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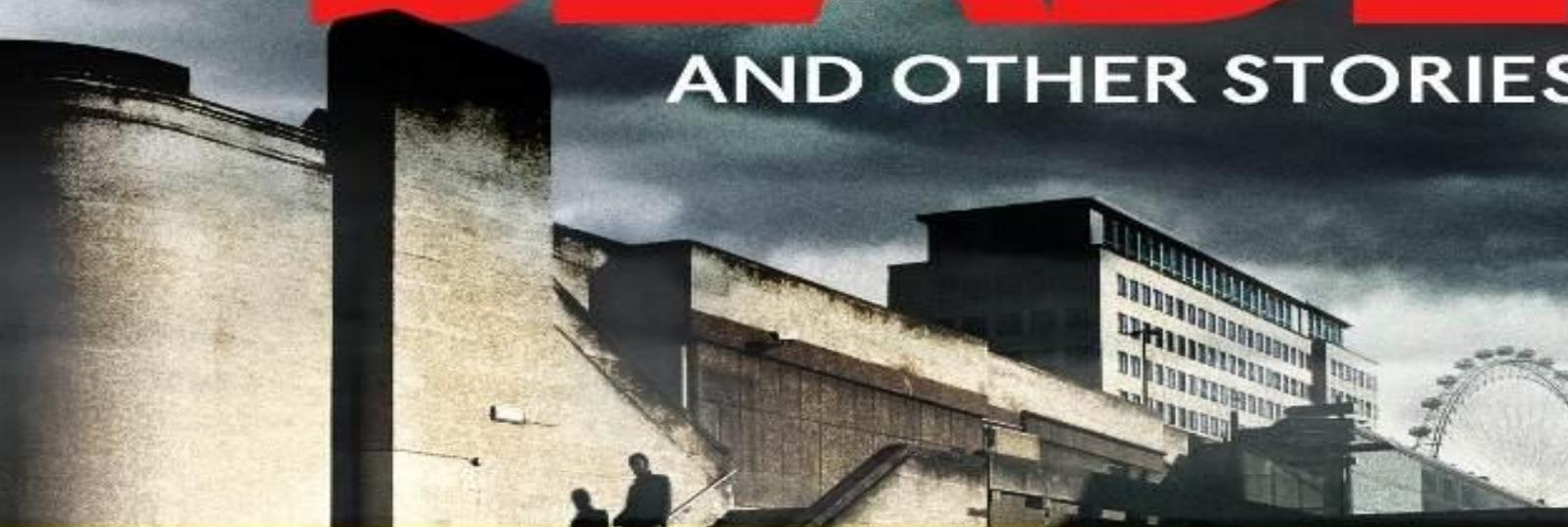
MARK

BILLINGHAM

DANCING
TOWARDS

THE **BLADE**

AND OTHER STORIES



EBOOK SHORT STORY TRIO

Mark Billingham has twice won the Theakston's Old Peculier Award for Best Crime Novel, and has also won a Sherlock Award for the Best Detective created by a British writer. Each of the novels featuring Detective Inspector Tom Thorne has been a Sunday Times bestseller, and *Sleepyhead* and *Scaredy Cat* were made into a hit TV series on Sky 1 starring David Morrissey as Thorne. Mark lives in North London with his wife and two children.

Also by Mark Billingham

The DI Tom Thorne series

Sleepyhead

Scaredy Cat

Lazybones

The Burning Girl

Lifeless

Buried

Death Message

Bloodline

From the Dead

Good as Dead

The Dying Hours

Other fiction

In The Dark

Rush of Blood

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DANCING TOWARDS THE BLADE

He was always Vincent at home.

At school there were a few boys who called him 'Vince', and 'Vinny' was yelled more often than not across the playground, but his mother and father never shortened his name and neither did his brothers and sisters whose own names, in turn, were also spoken in full.

'Vincent' around the house then, and at family functions. The second syllable given equal weight with the first by the heavy accent of the elder members. Not swallowed. Rhyming with 'went'.

Vincent was not really bothered what names people chose to use, but there were some things that was never pleasant to be called.

'Coon!'

'Black coon!'

'Fucking black bastard...'

He had rounded the corner and stepped into the passageway to find them waiting for him. Littered with turds in long grass. A trio of them in Timberland and Tommy Hilfiger. Not shouting, but simply speaking casually. Saying what they saw. Big car. Hairy dog. Fucking black bastard.

Vincent stopped, caught his breath, took it all in.

Two were tallish – one abnormally thin, the other shaven-headed, and both cradled cans of expensive lager. The third was shorter and wore a baseball cap, the peak bent and pulled down low. He took a swig of Smirnoff Ice, then began to bounce on the balls of his feet, swinging the frosted glass bottle between thumb and forefinger.

'What you staring at, you sooty fucker?'

Vincent reckoned they were fifteen or so. Year-eleven boys. The skinny one was maybe not even that, but all of them were a little younger than he was.

From somewhere a few streets away came the noise of singing, tuneless and incoherent, the phrases swinging like bludgeons. Quick as a flash, the arms of the taller boys were in the air, lager cans clutched in pale fists, faces taut with blind passion as they joined in the song.

'No one likes us, no one likes us, no one likes us, we don't care...'

The smaller boy looked at Vincent and shouted above the noise. 'Well?'

It was nearly six o'clock and starting to get dark. The match had finished over an hour ago but Vincent had guessed there might still be a few lads knocking about. He'd seen a couple outside the newsagent as he'd walked down the ramp from the tube station. Blowing onto bags of chips. Tits and guts moving beneath their thin replica shirts. The away fans were long gone and most of the home supporters were already indoors, but there were others, most who'd already forgotten the score, who still wandered the streets, singing and drinking. Waiting in groups, a radio tuned to 5 Live. Standing in lines on low walls, the half-time shitburgers turning to acid in their stomachs, looking around for it.

The cut-through was no more than fifteen feet wide, and ran between two three-storey blocks. It curled away from the main road towards the block where Vincent lived at the far end of the estate. The three boys that barred his way were gathered around a pair of stone bollards, built to dissuade certain drivers from coming onto the estate. From setting fire to cars on people's doorsteps.

