

Matthew Kerry was born in Derby in 1987. *Footsteps in the Darkness* is his first book, and was written between January and March 2008 whilst in Spain as part of his degree course.

Footsteps in the Darkness

Matthew Kerry

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The Bigger Picture

The Editor stormed through the room. Eyes peered up fearfully from shimmering computer screens and watched him stride past the desks from which loose papers fluttered and whispered to the ground in his wake. The door slammed behind him, causing the windows to shudder with the vibration and cups of coffee to ripple and quiver. The reporters, columnists and sub-editors exchanged long, raised-eyebrow glances full of relief that it was not their turn. The silence remained for several long seconds before the gentle sound of the keys tapping the news into neat and comprehensible articles slowly filled the room once more.

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It felt like he was outside the headmaster's office again, only this time twenty years later. The photographer shut his eyes and listened to the heavy footfalls that hardly seemed to be getting any closer at all. He wondered what would happen this time. It was not as if this was the first occasion on which it had happened either; in fact he had lost count. The problem was that he had almost reached the point that he did not care anymore. In the grand scheme of things, did the petty politics and daily deadlines really matter, all that much? Nevertheless at the same time he felt the tugging fear that he did need this job, not just for the money, but also for the way it opened doors for him, making his professional life a great deal easier.

Despite the secure feeling that he knew he was good at what he did, he was aware that freelance was difficult. He had prospective clients and the respect of his peers, but he knew it would be far more complicated when it came to obtaining permits, visas and audiences with all the petty bureaucrats that he needed in order to obtain access to the areas where he had to be. The click of the key in the lock at the side of

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his head brought him back to the real world. He stood up silently and followed the Editor into his office. It was austere, white and sparsely decorated, indeed remarkably similar to a hospital room. There was little furniture in the office, only two filing cabinets, a desk and two chairs, all of which were designed in the same drab and functional style. A jagged red line traced the newspaper's readership across the wall.

The desk in front of him was neat and organised: colour-coded files on one side, stationery at the top and in the centre a small wad of photographs through which the clumsy fingers of the Editor wandered. His eyes darted this way and that as his flabby cheeks glistened with sweat in the clinical light.

With a faint thump, the photos hit the desk and scattered slightly. The Editor settled back in his chair and as he rested his hands on his vast paunch small strands of belly hair crept out from between the buttons of his shirt. He rubbed his eyes, put his glasses on and surveyed the specimen in front of him.

Slightly dejected yet with the defiant air of someone whose independent streak refuses to let them pay heed to criticism, the photographer stared back.

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However his eyes had the blank look of someone who was thinking of far and distant places.

The Editor sighed.

‘Martin...I’m sure you can guess why you’re in here,’ he said with a schoolmasterly frown.

Martin did not reply but his eyes did make an effort to focus and place him back in the office.

‘I’m sure I don’t need to reiterate, but these photos simply won’t do...several experimental testers here...’ The Editor’s fingers flickered over a few blurry panoramas and dark vistas. ‘...a couple of nice street scenes...’ He paused and chose his words carefully. ‘Of course you do realise, Martin, that we don’t pay you for the “nice” pictures.’

Martin looked him straight back in the eye with a helpless look that was nevertheless full of bold defiance.

‘Do you realise how much you cost? The string pulling, the politicking that goes on? Your privileged position? ...We pay you to get there...right to the front to take *those* pictures. You understand me, I’m sure.’ The Editor leaned forward and the chair creaked. He blinked furiously. ‘The grief, the horror, the violence,

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the blood, the *humanity*. It's what we need, it's what the people want. We live and die by what those people want, Martin, live and die...' The Editor could not help but glance over at the angry red line on the wall. If it were some chart of someone's medical progress, they certainly had grim prospects for the future.

Martin stared at him and felt the desire to laugh hysterically. He had no idea, this piggy little editor. No idea of the suffering, the chaos, the madness and death. The panic. The pure, animalistic desperation to survive. Here he was, wallowing in the glutinous newsprint of his small empire judging the amount of suffering in each photo –was it enough? Maybe we could do with a crying, dying baby in the corner...or would that be too much?

The editor was asking him to sit back in silent concentration on the front line with impassive objectivity and try to get the sunshine to hit that pool of blood perfectly. He nearly vomited over the desk. Some kind of passive observer satisfying the wants of a desensitised and bloodthirsty public whose only experience of war is some stories from their frail old grandpa, a few poems from ninety years ago and two

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minutes around the memorial once a year. That did not make up for the brutal reality of being there.

Even for the photographer there is always that gap, that space which separates the viewer from subject. Martin could not comprehend this distance, for him the photographic lens might as well be another barrel pointed at the subject.

‘I can see it in your eyes,’ the Editor said suddenly. ‘We know what happens –people have told us what you do. I’m sure you realise that this is not just about readership; it’s about stopping war, Martin. Think of Vietnam, the marches!’ He leaned over the desk still further. Martin could feel his hot putrid breath and smell his stale sweat.

‘I don’t want to see this happening any more than you do. We want the same thing, Martin. This is about awareness: people need to know, be shocked; we need to make them conscious!’ He gestured wildly towards the ceiling.

‘You know you have the ability to take *the* photograph that stops the war...like that one of that naked girl running, when was it? Korea!’

‘Vietnam,’ muttered Martin.

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‘Not only that, you have that sixth sense, such that you are always at the right place at the right time...we would have the photos before anyone else; the news would be out there, so quickly!’ The eyes flickered excitedly.

‘The problem is, every single time, that it’s too late. Every photo. You get caught up in your “aid work”. That isn’t your role, Martin, it has *never* been your role. So...’

Martin gazed at the wall above the Editor’s gleaming forehead but all he could see was smoke and dust. The smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils and the curious ringing silence in his ears was suddenly replaced by shrieking screams and thumping artillery. He stumbled over smoking rubble and choked on mouthfuls of dry dust and ash. A woman appeared, black robes flapping wildly, hands clawing helplessly at the sky, face contorted into a hideous and bestial expression of raw grief. There were bodies all over the ground, some moving: a slow, singular, seething mass. Martin never failed to be shocked by the fragile naked mortality of man as he saw skin and flesh stripped from bone and intimate parts of the body that should never

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be seen oozing blood. Language was no barrier; everyone understood the need to evacuate the victims to the nearest hospital as fast as possible. He ran back and forth, carrying bodies, helping with bandages, holding limp hands, his sweat mixing with everyone's blood, willing them to make it through.

‘...And of course there's the issue of your...’

Once again Martin struggled to refocus and place himself in the here and now, but the adrenaline was pouring through his veins and the throbbing sound of his own pulse thudded in his ears.

‘...as such, and please believe me when I say that it gives me great pain to say this to you, Martin, you are permanently suspended from your role with this company with immediate effect and we do not expect you to return to us.’

