

Passion

Even as she parked the car, Melissa could not help the pangs of delight that skittered around inside her stomach. Tonight was the night, she was sure of it, more sure than she had ever been about anything before. From the first moment she had spoken to him, in that nightclub she had only occasionally frequented, she had felt something, something good, something right, but she had not wanted to let something as simple as lust destroy what relationship they might have waiting ahead of them. She'd denied his fullest advances so far, laying her hand against his to restrain his reach every time he had strayed, her breasts something to be savoured, her sex something to be cherished later on.

Melissa had never been one to sleep around, except for one regrettable night years ago when she had been a student; and that night had haunted her morals ever since, allowing herself to be undressed, groped and penetrated at a party, hidden away in an upstairs room of a stranger's house. She hadn't particularly regretted it at the time - she'd been drunk, she'd told herself, and that's what students did - but in the long run, it had tarnished her subsequent moralistic viewpoint on relationships to the point where if anyone asked if she'd ever had a one-nighter, she'd become embarrassed and would have to resort to either changing the subject, or simply outwardly accepting that casual sex was okay.

There was a clear sky overhead as she hurried across the small resident's car park towards the flats, the stars glittering, the moon pale and full and washing

its surreal light across the path ahead of her. Mark lived in the ground floor apartment of a converted house, and she rapped on his window eagerly, waiting until the curtains were pulled back to reveal his handsome face before she smiled sweetly at him. Inside she was churning, desperate to have her arms around his broad frame and to have his hands spread across her body. She hoped he would not need too much coaxing tonight; she had rather a nice figure, she thought, and it would look so good draped across his, but then she didn't want to seem overly anxious in laying it out for him either. He had to instigate it all. It would make him feel better about himself anyway. Her body would be his reward for his patience these past three weeks.

The main entrance door opened and there he stood, bare-chested and wearing only tight-fitting jeans below. She stepped up into his arms and there they hugged for a few moments, nestling in the heat coming from him, until they finally pulled apart and stepped through the communal hallway and on into his flat.

"How's work?" Mark asked her, making small talk as he swept his dark wet hair back with one hand. She had been so enamoured of his beautiful face that she hadn't even realised that he'd just stepped out of the shower. Passing through the living room on their way to the kitchen, she could see his wet towel still draped across the sofa.

"You know, the usual," Melissa replied distantly, combing her brown silken hair away from her face with one hand. She was going for the Liz Hurley look tonight, bedazzle him with something sultry and willing. Her blouse was unbuttoned to her cleavage.

"Coffee?" he asked, glancing back at her with a warming smile.

She watched as he plugged in the kettle, and nodded affably as she set her keys down on the counter before leaning back against it. She watched him as he pulled two mugs down from one of the wall cupboards, the neat muscles of his back rippling in hypnotic formation as his shoulders moved, the muscles of his arms tightening. He was a sight of perfection, she thought, dark, graceful, divine. He glanced across his shoulder suddenly, enquiring about sugar, and caught her scrutiny of him, and his smile widened across his lips. She wanted him to kiss her then, to take hold of her and initiate the love that she hoped they would soon be making this night.

His smile grew into a grin, as though that thought had somehow managed to breach the gap between them, from her mind to his, and he suddenly turned and stepped towards her across the tiled kitchen floor. Melissa's lips parted in expectation of what was to come as he took hold of her in his strong bare arms, his lips like fire-brands as he pressed them against hers. She heard a sigh of bliss escape her as she tasted his hot thick tongue, pushing out between her lips, against her tongue, glancing across her teeth.

The kiss was exquisite, disorientating, and yet it was so distressingly brief. He pulled away from her all too soon, and her eyes flickered open with something close to alarm. He wore that same smile, his eyes bright and glittering, and she had to force one of her own just to keep from crying at his departure.

She was close to him now, just inches from his face, so close that she could see a mark of red next to his mouth. She raised her fingertips towards it but he shied away from her touch.

"What's that?" she asked gently.

"What's what?"

"You cut yourself shaving?"

He put his own hand to the nick of blood delicately.

"Yeah. Damn razors. Sorry. I'll go clean up."