Vincent answered the question, trying to keep his voice low and even, hoping it wouldn't catch. 'I'm going home.'

'Fucking listen to him. A posh nigger.'

The skinny boy laughed and the three came together, shoulders connecting, forearms nudging one another. When they were still again they had taken up new positions. The three now stood, more or less evenly spaced across the walkway, one in each gap. Between wall and bollard, bollard and bollard, bollard and wall.

'Where's home?' the boy in the cap said.

Vincent pointed past the boy's head. The boy didn't turn. He raised his head and Vincent got his first real look at the face, handsome and hard, shadowed by the peak of the baseball cap. Vincent saw something like a smile as the boy brought the bottle to his lips again.

'This is the short cut,' Vincent said. 'My quickest way.'

The boy in the cap swallowed. 'Your quickest way home is via the airport.' The smile that Vincent had thought he'd seen now made itself very evident. 'You want the Piccadilly line to Heathrow, mate.'

Vincent chuckled softly, pretending to enjoy the joke. He saw the boy's face harden, watched him raise a hand and jab a finger back towards the main road.

'Go round.'

Vincent knew what he meant. He could walk back and take the path that led around the perimeter of the estate, approach his block from the other side. It would only take a few minutes longer. He could just turn and go and he would probably be home before they'd finished laughing.

'You heard.' The skinny boy leaned back against a bollard.

He could *easily* turn and go round.

'Now piss off...'

The edges of Vincent's vision began to blur and darken and the words that spewed from the mouth of the boy with the shaven head became hard to make out. A distant rhythm was asserting itself and as Vincent looked down at the cracked slabs beneath his feet, a shadow seemed to fall across them. A voice grew louder, and it was as if the walls on either side had softened and begun to sway above him like the tops of trees.

The voice was one Vincent knew well. The accent, unlike his own, was heavy, but the intonation and tone were those that had been passed on to him and to his brothers and sisters. It was a rich voice, warm and dark, sliding effortlessly around every phrase, each dramatic sentence of a story it never tired of telling.

His father's voice...

Looking out from his bedroom window, the boy could see the coffee plants lying like a deep green tablecloth across the hillside, billowing down towards the canopy of treetops and the dirty river beneath. If he raised his eyes *up*, he saw the mountain on the far side of the valley, its peaks jutting into the mist, the slopes changing colour many times a day according to the cloud and the position of the sun. Black or green or blood red. Other colours the boy had no name for.

A dozen views for the price of one, and he'd thought about all of them in the time he'd been away. He'd tried to picture each one during the bone-shaking, twelve-hour bus ride that had brought him home from school five days before.

'Hey! Stand still, boy. This is damn fiddly.'

Uncle Joseph, on his knees in front of him, his thick fingers struggling with the leather fastenings, as they had every morning since they'd begun. It was hard to tie the knots so that the strings of beads clung to the calves without slipping, but not so tightly that they would cut into the flesh.

When he'd finished with the beads on the lower legs, Uncle Joseph would move onto the thick bands of dried goatskin, each heavy with rows of bells and strapped around the thighs. These were expensive items, hand-made like everything else. Lastly, Joseph would wrap the dark highly-polished belt around the boy's waist. On three out of the last four mornings, much to the boy's amusement, he'd sliced a finger on one of the razor-sharp shells sewn into the leather.

Behind him, Uncle Francis worked on attaching the beads that crossed his back and chest in an

like brightly-coloured bandoliers. Francis was always cheerful, and the boy imagined that he to looked forward to that moment when Joseph would cry out, curse and stick a bleeding finger into his mouth. It was always Francis and Joseph that dressed him. The rest of his uncles waited outside. He had been amazed at quite how *many* uncles he had, when they'd gathered on the night after he'd got back when the family committee had met to organise it all.

There had been lots to decide.

'Do we have drummers?'

'Of course. This is important. *He* is important.'

'Grade A. Definitely Grade A.'

'These drummers are not cheap. Their damn costumes alone are a fortune.'

'I think they should come *with* their costumes. It isn't fair. We shouldn't have to pay for their costumes separately.'

'We should have *lots* of drummers!'

And on and on, deep into the night, arguing and getting drunker while the boy listened from his bedroom. Though he didn't understand everything, the passion in the voices of these men had caused excitement to swell in his chest. Yes, and an equal measure of dread to press down on it, like one of the huge flat stones that lay along the river bed at the bottom of the valley. He'd lain awake most of that night thinking of his friends, his *age-mates* in the other villages, wondering if they were feeling the same thing.

'All set, boy,' Uncle Joseph said.

Uncle Francis handed him the head-dress, rubbed the back of his neck. 'Feeling fit?'

Outside, he was greeted with cheers and whoops. This was the last day of gathering and there was more noise, more gaiety than there had been on any day previously. This was the eve of it all; the final, glorious push.

He took his place in the middle of the group, acknowledged the greetings of his brothers, uncles, and cousins whose names he could never remember. Though no one was dressed as extravagantly as he was, everyone had made the necessary effort. No man or boy was without beads and bells. The older ones were all draped in animal skins – monkey, zebra and lion. All had painted faces and strips of brightly coloured cloth attached to the edges of their leather vests.

A huge roar went up as the first drum was struck. A massive bass drum, its rhythm like a giant heartbeat. The smaller drums joined then, and the whistles, and the yelps of the women and children watching from the doorways of houses, waving the gatherers goodbye.

The boy cleared his throat and spat into the dirt. He let out a long, high note, listened to it roar away across the valley. The rhythm became more complex, more frantic, and he picked up his knees in time to it, the beads rattling on his legs and the shells clattering against the belt around his waist.

He began to dance.

The procession started to move. A carnival, a travelling circus, a hundred or more bare feet slapping into the dirt in time to the drummers. A cloud of dust rose up behind them as they picked up speed, moving away along the hard, brown track that snaked out of the village.

The mottled grey of the slabs was broken only by the splotches of dog-shit brown and dandelion yellow.

Vincent looked up from the floor of the walkway.

The eyes of the two taller boys darted between his face and that of their friend. It seemed to Vincent that they were waiting to be told what to do. They were looking for some sort of signal.

