

**A Case of Black Rock
and other stories**

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A Case of Black Rock Mineral Water

The house was in turmoil, the air filled with an overpowering odour of furniture polish and the deafening roar of vacuums. Vases of fresh cut flowers bloomed miraculously in bay windows while a general air of nervous anticipation pervaded every room. Great Aunt Lucritia had cabled to inform us she was descending for the weekend. I suppose there must have been a time when the Gal, as she was irreverently known behind her back, must have waited to be asked like anyone else. But for the twenty odd years I had known her she had ignored such mundane conventions, preferring to cable directives to her unsuspecting hosts instead. Not that she overstayed. Welcome or not she invariably arrived shortly before lunch on Saturday and departed shortly after the same repast the following day. Even so, each visit proved a tour de force guaranteed to test the stamina of the most seasoned Swiss hotelier.

In the early days she arrived by train. My wife and I would drive to the station to collect her, allowing sufficient time to make the obligatory financial adjustments with the two local porters without condemning ourselves to a longer wait than necessary. Expresses would come and go until, just as we were about to give up hope and return to the car, one of the wheezing little branch trains of which she was so fond would finally creep along the platform and sigh to a grinding halt. The wretched machine was never on time, but then after stopping at every station and giving way to all the more important trains along the line, the delay was scarcely surprising. The Gal would take her time, gathering a multitudinous collection of hand baggage, before finally descending from one of the few first class compartments to greet us with an affectionate if regal graciousness. All this took some while, but there was little cause for concern the train might leave before she was ready, for it took the two struggling porters a great deal longer to unload her heavy oak chest from the guards van.

Just why The Gal was unable to travel with suitcases like everyone else I never dared enquire. I had once been foolish enough to ask why she was so insistent on avoiding express trains, pointing out how much faster and more comfortable they were in comparison to the local feeders she patronised. For what has always seemed one of the longest moments of my life she eyed me pityingly through her pinz nez, then annunciating each word slowly and clearly as though addressing a retarded child she replied. 'The reason I prefer the slow trains, my dear, is they are so much easier to catch.' And with a sad shake of the head she had patted me gently on the cheek

before turning her attention to more important matters. I have no doubt her reasons for travelling with an oak chest would have been equally valid.

Separate first class compartments have long since disappeared, as have the feeder trains, and now on the rare occasions The Gal decides to grace us with her presence she arrives by car. Though perhaps not a vehicle most might choose, for Great Aunt Lucretia the car could have been custom built in heaven. A Daimler of ancient vintage, made in the days when it was mandatory for the roof above the back seat to be high enough to accommodate a tall man wearing a top hat, it was a car born of an era when the bodies of all great motors ended in the glorious S shaped sweep of a well-endowed opera singer. Guided by the shaky hand of Jessop, who until the need for a chauffeur arose had served The Gal for many years in the capacity of gardener driving nothing more sophisticated than a lawnmower. But somehow he had managed to master this majestic machine that purred with an almost feline grace through the city streets, though whether he was officially entitled to drive it I purposely never enquired. Perhaps due to a lack of familiarity with four wheels, or perhaps because all three had reached an age when speed had long lost its allure, Jessop seldom demanded more than thirty five miles per hour from his steed, a pace suitably symbolic of graceful retirement.

But with the passage of time disaster finally struck. The old car developed a tendency to leak in wet weather, a trend that swiftly turned to a disastrous cascade. Repair was a task the experts deemed impossible; the options they opined were simple but stark. A new roof or a new car. The Gal dismissed both possibilities as irrelevant. Irritated though otherwise unmoved by the proposed inconvenience she swiftly brought her own particular brand of pragmatism to bear on the problem solving it at a stroke. Taking advantage of the unusual height above the back seat she took to opening her parasol on rainy days.

Great Aunt Lucretia was the last surviving member of her generation. Sister to my wife's grandmother she had never married, though family gossip suggests that even in those less permissive times she was seldom lonely in her younger days and even then had been recognised as the oddest member of a decidedly eccentric brood. My wife for example is considered mad as a hatter by many but seems almost boringly orthodox when compared to her Great Aunt.

