deeper. Something darker. Something that made Mark hope – hope for the first time in his life that he might have found a friend. So he watched Glenn those first few days and wondered what it was, that fear that flitted through the new boy’s eyes. It was the start of the next week that he found out.

‘His mum killed ’erself.’

Glenn also heard the whispers, but whenever he looked round, fist raised to make them take that back, all he saw were the children of the damned, staring at him like he was a freak. He never knew which one of them had actually spoken, they all seemed to morph together, like an evil gestalt. How many were there: 20, 30? Even the teachers stared at him

with buggy eyes. There was no sympathy for the boy, not in 1950. The shadow of the war hung over them all, making everyone look ahead – not back. Now was a time to rebuild society, to think of achieving great things and letting the horrors of the past wash away. No one wanted to know of more death – especially when it was a death at the hands of the worst weakness: the cowardice of suicide. Glenn Eastern was a pariah, and that was what drew Mark Radix’s attention.

And it was mutual. Glenn was drawn to the school’s other outsider, though he did not know how to talk to him, as Mark Radix kept to the shadows, barely ever raising his head, not making eye contact. Keeping his face secret, which made him all the more fascinating to Glenn.

Generally, at the end of the school day, as soon as the school bell rang, Mark sprinted for the door and was gone. He knew that if he was slow they would throw things at him on the way home. Sometimes it was water bombs – other times it was stones and rocks, big enough to draw blood. Once they were big enough to break bones. If they caught up with him it could be worse. Punches, Chinese-burns and they would spit at him – on him, Mark tried his hardest to make sure the bigger boys never caught up with him.

Glenn watched Mark dart to the door every day as soon as the bell sounded. He made a plan. One day after school, a Friday, Glenn was just as quick and caught up with Mark on the walk home, they lived close to each other. Glenn’s dad had rented a small cottage that butted on to the Tannone Estate where Mark lived. One of the bullies was lying in wait. He had pockets full of stones.

‘Monster, ugly fucking monster...’ he threw the stones.

Glenn appeared from nowhere and levelled a pellet gun at the boy and fired twice. The boy screamed and blood poured from his cheek. He ran off crying. Glenn fell alongside Mark and they walked together, side by side, without speaking. Mark didn’t thank him – at

least, not in words but they both felt a sense of something shared, and it felt good. They walked home together, again in silence, on Monday afternoon, and it soon became as regular as clockwork. By the end of that week they were grunting a kind of goodbye as they reached the point to separate, and in week two a few words crossed the chasm between them.

If they had not become friends Glenn, eventually, would have drifted back into the current of normal life. It was the grief that kept him from the belly of the mainstream. But that was not to be. Instead, these two boys found each other, and as they finally talked, they discovered they had much in common: they both loved Sherlock Holmes, Sexton Blake and the mysterious Dr Fu Manchu. Mark introduced Glenn to Greyfriars School and they would sit together happily day after day, making up their own stories about their heroes, or listening to the radio where Jet Morgan flew through space and Holmes and Watson battled injustice. Then something happened that bonded them even deeper than before. On 14 April 1950 the first edition of the *Eagle* comic was released starring Dan Dare. For both boys it was like it was written just for them. Glenn was Dan Dare and Mark was Digby, forever his batman and loyal friend. The summer holidays arrived soon after and the two boys spent the entire six weeks together – almost like co-joined twins. Mark started to sleep over at Glenn's house. Mark's mother was happy – she didn't have to look at her son's face. Glenn's father didn't care – he didn't have to talk to his son. So the two boys played and created a world where they were truly gods.

When school started again in September 1950, Mark found the bullying was at an end. He had Glenn now, as a protector, but also his friendship made Mark bolder. He walked around with his head held high, he no longer kept his face turned to the ground. He and Glenn took up boxing after school and Mark was good at it. As he was getting older he was getting stronger too. He was happy. At last he was happy. And that was how the rest of their lives at primary school went.

As secondary school loomed, they feared they might be split up. Both boys were smart enough to reach grammar school but Glenn's dad had money and was willing to spend it. Mark's mother had none, and even if she had it would not be spent upon her son. Those few months before school places were decided, Mark worked like a demon. He knew he had to get exceptional results in his exams to stay with Glenn. He had the motivation, he loved Glenn Eastern with a fire. So, in September 1952, they both started at John the Martyr grammar school. It was an hour travel there and back but Glenn's dad bought him a brand-new bike.

'Top of the range,' his dad told him proudly. Glenn sold it, and with the money bought two much cheaper bikes so he and Mark could cycle to school together.

The two boys did well, they were always one and two in the class rankings, Mark number one and Glenn number two. Mark was never bullied there, and in fact there was some strangely twisted form of awe from some of the kids who looked at his face as a badge of courage.

Ten

Mark Radix stops talking, he stares out of the window, lost in memory. It's fine by Patty as she needs to catch up with him, her pen flashes along the paper creating strange shorthand hieroglyphs. It takes her five minutes to finish the story he has told her so far, all that time the Ugly Man is silent. She watches him and is amazed to notice that his face seems to have changed a little, softened. She remembers that one of the pub regulars said that the Ugly Man couldn't read or write, yet that is obviously false. How could they see him every night and not know who he was? Have no idea of the man behind the mask?

'Mark,' she says softly.

He turns his head to her, his eyes are swollen and watery – for a second she sees the boy who was so good at school, who loved his friend with all his heart. Then he blinks and the cold, hard eyes are back. There is no spark of humanity now.

'I am not sure if you're telling me the truth.' Her voice wavers as she tries to keep it level.

His lips curl higher, sharp teeth glint. 'I'm no bloody liar.'

'I don't see the...' she hesitates not knowing how to phrase this. What can she say, *I don't look at you and see any intelligence and sensitivity?* How do you say that? 'You describe a boy who... I cannot see that in you.'

