

# 1

Damn, I'd smeared blood on the phone. "It's Maream," I said, fumbling for a handkerchief, "she's had a terrible accident."

"What?" – Jon's shocked voice came along the line – "How?"

I wiped the receiver, restored the sheen. "Look, Jon, she's in hospital. I'm going there now. Can you meet me..?" I left the question dangling.

"Wait" – his voice was a wail at the other end – "I can't" – he was gasping – "I don't have the car tonight."

"Uh." I frowned at my handkerchief, shrugged, returned it to my pocket. "She'd want to see you, Jon, I know she would."

"You're sure?" – I imagined his fingers sweeping his thinning hair – "Yes, I guess" – he was stumbling with his words like someone hurrying over a cliff-edge – "can you pick me up?"

Got him!

"I'll be right there."

And the conversation was over.

And my preparations were over.

A black and white cat was looking up at me. "So, Caspar," I informed the little vermin, "this would appear to be goodbye."

Caspar regarded me with his usual mixture of curiosity and hope, then trotted off to his feeding bowl, tail lifted in optimism.

"Better give you plenty this time, old rodent." I followed him to the kitchen and reached

for his packet of Crunchies. “Now then,” I told his upturned face, “not to worry. I’ll leave the door unlocked so the neighbours can get in.” I gazed round the kitchen in speculative farewell. “Will it be the neighbours, though?” Fingers tapped the granite work surface. “Might be the cops.” Encouraging nod to the stinky little creature. “Yes, you might get your next meal from the custodians of the law.”

Maream’s pinny still hung behind the door. “Well well,” I murmured, reaching over to stroke it, “however did I get that blood on me?” – I checked the offending hand; all clear now – “don’t want anything on the pinny, do we?”

I strolled to the lounge for my keys, lifting them with a contemplative clink. “How does it look?” A hair scrunchie lay on the sofa, probably fallen off while Maream goggled some wildlife programme. “There’ll be plenty for forensics to find.” Two furry slippers lay by the door where she’d kicked them. Red comb on the mantelpiece, strands of hair in its teeth. “They can piece it all together.” Briefly I remembered the bathroom upstairs. “Ah, that might be a bit different.” I wondered what they’d make of it. Not that I intended going up and reminding myself.

Sometimes a man likes to be fastidious.

I returned to the kitchen: “Well Caspar, old moron, where do you think she is now?” Caspar mewed vaguely. “What’s that? You want to join her?” Mock pause. “Oh, I think that would be a bit excessive.” Smirk. “A journey like that is my job.”

Okay, check the uniform. Zip-up jacket: colour of mud. Nondescript trousers: dark mud. All appropriate camouflage for where I was going.

And with that I set off. Onto the gravel driveway, open the door of the Merc, smooth onto the seat. And the gravel moved under the wheels, or the wheels moved over the gravel. One way or another, there was movement. You might say the whole earth began moving under the Merc,

tilting this way and that as I turned into the road. Indeed, as I came round the next corner, you might say the earth began speeding up to a nice law-abiding thirty miles an hour.

And ah! the November night sky was so full of drama as it drifted over the windscreen. Dark clouds, passionately glowing with the orange of streetlights – they seemed loaded with more than just rain – and already it had begun falling. Pleasing in its intense restraint.

For that was the way to do it, with restraint. Nothing too bold, nothing too alarming. Just lead Jon along. You don't get a lifetime's revenge by being too pushy.

Years of preparing, years of sliding into middle age, years of pretending to tolerate him: Jon, my other self, repository of every justified hatred, my milksop doppelganger.

Past the traffic lights and up the hill, and I was onto his estate. I felt the surge of significance. Tingling. Embracing. I fed the wheel into his street and swept the car to a halt in the rain-soaked gutter. The precision of that stop was important, its control, the darkly shining road, the audible water. Everything was magnified because everything was happening for the last time.

Jon, for instance.

