

THE HOUSE THAT SHADOWS BUILT.

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PART TWO: The Fat Man.

Soon after meeting The Kid I moved in with him in the Last Free House in the World. It was during a cold winter, the kind which cracks cobblestones and the room we shared had broken windows that he'd hastily repaired with gaffer tape and cardboard and a corner bed made from an old door stacked some beer crates.

Our room was on the first floor, only one flight of stairs away from the backyard. Only one flight of stairs from the mound of decaying waste. Only one flight of stairs for the rats who scavenged their survival in the mound to ascend. Some former resident had even painted a large rat over the door and when I first met him The Kid sometimes went by the name The Rat King. He was still pre-pubescent then and addicted to glue and skunk. In those early days together we shoplifted exotic fruits, the names of which he poetically mispronounced, and spent our days sleeping and our nights exploring the city looking for back alleys that looked film sets and forgotten chunks urban something or other than reminded me of the slithers no-man's land between

carpark fences and petrol station forecourts.

The Last Free House In The World was huge. It was in fact two houses. A front house and a back house, the result of long since forgotten social architecture, the ghost of which somehow still managed to exact some influence on the present.

The back house was slowly sinking into the ground and was already so submerged that what had once been the ground floor was entirely underground. Darkened window looked out on soil and roots and burst from the pressure. Once while lost in the labyrinth of collapsed staircases and corridors, no electricity and a population of uncertain size and origin I'd come across groups of eastern europeans with facial tattoos and heavy piercings washing themselves under the the icy drip of crimson rusting tap.

Other residents of note included a blind former session musician with eyes obstructed by cataracts the colour of sour milk who survived on arcane cocktails of his own invention. As well as being blind he suffered from acute bouts of narcolepsy and often fell asleep mid sentence, surrounded by his strange inventions, pint glasses half filled with cold coffee and pureed onion, topped with a slice of potato to be drunk through a leek straw. A former left wing guerrilla from some hot and sweaty he shared his bed with an AK47 in bed and his room with an Mediterranean suspected of bombing a police station who scared cops on the street by barking at them, frothing rabid.

The Kid often did the makeshift bar, standing on an empty beer crate so that he could rest his arms on the bar, he sold weed and pills on the side. The first night I was in the house some students were in the bar slumming it with all the alcoholics and schizophrenic radical vegans. The Kid sold them some weed and then while he was momentarily distracted by a vicious broken bottle duel with an enraged resident, the students took off without paying The Kid.

It was the first time I saw The Kid warp, he stumbled off his crate and smashed the collected empty bottles, leapt back up bristled in shards of broken glass spitting bits of his tongue in a spray of claret mince and invoking vengeance in a language that sounded like a car crash, one I was quite sure was his own cant, an amalgamation of the foulest bits of other languages it's primary function being to attack, to defame, to intimidate.

He hopped over the bar and set off in pursuit of the students. I decided to follow. It was a weekend in the partyzone, the street was packed with people drowning currency and smiling as they went under. The Kid dropped down onto his stomach and began to crawl through the crowd like a snake, slithered towards the entrance of popular club. I spotted one of the students standing in the line to be let in. The Kid was now behind him and ready to pounce, he was all of a sudden on the back of the student. He took a can of pepper spray from his pocket and emptied it into the screaming students eye. The eye looked like it would pop and a space formed around The Kid who was now biting and

scratching at the student with unadulterated vigour. Someone said they'd call the cops but no-one did. He was too young back then anyway. They'd made the decision to bide their time.