His eyes flare for a second with what looks like absolute hatred, and then that fades.

Patty takes a deep breath, 'Lillian King—'

'You talked to the doctor's wife?'

Patty nods.

His face darkens and creases. ‘Did she...’ he begins.

‘She took me to the cemetery. First we visited Anton King’s grave. Then she showed me the way to Jessica’s.’

He lets out a raspy breath and sags a little, looking like a very old man. ‘Jessica,’ he breathes.

‘Jessica Caxton. You tend her grave don’t you?’ Patty asks him with a voice that is soft like butter.

‘There’s no one else,’ he whispers.

‘You loved her?’

‘I...’ he remembers.

Secondary school was a revelation for Mark. It wasn’t without the odd funny look, and it wasn’t totally devoid of cruel insults, but he had Glenn to defend him, and he had a growing sense of self-worth. He was staying at Glenn’s house every weekend and most evenings during the week. They spent their holidays together and loved the long summer break most of all. They were inseparable – until the summer they turned 16.

The summer break itself was an amazing time of adventure, and brought them closer than ever. They hitchhiked to Scotland and camped in the woods and moors and even on beaches. Mark’s mother probably didn’t even realise her son was away; Peter Eastern was concerned – but he trusted his son and was fond of the ugly friend who was always around. For the trip he brought a present, mostly for Glenn but it was something he knew they would

share. A standard eight-millimetre movie camera. Peter Eastern presented his gift to the pair of them on the eve of their big trip. Alongside the camera were five rolls of film.

‘Oh, Dad, it’s wonderful.’ Glenn hugged him, and then the boys ran off to pack and talk about the films they will make.

They left Peter Eastern alone in the kitchen. Ten minutes later he still felt his son’s arms around him – it was the first hug they had shared in so many years. The man had forgotten what genuine affection had felt like. He missed it... missed the love of his son and, most importantly, of his wife. He stood there in the kitchen and wept like he has never wept before. For the son he has almost lost and the woman he loved, who left this earth so horribly. He stood there crying into the sink full of dishes, washing and rewashing a pan until his hands were like prunes. Then he opened a bottle of Scotch and washed the sadness away.

It is the beginning of their summer holiday. While they wait for cars to stop and give them rides, the two boys talk films and plan shots. Mark will be the director and cameraman; Glenn will be the star. They know just what they will film when they reach Scotland. Both of them have just read the most amazing book, *Dr No*. Glenn will be James Bond.

‘Look to the camera, smile and then dive into the water. Action.’ Mark calls.

Glenn strips off his shirt. He is only 15, almost 16 but already his torso and arms are beginning to tighten and become defined. He smiles his killer smile and arcs into the water. Mark sees all this through the eyepiece... he pans down to the water, can see the churning waves where his friend has cut through the surface. He counts, one Mississippi, two Mississippi... he keeps the camera running while he waits for his friend to slice back through the water into frame. This will be a great shot.

Eighteen Mississippi, nineteen Mississippi... his finger still on the trigger... counting, counting... all the way to thirty Mississippi... The motor slows and whirls to a close as he

relaxes his finger. He cannot tear his eye from the viewfinder... looking through the lens is not real, not real life. He starts to feel cold in his bones. Finally...

‘GLENN!’ He screams and then he is ripping at his own shirt and pulling at his belt. He strips in a second, takes as big a lung full of air as he can and dives. He is not a great swimmer, not confident, but today he is brave and determined. He powers down through the water, which is cloudy with silt. In the middle of the churning cloud he catches sight of a white flash of arm, whipping and thrashing, trying desperately to hack through the weeds that entangle him. But as he watches Mark sees the arm lose energy, the fight ebbing away, leaking hope and life. Mark sees there is no time left for Glenn as he makes one last pathetic attempt to pull himself free and...

Mark dives forward to tear at the clinging tendrils and grab Glenn around the waist and pull... pull... pull him away from the weeds and up through the water. Mark drags him on to the bank, rolls him on to his side and hits his back hard again and again. With all his strength he forces his arm into his friend’s lower back and pushes up and up to drive the water out... ‘Please , please, please,’ he moans and green and black water pours from Glenn’s mouth and nose, mucus and snot, cherry dark syrup and then hacking coughs... thank God, alive. Mark is so happy, so proud, so... he hugs his friend tight, tight, tight... because he is alive, because he is so happy. He kisses his cheek, because he can... he is so excited. He loves his friend, and he has saved his life. That is a bond that will link them together for ever. For ever.

After the idyll of their six weeks together, touring Scotland, they returned to Little Longstone to start school again. They were as close as friends could be... but all that is about to change, because of Jessica Caxton.

The Caxton family had arrived in the village while the boys were away. James Caxton was a young lawyer who had recently started a new practice in Matlock. He moved to Little Longstone with his wife and two children, with another on the way. The oldest child was sixteen years old – Jessica Caxton. A donation from her father’s new venture, as well as her own abilities, allows her to start at Mark and Glenn’s school where she immediately catches every boy’s eye. She is funny and has a sophistication that none of the other girls have. She quickly steals Glenn’s heart.

At first there are looks, stolen glances, smiles. Then one day Glenn is outside school waiting for her and they ride home together. For the first time in almost eight years, Mark Radix has to cycle home alone. The next day Mark makes sure to stick like glue to Glenn even while he waits for Jessica. So it is the three of them who travel home, even though they all know Mark is a gooseberry. But Jessica does not mind, she sees great promise in Glenn Eastern – even likes the loyalty he shows his toad-like friend. She likes his looks and his easy humour. If she had not been so lonely she would not have so quickly pounced upon him but she wants somebody special to make the transition to the countryside more palatable. For the whole of that term Mark and Jessica ride home each night with Mark tagging along behind them. In the morning Glenn is always at her gate waiting for her, and they bike together. Behind them, like a lost puppy, Mark follows.