One of the more wearisome idiosyncrasies of this family doyen was her unshakable addiction to Broughton's Black Rock Mineral Water. Not that I begrudge a taste for healthful refreshment, we drink liberal quantities of mineral water ourselves, it was the particular brand she had so typically selected that irritated me. In the first place it was virtually unobtainable. None of the local supermarkets stocked Broughton Black Rock Mineral Water, indeed not a single major London store including Harrods had ever heard of it. The only suppliers of this to my taste brackish Adam's ale was Aluishious Clovis & Sons of Camden Passage.

On exploratory visits to freshly discovered country houses, The Gal would bring her own supply of the wretched brew. But after a couple of weekends and much singing of the products praise she would pointedly leave the address and telephone number of Clovis & Sons prominently displayed on her departure, secure in the expectation that her host of the day would

feel obliged to provide the offensive elixir in future. Despite the skilfully crafted label depicting an oversized buzzard soaring above a village, presumably Broughton, nestling in a sun splashed facsimile of the Yorkshire Dales, I have always mistrusted the origins of the concoction. Mentally picturing a hoard of miserable young Clovi splashing about in a sodden basement beneath the evil aqueous eye of Aluishious himself. Toiling from dawn to dusk in the Herculean task of filling a never ending procession of bottles from rows of gushing taps connected to the mains.

Despite such fantasies, the moment I heard of The Gal's imminent arrival, I at once telephoned Clovis & Sons to order a case of Broughtons Black Rock to be dispatched without delay. Unfortunately it was the lunch hour and the usual efficient staff had temporarily deserted their posts. But since it was a matter of some urgency I persevered with the cretinous substitute left on duty and after several minutes of patient explanation was beginning to feel confident that my order had finally been understood when the voice shrilled in my ear

‘Then you'll be wanting the twenty four, right?’

‘Yes, yes.’ I replied, partially deafened. ‘That's correct, twenty four.’

Returning from the village the following afternoon I found my wife close to hysterics. Almost speechless she pointed to the menacing wall of Broughton's Black Rock Mineral Water that effectively blocked all access to the front door. Since it was already late afternoon on Friday there was no hope of recalling the delivery van to remove the twenty-four offending cases. So while my wife staggered off to the kitchen with one case, I began the backbreaking task of conveying the remainder to the garage, composing rude and vengeful limericks at The Gal's expense along the way to ease my creaking spine.

Saturday dawned, and on the stroke of noon the old Daimler hissed to a halt on the gravel sweep. Jessop slowly lowered himself arthritically from the running board and after allowing time to catch his breath, fished a sheet of thick vellum note paper from his breast pocket and adjusting his glasses turned to address us.

‘Madam sends her apologies,’ he announced in quavering tones, ‘but she has been overcome by ill health and regrets she must postpone the weekend to a future date. She has instructed me to present you with this gift as a token of her affection and to ease your disappointment.’

Carefully replacing the notepaper he removed his glasses and with an attempted flourish, opened the rear door of the Daimler to reveal two cases of Broughtons Black Rock Mineral Water resting regally on the back seat.

‘Shall I take them through to the kitchen for you, sir?’ He enquired.

‘No thank you, Jessop.’ I could feel hysteria rising. ‘I rather think the kitchens quite well stocked at the moment. You might try the garage though; they might bump into a few friends there.’

For a moment Jessop eyed me with concern, then bending to his task slowly lowered the first case to the gravel. As he paused to catch his breath before attacking the second I was swept with shame.

‘That will do Jessop, thank you very much, that will do just fine.’ I rescued the second case then opened the driver's door and helped the old man back into the car. ‘Please give our best regards to Aunt Lucretia and tell her how sad we are to have missed her. Thank her for the mineral water and tell her we look forward to seeing her as soon as she is feeling better.’ I smiled, lying through my teeth.

I watched the old Daimler trundle down the drive then with a sigh bent to the first case. At least we won't go thirsty, I thought groaning softly as I heaved myself erect. Staring up at the sky I took the first unsteady pace forward. It looked like rain.

