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# **Dust and Desire**

Written by Conrad Williams

Published by Titan Books

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**SONATA OF THE DEAD (JULY 2016)**  
**HELL IS EMPTY (NOVEMBER 2016)**

**CONRAD  
WILLIAMS**

**DUST AND  
DESIRE**

**A JOEL SORRELL NOVEL**

**TITAN BOOKS**

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**For Rhonda, Ethan, Ripley and Zac. Always.**

**"Man the sum of his climatic experiences Father said.  
Man the sum of what have you. A problem in impure  
properties carried tediously to an unvarying nil:  
stalemate of dust and desire."**

WILLIAM FAULKNER

## PROLOGUE

**H**e arrived on the Euston Road just as it was getting light, one cold morning at the end of November. He had spoken maybe six words on the way down from Liverpool. The canvas holdall remained in his hands at all times, even though it was large and cumbersome. He shook his head – a single violent jerk – when the drivers who picked him up suggested he sling it in the back. In the tension that followed, he could tell that they considered it a mistake to have stopped for him. They gripped the steering wheel too tightly, or struggled to make conversation. They turned the radio off, or on.

He didn't want to make small talk. He just wanted to arrive. London was at the end of this road. Everything was at the end of this road. His own doorstep and everyone else's, linked by miles and miles of tarmac. Just one road, going everywhere.

As the driver of his final lift sped away, leaving him outside the Shaw Park Plaza Hotel, he knew that this place could become as much his as Liverpool had been. The city was dirty and ugly. It had no favourites. It pretended it

did, but you'd eventually be found out. At its best, the city tolerated you. And that suited him fine. He listened to the traffic stutter along Euston Road, until the cold made his eyes water. He squeezed the handle of the holdall, its worn grip moving into his fingers, moulding to their shape, comforting him. It was like holding his mother's hand: something that must have happened once, he knew, although he could not remember it. He watched some of the passers-by, the way their hands were naturally curled in towards their bodies as they walked, hopeful or ready – maybe instinctively ready – for another hand to join theirs.

His fingers itching with ghosts, he broke into his final ten-pound note to pay for breakfast at a cafe off the main drag. There was a *Sun* lying on his table but, although he tried to read it, his mind wouldn't settle on the words. His bacon sandwich was dry and difficult to chew, but it was hot and he ate it all, his first meal in over eighteen hours. Food was merely fuel, and he had little time for it. It just got in the way. He sipped his coffee until its tasteless heat had dissolved the cold, hard knot in his belly. Slowly, exterior sounds and smells began to break down his barriers. He was too tired to try to stop them. He sat back in his chair and ordered another coffee.

Outside, a tramp walked past the window, a blue hand outstretched.

He pushed his unfinished drink out of the way and wrestled his bag past the early-morning suits queueing for their toast and tea. The tramp was dipping into a rubbish bin now, seeing what he could unearth from the discarded *Metros* and drained cardboard cups. The man's face was so gaunt, the inside of his cheeks looking as if they were about to touch each other. His cardigan was shredded: it seemed

to cling to his body by dint of gravity, or sheer bloody-mindedness.

*Turn and face.*

Gradually, his breathing evened out. The casual impingements of madness retreated. This was only a tramp. Nobody he knew or had once known. Everything was cool. There was nothing to fear. It was time to get to where he needed to be. From his back pocket he pulled out a small, pink diary, very worn, with illegible gold initials embossed on the front cover. He flipped it open and scrutinised the photograph clipped to one of the pages. He wondered how she might have changed over the years, realising he must allow for the differences that might have visited her. He must try to pin her to the there and then, even if, in the here and now, she appeared to be a totally new kind of person.

It started to rain; umbrellas went up around him and the passing throng became like a formation of soldiers with their shields up, marching turtle fashion. Needles of rain bounced off the impervious black canopies, slanted across a hundred inscrutable faces. He managed to dodge them and the traffic, hurrying along Pancras Road to the entrance to St Pancras International Station, where a dozen suits without protection from the rain tutted and stamped, consulting their watches, gazing up at the sky.