We shared the room with anyone else who was passing through the city and the house, the doors were shut to no one but only other permanent resident was a street violinist, who besides playing the violin was only interested in lecturing anyone around, mostly me and The Kid, on the evils of homosexuality. He had particular disdain for actual act of sodomy, which he was able and inclined to describe in vivid detail despite his cumbersome grip on the English language and his apparent distaste for the act itself. During these speeches he would wave a large wooden crucifix around and sometimes hold it upside down like a child with a toy sword. The Kid loved to piss off the violinist and would sit in the corner of the room clutching his bag of glue and telling tales of his time as a child rent boy in the carparks of the large hotels near the central parliament in his home country. The violinist was of the type who couldn't separate fact from fiction and took The Kid's badly moulded stories to heart. He often declared he would save The Kid's soul, The Kid made it clear he was not the first to try and promptly sold me his soul for a price of a bag of weed.

Owning the soul of a prepubescent shoplifter and possible former rent boy of unidentifiable nationality had few perks and on the occasion of the eviction of The Last Free House In The World it earned me a black eye and a fractured wrist

from a cop, who took The Kid proclaiming;

“But you can’t separate us he owns my soul!”

As a declaration that I was either The Kid’s pimp or lover, neither of which he approved of. The eviction was also the first day that I learnt that if you cast off the strappings of normality you become someone with whom the police are only capable of communicating with through a violent form of charades, a free form language in which strikes and gouges function as verbs and adjectives, concussion and fractures as commas and full stops.

Post eviction we found ourselves on the streets together, the violinist took off to the East in search of the only violin shop he knew of in his home village, he returned some months later with a new string but when he failed to find me and The Kid took to sleeping in the central station where some leatherskins took justifiable offence at his sermonising and hospitalised him, the violin was also broken in the incident.

After getting out of hospital he set off again to the village and the violin shop and returned again to the West and street corner busking and sermonising, every time the string would break he would set off again to the only shop he knew and then return to the corners of the cities and the underpasses that lead to the underground stations. I imagine this pattern continues to this day, madness is

as accurate and reliable as the mechanisms in an expensive watch.

Once homeless I became entirely reliant on The Kid's street wits, he taught me the right way to empty a shelf, how to coat a bag so that it won't set off metal detectors and most importantly of all how to befriend security guards. Watching The Kid interact with security guards was like watching someone feed ducks in a pond, The Kid had them wrapped around his little finger. He knew the names of their wives and the schools their children went to, he knew their birthdays and hobbies, and used chit chat as a weapon and a tool of control the Moriarty of the shopping aisles.

Like kings we lived off tea leafed steaks and half inched fruit juice. Like rats we sparred with stolen boxing gloves on station platforms for shrapnel. Like rat kings we became wrapped up in the shadows, stuck together by proximity and dirt. Then on one of our expeditions we discovered The Spot and moved in. Declaring a new golden age had begun in our own broken down empire of pilfered goods and un-mapped corridors.

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At first I thought it was just the sound of the night before trying to escape my head with a push drill, but then I heard voices and the unmistakable bad-day-sound of crackling radios.

I stood up. Standing in the hallway I closed my eyes and listened. It was definitely cops, most certainly cops, I could hear their tribal tattoos squeaking with sweat against their armour and the anxious glistening of their batons.

Cops. Cops with wives and kids and suburban homes and racist views, cops with muscles and black belts in bone cracking martial arts. Cops with a screaming dislike of anything that doesn't fit the small box they have in the middle of their eyes instead of pupils. Cops.

I looked for The Kid and found him naked on the toilet with his dick and the black queen from the chess board in his hand. I slapped him across the face.

"What the fuck?"

"Eviction"

"Fuck off"

"Really"

His ears pricked at the sound of a drill pushing through metal. He stood up and threw his queen to the ground.

"If they catch us in here we're fucked"

"I know"

"Do we have time to turn off the electric?"

"No"

Trotters on the stairs. I grabbed my projector and a few books and filled up a suitcase with whatever I could grab. The voices suddenly seemed further away and I realised they must have become lost in the catacombs, perhaps momentarily, perhaps eternally, a lost legion of cops destined to spend their lives turning circles in the dark, chasing oases and hallucinated doors. Taking advantage of the moment of chance I climbed up through the emergency exit and peeked over the edge of the roof. I whistled.