A Pleasurable Assignment

The man paused at the door for a moment, eyes sweeping the room with a critical glance. But apart from Jasper sprawled peacefully in his armchair, eyes closed and seemingly asleep everything looked undisturbed and in place. The man permitted himself a small smile of satisfaction, from the moment he had gained entry to the flat the entire business had been concluded without fuss in less than twenty minutes, definitely one of his more pleasurable assignments

A short half-hour earlier Jasper had struggled with the shopping, balancing the bags on a raised knee propped against the door as he fumbled for his key. God, he muttered how he detested shopping. Trolleys ramming around aisles like bumper cars, canned announcements extolling everything from aerosols to pork chops to the endless shuffling queues at checkout, the whole business was a total anathema to him. Then without warning the door opened and he nearly dropped the wine on the hall floor. Clutching the slipping carrier bags between his knees he sidled crab wise to the kitchen and dumped the lot on the dresser. Twin necks of Cote de Nuits Village 99 poked seductively from the plastic. Removing them to a side table he paused for a moment to caress the dark green bottles, his mind already focusing on the carnal pleasures to come.

Jasper Porrit was a highly successful young advertising executive. Self-centred, good looking, highly sexed with a leaning to the sadistic, his tastes inclined toward the more easily won gratitude and subsequent subjugation of older women. Rich married women preferably with incomes dependent on their husbands. Great lays, good for expensive presents but unable to cause a fuss when discarded. Silvia was the current pot-boiler and he had promised to cook dinner for her in the discreet little love nest she had rented in a large impersonal apartment block. A confirmed gourmet Jasper had decided on Caneton aux Olives for the evening's main course. He enjoyed creating good food, but only one dish at a time, so he had asked Silvia to bring a dozen oysters and a bottle of Bollinger for starters. He had dismissed desert; they were usually hard at it half way through the third bottle, seldom even making it to the bed, and his mean streak deplored waste. With mouth suddenly dry at the prospect of pleasures to come, he picked up an upended tumbler from the draining board, absent-mindedly pouring cold Frascati from a ready

opened bottle in the fridge. Then, fastidious nature rebelling as he realised his mistake, emptied the offending tumbler in the sink and reached for a wine glass from the cupboard.

Silvia held the present pride of place in his mental trophy room. Not only proving herself gratifyingly adaptable in bed but generous to a fault in dispensing her husband's money when out of it. The perfect combination made even more stimulating by her position as wife of his boss, Cyril Saxby. Cyril Saxby ran his company with a rod of iron disguised beneath a winning smile and jovial laugh. He was a man who revelled in hogging the limelight and though prepared to admit a small measure of his subordinates achievement in private, insisted on receiving all the credit and consequent plaudits in public. Woe betide the employee who stepped forward to take even the slightest share in the general acclaim, however justified. After a generous handshake and disingenuous smile for the cameras, the offender was subsequently quietly fired for an offence never clearly defined, but always accompanied by sufficient unsavoury rumours to guarantee their removal from the advertising world for good.

Jasper was frequently summoned to the presence to be left standing and ignored before the great man's desk and when finally acknowledged only to be told his suit at a previous meeting had been poorly pressed or some other equally trivial complaint. But along with his colleagues he accepted the humiliation without protest as Cyril knew they would. For Cyril paid nearly forty per cent higher than other agencies. There had been moments when he had nearly snapped, told the old frog faced bastard what he could do with his fucking job, but he never had. Because that was precisely what Cyril wanted to hear. Behind that expressionless bug eyed face the man was willing him to break, longing for an opportunity to display his powerful superiority, followed by lofty dismissal. Cyril Saxby enjoyed his games, which was why he paid his players so well.

But now everything was different. He was still summoned before the desk, a penitent waiting to be told of his latest crime, but now when the fat old man finally deigned to acknowledge his presence he could look him straight back in the eye. 'Hey frog face,' he would mentally jeer, 'I'm balling your wife, and when we're not balling we're out spending your money like it's going out of fashion. So go ahead, keep me standing here as long as you bloody like if it makes you feel big. But know this, you pathetic rat arsed mottled old toad, come six O'clock I'm out of here, and the rest of my evening will be spent either on her or on you!' It not only made him feel better, it made him feel superior. But although Jasper was careful never to let a hint of his triumph translate into facial expression, sometimes he had a strange foreboding that somehow Cyril had got the message and knew. Perhaps the old coot was telepathic, he thought idly, and for a moment went cold all over before dismissing the idea.