Martin remained silent. He was not surprised, however at the same time he still found it incredible that he had been sacked again for giving into the human instinct to help others. He could not understand how these well-fed, freshly-showered and nicely-pressed photographers could stand back and take photos of suffering, dying people. How did they justify

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it to themselves?

He stood up slowly. The Editor remained still and regarded him silently. Martin turned and walked to the door, turning the cool, metallic handle in his hot, moist hand. The sounds of telephones ringing, excited chatter and the inexorable tapping of keyboards suddenly flooded into the room.

‘Martin, a piece of advice.’ Martin looked back defiant and angry. The Editor removed his glasses and after carefully placing them on the table tried a benevolent smile. ‘Try and at least see the bigger picture.’

The door slammed so hard that the glasses jumped off the table and onto the Editor’s lap whilst the pens rolled violently from side to side. The Editor shook his head with a sigh before turning back to his advertising revenues.

It perhaps should have been fifty years later, a full page, with a large portrait of an old man and a bold headline, such as ‘The Man behind the Camera’, or even, ‘Remember this?’ with a copy of the picture he took that stopped the war and saved thousands of lives. As it

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was, the obituary of Martin Cooper was four lines long, under the general heading of 'In Brief' and glossed over by the majority of the readers; for those who did read it, it was not really that important –just another story of a voluntary aid worker killed by accident in some far-away and forgotten war.

Hard Copy

As if in slow motion the pink blossom petals gyrated and fluttered to the ground, caressed by the soft touch of the breeze which crept up from the valley below. The sunshine of the spring morning bathed the whole basin in a warm, soft radiance, including the mountains that stood shoulder to shoulder bending over the city that stretched over the plain. The grass was cool and damp beneath her bare feet as she padded through the half-dozen trees towards five large wooden buckets. She checked them one by one, giving them a prod or a stir before sitting down to one side and savouring the sweet, clean taste of the spring day. Even through the thick haze of pollution spread over the city below it was

Hard Copy

possible to see the dozen cranes poking up boldly from the urban sprawl. Every day the metropolis seemed to skulk steadily closer, crawling over the fresh virgin grass and rugged rocks, ripping up and chewing the earth, before spewing out tonnes of damp concrete, sharp shining glass and snaking cables in the form of new buildings and roads whilst at the same time belching out filthy fumes. As the city crunched and grinded its way up the slopes it seemed to claw the peaks down due to the builders who were hacking steadily away at the very roots and foundations of the mountains.

She picked up a round pebble and rolled it around her palm, marvelling at its flawless shape, mottled colour and perfect smoothness. She never failed to be amazed by the beauty of nature. Slowly, she let it slide from her hand and down the hill it tumbled, bouncing over the grass and clattering down the long scree slope, although that was so far below that she could not actually hear it. The pebble then disappeared from sight. Fortunately it seemed that she was safe for a while yet.

In the metropolis she would, of course, be branded and stuck with a label, locked into a pigeon-

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hole with inflexible values and boundaries already preconceived and designed for her. It was easier for them to recognise her then, work her out, smile knowingly to themselves in the street. It made life much quicker and easier for the busy people leading important lives in the city. People could not deal with complications and ambiguities. New Age? Modern hippy? She did not know, but then again, neither did she particularly care.

It might as well be a different world: that metal weal on the skin of the earth. Visible and tangible, yet still far enough away that none of the ugly noise broke the natural tranquillity of the surroundings of her home. She combed her hand gently through the now dry and stiff grass before going back inside to start writing.

When the light started to fade she stopped. Dusk was passing quickly, hastened by the cloud-mottled sky and because the sun had dropped behind the peaks to the east of the house. She went out to her spot overlooking the valley and lay on her back covered by a blanket with her hands behind her head, where she engaged in one

Hard Copy

of her favourite hobbies.

There was something about the sky which fascinated her. In truth, she probably spent more hours gazing at the beautiful canvas across which the ever-shifting and morphing clouds were painted than actually on her work. The people in the city did not understand this, they had no time for such time-wasting and foolish obsessions. They saw the sky in the same way in which they looked at a photograph. Throwing a quick glance at the sky, whilst it may offer an accurate indication as to whether it is raining or not, does not give a fair reflection of the ephemeral nature of the appearance of the sky during each individual second. Similarly, photographs do not give a true depiction of life. They are convenient and useful but life is never fixed, people never stand posing with fake smiles glued to their faces and birds are never stopped midflight, hanging in midair. Attempting to pin these things down to something so one-dimensional and motionless as postcards and photographs means that they lose the pulsing vibrancy of life and transiency that makes them so special to begin with. She could lie and watch clouds for hours; in fact perfect sunny days she considered as

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the most boring of all. Clouds are noble beings, light and soft, or, like these, dark and growing thicker, heavily pregnant with the prospect of rain.

The chilly breeze stroked softly over her as she lay and turned her mind to her narrative. She closed her eyes and sank into it, remembering what had happened so far. She had no idea how long it would be or how it would end as she simply let the characters slowly play out the lives in her mind. To try and impose conditions on that slippery, writhing, living process in her head was the very opposite of her philosophy. For her, planning a story killed it; it needed to breathe, flex its muscles and simmer in her mind for days and days, usually before she even started writing.

The cord was light and strong, the result of many experiments with different grasses and plants. She threaded it through the six holes she had made and pulled firmly yet with care so as not to break it. The needle snaked back and forth through the holes along the cover several times before she eventually tied the cord off. Another one finished.

Her fingers flicked at the pages which

Hard Copy

stubbornly gave way at her touch. The leaves were thick, grainy and a blurry mix of colour, very different to the sterile and translucent printer paper of the city. She placed the book on the shelf with the forty or so others, next to the large dark bottles of homemade ink. She went outside to stir her buckets, hoping that the rain might have helped the consistency of the pulp.

The simple, abstract painting was large and half-covered the plain white wall. It was boring, fashionable and consequently very expensive. In front of the painting there was an old wooden desk, presumably antique, behind which sat a young, bespectacled man who drummed his fingers on the desk impatiently with an air of excitement. It was early evening and his face was illuminated by the glowing screen of the laptop computer as his eyes raced quickly over the book laid open before him.

The man could not believe his luck; this was his chance. He was going to be rich. The writing was mesmerising, perfect and far superior to anything he had ever read. It was heavily cinematic yet with a lightness of touch and with almost a fragrance about it

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that kept him entranced from the first word until the last page. Not only that, but, according to his sources, this copy was unique and the writer was not interested in fame and fortune for herself at all. What a fool! This was not a bestseller; it was a classic, if not *the* classic. Moreover, no one would know it was not his own work after he had burnt the original. He flexed his fingers and pulled the computer closer to him before starting to type.

Working feverishly it took him until nearly midnight. He formatted and set it to print without even bothering to check it. One by one the printer ejected pristine sheets of neat smart black Times New Roman that slowly grew into a precisely collated pile at the side of his desk. He opened the drawer and selected the large gleaming stapler. Taking the satisfying wad of A4 sheets he pierced it four times until it was tightly secured by the metal staples. Then, he folded the corner over smoothly and started to read.