She watched almost helplessly as he slipped out of the kitchen, his departure saddening as though it was somehow final. She gazed impatiently around the kitchen while he was gone, her eyes falling indifferently over his pans and mugs, the kettle in the corner. She caught her reflection in the kitchen window facing out into the night, straightened her bra beneath her blouse, evened her breasts, deepened her cleavage. Her hair hung over her shoulders like an expensive veil, cascading and sumptuous. She wanted his face to be in it, to be between her breasts.

"Sorry about that."

She looked up startled. Mark was coming through the kitchen door, his face now clean of blood. He had a grin of thanks on his face, barely concealing another one of embarrassment that lurked behind it, and he quickly returned to the mugs still sitting on the counter opposite her.

Her attention went briefly back to her reflection in the black window. Breasts, cleavage, hair; all that she wanted him to have. She returned to Mark. He was spooning coffee into each mug. Then he was reaching down to the fridge for a carton of milk. She studied him intently as he did so, like a zoologist studying a rare creature, lithe and fleeting, as though he were perhaps on the brink of extinction, this moment elusive, sacred. The kettle boiled behind him as she watched, a plume of steam encasing the area around him like a primordial fog rising up from a wild plain. He seemed like something free, something unique, and

it was only after he'd stirred the mugs and dropped the spoon down into the sink with a clatter that it broke the magical moment. He looked up at her, as he carried their coffees through into the living room, with a slightly bemused expression, and it was only her eager smile as she followed after him that kept him from asking about her scrutiny.

Melissa took a seat next to the damp towel, and watched as he scooped it up with that same embarrassed smile on his lips, before taking it back through into the bathroom. Reaching for her coffee, she noticed a small notebook sitting on the edge of the coffee table partially obscured by a handful of well-thumbed magazines. She picked it up as she waited for him to return, leafing through it with mild curiosity, wondering if it might be his little black book. But there were no girl's names or strings of telephone numbers inside, just a few pages of scribbled notes accompanied by a handful of scratchy illustrations. She couldn't make much sense of the images, though, roughly scrawled in biro as they were, and she was about to set it back down before Mark came back and caught her with it, when her eye picked up a little tally of numbers on the inside front cover. This too was roughly etched in, and symbolised a series of four vertical strokes with the fifth angled through them. The number of strokes equalled twelve in all, and frowning at this tally without similar explanatory notes or captions such as what had appeared on the other pages, she wondered just what he had been adding up. The thought disappeared quickly out of her head as she heard his footsteps returning, and she quickly set it back down on the table as he reappeared through the door.

The smile was still on his face - it seemed he was genuinely glad to see her - and she now saw that in the few moments that he'd been away, he had combed his hair and put on a shirt too, which last detail now obscured much of his torso from her gaze. When he finally took a seat next to her, she realised that he had also put on some aftershave. He smelt divine now, strong and protective, and even before he had turned to look deep into her eyes, she realised how very wet she had already become.

A feeling of self-disgust rolled over her briefly, wondering how she could possibly have allowed herself to become so excited before anything had even been started between them. But then she realised that they were together now, that was the only important thing, and so she cherished the simple sight of him, realising even as she thought this how much she actually wanted him. He moved away from her a few inches to reach for his coffee, but Melissa laid a hand on his arm almost immediately and stopped him before he could do so. He looked back at her, a frown glancing his brow.

"What's wrong," he started, but Melissa did not want to reply with words, but instead took hold of his hand and began to stroke it tenderly. She had a smile of her own now, and leant forward to place a kiss upon his lips, a hazy fervour spreading throughout her body that felt almost like the luxuriant warmth of alcohol. The movement seemed to catch him off guard momentarily, Melissa having instigated the act, but he responded quickly enough, and turned now to take hold of her arms.

Melissa gasped with delirium as his hands moved passionately around to the soft flesh of her back,

pulling her body against his as he pressed his lips hard against hers. His tongue came once again, tasting her wet lips as one hand moved round to take hold of her breast. She did not deny him this time, she had promised herself that much on her journey to his flat this night, and let him feel the softness of her flesh, the hardening of her nipple. She wanted him to touch her, to feel her body beneath his, and as she took hold of his hand, she urged him to knead her resilient flesh more firmly, to grasp it and squeeze it tightly, to pleasure her as fully as she wanted to be.