The boy in the cap raised his eyes up to Vincent's. He took a long, slow swig from his bottle, h

gaze not shifting from Vincent's face. Then, he snatched the bottle from his lips, wiped a hand across his mouth and glared, as if suddenly affronted.

'What?'

Vincent smiled, shook his head. 'I didn't say anything.'

'Yes, you fucking did.'

The boy with the shaved head took a step forward. 'What did you say, you cheeky black fucker?'

The smaller boy nodded, pleased, and took another swig. Vincent shrugged, feeling the tremble in his right leg, pressing a straight arm hard against it.

'Listen, I don't want any trouble. I'm just trying to get home.'

Home.

Vincent blinked and saw his brother's face, the skin taken off his cheek and one eye swollen shut. He saw his mother's face as she stood at the window all the next afternoon, staring out across the dusty carriageway towards the lorry park and the floodlights beyond. He saw her face when she turned to him finally, and spoke.

'We're moving,' she'd said.

One more blink and he saw the resignation that had returned to her face after a day doing the maths; scanning newspapers, and estate agents' details from Greenwich and Blackheath. As the idea of moving *anywhere* was quickly forgotten.

'I've already told you,' the boy with the bottle said. 'If you're so desperate, just go round.'

Vincent saw the face of his father then. As it had been that day when his brother had come home bleeding, and then, as he imagined it to have been twenty-five years before. In a country Vincent had only ever seen pictures of.

The boy sat at the back of the house, beneath the striped awning that his father had put above his bedroom window. Rose rubbed ointment on to his blisters. They stared across the valley at the sun dropping down behind the mountain, the slopes cobalt blue beneath a darkening sky.

He knew that they should not have been sitting together, that his uncles would not have approved. Contact with young women was frowned upon in the week leading up to the ritual. He would regret that, his uncles would have said, in the days afterwards, in the healing time after the ceremony. 'Talk to young women,' Joseph had told him, 'let them smile at you now, and shake their hips, and you will get your pay.'

He didn't care. He had known Rose since before he could walk and besides, Joseph, Francis and the others would be insensible by now. They had sat down around the pot as soon as they had finished eating supper. Talking about the day, filling in the elders on how 'the boy' was doing, and getting the boy slowly drunker. Sucking up powerful mouthfuls of home-brew from the pot through long, bamboo straws.

The boy had watched them for a while, no longer jealous, as he would have been before. Once it was all over, he would have earned the right to sit down and join them.

'Fine, but not yet you haven't,' Rose had said when he'd mentioned it to her.

It had been a hard day and the boy was utterly exhausted. He reckoned they had danced twenty miles or more, visited a dozen villages, and he had sung his heart and his throat out every step of the way. He was proud of his song, had been since he'd written it months before. Even Rose had been forced to concede that it was pretty good. He'd practiced it every day, knowing there was prestige and status attached to the best song, the best performance. He'd given that performance a hundred times in the last week and now his voice was as ragged as the soles of his feet.

It had been a successful day too. Uncle Philip had not announced the final tally, but it had

certainly been a decent haul. Relatives close and distant in each homestead had come forward dutifully with gifts: earthenware dishes piled high with cash; chickens or a goat from cousins; catt from those of real importance. Philip had made a careful note of who'd given what, in the book th was carried with them as they criss-crossed the district, each village ready to welcome them, each ab to hear them coming from a mile or more away.

Everyone had been more than generous. By sundown the following day, the boy would be a ric man.

'Are you scared?' Rose asked.

He winced as she dropped his foot to the floor. 'No,' he said.

The boy wasn't sure why he lied. Being frightened was fine, it was *showing* the fear that w unacceptable, that would cost you. He remembered the things that had scared him the most that da scared him far more than what was to come the following afternoon. He had been sitting with th elders in the village where his father had been born. Squatting in the shade, stuffed full of roasted go and green bananas, with barely the energy to nod as each piece of advice was given, each simp lesson handed out.

'You will not fear death.'

'You will defend your village against thieves.'

Then he'd been handed the baby.

'There are times when your wife will be sick, and you must look after yourself and yo children.'

'You will learn to cook.'

'You will learn to keep a fire burning all day.'

They roared as the baby began to piss on his lap, told him it was good luck. They were st laughing as the boy danced his way out of the village. All he could think about, as he began his sor again, was how being unafraid of death and of thieves sounded easy compared with taking care children.

He thought about telling Rose this, but instead told her about what had happened in the fir village they'd visited that day. Something funny and shocking. A distant cousin of his father's ha been discovered hiding in the fields on the outskirts of the village. Trying to dodge the handover of gift was a serious matter and not only had the offering been taken from him by force, but he ha brought shame upon himself and the rest of his family.

'Can you believe it?' the boy said. 'That man was Grade A! Cowering in the tall grass like woman, to avoid handing over a bowl. A *bowl* for heaven's sake.'

Rose pushed her shoulder against his. 'So, you think *you're* going to be Grade A? Grade maybe? What d'you think, boy?'

He shrugged. He knew what he was hoping for. All he could be certain about was that this was th last time anybody would call him 'boy'.

The one with the bottle stood a foot or so forward from his two friends. He reached over his should for the lit cigarette that he knew would be there, took three quick drags and handed it back. 'Wh team do you support anyway?'

'Fucking Man U, I bet.'

For a moment, Vincent thought about lying. Giving them their own team's name. He knew th he'd be caught out in a second. 'I don't follow a team.'

'Right. Not an *English* team.'

'Not any team,' Vincent said.

‘Some African team, yeah? Kicking a fucking coconut around.’

‘Bongo Bongo United FC!’

‘“Kicking a coconut”, that’s classic.’

‘Headers must be a nightmare, yeah?’

The skinny one and the one with the shaved head began to laugh. They pursed their lips and stuck out their bum-fluffy chins. They pretended to scratch their armpits.

‘You know what FC stands for don’t you? Fucking coon.’

Vincent looked away from them. He heard the monkey noises begin softly, then start to grow louder.

‘Look at him,’ the one in the cap said. ‘He’s shitting himself.’ He said something else after that but Vincent didn’t hear it.