One hour later he had still not advanced any further than the first page. He read the sheet again, brow furrowed in concentration and anger. It was impossible to understand; the words were the same as

Hard Copy

the original, but they made no sense at all. The story was ridiculous, the language wan and lifeless, the mysterious beauty replaced by pedantic, mechanical drivel. His eyes flickered back and forth between the two copies trying to work out what differentiated them. Nothing. Both were exactly the same. He read the first page of the original version and found himself intoxicated once again. It was impossible, what was it lacking? Everything was there as far as he could see. He did not understand. Angrily he jabbed the delete key, and the cursor blinked back over the lines, neatly deleting all of the text. He rubbed his eyes, flexed his fingers and manically started typing the whole story anew.

Several hours later the clean, crisp copy lay in front of him, identical to its predecessor and with exactly the same effect. He howled and thumped the desk with despair. Money and recognition were within his grasp; he could almost taste them. He was tired of being a nobody. The computer sat waiting impassively on his desk. He blamed the computer, why should it not be its fault? It sat motionlessly, humming quietly and waiting for the angry word thief to decide what to

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do next.

He rose in one fluid and quick movement, kicked the chair away and strode to the window. He looked out over the roofs of the city which shone with the sunshine of the new day. Sentences ran through his mind continuously, he could see them written in the sky: curvy vapour trail handwriting. He blinked and it disappeared. The computer stopped humming. It had decided it had wasted enough energy waiting for him to start again. Why did it not work? All he had to do was process this story and send it to the publishers; as everyone knew, they would never accept anything as backward as a handwritten script. Suddenly he turned back from the window and grabbed the computer. It was the fault of the computer; it just sat there smugly ruining his chances by changing the wonderful story in some hidden way he could not understand. Rage rose within him, he wanted to throw it through the window, but even as the warmth soaked through his fingers, he knew that he could not do it. Gently he placed the computer back down on the table and, brushing the latest copy off the desk onto the floor, he slowly started to type once more.

On the Edge

‘You mean you weren’t at your parents? How...? I can’t believe...I rang you all day...even at work...You complete, utter bastard!’

He hardly heard. Numb, he hated himself almost as much as she did. And it was not the selfish regret of being caught, but rather the genuine remorse for a mistake that he had made and consequently how that was making her feel. How could he have been so stupid? The route back from the dangerous cliff edge now seemed so incredibly clear and easy to follow. Instead, yesterday, he had heedlessly thrown himself off, and was dealing with the consequences of everything he had shattered. He stood up and

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mechanically followed her into the bedroom. It all seemed like some kind of dream being played out in third person. He struggled to place himself back in the real world, but it felt like he was trying to run through deep water and sound only came through in distant echoes.

Drawers were left leeringly open as she flung clothes haphazardly into the suitcase on the bed. He muttered something incoherently and tried half-reassurances in an attempt to make her stay, or at least stall for time. When she heard those brief, mumbled words she stopped suddenly, completely, the long earrings the only movement: swinging slowly from side to side. Her swollen red eyes burned at him with such frenzy out of her pale, luminous face that he was rendered speechless. It was a look of shock and absolute bewilderment that he could not comprehend why she was doing what she was. An intense stare of pure outrage. Nevertheless, even from the distance, he could see the hurt, the loss and the pain, along with himself, stood seemingly dispassionately in the doorway, all reflected in those beautiful blue irises.

The silence continued for several long seconds.

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He noticed the knuckles on her hand whiten; then with a feral cry she sprung at him causing him to stumble backwards. What happened next he could not be sure, but he came to lying on the floor by the bathroom door surrounded by shattered crystal. His head throbbed. The front door opened; he closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable clichéd slam but it shut with a barely perceptible click.

Everything had happened so quickly and he had just stood there helplessly, not knowing what to do. He opened his eyes briefly and surveyed the room through a watery film before closing them once more. It was Thursday evening, how was it possible for so much to have changed since yesterday morning?

Jamie drove to work carelessly with the sound of car horns screeching behind him. He hardly heard, nor did he care; tears streamed down his cheeks. They had both gone too far: yes, it had been an argument, but they had gone to extremes and had said things that probably should have been left unsaid, better that they be swept under the carpet for a few years, perhaps even forever. Things that even might not be true, he was not sure; all

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he knew was that the argument had got spiteful and nasty, and now he was sat in the car park at work at half-past seven on a Wednesday morning, long before everyone else arrived, having reached the cliff edge of this particular period of his life. Had they gone too far? Was it possible to turn back? It did not feel like it. Jamie inched ever closer to the edge and looked down. It meant starting all over again; did he really want to take the plunge? He stared out over the misty empty car park. He checked his phone: nothing, and the battery almost dead. Opening the door, he stepped out into the cool air and went to walk the quiet streets whilst attempting to ready himself to take the seemingly inevitable leap.

‘Come on.’

Jamie looked up without understanding at the face that offered him an encouraging smile.

‘Let’s go for a drink.’

Jamie saw several of his colleagues beginning to shut down their computers and finish work despite it being Wednesday, and only five o’clock. ‘But haven’t we got another hour yet?’

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Jonathan decided to try another approach. 'Look mate, you've hardly done anything all day, and it's alright, we understand. Let's for a drink, have a chat –I'm sure you'll feel better for it.'

He was right, Jamie was certain. Sat in silence trying to wade through the numbers all day had not helped him at all, in fact, he felt even worse for it. It had only happened this morning, but the pain had been so sudden and so great that he already felt very much alone in the world, unattached, and missing the human connection and affection. Jamie nodded in silent agreement and rubbed his eyes before preparing to leave.

Jamie stared at the door in front of him, key frozen in his hand that hung in mid-air. She was in the flat, why was that? Two days spent waiting for him? He had not gone home last night, and now it was Thursday evening, surely she would have gone by now, what reason was there to hang around? After all, it was his flat. He squared himself and prepared for another fight.

He slowly climbed the stairs, dragging his feet like a child who is being taken to a place to which they

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do not want to go. He traced his hands absentmindedly over the rough white walls and tried to think. Maybe she had left the light on by mistake? No, that was not what she was like. She must be in there packing. Perhaps.

The car he had parked around the corner as normal because there was never any room in front of the flat. Now he was stood on the pavement staring up at the building, mystified. All of the windows of the block were in darkness, except those of his flat, which blazed with a yellow glow. Someone must still be inside, why? She had not tried to contact him; it had all appeared over, finished. What more was there left to say?

Back in his own car, the drive back to his flat made him feel like life was back to normal. He drove slowly, not wanting to arrive at his destination, with his mind still performing somersaults and running off at tangents in an undisciplined manner as he tried to concentrate. Thirty-five and a half hours earlier he had left. It seemed a lifetime ago, yet the confusion and the raw pain were there still, very close to the surface.