He had met Silvia at a party to open the Company's new office block. Cyril had connived the opening to coincide with a launch of a charity for underprivileged children and was able to bask in the reflected glory of an attending junior Minister as a result. During the evening Jasper had been introduced to his wife. The moment they shook hands a blast of sexual arousal past between them as potent as a lethal charge of electricity. After a few minutes idle conversation Silvia had excused herself and with a meaningful look left the room. Jasper gave her three minutes before

following in a state of wild excitement to take her standing in a broom closet, with her legs locked round the back of his neck like a feeding python. How they got away with it was a miracle, for it was a busy corridor, there was no lock on the closet door and the noise they made must have rivalled Noah's Ark in spring. Later, as they caught their breath, Silvia had scribbled her telephone number on a scrap of paper before hurrying back to the party. There was a footnote that read, not before 10, but you had better make sure it's tomorrow. 'Gotcha!' He had crowed out loud, and wondered if she had a sexy voice. He liked sexy voices they turned him on but not a word had passed between them in the entire fifteen minutes.

Jasper checked his watch, he was running late, not that he was bothered. He liked to keep them waiting, gave him an edge, but tonight he was hungry and knew food was never uppermost in Silvia's mind. If he was ever going to eat the bloody duck he had better get a move on. Humming tunelessly he refilled his glass then headed for the bedroom to change into more comfortable clothes. But as he passed the open door to the sitting room he noticed a man sitting in the armchair by the window.

Jasper marched into the room. 'Who the hell are you? And what do you think you're doing loafing around my apartment as though you owned the place?' He stormed angrily.

The man smiled politely, he had one of those nondescript everywhere type faces, with thinning ginger hair and colourless eyes. There was an open copy of the Daily Telegraph spread over his lap, suggesting he had been reading the paper before being disturbed which enraged Jasper even further.

'Listen to me, you shitty excuse for a burglar. I'll give you one minute to clear out then I'm calling the police.' Jasper glared in genuine fury.

The man seemed unmoved. 'Mr Jasper Grange?' The enquiry was polite, almost apologetic.

'Yes, I'm Jasper Grange, you bloody little crook, and this is my apartment. Now get the hell out of here!' The man gave a small sigh, though whether of pleasure or regret it was hard to tell. 'Sit down in that chair across from me, if you would be so kind, Mr Grange.' The voice was flat and devoid of emotion, but the newspaper had been removed revealing an automatic pistol complete with bulbous silencer pointed unwaveringly at Jasper's stomach.

'I don't understand,' voice suddenly high pitched bordering on hysteria; Jasper viewed the weapon with terror and for the first time noticed the man was wearing gloves. The silencer reminded him of the one's used in spy movies, and the uncanny stillness of the man convinced Jasper that he meant what he said and would have no hesitation in using it if necessary.

'Yes, I'm afraid so,' The man read the fear in his eyes, 'but only if you force the issue.' The barrel twitched, indicating the chair and Jasper followed obediently and sat down. The man shot a swift glance at the mantelpiece clock while maintaining a watchful eye on Jasper. 'Well, we have about ten minutes to pass together, so please relax, make yourself comfortable. Do you have any particular interest or hobby you would care to discuss?'

'Just tell me what's going on, what this is all about?' Jasper implored, role of indignant householder forgotten. 'If it's money I don't keep much in the flat but there's a couple of

thousand in my account. You're welcome to that, though we would have to go to the bank of course.'

'Relax, Mr Grange, I have no interest in your money.'

'Then what the hell do you want? Jasper sobbed. 'Just tell me, I'm not proud, I'll do anything you say.' He gesticulated wildly, spilling wine from his glass before draining the rest.

'Calm yourself, Mr Grange, providing you make no rash or ill advised moves, I shall do you no harm. You have nothing to fear from me, and I promise your curiosity will be satisfied within minutes.'

'I know, I've got it. It's some kind of office joke. Some of the girls put you up to it, didn't they? Getting their revenge for the mike I stashed in the ladies.' Jasper gave a shaky laugh, 'is that what's behind all this?'

'Not exactly, though you are heading on the right track. But I can say that though I play a leading role in the proceedings, the star part remains yours alone, Mr Grange.' The man permitted himself the ghost of a smile and shot another look at the clock.

