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The Mirror World of Melody Black

Written by Gavin Extence

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THE
MIRRORED
WORLD
OF
MELODY
BLACK

GAVIN EXTENCE


HODDER &
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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Simon's flat was a mirror of ours. One bedroom, a shower room rather than a bathroom, and a kitchen-lounge-diner that a letting agent – in a couple of weeks' time – would generously describe as open-plan. The central hallway was narrow and windowless, lit by a solitary uplighter which cast concentric pools of light and shadow over unadorned paint.

The lack of decoration was something I noticed straight away, in the several seconds in which I paused on the threshold. Beck and I had gone the other way in our flat. On our main lights we had those tiny imitation-glass chandeliers that you can pick up for ten pounds in any homeware store; and we had prints or photos on every available surface – landscapes and holiday shots – along with half a dozen mirrors of various shapes and sizes, to give the illusion of space. I've always believed that the way a person chooses to embellish his or her surroundings speaks volumes. My décor, for example, would tell you that I have a weakness for kitsch, tend to accumulate clutter, and dream of bigger things.

But what did Simon's flat say about him? On the face of it, nothing at all. It just added to the mystery. Peering into that hallway, there was not a single totem of personality to be seen. Nothing to fill in the poorly drawn impression I had of the man. In all honesty, I'm not even sure you could call what I had an impression. It was probably more fantasy than reality, the sort of half-baked fiction we tell ourselves to flesh out the bit-players in our daily soap opera. As far as facts went, I could have written everything I knew about Simon on a Post-it note. He was forty-something, lived alone, was well groomed, impeccably polite (in an arm's-length sort of way), didn't pronounce his aitches, and had a job that required him to wear a shirt, and sometimes a suit jacket, but not a tie. I'd never been interested enough to find out what that job might be.

I don't know how long I hesitated in the doorway. In my memory, the moment seems to go on and on – an insect caught in amber – but I'm sure that's just an effect of hindsight, of knowing what was to follow. The door to the kitchen-living-dining room was ajar and the television was turned up loud. This, I reasoned, was why he hadn't responded to my knocks. I knocked louder, on the inside of the door, then called his name, but there was still no response. Just the ongoing babble of the television.

Go on or turn back? Curiosity and caution fought a short, bloody battle (more of a bludgeoning, truth be told) and then four and a half steps took me to the half-open interior door, where I stopped mid-stride, left arm aloft and knuckles poised.

Simon was dead. I didn't need to get any closer to satisfy myself of this fact. He was sitting in an armchair on the far side of the room (about eight feet away), his eyes wide and his back

preternaturally straight. But really, it was nothing to do with his posture; it wasn't even the glazed, vacant stare as the television continued to flicker in his irises. More than this, it was just a feeling of absence, the certainty that I was the only person in that flat. I was a person, and Simon was a body.

My immediate thought was that I needed a smoke, which seemed to arrive simultaneously with the realizations that I'd left my cigarettes in my shoulder bag and there was a pack of twenty Marlboro on the coffee table. And, after all, why not? Beck hated me smoking in our flat, no matter how far I poked my head out of the window. But it wasn't as if Simon could have any such qualms. This was a completely reasonable response to the situation in which I found myself. I stepped into the room, removed a Marlboro from the pack – there were seven left – and looked around for a lighter. Since there wasn't one by the ashtray, the next logical place to check would be Simon's front trouser pockets. That, however, seemed a step too far. Instead, I lit the cigarette from the gas hob in the kitchen area, taking care to keep my hair away from the naked flame, and then leaned against the counter and started to think.

I'd been in the presence of a body once before, at my grandmother's funeral, but that had been very different in terms of atmosphere. There was a sense of public display, of everyone – me, my mother, the vicar, the organist – playing a part, bound to follow the stage directions of an inflexible script. Here, I was alone with my thoughts, and my predominant feeling was of calm recognition. At the same time, there was something almost exhilarating about the circumstance I found myself in. Of course, smoking always makes me feel more alive – that's the wonderful paradox of smoking – but this was something

beyond that. The sensations were clear and vivid, like drinking cold water on a hot day, and I could feel my pulse throbbing in my fingertips. I made a mental note to tell Dr Barbara about these feelings the next time we met. But she was the only person I'd tell. I didn't think my feelings were suitable for anyone else.