Work was awful; it felt even worse than the day

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before. At least there was only tomorrow before the weekend. Everyone knew what had happened and hardly any of them looked him in the eye when they spoke to him. That made him feel even worse: dirty and unclean, like filth on their shoes. He struggled to concentrate on the numbers that floated around him as his cheeks prickled with embarrassment whilst he tried to make sense of what had happened yesterday evening. Even now it was still impossible to figure out how it occurred, and what about the morning? Was it all over? It had seemed so final at that moment, however with the passing of the last twenty-eight hours it now appeared in a softer focus, as though it was just a major blip...a blip, nothing more. But what had he done? She had not rang...He shut his eyes and tried to block out the whispered conversations. Sales. Profits.

It was the second journey to work in as many days that had broken the routine of so many years. Instead of the usual arrival at 08:51 via the normal streets, queues of traffic and listening to the same songs, this time he was not even driving, but sat uncomfortably in the passenger seat staring at the unfamiliar streets full of strange shops, signs and post

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boxes. They arrived later than he normally did, but that did not bother him too much on reflection, in fact this time he actually preferred it. Three more hours until he could take more paracetamol.

When Jamie woke up, he did not have to open his eyes to know that everything was not alright. There was no moment of confusion, that strange displacement of “where am I?” Although in fact he did not know where he was, through the certainty of the knowledge that it was Thursday morning and the presence of a thumping pile driver of an incredible hangover from which he was strangely suffering, he knew that something somewhere had gone dreadfully wrong. Gingerly, he opened his eyes and was awoken by the bright beams of a horribly sunny day. The room was not his. In truth, he was sure that he had never been here before, and could not remember arriving last night. Jamie squinted at the ceiling and in vain tried to moisten his mouth with his tongue. He needed a drink of water but weighing it up against remaining still such that he did not aggravate his head too much, he decided that not moving was the better option. The sleeping form on his left (strange, he never slept on the

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right side of the bed) shifted slightly. She turned over ever so slowly, or so it seemed, and as she did so the sickening realisation of what happened yesterday, one incredibly long day, rose relentlessly from the pit of his stomach as he screamed desperately and silently in sheer panic at its attempts to drown and immerse him with the cruel reality of the present. However his mind and body did not listen to him and images and snatches of conversation started to wildly spin through his head as he lay prostrate and helpless with his eyes glued to the ceiling as the female form still continued turning inexorably towards him. There was no place to hide. He knew what had happened. But still, when the face looked up at him sleepily he felt that jolt of shock and his stomach twisted over and in on itself.

A voice callously inside himself tried to reason with him, he was free. After what happened, was he not allowed to do what he wanted? The face of the cliff was sheer and impossible to climb back up. He had passed that point. These things happened, it was normal: people need the comfort and the affection, they get drunk, and they make mistakes. But it was not a mistake, the voice continued to insist. The rest of his

On the Edge

mind struggled to understand this however, as underneath it all it still felt a like horrible betrayal, an inexcusable error. This was not Jamie; he was not the type of person who did these things.

Bus

At the last bus stop in the suburbs before the sun-baked plains, a tall and imperious figure waited with her arm raised to protect her face from the blazing sun. Behind her the sun-baked plain shimmered in the haze of the burning heat. She stood immobile, to attention, like some sort of stone regimental statue. The bus swung round and ground to a halt in a cloud of dust right in front of her. She patiently waited until the door fully opened before climbing up the steps into the sweaty and humid figure. Indeed, now no longer a far-off, proud and motionless figure, the woman seemed altogether different when close-up and in the flesh. She swayed unsteadily down the aisle of the bus over stray

Bus

limbs and flailing bags with strands of hair stuck to her damp forehead as the bus slowly lurched out of the city. That calm and steady aura of the aloof statue had been replaced by an agitated and preoccupied woman who appeared more than a little flustered even after she had swung herself into a vacant seat, murmuring a quiet thank you to the woman who had accommodatingly moved her child from the seat and onto her knee.

Her observer turned back to her book. She always struggled to concentrate on journeys; sometimes she wondered why she even tried to read. She looked up again. The new passenger was on the other side of the bus, two seats further forward. Despite the angle, she was visible and her profile was easy to observe. She was dressed smartly in black with a knee-length skirt, whilst her high-heeled shoes were the only indicator that she had been outside in the dusty and dry atmosphere. With her left hand she scraped the loose wisps of hair back behind her ear revealing a simple, silver stud-earring. Why would such an elegant and successful businesswoman be wearing such plain jewellery? she wondered. And a traveller as well; the paleness of the woman's skin contrasted sharply with

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the rest of the noisy and animated passengers. She nervously clutched several slim files and papers in her hands that fluttered in the draught caused by the open windows. Balancing the folders between her elbow and knee, she opened her handbag and rummaged for her lipstick. A solitary paper could have broken free and drifted lazily to the floor.

The two hands could have met as both women reached down simultaneously to pick up the stray sheet. The foreign businesswoman stared momentarily at the hands before glancing up and flashing a quick smile. However her eyes still appeared distracted and preoccupied, with a vulnerability which seemed to be searching for reassurance in the stranger's face.

'Thank you,' she said softly, looking down again. The connection of eyes, which had only lasted a split-second, was broken. Nevertheless, that was all it took: a fleeting glimpse, a naked glance, a fleeting look that penetrated each other, creating a moment of uncomfortable intimacy between the unprepared women.

She beamed back at the foreigner unreservedly. 'You speak with an accent as though you're from the

Bus

mountains,' she noted, surprised.

The woman glanced back from where she was shuffling her papers. 'Yes...well...my husband is from there and we lived there for a few years before moving down here.'

And that was it. Slowly, the conversation grew from this coincidental root and the two women started to speak of their respective past travels, impressions of places, and difficulties with the language. They spoke of minor tangents of their past and present lives, impressing them with exaggerated importance in an attempt to keep the conversation flowing as the bus trundled on across the vast, tedious plain in the overpowering heat of the sun. Inevitably there were ruptures in the conversation due to the fact that the women did not know each other. What followed was the uneasy silence that strangers feel the necessity to fill with meaningless chatter, whilst friends comfortably remain quiet in each other's presence.

She found out that she was right, the foreigner was a businesswoman. She had worked her way up one of the local corporations after moving to the country several years ago with her husband, who was a local

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notary, and with whom she was planning a three month trip to the far-east later in the year. All of this she discovered and pieced together through the small snippets of information which the woman with the dusty black shoes revealed, miscellaneous morsels that gave a more rounded and lifelike impression than a glance at an identity card with its name, address and social security number.

Gradually the unexciting plain was replaced by houses as they started to enter the large town which was their destination. On the edge of the centre the bus crunched to a stop and the businesswoman got off the now considerably quieter, yet still humid and sticky bus, with a brief farewell gesture.

