

February

“I wish I could go home with you.” I looked into Julia’s eyes and tried to communicate the depth of what I was feeling. I smiled, and pulled back just a fraction. I didn’t want to scare her off, not again.

“I know, John, but it’s too soon. I want to be sure this time. I’m *almost* sure... but not quite.” She looked very serious, so I looked serious back.

Suddenly we both laughed. My frustration was quelled by a wave of affection. I held her close and squeezed my eyes shut, losing myself in the tumbling scented curls of her hair. Her thick coat felt warm and cosy compared to my Denim jacket, and I wanted to stay in that embrace forever. My hand insinuated itself under her thick locks and I gently stroked the nape of her neck, knowing the effect it would have.

She threw her head back.

“Don’t! That’s not fair!”

“The weekend, then?”

“Maybe the weekend. *Perhaps* the weekend. We’ll see. Ring me on Saturday.”

“Can I say something?”

“If you want.”

“I love you.”

No reply.

“Do you love me?”

“Ring me on Saturday. Look, there’s a taxi.” She waved her arm frantically and the black cab swerved dramatically into a puddle by the curb. We jumped back to avoid getting splashed.

I opened the door for her and she turned before retreating into the cab’s gloomy interior.

“It’s been a wonderful evening, John. Really.” The brightness of her smile couldn’t be diminished by the darkness that swallowed her.

I stood and watched the taxi as it headed north up Tottenham Court Road. It turned right at a light and I tried to see Julia’s face, but she must have been sitting back.

A light drizzle caressed my face. I tilted my head up to catch the misty droplets. They felt cool against the warm glow that seemed to engulf me. Exhilarated, I had to resist the urge to hug myself. I couldn’t believe how well it was going. Even Julia’s caution was a good sign: she wanted to make sure this time, and it was a good counterbalance to my impetuosity and impatience.

Close friends had cautioned me that it was very difficult to go back, but I knew that it was OK, that it was *right*. We’d made all of the mistakes last time: the stupid arguments about whose flat to sleep at, the petty jealousies over her previous boyfriends whom she’d remained friends with, her resentment at my working at weekends. I’d identified the problems now, and I was sure we could deal with them. After all, I’d changed in the last six months. I’d grown.

The large illuminated sign over the Dominion theatre blinked out. My watch said 11.30 – not long till the last train. I tiptoed down the steps to the Tube station and became self-conscious. I felt sure the bustling throng would turn as one and ridicule me for the childish jauntiness of my gait. But they didn’t; they just continued to throng. The station was still busy. Older folk were returning home after a night out in the West End, dinner and a show; younger people were arriving for the start of a night at a club or gig. None of them looked as in love as I felt, and I pitied them.

At the bottom of the escalator a busker around my age, about 22, was playing his saxophone along to a tape of Kenny G. Normally I would have been appalled by the schmaltzy romanticism of the music, but this time I threw a pound coin into his well-worn sax case. He blew a long high note in thanks.

The first eastbound train was too crowded to even think about getting on. Ahead of me was a long ride out to the far reaches of the Central Line, and I didn't want to be crushed up against some foul-breathed drunk for half the journey. This was the part of coming into Town I hated. I could have driven in, but London traffic could be so traumatising that I usually left the car at Hainault and took the Tube in. With a tape in my Walkman and a book to get lost in (I was currently working my way through the Dune series for the umpteenth time), the slow stop-start journey could be made fairly tolerable.

Enough people got off the second train to allow me to squeeze on without too much jostling. By the time we went through Stratford, I could actually sit down. I sat at one end of a long, sideways-facing seat. At the far end of the seat opposite was a middle-aged Asian businessman, wearing a dark blue suit. He was reading a Japanese-language edition of the Wall Street Journal. Some words stood out in bold Roman type amongst the elegant strokes of Kanji and Hiragana characters: "Unilever", "IBM", company names that presumably have no equivalent in Japanese. He looked up and met my eye. I nodded, half smiled, then looked away. I pressed the PLAY button of the Walkman hidden in my jacket pocket and turned up Nine Inch Nails loud enough to drown out the noisy clanking and squeaking of the train. Glancing around the carriage I saw a couple of puddles – spilt drink or urine, it was hard to tell – a few scattered pages of discarded tabloid papers, and numerous cigarette butts. ("No Smoking. Maximum Penalty £400," said the sign opposite me.) I closed my eyes and the music filled my head.

I counted eight screeching halts and opened my eyes on the eighth lurching start to make sure I'd kept track of the stations. The sign moving past the window showed "Upminster", which was reassuring. I glanced over to where the businessman was sitting, and was surprised to see him surrounded by three young men, all standing. They were teenagers, the oldest no more than 18. Two were dressed in chain-laden leather and the third favoured the torn Denim style. All three had skinhead haircuts. The tallest, Denim-clad one was speaking. He had a Swastika rudely tattooed on his cheek. The arms had been drawn the wrong way round, presumably through ignorance rather than by design.

Reaching into my pocket, I slowly turned the Walkman down. I kept my eyes half closed, wanting to observe the situation without drawing attention to myself. I could hear what the loud one was saying now.

"Bit of a *nip* in the air tonight, doncha think?" His faced was pressed close to the Japanese man's, their noses nearly touching. The man looked more annoyed than frightened.

"Please go away," he said, over and over, very politely, very firmly.

"What yer reading, mate?" One of the younger ones spoke now. "The Chinky Times? Got any tits on page three, 'as it?"

