
Opening Extract from...

Slade House

Written by David Mitchell

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SCEPTRE

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Whatever Mum's saying's drowned out by the grimy roar of the bus pulling away, revealing a pub called The Fox and Hounds. The sign shows three beagles cornering a fox. They're about to pounce and rip it apart. A street sign underneath says WESTWOOD ROAD. Lords and ladies are supposed to be rich, so I was expecting swimming pools and Lamborghinis, but Westwood Road looks pretty normal to me. Normal brick houses, detached or semi-detached, with little front gardens and normal cars. The damp sky's the colour of old hankies. Seven magpies fly by. Seven's good. Mum's face is inches away from mine, though I'm not sure if that's an angry face or a worried one. 'Nathan? Are you even listening?' Mum's wearing make-up today. That shade of lipstick's called Morning Lilac but it smells more like Pritt Stick than lilacs. Mum's face hasn't gone away, so I say, 'What?'

'It's "Pardon" or "Excuse me". Not "What?"'

'Okay,' I say, which often does the trick.

Not today. 'Did you hear what I told you?'

'"It's 'Pardon' or 'Excuse me'. Not 'What?'"'

'Before that! I said, if anyone at Lady Grayer's asks how we came here, you're to tell them we arrived by taxi.'

'I thought lying was wrong.'

'There's lying,' says Mum, fishing out the envelope she wrote the directions on from her handbag, 'which *is* wrong, and there's creating the right impression, which is necessary. If your father paid what he's supposed to pay, we really would have arrived by taxi. Now . . .' Mum squints at her writing. 'Slade Alley leads off Westwood Road, about halfway down . . .' She checks her watch. 'Right, it's ten to three, and we're due at three. Chop chop. Don't dawdle.' Off Mum walks.

I follow, not stepping on any of the cracks. Sometimes I have to guess where the cracks are because the pavement's mushy with fallen leaves. At one point I had to step out of the way of a man with huge fists jogging by in a black and orange tracksuit. Wolverhampton Wanderers play in black and orange. Shining berries hang from a mountain ash. I'd like to count them, but the *clip-clop-clip-clop* of Mum's heels pulls me on. She bought the shoes at John Lewis's sale with the last of the money the Royal College of Music paid her, even though British Telecom sent a final reminder to pay the telephone bill. She's wearing her dark blue concert outfit and her hair up with the silver fox-head hairpin. Her dad brought it back from Hong Kong after World War Two. When Mum's teaching a student and I have to make myself scarce, I sometimes go to Mum's dressing table and get the fox out. He's got

'*Good evening, here are today's headlines at six o'clock on Saturday, October the twenty-second. Speaking at a press conference in Downing Street today, the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, rejected criticism of the government's ban on broadcast interviews with members of the Irish Republican party, Sinn Féin. Mr Hurd said*—' I switched off the radio, got out of my car and looked up at the pub. The Fox and Hounds. A memory came back to me, of me and Julie popping in for a drink here one time. We were house-hunting, and we'd viewed a place on Cranbury Avenue, one street up. It'd sounded all right in the estate agent's but a right bloody shithole it turned out to be – damp, gloomy, with a garden too small to bury a corpse in, it was so depressing we needed a liquid pick-me-up just to face the drive home. Five years ago, that was. Five years, one wedding, one dismal honeymoon in Venice, four Christmases with Julie's god-awful pinko, tree-hugging relatives, fifteen hundred bowls of Shredded Wheat, two hundred and fifty bottles of wine, thirty haircuts, three toasters, three cats, two promotions, one Vauxhall Astra, a few boxes of Durex, two emergency visits to the dentist,

dozens of arguments of assorted sizes and one beefed-up assault charge later, Julie's still living in our cottage with a view of woods and horses, and I'm in a flat behind the multistorey car park. Mr Justice Jones said I was lucky I wasn't booted out of the force. Thank God me and Julie'd never had kids, otherwise she'd be shafting me for child support as well as compensation for her 'disfigurement'. Grasping bitch. Five years gone. Blink of a bloody eye.