She observed the foreigner walked across the front of the bus and crossed the road, realising that she had no idea of her name, nor of her age. On the far pavement she paused in the shimmering heat, brow creased with a frown. She smiled through the window as the businesswoman, aware that she was being watched, looked up quickly at the bus.

Or rather, she might have smiled. Indeed, all of it could have happened; one of those casual everyday

Bus

encounters with a random stranger that is afterwards quickly forgotten. She turned back to the book which she had been struggling to immerse herself in throughout the journey. In truth, she had found it difficult to concentrate and had read the same sentence dozens of times because she had spent virtually all of the time in the bus observing her silent and flustered fellow traveller. She could not stop herself from inventing these details of people's lives, making presumptions based on observations whilst on the train, the bus, or in shops. Was she right? What was the truth? There was no way of knowing for sure.

She glanced out of the window again as the bus slowly started to move off. The woman shuffled the papers determinedly and straightened herself before ringing the bell of the building in front of her. The door was large, black and heavily reassuring. There was a golden plaque etched with imitation handwriting next to the bell. That was the clue; there was the truth. She sprung up from her seat and her book hit the floor with a dull thump. The bus started to turn the corner as she scrambled down the aisle, fixated on that polished rectangular sign. In the second she had, she just

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managed to read the lettering out of the rear windscreen, over the shoulder of a curious and vaguely annoyed-looking man. 'Coles and Co., Solicitors,' it said at the top and below, in slightly smaller letters which she could just about read from the bus, 'Specialists in divorce law.'

Solomon

Solomon looked at his reflection in the mirror. Solomon. He rolled the name across his lips and enjoyed the sound it made. Where it came from and what it meant, he did not care; all that mattered was that it was not his real name. The eyes stared back at him: hard, brown and unmoving. His hair was short and face stubbly with a few spots here and there. There was one give away though. The eyes narrowed. Gently with the tip of his forefinger he touched it up with the cream he had. It was not the best job he had ever done of it, but it would do –better than having a large star-shaped mole on his left cheek. The face in the mirror winked and then disappeared. Solomon picked up his

Solomon

bag, left the flat and vaulted down the stairs.

The streets were dark and deserted as hardly anyone went out these days. The irony of this always made Solomon laugh hollowly; what with cameras watching almost your every move and more police than ever, the city had probably never been safer. He crossed the street without looking and turned right. A bedraggled black cat jumped snarling into his path. Whether it was good or bad luck he could not remember, so he simply aimed a kick at it and left it hissing in his wake.

Outside the cafe he stopped. In faded green paint the soft, curvy lettering of a sign which said 'The Liberty Tree' could still just about be made out. Inside it appeared dark, dusty and rubble-strewn; Solomon did not notice this, however, as he was reading the bright and bold posters that were thickly pasted all over the windows.

Solomon felt the bile rise quickly in his throat but forced it down and spat instead, right in the smiling benevolent face in front of him. Furiously he clawed at the windows, pulling the posters down, exposing the clean glass underneath, and crumpling the posters in his

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hands until the lies and spin sizzled, dissolving beneath his fingers. Or rather, he wished. In reality, his fingers scabbled and scratched at the corners, but he only succeeded in pulling down a few jagged strips. Rage surged through him and he kicked the window with frustration, but it did not have any effect: coated and reinforced by the many layers of governmental promises, the glass held firm.

He could, of course, just do it there, right on top of the posters. However that did not strike him as very professional or credible and the background colours would lessen the impact. Instead, with a last virulent look at the old cafe, he stalked off around the corner. Head bowed he roamed on, not sure where he was going to end up. The train station was down the street to his right, but he had been there not so long ago and it felt too soon to return. He muttered to himself as he carried on down the road, alternately appearing and disappearing as he moved in and out of the yellow glow of the street lamps.

Solomon stopped instinctively at a sudden cacophony of raucous shouting, clinking glasses and heavy thud as a body hit the thick concrete of the

Solomon

pavement. Just the usual night out at the pub. Solomon moved quickly on, turning another corner before being confronted by the old towering building of the bus station. Perfect. Solomon grinned at the huge dimly lit doors in the darkness. After a quick furtive glance up and down the street he slunk around the back, hurrying down the alleyway. Unfortunately it was full of rubbish such that he stumbled noisily over clattering cans and rustling plastic bags. Half jumping and half climbing he managed to get into the large bin which was nearly full and stinking. There he waited, hoping that no one had heard him. The adrenaline subsided and he climbed out of the bin and peered up at the wall. It only extended another four feet or so from the top of the bin. Balancing on its rim he pulled a loose brick from the wall so that he could smash the broken glass cemented into the top of the wall. Silently he climbed over and dropped down the other side, before crossing the quiet, rubbish-strewn yard and entering the hangar. It was lit by shafts of dim light which penetrated the filthy panes of glass which made up the roof. Illuminated by the faint light the buses loomed motionlessly. He ran his hand over the cool metal; the light blue colours

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emblematic of the bus company would be a very suitable canvas for his work.

Solomon shrugged off the bag, pulled his jumper over his mouth and nose before standing back and contemplating the naked side of the bus briefly, spray can motionless in his hand. This was the moment he loved, the pure rush of excitement fuelled by the anger and resentment he felt. The words came to him unbidden: short, furious slogans which burned with wild immediacy. The can rattled as he shook it into life, then with a quiet hiss as the compressed air was released, he set to work.

It took him three hours of painstaking work, as Solomon was a perfectionist who, moreover, wanted the maximum impact possible. Once more he stood back surveying the bus with his mouth pursed critically. Finally after several seconds he nodded to himself, satisfied, and slipped the cans back into his rucksack. It was more difficult trying to get out of the bus station. Due to the size of the wall he had to pile some old junk in order to get high enough to climb over the top. He slipped and rolled over the edge, landing in the bin with a dull thump. Pain seared through his leg and Solomon

Solomon

gasped through gritted teeth. His nostrils flared instinctively at the foul smell of decay. Using his arms he managed to lever himself up and out without putting too much pressure on his ankle. He walked back down the alleyway and after a quick surreptitious reconnaissance look, started off down the street. He had barely walked more than fifty yards before the silence was broken once again by the loud, boisterous noise of people spilling out of a pub and into the street. Solomon paused briefly and decided to continue on as quickly as he could. Head lowered and blood tingling in his veins, he walked fast with his eyes alert to the milling figures in front him. Despite his painful leg he covered the distance quickly. There were six of them stood around, chatting and laughing loudly –perhaps a little too loudly. Solomon tried to quell the growing sense of uneasiness he felt. He was nearly there. He counted his footsteps one by one.

‘Mate, where are you going so fast?’ slurred the inevitable voice.

Solomon swore silently without moving his lips and carried on walking. Then it happened. All it took was a brief hand on the shoulder to unbalance him.

