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Written by D. B. Thorne

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TROLL

D.B. THORNE



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TROLL

one

FORTUNE LOOKED AT THE MAN IN CHARGE OF FINDING HIS missing daughter with the kind of dismay he generally reserved for the most dismally incompetent interview candidates. This was the man responsible for piecing together her final movements? Chasing down leads and taking names? Overweight, crumpled, he had the look of somebody who'd suddenly found himself in charge of his own washing and ironing. In his recent past, Fortune guessed, was a failed marriage and a whole lot of takeaways.

Looking at him over the interview room table, Fortune had a feeling close to panic. He blinked and said, 'I'm sorry?'

'Scaled it back,' said Marsh. He had little eyes and they weren't looking at Fortune; were looking anywhere but. 'No choice.'

'But she's still missing,' said Fortune.

Marsh nodded. 'I know. I'm sorry. But it's been weeks, and there's still no ...' He stopped. Body, thought Fortune. You mean body, but you haven't got the guts to say it. Marsh coughed. 'We're not closing the investigation. Just ... reclassifying it.'

'Reclassifying it,' repeated Fortune. 'What does that even mean?' It sounded to him like the kind of empty phrase his younger staff used: moving the needle, taking it offline, reaching out. Air, nothing more. It didn't make sense.

‘Mr Fortune,’ Marsh said. ‘You’re upset. It’s understandable.’

‘Of course it’s understandable,’ said Fortune. ‘She’s my daughter. She’s disappeared off the face of the earth. And you’ve got no leads, no ideas, no nothing. And now you’re giving up?’ He tried, but he couldn’t quite keep the desperation out of his voice.

‘Not giving up. Re—’

‘Reclassifying. I heard. I still don’t know what it means.’

‘It means ...’ Marsh sighed. ‘Mr Fortune, we’re trying to find your daughter.’

‘Not very hard.’

‘As hard as resources will allow.’

‘How many resources does a missing girl merit?’ said Fortune. ‘How important is her life? Ten policemen? Four? One?’

Marsh sat back in his chair, massaged the bridge of his nose. He had thin hair, grey. He couldn’t be in charge, running the show, thought Fortune. His daughter deserved better.

‘Mr Fortune, we’ve done what we can. Thrown bodies at the investigation, set up an incident room, knocked on doors, interviewed friends, ex-boyfriends, colleagues. We’ve spoken to the press, put out an appeal. CCTV, the lot.’ He lifted his shoulders. ‘Nothing. At this point, there’s just not much more we can do. Without ...’ Again he didn’t say the word. Body. Without the body of my only child, my daughter. Sophie.

‘You can’t give up on her,’ said Fortune.

‘We’re not giving up. We’re scaling back. No choice.’

‘How many people have you got on it? Right now?’

Marsh picked up a pen, something to look at rather than Fortune. ‘Right now, Mr Fortune, we have one officer continuing with enquiries. The investigation isn’t closed. But, like I say, it’s been scaled back.’

‘One. One officer.’ Fortune closed his eyes for several seconds. He had come a long way. Taken time off. ‘What can one officer do? She’s out there somewhere, and she needs help.’ He could hear a pleading tone in his voice, imploring. God, but he sounded desperate.

‘Mr Fortune,’ said Marsh, ‘what do you think happened to your daughter?’

‘That’s why I’m here,’ said Fortune. ‘To find out.’

‘No. I mean, when you heard that she had gone missing, what was your immediate thought?’

Fortune shook his head. ‘I don’t know. That she’d ... I don’t know.’

‘That she’d what?’ said Marsh.

Fortune shrugged, trying to keep calm. ‘Gone on holiday. Run off with a new boyfriend. I don’t know. Could’ve been anything.’

Marsh nodded, leant back in his chair. They sat facing each other and Fortune could hear the hum of the air conditioner, hum and rattle, a world away from the sleek, smooth hiss of his Dubai office.

There was a knock on the door and a young woman came in with two coffees, put them on the table. Marsh nodded to her and she left, closed the door with a gentle click. He lifted one of the Styrofoam cups, took a drink, made a face. He put the cup down carefully, slowly.