The Kid appeared below me and threw up two full bin bags. He jumped up after them and pulled himself onto the roof. We dropped the cover over the hole and lay there in silence, listening to the cops bursting into The Spot and begin tearing it apart. The Kid rolled a nub end between his fingers and spat off the edge of the building.

"What low life cunts, bottom feeders, can't they knock? Can't they fucking knock? I'll tell you, one day I'm gonna break into a cop's house at 7am and drown the cunt in dripping."

The Kid threw his two bags off the edge of the roof. The roof was full of holes. I knew that at any point I could fall straight through into the catacombs where I'd

probably lie for days in agony, a bag of flesh and crumbled spine, before dying. I reached The Kid and put my hand on his shoulder. He turned to me a manic smile spread across that cherubs face.

"I'm going to jump"

"Why?"

"Because I want to"

"I'm going to climb down"

"You're a coward"

He jumped off the building and I bent my neck to watch him fall. Because some special kind of chaos had blessed The Kid with uncanny luck when, in mid-air, he stuck out his elbows, instead of dying, his shoulders braced him between the two buildings and he slipped down at an even pace. He missed even the pipes poking out from the wall and landed injury free in a gap between the ankle snapping piles of half bricks.

He looked back up at me and gave me a sickly treacle smile. I heard a noise and turned in time and saw the helmeted head of a cop sticking out of our hidden escape route. I could smell the lifetime's worth of rotting red meat in his stomach and without being psychic I could read his thoughts. He was lusting after black and blue. I stepped off the building and shot out my shoulders; for a moment I was in free fall but then my shoulders were caught between the two walls and I

ripped through brick dust and landed next to The Kid.

My knee stung and I looked down and saw that I had torn both my jeans and the skin underneath and now blood was dripping down my shin and into my sock. The sock was once white but lately had turned a distinct grey; if anything the blood cheered it up, turning the edge a kind of warm pink colour not unlike the kind an amateur water colour painter might use to rim a sun.

We were in the space between the two buildings and fenced in at either end. The Kid was on his hands and knees digging a small hole with a stone. He ran his fingers through his pockets and the turn-ups of his jeans and the inner rim of his cap. His hand now contained baggies with trace amounts of powders, a couple of half pills and a lock pick set. He buried them in the ground and then leaned against the wall rolling a fag. I took the tobacco from his hands and rolled one too. There was a noise coming from the other side of the fence. The sound of a cop scrambling, trying to climb the fence. He gave in.
"You're fucked"

A gloved hand, the knuckles re-enforced with Kevlar, appeared on the top of the fence followed by the face of a cop. He pulled up his visor. Only cops can look both so ugly and yet so bland. The Kid took off his cap and threw it at the cop's face. The peak hit the cop on the nose.

"You lot always say that"

"Say what?"

"You're fucked"

"Well you are"

"Says you, but if I were to take a guess I reckon we probably don't have the same definition of fucked"

"What I meant is we got you"

"That isn't true either"

The cop tried to pull himself up on the fence but his bullet and stab proof vest was so large that he couldn't. There was the sound of other cops helping him from the other side of the fence and then it stopped.

"You fat fucks"

"Oi I'm warning you kid, watch your words"

They tried again to get over the fence but again failed. I sat down against the wall and watched planes cut through clouds. The Kid chain smoked and ragged on the cops in three or maybe four different languages. Nothing gets cops more worked up than being insulted in languages they don't understand; it scratches at the very fabric of their being, that macho pedestal of false omnipotence.

“Climb over or we’re going to break the fence down”

“Are you threatening me with the destruction of a fence I don’t give a shit about?
Fuck, you need to go back to hostile negotiator school and take a class on
leverage”

The Kid loved these moments. He was the matador and they were the bulls.
He had a scar four inches long on the back of his head from where some cops
had knocked him unconscious on the bottom step of a flight of stairs. It took ten
stitches to close the gash. The cops said he had thrown himself down the stairs.

