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Maps of Hell

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Published by MIRA Books

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PAUL JOHNSTON

**MAPS
OF HELL**



1

I woke up in panic and felt pain all over my body—arms, gut, ribs, groin. I took a deep breath and turned onto my back. The searing light made me jam my eyes shut. Holding my hand in front of my face, I sat up slowly, finding it hard to balance, and looked at myself. I was naked and filthy, white skin rubbed raw in places from the rough blanket I'd been lying on. Suddenly I felt dizzy and pitched forward onto the cold floor. A rush of vomit surprised me, jerking from my mouth in successive surges. I felt like shit.

Then I realized something worse. I didn't know who I was. I had no memory. I had no past. I was no one.

I clenched my fists and tried to get a grip. Where was I? I looked around the room. It was only a little longer than the concrete platform I had been lying on, and not much more than twice as wide. One of the narrow ends was taken up by a metal door, and there wasn't a window in any of the other three walls. A long fluorescent light divided the ceiling, while the floor was concrete. I had no recollection of coming to the place. I had no idea, even, of what part of the world I was in.

I blinked and took in the room again. It was making my head swim. The platform was at a weird angle to the floor and it was wider at one end than the other. The walls, ceiling and floor had all been painted in the same dull gray color, so it was hard to see where one ended and the next began.

I realized I was sweating heavily. The place was roasting hot, even though there was no sign of a heat source. The stench of my vomit was making me gag. I wiped the floor with my blanket, then threw it into the corner. My throat was parched and I searched in vain for a tap or bottle. Apart from me and the stinking blanket, the room was completely empty.

I wondered how long I had been there. I had lost all sense of time and couldn't say whether it had been minutes or hours since I'd woken. I went to the door and put an ear to it. I couldn't hear anything. I seemed to be completely alone. My empty stomach contracted and I clamped my arms around my raised knees. Had I been left to rot in this hole?

At least my mind was working. I was able to think, but that only made me feel more bereft. I yelled and listened for a response. There was none. I felt my eyes dampen. I could think and I could speak, but I knew as little as a tiny child. Someone had stolen my identity, my very soul. I had never wanted to see another human face so much. But no one came.

I inspected my body. There were yellow and black bruises on my arms and abdomen, and lumps of dried blood on my knuckles. I looked closer. Puncture marks dotted the skin on the inside of my upper and lower arms.

I ran my fingers across my face. The stubble was thick. My hair was short. I pulled some out and saw a mixture of black and white. I felt scabs on my forehead. There was nothing in the room that showed my reflection. I went to the door and banged my hands on it. There was a narrow space between the bottom of the door and the floor. I dropped to my knees and lowered my head, but could see nothing, not even a trace of light. I stood up again on unsteady legs, my eyes getting damp again as I realized I had no idea what I looked like.

I started to mumble, trying to find comforting words, words that would help me find out who I was. I took in my shrunken genitals. Man. I was a man. Muscles. My arms and legs hardened when I tensed them—I was in reasonable shape. I was thirsty, hungry. My throat hurt and my stomach rumbled. I stretched out on the floor, closed my eyes and tried to empty my mind of the here and now. Think. Remember. Who was I? Where did I come from? Who did I know?

For a time nothing happened. Then a name appeared unprompted in my consciousness.

Washington.

What did that mean?

I was suddenly aware of a dim figure, a man in a wig and a military jacket. Washington.

Wooden teeth.

What the hell?

Then, as if curtains had parted, my mind regained its visual function and I saw a wide, grass-covered open space with a tall, domed building in the distance. I seemed to know that the place was called Washington, but I had

no idea where it was or what it meant to me. I was sure I had been there, though: the picture was too vivid to have come from a film or a book.

I said the word aloud, breaking it into syllables.

“Wash-ing-ton...”

...I am in a car driven by an impassive man in a dark suit. On the backseat beside me is a blonde woman, whose name I don't know. She seems to know me. She squeezes my arm as we pass, on our left, a white house with a colonnaded porch. She seems to treat it with exaggerated respect, as does the driver. The sun has almost set and its rays are casting a soft red light over the buildings. I'm in very good spirits.

“Hey, didn't you say you could take us wherever we wanted?” I say to the short-haired man at the wheel.

He glances at me in the mirror. “That is so, sir. But I suggest we go to your hotel so you can freshen up first.”

I look at the woman by my side and laugh. “Oh, we're fresh enough. Why don't you take us to one of those rough places? I want to see the real Washington.”

My companion shakes her head and leans forward. “Don't listen to him. He likes to think he's an expert on crime.”

I laugh again. “And you're not? Come on, let's live dangerously. Let's go to Anacostia. That's where the drug dealers are in charge, isn't it?”

The driver nods. “Yeah, it's one of the places that's theirs. I really don't think—”

“Don't worry, we'll take full responsibility,” I say, getting a frown from the woman. “Anyway, you've got a radio to call for help, haven't you?”

He twitches his head but then does as I say, turning to the right and crossing a bridge shortly afterward. The buildings change from stone to clapboard, and there are young black men on every street corner. They give the large car glances that combine interest with disdain.

“Seen enough?” the driver asks, after a few minutes.

“No,” I say. “We want to get out and take the air.”

“Speak for yourself,” my companion says in a low voice.