Footsteps in the Darkness

Solomon tripped. He fell sideways into one of the figures who happened to be a smartly dressed young man. He vividly recalled his smooth pale face and wreaking vodka breath.

It all seemed so pathetic and avoidable now as Solomon struggled to come to terms with the incident: rucksack on the floor, spray cans scattered, an off-duty police officer amongst the drinkers. It had been so ridiculously coincidental, like a sequence of events that should belong to a film or cartoon rather than real life.

Solomon gazed at the blank ceiling of his cell and tried to find solace by telling himself that there had been no reason not to have chosen to do what he did. Without hindsight he would have made the same decisions.

Solomon stood up in the dock. The court was full and humming with excited conversation. He felt the heat of the gaze of everyone in the room as they analysed his face. People scribbled, others sketched, the rows at the front merely scowled at him grimly. Solomon had seen his work in the newspapers before but had never thought it would generate this much interest.

Solomon

The charges were read out against him as he stared at the tiled floor in front of the dock. Solomon raised his head and in a loud unfaltering voice declared himself 'not guilty.' He knew he was guilty, of course, but he needed time. He smiled to himself. The people whispered. Let them interpret that how they will.

The prosecution did an efficient job. Solomon was outwitted and convicted by the intricate science of DNA, and also by the simple matching of the paint colour from the cans to the graffiti. All through the questioning of the witnesses and the presentation of the evidence Solomon sat quietly defiant. He felt the swelling rage of someone being rudely shushed before they even had a chance to speak. He had a right to protest, to say 'no, I do not agree with the status quo', did he not? Yet at the same time he accepted what was happening with the weary resignation of the inevitable.

Nevertheless, when Solomon had his chance, he seized it and gave an impassioned plea to the people in the court. He stood and looked everyone in the eye, scrutinising every single face. The journalists stopped their furious scribbling and chewed their pens thoughtfully.

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‘Mr. Justice Adams, members of the jury, ladies and gentlemen of the public, and distinguished journalists, I do not profess to produce some kind of art, as some of you are inclined to believe, nor do I wish to be portrayed as some mindless vandal. This graffiti is a personal expression, my heartfelt feelings of what is wrong with this country. I write what many feel –what many of you feel- but are afraid to express. What means do I have of demonstrating these views except a few whispered conversations at the back of the pub?’

‘I am not a rich man, I do not own newspapers. Neither am I actually a grown man in the eyes of the state, and therefore I do not have the right to make a small contribution by voting. You, the journalists, have your papers, your radio and television programmes. Yes, you are controlled to some degree about what you can say, but at least you have the means with which you can express your feelings and make them known to the whole country. Why is my opinion any less valid than yours?’

‘If we live in a plural democracy as this dictatorial state professes to call itself, then I have the right to my voice to say what I believe. Ladies and

Solomon

gentlemen, I have a message, a message that many want to hear, and as a poor, common youth without money or influential friends, *this* is the only way I have of conveying it.'

The whole room was silent. Solomon sat down. One by one the journalists started to scribble again, before stopping and looking at each other. The court tried to understand the radical and immediate populist politics of the young man, but they struggled to place it within the context of the society in which they lived.

The hammer of the judge slammed down onto the wood. The sound woke Solomon and he sat up quickly, shivering in the coldness of his cell. He knew instinctively that it was time; they were coming.

Five minutes later they opened the door and without saying a word led him out to the police van outside. The journey to the court was quick and upon their arrival he was let out by yet more silent officers. They walked down numerous corridors before he was eventually thrust into the court room. Everyone stopped talking. He had a sudden feeling of what Caractacus must have felt upon entering Rome.

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The proceedings advanced but he hardly heard a word as he stared listlessly at the impassive faces in front of him. When the moment came, he stood and cleared his throat. However, he was nowhere near as eloquent vocally as he was articulate when he sprayed vicious criticism furiously across walls and trains in an attempt to expose the lies and propaganda of the government, nor was he as fluent as he was in his dreams. In reality, Solomon struggled to portray himself as little more than a wretched, petty hooligan.

Guilty on all counts, Robert Sean Luther was sentenced to five years in prison.

After the Accident

Anna did not fully understand what was going on, but what she did realise was that she had lost something. Another shoebox hit the bed. She stood on tiptoes on the tall wooden chair and strained to pull the last box from the wardrobe. Her fingers scrabbled at the sides before managing to get a decent grip on the lid and sliding it towards her. It was the heaviest so far so she had to clutch it tightly to her chest and then lower it gently onto the bed.

After a hurried dust with her fingers, which she then wiped on her dressing gown, Anna removed the lid. More old photographs of people and landscapes that she did not recognise. She lifted the box and

After the Accident

dumped the photographs on the floor with the rest. There were still not quite enough boxes. A quick glance at the wardrobe confirmed it was empty. Anna chewed her lip thoughtfully; then she suddenly darted out of the room and across the landing.

Five minutes later she returned, hidden behind the half-dozen different sized boxes that she was carrying. She tipped them onto the bed and climbed on afterwards. All of them were empty. Slowly, she lowered them one by one down the other side as she lay on her front on the bed with her head dangling over the edge and feeling the tingling pressure as all the blood rushed to her face. The boxes she arranged in a semi-circle, just large enough for her to curl up in, and with the back formed by the side of the bed. Brick by brick the walls grew taller until it reached the height of the bed and only a small opening was left at the front. She brushed Lion, Mouse and the others off the bed and into the lair.

Anna rolled off the bed and closed the door with quiet care. She then made her way across the photo-mosaic moat that surrounded the roofless igloo, stopping to pull off the pictures that stuck to her bare

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feet.

Anna squirmed in through the gap carefully so as not to cause the structure to collapse. The duvet was pulled over the top, boxes were shifted slightly to cover the entrance, and at last it was finished. Anna sat cross-legged with Mouse on her lap and listened to the deep, perfect silence. It was almost completely dark, with only small chinks of light penetrating some of the gaps and the air was warm and heavy. She lay down carefully, curling up and hugging her knees, and felt like she was in a huge safe cave at the centre of the earth. Slowly, in that position on the hard and inflexible floor, Anna gently started to cry, as she felt the overwhelming feeling of helplessness and terror at the prospect of the dark brave new world which was opening up in front of her.

She looked at herself in the mirror and tried to appear strong and resolute. She smiled broadly, although it clashed with the pale, drawn skin and the raw red eyes that were puffy and shadowed with a lack of sleep. Despite everything she tried, there was nothing she could do to hide all of that.

After the Accident

The mouse bounded quickly up the smooth marble steps and pounded on the tall doors. They swung open silently to reveal the enormous throne room which was airy and light with hundreds of elegant, arched windows lining the walls. Pausing only for a slight moment, the mouse twitched his nose before walking quickly down the long plush carpet towards the distant throne. Groups of chattering courtiers cast admiring yet jealous glances as he strode past with his paw resting lightly on his slim rapier.

‘Your Majesty,’ the mouse said, removing his feathered cap with a flourish.

The Princess smiled kindly down at the slightly pompous figure. ‘Yes, Captain?’

‘I hope Your Majesty will be pleased to know the gates and walls have been fully secured with the guards ready and awaiting your orders.’ He saluted grandly.

The Princess inclined her head gravely in a gesture far beyond her years, before squealing with delight and pulling the Captain onto her lap. The mouse, evidently embarrassed by the ensuing hug,

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cleared his throat, ‘Erm...Your Majesty–.’

However, he did not have time to finish. The walls of the palace quivered and the floor seemed to pitch and roll. The courtiers screamed and fled, shouting: ‘Earthquake!’ The terrified Princess clutched the Captain who peered out fearfully from between her fingers, unable to move. A thick, deep voice that seemed to sound from within her own mind called softly, ‘Anna...Anna...’ She closed her eyes and tried desperately to blank out the sound.

The vaulted roof crumbled and was torn leisurely off by an unseen hand. The Princess screamed with the terror at the unseen threat that was coming for her, until she could bear the suspense no longer and her eyes snapped open.

‘Anna...Anna...’ groaned the distorted voice. The mouse lay prostrate in the lap of the Princess so terrified that he could not move. Slowly the Princess raised her head and gazed up into the gigantic, grief-stricken face which filled the gaping hole where the roof of the palace should have been and that was contorted into an expression of bewilderment.

‘What are you doing, darling?’ The slow

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movement of the grotesque mouth hardly seemed to match the words.

‘Come on, it’s time to go. You have to be strong for Daddy.’

The Princess was plucked from the safety of her four strong walls and immersed in the photographs.

‘What have you...? It doesn’t matter.’

Anna stared dumbly at the swollen eyes. The lip trembled and the eyes screwed up slightly as the arms reached down towards Anna once more. She recognised the signs of the inevitable and fled the room out of the reach of the arms, before the solitary salty tear escaped and traced a single glistening line down the smooth cheek.

When they arrived it was late afternoon and the building was teeming with bustling, hurrying people. Anna stood with her mother in the centre of the huge entrance hall staring at the ceiling that was a long way above her. She felt so very small, threatened by the giants that strode past impassively, the strange bleeping sounds and the eternal clamour of ringing phones. The sounds became louder and louder, drowning out her

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thoughts. She saw a quick movement out of the corner of her eye and felt the presence of someone behind her. Anna turned quickly –no one. She kept turning faster and faster, feeling the mounting fear of an unknown danger which she could sense, but was just out of her reach.

‘Stop that!’ Anna’s mother grabbed her hand and frowned furiously down at her before continuing speaking to the woman in the long white coat. Anna stopped and clung on tight; she did not like this place.

Anna did not want to enter the room, but she knew that she had to. It was brightly lit, however not by a warm, homely glow, but rather a hard, sterile light. The bed dominated the room, on it lay the body, seemingly lifeless and inert. Long, serpentine tubes plugged the body into the different machines that continuously pumped thick juices into the scarcely living form. He seemed so much smaller now that the aura of strength and security, which he had previously radiated, had diminished to the point that it had disappeared completely. The hand twitched. It did not even appear to be the same hand that used to pick her up

After the Accident

effortlessly and twirl her around and around.

Unsurprisingly, Anna did not want to see him. Well she did, but not like this. The slow, mechanical beeping of the complicated machines continued. The wave of sick realisation rose gradually within her. Yet it was an ignorant realisation because in truth she did not really know what it was. Instinctively she knew it was bad, something indescribable but nevertheless something awful, like feeling an unseen object with your hands with the innate knowledge that it is not good.

Anna had definitely lost something, even though she could not define exactly what it was. As she stared across over the coldly-illuminated and limp body, the chilly darkness of the world outside seemed to press against the window; it was a far more sinister and threatening world than it had ever appeared before.

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The sound of stumbling footsteps and laboured breathing was swallowed by the wind as it swept over the moor. Naked and open it exposed the men to the bitter cold which kneaded their faces with freezing, numb fingers whilst barely visible clouds melted and raced across the starry sky, frequently obscuring the full moon. The men continued to struggle along the narrow path with their heads bowed low and shins brushing past thick heather and low creeping gorse. The moon appeared again, illuminating the landscape, and the leader of the small group strained his eyes in an effort to discern where they were going, or at least make out some of the more dangerous features of the stony path.

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Imperceptibly at first, but with a growing intensity, it began to rain. Scars of lightning forked across the distant horizon. The leader stopped once again and lifted his hand to protect his eyes against the gusts of rain that were billowing over them, driven by the ferocious wind. There, in the distance, appeared to be...clouds cloaked the moon. He waited in the darkness until the forks of light blazed once more. There it was! A singular white edifice, clean, sharp and shining against the wild, tumbling vastness of the moor. Then it disappeared again, shielded by the darkness. Nevertheless the leader had its image of shimmering pureness etched into his mind, along with its location and, turning to his companions, he grinned briefly before plunging forward again with renewed vigour.

It was only when they drew nearer that they realised it was not one but in fact two buildings. The second was far smaller and simpler, in truth hardly more than a lean-to at the side of the church. The four shivering men stood huddled in their sodden clothes in front of the grand wooden door of the church. The stonework was ornate with a beautiful simplicity that

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even in the darkness shone through the muck and grime. The leader raised one hand rendered inflexible by the freezing cold and knocked painfully on the door. The men waited whilst exchanging uneasy glances. No one answered. The church seemed to be as unoccupied as it appeared unkept. And rightly so, who would want to live on this miserable moor in the middle of nowhere?

The leader gave one last heavy knock. Nothing. Dejected, they turned back to the cruel and unforgiving landscape.

‘Hello? Is there somebody there?’ The voice was hardly audible over the wrath of the wind. A shaft of light lit the ground to the left of the men, framing the shadow of what appeared to be a tall man.

The smallest of the men turned and saw not a tall figure, but actually the diminutive form of an old man who was standing in the doorway of the lean-to. He squinted and tried to make out some of the features of his face against the glare of light behind him.

‘What the...?’ Even with his face in shadow it was still possible to see the old man soften into a smile as he saw the anxious faces of the soaked figures in

Footsteps in the Darkness

front of him. 'Come in.' With that he turned and bustled back into his small home.

The three men looked to their leader who merely shrugged in a resigned manner before following the old man into the hut. Luckily there was enough room for them all to stand up inside, dripping and bemused by their surroundings. Their host was bent over an antique stove which stood against the stone wall of the church. Next to the stove was a chair and, on the other side, a small bed. The floor and corners were littered with the rubbish and detritus of the last few years: papers and clothes. The old man turned back to the travellers and peered at each of them one by one. It was instantly evident from his garb that he was a priest and, from the way that he looked at them the priest struggled to see. The man with long dark hair on the left shifted uneasily.