Dawn, at the river, on the final morning.

Dotted for a mile or more along the flat, brown riverbank were the other groups. Some were smaller than his own, while others must have numbered a hundred, but at the centre of each stood one of the boy’s age-mates. Each ready to connect with the past, to embrace the future. Each asking for the strength to endure what lay ahead of him.

The boy was called forward by an elder. As he took his first steps, he glanced sideways, saw his age-mates along the riverbank moving in a line together towards the water.

This was the preparation.

In the seconds he spent held beneath the water, he wondered whether a cry would be heard if he were to let one out. He imagined it rising up to the surface, the bubbles bursting in a series of tiny screams, each costing him grades.

He emerged from the river purified and ready to be painted with death.

The sun was just up but already fierce, and the white mud was baked hard within a minute or two of being smeared across his face and chest and belly. The mist was being burned away and looking along the bank, the boy saw a row of pale statues. A long line of ghosts in the buttery sunlight.

He watched an old man approach each figure, as one now approached him. The elder took a mouthful of beer from a pumpkin gourd and spat, spraying it across the boy’s chest. The beer ran in rivulets down the shell of dried mud, as prayers were said and his uncles stepped towards him.

The group that had been nearest to him jogged past, already finished, and he looked at his age-mate, caked in white mud as he was. The boy had known him, as he’d known most of them, for all their sixteen years, but his friend was suddenly unrecognisable. It was not the mask of mud. It was the eyes that stared out from behind it. It was the eyes that were suddenly different.

The boy was nudged forward, was handed his knife, and the group began loping away in the same direction as his friend. Drumming again now, and singing, heading for the marketplace. All of them, all the ghost-boys, moving towards the moment when they would die and come back to life.

‘Shut up!’ Vincent shouted.

After a moment or two, the skinny one and the one with the shaved head stopped making the monkey noises, but only after a half-glance in their direction from the one in the cap.

‘Turn your pockets out,’ he said.

Vincent’s hands were pressed hard against his legs to keep them still. He slowly brought each of them up to his pockets, slipped them inside.

‘Maybe we’ll let you *pay* to go home. Let me see what you’ve got.’

Vincent's left hand came out empty. His right emerged clutching the change from his train ticket. He opened his hand and the one in the cap leaned forward to take a look.

'Fuck that, mate. Where's the notes?'

Vincent shook his head. 'This is all I've got.'

'You're a liar. Where's your wallet?'

Vincent said nothing. He closed his hand around the coins and thrust his fist back into his trouser pocket.

The one in the cap took a step towards him. He was no more than a couple of feet away. 'Don't piss me about. I don't like it, yeah?'

He could easily turn and go round...

'Where's his phone?' the skinny one said.

'Get his fucking phone, man. They always have wicked phones.'

The one in the cap held out his hand. 'Let's have it.'

It suddenly seemed to Vincent that the phone might be the way out of it, his way past them. Handing it over, giving them something and then trying to get past was probably a good idea.

The mobile was snatched from his grasp the second he'd produced it. The one in the cap turned and swaggered back towards his friends. They cheered as he held it up for them to look at.

The three gathered around to examine the booty and Vincent saw a gap open up between the first right bollard and the wall. He thought about making a run for it. If he could stay ahead of them for just a minute, half a minute maybe, he would be virtually home. He reckoned he could outrun the two bigger ones anyway. Perhaps his mother or father, one of his brothers might see him coming.

He took a tentative step forward.

The one in the cap wheeled round suddenly, clutching the phone. 'Piece of cheap shit.' His arm snapped back, then forward and Vincent watched the phone explode against the wall, shattering into pieces of multi-coloured plastic.

The crack of the phone against the bricks changed something.

By the time Vincent looked again the gap had been filled. The three stood square on to him, their bodies stiff with energy despite their efforts to appear relaxed.

The space between them all was suddenly charged.

Vincent had no idea how he looked to them, what his face said about how he felt at that moment. He looked at *their* faces and saw hatred and excitement and expectation. He also saw fear.

'Last chance,' the one in the cap said.

The boy was stunned by the size of the crowd, though it was nothing unusual. He could remember when he'd been one of the onlookers himself as a child, thinking that there couldn't possibly be that many people in the whole world. Today, as at the same moment every year, those that could not get a clear view were standing on tables and other makeshift platforms. They were perched on roofs and clustered together in the treetops.

He and his age-mates were paraded together, one final time, carried aloft like kings. His eyes locked for a few seconds with a friend as they passed each other.

Their Adam's apples were like wild things in their throats.

While the boy moved on shoulders above the teeming mass of bodies, the dancing and the drumming grew more frenzied. Exhausted, he summoned the strength to sing one final time, which below him the basket was passed around and each relative given a last chance to hand over money or pledge another gift.

Now, it was only the fizzing in the boy's blood that was keeping him upright. There were

moments – a sickening wave of exhaustion, a clouding of his vision as he reached for a high note when he was sure he was about to pass out, to topple down and be lost or trampled to death. He was tempted to close his eyes and let it happen.

At the moment when the noise and the heat and the *passion* of the crowd was at its height, the boy suddenly found himself alone with Joseph and Francis at the edge of the marketplace. There was space around him as he was led along a track towards a row of undecorated huts.

‘Are you a woman?’ Joseph asked.

‘No,’ the boy said.

The boy wondered if thinking about his mother and father made him one. He knew that they would be waiting, huddled together among the coffee plants, listening for the signal that it was over. Did wishing that he was with them, even for the few moments it would take to shake his father’s hand and smell his mother’s neck, make him less than Grade A?

‘Are you a woman?’ Francis repeated.

‘No!’ the boy shouted.

His uncles stepped in front of him and pushed open a door to one of the peat latrines.

‘This will be your last chance,’ Joseph said.

The boy moved inside quickly, dropped his shorts and squatted above the hole formed by the square of logs. He looked up at the grass roof, then across at his uncles who had followed him inside. He knew that they had sworn to stay with him until the final moment, but honestly, what did they think he was going to do? Did they think he would try to kill himself by diving head first into the latrine?