Cigarette smoked down to the filter, I extinguished the remnant under the cold tap, rinsed the sink, and then walked resolutely over to Simon's chair. My finger hovered for just a moment before I took the plunge and prodded him in the cheek. His flesh felt inorganic, like rubber or latex, but it wasn't as cold as I'd been expecting. Not that my expectations had been at all realistic. You assume death must feel like ice; what you get, instead, is cooled bathwater. Or that's what you get on a London evening in late spring.

There wasn't a phone book anywhere near the landline, and inevitably I'd left my mobile in my bag, in the same pocket as my cigarettes, but I had a vague recollection that there was a non-emergency police number for situations such as this. Something beginning with a one. Beck would have known in a second – numbers were more his thing than mine – but I still didn't feel like going back to our flat to explain. I thought it was important that I deal with things myself, as though it were a test of my competence as a responsible human being. There'd be time enough for explanations later.

So I picked up the phone and started dialling all the obvious three-digit combinations beginning with a one that I could think of. There really weren't that many, but it took four attempts, nevertheless: 111 was an automated NHS helpline, 100 put me through to the phone company, and 123 turned out to be the

talking clock – which I realized I knew, after the fact. By the time I got to 101, I noticed that my fingers were drumming the wall impatiently, telling me that I should have taken the time to light another cigarette before embarking on this trial and error lunacy. Then the speaker clicked and the police operator came on the line.

‘I need to report a dead body,’ I told her. *A dead body*: I’d decided this was the most concise way of explaining myself, since the relevant context was already implicit. Or so I thought.

‘A body?’ the operator repeated.

‘A dead body,’ I confirmed. ‘My neighbour’s.’

‘Okay. Can I take your name, please? Then you can talk me through what’s happened.’

‘My name’s Abby. Abigail Williams.’

‘Abby or Abigail?’

This seemed a strange question.

‘Does it matter? Either; both. Abigail on my birth certificate, Abby if you want to save yourself a diphthong.’

Silence.

‘Okay, Abby. Tell me what happened.’

‘There’s not a great deal to tell. I came over to his flat and he’s dead. He’s cold and stiff.’

‘You’re absolutely certain he’s dead?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘You’ve checked for a pulse? I can talk you through it if you need me to.’

I looked across at Simon’s taut neck, his slack wrist. They looked equally unappealing. ‘He’s cold and stiff,’ I repeated. ‘He’s obviously been dead for a while.’

‘You’re certain?’

‘Yes, of course!’ The woman was an imbecile. ‘He’s dead. He hasn’t had a pulse for many hours.’

‘Okay. I can appreciate this must be distressing. But you’re doing really well, Abby. I just need a few more details before I send someone over. You say the deceased is your neighbour?’

‘Yes. He’s my neighbour – was my neighbour. He lived across the hall. I came over to borrow a tin of tomatoes. My boyfriend is making pasta sauce. But when I got here he was dead, deceased, as we’ve established.’

‘Abby, you’re talking very quickly’ – this was all relative, of course – ‘I need you to slow down a second. What’s your neighbour’s name?’

‘Simon . . .’ I fumbled for a few seconds, trying to picture his post. ‘Simon . . .’ The image wouldn’t come. ‘I can’t remember his full name,’ I admitted. ‘I didn’t really know him that well.’

‘Do you know his age?’

‘Forty-something. Early forties, I’d say.’

I heard keys clacking down the line. ‘And can you confirm your address, please?’

‘129 Askew Road, W12.’

‘Okay. I’m sending a police car over now. It should be there within ten minutes.’

‘Great. There’s an intercom. If they buzz flat 12 I’ll let them in.’

‘Thank you, Abby.’

‘No problem.’

‘It’s imp—’

I realized there was more in the same instant I jabbed the hang-up button, so I didn’t get to hear what *it* was. Important?

Imperative? I smoked half of another cigarette, waiting to see if the phone would ring.

It did not.

When I got back to our flat, Beck was still sweating a lonely onion, which had reduced down to a caramel mulch at the bottom of the pan. I set the tomatoes down next to the hob.

'Simon's dead,' I told him. There wasn't any better way of saying it.

'Dead.' He looked at me as if waiting for the punchline. 'What, he wouldn't give up the tomatoes without a fight and it all got out of hand? I guess that explains why it took you so long.'

I pouted a little. 'No joke. He was dead when I got there. In his armchair.'

'Dead?'

'Dead.'

'Like . . . actually dead?'

'Jesus! As opposed to what? Virtually dead? He's dead! Just dead. Cold and stiff.' Why did no one trust my judgement on this?