I set off down Westwood Road, eyes peeled. I asked a woman in a miniskirt and ratty fake fur coat – on the game, I'd bet a tenner – if she'd heard of Slade Alley, but she shook her head and strode by without stopping. A jogger ran past in a blur of orange and black but joggers are tossers. Three Asian kids went trundling past on skateboards, but I'd had enough of our curry-munching cousins for one day so I didn't ask them. The multi-culty brigade bleat on about racism in the force, but I'd like to see them keep order in a town full of Everywherestanis whose only two words of English are 'police' and 'harassment', and whose alleged women walk about in tall black tents. There's more to public order than holding hands and singing 'Ebony and Ivory'.

The streetlights came on and it was looking like it might rain: the sort of weather that used to give Julie her mysterious headaches. I was tired after a long and stressful day and at the 'sod this for a game of soldiers' stage, and if our chief super was anyone but Trevor Doolan I'd have buggered

off home to the remains of last night's tandoori takeaway, had a laugh at the Sharons and Waynes on *Blind Date*, then seen if Gonzo and a few of the lads were up for a pint. Unfortunately Trevor Doolan *is* our chief super and a walking bloody lie detector to boot, and come Monday he'd be asking me some rectal probe of a question that I'd only be able to answer if I'd really followed up Famous Fred Pink's 'lead'. It'd be 'Describe this alley to me, then, Edmonds . . .' or some such. With my appraisal in November and the Malik Enquiry due to report in two weeks, my tongue has to stay firmly up Doolan's arse. So down Westwood Road I trogged, looking left, looking right, searching high and low for Slade Alley. Could it have been blocked off since Fred Pink's day, I wondered, and the land given to the house-owners? The Council sometimes do that, with our blessing; alleyways are trouble spots. I got to the end of the road where the A2 skims past a park and dropped my fag down a gutter. A guy with a busted nose was sat behind the wheel of a St John ambulance and I nearly asked him if he knew Slade Alley, but then I thought, *Bugger it*, and headed back towards my car. Maybe a swift beer at The Fox and Hounds, I thought. Exorcise Julie's ghost.

About halfway back down Westwood Road I happened upon an altercation between a five-foot-nothing traffic warden and two brick shithouses at least eighteen inches taller, wearing fluorescent yellow jackets and with their

backs to me. Builders, I could just bloody tell. None of the trio noticed me strolling up behind them. 'Then your little notebook's *wrong*.' Builder One was prodding the traffic warden on the knot of his tie. 'We weren't here until *after* four, gettit?'

'I was 'ere,' wheezed the traffic warden, who was the spit of that Lech Wałęsa, that Polish leader, but with an even droopier moustache. 'My watch—'

'Your little watch is telling you porkies,' said Builder Two.

The traffic warden was turning pink. 'My watch is accurate.'

'I hope you're a good performer in court,' said Builder One, ''cause if there's one thing juries hate more than traffic wardens, it's *short*, little Napoleon, privatised traffic wardens.'

'My height's nothing to do with illegal flamin' parking!'

'Ooh, the F-word!' said Builder Two. 'Verbal abuse, that is. And he didn't call me "sir" once. You're a disgrace to your clip-on tie.'

The traffic warden scribbled on his ticket book, tore off the page and clipped it under the wiper of a dirty white van they were standing next to. 'You've got fourteen days to pay or face prosecution.'

Builder One snatched the parking ticket off the windscreen, wiped it on his arse and scrumpled it up.

'Very tough,' said Lech Wałęsa, 'but you'll still have to pay.'

'Will we? 'Cause we both heard you ask for a bribe. Didn't we?'

Builder Two folded his arms. 'He asked for fifty quid. I could hardly believe my ears. Could you believe your ears?'

The traffic warden's jaw worked up and down: 'I did not!'

'Two against one. Mud sticks, my faggoty friend. Think about your little pension. Do the clever thing, turn round, and go—'

'What *I* just heard was conspiracy to bear false witness,' I said, and both builders swivelled round, 'and to pervert the course of justice.' The older of the two had a broken nose and a shaved head. The younger one was a freckled carrot-top with raisin eyes too close together. He spat out some chewing gum onto the pavement between us. 'Plus litter offences,' I added.