'The girls have stashed a video camera somewhere have they? Going to bust in on us are they with some sort of you've been had banner? Is that what we're waiting for?' Jasper's voice sounded shrill as he shot desperate looks at the door. 'Do you mind if I get another glass of wine to pass the time? Perhaps you could do with one too?'

'No thanks, not for me. But by all means get one for yourself.' The man unscrewed the silencer, putting it and the snub nosed automatic in a black case at his feet.

'Christ! I'm glad the James Bond bit's over,' Jasper smiled with relief, 'don't mind admitting that silencer of yours really gave me the creeps!' As he started to get up a puzzled look came over his face. 'Funny, my legs seem to have gone to sleep, all that drama I suppose, must have been tensing my muscles or something.' He tried again, puzzlement giving way to anxiety tinged with fear.

'It's no good I'm afraid,' the man interrupted, 'they're paralysed; the paralysis will spread to the rest of you in a few moments. It always begins in the legs, something to do with the blood supply I'm told. Apparently the stuff collects there, in the legs I mean, particularly when sitting down.'

'Wha the helth's goin on,' Jasper mumbled, finding it difficult to move his tongue.

'I'm glad you asked the question, I would have told you in any event of course, but it's always nice to be asked. The answer, as you will probably have realised by now, Mr Grange, is you've been poisoned.' He raised a hand to silence the hideous grunting sounds emanating from Jasper.

'Please, Mr Grange, we have little time.' He shook his head impatiently then continued, 'if you want an explanation you really must try to calm yourself and listen. The poison is a sophisticated derivative of curare, a paralysing drug used for centuries by South American Indians when hunting game. When taken orally it is quite tasteless, and once in the bloodstream proves lethal within ten minutes or so, depending on the subject's height and weight. There is no antidote; so all handling has to be conducted with extreme caution as even the smallest amount

either swallowed or dropped on broken skin will prove fatal within hours. The victim loses control of his limbs, lungs, and finally heart in that order, but is usually rendered unconscious before the closing stages as I'm sure you will be comforted to hear.'

He lent forward to check Jasper's pulse to ensure he still had his full attention. 'Please believe me when I say I have no personal feelings of animosity towards you, Mr Grange. I am merely a tool in these matters. Carrying out an assignment as quickly and efficiently as possible, like any other technician. In normal circumstances professional courtesy would preclude my divulging the name of my principal. But on this occasion, with the coup de grace already delivered, I think we can dispense with such proprieties.' He smiled; pleased to be able to break his code of confidentiality and share the finer points of the plan. 'As you may have surmised by now the man responsible for ordering your death is your boss Cyril Saxby. I won't waste your time with details, suffice to say Mr Saxby is a jealous and vengeful man, which is why I also called on Mrs Saxby a little earlier this evening and accepted a gracious offer to join her in a gin and tonic at that private little hide away you share.'

Once again he checked the flickering pulse, face momentarily creasing with anxiety. 'Hang in there, Mr Grange; don't leave, at least not yet. Not until I have explained the final dénouement, the ultimate betrayal. It really is the very best part.' Squatting in front of Jasper's slumped form he and began to speak slowly, forming each word graphically with his mouth in hopes that even if his hearing was gone, Jasper might still retain sufficient sight to lip read and understand the gist of what he was saying.

'My usual charge for these matters is £30,000 per disposal. However, Mr Saxby, who by the way struck me as a particularly vain and egotistical man, insisted I report to him in person with a detailed account of your individual passings before paying the final part of the fees due. Needless to say in my business one can never permit such a meeting. I might as well give the man a signed photograph of myself at work along with a detailed confession. So I doubled the usual price, telling him the charge was for both assignments would be £90,000. He made no objection to the figure, but then once decided on this course of action clients seldom do. He was of course unaware that the additional £30,000 represented my fee for his own disposal.