Did they think he would try to run?

Joseph and Francis smiled as the shit ran out of him like water.

‘Better now than later,’ Francis said.

The boy knew that his uncle was right.

He stood and wiped himself off. He felt no shame, no embarrassment at being watched. He was no more or less than a slave to it now.

A slave to the ritual.

The beer can hit him first, bouncing off his shoulder. It was almost empty, and Vincent was far more concerned by the beer that had sprayed onto his cheek and down his shirt. The can was still clattering at his feet when the cigarette fizzed into his chest. He took a step back, smacking away the sparks, listening to the skinny one and the one with the shaved head jabbering.

‘I don’t believe it, he’s still fucking here.’

‘Is he? It’s getting dark, I can’t see him if he isn’t smiling.’

‘He said he wasn’t looking for trouble.’

‘Well he’s going to get a fucking slap.’

‘He’s just taking the piss now.’

‘We gave him every chance.’

‘They’re *all* taking the piss.’

‘He’s the one that’s up for it, if you ask me. It’s *him* who’s kicking off, don’t you reckon? He could have walked away and he just fucking stood there like he’s in a trance. He’s trying to face up to it, down, the twat. Yeah? Don’t you reckon?’

‘Come on then.’

‘Let’s fucking well. Have. It.’

Vincent became aware that he was shifting his weight slowly from one foot to the other, that his fists were clenched, that there was a tremor running through his gut.

A hundred yards away, on the far side of the estate, he saw a figure beneath a lamppost. He

watched it move inside the cone of dirty orange light. Vincent wondered if whoever it was would come if he shouted.

His eyes darted back to the boy in the cap, and to the boy's hand, which tilted slowly as he emptied out what drink there was left in his bottle.

The noise in the marketplace died as each one stepped forward, then erupted again a minute or two later when the ritual had been completed.

It was the boy's turn.

The crowd had moved back to form a tunnel down which he walked, trance-like, his uncle slightly behind. He tried to focus on the two red splodges at the far end of the tunnel and when his vision cleared he saw the faces of the cutters for the first time. Their red robes marked them out as professionals – men who travelled from village to village, doing their jobs and moving on. They were highly skilled, and had to be. There were stories, though the boy had never seen such a thing happen, of cutters being set upon by a crowd and killed if a hand was less than steady; if a boy were to die because of one of them.

The boy stopped at the stone, turned to the first cutter and handed over his knife. He had sharpened it every day on the soft bark of a rubber tree. He had confidence in the blade.

In three swift strokes, the knife had sliced away the fabric of the boy's shorts. All he could feel was the wind whispering at the top of his legs. All he could hear was the roaring of the blood, loud as the river, inside his head.

He was offered a stick to clutch, to brace against the back of his neck and cling onto. This was the first test, and with a small shake of the head it was refused. No Grade A man would accept this offer.

He was hard as stone.

His hands were taken, pressed into a position of prayer and placed against his right cheek. His eyes widened, and watered, fixed on the highest point of a tree at the far end of the marketplace.

Repeating it to himself above the roaring of the river. *Hard as stone.*

The boy knew that this was the moment when he would be judged. This was everything – when the crowd, when his family would be watching for a sign of fear. For blinking, for shaking, for shitting

...

He felt the fingers taking the foreskin, stretching it.

Focused on the tree ... chalk-white ghost-boy ... stiff and still as any statue.

He felt the weight of the blade, cold and quick. Heavy, then heavier and he *heard* the knife pass through the skin. A boom and then a rush...

This was when a Grade A man might prove himself, jumping and rubbing at his bloody manhood. The crowd would count the jumps, clap and cheer as those very special ones asked for alcohol to be poured into the wound.

The boy was happy to settle for Grade B. His eyes flicked to his uncle Joseph, who signalled for the second cutter to come forward. The knife was handed across and with three further cuts the membrane, the 'second skin' was removed.

A whistle was blown and the boy started slightly at the explosion of noise from the crowd. It was all over in less than a minute.

Everything took on a speed – underwater slow or blink-quick – a dreamlike quality of its own as the pain began.

A cloth was wrapped around the boy's shoulders.

He was gently pushed back on to a stool.

He lowered his eyes and watched his blood drip onto the stone at his feet.

There was a burning then, and a growing numbness as ground herbs were applied, and the boy sat waiting for the bleeding to stop. He felt elated. He stared down the tunnel towards the far side of the marketplace, towards what lay ahead.

He saw himself lying on a bed of dried banana leaves, enjoying the pain. Only a man, he knew would feel that pain. Only a man would wake, sweating in the night, crying out in agony after a certain sort of dream had sent blood to where it was not wanted.

He saw himself healed, walking around the marketplace with other men. They were laughing and talking about the different grades that their friends had reached. They were looking at women and enjoying the looks that they got back.

The boy looked down the tunnel and saw, clearer than anything else, the baby that he'd been handed the day before. He watched it again, happily pissing all over him.

He saw its fat, perfect face as it stared up at him, kicking its legs.

The skinny one and the one with the shaved head were drifting towards him.

Vincent knew that if he turned and ran they would give chase, and if they caught him they would not stop until they'd done him a lot of damage. He felt instinctively that he had a chance of coming out better than that if he stood his ground. Besides, he didn't want to run.

'I bet he's fucking carrying something,' the skinny one said.

The one with the shaved head reached into his jacket pocket, produced a small, plastic craft knife. 'Blacks always carry blades.'

Vincent saw the one with the cap push himself away from the bollard he was leaning against. He watched him take a breath, and drop his arm, and break the bottle against the bollard with a flick of his wrist.

Vincent took a step away, turned and backed up until he felt the wall of the block behind him.

Hard as stone ...

'Stupid fucker.'

'He can't run. His arse has gone.'

'I bet he's filling his pants.'

Vincent showed them nothing. As little as his father had shown when the blade sang against his skin. He tensed his body but kept his face blank.

'Three points in the bag, lads,' the one with the broken bottle said. 'Easy home win.'

Vincent had learned a lot about what you gave away and what you kept hidden. They could have his phone and whatever money they could find. He would give them a little blood and a piece of his flesh if it came to it, and he would try his hardest to take some of theirs.