Mark complied with breathtaking speed now that he was no longer restrained by her chastity. His other hand left her back altogether and swept down between her legs, eager to be buried beneath the folds of her long skirt. A moan escaped her as he found her sex almost immediately, his fingertips firm as they sought out her own soft folds, teasing her private place, fingering her where she was most wet.

An image came into her head suddenly, a picture of how slutty she must look with her skirt pulled up between her legs, the front of it damp and dripping, darkened with her own fluids made slick from passion and want. But she suddenly didn't care. She wanted to look like that for him, she wanted to be touched like that by him, she wanted him to feel her, to be inside her; and then she took hold of his hands as roughly as she could, her head lurching forward, her eyes open, and she saw his gaze return hers, frustrated, sharp, anxious.

But she did not say no to him as he no doubt thought she would. No, she wanted him more fully than she had ever wanted anyone else before. This was no time for fancy or for sweetness. She wanted him

inside her. She wanted heat.

"Take me to bed," was all that she said.

His hands found every crease that her body had, his tongue locating every part that could offer delight. His cock was large and it filled her utterly, and for a span of time that she would have sworn would have taken them well into the following day, he pleased her steadily towards a heady climax.

Slumped back and sweating profusely, she lay on her back gazing up at the ceiling as her heart thumped and her pores oozed. Mark lay panting at her side, one hand on the flat of her stomach, his face nestled snugly against the curve of her breast. Oh but this was wonderful, she dreamed, and for a few moments she even wondered whether her morals had been right, or whether she should just let herself get fucked once in a while when the mood took her.

But these were just idle fancies, and they were soon gone from her head, chased away into the darkest recesses of her mind by the certainty that this was only good because they had known each other for a time; they had dated, they had spent time together, they had learned to look at each other and realise the magic of that passion. All that had been cultivated into an hour of blissful sex, two bodies churning together, writhing, contorting, both bringing and finding love. A foundation for their future had been made here this night, which, if they hadn't of waited, might never have been found.

They had parted the following morning a little after seven, Melissa making a reluctant departure to start her journey home in order to shower and change

before continuing on to work. She had almost begged Mark to see her again that evening, not wanting to spend another night alone without his arms around her, his cock inside her. He agreed with a kiss, telling her that they would do so very much more that night, and as good as his word, as soon as Melissa crossed the threshold to his flat and sealed the world behind them, they tugged at each other's clothes like rabid animals and headed straight to the bedroom to begin a meal of flesh and love.

Melissa urged him on more than she would have ever though possible, clawing at him, demanding his cock, his fingers, raking her nails across his back until he cried out, dragging marks across his flesh. He took her with a heightened fervour too, grasping her breasts with both hands, squeezing them until she could no longer distinguish the boundaries between desire and distress. She lay on her back with his weight forced hard between her legs, almost crying out with alarm as his teeth sank deep into the meat of her shoulder, biting down and into her until she thought her blood would come. Only when he moved down her body towards her triangle of dark hair did she consciously put her hand there, lifting her fingertips up before her eyes to check for blood as Mark pressed his tongue deep into her sex. But her fingers came back soaked with nothing more than sweat, a slick mixture cultivated by their frenzied heat, but the memory of his teeth diminished quickly as his lips and tongue worked their former miracles once more on the churning heat of her pussy.

She knew exactly how wet she was, her fluids running down the insides of her legs, soaking the sheets and the mattress, so she was surprised at how

readily Mark was to go down on her after an hour's passionate lovemaking. His tongue was firm and keen, however, and found her clitoris immediately, teasing and turning it with a vigour that shuddered through her spine, so that she was clutching at the top of his mop of dark hair within seconds, gasping at his touch. He seemed not to even notice how roughly she tugged at him, or even to care, but seemed genuinely urged on to penetrate her more deeply, his tongue lengthening to taste the soft wet walls of her vagina, arousing her so intensely that she began to roll her legs around him, crushing him hard. Melissa's hands went to her own hair now, grasping it and pulling at it as her hips bucked below him, her body now way beyond her control, slave to her lover's roving tongue.