I smile and kiss her on the lips. “Stop at the next junction,” I tell the chauffeur.

“I really don’t recommend this, sir,” he says, but he complies.

“Coming?” I ask, as I open the door.

“Oh, all right,” the woman says. “Idiot.” She slides awkwardly across the seat and takes my hand. I feel her weight.

I lean down before I close the door. “Turn right and wait for us.”

The driver gives me a disapproving look and then drives on.

We’re on our own. For under a minute. The first boy—he couldn’t have been over twelve—turns his bicycle toward us, pedals hard and then stops a finger-length from me.

“Watcha got in the bag, lady?” he asks with a wide smile, but I notice his eyes have narrowed.

My companion holds her shoulder bag against her abdomen. “Oh, just girly stuff,” she says.

Another boy on a bike skids up. “Girly stuff?” he says, displaying gleaming white teeth. “We likes girly stuff.” He

looks at me aggressively. "How about you, mister? You like that shit?"

Over his head I see a fleet of medium-size bodies on bikes approaching.

"Give us a break, guys," I say. "We're just taking the air."

"Oh, yeah?" says another boy, wearing a baseball cap like the rest, but with sunglasses shielding his eyes. "How about we takes the bag, then? And everythin' you got in your pockets, big man?"

I puff out my chest and step toward him. "How about you guys go home to your mothers?"

The teenagers pull their bikes back and I grin triumphantly. Then I hear a deeper voice from behind me.

"You dissin' the youth, whitey?"

I turn to confront a tall, heavily built young man, his hair in cornrows and his tracksuit top open to display a large silver pistol in his waistband. I hear the woman beside me inhale sharply. Before I react, she hands her bag to the armed man and clamps her hand on my arm.

"There's our car," she says, pulling me toward the corner.

The limousine has appeared silently, the driver standing on the curb with a radio handset at the side of his head.

The boys pedal away, cheering, while the young man saunters away. He drops my companion's bag on the pavement. I go over and pick it up.

"Anything missing?" I ask, as I hand it over.

She checks. "Just my purse, with all the cash I brought," she says. "And my passport."

“Shit,” I say.

“Yeah, right,” says the driver. He holds the door open for my companion.

As we move off, I turn to her. “Sorry,” I say, in a low voice.

“Sorry don’t get you nowhere in this town, buster,” she says, in an accent like the driver’s.

I try to laugh, but I feel about two feet tall....

The scene stopped suddenly. I tried to bring it back, but there was nothing. I couldn’t remember anything else. Who was the woman? I was obviously close to her. Where was she now? Where was I? I blinked and then banged my forehead against the wall. The pain was intense, but strangely I felt better for it.

Sometime later, there was a crash at the door and a tray appeared at floor level. I went over quickly, but the narrow hatch was instantly slammed back down.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Let me out of here!”

There was no response. I couldn’t even hear any footsteps.

I examined the food on the tray. There was a cup of dirty-looking water, which I drank half of before I could stop myself. A hunk of discolored white bread and a piece of hard yellow cheese was all there was to eat. I wolfed them down, taking a small sip of water to soften each bite of the bread. When I’d finished, my stomach wasn’t even half-full and my throat was as rough as it had been before. And the temperature in the room seemed to have gone up to scalding.

I went back to the slanted bed and lay down. I tried to

go back to Washington or to anywhere else that wasn't as confined as the grave, but my mind remained blank.

Then the music started—ear-shredding, grinding rock at terminal volume. Pressing my hands to my ears did little to shut it out. The light on the ceiling started to flash irregularly. I turned my head to the wall, but it seemed to be shaking to the thunderous beat.

I had no idea how long that went on. Soon after the noise finally stopped, there was another crash at the door. This time, a round hole appeared at waist level. Before I could move, the muzzle of a hose sprayed freezing water in at high pressure, soaking me instantly. The jets of water stung my skin and I was forced to crouch at the far end of the bed, not that it gave much cover. I cupped a hand and swallowed, but had to spit immediately. The water tasted like something had died in it. Quickly, the level rose to my calves and the soiled blanket started to move towards the door. I grabbed it and tried to rinse the vomit from it. Then the spray stopped as suddenly as it had started and the water flowed away under the door.

I soon noticed that the heat had been turned off. I began to shiver violently.

Draping the sodden blanket over me did little to help. Then, without warning, the light went out.

I sat in the total darkness, my head in my hands. Why was this happening to me? What had I done to deserve treatment like this? I tried to conjure up the woman I'd seen again, tried to find anyone from my past. Nobody came. Maybe the scenes in Washington, wherever the hell that was, had just been the fruits of my imagination. Maybe nothing meant anything and I couldn't even trust my own mind.

I fell away into an abyss, my breath rapid and my limbs locked by the chill.

The only thing I could hope was that I had died. Did that mean there was an afterlife? The idea was attractive. Perhaps I was in the underworld. Or in limbo. Or even purgatory.

Then the cold bit into me again and I was back in hell. It was obvious that whoever was doing this to me had a deep knowledge of cruelty and evil.

I had the feeling that I'd met more than one person like that in my unreachable past.

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gaining more acclaim than
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First published in Great Britain 2010.
MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN 978 0 7783 0373 2

59-0810

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Printed in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc