

The Night Climbers

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Extract

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THERE WERE SECURITY BARRIERS IN THE FOYER, THICK glass turnstiles that fell open when you stuck the right card in the slot. The receptionists, however, were the real security. Their 'Can I help you?' and bright smiles were the modern equivalent of 'Who goes there?' It was a surprise, therefore, to find Jessica sitting in my black leather chair, waiting for me to return from the basement gym, where I had spent a cathartic lunchbreak pummelling my personal trainer, sweating out the last drops of the previous night's whisky. I knew from the way she looked at me, tilting her head forwards and peering out from under her blonde fringe with a lopsided smile, that she had lied her way in. Her expression was just as I remembered, and pulled me back into the past with the force of a scent. At thirty-two she was already losing her looks. They were not going gracefully, with the haunting quality that briefly heightens doomed beauty. She had bags under her eyes and a spot on her chin where her make-up had formed a beige scab. I took no pleasure in this, but I did take pleasure from the fact that I didn't care. Indifference, not feigned but genuinely felt, was a hard-won victory, and I prized it. I shook her hand and smiled.

She had been playing with the objects on my desk. My pens were scattered over the blotting paper.

'How can I help you?' I asked.

'Don't you want to know how I got in?'

'I pretended to be from London Underground. I read about the deal you're doing, turning public services private. You used to be so left wing. I'm your two-thirty.' She grinned. 'You look nice. And you look rich. Nice and rich.' She leant across the desk and lifted one of the silver balls on my Newton's cradle, letting it go to hit its fellow with a gentle click.

As I looked at her, I tried to gauge her financial situation. It seemed the quickest way to divining what she wanted. Her platinum hair had been recently cut and highlighted. Her fingernails were salon neat and unpainted, but glazed. The jewellery she wore was simple, a scuffed Tiffany's silver pendant. Her black suit could have been tailored, but Jessica had always had a body that made cheap clothes look expensive. In the days when I had known her well, she had practised a policy of sartorial simplicity designed to exhibit her natural gifts, and I think to embarrass the girls who dressed up. I could not tell whether this policy had survived the passing of her beauty. I thought on the whole that choice had given way to necessity. There was no ring on her finger.

Jessica sat back in her chair and met my eye as if to say, 'And what has become of you?'

'So, you're my two-thirty. I bill at two hundred and fifty pounds an hour. What can I do for you?'

'You can give me a discount, for starters.'

We looked at each other with fixed smiles, headlights speeding towards one another in the dark. She relented first. 'I need a place to stay for a few days. I don't want

to go to a hotel. I don't want to go to friends. I don't want to be found.'

She rose from my seat. Her movements still had the light accent of childhood ballet. Born of parental ambition, undone by a teenage growth spurt, a graceful precision was the last legacy of repetition and bleeding toes. To my displeasure I noticed that behind the chair sat a briefcase and a piece of fake Louis Vuitton luggage, its beige midriff distended with female packing. Jessica knew the difference that social leverage could make, and it would be that much more awkward to dismiss her if she had all the practical necessities already to hand. I wondered what the receptionists downstairs would think of my attractive female clients arriving prepared for an overnight stay. It was typical of Jessica to cause disruption simply by virtue of her presence. With an air of unimpeachable honesty, she addressed me eye to eye. The air was still filled with the faint metallic click of the toy she had set in motion on my desk.

'Is there somewhere else we can go to talk? I don't mean to be melodramatic, I just haven't seen you in a long time, and if I'm going to get turned down I'd prefer to do it somewhere pretty. Don't you have client hospitality or something? After all, I am a client.' She grinned again.

We stood in the lift, and I watched as the two halves of my image slid together in the metallic panels of the doors. Jessica's appraising look was still fresh in my mind, and I checked myself out discreetly. My dark hair was perfectly slicked; my blue eyes glowed even in the dull surface of the metal. My arms were thick from the gym. The slight bulge of flesh around my collar appeared again today. I raised my chin a little to tighten the skin. Jessica almost caught me in the reflection, and I looked

away. The lift deposited us smoothly on the top floor, like riding up in the palm of a giant. The doors slid apart, and my image divided and disappeared. By the time we arrived Jessica was solemn, demonstrating one of those mercurial shifts of mood that had confounded her youthful suitors. The young men at Cambridge could never tell whether to court her as a child, a princess, an executive or a clown. Only the few of us who had become truly close to her had learnt to read her sudden shifts, like sailors at the mercy of an unpredictable sky.

The great glass wall of client reception disclosed a cinematic view of the City, stretching down to the glittering ribbon of the river and the stately dome of St Paul's. On the South Bank the great blocks of culture faced the towers of commerce, the National Theatre hunkered down on the edge of the Thames, its grey concrete balconies camouflaged against the sky. I put on my overcoat and led Jessica past the ranks of black leather sofas and neatly stacked periodicals, and the fresh fruit and orchids quietly dying in their glass vessels.