'Wow, that's . . . ' A long pause, then he glanced left and frowned. 'Huh.'

'What?'

'You still got the tomatoes?'

I shrugged. 'What's the difference? We still need to eat. You can't make pasta sauce without tomatoes.'

'Right . . . That makes sense, I suppose.' Another pause, heavily pregnant. 'Are you all right?'

This question irritated me for some reason. 'Of course I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be all right?'

‘Well, you know.’ He gestured vaguely at the kitchen wall – or, rather, through the wall, to Simon’s flat, separated from ours by maybe eight inches of brick and bad tiling. It was funny to think of him being so close, still sitting in his chair.

‘I’m fine,’ I repeated.

Beck nodded, but he didn’t look convinced. The expression he was wearing – too purposefully neutral – told me he was already rehearsing his next sentence.

‘Listen, Abby. Maybe you should just sit down for a second. You seem—’

‘What’s the non-emergency police number?’ I asked.

‘101,’ he replied, no hesitation.

‘Right.’

‘I can call them if you prefer?’

‘Already done – they should be here any minute.’

‘Oh. So why did—’

‘I just wanted to know if you knew. I thought you probably would. I think the onion’s catching.’

Like most men, Beck had no ability to multitask. He turned to attend to the frying pan, and I took the opportunity to slip back out into the hallway. A minute or so later, the intercom buzzed.

I pressed my nose against the glass so I could see what was happening in the street below. My reflection dissolved. Blue light, flashing like a strobe. A police car and an ambulance. I wondered why an ambulance and not . . . something else – a van, cold storage. Maybe my diagnosis was still in doubt? You’d think there’d be some sort of competency test for police phone operators. Or maybe there was: if you passed, you got to answer 999 calls; if not, it was straight to 101.

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It was another ten minutes before they took his body away, on a trolley, in a bag. Shortly after that, the police were knocking on our door. By then, it was almost dark outside, and I'd poured myself a glass of red wine. Beck made tea for everyone else – for himself and the two policemen – which made me the odd one out. One girl, one glass of wine. The irony, of course, is that it's completely fucking crazy to be drinking strong, sugary tea at nine forty-five on a Wednesday evening; I was the only one with an appropriate drink.

One of the policemen told us their names, but I forgot them instantly. PC Something and PC Somethingelse. I was distracted before the introductions were even half complete, thinking about the fundamental imbalance of power implicit in any interaction with the police, starting, specifically, with the exchange of names. They had our first names, we had their ranks and surnames. I remembered having a conversation with Dr Barbara about the moment in the early noughties when GPs seemed to decide collectively that surnames should be jettisoned in favour of Christian names, though Dr Barbara maintained she'd been bucking the trend for the best part of two decades (in part because she wasn't a GP). She realized early in her career that patients appreciated the fact that she was a human being, as well as a doctor, and they were more likely to engage with Dr Barbara than Dr Middlebrook. But, then, I supposed an equivalent rebranding was out of the question with the police. You couldn't have PC Peter or Inspector Timothy – the very idea caused an involuntary giggle to spasm in my stomach. It emerged a few seconds later, cloaked in a hiccup, but neither of the PCs seemed to notice.

They made me go through what had happened once more,

and then homed in on all the bits I'd left out for the sake of brevity, starting with the unexplained smell of cigarette smoke. Had I noticed that?

'No, that was me,' I clarified. 'I smoked a cigarette – one and a half cigarettes – after I found him.'

'You shouldn't have done that,' PC Something admonished. 'It's a potential crime scene.'

'Oh. Well, I kind of needed it. And Beck doesn't like me smoking in the flat.' I thought I saw the policemen exchange a sidelong glance, so I added, 'Not in a weird, controlling sense. It's just, you know, one of those issues you learn to compromise over. I mean, in general our domestic situation is a good one.' I rested my hand on Beck's leg and smiled at him for back-up. He was giving me a *what-the-fuck* look, which I suppose, in hindsight, may have been warranted. I'm not sure where the verbal diarrhoea had come from, but it was possibly connected to the general lack of space and air in the room. Needless to say, our flat had not been designed with four occupants in mind; it had not been *well* designed with a single occupant in mind. Beck and I were sitting on the two-seater, and the policemen had pulled chairs across from the dining table – such as it was. If you imagine each of us sitting at one corner of a washing machine, that was the approximate space we occupied. Is it any wonder that our dialogue felt more like an interrogation?

