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2011

This Ain't the Summer of Love

He had not managed to scrub off all her blood. A dark line like a parenthesis lay under the middle fingernail of his left hand. He set to digging it out, although he quite liked seeing it there: a memento of the previous day's pleasures. After a minute's fruitless scraping, he put the bloody nail in his mouth and sucked. The ferrous tang recalled the smell of the torrent that had splashed wildly onto the tiled floor, splattering the walls, drenching his jeans and turning the peach-coloured bath towels – fluffy, dry and neatly folded – into blood-soaked rags.

Colours seemed brighter this morning, the world a lovelier place. He felt serene and uplifted, as though he had absorbed her, as though her life had been transfused into him. They belonged to you once you had killed them: it was a possession way beyond sex. Even to know how they looked at the moment of death was an intimacy way past anything two living bodies could experience.

With a thrill of excitement he reflected that nobody knew what he had done, nor what he was planning to do next. He sucked his middle finger, happy and at peace, leaning up against the warm wall in the weak April sunshine, his eyes on the house opposite.

It was not a smart house. Ordinary. A nicer place to live, admittedly, than the tiny flat where yesterday's blood-stiffened clothing lay in black bin bags, awaiting incineration, and where his knives lay

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gleaming, washed clean with bleach, rammed up behind the U-bend under the kitchen sink.

This house had a small front garden, black railings and a lawn in need of mowing. Two white front doors had been crammed together side by side, showing that the three-storey building had been converted into upper and lower flats. A girl called Robin Ellacott lived on the ground floor. Though he had made it his business to find out her real name, inside his own head he called her The Secretary. He had just seen her pass in front of the bow window, easily recognisable because of her bright hair.

Watching The Secretary was an extra, a pleasurable add-on. He had a few hours spare so he had decided to come and look at her. Today was a day of rest, between the glories of yesterday and tomorrow, between the satisfaction of what had been done and the excitement of what would happen next.

The right-hand door opened unexpectedly and The Secretary came out, accompanied by a man.

Still leaning into the warm wall, he stared along the street with his profile turned towards them, so that he might appear to be waiting for a friend. Neither of them paid him any attention. They walked off up the street, side by side. After he had given them a minute's head start, he decided to follow.

She was wearing jeans, a light jacket and flat-heeled boots. Her long wavy hair was slightly ginger now that he saw her in the sunshine. He thought he detected a slight reserve between the couple, who weren't talking to each other.

He was good at reading people. He had read and charmed the girl who had died yesterday among the blood-soaked peach towels.

Down the long residential street he tracked them, his hands in his pockets, ambling along as though heading for the shops, his sunglasses unremarkable on this brilliant morning. Trees waved gently in the slight spring breeze. At the end of the street the pair ahead turned left into a wide, busy thoroughfare lined with offices. Sheet glass windows blazed high above him in the sunlight as they passed the Ealing council building.

Now The Secretary's flatmate, or boyfriend, or whatever he

Career of Evil

was – clean-cut and square-jawed in profile – was talking to her. She returned a short answer and did not smile.

Women were so petty, mean, dirty and small. Sulky bitches, the lot of them, expecting men to keep them happy. Only when they lay dead and empty in front of you did they become purified, mysterious and even wonderful. They were entirely yours then, unable to argue or struggle or leave, yours to do with whatever you liked. The other one's corpse had been heavy and floppy yesterday after he had drained it of blood: his life-sized plaything, his toy.

Through the bustling Arcadia shopping centre he followed The Secretary and her boyfriend, gliding behind them like a ghost or a god. Could the Saturday shoppers even see him, or was he somehow transformed, doubly alive, gifted with invisibility?

They had arrived at a bus stop. He hovered nearby, pretending to look through the door of a curry house, at fruit piled high in front of a grocer's, at cardboard masks of Prince William and Kate Middleton hanging in a newsagent's window, watching their reflections in the glass.

They were going to get on the number 83. He did not have a lot of money in his pockets, but he was so enjoying watching her that he did not want it to end yet. As he climbed aboard behind them he heard the man mention Wembley Central. He bought a ticket and followed them upstairs.

The couple found seats together, right at the front of the bus. He took a place nearby, next to a grumpy woman whom he forced to move her bags of shopping. Their voices carried sometimes over the hum of the other passengers. When not talking, The Secretary looked out of the window, unsmiling. She did not want to go wherever they were going, he was sure of it. When she pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes he noticed that she was wearing an engagement ring. So she was going to be getting married . . . or so she thought. He hid his faint smile in the upturned collar of his jacket.

The warm midday sun was pouring through the dirt-stippled bus windows. A group of men got on and filled the surrounding seats. A couple of them were wearing red and black rugby shirts.

He felt, suddenly, as though the day's radiance had dimmed. Those

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shirts, with the crescent moon and star, had associations he did not like. They reminded him of a time when he had not felt like a god. He did not want his happy day spotted and stained by old memories, bad memories, but his elation was suddenly draining away. Angry now – a teenage boy in the group caught his eye, but looked hurriedly away, alarmed – he got up and headed back to the stairs.

A father and his small son were holding tight to the pole beside the bus doors. An explosion of anger in the pit of his stomach: *he* should have had a son. Or rather, he should *still* have had a son. He pictured the boy standing beside him, looking up at him, hero-worshipping him – but his son was long gone, which was entirely due to a man called Cormoran Strike.

He was going to have revenge on Cormoran Strike. He was going to wreak havoc upon him.

When he reached the pavement he looked up at the bus's front windows and caught one last glimpse of The Secretary's golden head. He would be seeing her again in less than twenty-four hours. That reflection helped calm the sudden rage caused by the sight of those Saracens shirts. The bus rumbled off and he strode away in the opposite direction, soothing himself as he walked.

He had a wonderful plan. Nobody knew. Nobody suspected. And he had something very special waiting for him in the fridge at home.