Vincent looked down the tunnel and saw them coming. He would not show them that he was afraid though. He would not give them that satisfaction.

He was Grade A.

STROKE OF LUCK

So many things that could have been different.

An almost infinite number of them: the flight of the ball; the angle of the bat; the movement of his feet as he skipped down the pitch. The weather, the time, the day of the week, the whatever.

The smallest variance in any one of these things, or in the way that each connected to the other at the crucial moment, and nothing would have happened as it did. An inch another way, or a second, or a step and it would have been a very different story.

Of course, it's *always* a different story; but it isn't always a story with bodies.

He wasn't even a good batsman – a tail-ender for heaven's sake – but this once, he got everything right. The footwork and the swing were spot on. The ball flew from the meat of the bat, high above the heads of the fielders into the long grass at the edge of the woodland that fringed the pitch on two sides.

Alan and another player had been looking for a minute or so, using hands and feet to move aside the long grass at the base of an oak tree, when she stepped from behind it as if she'd been waiting for them.

'Don't you have any spare ones?'

Alan looked at her for a few long seconds before answering. She was tall, five seven or eight feet with short dark hair. Her legs were bare beneath a cream-coloured skirt and her breasts looked a good size under a sleeveless top. She looked Mediterranean, Alan thought. Sophisticated.

'I suppose we must have, somewhere,' he said.

'So why waste time looking? Are they expensive?'

Alan laughed. 'We're only a bunch of medics. It costs a small fortune just to hire the pitch.'

'You're a doctor?'

'A neurologist. A consultant neurologist.'

She didn't look as impressed as he'd hoped.

'Got it.'

Alan turned to see his team-mate brandishing the ball, heard the cheers from those on the pitch as it was thrown across.

He turned back. The woman's arms were folded and she held a hand up to shield her eyes from the sun.

'Will you be here long?' Alan said. She looked hesitant. He pointed back towards the pitch. 'We've only got a couple of wickets left to take.'

She dropped her hand, smiled without looking at him. 'You'd better get on with it then.'

'Listen, we usually go and have a couple of drinks afterwards, in the Woodman up by the tub. D'you fancy coming along? Just for one, maybe?'

She looked at her watch. Too quickly, Alan thought, to have even seen what time it read.

'I don't have a lot of time.'

He nodded, stepping backwards towards the pitch. 'Well, you know where we are.'

The Woodman was only a small place, and the dozen or so players – some from either team – took up most of the back room.

'I'm Rachel, by the way,' she said.

'Alan.'

'Did you win, Alan?'

'Yes, but no thanks to me. The other team weren't very good.'

‘You’re all doctors, right?’

He nodded. ‘Doctors, student doctors, friends of doctors. Anybody who’s available if we’re short. It’s as much a social thing as anything else.’

‘Plus the sandwiches you get at half time.’

Alan put on a posh voice. ‘We call it the tea interval,’ he said.

Rachel eked out a dry white wine and was introduced. She met Phil Hendricks, a pathologist who did a lot of work with the police and told her a succession of grisly stories. She met a dull cardiologist whose name she instantly forgot, a male nurse called Sandy who was at great pains to point out that not all male nurses were gay, and a slimy anaesthetist whose breath would surely have done the trick were he ever to run short of gas.

While Rachel was in the Ladies, a bumptious paediatrician Alan didn’t like a whole lot dropped a fat hand onto his shoulder.

‘Sodding typical. You do bugger all with the bat and then score *after* the game!’

The others enjoyed the joke. Alan glanced round and saw that Rachel was just coming out of the toilet. He hoped that she hadn’t seen them all laughing.

‘Do you want another one of those?’ Alan pointed at her half-empty glass before downing what was left of his lager.

She didn’t, but followed him to the bar anyway. Alan leaned in close to her and they talked while he repeatedly failed to attract the attention of the surly Irish barmaid.

‘I don’t really know a lot of them, to tell you the truth. There’s only a couple I ever see outside of the games.’

‘There’s always tossers in any group,’ she said. ‘It’s the price you pay for company.’

‘What do you do, Rachel?’

She barked out a dry laugh. ‘Not a great deal. I studied.’

It sounded like the end of a conversation, and for a while they said nothing. Alan guessed that they were about the same age. She was definitely in her early thirties, which meant that she had to have graduated at least ten years before. She had to have done something, had to *do* something. Unless of course she’d been a mature student. It seemed a little too early to pry.

‘What do you do to relax? Do you see mates, or ...?’

She nodded towards the bar and he followed her gaze to the barmaid who stood, finally ready to take the order. Alan reeled off a long list of drinks and they watched while the tray that was placed on the bar began to fill up with glasses. Alan turned and opened his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it.

‘I’d better be getting off.’

‘Right. I don’t suppose I could have your phone number?’

She gave a non-committal hum as she swallowed what was left of her wine. Alan handed a twenty-pound note across the bar, grinned at her.

‘Mobile?’

‘I never have it switched on.’

‘I could leave messages.’

She took out a pen and scribbled the number on the back of a dog-eared beermat.

Alan picked up the tray of drinks just as the barmaid proffered him his fifty pence change. Unable to take it, Alan nodded to Rachel. She leaned forward and grabbed the coin.

‘Stick it in the machine on your way out,’ he said.

Alan had just put the tray down on the table when he heard the repetitive chug and clink of the fruit machine paying out its jackpot. He strode across to where Rachel was scooping out a handful of ten pence pieces.

'You jammy sod,' he said. 'I've been putting money into that thing for weeks.'

~~Then she turned, and Alan saw that her face had reddened. 'You have it,' she said. She thrust the~~ handful of coins at him, then, as several dropped to the floor, she spun round flustered and tipped the whole lot back into the payout tray.

'I can't ... I haven't got anywhere to put them all.'

She'd gone by the time Alan had finished picking coins off the carpet.

It didn't take too long for Rachel to calm down. She marched down the hill towards the tube station, her control returning with every step.

She'd been angry with herself for behaving as she had in the pub, but what else could she do? There was no way she could take all that loose change home with her, was there?