“Just come over the fence”

“You gonna let me smoke in my cell? No? Didn’t think so, so let me finish the
pack and then I promise I’ll climb right over... Hey copper, can I ask you a
question?”

“I guess so, since we’re waiting”

“Are you in favour of gun control?”

“Yes”

“Is that because you conform to the idea that a gun in the hands of the wrong person is dangerous, because it’s an enabler of violence? Point and click death?”

“Yeah, something like that”

“What if I put it to you that on a grander scale the police are like that gun. I mean in the same way a murderer uses a gun, a fascist state uses the police”

Now the policeman was silent, no doubt trying to recall the protocol for such a situation. Finding nothing he stayed silent. The Kid continued.

“The police should therefore be governed by a similar logic that governs gun control. You are after all, a deadly weapon”

I imagined the cop smiling on the inside at being called a ‘deadly weapon’. He was probably thinking back on all of the hours spent in his childhood playing with action men and watching action heroes on TV and aching to right the world with pain. Cops are like those particles that you hear about on quantum physics documentaries that don’t exist until they are observed. Cops don’t exist until they forbid you from doing something. They are defined by the action of forbidding. Otherwise they are just people in fancy dress. They are transformed and defined by the action of forbidding. You cannot explain this to a cop nor should you try. Talking philosophy with a cop like talking race with a nazi, it’s never going to

work.

The Kid let out a theatrical yawn. He climbed up onto the fence and balanced on the edge for a second, then jumped with his arms outspread right over the cop's heads. After a momentary scramble the cops got a hold of the kid and pressed their knees into his spines, eliciting yelps of pain and long winded insults spanning two languages and a multiplicity of tenses from The Kid.

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The police woke me up sometime between midnight and the sun coming up and took me out of the cell and into a small, well lit room where a doctor took my blood in order to run some drug tests. I closed my eyes and bit my tongue as he prepped the syringe. The needle pushed into my arm and I watched as my blood was sucked up.

Once when off school sick with fever I spent a day on the sofa and watched a television documentary on the history of the polio vaccination. Having a fever rubs at the outer layer of the brain- that thick shield of psycho-mucus that keeps certain thoughts and ideas at bay, or at least keeps them in a manageable scale and perspective. On this day I was made defenceless by the fever and I was pierced by the documentary. Punctured by the image of the needles and by the concept of vaccination. Images of viruses under the microscope pushed

themselves close to my thoughts which in turn swelled like my infected glands. In crackling, decayed black and white a young and emaciated boy in an iron lung played a xylophone with the mallet held in his mouth. I was sweating and the skin of my back stuck to the leather sofa my parents were paying for in monthly instalments. At the climax of the documentary, in amongst the ebb and flow of montaged images a disembodied voice spoke.

“The concept of vaccination is not new. In fact the oldest documented use of vaccinations dates back to fifteenth century China. Variolation was a primitive form of vaccination in which smallpox material, most often the crushed up scabs of smallpox victims, was blown up the nostrils of potential sufferers. Another common alternative was carried out by rubbing powdered smallpox scabs or fluid from pustules into scratches made in the skin.

Once again I became lost in the images of thin, pale children stabbed by thick needles carrying an isolated dead virus. My head swerved, the room felt creased; I felt compressed, pressured under the weight of my own thoughts and heat conduction. I wiped the sweat off my brow and tried to concentrate on the documentary. A phrase struck out at me: herd immunity- the idea that once a large enough proportion of the population has been infected, vaccinated and made immune then it will provide a level of protection to those who are not yet vaccinated. The vaccinated herd as the forlorn hope, the vanguard.

The logic of it pushed in on me with a weight that made it hard to exhale. The purity of deliberate infection lodged itself into the muddled thoughts in my feverish mind. I'd never considered it before: like calloused skin or muscles, but more deliberate, more modern and horrifying; poison as medicine, medicine as poison. I spat into the bucket in front of me and watched as the plastic warped. I thought about kids I knew at school whose dads locked them out when they were chased home and made them take a beating to toughen them up. I thought about the callouses I saw on my dad's hands and I visualised the mixing of the blood and the virus, blood speckled yellow or white or blue, sickly. Patterned with a fearful symmetry: that of disease, the dots of poison like holes in which something could be living or worse still growing in death.

All of these memories came rushing back to me as I watched my blood entering the syringe. Back in the cell I mostly slept. At some point in the night I was woken up by the sound of someone screaming. It was hard to tell if they were screams of joy or of pain, and after a while I concluded that the person screaming probably didn't know themselves.

They let me out the next morning with some papers and details of how I could pay my fines. I asked about The Kid. They told me he was in the hospital being treated for injuries he'd received while aggressively resisting arrest and that they had to wait for information from his homeland before they could release him.

I went and bought something greasy to eat from under the railway bridge and stood eating it and looking at the bodies of dead pigeons impaled on the thin silver spikes that they had installed on the underside of the bridge. I watched as fluid dripped from the decaying corpses. One step forward two steps back. I guess there is a debate to be had on the subject of what is a preferable pollutant of the modern urban environment; pigeon shit or rotten blood. I walked up and down and stopped at a bus stop. I watched over a middle aged woman's shoulder as she read the news on her phone:

“Tragic moment a crying seventeen-month-old toddler is found drinking milk from his mother's dead body in India.”

A man came out of the betting shop and went into a phone box. His hands shook as he inserted coins into the slot. He lifted the heavy plastic receiver to his ear and lent backwards against the glass, his eyes closed. Whoever he was calling must have answered. His lips started to move quickly. It must've been urgent. He put the receiver back and stepped out of the phone box. He circled it, smoking those extra-long cigarettes that only pensioners and teenagers smoke. Half an hour must've past but I couldn't stop watching the man. I was transfixed. There was something about the way he was circling the box that hypnotised me. A car pulled up and a woman got out. The man rushed over to meet her, the long-suffering wife or sister. She put one arm over his shoulder and spoke into his ear. A large chunk of dead pigeon landed on the roof of a bus, the sound

echoing under the bridge.

The pair began to walk away so I crossed the road and followed them. They stopped in front of a cash machine and the man took out a small plastic wallet like the ones bus passes come in and removed a bank card. He stuck it into the machine and waited a moment. The woman now had a piece of paper in her hand. She unfolded it and I watched as she leant in front of the man and punched numbers into the keypad. The machine spat a couple of notes at the man and he kissed the long-suffering woman on her long-suffering cheek. He reached out with his left hand and tried to take the piece of paper from her but she moved quickly and folded it back into her pocket. The man walked off fast into the betting shop.

I spent the day walking around the city centre, people watching and window shopping and thinking about the idea of vaccination. Herd immunity. If enough of the population could be vaccinated against the real horror of life then we wouldn't need the hallucinatory world we'd been raised in. We could fight back against the way our minds have been raised, we could bridge the chasm between the battlefields of the third world, the slum houses where families starve and the airports and hotel lobbies, embassies from an alien world - another plane of curved edges and sealed packaging; of folded napkins and tiered breakfast buffets.

Where our imaginations are raised, the battlefields and operating theatres kept at arms length. Olympian curves and elevator music, gliding cars cutting silently through the night on roads that pass through snow topped mountains. There is an

to this imposed reality, this controlled and defined layer- this nursery of point-of-view. Kept in isolation, untouched by reality, by the rough and tumble of most people's world, most people's lives: stumbling ram-raid attempts at living defined by misunderstanding and punctuated by tragedy. Having been raised in this fantasy it's no wonder people turn a blind eye to the horror creeping under the surface, no wonder people live in denial.

Going about their daily business as if everything is fine but always fearing deep on the inside that what they see out of the corner of their eye or what they feel in their gut and confront in nightmares is actually a part of their world. This sickness can be cured. If they were forced to watch, forced to see, then they would no longer be shocked, no longer scared or reluctant. We could recalibrate our vision and see the world for what it really is. Maybe then at last as a species we could move forward with a new perspective; a perspective that accepts the fundamental horrors and truths of our world. Tumours, cruelty and raging infernos.