Mr Saxby is a drinking man, a discerning drinking man I grant you, but a drinking man none the less, with a particular weakness for Tres Vieux 1er Cru Grande Champagne cognac. Not a tippie most can afford, but then taking my fees into account I thought I could splash out just the once and purchase a bottle.' He reached into the case and waved the ancient brandy before Jasper's face. 'Now, Mr Saxby always keeps a bottle close at hand on his desk, a fact I ascertained when I made my customary private visit earlier this morning. And when I call him as per his instructions to report our business concluded, I have little doubt that his first reaction will be to reach for a celebration snifter.'

For the first time what might have passed for a smile flitted briefly across the man's face, as with Jasper forgotten he pulled a mobile out of his pocket and punched a number. Almost at once the receiver was picked up at the other end and a voice barked 'Yes?'

‘Contract honoured, business completed,’ the man replied tonelessly.

‘In one hour then.’ The connection was broken abruptly.

‘Hopefully, he will be dead by the time I get there,’ the man continued to describe his plan to a point somewhere above Jasper’s head. ‘Failing which I shall have to persuade him to take a drink one way or another. Either way, once his value to the assignment is at an end, I shall switch bottles, ensuring the only trace of poison found will be in his glass, while at the same time leaving the half used phial of curare in the top drawer of his desk. It won’t take long for the police to discover your affair with Sylvia Saxby, and without any forensic evidence to the contrary they will naturally conclude Cyril Saxby murdered the pair of you in an act of premeditated revenge before taking poison himself.’

He nodded to himself with satisfaction, then sweeping the room with an expert eye began removing all trace of his presence, plumping up the cushions and using a small brush over the area of carpet between the two chairs. Moving to the kitchen he took out the brandy bottle broke the seal and regretfully poured half the contents down the sink before returning it to the case. Then placing the mobile phone in a plastic bag put it on the tiled floor and ground it to pieces under foot for later disposal. He picked up Jasper’s discarded tumbler from the sink and after a moment’s hesitation filled it with water from the tap, downing the lethal draught with a sigh of satisfaction before drying and carefully returning the wiped glass to the cupboard.

Force of habit made the man check the locks on his case to ensure they were secure, then favouring the still figure in the armchair with a final glance he put the empty wine glass in his case and with a final nod of salutation murmured. ‘My apologies for disturbing you, Mr Grange, and my thanks for making the assignment a most pleasurable one.’ The front door closed silently behind him.

One of those Days

Looking down at Harry's body, a lifeless doll lying there loose and disjointed, rain slicking his hair turning the dark welling blood to an anaemic pink, it seemed incredible I had found this pitiful creature so intimidating a few short minutes ago. His eyes were open, staring sightlessly into the void. The same pale fishy grey eyes that moment earlier had gazed at me in sadistic pleasure devoid of compassion as I begged and pleaded with him to make them stop. My chest was on fire from cigar burns and the broken fingers on my right hand made me light headed with pain. Trust Harry to break the right hand, the evil bastard knew just what a right hand of broken fingers meant to a technician. In a fit of rage I stuck my foot under his body and rolled it off the jetty. He hit the dark water with scarcely a splash and sank like a stone. Funny that, I always thought bodies floated. Harry's didn't, but then I think he had a pressing appointment in hell. The effort made me dizzy and I hung on to the rail for a while to catch my breath before tackling the two goons. The force of the bullets had blown one of them over the guard rail, leaving him hanging doubled over like a puppet with the strings cut, while the other lay face down, clutching what was left of his stomach. 'Good, hope it bloody hurt,' I muttered and kicked him over the edge to join Harry.

The effort brought back the dizziness and I lent against the rail as rational thought processes began to return bringing with them the question of who had saved me and why? Who had gunned down Harry and his goons? It had to be either an act of gangster revenge or because they had something the killers wanted. It didn't take an Einstein to work out which and I felt a block of ice begin to form deep in my guts. No professional would hit three people in cold blood and let the fourth live to be a witness out of kindness. I was only alive because whoever they were thought I knew where the case was. Harry, whoever he was, had believed the same thing. I never knew his real name. 'Call me Harry,' he had said, thin lips twisting in parody of a smile. 'That is while you can still talk,' he had added before nodding to his thugs to break the first finger. The sadistic bastard had enjoyed it too. He must have known no sane man would face the agony of having his fingers snapped one after the other for the sake of a God damned suitcase. I would have denied my mother, betrayed my closest friends and bared the secrets of my soul to avoid pain like that. Not that it would have helped, I hadn't a clue what it was all about, didn't even know where the bloody thing was. But of course none of them believed me.