For Mark it had been fine. He knew his limitations, and he understood what Glenn saw in Jessica and what he wanted. Mark could see how pretty she was, how funny she was. There was no real jealousy from him, as long as he could keep being with Glenn – as long as he wasn’t totally excluded. But for Glenn it was a problem. He looked upon his friend and felt his lack of love deeply. He worried that his best friend would be lonely, and believed Mark must yearn for physical contact and sex, just like he did. For Glenn it was an awful time, hormones raced around his body – he yearned to be with Jessica, desperately wanted to

taste her body – and yet when Mark was with them he felt a terrible guilt. He knew he would get what he wanted some day, but he thought Mark would forever be unfulfilled. What woman would look past that face to his heart, see the man inside? Glenn felt uncomfortable when Jessica kissed him. Guilt flattened the passion he felt for Jessica, or at least the guilt smothered it so he couldn't act upon his desires. He had no idea that Mark watched them and wished he were Jessica, that he could feel Glenn's kisses. The two boys never talked about it. Glenn continued to project these yearnings on to his friend; Mark continued to bask in the affection of these two beautiful people.

And then it all tumbled down.

It is almost Christmas. The three of them out at Meldon Point and it is close to dark. Jessica has invited Glenn to her house for Christmas Day.

'But Mark comes to my place, he always does.' Glenn looks to his friend to back him up and Mark nods. It's true, they always spent Christmas afternoon together. Mark knows Jessica's invitation does not extend to him.

'Well, I want to spend the day with my boyfriend.' Jessica says harshly. 'Just my boyfriend not his...' she does not finish, but Mark feels tears swell.

Glenn's first reaction is to look to his friend.

'It's okay.' Mark tells him, trying not to show his disappointment. 'I'll come on Boxing Day.'

Glenn feels as if he will twist himself in two, looking from Jessica to Mark and back again. 'He's my friend, he comes first,' Glenn tells her sadly.

Her face falls, she looks so heartbroken. 'But I want you to be with me. I want you to come over on Christmas Eve, spend it with me and my family, so they get to know you and really like you, like I do Glenn... I love you.' She hadn't meant to say any of this. She had

not told him she loved him, never intended the first time to be like this – more in anger than love, but she is sixteen, and she wants Glenn to herself. It isn't much to ask is it?

Glenn shakes his head – it is hurting – he feels the pressure from them both break over him in a wave of expectation. 'No. No. It isn't just you and me. There's three of us.' Glenn looks to Mark. Three of them. A holy trinity of love.

'I really don't...' Mark begins, feeling anxious and embarrassed – but also elated. Glenn isn't throwing him over, isn't choosing her instead of him.

'Glenn. I just told you I love you and...'

Glenn screws up his face, this is all too much. He wants to tell her that he loves her too – more than that he wants to show her he loves her, wants her but... 'And Jessica, I...' Her face lights up. 'I do love you too,' he tells her, 'but if you love me then you must also love my friend.'

'What?' she says, shocked.

Mark takes a step back, this is nothing like what he wants. His stomach starts to broil.

'Kiss him if you want me.' Glenn tells her.

The three friends stand like statues, not knowing what to do.

'Come on,' Glenn, breaks the silence. 'You two kiss. For me.'

Jessica's lip quivers, but she holds it in. Instead she walks over to Mark and grabs him roughly. Pulls his head up from where he stares at the ground and kisses him, angrily – her teeth cutting into his lip. Then she takes his hand and roughly pushes it down to her jeans... 'Want to feel me up too? Is that it? Was there always some horrible plan?' Her face is red with anger.

Mark feels like he wants to cry, to curl up and die. He pulls his hand away and runs from her. He trips and goes sprawling, his eyes brim with tears and snot starts to stream. He feels so humiliated.

‘I thought you loved me’ she screams at Glenn.

He looks shocked, uncomprehending. He had not meant for this to blow up, he was just so guilty. He doesn’t understand what has happened. He doesn’t understand.

‘You bloody....’ She is almost blind with tears. She hates him, hates them both and wants to go... she grabs her bike and is off – pedalling wildly away from them, veering along the path back to town.

‘I hate you, Glenn Eastern’ she screams as she goes. ‘I hate you.’ She sobs. ‘I wish you were dead.’

The two friends are left in the near dark. They don’t speak but pick up their bikes and slowly walk towards home. Suddenly Glenn stops and drops his bike by the side of the path and runs into the woods. Mark watches him go, wants to run after him and hold him – ‘There there, it’s okay. I love you. I love you.’ That is what he wants to tell his friend, but he cannot. Instead he watches Glenn fade into the gloom of the encroaching night. He stands there for the longest time, afraid to go home. Afraid that the good times are over, that he has lost his only friend in the world; the only person he loves... and he does love Glenn Eastern. Sometimes as a best friend, sometimes as a brother and sometimes... he feels an emotion he does not really understand. Tears come and go and finally, with numb fingers, he mounts his bike and rides slowly into the dark, feeling sick to his stomach. It was all changing, he knew deep down that nothing would be the same after this.

He cycles over the brow of the hill and down – as he gets closer to home he starts to feel like something is very wrong. He can see his own house from some way off and wonders why all the lights are on, in every room. He stops at the gate, normally his arrival would not elicit a reaction, but tonight the front door opens... it isn’t his mother. It’s a policeman, who waves. Why is he waving? Time seems to distort, slow, like moving through treacle. The

policeman's mouth opens, Jessica's mouth forces itself on to his. Her teeth butt hard, he tastes blood – the policeman speaks.

‘You're a friend of Jessica Caxton?’ He can only nod slowly. ‘She was hit, knocked from her bike. She's dead...’