'Can we go back to the very beginning?' PC Somethingelse asked. 'What *exactly* were you doing in his flat?'

'Tomatoes,' I said. 'I wanted to borrow a tin of tomatoes.' I felt I'd been quite clear on this point.

The policeman nodded slowly. 'Yes, I understand why you went over in the first place. But then what? Why did you go

into the flat? Did you have any reason to think something was wrong?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘So why enter? You said the door was closed.’

‘Yes, it was.’

‘He wasn’t expecting you.’

‘No.’

‘And you weren’t in the habit of dropping in unannounced?’

‘No.’ I decided not to mention that this was the first time I’d ever been in Simon’s flat, that I hardly knew the guy. This was quite hard to explain already. ‘I tried the door on an impulse,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t really expecting it to open. I presumed it would be locked.’

‘But it wasn’t, so you entered.’

‘Yes.’

‘Another impulse?’

‘Right. More or less. I mean, the TV was very loud, so I thought maybe he hadn’t heard me at the door.’

‘Quite a coincidence,’ PC Something pointed out. ‘That you happened to go over today.’

‘Yes, that occurred to me too.’

What else could I say?

I sipped my wine and waited to see if there was more.

‘Jesus, Abby! “Our domestic situation is a good one”?’

‘Did it sound insane?’

‘Yes – entirely!’

‘Oh.’

‘Are you drunk?’

‘No.’ After two glasses of wine, I was a little light-headed,

but Beck didn't need to know this. It wasn't relevant. 'It was just the way they kept looking at each other. You must've seen. It put me on edge.'

'They were looking at each other because you'd just revealed you sat and had a cigarette – sorry, one and a half cigarettes – with a corpse. That's not the most normal thing to do.'

I shrugged. What part of this evening had been normal?

'I wonder what happened,' I said later on, not for the first time. We were back on the two-seater, having emptied one bottle of wine and started on another.

'God knows,' Beck replied. 'How old was he, anyway? Forty, forty-five?'

'Yeah, about that. No age to be dead.'

This was a fairly ridiculous thing to say, but Beck didn't seem to notice. He was stroking the nape of my neck with two fingers.

'Presumably it couldn't have been a natural death,' I said. 'I mean, it didn't look like a crime scene, but still . . .'

'Hmm.'

'Healthy people don't just drop dead in their early forties, do they? There must be more to it – suicide or something. Although . . . well, you do hear about these sudden, unexpected deaths sometimes: blood clots, haemorrhages, aneurysms – things like that.'

Beck's fingers were now massaging my left shoulder below the bra strap, and seemed to be migrating south with each passing second. What was it about men's brains? If there was a topic of conversation that could divert their attention away from sex, I had yet to discover it. I shifted my position and leaned back to reorientate his hand, a manoeuvre that was somehow misinterpreted.

'You know, I'm not feeling in a particularly sexy mood right now,' I told him.

'Oh.' The look on his face was confusion tinged with disappointment and a hint of resentment, as if I'd been making come-to-bed eyes for the past hour. 'Because of Simon?'

'Well, yes, that might be part of it,' I lied.

'I thought you were fine?'

I hesitated, for just a moment.

'No, of course you're not fine. You're—'

'I am fine,' I reaffirmed. 'That's not the point.'

What was the point? I didn't know. It wasn't as if sex was such an outlandish suggestion. We'd both been drinking, after all, and it was a Wednesday. Not that we'd got to the stage where sex needed to be timetabled, or anything like that. But nor was it purely spontaneous any more. It was just that Wednesday tended to provide the most convenient mid-week option. I think we both agreed, tacitly, that we didn't want to have all our sex at the weekend.

'I'm a little lost here,' Beck admitted. 'Simon's dead and that's . . . put you off sex? It didn't put you off his tomatoes.'

I didn't say anything.

Beck looked at me very earnestly for a few seconds, then took my hand and said, 'Look: if it makes you feel any better, we can have a two-minute silence before we start.'

I was smiling, despite myself – which I suppose was his intention. He was trying to help me deal with this on my own terms, however baffling those terms might have been.

'Or after. Or during. Take your pick.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Well, of course we'd be silent *during*. We're English.'

'I'll let you smoke a cigarette afterwards. In bed. Suppress all my weird, controlling instincts.'

I hate to admit it, but that was definitely the clincher.