He came fumbling out of his front door like the hapless bundle of goodwill I'd goaded and greeted for the last forty five years. Forty five years since we were born together, same nursing home, same day. Forty five years since two sisters became two mothers, two rivals for our affections. Forty five years since Jon and I started out as first cousins, first friends, first enemies.

To be fair, he had tried to kill me first. And – fair again – I had driven him to it. Yet his attempt had been unexpectedly interesting. Lacking muscles or weapon competence, what could he try? And, ingeniously, the answer was the occult. It had been delightful. A trifle damaging, I had to concede. But I was grateful for the hint: if you want to be extraordinary, go occult.

And here he was, bless him, blue-denim jacket over head, elbows catching the rain as I reached to push the door for him. It summarised the man, the dysfunctional use of clothing, that and the surge of rain as his equally blue jeans slid onto the passenger seat. Tough guy Jon, forever wet. Goodwill Jon, forever clumsy. Man of the people Jon, forever out of touch.

“How bad is she?” he asked at once.

“Poor Maream.” I creamed the car away in smooth first gear.

“Do you think she’ll pull through?”

“We must wait and see.” I glided up the gears.

“Bridget would have wanted...”

“Ring her when we arrive.” I turned out of his street, meticulous, like a full-time driving instructor.

“Thanks, Dunc, for...”

“Just let me concentrate on the road.” I sighed with contrived grief. I didn’t want to waste words on the indeterminate fate of Maream. She was a quantum puzzle of possibilities, a Schrödinger’s cat of unknown outcomes.

Instead I studied Jon by peripheral vision. Not front on. No, I’d decided I wouldn’t look at him directly any more. After all, he was the one who’d alerted me to matters occult, so he could scarcely complain if I employed similar techniques. But would he realise what peripheral vision could achieve? I doubted it. He’d gone very straight, very narrow, since his foray into the unusual. Pillar of the rigid club, doyen of normality.

He wouldn’t realise you can see the non-physical on the edges of perception – elemental spirits, that sort of thing. Indeed right now, Jon’s spirit – well, his aura – seemed remarkably straight, remarkably narrow, scarcely more colourful than his dastardly suit of faded blue-denim.

Meanwhile, the road wound amongst the fuchsia hedges and stone porticos of aspiring suburbia. A BMW here, a four-wheel-drive there, all the foibles of parochial ambition, and aptly criticised by the weather. Yes, the sky leaned in, as if perching elbows on the tiled roofs, and emitted a fine, contemptuous spray of spit.

I halted at the junction. Soon I'd be speeding through the straggle-house edge of town, which was handy because once you accelerate there's less chance of people jumping out of cars.

"We've had a variable life, you and me." I kept my eyes fixed ahead, but my eye corners registered a head-turn from Jon. "Born together," I continued, "ups and downs as youngsters, something of a clash at University, then separate ways for a couple of years."

"Well, we were..." he began, and the end-town garages and trees swept past the windscreen like half-awake waves of farewell.

"You know," I continued, "it's twenty years since the time you came to my house – well, the place I lived at the time – to kill me." As the rain came heavier the wipers flapped from side to side in oncoming panic. "Interesting that a weed like you should try, although you had learned some fascinating little tricks."

We'd reached the A64 by now, the main road to York, and I slanted the Merc onto the carriageway. At last, the car could have a decent stroll – seventy-mile-an-hour's worth – and it was a useful time of night, less traffic to encumber us when things got dramatic.

Jon, meanwhile, was gabbling about "ages ago" and "water under the bridge."

"Yes yes." I expanded to a more musing tone. "You know, at the time I had been on the path to greatness, one of the movers and shakers of the world, as the cliché has it, perhaps even..."

Peripheral vision showed another head-turn from Jon. But it also showed his aura –

settled in neither shape nor colour – as if disorientated by the changes of speed and conversation.

“After you messed everything up,” I continued, drinking in the darkened windscreen, “I spent ten years travelling, studying the hidden world you’d shown me.” To our left, the trees banked themselves. To our right, the headlights flashed through the crash-barrier. Above us, the sky hurled rain from scraped and trailing clouds. “I really should thank you for all you’ve introduced me to. Offer some lessons in return.”