‘How many times did your daughter attempt suicide?’

There it was. The question Fortune had been expecting, waiting for. The question he didn’t want to face. He remembered hospital corridors, hard seats, his wife next to him, the click of heels on linoleum. The slow tick of a wall clock, more than one clock, more than one hospital.

‘No,’ he said. ‘No.’

‘We’re not ruling anything out,’ said Marsh. ‘But given her history ...’

Fortune wished Marsh had the courage to finish his sentences. To tell it like it was. That his daughter had had a troubled adolescence, all the way through her late teens and early twenties; that she had been moody, anxious, depressed, angry. Lost.

‘She’d been better,’ he said. ‘Much better. A different person.’

No more suicide attempts. No more pills, flatmates finding her after coming back from a late bar shift. No more ambulances, vigils, apologies, tears. She had been better, making a life for herself, or at least that was what he’d been told.

Marsh sighed and opened a file that he had brought with him, placed it on the table between them. It was beige and thin. If this was it, Fortune thought, the sum total of the investigation, then a lot of midnight oil had gone unburned. Marsh took out a clear plastic wallet with a piece of paper inside, using two fingers to slide it into place between the pair of them.

‘We found this,’ he said, turning it so that Fortune could read. An A4 sheet of paper, covered in scribbles. Fragments of phrases in black pen, haphazardly placed. *This needs to end*, underlined many times. *This ends today*, the words gone over again and again so that the ink shone and the paper was indented, almost worn through. *Can’t go on. Can’t go on. Can’t go on.* In block capitals, at the bottom of the paper, this time carefully printed: *WHY SHOULD I TAKE ANY MORE?*

Fortune looked at the writing, the flourishes on the tails of the gs and ys, the to-hell-with-you freedom of it. It was Sophie’s writing, no mistaking it.

‘What is this?’ he said.

‘We found it on your daughter’s desk,’ said Marsh. ‘I’m sorry.’ Fortune looked at it again. It wasn’t conclusive, it couldn’t be. ‘This doesn’t mean anything,’ he said.

‘Maybe not,’ said Marsh. ‘But given her history ...’ Again, *again*, he left the sentence hanging, reached forward and took a drink of his coffee, eyes anywhere but on Fortune.

‘This isn’t a suicide note,’ said Fortune.

‘Mr Fortune, your daughter had a history of suicide attempts. She disappeared and nobody knows where she went. There is no body. She had no enemies. Her lifestyle was ... unconventional. I’ve read her blog. This is London. It gets to people, particularly young people. Big cities can feel very lonely.’

There was another knock on the door and a young policeman pushed it open a fraction, put his head into the room and lifted his chin to summon Marsh. Marsh pushed his chair back, said, ‘Excuse me,’ and left, pulling the door closed behind him.

Fortune looked down at his daughter’s handwriting, tried to picture her face. How long since he had seen her? Months. He could barely remember her, could better remember her as a child. She had been beautiful, that he could recall. He could remember her weight as he tossed her into the air and caught her, delighted eyes sparkling in the sun. Laughter. His daughter, before he lost her, before her happiness was replaced by something dark and alien that Fortune could not understand or connect with. Before she had given up on him. Or he had given up on her.

He closed his eyes, tried to sit comfortably. It felt as if he had spent the last day being passed from one air-conditioned environment to another, a dreamlike journey completely unrelated to the real, living world outside. Watching the desert

sands of Dubai's outskirts unreel past him from the cool interior of the company's Mercedes. Reading the paper in the perfect ambient temperature of the airport lounge. Onto the plane, back out at Heathrow and into another Mercedes, an older model than the company's but air-conditioned nonetheless. Dropped at the hotel, then here, an off-green interview room in a dilapidated suburb of London, blighted by cardboard and polystyrene tossed in the wind. He was tired and he did not want this to be happening, none of it. Did not want this to be real.

Marsh came back into the room, apologized and sat down again. Fortune watched him impassively. Marsh took a deep breath.

'Mr Fortune,' he said. 'I am sorry, I really am. I don't want you to think this case is closed. But if I'm to be honest, I think both you and I know that your daughter was troubled, and that the most plausible explanation for her disappearance is that she took her own life.'

Fortune had to give Marsh credit; he'd managed to get to the end of that sentence, difficult as it must have been to say.

'So that's it?'

'No, Mr Fortune, that's not it. But we've done all we can. If there are any further developments, then of course we'll assign more resources. But for now, we're out of options. And we have other cases. Many other cases.'

Fortune sat in silence until he realized that, as far as Marsh was concerned, this meeting was over. He had travelled two thousand miles, taken days off work, to be told that his trip had been wasted and that his daughter was, in all probability, dead. He stood up.

'Who's your manager?'

Marsh just shook his head. 'It won't help.'

'It can't be ... You can't just leave it. One officer? It's not right. She's my daughter.' So empty, his words. So needy. He felt ashamed of himself.

'I'm sorry,' said Marsh.

'I don't think you are,' said Fortune. 'I don't think you care at all.'

Marsh looked at his watch. 'We're going to have to finish here.'

The public sector, thought Fortune. It was everything they said it was. The monkeys put in charge, the blind leading the blind, the lunatics running the asylum. He ran out of metaphors. He shook his head. There was nobody out there looking for his daughter. Nobody.

Marsh picked up the thin file, stood up, walked past Fortune and opened the door. 'I'm sorry,' he said, once again. Again Fortune had a feeling of panic, as if, were he to leave this room, any chance his daughter had of being found would be gone. At last he stood up and walked to the door. He should have looked after her. Been there for her. It wasn't this policeman's fault. It was his, his and his alone.

He walked past Marsh without looking at him, not as a show of contempt, but because he didn't want the policeman to see the shame and guilt in his eyes.

Outside the police station, the weather was cold, even though it was spring, or meant to be. Fortune felt every expat's momentary incredulity that the people of Britain stayed here, here in this country of decaying infrastructure and eroding values and soul-sapping weather. He looked for a cab, but this part of London, way out east, wasn't a black cabbie's turf of choice.

He lit a cigarette, cupping his hand around the flame, took in a lungful with his eyes closed, waiting for the nicotine to

do its thing. He coughed, tried to stop, coughed some more. That used to be another thing about Dubai: you could smoke anywhere, not like here. He stood smoking on the pavement, watching immigrants walk past as if it were they, rather than him, who belonged on these streets. A man with a tattooed face and crutches asked him for money to get a hostel for the night. Fortune put his hand in a pocket, remembered he'd spent his last British money on a coffee at the airport.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I've got nothing left.'

He watched a cyclist overtake a minicab and swear at the driver as he passed. He watched a Middle Eastern man step outside his convenience store and stand, arms folded across his chest, facing the world with pride. He watched a young woman push a pram while swearing at somebody down a mobile phone. Eventually a taxi arrived and Fortune gave the driver the name of his hotel, upscale, five star, where people understood the rules, how things worked.

two

SO WHAT I'D LIKE TO KNOW IS, SINCE WHEN HAS IT BEEN OKAY to pay a thousand pounds a month to rent a flat when said flat a) doesn't have heating that actually, you know, heats, and b) has no light on the entrance stairs, so at night I've got a good chance of falling over and breaking something important (like my iPhone).

I called Sam and asked him pretty much this question, and he told me that he'd see to it, that it was on his list. I asked him how long his list was. He replied by saying, 'How long is my *what?*' and laughing. That, I think, pretty much sums him up.

But then he said, and I'm still turning this over in my head, he said that there'd been complaints about me.

'What kind of complaints?' I asked him.

'Noise.'

'What noise?'

Sam sighed, like he'd heard it all before. But I was serious, I haven't made any noise, definitely haven't. Let's be honest, it's not as if I have enough friends to invite over and make noise with

'Music,' Sam said. 'Loud music, on all night. I've had a couple of complaints.'

'I haven't made any noise,' I said.

‘Of course you haven’t. Still, though, you know ... keep it down.’

‘I told you. I haven’t been making any noise, and certainly not at night. Who complained?’

‘Dunno. Got a message, left on my phone.’