It all began earlier that afternoon; I had been taking some software discs and a repaired flatbed scanner across the city center to a customer. I prided myself on fast service so despite the heat wave had decided to deliver the case personally. Partly because I find satisfied customers often become steady customers, but mainly because this particular man always paid cash on the nail and the way business had been going lately the prospect of cash more than outweighed the inconvenience. The traffic was snarled bumper to bumper as usual so cabs were out and I didn't fancy riding sardine with a bunch gasping commuters which ruled out the subway. The only alternative was to hoof it, taking it slow and easy with the odd pit stop for a refreshing cold beer along the way. Maybe the beer tasted too good or maybe I made one pit stop too many, I don't know. But at some point striding down the street happy and at peace with the world, I suddenly realised I had left the God damned case in the last bar.

I wasn't too bothered about losing the scanner, I had more than enough spare parts in the workshop to put another together and it wouldn't cost much but the loss of my software was something else. I had spent hours sweating blood over those programs, they gave me the ability to diagnose and correct virtually any fault in any customer's computer. They also let me extract whatever information I thought might come in handy at the same time, though I didn't exactly advertise that part of the service. I legged it back through treacle heat to the bar but the case was gone. Gasping for breath in front of the barman, I tried to communicate the problem in sign language. He watched me with quizzical amusement for a moment, then taking pity his smile broadened and he ducked down behind the bar. 'This what you're after?' He surfaced and slapped my green case on the bar.

'Thanks,' I wheezed, 'you've a miracle worker. Please, have a drink of whatever on me. You've saved my life.'

'A beer would go down nicely,' he grinned and popped a can, 'take a tip from me and stick a name tag on that case of yours in future. Someone else came in after you left with an identical one to yours. A real weirdo if you ask me, knocked back a couple of double Jack Daniels, then picked up your case by mistake. He was in such a state he refused to believe it wasn't his until I made him take a look inside. Then he just grabbed the right one and ran out of the back door without a word of thanks as though the hounds of hell were after him. Some people!' He shook his head and made my change.

'Yeah, I hate people like that, makes you want to kick their ass or worse!' I shrugged agreement, picked up my change and with a friendly wave shouldered my way back into the heat.

I was running late now, but at least the traffic was moving so I stood on the sidewalk waiting for a cab. One of those small moving vans with a sliding door on the side pulled up in front of me blocking my view. Looking back I remember thinking it odd at the time, there was nowhere to unload, the rest of the traffic was shifting easily enough and the lights were green. Then without warning the side door slid open and a huge man grabbed hold of me and started to pull me inside. I kicked out and yelled for help; but his pal, who must have climbed down from the

passenger seat, shoved me hard from behind and I landed in a heap on the van floor. Someone pulled a sack over my head, the door slammed shut and the van lurched out into the traffic.

They took me to the old dock area with its rusting cranes and dilapidated warehouses. Then to make doubly sure no one would hear my screams hauled me out to the end of a long jetty used by dockers from across the river in the old days. They had a point too, for after they opened my case and found the discs and scanner my screams would have woken the dead. Well, now they were dead and good bloody riddance. I turned my attention to the new threat, scanning the shoreline for any sign of movement. But wherever they were they were lying doggo, waiting for me to make the first move, presumably hoping I would lead them to the real case. By now my hand was double its normal size and growing, grinding my teeth against the pain I made a rough sling, looping the sleeves of my jacket round my neck, and started back down the jetty forcing myself to think straight. My only hope was to lose them the moment I hit the shore then keep running until I found somewhere nobody knew me. Who these people were and what they wanted I didn't know but they were obviously ruthless professionals who for all I knew would be checking out my usual haunts by now if they hadn't staked them out already. The big question was where to hide?

I took the first street I came across between the warehouses, sprinting to the main road at the top. For once my luck was in and a bus was just pulling in to pick up some fares. I scrambled on board and tried to look inconspicuous. A few people stared strangely at my arm, but the hand was hidden and thanks to the clumsy sling most of the shirt bloodstains and burns were covered. The stream of cars behind the bus made it impossible to see if I was being followed, so I sat back to wait for the city centre and the crowds that went with it.

