

Run

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Eyelevel Books

Five chapter taster!

First published 2013
by Eyelevel Books, Worcester, England
in association with
createspace

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ISBN 978 1902528 755

First edition
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Typeset and Designed by Eyelevel Books.

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The old man sat in the corner, resting his chin on his chest as if fascinated by the small white bone that poked from the front of his coat. Crumbs from his evening meal still clung to his extravagant grey beard; beside him on the floor a bottle of whisky lay empty and forgotten. A long gash beneath his right eye hung open, matted with dried blood and dirt, though it gave him no pain. Rain pattered through the broken window above him, turning his threadbare trousers stiff and dark, though he ignored its cold sting, as he ignored everything but that little white bone.

The Old Pirate had come here as September turned to cold October. His bed down behind the loading dock of Sainsbury's was growing too cold and uncomfortable for a man of his advancing years. The grass, once warm and soft, now bore frost in the hours before dawn and he knew he had to find shelter before the weather really closed in. Mason Farm had seemed perfect at the time.

He hadn't even needed to force the door. The small Georgian farm house and the barn across the yard – buildings that had once hummed with life – lay abandoned. The front door stood slightly

ajar, the house almost seeming to welcome human company after so many years alone.

Jess and Max stood close at heel, tails between their legs, looking up at him. He swung the door open and looked in.

‘It’s a’right,’ he said, reaching down and fingering Max’s ear affectionately. ‘Better’n town anyway. Keep us body an’ soul a’gether till daffodil day.’

The dark hallway of Mason Farm stood impassively before him, an open invitation.

He could remember a time before the new estate came, before the briars had grown across the footpath and the woods had become a dark impenetrable tangle. He had even done some odd jobs here, back when all this was fields and Wiston was just a quiet farming village – helping herd the cattle in summer, apple picking in autumn, sluicing out the barns in winter, anything to keep him busy and earn him a feed. Then one autumn he had come and the place had been abandoned. The owner had nailed a For Sale sign to the gable wall, packed up his van with whatever he could carry and simply gone. No one knew where; it didn’t matter. What speculation there had been had very soon died, overtaken by fresher village gossip. At first the house was just for sale, then just empty, then just forgotten, remembered only by those in need of shelter for the winter.

So now, nearly two decades after his last visit, the Old Pirate was back. A cold wind sighed through the trees and a sheet of newspaper turned lazily over against an oil drum that stood at the far corner of the house. A window rattled and shuddered in its frame somewhere at the back of the building, but the farmyard was unnaturally quiet. There was no birdsong, no rustling in the undergrowth, no scurry of mice in the barn. Maybe it was more than just the farmer who had left.

He stepped in. For a building so long abandoned, it remained remarkably intact. Stretching along the hall was a filthy carpet;

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the walls retained much of their brown striped wallpaper; and in the kitchen at the end of the hall the sink still had its drainer and a few odd pieces of cutlery standing to attention in a rack. A single white bowl lay beside the taps. The ceiling between the kitchen and the hall sagged a little from the damp that had made its way through the roof over the years but the floor looked safe enough. The house smelled musty, with a tang of old fires and a heavy, rich smell that might have been a rat or a cat mouldering in an upstairs corner.

He had no intention of risking the stairs. He had not slept in an upstairs room in nearly twenty years and he didn't fancy the idea of breaking the habit – and probably his neck – now. A brief look into the room to the right of the hall revealed a bow in the ceiling that he guessed would not survive the winter, so he settled for the room on the left. The ivy that half-covered the window made it cool and dark and the accompanying damp had buckled the floorboards, but there was a fireplace, space for his bed and a door to close on the encroaching winter.

That first night he lit a fire when he judged the people in the estate beyond the railway would be asleep, when the smoke from the chimney would not attract unwanted attention. He reheated the scraps scrounged from the restaurant bins and ate by the light of a single candle. As the wind whistled softly through the broken window he huddled closer to the fire and pretended this was home.

But this was not a homey place. His dogs knew it. From the first moment they had entered the hallway they had whimpered softly and looked at each other for reassurance. As night drew in they had retreated, hunch-backed and pathetic, to the barn. They would not spend a night in here. They could hear the sounds; they could feel the things that crawled beneath the floorboards and behind the walls.

The Pirate loaded lumps of damp wood found in the barn

onto the fire to keep it smouldering through the night, then spread his cardboard-and-blanket bed on the floor as close to it as he dared. The clouds parted and through the cobwebbed and filthy window he could see the trees in the wood swaying. He shivered and drew his coat tighter around him. Come spring he could move on. Next year he would find somewhere better. But for now he had no choice.

Beggars can't be choosers.

He slept fitfully that first night, waking often and turning the blackening logs this way and that to coax life back into the fire. For a long time he sat watching the flames gutter and creep around the wood, or stared out of the window as the moon came and went behind the clouds. He was bone-cold and his instincts told him that this was no longer a house for the living. There was something dark and dreadful about Mason Farm, especially without Jess and Max to assure him he was not alone. He drifted into a restless sleep around two as the fire danced shadows across his face.

In the morning he rose and stretched, his joints cracking and popping, but his head clear and his mood much improved. He whistled to his friends in the barn and went into the kitchen.

He turned the tap. It groaned for a moment, then let out a trickle of dust. He should have known it would never be that easy. They must have capped the well when they built the Maybury estate almost ten years earlier.

'Ah well,' he muttered, 'thar'll be a butt. Water's water.'

He retraced his steps of the night before along the hall and out of the front door. Watery sunshine hit him and he smiled for a moment, glad to be alive. The nights might be getting cold, but these October days when the sun shone and the air was still warm made him almost glad he had chosen a life on the open road. After all, he had his faithful companions, and that was really all he needed.

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A chill ran through him. His eyes snapped open and the joyful smile turned to a fixed rictus of alarm. Where *were* his faithful companions?

Jess and Max should have met him in the kitchen. They should at least have met him in the hall, tails wagging, mouths open, ready to give him their usual slobbery kiss good morning. But there was no sign of them, no sound. Nothing stirred in the barn and yet he had the distinct impression that he was being watched.

He whistled through his teeth, the thin airy noise the only sound disturbing the deathly quiet of the farmyard. There was no response. His spine tingled and the flesh on his arms stood up in goosebumps despite the warmth of the sun. He called again, quietly at first, then more forcefully, part annoyed, part frightened. Max could be lazy; he liked a lie-in if he had found a warm nest, but Jess...? She had long since given up on the idea of a regular breakfast, but she had never given up on the Old Pirate. She loved him, and he loved her, and they were always pleased to see each other come morning.

He crept across the weedy gravel drive, his gaze never leaving the black opening of the barn. He called to Jess softly, but nothing moved.

The Old Pirate stood in the doorway and sniffed the air. He could see nothing, hear nothing. Smell was the only sense left and it brought an old familiar scent: a thick, metallic smell, like the palms of his hands after a day collecting coins from passers-by. It was the smell of blood.

‘Jess,’ he hissed. ‘Max. Here boy, come on.’

Nothing.

‘Come on. It’s OK...’

But it wasn’t OK. As his eyes gradually adjusted to the dark he saw the mound over by the back wall.

He took a step over the threshold and darkness closed in

around him. Overhead, the metal roof clicked as the sun warmed it. He looked up instinctively, but saw nothing.

He half shuffled through the years of filth strewn across the barn floor – rotten straw, fragments of brick and concrete, a handful of empty shotgun cartridges, the corpses of spiders, butterflies, beetles. His foot crunched on the skull of a rat, but his eyes never left the dead, unmoving patch of darkness in the corner.

The door behind him moved. A trickle of breeze stirred the dry husks on the floor and the ancient door groaned, a sound like the bellow of a cow in the distance. He pushed the image away. He did not want to remember that. The cows, brought in during the vicious winter of '62, '63. Crowded together against the blizzard outside. The Old Pirate had just been a lad then, but he'd heard the story repeated in fearful whispers through the village. Five cows found mutilated in the barn come morning; three more the next day. Culprit never found.

By the mound he crouched, holding his breath. He reached towards the deep shadows, certain that touch would tell him what sight kept hidden. Certain that he would know by feel alone which one it was – Jess or Max – lying cold and motionless among the dead leaves and spider webs.

His fingers made contact.

Instantly he recoiled, staggering backwards on his heels. Not fur, not even flesh and bone, but material. He reached out again and grabbed the crumpled roll of tarpaulin, pulling it out of the shadows. He let out his breath and almost wept with relief. There was nothing here. Nothing but rumours and old wives' tales. And anyway, what had happened at Mason Farm – if it had happened at all – had been years ago. Whatever had killed those cows would be long gone, like the cattle themselves and the farmer and the water supply.

He flung the tarpaulin away and walked back into the light,

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annoyed at himself for being so foolish, annoyed at Jess and Max for going off to the woods alone. Well, they could find their own breakfast. He was going into town without them.

He left without returning to the house. He pushed his way back through the briars and fallen apple trees to the main road and set off on the three mile walk into town to find breakfast. He looked back, but the dogs had not followed. *Probably rabbittin'*, he thought. *Or dozin' by some ole fox-'ole.*

It was a good day, an Indian summer day, where the shoppers were generous in response to his tuneless tootling on his dented penny-whistle. The only tune he knew end-to-end was *Hey Diddle Diddle*, and by endlessly varying the wrong notes that kept creeping in he could make it last for hours. He made enough by noon to get a proper feed of soup and bread. Having found only half a pizza for breakfast he was heartily glad of its warmth. As evening drew in he cruised the bins behind the row of restaurants just off the High Street and found enough for dinner, and a little extra for Jess and Max (not that they deserved it, the lazy buggers). He set off home with a spring in his step and a warm feeling that only the certainty of meeting old friends again could bring. His dogs would be waiting for him, of that he was sure.

With a glance over his shoulder to see that no one was watching him, he vanished from the pavement into the tangle of undergrowth and made his way back across the fields towards the farm. The sun had long gone and it was almost dark. A cold moon shone yellow above the horizon and he was unnaturally chilled by the time he reached the farmyard.

'Jess! Max!' he called. There was no response. He glanced towards the woods, but it was too dark to see anything. The house stared at him with blank, dead eyes, the ivy on the roof silhouetted against the moon like tangled hair. The front door stood slightly ajar; a mouth gently sucking in the night air. He called again, a forlorn sound witnessed only by himself.

That was when he knew. They might run off in the morning sun, unconcerned and frisky, but they would not be gone from him this long. They should be waiting, hungry and expectant. But they weren't.

Quickly, he walked into the barn. Something overhead rustled then was quiet. He whistled, knowing that he was whistling to himself. Jess and Max were not here, and he knew they had not been here all day.

A dull unfocussed panic began to grip him. He strode back to the house, pausing again to look towards the woods. Every instinct, honed by a lifetime on the streets, told him not to go there, but he had to find his friends. He had to know... If they had gone off rabbiting at first light (and he still clung to that as a possible, if unlikely, explanation), the woods were the best place to start the search. Jess could have been caught in a poacher's snare; Max would wait beside her, wait for the Old Pirate or for some other miraculous intervention.

But he would have barked when I called.

Unless...

He dropped his haul of food on the floor of the front room and scrambled through his bag for matches and the nub of candle he had saved for tonight. In the near complete darkness his hand slipped, dropping the candle on the floor. It rolled away somewhere over by the fireplace. He felt around, panic growing in him, the feeling of being alone more acute than he had felt in years. His fingers found the candle and felt for the wick. An insect – a beetle maybe, or a cockroach – scurried across his fingers and he shook it off. Trembling, he struck the match and the flare of light pushed the darkness away.

He lit the candle and dropped the matchbox into his coat pocket. In the flickering light he saw the white beetle scurry down between the floorboards. He shivered and held the precious light close.

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Outside, the candle did little more than blind him to what lay ahead. He shielded it against the breeze and set off in the direction of the hulking black mass of the wood. Twice he stumbled on tangles of undergrowth that had sprawled out across the old path; twice he nearly lost his nerve and returned to his den in the house. But without Jess and Max, the night would be endless. The old stories of Mason Farm would not leave him alone; they would infect his dreams and drive him into the woods eventually. Unless he could solve the mystery of their disappearance now, he would never find peace to rest. And he could not just leave: if he left now, he would never find the courage to return, and his dogs deserved better than that. No death should pass completely unremarked.

He stopped at the edge of the wood and called softly. Wisps of breath curled up in the candle light and his voice sounded dead, as if he was calling into a bottomless pit.

He stepped in.

Pools of mist rose and fell between the tree trunks, snaking through the brambles and rocks, swallowing his feet. He edged forward with a slow, shuffling gait. Even with a torch he would not have been able to see where he was stepping, and with only the flickering of his candle to guide him, he was terrified of what he might stand on – a rotted-out tree stump or a badger hole, the thick roots of a wild rose or a hidden tussock of grass. He could break an ankle in here as easy as snapping a matchstick.

But what really terrified him, the thing he kept pushing away from his conscious mind, was the thought of standing on something soft, of reaching down into the mist and touching fur. A familiar paw, the solid muscles of a neck, soft floppy ears.

‘Jess!’ he hissed. ‘Max! Oh, come on... come *on!*’

He pushed on into the wood, ducking beneath branches, clambering over deadfall. After a couple of minutes he came to a small clearing. He rested a hand against the cold trunk of a tree

and looked back towards the farmhouse. The familiar and safe old building was lost in the night. It was no more than thirty yards away, but it might as well not have been there at all. With the ground shrouded in mist it was already near-impossible to see the route back out of the woods.

Something behind him hissed, and out of the blackness he caught a glimpse of a small lithe form dart between the trees. The cat bolted straight at him and in his shock he dropped the candle and darkness crashed over him like a wave. The animal brushed his legs and was gone, leaving him standing in stunned silence, the sound of his heart pounding fast and hard in his ears. His skin crawled and he felt deathly cold. Something was watching him. He felt eyes on him, waiting for his next move. He was walking into a trap. Dogs or no dogs, he had to get out of the woods.