The Broken Nose stepped up and peered down. 'And you are?'

Now I'm not one to boast, but I cut my teeth in the Brixton riots and earned a commendation for bravery at the Battle of Orgreave. It takes more than a hairy plasterer to put the shits up me. 'Detective Inspector Gordon Edmonds, CID, Thames Valley Police.' I flashed my ID. 'Here's a suggestion. Pick up that ticket *and* that gum; climb into your pile-of-shit van; go; and pay that fine on Monday. That way I might not bring a tax audit down on you on Tuesday. What's that face for? Don't you like my fucking language? *Sir*?'

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Me and the traffic warden watched them drive off. I lit up a smoke and offered one to Lech Wałęsa, but he shook his head. 'No, thanks all the same. My wife would murder me. I've given up. Apparently.'

Pussy-whipped: no surprise. 'Bit of a thankless job, huh?'

He put away his pad. 'Yours, mine or being married?'

'Ours.' I'd meant his. 'Serving the Great British Public.'

He shrugged. 'At least you get to put the boot in sometimes.'

'*Moi*? Poster boy for community policing, me.'

A Bob Marley lookalike walked straight at us. The traffic warden stood to one side, but I didn't. The Dreadlocked Wonder missed me by a provocative centimetre. The traffic warden glanced at his watch. 'Just happened to be passing, Detective Inspector?'

'Yes and no,' I told him. 'I'm looking for an alleyway called Slade Alley, but I'm not sure it even exists. Do you know it?'

Lech Wałęsa gave me a look that started off puzzled; then he smiled, stepped aside and did a flourish like a crap magician to reveal a narrow alleyway cutting between two houses. It turned left at a corner twenty yards away, under a feeble lamp mounted high up.

'This is it?' I asked.

'Yep. Look, there's the sign.' He pointed at the side of the right-hand house where, sure enough, a smeary old street sign read SLADE ALLEY.

'Shag me,' I said. 'Must've walked straight past it.'

'Well, y'know. One good turn deserves another. Better be off now – no rest for the wicked, and all that. See you around, Officer.'

Inside the alley, the air was colder than out on the street. I walked down to the first corner, where the alley turned left and ran for maybe fifty paces before turning right. From up above, Slade Alley'd look like half a swastika. High walls ran along the entire length, with no overlooking windows. Talk about a mugger's paradise. I walked down the middle section, just so I'd be able to look Chief Super Doolan in his beady eye and tell him I inspected every foot of Slade Alley, sir, and found doodly bloody squat, sir. Which is why I came across the small black iron door, about halfway down the middle section on the right. It was invisible till you were on top of it. It only came up to my throat and was about two feet wide. Now, like most people, I'm many things – a West Ham supporter, a Swampy from the Isle of Sheppey, a freshly divorced single man, a credit-card debtor owing my Flexible Friend over £2,000 and counting – but I'm also a copper, and as a copper I can't see a door opening onto a public thoroughfare without checking if it's locked. Specially when it's getting dark. The door had no handle but when my palm pressed the metal, lo and behold the bloody thing just swung open easy as you please. So I stooped down a bit to peer through . . .

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. . . and where I'd expected a shitty little yard, I found this long garden with terraces and steps and trees, all the way up to a big house. Sure, the garden'd gone to seed a bit, with weeds and brambles and stuff, and the pond and shrubbery'd seen better days, but it was pretty breathtaking even so. There were roses still blooming, and the big high wall around the garden must've sheltered the fruit trees because they still had most of their leaves. And Jesus Christ, the house . . . A real mansion, it was. Grander than all the other houses around, half covered with red ivy. Big tall windows, steps going up to the front door, the lot. The curtains were drawn, but the house sort of glowed like vanilla fudge in the last of the evening light. Just beautiful. Must be worth a bloody mint, specially with the housing market going through the roof right now. So why oh why oh why had the owners left the garden door open for any Tom Dick or Harry to amble in and do the place over? They must be bloody mental. No burglar alarm either, so far as I could see. That really got my goat – 'cause guess who gets the job of picking up the pieces when the houses of the rich get broken into? The boys in blue. So I found myself walking up the stony path to give the owner a talking-to about domestic security.