When the bus stopped on Main Street I hit the ground running the moment the door hissed open, ducking and weaving through the crowd, sprinting for Joe's Pool Hall on the corner of fifth and ninth as though the entire mob was after me. I knew Joe's like the back of my hand, the entry sign opened on a passage with a door halfway down on the right that opened onto the poolroom and bar. At the far end was a fire exit leading to the street at the rear of the building that Joe always left open in summer. But ignoring both I took the rickety stairs to the storeroom on the left. The staircase was a dirty brown and easy to miss if you didn't know it was there, particularly coming in from the brightness of the street outside. I flattened against the first floor landing wall waiting for the pursuit. It didn't take long, footsteps pounded up the passage to the fire exit, then hurried halfway back to pause while the owner checked out the pool room before running back out of the main entrance. So far so good, I eased up the storeroom window, climbed out onto the flat roof and checked the window of the house next door. It was half open. Hallelujah, thank God for summer! I cat burgled inside and locked it behind me. The house was empty, so I helped myself to a handful of aspirin from the bathroom cupboard before letting myself out of the front door to meld with the crowd on the street.

I spent the next two hours shaking off imaginary pursuers, ducking in and out of main entrances, side entrances, goods entrances and staff entrances. I bought the largest summer shirt

in stock from a store called The Bigger Man; it looked ridiculous but covered my arm. I criss crossed the city by cab, bus and subway, even coming up with a safe place to hide while I was at it. My hand had doubled again in size and was throbbing so badly I was tempted to risk a hospital but suspected they would have the casualty departments covered too. In desperation I considered the police, but what could I tell them? Some bad people I didn't know had kidnapped me for a case that didn't exist bust up my hand and burned my chest. But now they were all dead, gunned down by another gang I didn't know and left floating some place in the river and now the other gang were after me and I needed protection. After the laughter had died down they would call an ambulance and tell the medics to fix my hand before taking me to the nearest booby hatch and who would blame them. No, my only hope was to lie low in my bolt hole until dark, then go somewhere very far away and never come back.

Arthur Filmer was to be my unknowing host till nightfall. His name had come to me in the shirt store. Arthur Filmer was a wealthy computer buff who liked to have his systems checked out regularly on a contract basis. I even had a key to carry out these duties when he was away and his housekeeper had been alerted to let me in to get on with my work and not to panic if I turned up with a suspicious looking bag. By now I was becoming light headed with pain, if I was going to make it to Filmer's place I had to get going right away. I took a cab to the apartment block staring at my demented expression in the elevator mirror with horror as it whooshed me up to the pent house floor. I made an attempt at smoothing my hair with my left hand but it wasn't a success. Still the housekeeper had been warned to expect a weird computer nerd, I only hoped she wouldn't flip when she saw one. As I let myself in I could hear her clattering away with dishes or something in the kitchen, so I called out everything was OK and that I was the computer man and got a muffled response to go right ahead and she would be out shortly.

It was a beautiful room with large low-slung sofas and nice pictures on the walls. The French windows were open letting a welcome breeze blow in gently from the terrace. For a moment I looked longingly at the twin sofas but knew if I lay down on one I would never get up, so I made myself sit on the hard computer chair by the window instead. The aspirin was making me sleepy while the throbbing of my hand had induced the same kind of hypnotic state that train wheels do clicking over sleepers. Far away I heard the peel of the apartment bell followed by a muffled shriek, then the door burst open and I jerked awake.

The housekeeper hung like a rag doll against the chest of the biggest black man I had ever seen, one huge hand covered her face, holding her off the floor while at the same time acting as a suffocating gag. Long ago someone had slashed his mouth with a razor, leaving him with a perpetual leering smile born of nightmares.

'Well, you little shit, thought you'd give Ole Big Sam the slip did you?' Drug crazed eyes locked on mine. 'Thought to make him the run around a little eh? Jump through hoops like a dog for a sweetie, make him really work his ass off for to get his hands on that little old green case of yours.' He wagged his head in parody of refuel understanding, but his eyes stayed locked on me like a turret gun on a moving tank. 'Well I hopes you've got it boy for your own sake. Hopes

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