He had been here once before, he thought, many years ago, when he was little more than a toddler and the station was not so expansive. On a day out, it had been. He remembered a stall where you could get warm almond croissants. That was gone now, it seemed – or maybe not gone but lost to the glut of shops that had sprung up in the hall beneath the platforms. Now it was like being in a glass shopping mall. Upstairs was a champagne bar where, if you bought a glass

of bubbly, you could have some complimentary oysters to enjoy alongside it. That seemed almost preposterously decadent: a long way from the dollop of gravy Marge would decorate his chips and peas with at the fish bar in Anfield.

You could live here, he thought, with a sudden thrill, as he wandered from shop to shop. People streamed by him, stared straight through him, lost in the subtle panic of needing to be elsewhere, their minds filled with platform numbers and departure times and nothing else. He was invisible. Back home, people said hello to him in the street. You couldn't walk into a pub or a café without someone knowing you. But here, everyone wore the same countenance, as if the face was shocked that it possessed eyes, as if looking at others was too aggressive an act and the expression was its own apologist. People were stone, here. They were as cold as the concrete they walked on.

He bought another coffee at the Cappuccino Bar, and drank it in a fenced-off area reserved for patrons only. People were forming huge queues at the newsagents to buy reading matter for their journeys. In the distance, beyond the outer edge of the curved platform canopy, he could see the cement-coloured sky teeming with rain. The silhouettes of trains waiting to depart were slowly being erased by their own fumes. The place smelled, not unpleasantly, of scorched diesel.

Opposite, a woman on a stall selling smoothies was busy wiping down her counter. He watched her hull strawberries and feed crushed ice into a row of blenders. She worked diligently, never once looking up unless it was to serve a customer. He guessed she had been in this job a sufficient while for the novelty of such a busy place, with its people-watching, to have grown stale. She had alluded to her job

before, on the message boards at skoolpalz4eva.com, but only mentioned that she worked mornings, and enjoyed it, and that it got her out of the house while her husband, a musician, taught guitar to a steady stream of bored children.

After an hour, a young man arrived, and they chatted behind the counter for a while until the woman took her apron off and patted him on the shoulder. The young man assumed her place, took up a knife and turned carrots into coins, ginger into pins and needles.

The woman retrieved a magazine from behind the counter and carried a plastic cup of frothy, shocking-red juice directly towards him. She pushed a current of air before her. He drew the smell of her into his lungs, a mix of fresh fruit, soap and recently laundered clothing. He thought he could smell something of the past, too, on her: bitterness and regret, maybe, but he was guessing.

'Mind if I park here?' she asked him.

He shook his head and withdrew into his space, wishing she had chosen a different table, despite his pursuit of her. There were plenty of unoccupied seats, but they were at tables being used by people with piss-off amounts of matching luggage, or newspapers that were spread out like territorial markers. She dunked a straw into her drink and spread her own magazine – one of those weekly celebrity-obsessed glossies – in front of her. He glanced at her while she pored over the photos of Posh and Kim and Miley before alighting on a crossword and pulling a cheap Bic pen from her pocket, its end chewed to opacity. She wore a fur-lined denim jacket, jeans and a pair of dark-blue Acupuncture trainers: the kind with Velcro straps, no laces. Her hair made her look like some kind of spaniel: centre parting, flattish on top, soft brown curls down to her shoulders.

It was her, after all. No question of it. Her hair was maybe a little longer, but there was no doubting she was the same girl. A woman now. Wide eyes. Nice, friendly mouth. Little rash of freckles across the bridge of her nose. That she was in his sights within a couple of hours of landing, without any problems or inconvenience, infused him with confidence. The pall of fear and uncertainty was pushed even further away. The sky began to clear.

He said, 'Mask.'

'Excuse me?' The woman lifted her head. He couldn't take her scrutiny and looked away.

'Mask,' he said again, more quietly. 'Cher film, 1985.'

'Really?' she said, filling in the letters. 'Thanks. You seen it?' she was looking at him properly now, taking him in.

He shook his head. 'Cher should stick to what she's best at.'

'Singing?'

'No, plastic surgery. She's had more stitches than Roger Bannister, that one.'

The woman laughed and he thought: *In the bag*.

'What's your name?' he asked. She looked at him for a moment, the slightest shadow of concern darkening her face. But then she smiled and, as she opened her mouth, he thought: *Linda*.

'Linda,' she said.

'You're not from around here, are you?' he said. 'I mean, originally. I can tell from your voice.'

She had come to London four or five years previously to try to get some production experience at a film company, or in television. He knew all of this from the message boards. She now relayed it to him in almost the exact same words.