He fell to his knees and felt among the wet leaves where he thought the candle had fallen. In the distance he heard the first faint chattering sounds coming from the farm.

He found the candle and gripped it in his teeth as he patted himself down, searching for the matches. The box rattled and he ripped it from his pocket. The chattering sound was growing, seeming to spread out along the path that skirted the woods. With shaking hands he pulled a match out and felt for the telltale knob on the end that would give him light.

He struck it, but it snapped and the bright flare fell into the mist, seeming to hover for a moment like a will-o-the-wisp before winking out. He got another one, but in his haste, he pulled the drawer too far and the matches spilled to the ground. He bit the tip of his tongue hard and tried to stop the shaking in his hands.

All along the edge of the wood he heard them now. Tiny chattering voices, whisper-light and inhuman. In them he heard her name repeated over and over. *Jess, Jess, Jessss*, they said.

He patted the wet leaves, his hands lost in the mist. Keeping

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his eyes on the edge of the wood, he felt a match and quickly fumbled it between his fingers. He struck it but it snapped before even catching light. Again he reached into the ghostly fog. This time he was not so lucky. His previous search had shaken the remaining matches deeper into the leaf-litter and dying weeds and as he frantically searched the ground they were scattering ever further from his grasp.

The sounds were growing louder now. He thought of rats, hungry and excited, chattering and fighting in the darkness. He thought of snakes, writhing and twisting towards him, a monstrous Medusa stalking him through the trees.

He felt another match. Carefully, with agonising care, he felt for its striking tip, cleaned away the damp earth and prayed. This, he knew, would probably be his last chance.

With as much force as he dared, he ripped the match along the sandpaper edge of the box. A sudden, blinding flare filled his vision, then dimmed and wavered. The flame was weak on the damp wood, and as he touched it to the candle's wick it almost died. Somehow, he got the candle to catch and stood up, shielding the precious flame. The voices were still now. Waiting. But close.

That was when he ran, hugging the candle to him and crashing back through the mist and undergrowth towards where he hoped the safety of the farm lay. A tree branch whipped across his face, cutting a deep gouge beneath his eye. He felt the blood begin to pour through his beard but he felt no pain. The only thing that mattered was getting out of this cold blackness.

He stumbled out onto the path, expecting to see rats or snakes, or the imps of Hell itself waiting for him, but the path was clear. The farmyard was silent and as the moon peeped momentarily out from behind a cloud, he saw the way back to his front door was completely deserted.

But he knew they were watching.

He ran into Mason Farm and along the hall to the front room.

He slammed the door behind him and stood with his back against it, breathing hard.

He placed the candle carefully on the mantelpiece and wiped his hand down the gash on his cheek. His face had begun to swell and already the view from his right eye was framed with dark puffy flesh. His fingers probed the area, but with the immediate panic over, the sharp pain that was beginning to bloom made proper investigation impossible. He needed to wash out the cut, but he was not going out into the farmyard in search of water tonight.

He was stuck here for now. In this room he was relatively safe, but he had to make the room as secure as he could.

He felt along the floor until he found the end of a floorboard. By running his hand along it he guessed its length at about three feet; perfect for his needs. He dug the tips of his fingers under its end and pulled. It had warped and swollen and was stuck fast. Weak shadows danced on the walls and he fancied he could hear them again outside the door. When he listened all he could hear was the breeze through the window and the faint clicking of the old building cooling in the autumn night. But they were out there; the goosebumps on his arms and the hairs on his neck told him that.

He gritted his teeth and forced his fingers deeper into the tiny gap between the boards. Then he yanked, hard. A blast of pain exploded in his right hand as he tore a fingernail back, and he staggered on his heels and cried out. As if in answer, a faint rustling chatter came back, closer now, inside the house. Cold sweat stood out on his face as he pushed the finger nail back into place and once more returned to the floorboard.

The Old Pirate dug into the crack one more time, grimacing against the pain in his hand. He felt the flesh beneath his eye tear open again and warm blood begin to ooze down his face. This time the board began to lift. He managed to get his fingers right

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under it and with a scream of rage and terror he wrenched it free and scurried on all fours back to the door. He wedged one end under the doorknob, the other into the floor to hold the door firmly shut.

He stood for a moment, his head spinning slightly from the effort and lack of food.

At his feet was a gaping hole where the floorboard had been. Unseen in the inky blackness below, the dull lifeless eyes of a dog stared up at him.

He put the tip of his finger in his mouth and sucked where the nail had been torn away. Now he would be safe. They might be able to batter through the door eventually, but he would have enough time to escape through the window while they did it.

The window was only cracked, so nothing of any size was going to get through that way without smashing the glass... which should give him enough time to escape through the door. He let out a long slow breath and scanned the room for other possible points of entry. Other than the hole in the floor, there was nothing. In here he could wait them out, hopefully make a dash for freedom come first light.

He lit a fire in the grate from the few sticks and bits of old furniture he had saved from the night before. The warmth barely made it beyond the hearth, the flickering light joining with that of the candle to throw huge shimmering shadows on the walls of the old dining room.

With one eye on the window he dug deep into his rucksack and found the plastic carrier bag stuffed into a spare shoe. In it was his emergency box of matches. The candle had no more than an hour and a half left to live – two if he was very lucky and the breeze through the window died down. A match would not be much against the vastness of the night, but its little flame would be better than nothing. He took the matches (eight in all, he counted) and gently dipped their tips into the liquid wax at the

foot of the candle to ensure they would light and burn brightly if he needed them.

He sat in the corner of the room and tucked the precious match box in against the foot of the cupboard beside him. From this position, with the window above him, he could keep his eyes on the night outside – a night that was silent now except for the rustle of wind in the trees. The rustle that *might* have sounded just like chattering voices.

Jess... Jesss... Jessss, the trees whispered.

The Old Pirate relaxed a little. Maybe there was nothing here after all. Maybe he was just spooked by the quiet, the desolation of this place, by the absence of his dogs. He forced a mouthful of the stale bread that he found in his coat pocket from lunch, but he had no appetite. His mouth was dry and the bread tasted like cardboard. There was something else that would do him more good, he thought.

Without taking his eyes off the window he felt around for his whisky. The bottle was half empty but it held enough to numb the pain from his injuries and the gnawing sense of loss. He flicked the top across the floor and took a long swig. The warmth comforted him like an old friend. He even managed a weak smile.

All around him, they waited.

Some time after midnight, his face, hand and brain now comfortably numb, the bottle slipped from his grasp. He fell into a shallow sleep, his chin resting forward onto his chest, his coat open slightly at his stomach. The wick of the candle, already just a pinprick of flame in a pool of molten wax finally winked out. The fire burned down to embers, the embers died to warm, white ash and the last of the glow was extinguished from the room. The shadows fell still.

And then they came.

They didn't need the door, or the window, though some of

them made use of the hole in the floor.

They were on him in seconds. He woke suddenly as the first piercing bites struck him. He reached reflexively for the matches beside him, wide-eyed with incomprehension, his mouth a surprised 'O'. That almost comical expression turned quickly to a silent scream as hundreds, thousands, of needles of pain exploded all over his body. Frantically he tried to brush them away, but there were too many of them. They poured into his open mouth and bit through his tongue and throat as he tried to scream.

He twitched and bucked as they drilled into his soft flesh. For a few nightmarish seconds that stretched out like an eternity, he felt as if he was on fire, burning with a white-hot flame from the inside out. As they worked on him, his body continued to ripple and boil with their movements but the Old Pirate was dead. In their feeding frenzy they turned his organs to liquid, tunnelling deeper and deeper into their meal.

In less than five minutes they were sated, leaving just a dry husk of skin hanging loosely on its skeleton. They left as quickly as they had come, back into the fabric of the house, into the floors, behind the plaster, to congregate in the rank blackness of the cellar. They were satisfied now. They could rest again, maybe for years, unnoticed in this abandoned place.

The Old Pirate leaned against the wall, exactly where he had sat down just a few hours earlier. One white bone poked through a hole in his chest and his empty, unseeing eyes stared down at it, fascinated. A final drop of blood oozed from the cut on his face and meandered down his cheek. He ignored it, as he ignored everything but that little white bone.

Mason Farm returned to its slumber, peaceful now, waiting for its next visitor. But it was to be a long wait.

Five years passed. People came and went in the houses in what had once been the best cattle pasture; trains rattled more frequently over the bridge above the impenetrable darkness of

the woods. The smell of summer barbecues and Guy Fawke's bonfires drifted down through the trees. Mason Farm and the wood whose name no one remembered was marooned. The footpath grew over and disappeared from sight and the old barn crumbled into the farmyard. Trees shielded the place from view. Time ticked through the fallen leaves.

No one came here any more.

So they waited.

‘One, two, three, four.

‘And hold... hold... hold. OK, go on...

‘Five, six, seven...’

Daniel Ang had achieved three things in his twenty-six years on earth, and all of them since he had left school at eighteen – something he considered was no coincidence. He’d never been academic, but he was bright. Bright enough to have achieved three things in his life, anyway.

‘... ten, eleven, twelve...

‘And hold it, hold it Danny.’ His stomach muscles screamed. Sweat stuck the medicine ball to his chest through his t-shirt, but still Brian kept him holding that unnatural half-sitting-half-lying position. They’d been at it for forty minutes and now every second felt like torture.

‘And down.’

He dropped back to the mat and Brian finally got off his feet. He held out a hand to help Danny up. The younger man shook his head. Brian wasn’t being helpful; he was just in a hurry to inflict more pain.

His first achievement had prepared the ground for both the

others. With the ink still drying on his final school exam paper, Danny had incorporated Zubio First Media, an internet development company which specialised in rich-media sites and now counted among its clients some of the best-known publishers, independent film companies and games developers in the country. In under three years, he had gone from sixteen-year-old sole-trader holed up in the bedroom of his family home to boss of six people in a plush but informal office on the outskirts of London. *Twenty miles* on the outskirts, but that was by design. His six-figure turnover could easily have supported a city office, but the city was not in Danny's blood. He needed open spaces.

Right now, he wished he was out in one of those open spaces instead of in the gym sweating like a race horse. Brian was expensive, but by God he made sure the clients got value for money.

'OK. When you've finished having a lie down, towel yourself off and I want twenty-five knee raises from the bar.'

'I'm just about fit to *collapse* at the bar,' Danny said.

'You're not fit for anything. Now move before I make it thirty.'

His second achievement had made the first all the sweeter. At twenty-one he had married Carrie Marshall, a primary school teacher with music in her easy laugh and summer in her smile. She had been working as a waitress to pay her way through her final term of post-grad training when they met. (Danny had never had a girlfriend who *hadn't* at some point been a waitress. He liked to think it was just because he drank so much coffee, but then again.... Whatever Freud might have had to say on the subject, Carrie had been the best, and the last.) There was no family yet, but as they'd looked for their first home together it had been with half an eye on a room suitable for a nursery, and probably one for when their second child came along and they needed yet more space.

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‘Twenty-three... twenty-four...’

‘Get on with it!’

‘Twenty...*five*.’

‘Better. That’s about time for this morning. Warm down with a full set of padasanchalana and we’ll try again tomorrow. We might make something of you yet, boyo.’

As Danny lay flat on the mat in the corner of the gym and breathed deeply Brian stood over him. To all intents and purposes the stocky old army major was just toying with the medicine ball, but there was always that hint of doubt in Danny’s mind. The yoga warm-downs were meant to consolidate the brutal physical workout, but it was hard to get a feeling of inner peace with a fifteen pound ball being passed hand-to-hand just above your face. With Brian, even yoga was militarised.

Danny’s third achievement had been to win last year’s Windsor half-marathon just a week before setting a personal record of thirty minutes dead for the 10k. From being a pudgy five-year old to a portly eight year old to a downright fat eleven year old he had finally got himself into gear and begun to hone his body. By fifteen he still carried with him the vaguely racist nick-name ‘egg roll’, but he had shed close to a third of his body weight. In doing he so he had unearthed more than just his inner athlete: he had discovered he had real talent.

These three achievements were, he secretly admitted, in reverse order of importance. Whatever Daniel Ang was professionally and domestically, he was, first and foremost, a runner. He adored his wife (even if the cat she had brought into the marriage was like a sullen third wheel); he loved his job, but running was in his blood. It was his drug of choice. As well as frequent gym sessions and long runs at the weekends, he made his journeys to and from the Zubio offices on foot, and usually against the clock. It was his way of commuting.

In the mornings he would jog from his home on the edge of

Wiston to the Nimbus Gym, arriving at the exclusive and expensive facility on the same industrial park as Zubio by seven o'clock. Three mornings a week Brian would be waiting for him. Always waiting for him. The man didn't eat, or sleep, or have a life outside the gym as far as Danny could tell. But he was good. Stuck in an office all day and with a genetic propensity to run to fat at the slightest provocation, Danny had sought out the most hard-assed trainer he could. Running was about a whole lot more than one foot in front of the other. He could do that with his eyes closed. What he needed from Brian was core strength and discipline.

Danny showered and changed for the office then stopped in at the bar for an bottle of water. It was deserted; only the TV high on one wall gave the room any movement.

As he sat at the bar his eyes wandered over the posters taped up where other such establishments might have optics and advertising mirrors. There was a plethora of local charity events, mostly runs, but also bungee jumps, abseiling, plus the usual recruitment posters for five-a-side football and touch rugby. He had already enrolled in the Bungay half marathon, the first of his season which ran, literally, through the summer and culminated in the Windsor race, but another of the race posters hit him with its mix of tranquil locations and adrenaline-inducing challenge. Cape Wrath. Even the name sent a tingle through him. Six days of hell, including a full and half marathon. But it was the five and a half mile hill run on day two that caught his eye. As a 10k-plus specialist the distance was shorter than he trained for, but the terrain... in that near-wilderness he could put his gruelling new fitness regime to a real challenge. See if what he was paying Brian was *really* worth the cash and the pain.