My hand was on the knocker when a soft quiet voice said, 'Can I help you?' and I turned round to find this woman at the foot of the steps. She was about my age, blonde, with bumps in all the right places under a man's baggy granddad shirt and gardening trousers. Quite a looker, even in her wellies.

'Detective Inspector Edmonds, Thames Valley Police.' I walked down the steps. 'Good evening. Are you the owner of this property, madam?'

'Yes, I - I'm Chloe Chetwynd.' She held out her hand the way some women do, fingers together and knuckles upwards, so it's hard to shake properly. I noticed her wedding ring. 'How can I help you, Detective . . . uh, oh God, forgive me, your name – it came and went.'

'Edmonds, Mrs Chetwynd. Detective Inspector.'

'Of course, I . . .' Chloe Chetwynd's hand fluttered near her head. Then she asked the standard question: 'Has anything happened?'

'Not yet, Mrs Chetwynd, no; but unless you get a lock on that garden gate, something will happen. I could have been anyone. Think about it.'

'Oh gosh, the gate!' Chloe Chetwynd pushed a strand of waxy gold hair off her face. 'It had a, a sort of . . . wire clasp thing, but it rusted away, and I meant to do something about it, but my husband died in June, and everything's been a bit . . . messy.'

That explains a lot. 'Right, well, I'm sorry to hear about your loss, but a burglar'd leave your life one *hell* of a lot messier. Who else lives here with you, Mrs Chetwynd?'

'Just me, Detective. My sister stayed on for a fortnight after Stuart died, but she has family in King's Lynn. And my cleaner comes in twice a week, but that's all. Me, the mice and the things that go bump in the night.' She did a nervous little smile that wasn't really a smile.

Tall purple flowers swayed. 'Do you have a dog?'

'No. I find dogs rather . . . slavish?'

'Slavish or not, they're better security than a "wire clasp thing". I'd get a triple mortice lock fitted top, middle and bottom, with a steel frame. People forget a door's only as tough as its frame. It'll cost you a bit, but a burglary'll cost you more.'

'A "triple mortar lock"?' Chloe Chetwynd chewed her lip.

Jesus Christ the rich are bloody hopeless. 'Look, down at the station we use a contractor. He's from Newcastle-upon-Tyne so you'll only catch one word in five, but he owes me a favour. Chances are he'll drop by in the morning if I give him a bell tonight. Would you like me to call him?'

Chloe Chetwynd did a big dramatic sigh. 'Gosh, would you? I'd be so grateful. DIY was never my forte, alas.'

Before I could reply, footsteps came pounding down the side of the house. Two kids were about to appear, running at full pelt, and I even stepped onto the lowest step to give them a clear run . . .

. . . but the footsteps just faded away. Must've been kids next door and some acoustic trick. Chloe Chetwynd was giving me an odd look, however. 'Did you hear them?'

'Sure I did. Neighbours' children, right?'

She looked unsure and nothing made sense for a moment. Her grief must have turned her into a bag of

nerves. Inheriting a big old tomb of a house can't have helped. I regretted not handling her a bit more gently earlier, and gave her my card. 'Look, Mrs Chetwynd, this is my direct line, in case of . . . anything.'

She gave my card the once-over, then slipped it into her gardening trousers. Against her thigh. 'That's extremely kind. I – I feel safer already.'

The red ivy shivered. 'Grief's a bastard, it really is – pardon my French. It makes everything else harder.' I couldn't decide what colour Chloe Chetwynd's eyes were. Blue. Grey. Lonely as hell.

The woman asked, 'Whom did you lose, Detective?'

'My mum. Leukaemia. A long time ago.'

'There's no such thing as "a long time ago".'

I felt all examined. 'Did your husband die in an accident?'

'Pancreatic cancer. Stuart lived longer than the doctors predicted, but . . . in the end, you know . . .' The evening sun lit the softest fuzz on her upper lip. She swallowed, hard, and looked at her wrist as if there was a watch there, though there wasn't. 'Gosh, look at the time. I've detained you long enough, Detective. May I walk you back to the offending door?'