They chatted casually, as strangers sometimes do when

they have time to kill and nowhere else to kill it. She looked at him for long stretches, her fingers twirling the pen. She was gazing at his muscles, her eyes lingering on the biceps filling the armholes of his white Gap T-shirt. She seemed confused, as if uncertain that such a young-looking boy should be so toned, so swollen.

Presently she went back to work, and he dawdled over his cold coffee, writing in a battered journal, the words going down hard and black, scoring future blank pages with the jags and slashes of his memories. Before she finished her shift, he moved away and watched her from behind a stall selling London souvenirs: T-shirts with supposedly funny slogans and Union Jack underwear and catatonic Beefeater dolls in clear plastic sleeves. Eventually she gathered her things together, waved goodbye to her colleague, and headed for the tube station at nearby King's Cross. He followed her to Soho, where she shopped for shoes and had a late lunch with friends at Café Pasta, until it grew dark. Then, behind Holborn underground station, down a narrow alleyway called Little Turnstile, as she waited for someone to answer the doorbell she had just rung, he crept up behind her and slit her throat with a knife that was flesh hot from lying against his thigh all day. Her bag was on his shoulder, the purse from her front pocket in his, and he was across the main drag and into Procter Street before her mind caught up with what had happened to her body, and spilled her to the pavement.



**PART ONE**  
**LASCAR**  
**ROPE**

I came out of the Beehive on Homer Street and trod on a piece of shit. Big surprise. I'm always doing it. It was the end of a pretty rough day, and the noble gods of misery obviously didn't fancy me toddling off to bed without pissing in my pockets one last time. I looked down at my shoe. The piece of shit said: 'Can you get off my face now?' I lifted my foot and let him stand up.

'Barry Liptrott,' I said, 'you're looking well.'

Liptrott straightened his collar and, with a grubby handkerchief, did what he could about the muddy cleat marks from my size 9s on his cheek. 'You didn't need to do that. I didn't do nothing to you.'

'Force of habit,' I said. 'Last time we bumped into each other, you were carrying a knife, in a decidedly unfriendly way.'

'I'm straight now, Sorrell. Straight as arrows.'

'Yeah, right,' I said. 'Straight as fusilli, more like. Straight as da Vinci's perfect fucking circle.'

'I mean it.'

‘What are you doing around here? This isn’t your manor.’ I was thinking of bed, and Mengele. I was thinking of that bottle of Grey Goose all cold and lonely in my freezer.

‘It’s a free country, Sorrell. A man can take a gentle stroll of an evening, can’t he?’

‘Just get out of my sight,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to see you around here again. You walking down this street, it’s knocking thousands off the value of my flat.’

‘I’ve been looking for you.’

‘Christ. After “Brand-new ITV comedy”, those are the words that make my blood run cold the most.’

Liptrott spat grit on to the pavement. ‘Just listen, will you, for a fucking change.’

He told me then, and I played nice all the way through it. When he was finished, I nodded, smiled and said: ‘Fuck off.’

‘What *is* your problem?’ he said. ‘I’m doing you a favour here.’

‘*You* are doing *me* a favour? Why? Last time we met, you didn’t even speak because I’d spannered your mouth off, remember? While we were waiting for the coppers to turn up.’

‘All right, then, I’m doing it for her. But I know you could use the work.’

‘I do okay,’ I said, a little too snappily.

‘I don’t mean nothing by it,’ he said. ‘We all need a bit of work, ’specially at this time of the year. And anyway, I know you, and she’s looking for a good man.’

‘Yeah, Lippy, we’re the best of friends, you and me. Who is she, this girl?’

‘Her name’s Kara Geenan. Nice girl, but desperate.’

‘She’d have to be if she counts you as one of her mates. How do you know her?’

The lights in the pub behind us went off. I nodded in the

direction of Old Marylebone Road. I didn’t like talking to Liptrott anyway, and I certainly didn’t like talking to him in the dark. We stood at the corner and watched the office workers coming out of the Chapel, the wine bar across the road. They had a Christmas menu going already, seventy quid, all in. I was well up for it myself, but my wallet wasn’t. I listened carefully to Liptrott. I wanted some work, but I wasn’t going to let him know how badly. He told me that he had got chatting to her when he happened to be in the block of flats where she lived, doing some rewiring for a relative. He gave her his number, told her to give him a call if she needed any electrical stuff doing. She had called him last night, pissed and hysterical, convinced that her brother had been murdered.