‘I wish you were dead,’ echoes through the slow moving treacle of history.

‘I am sorry.’ Patty tells the distraught man who seems to have become a boy before her eyes. ‘It wasn't your fault you—’

‘What do you know? What do you know about anything?’ He picks up his empty mug and smashes it into the fireplace. Shards of pottery explode around them, Patty feels a piece sting her cheek. She touches her face and feels the bead of blood there. Mark Radix looks at her, his eyes wide. ‘I am sorry. I... I get angry.’

‘It's okay, Patty tells him though she doesn't really mean it. Fucking men and their anger.

‘I... Jessica...’ he cannot finish. He is still trapped in the past. Remembering the night that she died. The night his life was turned inside out. The night...

Eleven

His first thought is to get to Glenn, wrap his arms around him, beg forgiveness. He turns to ride away but the policeman grabs at him. They take his bike – there are questions to be answered. ‘I need to see Glenn,’ he tells them.

‘Why?’ The policeman asks.

‘She loved him.’ Mark tells him, and an eyebrow is raised.

‘Why she was riding at such a speed? Was she upset? Had you done something to her? Is that a bloody lip you have, how did you get it?’

There are lots of questions. Mark does not know what to say to him. Not the truth.

‘I want to see Glenn Eastern, he’s my friend.’

The policeman shakes a weary head. ‘That’ll have to wait until tomorrow, and not until we have taken statements from you both. Separately. Now let’s sit down and chat, I have more questions for you.’

Mark answers all their questions and is patient. It takes three hours, at the end of which he is free to go. There is no one there for him. So he walks home alone. Once there he climbs the stairs, brushes his teeth, gets into bed and lies there. He waits while the sounds in the street die away... then waits some more before pulling back the covers and retracing his steps back down the stairs and out of the house.

He wears a coat, gloves, scarf and hat over his pyjamas. The night has become very cold. He can see his breath, a miasma of pearls that speed from his mouth to curl in the darkness before fading away – then another cloud appears. Mark moves quietly, sticking to the shadows as he heads to Glenn’s house. It isn’t far. There are very few streetlights and most houses are dark. The only building that has any light is the community hall, which is at the heart of the little village. It has a couple of dim li—

Flash! Suddenly every light is on in the community hall, he moves out of the spill of light and presses into the dark on the other side of the street. Mark hears a motor from behind him and pushes himself even deeper into the shadows, slinking down so he can see the front of the building opposite. The town police car pulls up outside the hall and two men jump out leaving the doors open and the headlights shining on the front door, like spotlights illuminating a stage.

‘The body’s in the back...’ one of the policemen calls to the other. ‘There’s a walk-in cold room.’

Mark realises Jessica’s body is in there, being kept refrigerated as there is no funeral director in the village. For a moment he feels so sorry for her, for the last few hours he has not given her much thought, he has been worrying about Glenn. But now he imagines her, lying there in the cold – all alone. Alone forev—

‘AAAAAAAAAagggggghhhhhh...’ there is the sound of yelling, screaming. It’s coming from inside – but Mark can’t make out any of the words. It sounds so primitive, rage and pain, like a heart rent in two. The two policemen run forwards, just as a figure emerges from the front of the hall. Mark can’t make out what the shape might be, it flicks this way and that like smoke curling in the night.

‘Help me, you two.’ A police sergeant calls to his colleagues and they grab the smoke shape, holding it still and... Mark swallows hard recognising the twisting figure.

‘Glenn.’ He whispers, seeing his best friend held by the police. He is handcuffed behind his back, his face is screwed up with rage and pain. He is naked.

‘What the hell was he doing in there?’ one of the policeman asks.

‘It’s fucking sick,’ the sergeant tells them. ‘The Eastern kid broke in.’

Mark wants to run forward and pull the men off his friend – but he is frozen.

‘What’s he done?’ asks one.

‘He’s only taken the body out of the storage, got bollock naked and...’

‘What?’

‘He fucked ’er.’

‘The corpse?’

‘The poor dead girl, Jessica Caxton. He’s fucked the dead body.’

Mark slides to the ground, he feels sick.

‘That poor little girl. Treated like that, in death...’

‘Jessica.’ Mark whispers her name.

‘You’re making a mist—’ Glenn starts but a policeman punches him in the stomach.

‘Shut up, you dirty fuck.’

Glenn gives a primitive cry of grief and hurt and loss and... then the policemen force him into the back of the car and in seconds is gone.

‘Gone.’ Mark Radix tells Patty.

‘Lillian King told me that Glenn was taken away to an asylum.’

‘Given shock treatment.’ He says *shock treatment* like the words themselves are corrosive. Patty remembers the pub regulars telling her that Mark Radix had been hospitalised and given shock treatment himself. She shivers at the thought.

‘Lillian told me Glenn died in an asylum.’

‘Told me the same. Told me they fried his brains and cut into his head so he wasn’t Glenn any more and then he... hanged himself. They told me he hanged himself and, that it was for the best. The best.’ He curls into himself, into a kind of foetal ball.

‘Do you know what the worst thing in this world is?’ He asks after a minute or two.

‘No.’ She says, her mouth dry.

‘To hold a baby in your arms, lamb or calf, and put the bolt gun to its head. Feel it piss or shit itself, so full of fear, eyes wild looking out for its mummy... then you hold it tight and pull the trigger.’ He rocks back and forth. ‘I’ve killed so many of ’em. Don’t feel a thing, not now.’

‘He came back, didn’t he? Glenn came back.’

‘Yes.’

Twelve

It had been about ten o'clock and he had drunk seven or eight pints, a slow night for him. He was probably going to have another with a whisky chaser and then call it a night. There were very few other customers, he knew them all; had known them his entire life, but all he ever shared with them was a glare. He hates them, despises the fact that all they see is his face. They know nothing about him. Fuck 'em. He drinks, what else is there to do?