Sometime around midnight I found myself disorientated on a side street of boarded up terraced houses. Half way down I passed a closed-up bar. There

was a flickering candle light behind one of the metal sheets covering the upstairs window. The sight of it reminded me of the necessity to find somewhere to sleep. I'd never squatted anything without The Kid before but I didn't fancy spending the night outside so I kept walking until I found a house that fit my needs.

The windows were unprotected but covered up from the inside with old faded newspapers. I opened the gate and walked up the path and took a peak through the post flap. I could see post piled up on the door matt and the strong musty smell of damp and mildew seeped through the walls.

I couldn't see a repossession notice on any of the windows or pinned to the door. I opened the side door to a small paved yard. Weeds grew to knee height through the cracks and gaps in the paving slabs. An old fridge leant against the red brick back wall of the house, the coil golden with rust. It was surrounded by piled up old lager cans and six pack rings.

I pushed my face against the window and managed to get a blurry look into the kitchen and reassured myself that the house was empty. I took a stone from the ground and smashed the window. I waited for a moment for the sound of a neighbour or passerby reacting but nothing came. I reached inside and, avoiding cutting my forearm, opened the window pulled myself through and with outstretched arms felt my way to the corner of the kitchen and located a plug socket. I recovered the small lamp from my bag and plugged it in. The room was

splashed in dim light.

I was surprised that the electricity was still on but was confident that there was no-one living in the house. I picked up the lamp and carried it as far as the cable would stretch into the living room. The carpet in was covered in a thick layer of dust and the ceiling was dominated by an expanding circle of damp; the walls were flecked in green, grey and black mould. A sofa bed, stacked full to the ceiling with pile of old newspapers, was pushed up against the door that I assumed would lead to the front door. Against the other wall facing the sofa were two portable TVs stacked on top of each other and connected up to two VHS players, the other half of the room was still too dark to make out clearly and I searched my bag and found a lightbulb and screwed it into the fitting that was hanging from the ceiling. Now I saw the whole room clearly. A disordered pile of video cassettes dominated the other half of the room, stacked like a half crumbling aztec pyramid against the mouldy wood chip wallpaper. None of them were boxed and many had the tape pulled out, knotted and torn, shining and black.

I began to clear the sofa bed of newspapers. I was careful not to disorder the piles; I wanted to keep any system there may or may not have been intact. When I had cleared the sofa bed enough that it could be moved I pulled it away from the door. The carpet was covered in mouse droppings and was faded and marked where the sofa had been, giving the impression that it hadn't been

moved in a very long time. I looked at the door and when I did I felt something I hadn't felt in years: the unmistakable chill of the fear of the dark.

A Fear of opening the door and exploring the house further. In all the years I had slept on the streets and in abandoned buildings I had never felt so suddenly and inexplicably scared. It was not the fear of an adult, but a child's fear. The fear that I remember forcing me under the bedcovers and then not being able to come back out.

I pushed the sofa bed back against the door and hastily, with little regard for the possible order of the piles, weighed it down with the stacks of old newspapers. I closed the curtains over the window that I had climbed in through. I took out my scrapbook and flicked through the pages. I thought over the questions of the policeman when they had found it in my bag.

"Bit morbid ain't it? Youth in my day used to collect football stickers - this is depressing stuff"

"Youth in your day didn't know what the world was really like"

"What do you mean?"

"Well have you ever seen anyone murdered?"