'See you tomorrow, boy,' Brian said. Danny turned to see the trainer leaning against the bar's open door. He looked somehow much older out of his gear, smaller.

‘You OK?’ Danny said.

‘Fitter than you’ll ever be.’

Danny grinned and turned back to the posters behind the bar. Brian smiled at the back of his head and pushed himself upright. He liked Danny. A Natural. Cocky, and wont to be lazy, but he had the right stuff in him somewhere. He only hoped he’d live long enough to see the lad make something of his talent. He rubbed the small of his back and shook his head slightly. He wouldn’t. Danny would go on to great things, but not in time.

As the bar door swung closed, Danny jotted down the Cape Wrath web address and slung his bag over his shoulder. He strode out into the early February sunshine with a spring in his step and a half-eaten banana in his hand. Already the pain of his workout was mellowing into a satisfying reminder of a job well done.

He was the first to arrive at Zubio. There were no clocks in the office and his watch was still in his pocket, but the computer screensaver bounced a clock around which said 8:15. He put the percolator on and sat down at his desk in the modern open-plan office. Before the first coffee had begun to hiss into the jug, he had read the Cape Wrath website end-to-end. From the results of the previous year’s race, he didn’t fancy his chances of placing in even the top ten, but that was the point. He wanted something that would stretch him... and keep him hungry for improvement.

‘You scouting for new business?’

Danny jumped. He hadn’t heard Kerry come in behind him and her appearance triggered the sudden wave a guilt he saw in his staff if he caught them on Facebook or Twitter when they should have been working. He closed the Cape Wrath window and turned to greet his creative designer.

‘Just planning a holiday,’ he said.

‘You? A holiday? Now I *know* you were surfing porn!’

‘No, I’m thinking of taking a few days up in Scotland in May.’
He followed Kerry into the little kitchen in the corner.

‘What’s in Scotland?’

‘Cape Wrath.’

‘Robert Mitchum...’

‘That was Cape Fear,’ Danny said. ‘But it’ll probably amount to the same thing. There’s a hill race. Five miler.’

‘Now I get it. It was the word ‘holiday’ that threw me.’

‘Some people just don’t think you need to be sitting on your butt drinking cheap plonk to be having fun.’

‘Are you training for hill running? I thought you only ran on the roads.’

‘That’s something else I haven’t quite got sorted yet. I only thought of it ten minutes ago. Make that eleven. I need to do some work: we’re looking light next month.’

Danny took his coffee and disappeared into his cubicle while Kerry continued to dangle her Raspberry tea bag in the mug like a fish on a line. It was still too early to start making calls, but he’d marked today down as the day he hustled for business. He opened to database, scrolled through to ‘potentials’ and braced himself for the most hateful part of his job.

Then he closed it again and opened Google Earth. He needed to have his mind focussed to call new clients. Right now it wasn’t: it was jogging blindly around looking for an off-road training route. He quickly scrolled the screen so that the Zubio office was in one corner of the display and his house in Wiston was in the other. Between the two there might just be a route that was both safer than the roads and more in keeping with his new ambition of wilderness running.

Matt Prentiss entered like a force of nature while Danny was still tracing out his current commute. The ex-hacker and head of site security almost ran to his workstation. He banged his motorcycle helmet on top of his current batch of files and stabbed the computer out of its slumber. He rarely said good morning. Danny glanced up and thought he probably had no idea it *was*

morning. He'd probably not been to bed yet. Matt was the best in the business, but if he hadn't been rescued by Zubio and given a chance to use his peculiar skill-set on something legal he would doubtless be on every extradition list in the Western World by now. Danny often wondered just what dark corners of the Web he got himself into when he was off the Zubio grid.

'Bastards,' Matt mumbled. Danny ignored him. There was a significant area of green not too far from the main drag of the London Road that had his attention.

'Who is?' Kerry said. She put a coffee on Matt's desk and peered over his shoulder at the monitor.

'V-Storm got hacked,' Matt said.

'V-Storm got *what*?' Danny said. He was on his feet by mid-sentence.

'Hacked. Bastards got a worm onto the servers last night. By the time I picked the alert out of the noise the whole thing was turning tits.'

'They lose anything?' By now Danny too was leaning over Matt, watching as his security expert called up screen after screen of scrolling text.

'No. I put a double-back architecture in. But it's a mess in there. One worm, eh? Bastards.'

V-Storm was one of Zubio's biggest clients. A games developer headed by an old school-friend of Danny's, the two companies had grown up together. Since the huge success of Free Radical – an MMRPG of such violence that it made Danny feel positively geriatric, V-Storm had transplanted their operations to Soho, but the tie-up between the two was still strong.

'How the hell did it get in?' Danny said.

'This was a pro hacker. Just probed around until he found a bit of exposed skin, then let the worm do the rest. There!' He pointed at the screen. 'Few K of rogue hex. Replicated all over the place. It's going mad trying to find a way back out.'

‘Get it fixed,’ Danny said. ‘We lose Storm, we lose staff. OK?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Matt said. ‘I can get another job.’

‘Not with the reference I’ll give you.’

Matt took a sip of coffee and sighed. ‘Al Qaeda don’t need references,’ he said.

‘No, but they’re pretty big on commitment, so let’s see what you’ve got.’

‘Ah, plenty enough for you, man. How hard can it be to squash one worm?’

To an outsider eavesdropping on these early morning conversations, it would seem miraculous that Matt still worked at Zubio, but it was exactly his no-nonsense, anti-brown-nose attitude that Danny liked. He was good at his job, and he was proud of his job. If anyone could dam the breach in V-Storm’s servers, it was Matt. Still, the boss hadn’t been entirely joking about losing staff. Business was ticking over fine, but that was all it was doing. Growth was elusive, and they needed to grow.

Danny returned to his desk. By now Tony, Sam and Lou had drifted in and were mostly shooting the breeze in the kitchen as the kettle boiled. He would allow himself five minutes on Google Earth, then he’d start setting a good example for his staff. He zoomed in on an area in the middle of the screen. Home and office disappeared off the corners.

On closer inspection, Danny was amazed at just how much green space there was even this close to London. Her Majesty owned a good chunk of it, but even leaving aside the parks and reservoirs, there was a sizable area of farmland still untouched.

He focussed in on an open area that bordered Wiston. In the three years he and Carrie had lived there, he had been completely unaware of its existence. He’d been dully aware that there were woods over at the edge of the estate, but he had been oblivious to the fact that these woods themselves were on the edge of an even bigger green-field site. The railway cut a direct line through

the fields, a tattered patch-work bordered by hedges and the odd narrow farm-track. Danny followed an exploratory line from the Maybury estate, through the fields, until he came out on the London Road.

He zoomed in further and peered at the screen, and there it was: a shadow, a snaking tendril cutting through the briars and leaning hedges until it opened out into a proper path and crossed a wide paddock. A house with what appeared to be a huge pile of rubble in the front garden and a jungle of overgrown trees and shrubs in the back stood at the top of this footpath.

To one side of the house a narrow road ran up towards the far end of Maybury and the old village of Wiston itself. About thirty yards from the house this track was abruptly cut short by an embankment the builders had created when they built the new estate. On the other side of the house a narrow footpath followed the edge of a wood before cutting under the railway and vanishing completely into the trees. Closer to Maybury it reappeared briefly before meeting the same embankment. That fifteen-foot dyke of earth and shrubs meant he had never been aware that this little oasis of calm even existed.

Some distance south of the house the footpath through the fields splintered and became almost untraceable in the dereliction behind the London Road. At a guess, Danny thought it probably met the main road about fifty yards beyond the Texaco garage, on the opposite side of the road. Which meant he must have run past it a hundred times and never known it was there. From ground level all he saw was the rows of old terraced houses (which ranged from seedy boarding establishments to boarded up death-traps), the abandoned forecourt of West's Tyre and Exhaust, and weeds and fences high enough to hide an elephant.

But somewhere beyond that fence lay an entrance to another world. It was impossible to know from the aerial photographs just what the terrain was like, but if nothing else it had no cars on

it, and that would be a huge improvement.

He considered Googling Wiston to see if there was any clue as to what this seemingly abandoned farmland was, but he was interrupted by Kerry.

'Sim's on the phone,' she said. Danny's heart sank. Storm didn't usually wake up until at least ten o'clock, and Sim, the boss, rarely made an appearance before lunch. They'd obviously got wind of the breach.

'He knows?' Danny said.

'Some of it. Says their terminals are... well, I'll let him use the exact terminology. He's got a conference with some studio in LA at two, and he wants it sorted. Like, now.'

Danny picked up the phone and switched his computer to the V-Storm mirror site as he prepared to eat a life-time's worth of humble pie.

★ ★ ★

Danny slipped on his reflective bib and zipped the office keys into his bum-bag. He had already stretched and eased the tension of the day from his muscles in the large office rest room. And there was plenty of tension. Matt had repaired most of the damage, but Zubio had very nearly lost a huge account. Only Danny's history with Sim saved them, and then only on a promise that at the next hiccup Zubio would bow out amicably.

Dusk was drawing in as Danny began his build-up to his regular pace. Quarter past five, mid-February, spring tantalisingly close. He clicked on the iPod and turned the volume up high enough to drown out the hiss and buzz of the outside world. He had decided that if the path off the London Road was obvious, he'd try it; if not, he'd try to get an earlier start on Monday while it was still light. He figured if he couldn't even see the entrance to the path, he could be in a whole lot of trouble once he got into

the woods. Still, after the day he'd had, how much worse could things get?

As he neared the petrol station on the other side of the road, he slowed, studying the fence and the dereliction beyond. The path was here somewhere. From the aerial photographs it looked so obvious; from ground level, it was almost impossible to spot.

A battered old BMW was parked half on and half off the pavement. Danny noticed the occupants as he drew closer: three youngsters, two in the front, one in the back leaning forwards between the front seats. He continued to search along the fence as he drew level with the car. He glanced in and saw that the occupants had turned their attention to him. He nodded acknowledgment and moved on.

Sure he had gone too far, he turned back and studied the fence and its relationship to the garage opposite.

The car door clicked open.

'You looking for something, mate?'

Danny looked towards the car. The driver was half out of the door. Young, tall, grey-skinned, death-metal t-shirt, sleeves cut off to show off a swirling Maori tattoo on his skinny arms. Dead eyes: the eyes of a junkie.

'I said, you lost something? Like fucking China?' There was a snigger from the other occupants of the car.

'No,' Danny said.

'Then move the fuck on, gook.'

Danny did consider it. There was something in the man's manner, the sneering scowl, the set of his jaw, that told him he had strayed into something he was best out of. But he didn't move. The driver stepped out of the car. For a moment they stood, no more than six feet apart, eyes locked.

'You no speaky Ingleese?' the man said. The car rocked with laughter. 'Yees? I got your number, gook. If you got something, bring it on. Otherwise get the fuck outta here.'

There had been a stabbing outside the garage a few months before, and it was his own face on the front of the local paper that Danny saw in the split second it took him to decide this was not worth it. He saw the two monkey-faces of the car's other occupants staring out at him through the tinted windows. One-on-one, he'd have stood his ground. Three, no chance.

'OK, OK, I'm going,' he said.

'I don't forget a face,' the dead-eyed man said. 'You got no cover now, yeah?'

Danny had no idea what he was talking about, but he didn't intend to ask. He was on the point of heading off down the London Road and away, forgetting about trying to find another route home, when he spotted the break in the fence.

The passenger door clicked open just as Danny stepped off the pavement and into the wasteland beyond. He heard the one of the car's passengers say something to him, but already he was running.

He slipped between the briars and wild buddleia, through tufts of grass and dock that grew among the cracks in the concrete of the old tyre and exhaust forecourt. He vaulted a low brick wall and was gone.

In a matter of yards, the post-industrial dereliction with its noise and violence was behind him. He found himself running through a broad tract of what may once have been a hedge or the remnants of an orchard. With a lightness in his step he ran, stooping beneath the boughs of an old apple tree, jumping over fallen trunks, until he came out in a whole new world. He began to jog along the edge of weedy field, deftly avoiding the snares of bramble and stirring up air laden with the soft smell of roots and earth. There was no litter, no dog-mess, no sign that anyone but he even knew this path existed.

No more than ten minutes later, even at this unnaturally slow pace, Danny crested a small rise and was confronted by the blank

facade of the house he had seen on the computer. He stopped in his tracks, somehow surprised, shocked even, by its reality. The house, and a tumble-down barn opposite, seemed totally out of place, a once beautiful farm now bleak and forgotten in a place where a house with grounds and peace from the hurly-burly of the city could easily cost upwards of two million.

It was a house as a child might draw it: door in the middle, window on either side, two more directly above them on the first floor. It was a house as a face, with the upper windows wide, watchful eyes and the door below a mouth caught in a surprised gasp. A stubby canopy above the door arched like a neatly trimmed moustache. Even the name plate above the door added to the illusion, the two words acting as both name and nostrils for this stony face. And the name of this face was MASON FARM.

Fascinated, and rather amused by the startled look of the place, he walked towards the building.

Rather than seeming abandoned, it appeared to just be suffering a severe case of neglect. Dark green paint peeled from the door and windowsills, and weeds had laid siege to the bottoms of the walls. Ivy from the left side of the house had begun to creep across the front wall, but it bore none of the signs of vandalism that he would have expected for a house left unattended for even a few months.