As he sits, he feels a draft as somebody enters the pub, he registers something shift in his peripheral vision, but does not turn towards the movement, why would it matter to him? Nothing matters. He lifts the glass to drain the final dregs, it's bitter and he grimaces slightly. He doesn't bother to replace the glass on the table, no point – instead he hoists himself up and walks, mostly in a straight line, to the bar.

'Same, with a chaser.' Four consecutive words. This is the most he has said in weeks. She refills his glass and pours the whisky.

The man who had entered the pub only a few minutes before, moves around the bar to stand behind him. 'Mark?'

The Ugly Man does not turn, does not recognise his own name. Nobody around here calls him by his name, not since he was a kid. He is used to 'you' or 'oi' and 'fucking monster,' not Mark, not for a long time.

'Mark Radix?' The voice quivers slightly.

He turns slowly, in his hand the glass is ready. It would be the tragic loss of a pint, but he will glass anyone if he needs to, if there is a threat. Though he would prefer to keep the pint and just head-butt the man.

'Mark?' The voice still uncertain but somehow hopeful. Mark Radix looks into the man's face... but he's nobody. Never seen him before.

‘Don’t know a Mark Radix,’ he says as he turns back to the bar and draws heavily on the pint.

‘Sorry, I...’ the stranger looks confused. Then he turns to the barmaid and orders a coffee.

‘We don’t...’ she looks flustered.

‘Of course, yes – ‘ he mumbles, ‘Half a bitter shandy please.’

She makes his drink and he takes it and sits on the other side of the pub, as far from the man he believed was Mark Radix, as he can get.

The Ugly Man downs his pint and turns toward the stranger. He is head and shoulders taller, trim and well dressed, with dark hair that is white at the temples. Mark’s stomach pitches, suddenly he knows him and almost falls – he grabs the table, swaying slightly. ‘Jesus. That’s where they attached the electrodes,’ he thinks, then whispers to himself. ‘Glenn.’

He drinks his pint slowly, waiting for Glenn to leave. Once he sees him rise he drains the pint and then knocks back the chaser. It burns as it goes down and kick-starts the heart in his chest – it had stopped beating when he recognised his oldest friend. He gives him a minute or so head start and then leaves. He catches Glenn in the road outside, just by his car.

‘Glenn.’ He calls and the man stops and turns – a smile on his face. A genuine smile.

‘Why did you pretend n—’

‘No pretence. I didn’t recognise you... twenty years.’

‘I probably look different, and...’ he does not finish.

‘You left flowers on her grave.’ It is a statement.

Glenn nods. ‘I drove through early this morning. I wanted to...’ he pauses. ‘Is it you who keeps her grave looking so nice?’

‘I go every few months.’

‘That’s nice. She would have liked th—’

‘She’s dead. Long time dead.’

‘I wanted...’

‘You didn’t, though.’

The two men stand there like two gunslingers, each of them eyeing the other.

‘My dad died,’ Glenn speaks finally. ‘Cancer. Bone rotting, took ages... he moved to Prestwitch. I’ve been staying with him. It was awful... we talked about you...’

Mark snorts.

‘I... came back just to.... I wanted to see... her.’

‘Her.’ Mark repeats, his voice low and hard.

Glenn can’t make anything out in his face. Twenty years ago he could tell exactly what his friend was thinking but now... now the face seems so alien and the eyes. Christ the darkness of his eyes make him feel nervous.

‘Her and you.’ Glenn adds.

Mark stands impassive, years of hiding himself from the world has made him a master of the frozen stare.

‘I heard they fried your brain,’ Mark spits it out. ‘I heard...’ He can’t. Can’t put it into words, instead he turns on his heel and walks away.

‘Please, Mark.’ Glenn shouts to his old friend and walks towards him, his strides quickly eating up the ground between them. He grabs Mark’s arm who spins, sees Glenn standing there in the dark and simultaneously on a glorious summer day, a ghost image of the boy superimposed on the man. He is stripped to the waist, about to dive into the pool, about to almost die, about to be saved... both fates see-saw. Life and death; love and hate. Mark Radix feels twenty years of friendless, loveless, painful life push down on him, his back bows like it could snap. His hand shoots up and grips the side of Glenn Eastern’s face and pulls

him forward. He is sixteen again, a beautiful, beautiful boy. Twenty years of pain that need not have happened if he had had the courage to do this. He pulls Glenn's mouth down to his and kisses him with tenderness, with love. With a lifetime of desire, not the rage Jessica had fed into her kiss but instead a lifetime of love. Glenn does not react for a second and Mark hopes against hope that—

‘No.’ Glenn Eastern pulls away.

‘No!’ Mark Radix roars in anger and frustration. ‘You fucked her.’ He howls. ‘Even dead you wanted her more than me.’

‘No. I never...’ Glenn cannot finish as a fist slams into his gut, dropping him like a stone. His lungs empty and straining.

Mark kicks at him, hears a rib pop like kindling in a fire. ‘You left me’ and the levee bursts, there, in that shitty piece of dead ground behind the inn, Mark Radix, the Ugly Man, wails... snot and tears streaming, flowing like a torrent, while the love of his life struggles for breath at his feet.

‘I thought you were dead, that I’d lost you.’ Mark falls to his knees and puts his arms around the fallen man. ‘Why. Why Glenn. Why did you do it? Why did you do it?’

‘It all turned to shit, we had to get away...’

‘Why... why... why didn’t you take me with you?’ He strokes his hair, wants to caress his face but Glenn rolls away.

Mark punches the ground, feels the skin on his hand scrape away. ‘They said you were a pervert, a freak. In an asylum and... and...’ Mark Radix howls, like an animal, like a madman. Like he had all those years before when he saw them take his friend away. ‘They told me they fried your head, cut out your memories... they told me you were dead... dead... they told me you topped yourself. You left me.’