As she walked on she realised that actually, there *had* been things she could have done, and she chided herself for being so stupid. She could have asked the woman behind the bar to change the coins into notes. Those were more easily hidden. She could have grabbed the coins, left with a smile and made some beggar's day.

She needed to remember. It was important to be careful, but she always had options.

She reached into her handbag for the mints. Popped one into her mouth to mask the smell of the wine. The taste of it.

As she walked down the steps to Highgate station, she dropped a hand into her pocket, groping around until she could feel her wedding ring hot against the palm of her hand. There was always the delicious, terrifying second or two, as her fingers moved against the lining of her pocket, when she thought she might have lost it, but it was always there, waiting for her.

She stood on the platform, the ring tight in her fist until the train came in. Then, just as she always did, she slipped the ring, inch by dreadful inch, back on to her finger.

Lee pushed his chicken Madras round the plate until it was cold. He'd lost his appetite anyway. He'd ordered the food before the row and now he didn't feel like it, so that was another thing that was Rachel's fault.

She'd be in the bedroom by now, crying.

She never cried when it was actually happening. He knew it was because she didn't want to give him the satisfaction, or some such crap. That only proved what a stupid cow she was, because he couldn't stand to see her cry, to see any woman cry, and maybe if she *did* cry once in a while he might ease off a bit.

No, she saved it up for afterwards and he could hear it now, coming through the ceiling and putting him off his dinner.

The row had been about the same thing they were all about.

Her, taking the piss.

He'd backed down on this afternoon walking business, on her going out to the woods of a few minutes' afternoon on her own. He'd given in to her, and today she'd been gone nearly six hours. Half the day and no word of an apology when she'd eventually come strolling through the front door.

So, it had kicked off.

Lee was bright, always had been. He knew damn well that it wasn't *just* about her staying out of the house too long. He knew it all came down to the pills.

There'd been a lot more rowing, a lot more crying in the bedroom since he'd found that little packet tucked behind her panties at the back of a drawer. He was clever enough to see the irony in the

as well. Contraceptive pills, hidden among the sexy knickers he'd bought for her.

~~He'd gone mental when he'd found them, obviously. Hadn't they agreed that they were going to start trying for a kid? That everything would be better once they were a family? He was furious at the deceit, at the fool she'd made of him, at the time and effort he'd wasted in shafting her all those weeks beforehand.~~

There'd been a lot more rowing since.

Christ, he loved her though. She wouldn't get to him so much if it wasn't for that, wouldn't wind him up like she did. He could feel it surging through him as he lost his temper and it caused his whole body to shake when it was finished, and she crawled away to cry where he couldn't see her.

He hoped she knew it – now, with her face buried in a sopping pillow – he hoped she knew how much he loved her.

Lee dropped his fork and slid his hand beneath the plate, wiggling his fingers until it sagged and balanced on his palm. Then he jerked his forearm and sent the plate fast across the kitchen.

Watched his dinner run down the wall.

He watched them.

He lay on the grass, just another sun-worshipper, with his arm folded across his head he spied on them through a fringed curtain of underarm hair. He watched them from his favourite bench, his face hidden behind a newspaper, his back straight against the small, metal plaque.

FOR ERIC AND MURIEL, WHO LOVED THESE WOODS

He watched them, and he waited.

He watched *her*, of course, at other times, too. He'd followed her home that very first day and now he would spend hours outside the house in Barnet, imagining her inside in the dark.

He couldn't say why he'd chosen her; couldn't really say why he'd chosen any of them. Something just clicked. It was all pretty random at the end of the day, just luck – good or bad depending on which way you looked at it.

When he was caught, and odds on he would be, he would tell them that and nothing else.

It all came down to chance.

They'd begun to spend their afternoons together. They walked every inch of Highgate Woods, and picnics by the tree where they'd first met, and one day they held hands across a weathered, wooden table outside the cafeteria.

'Why can't I see you in the evenings?' Alan said.

She winced. 'This is nice, isn't it? Don't rush things.'

'I changed my shifts around so we could see each other during the day. So that we could spend more time together.'

'I never asked you to.'

'There's things I want, Rachel.'

She leered. 'I bet there are.'

'Yes, that. Obviously that, but other things. I want to take you places and meet your friends. I want to come to where you live. I want you to come where *I* live.'

'It's complicated. I told you.'

'You never tell me anything.'

'I'm married, Alan.'

He drew his hand away from hers. He tried, and failed to make light of it. 'Well, that explains

lot.'

~~'I suppose it changes everything, doesn't it?'~~

He looked at her as if she were mad. 'Just a *bit*.'

'I don't see why.'

'For fuck's sake, Rachel.'

'Tell me.'

'I don't ... I wouldn't like it if I was the one married to you, put it that way.'

She looked at the table.

'Don't cry.'

'I'm not crying.'

Alan put a laugh into his voice. 'Besides, he might decide to beat me up.'

Then there *were* tears, and she told him the rest. The babies she didn't want and the bruises you couldn't see, and when it was over Alan reached for her hand and squeezed, and looked at her hard.

'If he touches you again, I'll kill him.'

She appreciated the gesture, but knew it was really no more than that, and she was sad at the hurt she saw in Alan's eyes when she laughed.

Afterwards, Rachel leaned down to pull the sheet back over them. A little shyness had returned, but she was not uncomfortable, or awkward.

'I would tell you how great that was,' she said. 'But I don't want you to get complacent.' She turned on her side to face him, and grinned.

'I was lucky to meet you,' he said. 'That day, looking for the ball.'

'Or *unlucky*.'

He shook his head, ran the back of his hand along her ribcage.

'Did you know that a smile can change the world?' she said. 'Do you know about that idea?'

'Sounds like one of those awful self-help things.'

'No, it's just a philosophy really, based around the randomness of everything. How every action has consequences, you know? How it's connected.' She closed her eyes. 'You smile at someone at the bus stop and maybe that person's mood changes. They're reminded of a friend they haven't spoken to in a long time and they decide to ring them. This third person, on the other side of the world, answers his mobile phone doing ninety miles an hour on the motorway. He's so thrilled to hear from his old friend that he loses concentration and ploughs into the car in front, killing a man who was on his way to plant a bomb that would have killed a thousand people.'