But then her gasps slipped into a yelp of alarm as his teeth suddenly bit down on her clit, forcing her eyes wide with a sharp agony, and making her gaze down the length of her sweat-slick stomach to find Mark's eyes just as intense and staring back up at her. Even though much of his face was still engorged between her legs, she could still make out the grin of enjoyment plastered across his face. But his teeth had broken the moment of pleasure, shattered it irreparably, and she simply took hold of his face with both her hands and almost hauled him up right out of her lap.

She started to complain, but his lips were so intoxicating that her words soon fell short. His hands continued to roam across her wet skin, and so she laid back down and let him carry on as if nothing had happened. He seemed just as happy to pleasure her with his dick as he was with his tongue, however, and after a series of well placed kisses across her breasts and

neck, he soon found his former rhythm once again. It still took a few moments for Melissa to be able to close her eyes against his face once more, so unnerved was she about his impromptu biting. But his lips had regained their former passion across her body once more, heightening her own pleasure, and it was simply too much to resist, no matter how annoyed she had been just moments before.

The rhythm of his hips escalated steadily, until he was suddenly bucking hard against her own, forcing his seed deep inside her, its heat almost burning. She lay gasping and holding him for a while after that, her head filled with so many thoughts, some good, some bad, some dirty, some even reproachful. Mark collapsed across her body as he had the previous night, one hand clasping her breast while the other drifted down to knead the top of her thigh. It felt good to have him on top of her though, she thought, so good to have him touch her the way he did. And yet he had no right to bite her the way that he had. That had hurt, and it had been too much. She could no longer feel the pain, however - her sex was too worn and numb after the aggressions his cock - but she'd wanted to smack him for it at the time. But now as she peered down at him, half-asleep already, she simply ran her fingers through his damp unruly hair, and told herself that perhaps it had been an accident. He hadn't forced anything subsequently, or tried to get her to do something that she hadn't wanted, so why did she want to put this stress on a relationship that had already proved more successful and more wonderful than any other she had ever known? Keep quiet about it for now, she told herself. She wanted him in her life, she knew, and she wasn't about to reprimand him for anything that he

was doing, or even anything that he intended to do. He was wonderful, and that was the end of it.

The following evening they went out to dinner, a small restaurant in town that served a wonderful pasta. They ate well, a little too well, and were clutching their stomachs in pained but blissful extravagance on the short walk back to Mark's flat.

After a couple of glasses of red wine, the ache in their stomachs subsided and the heaviness of the wine drew a velvet veil across their minds, dulling their senses, but electrifying their groins. The sofa was small, but with the alcohol numbing their aches and forcing blood into their loins, they came quickly together in a long and passionate kiss.

Melissa already had her hands inside Mark's shirt, her fingers finding the deep grooves of his muscular frame, clawing at his flesh. His hands, meanwhile, had slipped beneath her skirt and were already inside her knickers, inching towards her sex held chastened by the angle of her body. Reclining back to allow him access, his fingers found their goal, and she loosed a delirious moan as they entered her. Oh how she had wanted them there during a day of answering telephone calls from frustrated customers, of meetings dragged on, of clients bullying and bargaining. She had hardly kept track of any of their wants or complaints, so much did the shape of his naked form fill her mind's eye. On the stroke of five thirty, she had been up from her desk and virtually running towards the lift, eager to be out and on her way home to ready herself for their special evening together.

He had pushed his fingers all the way inside her

now, filling her passage entirely as his tongue reached ever closer to the back of her throat. He was filling her so completely, so utterly, and still she wanted more of him inside her. Then his tongue suddenly slipped from her mouth, his lips hot and wet and tracking down across her cheeks and neck, searching out her shoulder as he eased back her silk blouse with his other hand. His teeth came again, biting at her soft flesh, and all she could do was whimper as her skin became pleased first into pain and then back into pleasure, her pussy crying out for more length and girth than his fingers could offer in order to punish it.