The Japanese garden on client reception had one of the best views in the City. Old enemies appeared on the eastern horizon: Magic Circle law firms sitting in state by Moorgate. From the balcony you could see St Andrew's Church, a tiny nub of conscience subsisting in the centre of the financial monoliths, so much older than the buildings that blocked it from the sunlight. The leaves of the weeping willow in the churchyard spilled over the wrought-iron railings on to the pavement. The roof garden itself was composed of large obsidian stones and elegant little shrubs arranged on a bed of white sand. The sand was raked into perfect parallel trenches, like a ploughed field in delicate miniature. A slate walkway paved the edges, and formed a bridge over a tiny stream

that bubbled up through the rocks. The sky seemed huge so many floors above the skyline, with no other buildings hemming it in. It closed like the lid of a freezer over the cold city. I felt proud to have brought her up here, on top of my impressive building, above my kingdom.

I slid the door closed behind us, and heard the comforting click of the catch, sealing my working world inside like the body of a despot in a vast stone tomb. The wind was strong so high above the street, and carried a film of drizzle that coated the garden with a thin layer of cold moisture. She walked away from me, her heels sounding on the grey slate, and leant on the stainless-steel railings that separated the balcony from the empty air behind.

'I know what you're thinking, James. I'm not on the run from the Mafia or the police, and I don't want money from you or help or anything else really except a couple of showers' worth of hot water. You work during the day. I go out at night. You won't even see me, if you don't want to.'

'I don't know how you are placed financially, Jessica,' I said, slipping into my professional idiom, 'but it seems to me that you could easily budget for a hotel with a higher degree of anonymity than an old university buddy's house.'

She sat on the metal bar that ran around the side of the balcony and put her feet against the large black boulder nearest the edge of the carefully raked white sand, dimpled from the raindrops. Behind her I could see the roof of a building the architects had never intended for public view. It was ten storeys down. I thought how best to guide her back from her perch without showing that it made me uncomfortable.

‘You have become pompous. Is that what we are? Old “university buddies”?’

Angry horns bleated down in the street. With her hands clutched around the bar, and her shoulders hunched a little forwards against the chill, she straightened her long legs slightly, leaning her slender torso fractionally backwards into space. I felt the sharp edge of a fledgling concern tapping against the inside of my skull. With a steady voice, I answered: ‘I haven’t seen you in the best part of a decade. What would you prefer to be called?’ She was already drawing me away from a proper examination of her motives.

‘Oh, I don’t know. Something with a little feeling. Playmate, darling, co-conspirator . . .’ This last one she delivered in a theatrical, breathy whisper.

‘I think I have company this weekend,’ I said.

‘She’ll understand. Women like to be made to wait. You can’t be overly available.’

Not these women, I thought.

She shivered and tugged the thin material of her jacket tight around her thin body and straightened her legs with little jerks, a childish gesture of distraction that pushed her body further and further out over the edge. I clenched my hands behind my back so that she could not see them. There was a light wind, so high above the street, and it carried the loose strands of her blonde hair up and over her cheekbones.

‘My place isn’t big. I don’t have a spare bed, and—’

She pushed suddenly with her feet; the gesture carried her too far and she fell first backwards, then forwards with a spasmodic tightening of her stomach to the floor. A surge of adrenalin manned my chest, and I ran towards her with an inarticulate cry. She was laughing with the exhilaration of her near disaster, and with triumph at

the terror in my face. I had started out across the perfect garden, breaking the patterned surface with my feet. The cut of my suit pushed me into an unnatural feminine jog, and I knew that I must have looked ridiculous. I acknowledged her victory with a sheepish smile, and walked over to where she leant laughing against the rail. Her laughter gave way to a coughing fit, and she bent over almost like an old man, clutching her stomach. Somehow the moment seemed vulnerable rather than disgusting.

‘So, can I stay or what?’ she said when she had regained some measure of control.

‘Fuck it. Why not.’

She was lying, but there would be time to uncover her lie. I could not remember when an obligation had been placed on me that was purely human. I did things because of what I had signed, what was expected, what was right, what was paid. This I would do because of who had asked me. I said yes because I would have done anything for her once, and required nothing in return. There were once many people who would have done anything for her, but from me she would have accepted.

‘We’ll stay up all night. It’ll be like old times.’ She said, ‘You might even have fun.’

My flat, designed to accommodate no one but myself and infrequent visitors whose opinions were irrelevant, was not the most hospitable place. Jessica cast a critical eye around the apartment. She lifted the single crystal tumbler from the surface of the table, sniffed the residue of dirty brown liquid and made an exaggerated moue of surprise and disgust, wrinkling her nose. I did not remember putting the bottle back in the kitchen, but was

relieved that I had. She inspected the apartment with the judgemental eye of a mother-in-law.

The bookshelves, painted a cream that chipped in places to reveal an old, somnolent green, were entirely filled with law books and DVDs. The former were mostly guides to commercial litigation and corporate finance, but there were some, such as my Chambers guide, that were as old as the decision I had taken to study the law. It had been a sudden and arbitrary choice, made in the conflicting currents of idealism and financial necessity that swept me along in the year after graduation. The DVDs were mostly pornography, a relatively expensive habit that had accrued over the years into a whole library of perversion. She began to browse the titles. She spared me the humiliation of reading them out loud.

‘I watch a lot of porn. It helps me switch my mind off.’

‘How can you find these sexy?’ she asked, running her finger over the DVD boxes, turned spine out to reveal slivers of garish nudity.

‘I don’t find them sexy,’ I lied, ‘I find them distracting.’

‘Why do you have them all on display?’

‘I’m not ashamed of what I like.’ And no one ever comes here to see. ‘Shall we talk about something else?’

‘Sure,’ she said, casting one last critical glance over the ranks of DVDs.

It occurred to me as her eyes dissected the visible portion of my life that I was seeing her in a curious double perspective. I knew her well, as only a friend can who has seen that final transition from adolescence into adulthood. I had watched her opinions and her priorities lose their plasticity and cool in the mould of complacent

maturity. But I did not know the barest details of her life. She was unmarried, or divorced, that much I knew from the lack of a ring. Something in her manner, a certain residual selfishness, precluded the possibility of kids. She did not have the distracted amiability of someone used to factoring others into their decisions, and her stomach still fit snugly into the unforgiving waistband of her suit trousers. I looked at her flat belly with the judgemental eye of a consumer. It was not right to turn this gaze on her, but habit was stronger than morality, and I knew she could watch out for her own interests. I allowed the fingertips of memory to run over the thin white line where the surgeon had slipped his tongs into her belly, the brand of childhood appendicitis. Despite the great blank of her personal narrative, I still knew her by the way she nosed around my flat, peering into confidential files and collecting dust on the tip of her finger in a playful parody of a disapproving woman. It occurred to me how meaningless were the details of someone's biography beyond a certain age, when placed in the balance against an understanding of their nature.

'Do you see anyone at all? From college?' she asked, peering out of the window with a deliberate non-chalance that roused my suspicion.

'No.'

'I've come across them once or twice over the years.'

'How is Michael?'

'Don't you read the papers?'

'I read the Business section.'

'He's dead.'

'Mountaineering? Sailing?'

'Testicular cancer. He has his own foundation now.'

'How about Lisa?'

She smiled. 'I'm sure Lisa's fine.'

She looked around the room, searching for something. 'Do you still paint?' she asked. She had been looking for an easel.

'No. Did you come back to discuss our contemporaries?' I said it more sharply than I had intended.

Jessica cocked her head and scrutinized me, trying to decide whether or not she had been slighted. 'No,' she said in a measured tone, 'I didn't come to see you to reminisce. Or rather I did, but not pointlessly. We've got a problem, and I thought I should warn you. In case there's something you can do to protect yourself.'

There was more than a hint of posturing in this statement, and she larded her motives with altruism to reproach me for my rudeness. Nevertheless, her words induced a brief wave of nausea, of old fear rising like bubbles through a thick liquid. 'What problem?' I asked, keeping my breathing under control.

She popped the catches on her briefcase and removed a folded newspaper from the neat beige interior (the leather was so pristine that I suspected the briefcase was a prop). It was a copy of the *Telegraph*, dated four days previously. 'It took me a little while to track you down,' she said by way of explanation.

I did not have to read the article to get the gist. I felt faint. The headline was enough to release all my fears. My head spun. 'Dire Financial Straits at Oxbridge College' read the banner in thick black type.

I wanted to throw the paper away, as if not being able to read it would make it untrue, but read on compulsively. There was a satisfying finality in seeing my nightmares resolved in black and white. Tudor College, Cambridge, after a series of extremely poor investments, was hoping to cover a five-million-pound black hole in

its budget by selling off a couple of pictures from its permanent collection.

Jessica stood silently whilst I read. It occurred to me I should be relatively grateful to her, for bringing the news to me like this. I tried to picture the scene where she, sitting at the breakfast table before work, perhaps with her partner or flatmate, had turned the pages, and come with no warning upon the article. It would have shoved the orbit of her life aside, with the sudden force of the policeman's knock late in the night when your loved one should have been home.

'How long would we get?' she asked, perching on the back of the chair with her long legs lightly crossed and her arms folded across her midriff.

'How long?' I said, unwilling to understand.

'How long. As in sentence.'

'I'm not a criminal solicitor.'

'Oooh . . . evasion. That can't be good.' She smiled. I saw that my discomfort provided her with relief from her own. I could help her by emphasizing my fear, but I wasn't sure I wanted to.

I relented. 'Well, there are all kinds of circumstances that could be mitigating, but if it went wrong . . .'

'Then?'

'Seven years, give or take.'

She was silent as she absorbed the information.

'I'd be thirty-nine,' she said quietly, looking out of the window at the rain.

Too old for children. The thought scuttled out of some mental crevice, and I crushed it quickly underfoot. 'You'd be out in five for good behaviour.'

'What makes you think I'd behave?' she said, and grinned.

This was the kind of response we had always adored in

her. Yet now, made in the dingy confines of my living room, with no one to hear her defiance but herself and me, and no one at all to believe in it, it seemed a tired routine. I was surprised to find I remembered how she took her coffee. I went into the kitchen and made her a cup, whilst she sat at my dining table (there was dust on all but two of the seats) and scrutinized the pink pages of my *FT* with the attention of a general studying the maps of his campaign. I topped up my cup with the bottle from the cupboard. We each took advantage of the few minutes we had apart, and when I came back into the room it was to find her calm. She had removed her suit jacket. The blouse underneath was white, and she wore it with the sleeves rolled up. She held her coffee cupped in both her small hands, and leant forwards with her elbows on her knees. It occurred to me how unfair I had been in assuming she wanted money. She needed a different kind of support, and one I was far less willing to give.

‘Are we fucked?’ she asked, taking just a hint of relish in her own frankness. She seemed invigorated by the danger, or perhaps by being brought back into proximity with the past. She looked alive. She removed a cigarette from her bag and lit up without asking.

My emotions were stiff and weak, like unused muscles, and they protested under the weight of this moment. I was struggling to find the right mixture of feeling, as if trying to speak a foreign language in which I used to be fluent, searching forlornly for the right word to break the spell of incomprehension. ‘I don’t know. Have you contacted Lisa?’

She looked down at the table and tapped off a length of ash. It lay like a dead insect in the bottom of the glass. ‘You’re the lawyer. We made a deal with her. You

remember.' It was not a question, it was a statement of fact. Neither of us could have forgotten the last time we had seen our silent partner.

She continued, and I felt from the way her eyes shifted that she was looking back into her own head, reading me a prepared speech off the walls of her sockets. 'I've forgotten a lot of what happened. I've tried hard to forget, in fact. Before I read this, I had half convinced myself it was all a dream, a year-long dream from which I woke at graduation, and my adult life was my real life, my waking life. Now I need to make a risk assessment. Once I know what the risk is, I can begin to plan. But I've done such a good job of forgetting. I can't . . .' She laughed, apparently in frustration at having to make the admission. 'I can't do this on my own. I need your memories.'

She looked relieved, and I knew she had finally disgorged her real purpose. As the perpetual gloom of London in winter deepened into night proper, I felt a tremendous sense of isolation. The ticking of the pipes in the walls and the rush of water in the metal system sounded like cooling rock, as if the sun had disappeared from the sky, and heat was quietly seeping out of the earth. I felt the walls of my skull had expanded to the size of my room, and the two of us had climbed inside for warmth. It felt good to have someone else to share this loneliness, but terrible also, because she would have access to all the classified files, the old diaries, the scrapbooks and albums my ego had collected with the fervour of a devoted fan, and the extent of my obsession with the past would no longer be a secret. I felt sometimes as if my life had stopped at twenty, when Jessica said hers had begun. The subsequent period had been outwardly active; I had acquired all the concrete

evidence of a life; the possessions and the CV of a professional man. But no tendrils of affection had grown out from me to embrace another mind. Instead, my thoughts and feelings had continually interrogated that year, trying to guess its purpose. I wanted to tell Jessica these thoughts, to draw comfort from her company, but without the hidden context of my life they would seem like embarrassing melodrama.

‘I’ll go through it all with you, if you like,’ I said evenly. ‘Do you want a drink? It’s Friday night, after all.’

Her scarlet lips blossomed suddenly into a broad smile. A minute crack split the make-up over her spot. I smelt her perfume, a delicate citrus scent mixed with the chemical tang of tobacco. The smell bypassed the border controls at the edge of consciousness, slipping right through with its illicit cargo of associations, and I felt a warm stirring in my groin.

‘Fine,’ she said.

I went back into the kitchen and poured us both a generous whisky. Whisky always tasted like memory to me.

I allowed myself a moment of self-abandon, like an old addict who finally disclaims his abstinence. I lifted my glass. ‘To Francis. He fucked us all in the end.’

‘To old times,’ she said, raising her tumbler. When she drank, she left the print of her mouth on the rim of the glass.

And then I knew the feeling – it was regret.