'Weary, footsore travellers, abroad on the moorlands...and in such intemperate weather!' intoned the priest softly. 'Pilgrims?' he added hopefully.

The men shook their heads causing the priest to sigh.

'And unlikely too. This route is seldom

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trodden these days.'

The water boiled and the priest poured it into the four waiting cups.

'Now there's not sufficient space in here for us all. You may sleep in the church –I'm sure God will not begrudge four travellers a roof on such an inclement night.'

The priest went outside followed by the four figures who were huddled over their steaming cups as though trying to absorb the warmth. He pulled out a large wrought key that dwarfed his thin veiny hand and opened the door. They stepped into the dark, cold church inside which the air was still, in comparison to the biting winds outside. A match flared in the darkness and priest lit several candles which cast a soft radiance over the pale walls.

'Now wait here just one moment.' The priest disappeared into the shadows. The men stood awkwardly in the corner until he returned with heavy blankets. 'I knew we never disposed of the reserves for the pilgrims.' He smiled and his eyes appeared watery with the effort to see in such dim light. 'Now if you would be so kind as to fetch the stove from next door.'

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The tallest man nodded silently and stepped back outside into the maelstrom.

Ten minutes later the men were all lying under rough blankets next to the stove, around which their sodden clothes steamed. The priest collected their cups and bade them all goodnight before returning to his simple bed in the lean-to. The men lay in the darkness, each wrestling with their own private thoughts.

‘Well...what are we going to do now?’ asked a voice.

‘He doesn’t know anything, at least we’re-.’

‘Yes I know that. But we can’t just, you know...up and off at the first crack of dawn...?’

‘And why not?’ snapped another voice.

No-one answered because deep down inside they knew they could not do it as, even deeper down, even they too had morals.

The next day dawned bright and the sunshine shone through the small windows of the church, revealing its simple interior. There was an altar covered by a plain cloth faced by five simple wooden pews. The walls were bare and in the corner at the back were a brush

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and other tools for keeping the place clean and tidy.

The men dressed and went outside into the cool air where they found the priest struggling to draw water up from a small well. The leader quickly went over to help and hauled the bucket up. The priest straightened. ‘Thank you, my son,’ he said, peering at them all in turn; this time with the light of day. ‘I trust you all slept well?’

They all murmured in affirmative agreement as the priest set the water to boil once again. One of the men cast a long, searching look over the hills but there was no movement at all. They felt the nagging feeling that they needed to leave, but that they had to do something to repay this old man who had risen in the middle of the night just to help them, and was probably appreciating their company in such a lonely and inhospitable place. As such, without discussion and without asking, they set to work on tasks that needed doing around the church. In the bright sunshine it was evident that the church was filthy, the roof was in a dangerous state and the whole surrounding area was overgrown with weeds and brambles. The priest was too old and frail for such physically demanding labour

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and it was clear that he was fighting a losing battle against nature.

Luke and Benjamin started work on the roof. They climbed up carefully and repaired the tiles in the best way that they could with the materials they had to hand. The sun moved lazily across the sky overhead as they silently laboured and sweated whilst the priest sung hymns quietly beneath them.

Mark, on the other side, was scrubbing the exterior walls of the church. He dipped the brush in the bucket before scouring the walls until the white stone shone through and the ground was sodden with grimy water.

It was simple tasks that they performed, as hard and as well as they could, although none of them were experts and none of the jobs pertained to their normal roles in life. The priest did not help them; he merely stood in quiet gratitude with his withered hands clasped against his chest. He prepared food for all of them, as large and grandiose as he could with his spartan larder. After eating they worked through until late afternoon when, as a final act, they built a bonfire with the brambles and undergrowth which they had cut

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back from around the church. The smoke rose and unfurled up into the azure sky as the men stood around the dancing flames. They knew that it was time to leave and that they could not wait any longer. At last the leader broke the subject with the priest, who seemed generally saddened.

‘I can express how much gratitude I feel for what you have done for me. As you can see, not many people come up or pass by this place any more.’ The priest did not ask them where they were going nor who they were. There was an unspoken feeling that this information needed to be volunteered without being asked for. The priest looked to the horizon, obviously unsure as to why they were leaving when night was falling. The evening was far more pleasant than the previous one; the sky was blood red in the distance which faded into a deep blue overhead, interspersed only with a few thin, furry slithers of cloud which glowed with a distinct shade of orange.

‘Thank you very much for getting up when you did and giving us four poor travellers a place to stay for the night. We hope that the church is in a slightly more robust state now than it was before.’ The leader stood

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awkwardly not sure what to say next. The priest, seemingly overcome by the small gestures that the men had done, embraced him along with the men, who accepted it with somewhat bemused expressions on their faces.

With that, the men set off in the direction the opposite to that in which they came. The priest watched the four figures disappear out of sight over the crest of the hill with the sun over their backs and heading towards where the darkness was fast approaching. He turned with a sigh and went inside to perform a brief evening service with no one to hear except the few squawking birds that would be soon flying away to roost.

The following morning the priest was once again woken by knocking, only this time on the door of his lean-to. He rose to open the door and wondered who it could be this time, two casual visits in three days was certainly out of the ordinary. People down in the distant town were far too busy to take even the slightest interest in the welfare of the tiny church and the old priest. He put it down to the intricate and obscure ways

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of God, as well as the coincidental, random nature of life itself. He pulled open the door and was greeted by the sight of two police officers standing grimly with notebooks already open and pens poised.

‘Good morning, Father, we are sorry to disturb you.’ The officer who had knocked and appeared to be in charge spoke in a businesslike yet not unfriendly manner. His eyes softened at the sight of the bleary-eyed priest who was still in his bedclothes.

‘Of course, officers, how may I be of assistance?’ He smiled benignly at them both.

‘We’re here in connection with a horrific crime that was committed two days ago. There was an attempted bank robbery by four men, which failed. Unfortunately, the men lashed out as they tried to make their escape, seriously injuring three people. Not only did they take one of the customers hostage, who happened to be a young girl, but she was only released after they had managed to gain safe passage out of the town...’

The priest listened with the growing suspicion of who the men were, although he did not want to believe that those kind and helpful men had been

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capable of such a crime, after everything they had done for him yesterday. One had even spent a long time painstakingly fiddling with the broken lenses of his glasses such that now he could use them, and read the Bible properly for the first time in two or three years. He knew that he would recognise the computer-generated images even as the police officer rummaged through his papers. The priest stared at the sheets in front of him and struggled to see the scouring faces grimly as all he could see was the sweat and the quiet concentration as they worked on the church.

‘I’m not sure, officer,’ he said somewhat hesitantly. ‘My assistant is probably inside the church already at work; I shall go and ask him...’ The officers waited outside in the warm rays of yet another sunny day. The priest went inside and sat on the front pew, tracing his hands over the grainy wood and praying for guidance as to what he should do.

With thanks to Angela Lavilla Cañedo