He swings his fist into Glenn Eastern’s head.

Mark drags the body back to the car and opens the boot, he lifts him up and stuffs him in after he has recovered the keys from Glenn's pocket. Then he drives off.

Mark Radix finishes his narrative and leaves the room.

Patty is left alone. She wonders for a second if she could get something heavy and try to brain him as he walks back through the door.

'Don't even think it.' Jim-in-her-head warns.

She recalls what Jen had said about Sally, that she had seen something that night that would make her rich enough to get to London. It was blackmail. She was blackmailing Mark Radix. Was she threatening to tell that she saw him kidnap a man or that she saw him kiss a man? 'Silly girl,' Patty thinks.

A minute later Mark returns with two cups of tea. He puts one down in front of Patty.

'So Glenn was never hospitalised – never in an asylum.'

Radix looks at her, his eyes a little glassy. 'No. No, he told me that when we got here.'

'His dad's house?'

'Yes. Peter DeLamater... I always knew him as Eastern. An old fucking drunk. They changed their name, you see, so I wouldn't find them.'

'How did you know about the place?'

'There was a pile of letters in the glove pocket of the car. After I stuffed him in the back I didn't know what to do. I wasn't thinking. I looked through the car and found the letters and house keys. So I drove us here.'

'And his wife?'

'Oh that was lovely. When I drove up to the house they all came out, waving, so happy to see me.'

‘Him, they wanted him, not you.’

‘No kidding. The wife screamed when she saw it was me at the wheel – it was like in a horror film.’

‘So you killed—’

‘Don’t you fucking judge me. You have no right to judge me.’

Patty pulls back, she thinks he is going to hit her. But he backs away, breathing heavily.

‘I locked them up and then I got him out of the boot and chained him up downstairs.’

‘You beat him.’

‘He deserved it.’

‘Why?’ Patty asks.

‘I...’ he falters, remembering Glenn’s face, the look of horror on it when he came to and saw that he was chained.

‘Please don’t do this.’

‘They said you were dead.’ Mark Radix’s voice is so full of pain, it slides into Glenn’s heart like a knife. ‘I didn’t know.’ He tells his friend – the eight-year-old Mark who stands before him. The kid who was always afraid and alone. The child with a deformed face.

‘I am so sorry, Mark.’

‘That night they took you away. I saw you. You broke into the town hall to be with her... why?’

‘Mark... Christ they twisted everything. I just wanted to hold her, do you understand Mark? She said she loved me, we were going to make love... I just wanted to feel our skin together – nothing dirty. I loved her... God she was so beautiful. I undressed, she was just in a flimsy cotton nightdress thing. I just lifted it and held her. It wasn’t dirty... it wasn’t dirty

Mark, please believe me. The police have such ugly minds – I only wanted to say goodbye to her and tell her I was sorry. I killed her Mark, I killed her. I chose you over her, I forced her away and made her so angry that she drove into a truck. But I loved her.’

‘Why did you leave – scurry away like a rat?’

‘The town wanted to lynch me – they said I had raped her dead body. Once they did the autopsy the police apologised, they could see she was untouched, but it was too late. That kind of mud sticks, I felt so dirty, even though I had done nothing. My dad got us out.

Mark can’t stop shaking. ‘You didn’t say goodbye to me,’ he says in a tiny voice.

‘I didn’t even go home. The second the police released me – my dad had a car all ready to go. We went back to Manchester and then he got a job in France and we moved.’

‘They said you died.’

‘Maybe the police were too embarrassed to admit they almost had an innocent boy lynched.’

‘They told me you died...’

Mark remembers where he was that day, that instant he believed the universe had no Glenn Eastern in it. He remembers that a part of him died that day too. That was when his seizures began and they were so bad he had been sent for electro-shock therapy. And he had been glad, because he had wanted them to burn it out of him too. Burn out the love...

‘Please, Mark. I didn’t mean to hurt you.’

‘Why didn’t you write?’ his voice is so small. ‘I would have come to you. I would have crossed the world for you.’ He kisses him so gently on the forehead, tasting his blood. ‘I love you.’

‘Please let my wife and kids go.’

Mark Radix freezes. He chooses someone else again, never chooses Mark. With a scream he lashes out at the man/boy he loves. He punches and punches and punches like he is tenderising meat. He wants to beat the love out of them both.

Patty sees the horror of his memories reflected in Mark's eyes.

'You blame Glenn for what happened to you, and you almost beat him to death?'

'He should have died 20 years ago.'

'And his family?'

There is no answer.

'What about them?'

Mark Radix does not answer.

'I was told you were a good man.'

'By who?' he sneers.

'Lillian King. She told me you had a good heart.'

'Maybe once. That was a long time ago.'

'No, I don't believe that. She said you were always there, reading—'

'Fucking lifetime ago.'

'I think they loved you.'

'Love,' he spits. 'Fuck love.'

'No, no... listen Mark, please let Glenn go. Let his family go and I'll speak out for you.'

'NO!' He walks forward. She cowers from him, thinking he's going to strike her.

Instead he grabs the handcuff and pulls her, the chair and table back to the wall and handcuffs her to the radiator.

‘Just write my story, all of it – the truth.’ And he stands and walks away, closing the door on Patty and locking it.

Thirteen

The girl opens the front door. It is never locked, there's no need to round here. She doesn't even know if there is a key to the door, she has certainly never seen it. School has ended early, a fire alarm went off and all the kids close enough to walk home were told to go. She's pleased as it means she can go early, make a cup of tea and curl up with a book. As she walks through the front door she calls out, 'Mum.' And listens for a reply. To her surprise there is nothing.