He walked the last few yards along the edge of the building and glanced into the back garden. This too was wildly overgrown, with its gone-to-hell lilacs and spindly plum trees, its patio lifted and distorted by roots, and those same eye-like windows. A house with eyes in the back of its head.

His last glimpse of the house before he plunged into the woods was the mirror image of the startled face of the front. Two of the windows were completely shrouded in ivy, which extended over much of the roof. A small porthole window in the middle of the upper floor was dark and shiny in the growing

gloom. But from the low position at the edge of the wood it was the overall effect that made him smile. Through the shock of ivy-hair the chimneys emerged like horns, and lamps on either side of the recessed back door glistened like fangs. It looked like the cover of a third-rate horror novel, a home to some modern-day Dracula fallen on hard times.

He plunged into the growing darkness of the woods with a childish grin on his face.

It took a few attempts to find a way through the last half mile of the woods. Past a small clearing elms had grown, died and fallen, creating a thick barrier that forced him to backtrack to within sight of the house again before a path opened up. He jumped across the puddles in the cattle-creep beneath the railway and began to climb the slope towards the estate. At the top he was surprised to find a gate. He turned to look back towards the farm, but it was hidden from view now. All was silent; the house with the vampire's eyes could no longer see him.

The gate it was stuck fast. The grass around it was untrodden and its hinges had rusted into a solid gnarly mass. He vaulted the fence beside it and was back on his home turf. As he jogged down to the estate's ring-road he looked back. The gate and fence were completely hidden from this side. Maybe that was why no one used it.

In a couple of days he had the way through the fields and woods imprinted in his mind and could run it without having to backtrack at dead ends or patches of bog. In the mornings he took the roads to the gym, but this little slice of wilderness quickly became his preferred route home. The path was too short to be ideal for training, but it was a far better work-out than on the roads and – he thought – far safer than going into battle with the evening traffic. It was thirty-four minutes during which he could switch off, settle into the zone and just *run*.

He almost stopped noticing the derelict farm or the black

woods. For a fortnight his time was almost exactly thirty-four minutes. He gave up setting the stopwatch then. After all, this wasn't about speed: these shorter runs were just about keeping in shape. The evenings were growing steadily lighter, the hedges showing the first flush of spring green and life settled into a new, optimistic, rhythm.

It was a Tuesday that everything changed.

He and Matt Prentiss had been summoned to Soho for a meeting with V-Storm's creative director. Two weeks ago, this meeting would have been the final death-knell for Zubio's relationship with the games company, but in the end Matt had done such a good job of plugging the security breach that V-Storm were actually eager for even closer collaboration. The defensive worm that Matt had created to stalk the servers and devour intruders was not only highly effective, it was capable of spontaneous evolution. It was a tiny piece of artificial intelligence that could always keep one step ahead of anything that meant to do it, or its home, harm. And V-Storm wanted to licence the technology.

They left Waterloo station a little before four with an outline contract that could push Zubio into the big-league. There was much to discuss, but as it happened there was much time to discuss it. What should have been a forty minute journey took almost an hour and a half.

By the time they reached the office it was almost dark. Danny watched the man who had so nearly wrecked his business, but had in the end presented him with the opportunity of a lifetime, roar away on his absurdly enormous CBX bike. He smiled at the darkening sky. Strange how life hinged on the smallest and most random of events.

He locked the office and began to jog across the car park. He considered taking the roads home, but figured by now he knew the route through Mason Farm well enough that it wouldn't

really matter that he couldn't see beyond the beam of his head-torch. And it might not have mattered, but for one other short-cut he took that evening.

In his rush to get out, he had neglected to take account of the fact that the train journey had, quite literally, bored him stiff. Although he had done his usual warm-up in the office rest room, it was nowhere near enough. He felt his thigh muscles protesting by the time he got to the London Road, but he was in a hurry to get home, and knew it was only a touch of cramp. Minor cramp was not much of an issue when running on flat roads, but on the uneven surface of Mason Farm's abandoned fields, it soon brought him to a limping stop.

He cursed his stupidity and hobbled along the edge of the field towards the house.

On the patch of weedy gravel that lay between the house and the collapsed barn he stopped and tried to stretch the tightness from his quads. His left leg was locked almost solid, the cramp concentrated in his thigh but beginning to make in-roads into his shin too.

The house was dark, but it was not quiet. There was a very faint rustling, hissing sound which came not from any specific location, but from the house itself. Curious, Danny limped over to the window to the right of the front door.

He switched off the head-torch, slid it back and cupped his hands to the glass. It was too dark to see anything but vague shapes in the room. He moved closer to get a higher vantage point and his feet met the wall where it disappeared into thick weed growth.

This clearly was a long-abandoned house after all. The ceiling in this front room had collapsed, leaving a dark ragged hole above a pile of grey rubble. Vague shapes, graffiti maybe, loomed out of the darkness around the chimney breast and the wallpaper hung in tattered, formless ribbons from the back wall. Whatever this

place was now, whatever its reason for being abandoned, it had not been anyone's home for a long time. So why did he feel like an intruder? He felt a chill down his back, a sense that he was no longer the watcher, but the watched.

Suddenly he lurched sideways and his hands squealed as they slid down the glass. He pushed himself away from the window but his left foot was caught. He fell backwards and landed heavily on the ground.

He fumbled the torch back to his forehead and flicked it on. He had been standing on the wooden cover of a cellar vent that had been almost completely rotted by years lying beneath a thick tangle of weeds. He pulled his leg free and kicked shards of wood back down into the hole. He swatted cobwebs and ancient coal dust from his shin and dislodged a tiny white beetle. He didn't see it. It scurried away from the last of the daylight and back into the blackness of the cellar. The house loomed over him, watchful, suddenly a thing of menace, a house from all those 1930s horror films he and his brother had dared each other to watch when they were kids. He shuffled back across the farmyard unable to take his eyes off the empty, brooding windows.

He stood, tested the condition of his leg and began to jog along the path towards the wood, carefully weighing the effects on the muscles. The cramp was mostly gone, but it was lurking. He could feel its sharp sting in his shin now, its tightness threatening to spread if he pushed too hard. He ran slowly through the trees, each step a balance between not wanting to aggravate what might already be quite serious damage and wanting to be as far away from Mason Farm as he could get.

By the time he got to the turn-in to Harley Way, the pain had all but gone and so was the unaccountable fear he had felt lying on the weedy verge beneath the house. As he closed the front door on the darkness outside, eager to share news of Zubio's upturn in business with Carrie, both were just a memory. The

house was not the lair of Dracula or the Mummy's tomb, it was just a house made ominous by the shrouding dark. And the cramp? It had been just that and nothing more; unusual in his shin certainly, but nothing serious. You couldn't *die* from a touch of cramp.

Getting up was not going to be an option. *Sitting* up was more than he could manage right now.

He tried to open his eyes but the light from the window cut into him like a knife. Even with his eyes closed he felt the narrow shaft of winter sun that spilled across his face from the crack in the curtains. He winced as each new pain found a home in his gradually waking body. He groaned quietly. Carrie did not respond.

He looked at the clock through a tentative chink in his eyelids and saw it was past seven. He didn't know what day it was, or what the hell had happened to him since he had gone to bed quite normally the previous night.

The bedroom door opened and Carrie crept in. He watched her shape round the foot of the bed through almost closed eyes.

'Are you awake?' she said quietly.

Danny groaned. The sound tore at his throat like barbed wire.

'Flu?' Carrie said.

'Guess so,' Danny whispered. 'Someone on the train yesterday. Sneezing everywhere.'

'I made you a lemon and honey.' She sat on the edge of the

bed and placed a hand on his forehead. He shrank away from her icy touch. 'It was like sleeping next to an inferno last night. You've got some temperature now.' She took her hand away and fire spread back into his face, but at least she was blocking the sun.

'Can you call Brian?' he said.

'Yes. And the office. You're not going anywhere today. But I have to. We've got inspectors in, so I don't have any choice.'

'I'll be fine.'

'The phone's by the bed. Call me. Or call Dr Stoddart.'

'I'll be fine,' he said again.

'I'm sure you will.'

'It's just flu. Man flu.'

Carrie laughed and kissed his forehead with frozen lips.

'I'm sorry, but I really have to go. I'll see if the chemist's got anything on the way home.'

'Just need to sleep it off. Could you close the curtains as you pass?'

'Will do.'

He was only dully aware of her leaving, or of the front door opening and closing a few minutes later. He rolled onto his side and pulled the duvet over his head. Everything hurt, especially his left leg. Vague memories of trying to run through a bad dose of cramp the previous evening pushed up through his delirium. Had he done himself a permanent injury? Or had the cramp merely been a symptom, a sign... of what? Of *flu*? Or of some other seed growing inside him, a seed carried like a suicide vest onto last night's train...? Who knew what the hell was out there these days...

A sudden, vast wave of heat rolled up through his body. He shuddered and felt sweat begin to pour off his skin. His eyes ached, his flesh tingled as if under the feet of a million crawling insects, and his left leg burned. He slipped deeper into the fever, his mind now spinning uselessly and his breathing shallow and erratic.

Run

He dreamed of darkness; he dreamed of heat and swirling movement, of an ocean of sticky, cloying fluid sucking at his limbs. He floated down red-black corridors, past row upon row upon row of empty windows... windows like eyes, holes in the eyes. A door, too small, he squeezed his arms and legs tight against his rigid body, slipped through. Open space, black and hot, Carrie sitting in a tree beside a slowly ticking Grandfather clock. The hands moved backwards. On the face a stream bubbled darkly, tinkling over the hands and running like blood out across the floor. Behind her, clinging to the branches of the tree was a koala, and when it turned its head towards him he saw holes, deep black voids, where its eyes should have been.

Carrie?

Danny, you're here.

I'll always be here.

Danny, you're bleeding.

She reached a long thin arm down from her perch in the tree and touched his leg. In the distance a house, the kind of house a child might imagine, burned, its window-eyes dark and eager through the flames.

Danny, you're dead now, I'm afraid.

I'll always be here.

Will you?

We're connected. It's all connected.

She withdrew her hand and touched the face of the clock with one blood-tipped finger. Her finger became a claw, her arm a barbed, insectile thing. She scurried down from the tree and stood beside him. The clock ticked like a heart-beat and the koala blinked its empty eyes.

He kissed his wife

I'll always be here

and sank his teeth into her left eye.

The phone beside the bed buzzed. He snapped his eyes open,

disorientated for a moment, then reached out from beneath the duvet. It buzzed again and he felt along the night-stand, knocking a still-full mug of Carrie's famous lemon and honey brew to the floor.

On the third buzz his hand found the phone and he pulled it back beneath the duvet.

'Hello?'

'Danny?'

'Hi Carrie.'

'How are you doing?'

'OK. The phone woke me.'

'I'm sorry. Just thought I should check you're still in the land of the living.'

'Yes, actually I feel a lot better.'

'You sound brighter.'

Danny pushed the duvet away and sat up. The cool air felt wonderful after the stale, fetid atmosphere of his duvet cocoon.

'I'm OK,' he said. He coughed, but his throat was more dry than congested.

He glanced at the photograph by the bed. Him and Carrie on Muri beach in Rarotonga. Island Night, seafood platter, dancers, fire throwers. Too much beer, a little fire throwing of his own. He'd succeeded only in setting fire to Carrie's handbag. She'd been good about it; even in the photograph that one of the locals had taken a few minutes later he could see the laughter in her eyes. *I've just eaten your eye* he thought. *Eyes. Eyes in the windows; holes in the eyes.*

'Danny?'

'I'm here.'

'I said, do you need me to come home? The inspector's been through my class, so I could slip out.'

'What time is it?'

'It's one o'clock.'

‘Oh, right.’ He looked at the clock on Carrie’s side of the bed: one-oh-three. He’d been asleep what, five or six hours? He remembered feeling half dead, and now this? He felt disconcertingly fine.

‘Are you sure you’re OK? You sound... sort of distant.’

‘I’m fine. I just woke up that’s all. I think the worst’s over.’

‘Now I know you’re lying! You can make a common cold last two weeks!’

‘Not this time. Only thing now is I’m damn hungry.’

‘There’s a can of chicken soup in the cupboard by the cooker.’

‘Then I’ve got to get to it. Listen, I really do feel a whole lot better. Don’t worry. I’ll see you later, yeah?’

‘I’ll be back as soon as I can. Just take it easy. These things can come up to bite you again without any warning. No going out for a run!’

‘No, not today.’

He rang off and sat on the edge of the bed wondering just what had happened.

He was still wondering as he drained his bowl of soup and wiped the last of his eighth slice of bread around it. His appetite was more or less sated. Nothing a couple of triple choc muffins wouldn’t cure anyway.

As he showered away the sheen of fever-sweat and stood with the warm water cascading down his back a broad grin spread across his face. He could honestly never remember feeling quite so good as he did right now; quite so *alive*.

Through the open door of the en suite he could just see the painting of the Highlands on the bedroom wall. ‘Scotch Mist’, it was imaginatively titled. It had been a present to Carrie on their first wedding anniversary and although it had cost him the thick end of fifteen grand, he still preferred Carrie’s own work. All she needed was a few days in the right environment to get her creativity flowing. Somewhere like, for instance, Cape Wrath...

Fed and clean, he tried to take it easy but it didn't work. He needed movement, purpose. There was a plan now: he and Carrie could take a few days' holiday in Scotland, she for the rest and chance to paint at leisure, he for the hill race. It was perfect (it was even half-term week, not that it would have stopped them going if it wasn't). Now all he needed was to get into good enough condition that he'd have a chance against more experienced competitors.

By two he had his running gear on and was pounding the streets around the estate. He'd only go a couple of miles, just to ease the last of the fever out of his muscles.

He ran along the ring road until he came to the path that led, almost invisibly, up to the gate. He stopped, with no idea why. He had little idea why he began to climb through the wet undergrowth towards the top either, except maybe that part of him wondered if Mason Farm had really just been another bit of his hallucination. The house had been there, way over behind the bleeding grandfather clock, seeming to watch him (*windows like eyes; eyes in the back of its head*). Even when he reached the post and rail fence at the top of the embankment, the farm seemed more dream than memory. (Since he had woken up, *everything* seemed more dream than memory he now realised. He'd probably half-suffocated himself under the duvet.)

From the gate he could see the railway clearly enough, and the wood, but the house was tucked down so deeply in its landscape that it was invisible. He considered going down through the woods, then decided against it. Making even one of those dream-images real did not seem like such a good idea any more.

He shook his head and jogged back down the embankment. He took the long way home, via the little cluster of shops at the estate's heart to buy flowers for Carrie. Tonight he'd hit her with his Big Plan, the one that involved them holidaying in Scotland,

Run

each doing what they loved most, and with the person loved most, rather than jetting off around the world just because they could.

By the time he reached home he was ravenously hungry again.

Despite finishing the loaf of bread, by the time Carrie came home at six, he still was.

★ ★ ★

It had sounded perfectly reasonable on the phone to the take-away, but laid out on plates it was almost comical. Four veg samosas, same of bhajis, Seekh kebab times two, Chicken Sashlik (that had salad; Danny's subconscious trying to save his soul), Chicken Madras, Mixed Veg Curry, two Rice, four keema naan and a garnish of prawn crackers (as a nod to his Asian heritage, sort of). As usual, the Pasha had been extravagantly generous with it all.

But Danny *was* hungry.

In the time it took for Carrie to eat her customary Madras and a couple of bhajis, he had demolished almost everything else. She had been even more enthusiastic about holidaying at Cape Wrath than he had dared hope. What had originally been ventured as a few days in a hotel grew to a full week of touring in a luxury motor home and Carrie positively fizzed with excitement.

Danny eyed the last naan furtively.

'You want that?' Carrie said. She had that cheeky, sexy, *I dare you* look in her eyes. Danny didn't need a second invitation.

'I'm carb-loading,' he said and rolled it up tight and began to feed it into his mouth.

'You are such an animal.'

'As you are about to find out...' He sidled across the sofa

towards her but she pulled away.

'Later, big boy. You don't want all the fun at once, do you?'

'You mean "go and wash up".'

'Couldn't have put it better myself.'

Danny stretched and heaved himself off the sofa, satisfied for the first time since he had woken from his brief and baffling fever that his craving for food was truly sated.

Sated he might be, but the vast meal did nothing to dampen his appetite for the dessert course Carrie provided for him later that night. In their years together sex had never lost its edge, never dulled with familiarity, but tonight he was transported. He was a horny seventeen year old, eager to the point of near-hysteria, and he knew he was transmitting a good part of that earthy lust to Carrie. Tonight was like the first time, except it was not just once. They laughed and they cavorted until past midnight, until, for the first time ever, it was Carrie who rolled away and slipped into delirious sleep before him.

Danny lay awake. He threw the duvet off to try to cool down; he lay on his back; he lay on his side; he sat up; he fluffed and turned the pillows; he watched the clock edge slowly through the night. Carrie's breathing was soft and slow beside him, which just made his torment worse. He was fidgety, his muscles eager for exercise, and even though the clock said 2.26am, there was no point going against nature. It must be the six thousand calorie meal he'd eaten.

He crept down the stairs to the granny annex off the kitchen. It had been converted from the garage as Carrie's father gradually slipped further into the twilight of pre-senile dementia. In the end it had not been needed. Lung cancer had saved him from the merciless ravages of losing his mind, but the little annex had been kept anyway. Carrie's mother was doing fine for now, but there might be a time...

Right now it was a sort of gym, kept for times such as these

when any normal gym would have been closed.

Danny bolted two two-kilo bells onto the bar and sat on the ottoman at the foot of the bed. He began the slow, slow, pump and felt the muscles in his arm and shoulder sigh with relief, even without his customary warm-up. Ten reps with each arm, each five seconds long, then back again. For half an hour he worked his arms and upper back with a well-tested routine of exercises, then he stood up. He considered going back to bed, but was still nowhere near sleepy enough to make it worthwhile.

He sauntered out into the kitchen and opened the fridge... and started backwards so violently that he tripped over his own feet and landed with a crash against the table.

For a moment he just blinked at the fridge before he realised what had startled him so badly.

It was the light. His eyes, so accustomed to the near-total blackness, had not been expecting the sudden brilliance of the inside of the refrigerator. That much was not surprising, but what was surprising (and just a little unnerving) was that all the time he had been working out, he had not put a single light on. It had just not occurred to him that he needed to.

Was he really that practised at finding his way around the house in the dark, at putting together the weights and doing the first half of his workout?

He looked around the kitchen. Beyond the pool of yellow glow from the fridge, the room was in darkness. He was almost relieved to see that his eyes could not penetrate that darkness, could not see into the shadows... or through walls. He had not suddenly developed some weird super-power. Maybe he had been much more asleep than he had realised; maybe his trip to the annex had been more sleep-walking than an insomniac's stroll. Sleep-walkers could tap into something much deeper than the ordinary day-to-day senses of the waking world: it was the only explanation.

Thanks to the sudden assault of the light he really was awake now, and there was a reason he had opened the fridge.

He took a pro-biotic yoghurt from the pack on the top shelf and tore off the foil top. He drank the contents in a single extravagant glug and scooped out the residue with his finger. The swing-lid of the bin had barely settled having devoured the empty yoghurt pot before he had finished a second.

He contemplated having another, but instead returned to the annex and worked his legs with squats, did some shin-lifts off the ottoman, seated calf-rises, and wound down with a foam roll, working the tube of stiff foam beneath his calves. By 4am he was at last beginning to feel the need for bed.

He walked back upstairs and slipped under the cool duvet beside Carrie.

He had still not turned on a single light.

★ ★ ★

It was in the shower that evening that he first noticed the marks on his leg. As he towelled himself off, he examined the tiny punctures on his left shin. Two holes, a couple of millimetres apart, small and dry and looking like the bite of a spider or an insect. *Or a very tiny vampire bat*, he thought with a grin. He'd never felt the bite, but the marks were there. And so was the itch. He pressed a finger against the mark and tendrils of that itch radiated down into the muscle of his leg. When he removed his finger, a deep white indentation remained. He watched, fascinated, for nearly half a minute before blood plumped the skin back to its proper condition.

He felt fine. No fever; not sick; still running OK (OK? Hell, he was running like Kenenisa Bekele and pumping iron like a Glasgow shipyard worker). So it wasn't a snake bite.

'A snake, in February, in England? Don't be daft!' he said to his

reflection in the bathroom mirror. ‘Well you thought it was a vampire bat a minute ago!’ he replied, belting his jeans and stooping for his shirt. As he did, his fingers strayed to the small patch of burning itch on his left shin.

‘By tomorrow, you won’t even remember it’s there,’ he said. This time, the face in the mirror did not reply.

The marks were still there the next day. They were still there a week later, but they were redder now, weeping dark stains into his trouser leg. The itch was there more often too. It was worst when he ran, but even just sitting in meetings or watching TV he was aware of a strange tingling sensation around those two angry marks.

The pain began on Thursday. He was sure of that because it started as he flew past the derelict farmhouse on his way to a thirty-minute-dead time; fully four *minutes* better than his average just a couple of weeks earlier.

It was a record that would stand for all time. On Friday, he reached the fence at the estate’s ring road out of breath and sweating hard. His leg felt as if it had been kicked by a horse. He limped home. He fumbled the key in the front door, fell into the hall when the lock finally turned and immediately went to the bathroom, traipsing mud up the stairs and along the landing.

He pulled the leg of his running trousers up. In the cold fluorescent light above the sink, the blood and the swelling around the bite looked black. He tried to dab it with a wetted corner of a towel, but it was too painful to touch. He barely made contact with it before a deep thunderous pain shot through the bones of his leg and his vision brightened and blurred. He had to sit on the edge of the bath until his head stopped spinning.

He was going to have to lay off the running for a few days until this cleared up. *If* it cleared up. He forced a smile at the frightened face in the mirror.

‘Get a grip. It’s only a bite. No one dies from an insect bite!’

On Friday morning he tried to believe that as Brian pushed him through another work-out. The trainer noticed something was wrong, but seemed distracted himself. For the first time since they had started working together, Brian excused himself early and Danny was left to work on upper-body condition alone.

By Saturday his belief was growing fragile. He tried antiseptic creams, he tried ice packs. That evening, against his better judgement, he tried to run through the pain and not tell Carrie. She had been satisfied with his explanation for the mild limp – that he had walked into an open filing cabinet drawer – but he knew it was getting worse and there would be no hiding it soon. He would have to tell her, and that terrified him. Admitting to it was acknowledging its existence, rendering it real.

He knew if this thing on his leg didn't start to improve soon, he would be in real trouble. If the infection got into the bone it could take months to shift; months of limiting himself to gym work and watching his keenest competition running away (quite literally) with all he hoped to achieve this season.

He turned in early on Sunday night, still vaguely hopeful that the rest would help him shift whatever it was that was so nearly crippling him.

He was slipping in and out of consciousness when Carrie found him on the floor of their bedroom at ten o'clock. She had known for days that her husband's problems went much deeper than a blunder into an office drawer, but even she had no idea how bad it had got, nor how frighteningly quickly.

The ambulance came and took him away, but Danny knew nothing about it. By the time he reached the hospital, his chances of seeing Monday morning, let alone running again, were dwindling fast.

Mark Fitch, *Mosh* to his friends and business acquaintances, had been on the booze since he was twelve, cannabis since thirteen and crack on and off for the last four years. He'd made it to twenty-one, and even he was amazed. Apart from a five-inch scar across his nose and forehead and a lifetime ban from the organ donor register, he was doin' sweet.

And he probably would have continued 'doing sweet' if he had not been parked half-on-half-off the pavement almost opposite the Texaco garage on the London Road late one Friday afternoon in February. Life, as Daniel Ang was finding out, often turned on the such mundane yet minutely specific events.

The BMW 325 had spluttered to a halt (as it was wont to do now and then; it never needed more than a bit of a rest and a whack with the thick end of a ring spanner), and Mosh, Dean and Cammo were stuck. They could have walked home, but this particular stretch of the London Road was no place to leave a car unattended, especially one as well known to Mosh's business rivals as this one was.

The guy who had staked out their car, pretending to be oh-so-interested in the fence that it was parked beside, had spooked

Mosh briefly, but he'd seen him off without having to give so much as his name and address, let alone have his altered insurance and registration documents tested. Once they'd been made, the undercover pigs were not much use as surveillance and they usually had the sense to clear off. Before the uniforms could come in as back-up the Beemer had wheezed into life and the three of them had got the hell out.

If it wasn't for the newspaper he now had propped up against the steering wheel of his trusty old 325, Mosh would never have given the weirdo in day-glo lycra another thought. But as he thumbed through the local rag, waiting for Cammo to do his deal in the house outside which they were parked, a familiar face stared out at him.

'Local athlete critical after freak accident,' the headline ran. Below it was the face of one Daniel Ang, promising middle-distance runner and local hero, holding some stupid medal up next to his grinning mug.

Mosh glanced in the rear-view mirror. The house was quiet. No sign of Cammo. He looked back at the newspaper and lit another cigarette.

'Daniel Ang, 26, class winner of last year's Windsor half marathon and CEO of Zubio First Media, a local internet development company, was rushed to hospital last Sunday night after a freak accident. A source at Maidenhead and Berkshire NHS Trust told our reporter that Mr Ang's condition is critical but stable, but would not speculate on the exact nature of his injury. He did, however, disclose that the patient was being kept in isolation due to a serious, though unspecified, infection.'

Mosh checked the mirror again. Nothing doing.

'Mr Ang, who has raised over fifty thousand pounds for local charities over the last eight years was described by Martin Lentham, the Danemere Argonauts' head coach, as one of the finest amateur runners of his generation...'

'Yadda yadda yadda,' Mosh mumbled. He blew smoke out of the car window and scanned through the rest of the article. Like most stories that the local rag ran, it was light on detail and heavy on speculation. Not that Mosh cared. If it wasn't for the picture, he'd not even have noticed the story. As it was, he couldn't care less about this golden boy, except that he had come a little too close to Mosh's area of operation. Still, at least he'd got himself buggered up good and proper now.

'Hope ya die, fucker,' he said, and tossed the paper into the footwell of the car as footsteps scuffed along the pavement behind him.

Cammo opened the passenger door and dropped onto the seat next to Mosh. He threw the baggie of Kali Mist into Mosh's lap and floated his head back onto the headrest with a blissed-out grin on his face. He'd done the deal, but he'd got himself loaded again into the bargain.

For the second time, Daniel Ang slipped into irrelevance in Mosh's world, but this was only a pause in proceedings. He would be coming back, and he was going to cause Mosh a great deal of trouble when he did.

It was during Danny's second night home after the hospital discharged him that Mosh next encountered him, in a manner of speaking. Again, it was the local news that did it. Mosh and Kats – his erstwhile girlfriend and chief reason he was still alive – were holed up in their usual booth of the Lamb and Flag on the corner of London Road and Westmoor Avenue. He'd cracked the window open despite the cold evening and was already on his fourth pint of bitter and was running dangerously close to the end of his fags. (He, the landlord and most of the clientele paid no heed to Tony Blair's dumb-assed smoking ban. If the police ever raided the Lamb, they would have far more to get them excited than the odd illicit cigarette.)

Kats had downed the last of her vodka and coke (heavy on the

vodka, no ice) and excused herself while Mosh went back to the bar. As Frank pulled another pint and refreshed Kats' glass, Mosh gazed absently at the mute TV above the bar. Frank was too mean to get Sky, but felt the TV gave the Lamb a certain modernity and sophistication, even if it was permanently tuned to BBC1. The late news had segued into the dog ends of local stories and it was as Mosh contemplated the contents of the newsreader's blouse that Danny once again popped into his vision.

The sound was off, but the image they were using was of a triumphant and smiling Daniel Ang, so he probably wasn't dead. The reporter looked pleased with herself, which kind of confirmed it. There was a shot of the hospital, then an amateur movie of the heroic Mr Ang running about in a field with a load of other tossers.

Apparently the disease that had got the docs so terrified had not proved fatal, the military had not been called in to secure the area and the little gook was going home. Yippee fucking doo-dah. And they call this crap *news*.

'I've seen him,' Kats said. She slid along the bar until she was leaning against Mosh's arm. She took a swig from her glass.

'Who?'

'Him, on the TV.'

'Where?' He handed a crumpled tenner to Frank.

'Runnin' about. Up the park mostly.'

'Dickhead.'

'What do you reckon happened?'

Mosh glanced back at the screen, but the bulletin had moved onto other things. There was a movie of some kind of bacteria swimming and dividing on a microscope slide.

'Stepped into something that was none of his business, if you ask me.'

'Yeah?'

They wound their way back to the booth by the open

window. Mosh shook the last of his cigarettes to the edge of the packet, counted them, decided he could afford one more, and took it out.

‘I saw him, few weeks back, snooping around,’ he said. ‘Pretended he was after something else, but he was interested in the car alright.’

‘You think he’s bacon?’

‘Gotta be. Under cover. There’s some story about him being a big boss of some company, but look at him! He’s got that shifty shirt-lifter look of a snoop. Once we’d made him, he disappeared into the waste ground behind the old Alto Tyres place.’

‘I wonder if that’s where he got himself fucked up.’

‘Why do you care?’

‘Just thinking.’

‘Just thinking *what*?’

‘Well, what if he wasn’t snooping on the car at all? Who knows what shit’s left behind Alto? If he’s a cop, he must have been going somewhere. Somewhere *someone* didn’t want him.’

‘So they did him over.’

‘Exactly. We should find out why. There could be anything back there.’

Mosh puffed out a couple of smoke rings. Kats had a point. Maybe the gook hadn’t been interested in the 325 after all; maybe he really had been staking out something else. Something hidden beyond the fence. What *was* behind the fence?

‘Come on then,’ Mosh said.

‘What?’

‘We’re going on an expedition.’

‘What? Forget it! I didn’t mean right now.’

‘No, listen Kats. You got a point. He was onto something. Like you said, there’s got to be all sorts back there. Cannabis farm, chop shop, stash of fucking money!’

‘I said that?’

‘Most of it. So what ya say? Fancy finding out?’

‘OK.’ Kats swilled the last of her drink and banged the glass down. Mosh didn’t bother. He was already half way across the bar with one arm in his leather jacket and the other struggling to get it the rest of the way on. He stopped at the car parked behind the pub only long enough to grab the flashlight from the Beemer’s glove box.

As far as Mosh Fitch was concerned, the world did not divide into hemispheres, continents or even countries. There were only places he knew and places he didn’t. For a life lived on the edge of survival, it was the best way. And it meant that he knew the roads around Wiston and most of the way to Hammersmith better than he knew his own house.

In part, this was an advantage. It meant he and Kats wasted no more than five minutes getting from the Lamb to the break in the fence near where he had first seen Daniel Ang. But in part, it was his undoing. The idea that there was somewhere right in his own back yard that he knew nothing about was more than he could stand. That the police were showing an interest in it – *under cover* – made it so mouthwatering he would have been powerless *not* to investigate.

He pushed through the tangle of briars and emerging nettles and flicked on the flashlight. Kats followed, cursing softly as her bare legs were assaulted by the undergrowth. They stepped over the low wall that marked the back of the Alto Tyres forecourt and into the fields beyond.

They were in a world more alien than any they had ever seen. This wasn’t just the wrong turf, this was *actual* turf. Mosh clicked the light off and stared in wonder across the fields. Moonlight bathed the scene in a silvery glow, a landscape of deep shadows and flattened perspective.

‘Well I’ll be fucked sideways,’ Mosh said. ‘Did you ever...?’

‘Come on. Race you!’ Kats set off across the edge of the field

towards the dark horizon. Mosh, who had been considering just going back to the pub, watched for a moment then followed. There wasn't going to be money or a car stripping operation out here, but he did have enough Kali Mist in his jacket pocket to make even this utterly pointless country walk bearable.

They came upon Mason Farm almost as unexpectedly as Danny had on his first trial run across this green oasis. But what had seemed to Danny to be a bleak and forbidding place, even in daylight, struck Mosh and Kats as a little slice of tantalising opportunity. The house was dark, so no one was home; it was abandoned, so no one was *coming* home; and it was in the middle of bloody nowhere. There could be *anything* in there.

'You think this is what he was looking for?' Kats whispered.

'Dunno. Could be,' Mosh replied. He too was whispering, though he had no idea why.

'Well come on, let's find out.'

Kats ran along the side of the house and around the corner at the back. Moonlight slanted along the wall, revealing the dark recess of the back door. By the time Mosh caught up to her, she was already trying to heave it open.

'Stand aside, lady,' Mosh said. He eyed the gap between himself and the door and raised his foot. With a single almighty kick, the flimsy lock splintered away from the frame and the door crashed open. It bounced off the wall behind it and shuddered to a stop. Kats stepped over the threshold and into the silent gloom. Mosh followed, clicked the torch on and surveyed the room.

The kitchen was still as intact as the day five years earlier when the Old Pirate had made a vain attempt to draw water from the tap. On the draining board next to the deep Belfast sink a rusty metal plate rack bore an assortment of cutlery and what appeared to be an enamel dog's bowl. A small table stood against one wall, and a chair, albeit one with only three legs, lay on its side next to it. A dresser next to the door still had a couple of cups on its lower

shelves. Its drawers hung open like limp tongues above warped cupboard doors.

Mosh played the beam of the torch around the kitchen and into the hall beyond. Where the kitchen door stood open against the side wall, the floor looked dangerously bowed. In the intervening years since the tramp had walked through this doorway more tiles had blown loose on the roof and a steady trickle of rain had begun to rot the floors. The space between the boards was now a dark chasm which even the light of the torch could not penetrate. Mosh motioned towards the hall with a sideways nod of his head and he and Kats stepped carefully out of the kitchen.

To their left was a small door set into the panelling beneath the stairs. On the right was a pantry, its shelves still bearing a few rusted tins and traces of the decorative paper that once covered the wooden slats. Further along the hall was another door, this one closed. Mosh turned the handle but the door would open no more than half an inch. Something inside was wedging it shut and however hard he leaned against the peeling paint, the door simply would not open. Although this intrigued him (the door was clearly not locked, or it would not have moved at all, so how the hell had someone managed to barricade it shut... from the inside?), it also unnerved him. Had the Old Pirate's attempts to wedge the door closed against his as-yet unseen enemy been less successful, what Mosh would have witnessed within the dining room might just have persuaded him to get out of Mason Farm while he still could. Instead, he leaned once more against the door then decided it was probably not worth the trouble.

Kats was already at the foot of the stairs.

'Hey, bring the torch. I want to see what's up there,' she said.

'There's nothing here,' Mosh said. 'Let's just get out. Pub's still open.'

‘No. I wanna take a look upstairs. I’ll make it worth your while...’

Mosh shone the torch up to the landing above. There was still some carpet on the treads, but where the wood showed through it looked powdery and weak. He didn’t fancy finding out what was up there, especially if the stairs gave way while they were half way up. He’d actually lost any interest in Mason Farm by now. Maybe it was just because this was his first taste of real country living; maybe it was because he was sorely disappointed that whatever it was he’d expected to find here was simply not here after all. Maybe it was the unnatural quietness of the place. Mosh lived his life in noise, among fights and fast cars, pubs and the hurly-burly of modernity. He thought if country living was always this quiet, the bumpkins and toffs could keep it.

While he was having this thought the decision was made for him. Kats was following the beam of his torch upwards, keeping close to the wall and testing every step before she committed fully. The stairs creaked and shuddered beneath her light tread, but they did not give way. Mosh began to follow.

At the top was a long, wide landing that ran parallel to the hall below. At the end of the landing was a tall window, grimed and filthy, but still clear enough to let in a corridor of pale silvery moonlight. Mosh turned the torch off. The bulb was already beginning to yellow and flicker, and he didn’t fancy having to get out of here in a hurry with a torch that had just gone flat.

Off the landing were two open doors leading to bedrooms. Kats skipped into one and Mosh was left alone, looking out over the woods behind the house. There was something wrong with this place, but he could not put his finger on what. He had a keen sense for danger, and that sense was beginning to overwhelm all his others.

Reluctantly he followed Kats in the bedroom. She was leaning on the windowsill, though there was little light behind her. The

window had almost completely grown over with ivy, giving the room a mottled, gloomy look.

‘You seen enough now?’ Mosh said.

‘Have you?’ Kats replied. She slipped her denim jacket and singlet off her left shoulder, though the effect was severely muted by the gloom.

‘Let’s go down,’ Mosh said.

‘Now you’re talking!’

‘Yeah, OK, but not here. I don’t like this place.’

‘You need a hit, my man,’ Kats said. She slipped off the windowsill and sidled over to Mosh, the shadows of the ivy playing for a moment on the pale skin of her shoulder. She reached into his trouser pocket and her fingers made a very round-about trip to find his tobacco box. She pulled it out and opened the lid.

‘Time we gave this shit a try, don’t you think?’

‘Not in here.’

Mosh turned and walked back onto the landing. Opposite was another bedroom, this one was considerably lighter. Its floor was partially collapsed in the middle, but there was a rocking chair against one wall and a narrow bed behind the door.

‘Now you’re talking,’ Kats said. With no regard for the perilous state of the floor she jumped onto the bed and even before the creaking protest of the floor had quietened she had flicked the tobacco box open and withdrawn two tapering joints.

‘Listen!’ Mosh said.

‘What?’

‘You hear that? Like hissing?’

‘That’s withdrawal, that. You need to load up.’

With a deft flick of the Zippo, she lit the joints and passed one to Mosh. As he watched the flame of the lighter cast shaky, hulking shadows of Kats’ head on the wall behind her, he listened again. The hissing was gone. Maybe he did just need a smoke.

This silence was killing him.

While Kats lay back on the bed staring at the ceiling, Mosh picked his way around the hole in the floor and looked out of the small side window. He drew the smoke deep into his lungs and an involuntary smile spread across his face.

‘Good, yeah?’ Kats said.

Mosh nodded. The Kali Mist warmed him and began to push the niggling fear away. It usually did. Moonlight spilled down the side of the house and illuminated the edge of the collapsed barn. All was still and eerily quiet.

Or was it?

Mosh listened hard. He could hear that hissing, much more faintly now, but it was there. It was not coming from outside, of that he was sure; it seemed to be coming from the house itself. He leaned his head against the cool wallpaper that still clung to the plaster beside the window. His head span slightly – a pleasing, detached feeling. At two hundred nicker an ounce it damn well should be pleasing, he thought. Kats sighed contentedly behind him.

He jumped back so suddenly that the first he knew of it he was dancing on the edge of the hole in the floor, cartwheeling his arms to maintain his balance. The orange tip of the joint etched fading circles in the air.

‘What the f...’

He clicked the torch on and shone it at the wall.

‘What?’ Kats said, her voice slow and far away.

‘Something just ran over my fucking face!’

Cautiously he touched the patch of paper where his head had rested. It felt spongy, as if there was an air bubble beneath, but nothing moved.

‘Strong stuff, this,’ Kats purred.

‘It’s not the Mist. There was something there!’

Except there wasn’t. At least, not now.

‘You’re getting para... what’s it.’

‘...Noid. No, babe, this place ain’t right.’

‘I’ll make it right, hotstepper. Wait here.’

Kats slid off the bed and stood, swaying slightly in the torchlight reflected off the wall. She shook her head, took another long draw on the joint, then staggered out into the hall.

‘Where...?’

‘Wait *here*.’ She winked at Mosh and disappeared down the hall. Mosh turned the torch back on the wall.

The paper where he had rested his head was bulging slightly. Again he touched it, and felt something hard beneath. He withdrew his fingers and watched as the shape scuttled away like a tiny mole. The torch flickered and the light slipped down another notch into the yellow and pointless end of the spectrum. He clicked it off and took another drag to steady his nerves. Dope like this could make him paranoid, he’d had it happen before, but that shifting bulge in the wall was not paranoia. It was not even hallucination. It was something to do with that hissing that was now all around him – faint, but pervasive.

‘Well?’ Kats’ voice drifted up the hallway, ‘what ya waiting for, big boy?’

Mosh made his way round the hole in the floor to the bedroom door. Strong weed was apt to have other physical effects on Mosh and he knew that, combined with the severe case of the willies this old house was giving him, he going to have to find a way to put Kats off her plan until they could at least get out into the woods.

Weed affected Kats in an entirely different way. Always one for a little creative sex, especially in novel locations, Mosh’s Special Blend had roused her to new heights of abandon.

Sitting on the windowsill at the far end of the hall Mosh could see her silhouetted in the moonlight. All along the hallway were neat little piles of clothes. Mosh gently pressed the

rubberised torch button and its yellow glow illuminated his girlfriend for a moment, as naked as the day she was born, if a little more developed. Then its light finally winked out and he was left to savour all that the night tried to conceal. Kats stood, purposely turning slightly so the profile of her breasts were etched for a moment on the night outside, then began to walk slowly down the hall.