Sex turned out to be surprisingly good, if a little strange. Not that the sex itself was strange – that was entirely regular: fifteen minutes of foreplay followed by five of missionary. It was more my reaction to the sex that was strange. At first, my head was all over the place. I was thinking about the outfit I'd picked out for tomorrow, for the Miranda Frost interview, checking the impression I made in my mental mirror. Cool, calm, incisive. Then I was thinking about Simon, about how his flesh had felt – tepid and spongy – under my forefinger. And it was at this point that something shifted. I started to feel curiously detached from reality. I was disembodied, floating somewhere above myself, as if watching some artily shot, though otherwise rather matter-of-fact, pornographic film.

When I returned, everything had changed, though I've little idea why. It might have been that I'd somehow managed to ingest the optimum amount of alcohol – enough to relax, but not enough to numb. It might have been that my libido was finally enjoying a renaissance, after so many months in free-fall. It might even have been thinking about Simon; there was something, I felt in that instant, quite pleasant about being alive and warm and motile. Whatever the case, I came very quickly, and after such a long period of so-so sex, it felt like an overdue release.

'I'm glad you talked me into that,' I told Beck afterwards, as I lay with my head on his chest. He ran his hand over my lower back and bottom, but made no other reply; and when I tried to speak to him again, he had inevitably fallen asleep.

But I felt wide, wide awake.

I rolled onto my back and smoked a cigarette, then another. Then I simply lay in the dark waiting for my mind to shut down, wishing, more and more, that I'd not switched off the bedside light. At least, then, I'd be able to read.

Our bedroom, I found, was a rather in-between sort of room. The curtains weren't quite thick enough to block out the light from the streetlamps, and the double glazing wasn't well sealed enough to cut out the London traffic. It got pretty stuffy in the summer, too. If I were ever to design a bedroom, I decided, it would be as cool and dark and quiet as the bottom of the sea.

It was 1.37 when I finally admitted defeat and got up. I eased the bedroom door open and closed with a burglar's stealth, and then put on the reception room light and got myself a glass of water. I felt like a coffee, but was, at this point, still nurturing the small hope that I'd start to feel sleepy some time before dawn.

Despite everything, despite the fact that I had to be in a rested, presentable state to interview Miranda Frost in not much more than seven hours, there was something oddly interesting about being up in the middle of the night, alone and for no particular reason. The flat felt unfamiliar – the way home feels after you take down the Christmas decorations, or return from a long holiday. It didn't feel at all like the flat I'd left earlier, when I'd gone to get the tomatoes. It was as if Simon's death had opened a portal on a subtly altered reality. I realized that what I wanted, more than anything, was to be next door again, just to sit quietly in that empty flat. But when I crept out and tried the door, it was locked.

So, instead, I opened the window in our reception room,

leaned out as far as I could, and smoked. There was the odd taxi passing in the street below, but nothing else. None of the house lights opposite was on. It was a solid mass of anonymous brick, each building melting into the next. I drew the warm smoke and cool night air into my lungs and wondered how many lonely deaths occurred in London on the average Wednesday night. And how many of those deaths were sudden and unexplained? Several, I was sure. Certainly enough to make Simon's death a mere statistic. Not the sort of thing that would warrant even a paragraph in the *Evening Standard*. Things would be different, of course, if I didn't live in London. In other parts of the country, where people weren't crammed one on top of the other like battery hens, it would be easier to grieve when a neighbour died. In other parts of the world, the simple action of going next door to borrow food would not be met with raised eyebrows and sidelong glances. But here, in a city of eight million, I couldn't escape the feeling that it was this action that had *caused* Simon's unlikely death. It was as if I'd broken one of the cardinal rules of modern urban living, and had to suffer the consequences. Maybe that was what I should have told PC Something: that there was nothing coincidental about my going over to Simon's flat today. It was just cause and effect.

My thoughts were spinning, so I left the window and tried to read for a bit. Then, when I couldn't concentrate on that, I flipped open my laptop and checked my emails. There was only one new message, from my sister. She wanted to make sure I wasn't planning to pull out of the 'family meal' at the end of the month. I sent a reply saying that I was still shortlisting excuses. After that I read my Google homepage for a while. Quote of the day was from Einstein: 'The difference between

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stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits.' Tomorrow's weather was grey, grey, grey. On a whim, I typed *lack of emotion death* into the search bar, and spent the next fifteen minutes completing a psychopath test, then started reading a forum post about a man who had felt no emotion when his mother died in a car crash. I clicked on link after link, following an erratic trail through cyberspace, with no destination in mind.

And this was how I first stumbled on the Monkeysphere.