'Mum.' She calls again and starts to climb the stairs. She thinks she hears something, it sounds like someone crying. She looks up through the slats in the banister. All she can see are motes of dust dancing in the air.

'Mum?' This time she is not as loud. She gets level with the top landing and looks through to see her bedroom door open as usual. She can see her bed at the back of the room and on it are her bears, but across from it her parents' bedroom door is closed. Their door is normally never closed. She shifts her weight to the ball of her foot. She moves quietly forward – reaches her hand out to the door handle of her parents' bedroom and starts to push it op—

Smash – it closes hard. She pulls her hand away in fright.

'Don't come in.' It sounds like her dad's voice.

'Dad?' She asks through the door. 'Are you...'

From behind the door she hears a stifled sob and whispering. A male voice urgent and a woman lower, upset...

'Can I come in?' Patty asks starting to feel afraid.

'No.' The male voice.

‘Darling, please,’ her mother’s voice cracks with emotion. ‘Patty, please don’t come in. Go out and play, I will come and find you in a minute... please.’ Her mother almost begs of her.

Patty reaches out again to the door handle, she wants to know – she grips it – then lets it go and walks backwards, feeling the wall with her fingertips. When she feels the stairs behind her she walks backwards down them. Her eyes glued to her parents’ bedroom door. She wants to know what it contains, but she retreats, as her mother asked her to. She finally loses sight of the door and then runs. She opens the front door and is out into the world. She races to the park. Half an hour later her mother comes to find her. Patty never asks what happened – but spends the rest of her life wishing she had gone into that room.

She opens her eyes, feels drool on her arm, realises she has fallen asleep at the table. Her shoulder is killing her where the arm is stretched back with the chain. Pins and needles dance up her arm and into her neck. She tries to stretch but the blood won’t flow. Her arm feels swollen, she tries to flex her fingers but nothing reacts. The blood won’t flow. The handcuff is tight, her hand puffy and tinged with blue and she needs the toilet.

‘Hey!’ She shouts. ‘Radix.’ There is nothing. She waits a minute then shouts louder. ‘Radix, I need the toilet. My arm’s dead and I am going to burst...’ she waits some more... ‘RADIX!’ She screams.

‘Bloody coming,’ she hears him bark from somewhere and a minute later she hears clumping feet on the stairs and a key scraping into the lock. Mark Radix pushes the door open and enters carrying a shotgun. His shirt is spattered with blood.

‘Oh Christ,’ Patty thinks. ‘Glenn, is he?’ she says out loud.

‘Thought you needed the loo,’ he grunts.

‘I... why? Please tell me, I don’t understand.’

He stares at her. 'Do you need the toilet or not?'

Tears start to stream down her face. 'Yes. I do.'

He pushes her back slightly, and then bends down to unlock her. Once that is done he stands, the chain like a dog lead and he pulls the chain hard, leading her from the room.

She splashes water on her face. She should have written something, a letter to Jim and Dani – something to tell them she loves them both. This might be goodbye.

'Don't think like that.' Jim-in-her-head tells her.

'I know you'll look after Dani, but don't forget me. Please.'

'I won't. We won't.'

She feels bile rise in her throat and she is sick – it is mostly stomach acid, very little food. Her mouth feels rancid. On the side there is toothpaste. She squeezes some on her finger and brushes.

'Are you done?' Mark Radix shouts through the door. It is not locked but he closed it to allow her privacy.

'Yes. Yes... I...' she opens the door. It is the walk to the gallows. He stands there holding his shotgun. 'I'd like to write a note...'

'Too late. It's time.'

He levels the gun at her chest. She's glad she was just sick, if she hadn't have been, it would definitely have happened then.

'I have a daughter.' She blurts out.

'How old?'

'Eight. She's eight.'

'Too young for me then.'

'I wasn't...'

He grins his shark-like grin. 'Get moving.'

They retrace the steps of yesterday, heading down through the house, to the basement where... she is shaking. 'Why?' she asks again.

'You're a bleeding journalist. Surely you wanna report the truth, wanna see this thing through to the end.'

'Please don't make me see him die. Please,' she thinks. 'You don't need to kill him.'

'No I don't, cos he's already dead. Twenty years. Can't kill a ghost.'

'His family—'

'I don't have a family?'

'That isn't his fau—'

'Isn't it?' He spits on the floor.

They are at the top of the staircase, he pushes her hard in the small of the back, she screams and falls forward, she tries to bring her hands around to break her fall but they are held behind her, her face strikes the top stair, she feels her forehead skin split, she is sliding down further, her body begins to twist and... he wrenches her up by the chain. 'Argh!' she yells as her shoulders flash in pain. He pulls her to her feet.

'Next time you'll go all the way down. Do what I say.' He says in a low, malicious voice. 'Walk.' She complies.

In silence they head down to the basement. 'Open the door,' he tells her, but she can't. Already she can smell the room. The sweetness of the blood and the sharp, acrid stench of urine and shit.

Mark Radix leans forward and whispers in her ear. 'I killed her, his wife. I raped her in front of her daughters. I told her that was what I was going to do to them.'

Patty can't stop. She starts to shake, the tears come – she is so scared. 'Dani.' She whispers, 'I am so sorry.'

‘Now open the fucking door,’ he hisses, poking the shotgun into her side and pushing forwards. ‘In,’ he commands and she moves into the fug of death, all the while she whispers Dani, Dani, Dani, Dani, I love you Dani – her daughter’s name will be on her lips at the end. She promises herself that. ‘Dani.’

The light flares, Glenn shields his eyes with his arm – even though raising it hurts so much. His eyes burn – he has been in the dark so long. He is like a slug, his clothes are sodden with blood and urine and his face all swollen from the beating.

Patty only knows it is a face because of the teeth she can see when he opens his mouth.