Alan puffed out his cheeks, let the air out slowly. 'What would have happened if I'd scowled at the bloke at the bus stop?'

Rachel opened her eyes. 'Something else would have happened.'

'Right, like I'd've got punched.'

She laughed, but Alan looked away, his mind quickly elsewhere. 'I want to talk to you later,' he said. 'I want to talk to you tonight.'

She sighed. 'I've told you, it's not possible.'

'After what you told me earlier, I want to call you. I want to know you're OK. There must be some way. I'll call at seven o'clock. Rachel? At exactly seven.'

She closed her eyes again, then, fifteen seconds later she nodded slowly.

It was a minute before Alan spoke again. 'Only trouble is, you smile at anyone at a bus stop in London, they think you're a nutter.'

This time they both laughed, then rolled together. Then made love again.

When they'd got their breath back they talked about all manner of stuff. Films and football and music.

Nothing that mattered.

Alan lay in bed after Rachel had left and thought about all the things that had been said and done that day. He wanted so much to do something to help her, to make her feel better, but for all his bravado and for all his heroic notions, the best that he could come up with was a present.

He knew straightaway what he could give her, and where to find it.

It was in a shoebox at the back of a cupboard stuffed with bundles of letters, a bag of old tools and other odds and sods that he'd collected from his father's place after the old man had died.

Alan hadn't looked at the bracelet in a couple of years, had forgotten the weight of it. It was gold or so he presumed, and heavy with charms. He remembered the feel of Rachel's body against his fingers – her shoulder-blades and hips – as he ran them around the smooth body of the tiger, the edge of the key, the rims of the tiny train wheels that turned.

After his father's death, Alan had spoken to his mother about the bracelet. He asked her if she knew where it had come from. The skin around her jaw had tightened as she'd said she hardly remembered it, then in the next breath that she wanted nothing to do with the bloody thing.

Alan put two and two together and realised how stupid he'd been. He knew about his father's affairs and guessed that, years before, the bracelet had been a failed peace offering of some sort. It might even have been something that he'd originally bought for one of his mistresses. His father had been a forensic pathologist and Alan was amazed at how a man who exercised such professional skill could be so clumsy when it came to the rest of his life.

It wasn't surprising that his mother had reacted as she had, that she'd wanted no part of the charm bracelet. It had become tainted.

Alan was not superstitious. He sensed that Rachel would like it. He wouldn't give it to her as she was though. He would make it truly hers before he gave it.

He knew exactly what charm he wanted to add.

From Muswell Hill it was a five minute bus ride to Highgate tube. Rachel leaned back against the side of the shelter. Her hair was still wet from the shower she'd taken at Alan's flat.

She'd thought so often about how she might feel afterwards. It had been a vital part of the fantasy, not just with Alan but with other men she'd seen, but never spoken to. The sex had been easy to imagine of course. It had been gentler than she was used to and had lasted longer, but the mechanics were more or less the same. Where she'd been wrong was in imagining the feelings that would come when she'd actually done it. She'd been certain that she'd feel frightened, but she didn't. Fear was familiar to her, and its absence was unmistakable. Heady.

She waited a couple of minutes before giving up on the bus and heading for the station on foot. Had there been anybody at the bus stop, she might well have smiled at them.

Lee didn't think that he asked too much. Not after a long day talking mortgages to morons and assuring mousey newlyweds that damp was easily sorted. At the end of it, all he wanted was his dinner and some fucking comfort.

He couldn't stand her so cheerful.

Taking off his jacket and tie, opening a beer and asking just what she was so bloody chirpy about.

Had she been up to those woods again?

Yes.

~~Who with?~~

Don't be silly, Lee.

Sucking off tramps in the bushes, I'll bet.

Then she'd laughed at him. No outrage like there should have been. No anger at his filthy suggestions, at the stupid suspicions that he'd only half torted up as a joke.

A jab to the belly and another to the tits had shut her up and put her down on the floor. Now, he straddled her chest, knees pressed down on to her arms, his hands pulling at his own hair in frustration.

'We were going to do the business later on. I was well up for it and tonight could have been the night we did something special. Made a new life.'

'Lee, please.'

'You. Fucking. Spoiled. It.'

'We can still do it, Lee. Let's go upstairs now. I'm really horny, Lee.'

He shook his head, disgusted, gathering the spit into his mouth. She knew what was coming, he could see it in her eyes and he waited for her to try and turn her head away as he leaned down and pushed the saliva between his teeth. Instead, she just closed her eyes, and he thought he saw something like a smile as he let a thick string of beery spit drop slowly down on to her face.

As soon as the seven o'clock news had begun, Alan reached for the phone and dialled the number.

It was answered almost immediately, but nobody spoke.

Alan whispered, realised as soon as he had that he was being stupid. He wasn't the one who needed to be secretive.

'Rachel, it's me...'

Suddenly, there was a noise, above the hiss and crackle on the line. It was a guttural sound, then echoed. That took him a few moments to identify. An animal sound; a gulp and a grind, a splutter and a swallow. It was the sound of someone sobbing uncontrollably but trying with every ounce of strength to assert control. Trying desperately not to be heard.

Alan sat up straight, pressed the phone hard to his ear.

'Rachel, I'm here, ok? I'm not going anywhere.'

He watched the comings and goings with something like amusement.

For a fortnight he watched her leave the house in Barnet mid-morning, then come home again late-afternoon. He stayed with her most of the day when he could, saw her meet him in the woods, sometimes go straight to his flat when they couldn't be arsed with preliminaries.

When they wanted to get straight down to it.

He watched her leave the flat, eyes bright and hair wet. The smell of one man scrubbed away before she went home to another.

He wondered if the man he saw climbing into the silver sports car every morning knew that he was a cuckold. On a couple of occasions he thought about popping a note under his windscreen to let him know. Just to stir things up a bit.

He hadn't done because he didn't want to do anything that might disturb the routine. Not now that he was ready to take her. Besides, mischief for its own sake was not his thing at all.

Still, he couldn't help but marvel at the things people got up to.

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