The weed might have made him paranoid; it might even have made him hallucinate a little, but any other effect it might have had was temporarily forgotten. Kats' slender frame sidled a few feet along the hallway, and Mosh began to sway towards her. He dropped the joint, holstered the torch in his back pocket and turned his attention to the zip of his jeans.

'Right here, right now,' Kats whispered.

Then suddenly she wasn't there. There was a crash and Mosh was left staring at the blank window.

He ran forwards and reached for Kats' hands, which were now scrabbling desperately for purchase on the rotted-out floor where she had stood just seconds before. Her legs kicked furiously at thin air three feet above the floor of the hall below. Her face, all but hidden in the darkness, looked imploringly up at Mosh.

'Hold on!' Mosh screamed. 'I'll get you from below.'

Kats made no smart comment this time. She just whimpered slightly and clawed her fingers into the floorboards. She was slipping, but some deep survival instinct made it impossible to let go, even though she knew the floor was only a few feet below her.

Mosh hurled himself down the stairs – which turned out to be well up to the punishment – and ran along the hall. Kats' feet were swinging limply now just above the sag in the floor between the hall and the kitchen. Mosh braced himself against the door-jamb and wrapped his arm around Kats' bare legs.

'OK,' he said. 'Let go.'

‘You must be fucking joking!’

‘I’ve got you. Let go. I’ll lower you down.’

Slowly, the weight in Mosh’s arm increased. The floor beneath his feet groaned a little but held.

‘Come on, let go, this floor won’t take much more!’

Kats slid her hands along the upstairs floorboards and slowly, reluctantly, allowed her full weight to be transferred to her boyfriend.

With one hand braced against the doorframe, Mosh took Kats’ weight onto his shoulder then let her naked – and by now, icy cold – body slip down until her feet met the floor.

‘Shit,’ Kats whispered.

‘You OK?’

Kats freed herself from Mosh’s grip and began to feel down the front of her body. Fortunately, the floor had given way so completely and suddenly that there were no grazes, only a liberal coating of wood-dust and dirt.

‘We need to get out of here,’ Kats said.

‘Like that?’

‘Well, are you going back up there just to get my clothes?’

‘No chance. Here, take my jacket.’

Mosh moved away from the frame of the door. Only slightly, but enough.

The floor groaned and for a moment the two of them looked at each other with almost comic disbelief.

Then she was falling again. Instinctively, Mosh grabbed her arm with one hand and thrust his other towards the doorframe again. There was a violent yank on his arm and Kats came to stop, swinging below him, her hand gradually clawing into his arm until she had a firm grip.

There they stayed, Mosh bending almost double, Kats dangling from his arm, her feet lost in the blackness of the cellar below. A cold, musty smell drifted up through the hole in the

floor, and this time they could both hear the hissing.

‘Get me out of here!’ Kats pleaded, close to hysteria now.

‘OK. I’m going to move back, solid ground, OK? Then I can pull you up.’

Mosh began to move, but the edge of the hole suddenly grew where his weight caved in the rotten boards. Without letting go of Kats’ arm (he had little choice; she was gripping him so hard she had her nails dug into his skin like fish-hooks), he lowered her a little and crouched on the more solid floor just inside the kitchen.

‘Can you get your feet onto anything?’ he said.

Kats kicked around for a moment then Mosh felt her weight reduce a little.

‘I’m on a ledge or something,’ she said. ‘Just get me up!’

The hissing was louder now, coming from the walls, the ceiling, but mostly from that ghastly black cellar.

‘Mosh! There’s something down here! On my foot!’

Mosh tried to pull her up, but his angle was all wrong. He could get no leverage and any movement was impossible, even against Kats’ light weight.

‘Grab hold of the joists. I’m coming down.’

‘No, don’t leave me! Mosh... they’re all over my legs!’

‘It’s just spiders.’

‘Hissing fucking spiders? Mosh, they’re everywhere.’

‘Calm down. There’s a door down the hall. Now let go, I’ll come and get you.’

But rather than let go, Kats’ grip tightened on Mosh’s arm. His hand throbbed painfully where the circulation was being cut off and Kats’ fingernails were beginning to draw blood just above his wrist.

‘Mosh... argggg! Fuckers! Something’s biting me...’

She screamed again, and her fingernails dug deep into his arm, tearing the flesh and making his eyes water until he could barely

see his girl's face in the blackness below. She jabbered and screamed, twisting this way and that, her free leg kicking out at the unseen enemy below. An enemy which even now Mosh believed was nothing more than a particularly pissed-off spider or two. The weird hissing was everywhere, not just where Kats was dangling from his arm. It sounded like escaping gas or a leaking water pipe, deep in the fabric of this derelict old dump. Not that he could hear much of it now over the incessant screaming.

Once again he tried to pull her up, but against her constantly shifting weight it was futile.

Then suddenly the screams stopped. Kats' face looked imploringly, desperately, up at Mosh.

Panic gripped him as he blinked away the tears and stared down into the bewildered eyes of his girlfriend. Something had changed. That was when he felt the terror, knew from the expression of incomprehension and pain in her eyes that whatever had got her was a whole lot more than just a spider. He shook his head minutely and tried to slip free of her talon-like grip. She had crossed the invisible line from being a human in need of saving to a dead weight that threatened to drag him down into her own version of hell.

Grunting now with the pain and fear, he tried to shake her free of his arm, to get away from whatever was swarming just out of sight in the depths of the cellar.

There was a choked gurgling from Kats' throat and a jet of blood erupted from her mouth. Her body began to twitch violently. Mosh tried again to let go of her arm, tried to shake her off, but her grip never faltered. She swung beneath him like a puppet, blood now gushing from her mouth and pooling in her upturned eyes. Suddenly the weight on his tattered arm reduced by several pounds and there was a gushing, splattering sound from the floor of the cellar below. It was almost a relief: at least now she was dead. No body could survive being eviscerated like that, but

even in death she clung to Mosh's arm.

From the lake of blood that had been her mouth something began to rise to the surface. The blood boiled and bubbled as a mass of tiny, pulsating white bodies surged upwards.

The creatures began to pour out of Kat's mouth and up her arm. In the dim moonlight they almost seemed to fluoresce, a delicate greeny hue against her pale and bloody skin. They flowed up her arm and onto Mosh's hand. Then he felt pain like he had never felt pain in his life.

Quite suddenly, Kats dropped away from him and was lost in the blackness below. One moment she was there, the next she had gone, taking all but a few of the hideous creatures with her.

Mosh staggered backwards into the kitchen, and saw why his girl had let go so swiftly. There was no flesh left on the lower half of his forearm. A few of the white beetles still clung to his tendons or gorged themselves on the bloody fragments of flesh between his bones.

He laughed at the sight of his stripped arm, but it was a laugh of hysteria. His mind simply could not compute what he was seeing. For a moment that high-pitched laughter was the only sound in the house.

Then they were on him, flowing like liquid from the walls and floor of the kitchen, engulfing him as swiftly as fire. They poured through openings in his clothing, and created more openings in his flesh as they sought out his internal organs.

Mosh's final thoughts were muted, almost dreamy. In all the new and novel sensations that ripped through his body in his final seconds on earth, his eyes never left the skeletal remains of his hand.

I never knew your bones were pink, he thought. Funny, that...

For a single, almost unmeasurably short moment right at the end, there was no pain. Thoughts, but no sensation. The creatures surged through the hole they had bored in his cervical vertebrae

and on into his brain. Then the thoughts stopped too. He fell forwards, his head bouncing on the lip of the hole, his body now swaddled in a blanket of white, frenzied creatures.

His body bucked and writhed for maybe thirty seconds as the concerted efforts of almost five thousand tiny eight-legged beetles shifted his weight further towards the edge of the hole in the floor. And still they fed. Mosh's face was little more than a skull covered with loose, bloodied skin when his centre of balance shifted enough for his mortal remains to tip over the edge.

He landed on Kats in a pose not unlike the one they had been contemplating when the floor had first begun to pitch them towards their deaths. Not an ounce of flesh remained when the swarm retreated once more into the fabric of the old house. Just two skeletons, covered in baggy skin and a few fragments of cloth. To a casual observer glancing down into that dark pit, the only sign that Mosh and Kats were anything other than a particularly kinky couple satisfying their lusts in the most disgusting place they could think of was the sight of Mosh's left arm. Those curiously pink bones.

The house was silent, the moonlight spilling in through the back door and probing the edge of the hole in the floor. A trickle of dust descended from the wrecked floor above and sank, ghost-like, into the cellar.

The creatures was sated again, but they could not rest. Something was wrong. The two intruders were dead, but the swarm was no longer alone.

Someone else, out there beyond the safety of Mason Farm, had infiltrated their closely-guarded secrecy, and now carried within him a connection. The collective unconscious of the swarm could feel this outsider, and though they could not know it yet, very soon he would feel them too.

Danny didn't remember the specifics of the dream the first time it came. He had been home from hospital for two days and had taken up residence in the granny annex just down the corridor from the kitchen.

The annex lacked many of the niceties of the rest of the house but it made up for it by having its own en suite bathroom and no stairs to and from it. The bed was comfortable enough in a squishy sort of way and the floor gave him the space and privacy he needed for the exercises his physio insisted on even at this early stage of his recovery. The gym equipment, so redolent of his old life, had been tactfully removed by Carrie while her husband was still in hospital. It had given her something to do.

On that third morning back home, he woke with a start in the pale light of dawn and the dream vanished. What woke him was the itch: a deep, gnawing itch that had its focus somewhere on his left leg, half way between his knee and his ankle. He reached down, but he could not stop the itch. He grimaced, clawing his fingers into the damp bedsheets, fighting a sensation he could not reach.

He lay very still, concentrating on driving it away from within.

It's not real, it's not real... None of this is real...

Gradually the sensation began to subside and was replaced by something else. Something *before* he woke up.

Flying. No, not flying. *Running*. Fast.

That was all he could recall. Maybe it was to be expected. Running, after all, had been what he lived for. But it was more than that. He'd dreamed of running before, but this time there was something else, something he could not quite pinpoint. More often than not his dreams of running involved being late for a race, or finding he had been entered in the wrong class, or he'd forgotten his shorts – the usual anxiety dreams. But this one had not left that dull, bitter afterimage in his mind. This one had felt... what?... invigorating? That was worse. It was a feeling he doubted he would have in real life for a very long time.

He shook the feeling away and blinked at the grey light beginning to flood through the chink in the curtains.

He had come a long way since that Sunday night when Carrie had found him unconscious on their bedroom floor. Even now much of it was completely lost to him, blanked out, erased by a near-lethal cocktail of drugs. As he lay in his new bed watching the motes of dust hover in the morning light, he thought it was this blank in his mind that made everything seem so unreal. It was a nightmare, someone *else's* nightmare, and he was caught in its swirling tempest.

He tried to pinpoint his last real memory, the final scene in the movie that was his old life. Even that was hazy. He remembered dinner on Sunday (duck, roast potatoes, veg: enormous), he remembered he felt he needed an early night and had left Carrie watching TV at, what, nine o'clock? After that the memories were swamped by the pain. Try as he might, he had no recollection of the panic he had caused when he collapsed, or the dash to hospital, or of any of what he was told had happened after that.

He had woken and struggled up through the fog of nausea on Monday morning to see a tent of bedding covering his lower body and a web of tubes and monitoring wires snaking out from beneath his bedsheets. Behind him machines counted out the vital statistics of his life, though they were as silent as the rest of the patients in the high dependency unit.

‘Carrie?’ The word was dry, painful. The tube down his throat made him want to heave, but he had no strength. He had no body yet, just a dim awareness of being conscious.

‘Oh, thank God,’ Carrie whispered. She pressed a button and Danny slipped away again.

He came round a second time, maybe seconds later, maybe half an hour. No more. A Malaysian nurse was fiddling with the machines behind his head. He smiled a beautiful, exotic smile and said something to Carrie. He left.

‘Danny, it’s OK. Try to stay still, the doctor’s coming.’

He had been unaware that he had even tried to move, but now, slowly, pain was beginning to hover around his body. Life was nudging its way back into his physical being.

‘What... day?’

‘It’s Monday, Danny. It’s a beautiful Monday morning. And you’re here. I’m here.’ Carrie took his hand and he felt the tape that held the cannula in the back of his hand pull a little. Then he felt her warmth and he knew he was alive.

He knew little else for a long time.

The doctors examined him. The Malaysian boy adjusted the rippling air that pulsed beneath him until he nodded and closed his eyes once more.

He floated, down, into darkness. It was a warm darkness, and when he reached its soft bottom, light filled him. He could smell life, fresh and clear. He was bathed in beauty. The pain was somewhere up ahead of him, a tangible thing, but not yet a part of him.

I've just been born. I remember it this time. I'm new, out in the new world. The pain will come soon and I will be alive.

He woke with a choking start. Carrie called out. The doctors ran. He tried to close his eyes against their bright pen-lights. He screamed and the feeding tube tore at his throat.

The morphine trickled.

He slept.

He woke.

It was time to know now. He was not a baby any more. It was time.

It was Carrie who broke it to him. He had been rushed into A&E at ten thirty on Sunday night, and an orthopedic specialist had immediately been called in. There had been no time for discussion, no time to consider options. He was seriously ill and any delay might kill him. So Carrie had signed to consent forms while the anaesthetist got to work and Danny had been wheeled away.

At midnight they had started the amputation.

Curiously, as he lay listening to his wife tell her story his first thought had not been that he would never run again. He could make no sense of any of it. The whole thing was unreal. She was talking about someone else. Even when he knew about the amputation (though Carrie refused to actually use the word) his mind was already leaping ahead, grasping at something beyond the immediate horror. He didn't ask how, or why, or anything about the cause of all this. He just knew he would run again. That was a given. It was what he did. Peg leg, or one of those carbon fibre blades, it made no difference. The blade would just be like having a super-ankle... could even make him faster. Superman. After all, the injury had been on his calf, so it was only a bit of his leg that had gone.