‘Give her this,’ I said, handing him one of my cards.

‘Wouldn’t it be quicker if you gave me your address? I know it’s round here somewhere.’ He glanced back along Homer Street as if his hunch might reward him with a neon arrow flashing on and off above my window.

‘I’d rather give my cock to medical school at this very minute than tell you my address. Now, fuck off.’

‘She needs to see you, Joel. Tonight. She’s desperate.’

‘Fu. Ck. *Off.*’

I print out a batch of those cards, about fifty of them, every night. In the daytime, I put half a dozen in my wallet and distribute the rest. *If you are desperate. If you can’t go to the police. If the police won’t help you. Then maybe I can. Private investigations. Discreet. Effective. I get results. Write, in the first instance, to Joel Sorrell...* I then walk all over London, dropping cards in phone boxes, in pub toilets,

on cinema seats, buses. Once a week I collect my mail from a post office box at the newsagent's round the corner. There isn't usually a lot. Sometimes there's dog shit in the envelopes. One time there was a photograph of a topless woman who had undergone a double mastectomy. Clipped to the pic was a marriage proposal. Another time there was a cheque for three hundred pounds and a note written in blue crayon: *SEND ME HI-HEELZ, BEE YA TCH*. No return address. Not that I had any high heels to send. I tried cashing the cheque but it bounced like a Spacehopper on a pogo stick. Yet I can manage that. Better than leaving a phone number. Better than leaving my address. I don't like strangers in my home. Not any more.

When I got back to the flat, I poured myself a drink and turned on the radio. I don't have a TV. Get away? No, really. Get away? No, *really*. I prefer *Late Junction* on Radio 3. They have some weird shit on there – warbling Finns and people who pluck and bow the inside of grand pianos – but it helps me to relax.

Mengele deigned to lift his head from his favourite bit of rug and blink at me with his amber eyes. Mengele is a silver tabby Maine Coon cat, and he is a big bastard, a stone and a half. I swear he looks at me sometimes as if to say: *I could take you... I know I could take you*. I feed him tuna on Saturdays and some dry stuff called Fishbitz throughout the week. Dry stuff is better for his teeth and his pisser, apparently. In return he dumps half his body weight into his litter tray every night, and uses my legs as a scratching post. Otherwise he sleeps and that's it. That's cats for you, I suppose.

I opened the back door and stepped out on to the balcony.

I'm on the top floor, so it's an all-right view. I can see the roof of the Woolworths building on Marylebone Road, and the clock tower at the Landmark Hotel. If I crane my neck to look past the chimney pots on Seymour Place, I can see the top of the BT Tower. Directly opposite me is the back of the Stanley Arms. Sometimes I can see a young girl who sits in a room and plays guitar. Or a plump, middle-aged woman who cleans like she's sold her soul to the Devil in order to be allowed to do so. Sometimes I watch the guy who does the lunches preparing sandwiches and jacket potatoes and shepherd's pie. I don't eat at the Stanley Arms.

I drank my vodka and thought about Barry Liptrott. I didn't like the way he had tracked me down like that. I must be getting old. Getting careless. Back when I brought Liptrott down for selling knives to kids involved in some nasty school wars, I was on top of my game. If he could nose me out – and Liptrott was not a player; in fact he wasn't even worth a place on the bench – then presumably the more dangerous people in this sordid city could do the same. That wasn't good. I wasn't up to it. I took another gulp of Grey Goose, and that helped a bit. Poured some more: easy way out. This was what was slowing me down, taking away my edge. I had never been much of a drinker, previously, and I prided myself on that. I'd loudly order a glass of orange juice when everyone else was getting the pints in. But that was before a lot of stuff happened, stuff that I found I didn't like remembering too clearly. Booze is instant fog for the brain. Booze is great in that way. Booze is just great.

Christ, why did he have to use that word: *desperate*. I'm a sucker for desperate people. Perhaps because I'm one myself. In helping them, perhaps I'm hoping that I might find the key to how I can help myself.

When it grew too cold to stand outside, I came indoors and took off my jacket. Quick thumbnail now of the flat, and it won't take long. One small bedroom with a sofa-bed permanently extended. One bathroom. One kitchen that is visited occasionally by a family of oriental cockroaches. A living room. No pictures on the walls. Bare floorboards. A couple of shelves with a couple of books. My trusty old radio. Mengele's rug. Mengele. A yucca. The view. A vodka bottle. Me.