‘I haven’t been making noise,’ I said again. What else could I say? There wasn’t much point in arguing; Sam had obviously made up his mind. ‘Anyway,’ I went on, ‘it’s freezing. Can you please sort the heating out?’

Sam said, ‘Tell you what. You keep the noise down, I’ll put you at the top of my list. Deal?’

He wasn’t even pretending to entertain the slight possibility that I was telling the truth. Even though I was paying him a thousand pounds a month to stay in a cold, dark dump. You know what I said?

‘Okay.’

But honestly, right then I didn’t have time to argue, because I was standing outside a bar called Mingles and hoping that the young lady I’d arranged to meet there had showed up. Because if she was there, and if what she had to tell me was true, then my career as a journalist would be looking up. And I’d be able to move to another flat, one with heating and working lights and maybe even a new television.

The young lady – no names – had told me what she looked like, and she wasn’t hard to spot. She’d told me that she was tall and quite pretty, which was close; she was actually tall and stunning. She was also quite clearly only about fifteen, although that hadn’t stopped the barman from selling her a bottle of lager. It was quite likely that he’d fallen in love with her, as she looked, well, awesome. She was perched on a bar stool, and her legs nearly reached the floor.

I asked her if she was who I thought she was, and she said yes, yes she was. So then I said, look, I'm sorry, but I can't talk to you here. You're underage, and you're drinking. We need to keep this legitimate, all above board. She rolled her eyes and sighed, as teenagers do, and I hoped she wasn't going to make this difficult.

Let me cut a long story short: she's fifteen, and a well-known TV celebrity slept with her and offered her drugs, even though he knew how old she was. I'm a journalist. It's a story. And I need to keep her onside, until the story breaks.

'Can I buy you a coffee?' I said.

'I haven't finished this.'

'Come on,' I said. 'Make this easy on me. Please?'

There was more eye-rolling, and an extra-long sigh, and then she said, 'Okay.' I can't help but like teenagers. They'll try to get away with anything, but the good ones don't mind getting busted. She slid off the bar stool like water poured out of a glass and looked down at me, and I'm not short.

'Are you sure you want to do this?' I asked her.

'I'm sure,' she said. 'He deserves it.'

And I had to agree with her there.

three

FORTUNE TOOK A TAXI FROM THE STATION AND PAID IT OFF AT the bottom of his drive. The sun was out and he had forgotten how many trees there were, this place where he had lived for so many years before he replaced the leaves and grass with desert sand and high-rises. He wondered for a brief moment where it was he called home nowadays and came up short with an answer. Not Dubai. And not here either, not any more. It had been too long.

He swung open the rustic five-bar gate, closed it behind him and crunched up the gravelled drive towards the house. Once a dog would have barked in greeting, a springer spaniel that had never been anything other than crazy, called Peter, named by his daughter. Peter. Odd name for a dog, but then the dog had been far from normal. They'd had to put it down and nobody had volunteered, so Fortune had put his hand up. That he remembered.

He rang the doorbell and waited, listening to birdsong and the soft hiss of far-off traffic. Suburban Essex, the dormitory-town idyll. Commuterville. Stepford self-satisfaction for the white-collar winners, safe, green, the high streets lined with boutiques and expensive wine bars. He'd never much liked it, this place, so superficial, so artificial. As unreal in its way as Dubai was.

Sounds came from inside the house, and through the distorted glass he saw a shape approach, turn locks, open the door. And there was Jean.

She looked beautiful blinking into the light and Fortune felt his heart lurch in his chest, a brief chemical explosion of sadness and regret. She regarded him with no expression.

‘Hello,’ she said.

Fortune had an urge to tell her that she looked wonderful, as beautiful as the day they had met, the kind of statement a man still in love with his wife would make, regardless of how long they had shared their lives. He took a breath, knew as he did so that he lacked the courage.

‘Hi,’ he said. ‘Sorry. Forgot my keys.’

Jean nodded but did not look at him, instead looked past him. ‘Come in,’ she said as if she was addressing somebody standing behind him, although there was nobody there.

‘You look great,’ Fortune said quietly, but his wife had already turned and was heading back into the house, down the dark hall. She stopped.

‘Sorry?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ said Fortune.

‘I thought you said something.’