“No, I haven’t”

“Well I have. In fact by the time I was fourteen I’d seen many videos of decapitations and murders”

“That’s sick”

“Nah it’s just true”

I ran my fingers over newspaper headlines and the faces of murder victims. I went over to the stack of newspapers and began sorting through them, seeking artefacts of pain and horror for my collection. Most of the papers were old tabloids and the pages that normally have tits on were already missing, so I deduced that the former resident was probably a man. After a few hours of sorting, I’d assembled one of the stacks in date order. They ran from March 1985 to June 1996 and then stopped. I took the last issue in my hands: June 27th 1996. The front page, Veronica Guerin is murdered in Dublin.

I put the paper down and took the next: 19th June 1996. I leafed through. On the fifth page, Ted Kaczynski indicted on the charges of being the Unabomber.

I put that issue down and picked up another: June 16th 1996, an IRA bomb goes

off in Manchester City Centre, 200 people are injured. Why did he stop?

Maybe there are more papers somewhere. June 1996 was a busy month. Maybe he died. If he died in 1996 surely someone would've taken over the house. The only other answer is that they never found him. That he was still there. I looked up at the circle of damp and wondered if it was his liquid fat merging with the floorboards. The thick dark rim of the damp spot seemed to ripple.

I had come close to seeing dead bodies a few times. When I was young and lived in the terraced house with walls so thin that my mum and dad whispered when they argued we had a neighbour called Meg who used to come around once a week and fill the kitchen with cigarette smoke and drop ash on all the saucers. She always looked tired and her skin had a leathery tan and always looked like it was about to tear. Meg's personality was split, her visits came in two shades. I learned to distinguish between the two by the way in which she held her cigarettes.

In some visits she stood, agitated, sometimes gripping the edge of the table and she held her cigarettes very near the end, pinched between thumb and finger so that they appeared longer; extensions of her fingers, a tool for indicating and deciding. When she smoked she took long drags and breathed out the smoke in one gasp casting the table in a fog. When she smiled her teeth looked chunky

and strong like nicotine stained cliffs.

In the other visits where she sat with her chair angled away from my mum and dad, she held the cigarettes midway down between two fingers and kneaded them in the long pauses between her speech. She took lots of short drags and lit new cigarettes with nubs of her old ones. After these visits my mum and dad would talk a lot and my mum would kiss me on the forehead and tell me she loved me.

I was 11 years old and went with my dad to visit Meg. He seemed worried. She didn't answer and he looked through the letter flap. He went and got a spare key and opened the door. He told me to wait outside but I followed him in and up the stairs. He was standing in the doorway to a bedroom with his hands on his face. When he turned around and saw me standing there he picked me up and carried me down stairs and out of the house.

I found out later that while we'd been away she'd stopped eating and starved to death. I later imagined that I'd seen through the door and that I'd seen her body neatly tucked in the bed with a cobweb running from her nose to her chin.

The second time I almost saw a corpse was when I was fifteen. I'd decided to hitch hike out of the city and got picked up by an old man. After about an hour and a half he pulled over into a lay-by and unzipped his fly.

I was so shocked by the presumed maturity of it that I smiled. He smiled too. His dick looked like a purple turnip. I got out of the car and he sped off. He called me an ungrateful cunt out of the window. I walked along the side of the motorway and felt well grown up. I smoked some fags I'd stolen out of my mum's handbag. I noticed that the cars weren't moving and thought about trying to get another lift but then I saw police cars and got really interested.

The car that had been hit was one of those smooth family cars that I imagine they make in the most wholesome corners of Scandinavia. The bonnet was entirely crushed but the ambulance crew was obscuring my view of anything. I turned my head and at the exact moment that one of the ambulance crew took a step to his right, I saw another man in a high-vis jacket cover the face of the body lying parallel to the mangled vehicle. I remember it being in a body bag but that might be the effect of too many American movies on my memory.

I was transfixed by the sight of the now hidden body. I stared at it till my eyes stung hoping for some kind of epiphany. Here I was face to face with death in all its shotgun-terror and I felt nothing. I remember putting my hands in my pockets. That's it.

