

The night before.

A shabbily clothed man closes the door to his flat, connects the ancient padlock and turns the key. He's not sure why he bothers. There's nothing inside worth stealing but that doesn't seem to matter much around here. The route to the ground is an outside metal staircase and his shoes scuff away flakes of rusty black paint as he descends.

Disparate pieces of litter and waste lie scattered around his feet as he scrapes his way through the alley. Waste bins as tall as giants line the walls with an old uncomfortable stench; soiled newspapers and grubby polystyrene boxes are strewn like sacrifices at their base. An ancient rat, its body mottled with the scars of many lost battles, can hardly be bothered to drag its feet under the wire fence and stops briefly to watch the man's progress before sliding out of sight.

The silence is eerie and unsettling as the man shuffles slowly towards the main road with its tired charity shops and dirty fast food outlets. This is a street where money resists journeying too often. Fumbling through his pockets, he finds a half stub of a cigarette and sucks it to life as if his whole being depended on it. He drinks in the silence. He is a head with no thoughts, a body with no life.

The plastic watch on his wrist shakes. It is time to go. Half heartedly, he kicks an empty tin of dog food and heads for the bus stop. The street is empty, as if the world has ended and nobody has told him. He hovers in the shadows for a few minutes before the number 51 bus arrives, lumbering like a slug as it makes its grateful way out of the city.

"Return to Chapel Green."

The driver looks the man up and down with a mixed expression of distrust and contempt as if it's in his power to decide whether he will allow the man to travel that far up market to Chapel Green. Briefly their eyes lock, the driver gives in, exchanges the man's last two pound coin for a ticket and adds:

"Last bus returns ten thirty sharp."

The voice is mocking. Who in Chapel Green would want the man in or near their house for more than a few minutes?

The bus shuffles up the social ladder as it leaves the city far behind. Most passengers have gone by the time it reaches Chapel Green and the man allows an elderly couple to get off the bus before him. All the while, the driver studies him carefully, taking in every little detail. In the driver's mind he is already making an heroic telephone call to Crimewatch. But it is not worth the effort. There is no violence or even fight left in the man.

He steps down from the bus and flinches as the rain spits at his face, biting into his cheeks and causing needless tears to slither down to his chin. Somehow his feet land in a puddle and his ten year old shoes provide no protection. He turns his face up to God, shakes his head and mumbles, "No problem. I can take it."

The houses near the bus stop are neat semis, once ordinary council houses but now individually refurbished, smartly presented and paid for. He turns up his collar and heads away from them. They are not good enough, not nearly good enough. Another mile, nearly two thousand tired paces up

the road, the weather has improved and the properties are far more pompous. They are well pleased with themselves; large, spaciouly detached, four/five/six bedrooms and at least three cars in every driveway. Around here, there are rich pickings to be had for everyone. The fourth house on the last avenue is called The Willows and parked outside are a new Range Rover and an Audi convertible, both with silly number plates. The front garden is small but there is at least an acre of land at the back with flat lawns and richly coloured flower beds. Or so he gathers. This is his journey's end.

The street light is glaring so he slinks back behind the front hedge and waits. Feeling inside his jacket pocket, he finds only one cigarette so decides to leave it for later. He studies the house with an architect's eye. It is solid and functional but it does not look like a home, not to him anyway. After a few minutes, a fox pads across the lawn, catches sight of the man, decides he can be ignored and carries on. The second hand of the Casio does not seem to be moving but there is a routine which keeps the man lurking here in the shadows.

At last, a light comes on in the small front bedroom and the window is pushed open by a small hand with a face that cannot be seen. The man looks at his watch and smiles. Nine thirty exactly. He waits. He listens. His ears cut out the sounds of the evening breeze as it wisps through the oaks and hedges around him. He is listening for something else.

The music touches him with a soft, physical force. The world inside his head loses every one of its senses but that of sound. Beyond the window, an unseen hand, now ten years old and soon to be eleven, fingers buttons tenderly while the unseen face caresses the mouthpiece of the trumpet. Second hand but in good condition; a gift from his father. Through the instrument, the young boy blows a message which he has practised for months. Breathlessly, the man sings along with him:

“Solitaire is the only game in town and every step that takes me takes me down.”

Each and every note reaches inside the man. Though to others the music might sound mournful and sad, to him it speaks of a big heart and of an even bigger love.

After just ten minutes, the playing finishes and the hand at the end of the unseen arm waves a brass trumpet and retreats. The man stares at the vacant window for a long time before a thirty eight year old woman with a small scar on her inner right thigh appears, stares into the darkness and then snaps the curtains together. Inside the bedroom, the woman feels that something out of her control has happened but she does not worry because she has underestimated how far and deeply sound can travel, how it can transport treasures with its every breath.

The man retraces his steps back home, all the time humming the same tune. He is energised by a heart that beats heavily with love, with a hope that maybe tomorrow will be a better day, that maybe tomorrow something good will happen