I woke up smartish, found it was still dark. The Grey Goose had stripped the insides of my mouth away; it felt raw, tender. The bottle was still in my lap. I stuck it back in the freezer and turned off the radio. Now I could hear what had disturbed me: voices were steadily rising from next-door west. I hardly ever hear anything from next-door east, and I don't know if that's worse, but the guy there lives on his own so what can you expect? Westside, when they aren't screaming at each other, they're fucking each other senseless – either that or they're playing their BBC wildlife videos at full whack; I can't tell the difference. Now it sounded as though they were in fighting mode. From her – pure Estuary English – I heard: '*...I've had to put up with free fucking years of this...*' His voice was lyrical Highlands, impossible to goad, and he was going: 'If you'd just sit down and let me explain...'

At midnight. Christ. I took a shower and put on a fresh shirt. I chucked a handful of Fishbitz into Mengele's dish and grabbed the car keys. Then I left them to it.

\* \* \*

It's a Saab V4, since you're wondering. Maroon. K reg. I bought it in 1985 for three hundred and fifty pounds and it's been in constant service ever since. It's seen some action, this car. It's been driven to places I will never take it again. It's been pushed more than a car of this age and class ought ever to experience. But there have been some good times, too. A lot of them on that back seat. It's been to Dungeness and Durness, known fresh air and foul, but it's never let me down. The steering wheel knows my hands so well, I'm convinced it's altered its shape over the years to accommodate them more comfortably.

I started her up and took her along Crawford Street, first left into Seymour Place and then left again up on to the Westway. I love driving at night. Obviously, the traffic's pretty much non-existent at that hour, but that's not the main appeal. London, for me, comes alive at night, seeming to breathe and seethe with possibilities. It flexes its muscles, this city, when everybody is asleep, perhaps working out the cramp from the previous day, with so much filth clogged in its airways, so many dirty feet shuffling along its streets. Regenerating itself, sloughing off its outer skins, the dark is this city's friend. They feed off each other, London and the night. As do the few who emerge at this hour, who know how to read its secrets.

I drove the car hard until I reached the White City turn-off. Then I eased her down to forty and cruised to the Holland Park roundabout. A minute later and I was in Shepherd's Bush. I parked the car on Lime Grove, outside the house I used to live in – *we* used to live in – when everything was all right. *Do you remember?* I wondered. *Do you think about this place, Rebecca, from time to time?* But, of course, she didn't. The house was dead, just like her. Venetian blinds

kept whatever now went on inside there a secret from me. We had built a den for Sarah in the cellar, painted its walls in bright colours, to be her own little place. The nicks on the wooden supports would still be down there, ticking off the inches as she grew taller. Sarah, giggling, as I tried to hold her still, while Rebecca reached up with a penknife.

I sat in the car looking up at the windows while my breath formed some more ghosts to keep me company. Then I gunned the engine and eased out into Goldhawk Road. By the time I got back to my flat, there was silence from the flat next-door. I had another drink, took another shower, and got my head down. Kip was what I needed: a long, hard, X-rated session of hot kip.

Yeah, right.

## 2

I don't remember the last time I had an unbroken night's sleep. Sometimes I can blame it on Mr and Mrs Decibel next door; sometimes on Mengele, who sings in the night, or claws at the closed windows (I don't let him out – he cost me two hundred and fifty quid for Christ's sake, far too much money to just let him end up as cat jam on the road), or else likes to sand-dance in his litter tray. Mostly I have to blame myself: drinking too much, thinking too much. Once I grasp the tail of a thought that's slinking out of view, I can't let go. It's like a crocodile; if I let go, it will turn around and bite my hands off. So I mull stuff over until it starts getting light, and then it's too light to sleep and I get up, not having resolved anything, really. I've resolved to murder the cat a few times, but how could I when he looks at me like that? Should have got myself a fucking lizard instead.

*She needs to see you, Joel. Tonight. She's desperate.*

Liptrott told me she'd be in Old Compton Street, in one of the all-night coffee bars. He said she'd be there for as long as it took. If I showed, I showed: if not, big coffee bill. I walked it, needing the spank of cold night air to