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I stayed in the house for three weeks before I ever went upstairs. I had a small electric heater to keep the winter at bay. I lifted food from the local supermarkets and I read and sorted the old newspapers and selected pages for my book. I cooked on instant barbecues that I stole every time I passed the petrol station on the corner, asking myself every time why they left outside in the winter gathering frost.

I'd managed to deduce quite a lot about the former inhabitant of the house from the stuff he'd left behind. The second stash of porn I found under the cushions of the sofa bed I took as a confirmation that he was male. I couldn't be sure about his age, but from the clothes in the cupboards and wardrobes in the other room downstairs I knew he was fat, and not just normally fat but xxxl fat.

I found it strange that his bedroom was downstairs in the cramped back room, but just put it down to his size and associated sloth and his eventual inability to ascend the stairs. But then where was he?

When I pictured him in my mind my nose filled with the smell of stale sweat. I named him The Fat Man. The thought of him scared me. Even though I came to feel quite at home in his house, at night, just before I fell asleep, my mind inevitably turned to him. To the folds of fat and the stale sweat trapped between them. A slug, a man surrounded by piles of dusty old papers and cascading video cassettes.

I got pretty bored without The Kid and started lifting whiskey and drinking a bottle to myself and going back through the papers finding reports of murders and accidents I'd missed to pass the time.

I got a letter from The Kid. He told me to hold tight, he'd be out in a month or two. After I ran out of real events I started cutting and pasting the leftover articles together creating my own tragedies. Only a few words separate the bad news from the good news. When I got bored of that I just got drunk and stared at the walls until I fell asleep, but then I couldn't sleep and that's when it really started to go wrong.

The thing that made me finally go upstairs was the noise. At first it was just like a creaking noise that I put down to old water pipes. I wasn't sure if it only started at night or if I just didn't notice it in the day, what with the sound of passing cars. But in the stillness of my sleepless nights the sound became more clear, more complex, and then as I strained my ears it took on a new dimension.

But what caught my attention wasn't the sound itself but the rhythm of it, the timing and the pauses between the noise. It sounded conscious. Not the sound but whatever was creating it. I stopped believing it was just the creaking of the house and I came to believe that something or someone was upstairs. The sound was considered and organic, the difference between a metronome and a

heartbeat. Eventually it became unbearable and I climbed up on the back of the sofa and, balancing on my toes, carefully pushed my ear against the ceiling.

I heard it clearly and saw what made it in my mind, the shifting movement of a living thing, crawling or walking and then unmistakably with a clarity that made me lose my footing, coughing. I sat down on the sofa bed with my heart beating in my ears. I fixed my eyes on the ceiling and watched as a small droplet formed on the damp spot and dropped onto my forehead. I touched the wet spot with my finger and then smelled it, moist and damp, mildew, green and underneath it all the metallic tang of blood. I reached for the bottle of whiskey. It was something but not enough. The sting of my gums and the feel of the bottle in my hand reassured me but I couldn't stop my ears from zoning in again on the creaking, and my mind flashed with images of bloated rigor mortis and a half rotted throat, gasping.

As I stood at the bottom of the stairs staring into the darkness I was sure the shadows shifted, but it could've just been the lights of passing cars through an upstairs window. I tightened my grip on the bottle. Step by step I made my way up to the unexplored upper floor of The Fat Man's house. The area at the top of the stairs was small enough for me to open the door to the toilet without leaving the relative safety of the staircase. I reached out with my free hand and pulled the door open. The toilet seat was down and covered with a thick layer of dust and hair. I tried the light switch but nothing happened.

I went back downstairs to get a torch from my bag. I walked back up the stairs with the torch in my hand and shot light into the corridor that led off from the landing at the top of the stairs. I could see that it wasn't long, and that two rooms came off from the right of it. I finished the bottle and forced myself to explore the upstairs bedrooms. I crisscrossed the first room with torchlight revealing that the wall was floor to ceiling with stacked VHS tapes. I searched the wall for a light switch and to my surprise the light came on. I turned off the torch and then gathering my courage approached the wall of tapes.

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