‘Mark. What have you done. Where are my family. I...’ he sees Patty. He thought she was dead, he does not understand. ‘You’re not de—’

‘No she’s not. Shut up, Glenn. Tell him.’ He leans his gun against the wall and with both hands, pushes Patty forwards and she collapses in her heap before him. ‘Tell him, journalist. Tell him the truth about his wife.’

‘He ki...ki...ki...’ she breaks down. She can’t say it.

‘I killed her.’

The scream is not human. Hell and despair pours from the mouth of the man who was once Glenn Eastern. It invades her mind, her brain and freezes her soul – Patty has never heard the noise of the pit before.

‘But your kids are alive. Do you hear me, Glenn? Your daughters are alive.’

The scream is cut dead... heavy breathing. ‘I beg—’

‘Don’t beg,’ he moves forward, as close as he dares to the beaten man. ‘I don’t want you to beg. I want you to choose. One can live. Only one.’

‘No.’

‘Only one.’

‘Noooooooo,’

‘The youngest, will she live? They both look so much like you.’

Patty could lunge at him, she has the end of the chain in her hand, she could try... but she is frozen, she is too scared to move. Mark Radix looks straight into her eyes. For a second she sees something move in there. In the depths of the blackness.

‘You will tell the truth,’ he says softly to her, just enough that she can hear but the words do not carry to Glenn. He puts his hand on Patty’s arm and, there is almost a tenderness there. Then he moves to the chain holding Glenn, and unlocks it.

‘Get up and move to the door.’ He bends down and picks the body off the floor, his arms around his friend’s chest. He holds him for a second. Patty watches his face – she sees Mark Radix’s features shift and swirl, as if his face is a watercolour. He smiles and blows a small and tender kiss to the back of Glenn Eastern’s head. Then he lets him go and softly pushes him forward, like a child on a bike with stabilisers, being released for the first time. Glenn topples forward and rights himself.

‘Oh Christ,’ Patty thinks. She finally understands. Her head turns in slow motion, to the door. Glenn is moving towards it, she cannot see his face but she knows he has seen it too: propped up by the door, left there when they entered.

‘No!’ Does she merely think it, or does she actually come out and say it? She has no idea – her brain is filled with the rushing sound of her blood – there is nothing else. It surrounds her and wipes everything else away. He used her! She was the icing on the cake, to spread the lie – to prove everything. ‘Noooooooo.’

Glenn Eastern is in the doorway. Mark Radix has not moved, not a twitch. He can see Glenn stop, framed in the door – a shadow. He sees his arm reach out – his battered and bloody arm, to grab the shotgun. Still he does not move. Glenn Eastern begins to turn – he is slow, Radix could swat him down. Patty looks back to him – the Ugly Man. He looks almost

beautiful. His arms start to rise. Glenn has the shotgun but his legs won't support him, he crashes to his side, almost dropping the gun as he strikes the concrete. He lies flat, in his own blood, and arcs the gun around and brings it up to point directly into Mark Radix's face, his beatific face. Patty Looks to Glenn, what is left of his face is twisted by hate. She tries to rise, she screams again. This time it does fill the room. 'Noooooooooooo...'

Mark's arms rise, not in defence but in supplication, outstretched like Christ on the cross.

Glenn screams and pulls the trigger. The noise deafens Patty. In that tiny room the explosion of the gun is immense. She can feel blood in her ears as at least one drum bursts. The blast pulls the gun from Glenn's hands and sends him back to crack his shoulder on the ground. His clavicle snaps like a wishbone at Christmas. Her eyes are on Mark, his smile in that last moment. '*You will tell the truth,*' he had said.

Both barrels hit him in the face and tear him apart. The Ugly Man is wiped from the earth.

Glenn throws the gun as far as he can and then collapses into sobbing. Patty crawls over to him, she gently takes the man in her arms and cradles him. 'You had to.' She sighs to him, though she cannot hear her own voice. 'You had to kill him,' she says, although she knows that is only a half truth – Mark Radix wanted to die and used them both. They cling to each other, it is only a few moments, but it seems like an eternity as these two strangers – survivors – clutch at each other. Then Patty puts her hand to his chin and tips his head up to hers.

'Come with me.'

Supporting him, as best she can, she leads Glenn up the stairs. They go to the kitchen where Mark Radix had held her. She washes his hands and face – removing most of the blood. She finds a carving knife and cuts his clothes away. He is naked. Then she leads him

to a bedroom – he follows her like a lamb. Lost. She selects a shirt and pair of trousers and helps him on with them. Now he looks almost human – except for the face and the hands, but she is no miracle worker. Lastly she leads him out of the house. She has worked out where they must be – the cottage that was probably at one time the stable. It has been converted to a granny annexe. When they get there they find the door locked. Patty walks over to a woodpile and takes an axe.

‘Stand back from the door.’ She yells, hoping the sound carries through the water she is immersed in, to the outside world. Then she hacks at the door. She likes it, feeling the wood splinter as she chops at it. She likes the release of all that fear. Finally the door cracks open. She takes Glenn’s hand once more and she walks through.

Inside, a little scared but totally unharmed, they find his wife and daughters – they are all fine. Each of them is upset by Glenn’s appearance but so happy to see him. They had not been threatened, the youngest daughter even asks where the kind man has gone, he had got her so many nice toys, even though he was funny-looking.

Patty leaves the four of them hugging and kissing and crying. Alone, she walks back outside. She returns to the main house to collect her bag and notebook. The police will want to log and file all evidence. So she pulls out the relevant pages and folds them up and hides them in her bra.

‘Tell the truth.’ He had asked her. And she will – when she can understand it herself, and when she can convey the loneliness and the pain of a lifetime without love. She needs to find a phone and call the police. But before them, she will call Jim and Dani... and Jack, to tell him to hold the front page.