‘No.’

He followed her into the kitchen, dropping his suitcase along the way at the bottom of the stairs, as if he was at a guest house rather than in his own home, where, in another lifetime, he had made an attempt to raise a family.

They sat opposite one another at the kitchen table, two cups of tea and the ticking of the wall clock for company. She looked

tired and detached, as if half of her psyche was occupying some other, unknowable place. Fortune watched her.

‘I went to see the police,’ he said, though he had already told her on the phone.

‘That man, what’s he called? Marsh?’

‘He told me they were scaling down the investigation.’

Jean picked up her cup with both hands and nodded at it vaguely. ‘They think she killed herself.’

‘Do you?’

Jean closed her eyes at this question and there was a long silence. When she opened them, they were wet with tears.

‘I wish I could say that I didn’t.’

Fortune thought of all the times his wife had been there for Sophie. The times she had withstood her anger, forgiven her insults, remained strong when Sophie had given up. She had believed in her daughter. Believed far more than Fortune had.

‘We don’t know for sure,’ he said. ‘She could walk through the door any time.’

Jean sighed, shook her head slowly. She still did not look at Fortune, and when she spoke next, it was more to herself than to him.

‘Oh hi, didn’t miss me, did you? Went on holiday, forgot to say. Can’t believe you were so worried.’ Now she did look at Fortune. ‘You don’t think I’ve told myself that a hundred times? But she’s not here, she’s gone, and nothing good has happened to her. Nothing.’

‘Jean,’ Fortune said. ‘It’s too early—’

‘It’s not too early,’ she said, clearly and slowly. ‘It’s too late. It’s far too late.’

‘You can’t give up.’

She laughed, a sound without warmth. 'I can't what?'

Fortune knew what was coming. He also knew there was nothing he could do about it. 'You can't give up.'

His wife set her cup down on the table carefully. 'And just what kind of moral right do you have to tell me something like that? Giving up's what you do, isn't it?'

'Jean,' he said again.

'You don't like it, that the police have given up on Sophie? Take a look in the bloody mirror.'

Fortune didn't reply, and they sat in silence for some time. He could feel his heart beating and he wished he knew what he should say, how he could bridge the gap between them. But at the same time he knew that they were separated by too many years, too many years and an ocean of disappointment.

'When did you last speak to her?' Jean asked.

'Sophie? A month ago, something like that?'

It had been longer, much longer, but he did not want his wife to know that. Three, four months, without talking to your own daughter. Was that normal? No. No, it couldn't be.

'How had she been?' he asked.

Jean drank tea, closed her eyes to its steam. 'Not good. Chaotic. Paranoid. I ...' She stopped, pressed the cup to her lips, hard. 'I told her I couldn't cope, told her she had to work it out for herself.' She kept the cup to her lips, as if for comfort. This is when I put my hand out, place it on hers, Fortune thought. Offer some comfort. He didn't do it, didn't even get close.

'She was just starting out. It was bound to be difficult, in a new city.'

'I wasn't there for her.'

'She's not a child.'

‘She needed help.’

Fortune didn’t answer. He wondered how many times he had told his wife to leave it, to let Sophie make her own mistakes, not get involved. Was that just another way of saying that they should give up on her?

‘You mustn’t blame yourself,’ he said, the words so worn and tired that they did not even register, didn’t last the journey across the kitchen table.

A cat mewed at their feet and Fortune looked down and tried to remember its name but could not. Jean got up and walked to the fridge, took out milk. She stood with the bottle in her hand and seemed to forget what she was doing, rendered immobile by an unexpected wave of grief and guilt. Despite everything, Fortune felt his throat harden, at the sight of his wife and at the thought of his daughter who was probably dead, who must be dead; weren’t they acting as if she was dead?

He got up from the kitchen table and walked over to his wife, but just as he got to her, she turned and said to him, ‘Please don’t touch me.’