As long as he resisted the temptation to reach down and let his fingers explore what was still just a numb thing beneath a tent

of hospital bedding, he could believe anything.

The doctor told him the truth at seven minutes past three. He watched the second hand of Carrie's watch tick round as she held his hand. It took thirty two seconds to tell him. It felt longer, but he was watching the hand so he knew just how long it took to shatter a world.

'Mr Ang, although we have every reason to believe you are going to make a full recovery, the steps required to save your life were more drastic than we had hoped. By the time we began to operate, the infection in your leg was severe. Severe enough that your tibia had begun to disintegrated and the patella had descended onto the fibula. To prevent the infection spreading further, your amputation was transfemoral, but it seems we achieved the results we were hoping for..'

Although the bite was near his shin, they had taken his leg off half way up his thigh.

As the surgeon continued to fill in details, he did reach down into the blanket tent that had hidden the truth. His cold hand met a huge wad of bandages and nothing else.

It was real then.

What made that reality even more terrifying was the time-line that Carrie filled in for him after the doctor had gone. He had been rushed to hospital on Sunday night, that much he knew. He also knew he had awoken on Monday morning.

But this Monday was not the next day, or even the next week. Danny had been in tented isolation in the ICU, then the HDU, for *two weeks*. The surgery had gone well, but as they tried to bring him round from the anaesthetic, he had crashed, not once but four times. At 9am on that first Monday he was clinically dead. Only a final desperate attempt to revive him before they called a time of death had restarted his heart. From then on they had kept him in a coma while they tried to fight the infection that was ravaging his already depleted and incomplete body.

No one had had the slightest idea what the infection was. Though Danny (and even Carrie) were completely unaware of it, this comatose patient had been visited by three of the leading consultants from the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in London. Not because they thought he had picked up some exotic foreign disease, but because they knew for sure that whatever had eaten his leg was nothing that had ever been seen in Europe before.

For more than a week the HTD team tried to culture cells from the infection. None lived more than a few seconds once they were exposed to either light or electron beams under microscopy, and when they died they entirely disintegrated. Only antibody testing gave any clue. In desperation the HTD suggested Leishmaniasis. They had to narrow down his treatment options somehow or the current bombardment of experimental antibiotics and anti-virals would kill him even if the infection didn't. So they stopped all their current regimes and pumped him full of Amphotericin. For three days they warned Carrie that it was unlikely to work.

On the fourth day – the Thursday before he woke up – his vitals suddenly stabilised. His temperature dropped to near-normal and his blood pressure rose. They took swabs from every part of his body, drew lumbar fluid again and sucked blood from his arm.

And they were baffled.

The parasite, virus, bacteria, whatever it was, had vanished. They could find no trace of it whatever in his system. There was no way the Amphotericin could have worked this quickly. It was as if the infection had simply had enough and given up.

They kept him under for a further two days, then gradually brought him back up to the surface, a surface he broke through into a bright and pain-filled world at 11am on Monday morning.

Carrie was by his bedside, and she had never been so glad to see her husband in all their years together.

The worst was over. Or so they thought.

They sent him home with a hamper of pills after a further week. The doctors (including the three from the HTD who came to marvel at this humanoid freak of science) had been staggered by the rate of progress he made. Within twenty-four hours of waking up he was eating normally – normally, that is for a twenty-six year old male who had been asleep for two weeks. Forty-eight hours after that he was eating as well as he did while training, and he was sitting in his wheelchair in the day-room. He was pumping iron, albeit with very light weights, by the weekend and on Sunday the medics declared that there was nothing more the hospital could do for him as an inpatient that they could not more easily and cheaply do as an outpatient.

His amputation wound had had the benefit of two weeks of complete rest, and the heavy doses of medicine they had used to hammer all his other problems had staved off all but a very minor *Staphylococcus* infection. The healing was maybe not all the doctors could have wished for, but they simply put that down to his wrecked immune system. With luck, close observation and a final round of tightly targetted antibiotics, there was no reason why he should not make a full recovery.

He was wheeled out of the hospital with a schedule of physiotherapy appointments, a nurse booked to visit him at home and a string of appointments with the consultant stretching off into the summer. But at least the days of lying in hospital were behind him.

He arrived back home, minus one left leg, but with the itch still firmly in place. It was this itch that had hauled him out of his dream, that first time the dream had been coherent enough to impinge on his conscious mind.

So he lay there in the cold light of early morning, clawing the bed sheets of his new squishy bed and repeating his now habitual mantra.

It's not real, it's not real...

The doctors had explained about phantom limbs, where a patient sometimes continues to have sensations in a limb that isn't there, but told him it would fade in time. So far it was showing no signs of doing so.

He swung his one remaining leg out of bed and sat up. The phantom itch was still there, but now only as a vague sensation he could write off as a mere trick of memory and too little sleep. Since he had been brought round from his coma the one thing he had not done well was sleep, and it was beginning to show.

The wheelchair sat expectantly beside the bed. He glowered at it, but he knew he was going to have to use it. It was that or stay in the cold sweat of bed and wait for Carrie to bring his breakfast in.

He was getting used to the mechanics of the chair, but thought he'd never get used to its necessity. He could bump around the ground floor, from his new home in the granny annex, into the living room, the kitchen, even the garden. But part of his mind still clung to the idea that this was a *choice*. If he really wanted to he could walk. He could just get up and do stuff again. Go out to the shops. Go to work.

Go for a run.

Of course it wasn't a choice at all. The hospital had provided him with a basic but perfectly functional pair of aluminium crutches, but he was a way off using them yet. His physio insisted on some dumb exercises which involved him trying to take faltering, falling steps with them, but the change in position to the vertical made his stump ache and his head spin and anyway, he couldn't really see the point. As soon as he was fit enough to be upright, he intended to get a prosthetic leg fitted and put invalidity behind him once and for all. The crutches merely represented another admission of his disability. Carrie didn't or couldn't see it; the crutches had become something of a focus for

their different attitudes to what had happened. Carrie insisted that getting upright again was an important mile-stone. Danny knew that for him at least, that mile-stone would point directly at a much deeper failure.

He hauled the chair towards him and levered himself into it. He shuffled back into the seat and banged his foot into the metal stirrup. He had barely got the blanket secured over his bandaged stump when the door opened.

‘Danny, you’re up!’ Carrie said. She marched into the bedroom and drew back the curtains. Light flooded in through the french windows.

‘Yeah, I’m up,’ Danny said. On the first night Carrie had slept in the armchair beside the bed, but by morning they both knew that could not go on. Danny was restless, often waking angry and clattering with deliberate carelessness into the en suite bathroom. Carrie, a light sleeper at the best of times, woke with a cricked neck and an acceptance that all Danny really needed was peace to come to terms with this thing. That and a little bell by the bed so he could summon help if he really needed it.

She had gone back to their marital bed on the second night, and they were both glad.

‘Do you want me to bring your breakfast in?’ she said.

‘No. I’ll get it.’

‘Bathroom?’

‘Carrie, I can manage!’

‘Sorry, I know you can. So, what’ve you got planned?’

‘Oh, real busy day. Drive to the living room, drive to the bathroom. Maybe drive to the kitchen and watch the birds for a bit. Might even take in yesterday’s crossword. If I get time.’

‘You’ll get there. One step at a time. Well, you know what I mean.’

Carrie rounded the back of the chair and began to wheel him towards the door.

'I can do it!' Danny said, jerking the wheels forwards.

'I know,' Carrie said, turning her attention to the bed. 'Only trying to help.'

'Why don't you go to work? I don't need to be nursed. Sorry. I didn't mean it like that.'

'I know, I know. Mr Glover said I should take the rest of the term off. I just don't think you should be on your own at the moment. Anyway, I could do with a break too.'

Danny wheeled himself through the kitchen towards the living room. He was annoyed at Carrie for still being there; annoyed at himself for not wanting her there. He was annoyed that she could go to work if she wanted to, but didn't, while he would have given his right arm to get out of the house and back to normality.

He couldn't help smiling to himself at the idea of giving his right arm for anything. Without that he would just wheel himself round and round in circles for ever.

Danny bumped through the just-wide-enough doorway into the living room. Smokey hissed and ran into the hall. The cat had never liked him much, but since he had come out of hospital he couldn't stand being in the same room as this strange wheeled human.

'So, what do you want for breakfast?' Carrie said.

'I'll get something later,' he said. 'Not hungry yet.'

'Bad night?'

'No. I'm fine.'

She gave him a strange, quizzical, look. It was a look he saw too often these days.

'Really,' he said, 'I'm OK. Just let me wake up in peace, will you?'

'Of course. I've just got to nip to the shops. I won't be long. Anything you want?'

'Leg?'

‘Oh Danny...’

‘I’m joking! Look, I’m OK. Just need to wake up that’s all. You go.’

Carrie kissed him and hooked her coat and scarf from behind the front door.

She was still putting the coat on when she closed the door behind her and began to march along Harley Way with tears blurring her vision and a growing dread about the future settling once more on her mind.

Danny had no dread, yet, but as he waited for their TV to come on he did have a powerful knot of guilt. Every time Carrie spoke to him it was as if someone else inside his head was making his replies. In hospital he had been able to keep his anger, his fear and his creeping self-pity to himself, but now he was with Carrie twenty-four hours a day, she was taking her share of it all.

Danny flicked round the channels. His hand moved subconsciously to the itch on his left leg, but met only the cool metal frame of the chair. He flicked the TV off again and threw the remote onto the table. He might be a cripple, but there was no way he was depressed enough to watch other people buying houses for entertainment.

He wheeled himself into the kitchen. Carrie had left the cereal boxes on the table rather than in the cupboard where he wouldn’t be able to reach them. She was making ‘allowances’ for him, and he hated it. He munched on a handful of dry tasteless muesli then opened the fridge.

Nothing doing. A bag of salad, half a trifle, butter, eggs, milk, couple of yoghurts (past their date, he noticed) and a plate of steak defrosting for tonight.

Something flitted through his mind, so quickly he didn’t catch it. For a moment he felt breathless. A fragment, no more than a single movie still from that strange dream, flashed in his memory, leaving in its wake a powerful sensation. He had been running,

like the wind. No, that was wrong. Not like the wind: like an animal. That's what it felt like, in the dream... like an animal. He had run thousands of miles before, but this felt different. This felt *instinctive* somehow, more... primeval.

He slammed the fridge, rage beginning to prickle tears into his eyes. The itch in his non-existent leg had grown to fever pitch again, and his hands clenched into tight white fists on the blanket. He clamped his teeth tight and repeated the mantra: *it's not real; it's not real; it's not bloody real!*

His span the chair round and launched himself at the back door. He needed air, something to distract him. He battled with the key and wrenched the door open, smacking it against his foot when he didn't get the chair out of the way quickly enough. He bumped down the hastily-constructed ramp and onto the patio, pumping the wheels until he felt the soft resistance of grass beneath him. He needed softness; something to sink his toes into, something away from the hard, sterile modernity of hospitals, physio gyms and invalid-friendly houses.

As he sat in the garden in the cold March breeze, dressed only in pyjamas and a travelling rug, he drew nature deep into himself. Early spring air: the faintest hint of rotting leaves, a few early daffodils, old mist, something earthy. A dog – probably Frank Jacque's boxer, Bartók, next door. Rain in the distance.

Strange. In all the hundreds of hours he had spent outside in his old life, he had never noticed how the air smelled. Sure, he had choked on traffic fumes, frying chips, the sewage smell on the edge of town on hot, still summer evenings, but he had never been aware of the *details*. These details of nature had been just something he had run right through.

Nor had he ever paid any attention to the glistening drops of dew that clung to the grass, the shiny red bark of the dogwoods in the hedge, the fragments of straw poking incongruously from the compost heap. It had just never been there before.

But it was now. Sitting in his chair, in the garden, in the middle of March, it was as if he was experiencing the world for the first time.

‘Oh God, I’m turning into a hippy,’ he said, then laughed.

But it wasn’t funny. It *was*, however, something else.

It was the only sound in the garden.

Danny held his breath and listened. There was not a single sound. Beyond the garden he could hear the drivers out the front pushing their luck against the speed limit. An alarm wailed in the distance. He could even hear a jet etching its vapour trail across the sky miles above him. But inside the garden there was nothing. No birds twittering or rustling through the undergrowth. No birds on the table pecking up Carrie’s lovingly grated bread crusts.

Danny shivered, suddenly aware of how cold it was. With a strange prickling in his scalp he wrenched the wheels of his chair around and propelled himself back across the patio and up the ramp. He was beginning to sweat as he slammed the door closed behind him and fumbled for the key that might lock out the deathly silence.

He looked out of the window. Something felt wrong. He was breathing too hard; he was hot, shivering. He realised that he was actually *afraid*.

He wiped his face with the blanket.

When he looked back at the garden, at that hostile outside world, a robin was pecking at the scraps on the bird table. It glanced at him then flitted away into the hedge.

Danny smiled. The creasing of his face felt strained and unnatural, but it helped to persuade him he was still OK. Since he had been confined to the bed or the chair, he had often felt trapped, uncomfortable being so limited in his movements, forced to view the world from an abnormal angle. He guessed it had just refocussed his mind on other things; things he had never

noticed before while he could move around as he pleased. While he could still run. That was all it was; nothing to be afraid of.

Danny continued to stare out of the window. The robin did not return. The house was quiet without Carrie or the cat. He chewed thoughtfully on the nail of his right index finger.

He was hungry.

Amongst all the food in the house, all the treats his wife had got in, his thoughts returned to the steak defrosting in the fridge.

Danny bit a little harder on the tip of his finger. The tiny nick began to weep blood into his mouth and he savoured its thick, warm taste.

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