He grabbed the paper from the man, who held tenaciously on to it. It ripped and the boy was left holding a ragged corner.

"Oh dear," he said, mockingly.

"Please leave me alone and go away!" His yellow, wrinkled skin glistened under the train's flickering fluorescent lights.

The compartment had become very warm. I felt a tightening in my bowels and dryness in my throat. There was a chance these were just a trio of fundamentally good-natured lads whose boisterousness would soon be spent. Then again, there was a *chance* that Tony Blair was an effective and dynamic Prime Minister.

I didn't know what to do. My anger at seeing this poor man being victimised was stifled by a strong sense of self-preservation: don't get involved; keep yourself to yourself and you won't get hurt. There are three of them; you wouldn't stand a chance. Maybe they'll get off at the next stop.

The youngest boy, the one who hadn't spoken yet, swivelled his head and looked at me. I quickly averted my eyes. He sniggered and turned back to the object of their torment.

It was the leader's turn again.

"Fuckin' slant-eyed cunt, ain't yer? We don't like slant-eyed cunts, do we lads?"

He hit the man. Not a punch, but a slap, hard, on the top of his head.

"Just leave him alone!" They turned to look at me. Shit. I hadn't meant to say it; it just slipped out.

"Who d'yer think *you* are? Fuckin' Red Angel or whatever them queers are called."

I'd jumped off the cliff of confrontation now; there was no scrambling cartoon-like back onto the precipice. In vain did I try to reason with this most unreasonable-looking person.

"Look..." My voice sounded shrill and pathetic, even to me. "Can't you just leave him alone? He just wants to read his paper." I swallowed a dry swallow and squeezed my buttocks together. I prayed for self-control.

The oldest one was thoughtful for a moment. The effort this entailed was visible on his face.

"All right, then," he said at last. "Well leave him alone..."

He turn to his two generals flanking him and completed his sentence:

"...for now."

It was a mistake to try to stand as they approached me. It added more force to Swastika's head-butt. Strangely, it didn't really hurt. I just heard a reverberating bang, as though someone had burst a paper bag in my head. Dazed, I fell back against the edge of the seat and slid down on to the floor. I was dimly aware of the first kick that landed in my midriff, but after that there was just merciful blankness.

The pain saved its savage intensity for when I regained consciousness. I was lying on my side, parallel to the seat I had been sitting on. There was an overpowering stench of shit. Someone detonated thermonuclear explosions in my head at two-second intervals. I groaned, breathed in, felt a searing pain as my lungs expanded against a broken rib, and groaned again. I could hear indistinct voices, then felt a hand grab me. I froze in terror.

"Can you hear me, old son?"

It was a gentle, concerned voice, not one of the skinheads. I cautiously opened my eyes. One of them worked; the other seemed glued shut. I became aware that it was stinging, as though someone had sliced the eyeball with a razor.

The voice had come from an ambulance man. He was middle-aged and jowly. He and his colleague had laid a green fabric stretcher next to me.

"Let's get you on here, shall we?"

A young policeman hovered in the background.

"Is he conscious? Has he said anything?"

The ambulance man turned sharply to him.

"In a minute, eh?"

They lifted me gently but nonetheless painfully on to the stretcher. As they carried me off the train, I saw the Japanese businessman's newspaper, torn into small scraps and scattered around the seat he'd occupied. Some of the fragments had landed in the viscous puddle by the seat and soaked up the dark red liquid.

"The Japanese guy...?" I mumbled.

The paramedic's eloquently subtle shake of the head told me all I needed to know.

In the ambulance, I cried. It wasn't from the throbbing head, the burning ribs or the stinging eye. The real pain was in my soul; it was the pain of dreadful realisation. Love, like that which I'd felt for Julia hours earlier, was impotent and transient. It was Evil that empowered, and Evil that would prevail. Love was a sham, invented as a distraction from the engulfing blackness of life. As the insight was born, grew and flourished, it ate away at the love within me, like a bone cancer eat away the marrow.

My flat-mate, Hugh, called Julia and she came to the hospital the next evening. Her concern was deep and sincere, and it left me totally untouched. She accused me of being distant, and said I was blaming her for what had happened, for not letting me go back to her place that night. On a superficial level that was true, but she'd missed the point. All it would have changed was my injuries. That wickedness, that devilish inhumanity which I'd been confronted with, would still have existed. That poor man would still have been murdered; those three animals would still be riding the trains, preying on the innocent and the defenceless. The only difference would be that I, safe with my banal romantic illusions, would have been pitifully ignorant of those things. Julia left the hospital in tears. I couldn't bring myself to call her when I was discharged a week later.

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The clocks went forward last night. I stare out of my bedroom window. Early pink and white blossom decorates the trees that line the suburban avenue below. A church bell tolls in the distance, calling the faithful an hour earlier than last week.

Breathing is almost painless now, and the blood that seeped into my eyeball has nearly cleared. I can look at my monitor screen at work without feeling nauseated. As the physical pain fades, so do the mental scars. Time, in its annoyingly clichéd fashion, is the healer.

Hugh knocks and pokes his head around the door.

"Well?" he asks.

"Quite well, thank you."

"Stupid. I mean: *well?*"

He comes into the room and hands me the phone, dragging the long extension lead behind him. He lifts the handset, taps Recall-0-1 and gives me the phone. I hear the faint ringing tone and press the hand set to my ear. My heart beats fast. My mind races; I don't know what to say. There's a click.

"Hello?" Julia says.