There were many photos of Jean and Sophie in the house, although few of them included Fortune. They were always smiling, their eyes even more alike from the similarity of their expressions. She had been their only child and into her his wife had poured all her love and devotion, an amount that Fortune had imagined endless. He picked up a photo, the two of them on holiday, a Roman ruin behind them, perhaps Greece. He’d missed that holiday, probably been at work. So many missed holidays, missed dinners, missed opportunities to get closer, bridge gaps, give support, show affection. He wondered why he

had found it so hard, so impossible. It had always been easier to stay at the office rather than face the hard work of raising a family. And now it was too late.

Jean was upstairs resting and he went to the garage to see if he could find any evidence that he had ever lived in this house, ever called it home. He had never officially left; had only been in Dubai for a year. He felt a hit of resentment as he looked for the garage key. His home. He had paid for it. Worked for it. Where were those keys?

In the garage, his golf clubs were still in the corner, the black and white leather Titleist bag, the full set of irons and woods and wedges and putters. He'd lied about the price to Jean; no way he was going to tell her how much it'd all cost. He wheeled them out, looked at them. Pulled out a seven iron, felt its weight, the balance of it. Imagined teeing off, creaming a drive down the fairway, the snick of the ball leaving the club, faint touch of fade, ball landing in front of the green, his fellow player grunting, 'Good shot,' reluctantly. Drinks in the clubhouse afterwards. Congratulations. Carded a round of sixty-eight.

'You're not,' his wife said from behind him.

He turned, club still in his hands. 'Not what?'

'Going to play golf.'

'No. No, just wanted to see if they were still here.' Jean, the golf widow. They'd laughed about it once. Not for very long.

'They're still here. But you're going to need to take them.'

Fortune frowned. 'Take them where?'

Jean shook her head. 'I don't know.' She paused, took a step back as if worried he might come at her with the seven iron. 'I want you to leave. For good.'

'What?' said Fortune.

‘Go,’ said Jean. ‘Just ... go.’

Fortune watched Jean and thought of the times they had shared at the beginning, when it had seemed as if their meeting had been preordained, a perfect case of aligned stars. She was standing almost side-on to him, as if to face him directly disgusted her, sickened her. Like the sight of him was an affront. He took a firmer grip on the golf club, as if to defend himself from her loathing. How had it come to this?

And then he realized with a sudden and unexpected sadness that their daughter’s disappearance was not something that would bring them together. It was something that would finally drive them apart. There was nothing left, no glue, no reason to keep up the pretence of marriage. No shared interests. No appearances to maintain. The end.

‘Where will I go?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ his wife said. ‘I don’t know what you do. I don’t know anything about you. Go anywhere you want. But I don’t want you here.’

‘Who’ll take care of you?’

Again, that laugh, devoid of humour or warmth. ‘I’ll manage.’

‘I want to help.’

‘You can’t.’

‘I can try.’

‘Please don’t.’

Fortune turned to look at the house that he had worked to pay for. ‘I’d like to see her bedroom.’

Jean sighed and turned her back on him, and Fortune walked towards his house to say goodbye.

*

He had spent far too little time in this room, although it had been his daughter's for nearly all of her life. Too late home to read bedtime stories. Banned from when she was, what, ten? Not allowed in. Keep out. Private. The bedspread, the few remaining clothes hanging in her wardrobe, the photos of friends stuck on the wall above her desk, it was all unfamiliar, unknown.

But could he blame himself? She had been so difficult, so angry, so unreasonable. Unknowable. He sat on the bed and felt the silence of the room press down on his shoulders, not letting go of its secrets, its intimate details, the life of his daughter.

After several minutes he went downstairs, picked up his suitcase and walked, wheeling his golf cart, back to the road at the bottom of his drive, where he would call a taxi for the station.

four

High Times and Miss Fortune: Five Things I've Learnt in a Taxi

So I was in a taxi last night (yes it was late, no I wasn't drunk) and I was talking to the driver, as you do. Well, I say you do, but some people don't like to talk to the driver. A friend of mine told me that he always asks them not to speak to him, which I said sounded rude. He said maybe, but who cares? They're only taxi drivers.

He's not my friend any more.

Anyway, so I was in a taxi, chatting away, and I told the driver (whose name was Ted, FYI) that I was just back from Brazil. He told me he'd always wanted to go but hadn't, on account of how he has a morbid fear of flying and last time he went on a plane, back from Alicante, he ended up being strapped to his seat by five air stewards, screaming all the while.