Jon’s soul – or aura, or emanation – wriggled like his backside wriggled on his seat, its colours and outline refusing to cohere. “What is all this, Dunc? You’ve been – we’ve been – friends and stuff for ages...”

And the dark November sky sloped in at us, as though we’d acquired such gravity that everything just had to come our way. Tarmac, cars, trees, clouds – all poured in like we were motionless and they must move for us. “Indeed, Jon – may I call you Milksop? – you are quite correct. I have reinvented myself, played the saved sinner, acted the affable friend.”

He was squirming, his aura fizzing and popping through a whole catalogue of shapes and hues. “I don’t get this,” he was saying. “I mean” – he didn’t seem to know what he meant – “you’ve done some great work, and...”

The power of the descending sky, it poured at me through the windscreen. It told me the time was coming. “Yes indeed, Milky Bar, you have been thoroughly fooled. When I re-entered your life ten years back I posed as Mister Ecology, dedicated to saving the planet. And, of course, with my background and talents, I could even do the job properly.”

All of life, swooping down that magnificent windscreen. I could have lifted my hands from the steering wheel, I could have lifted my foot from the pedal – for it was not the car that moved any more. No, the entire world travelled at an eager seventy miles an hour, waiting, just

waiting for the decisive acceleration.

“But Dunc,” he said, his multi-coloured aura waving this way and that, “I mean” – there he was again, not knowing what he meant – “none of us could have done it like you.”

Ah the road was a storm, the trees were a storm, the traffic through the crash barrier.

“And then,” I said, “came Maream. Adorable Maream. Mysterious Maream.”

He too was a storm, a jumble of shapes and colours. “Yes Maream,” he said, “do you think...”

“Five years ago she arrived. And three years ago she moved in with me.”

“Will she...” – he grabbed the topic like a lifeline – “... be alright?”

“Bridget tried warning her against me.” I spoke calmly. “Bridget, your detested wife and my enduring critic.”

“She – I mean – we...”

The Mercedes was purring along, so smooth, so right, as if able to drive itself. “Here’s a thought for you. Why did Bridget insist you should never get in a car I was driving?”

His aura, jumping and worrying like a badly tuned television. “She was” – splutter...

“Over-cautious? No, I wouldn’t say that. She just saw me for what I am.” Pause for response, although none seemed on offer. “Clever of me, wasn’t it, to select the very evening she’d be at night school and leave you without the car?”

This time I waited longer. His brain was working on its reply. “You *chose* this night?”

“Mm?”

“So Maream didn’t...”

“Didn’t what?”

“Suicide...”

“Ah, the ambiguities. Do you mean, is she still alive? Or, if not, did she kill herself? Or, failing that, did I kill her? These are deep issues, and I am pleased that you have raised them.”

“What’s the answer then?”

“Who can say? Who indeed can say?”

And the road thundered towards us. And the trees and traffic zoomed on either side. And the sky, oh the dizzy magnificent sky, it lost its balance and came tumbling down. I was accelerating. Up to eighty. The car never noticed, so smoothly did it ride. Up to eighty five. We skimmed the grateful road. Up to ninety.

I spoke confidentially. “Most of the bridges have anti-smash barriers at their sides.” I studied the traffic ahead. “Recently I spotted one that doesn’t.” There seemed a build-up in the outer lane. “Well that particular bridge” – we were approaching fast although the traffic was annoyingly slow. I braked – then, with a swoop of glee, saw the inner lane free. “Yes that bridge,” I continued, “it’s coming up now.”

I flung the wheel, sped onto the inner lane, saw an oil spill. That was nice. The wheels performed an excellent skid.

He reached for the handbrake. Good try, Jon.

He reached for the steering wheel. Nice try, Jon.

He made the wheels lock. Good man, Jon.

He even tilted the car. Well done, Jon.

But he couldn’t stop the impact.

No, he couldn’t do that.

The moment hung, suspended, full of all that led up to it and all that would follow.

Then: bang!