But that's not what I learnt. What I learnt was that Brazil the country is named after Brazil the nut, and not the other way round. So basically the nut came first, and then they named the country. Weird, right?

Anyway, it got me thinking of all the things that I've learnt in a taxi. And it turned out that I've learnt quite a lot. So here is my top Five Things I've Learnt in a Taxi:

5. I learnt that one of my ex-boyfriends had slept with not one, but two of my colleagues. Not only that, but one of those colleagues was a man. Not only that, but he'd slept with them while he was seeing me. I found this out because he was in the taxi with me, and he confessed all in a drunken attack of conscience (and in tears, too). Needless to say, I asked the taxi to stop, kicked him out, ignored his pleas that he had no money and no way to get home, and ignored the gazillion text messages he bombarded me with. And good riddance.

4. I learnt that the world is run by Jews, and that they're in league with the Muslims to destabilize the West. Okay, so when I say learnt, it's not that I actually believed it, but I'd been waiting for a taxi for hours and didn't fancy walking home in the rain, so I just nodded and uh-huh-ed as I listened to the man's drivel. Sheesh.

3. I learnt that one taxi driver's daughter was in hospital, and that he worked during the night so he could be at her side during the day, and that he was tired but he needed the money, even though he'd recently found out that the brain tumour she had was terminal and it was only a matter of time. His voice cracked as he told me this, and I also learnt that some people's lives are so hard it is a miracle they continue.

2. I learnt that T — — W — — had been in the back of the same cab only a couple of nights before me, and at the traffic lights on Piccadilly he had leant forward and offered the driver a toot on his cocaine.

1. I learnt that there is no sight more beautiful than two people kissing on Albert Bridge on a summer's night, with the lights of London reflecting in the Thames and the two figures intertwined, as natural as ivy and as gentle as music.

COMMENTS:

SharnaJ: *LOL on the boyfriend, I remember the same thing coming back from a party! He told me he'd kissed my best friend! I didn't throw him out, though ... I married him!*

LozLoz: *Funny!*

CatLover: *That poor driver and his daughter! Heartbreaking.*

Starry Ubado: *Next time you get in a cab I hope the driver rapes you, you stupid bitch.*

It's just a blog. I mean, seriously, it's just me, writing about my life. Hardly anybody even reads it, although I still harbour this crazy dream of gathering a million followers, turning it into a YouTube channel, serving up adverts and making enough money to buy a chateau in France where I'll grow grapes and fall in love with a local ne'er-do-well.

But really, it's just a blog. So why do people feel the need to leave comments like that? I try to tell myself that it's only a lonely teenager in his bedroom letting off steam because he hasn't got a girlfriend yet, but what if it isn't? What if it's some steroid-addled man-mountain with a wall covered in photos of me, with my face violently scratched out in every one of them?

I read an article the other day that said that trolls have the same personality traits as psychopaths. Apparently they share a

lack of remorse and empathy. It suggests that perhaps I should spend less time reading things online, but it didn't do much to reassure me.

Still, the troll's not going to win. I'll keep writing, and keep dreaming of the day I can swap my keyboard for a whirlwind Provençal romance with a roguish Frenchman. Right. Dream on.

I think I made some progress with the young lady I met in the bar, who I'll refer to as Child Z. She's still willing to cooperate. I met with her mother (her father's long gone, barely a memory) and she's keen to move things along too. The truth is, she wants the sleazeball TV celebrity locked up. Well, she wants a lot more doing to him than that, and I have to give her credit for her imagination, but I did point out that this was no longer the Dark Ages and that we didn't really do that kind of thing to people nowadays, for any number of good and enlightened reasons.

So now the whole matter is sitting with the lawyers, who are discussing whether or not, if we do run with the story, we'll be sued back into those selfsame Dark Ages. They want everything so watertight that I worry it will never see the light of day, but I'm doing all I can to make it happen. I kind of feel like Erin Brockovich, only not nearly as glamorous, and without the impeccable moral compass. But a bit like her, even so. Somebody a mother (or father!) could be proud of. It's all rather exciting.