Her head began to swim with a myriad of blurring thoughts, each one of them blissfully incoherent, but even as she felt his teeth sink even further into her shoulder, she could not help but let him taste her. Oh but this was good, that was what the cacophony of thoughts seemed to say in one mounting roar; this is good, don't let anything stop this.

Then Melissa's eyes flickered open as a wince of stinging pain came, her sight finding the top of Mark's head, buried at her shoulder. Vaguely, as though through some distant haze, she could see the place where his mouth had found its mark, and around it she could make out a dark crimson smear of blood. It almost seemed through this uncertain haze that he was drinking from her, drawing her blood out of the wound that he'd made, and swallowing it down just as he had swallowed down the wine earlier.

This sickening act seemed genuinely to be arousing him, the urge of his lips becoming more insistent than the motion of his fingers still buried inside her vagina. She struggled suddenly, the sharp pain in her shoulder disturbing her, but then she suddenly realised that he

had her in a vice-like grip, her body stricken and wedged into the side of the small sofa. She gasped his name, clutching at his hair, and in a moment of panic thought that he would not let her go, that he would drink from her until she passed out.

But then after a final draw on her shoulder, his eyes suddenly lifted and found hers, his teeth lifted, and then a wave of something close to remorse suddenly seemed to wash over him. He started to stammer apologies, almost begging for her to forgive him, but for some reason she simply hushed him and told him that it was alright, they'd just got carried away.

He settled down somewhat as they both retook their seats, but it wasn't until they both turned their attentions back to the bite-wound still pulsing blood, that they both headed swiftly through into the bathroom to try and staunch the flow.

Melissa's blouse was ruined - a large red stain covered much of the top half - but as Mark applied a dressing to it, and apologised yet again, so they both gazed into each other's eyes and began to laugh out loud. The whole premise suddenly seemed ridiculous, an act of vampirism in a suburban neighbourhood, an act of blood-drinking in the middle of a feel-up.

"I'm sorry," he began to say again, putting his arm round her and pressing his face into her long brown hair.

"It's okay, Mark," she told him, hugging him hard against her. "I shouldn't have let you get so involved."

"It's just that..."

She looked at him.

"It's just what?"

He gazed up into her eyes now, his expression intense, yearning.

"It's just that you turn me on so much. I look at you, at your skin, and I just want to touch it, get under it, be inside it so totally."

"Oh Mark," she tried to hold back a sob of delight. "I want that too."

He looked hard at her, his eyes searching hers.

"You do?"

"Of course I do," she cried. "I love being with you. I love when we go to bed together. Can't you tell how crazy I am about you? There's nothing I'd say no to you for."

"Really?" he said.

His eyes gleamed as that smile of his returned once again, and it seemed so good to have it there, creasing the edges of his lips that had only just before been buried against her, laying kisses of desire against her skin.

"Really," Melissa continued. "I want us to be together. I want us both to be happy. I want you to do whatever you want to me, whatever you like, if you think it'll give me pleasure."

Mark's smile broke into a wonderful grin at this, and with their arms still wrapped around each other, they stumbled awkwardly out of the bathroom, only this time heading for the bedroom instead of the living room.

They didn't have sex that night, but slipped under the covers and drifted into sleep fully clothed, their arms still in the same embrace that they'd had on leaving the bathroom. It was a soundless slumber, no disturbances or ill dreams to stir the two lovers, nothing until dawn brought its pale light to the room and roused them gently into the promise of another new day.

Mark filled Melissa's thoughts for much of the morning - the touch of his fingers inside her, the heat of his lips against hers, the pressure of his body that had fixed her so tightly into the side of the sofa - but it was the pain that his teeth had inflicted upon her that dominated them all. At lunchtime, she sat alone and pondered his appetites.

Drinking her coffee as she nibbled absently on a tuna sandwich, she turned over the sight of him drinking hard upon the wound he had made. She had not thought that he had consumed that much, and yet all day she had felt light-headed. It was probably her imagination, she kept telling herself, he would have to drink a lot before she would lose consciousness altogether. But still, the memory of him almost gorging himself on her own blood made her feel uneasy.

She had shaken off her anxiety in the bathroom afterwards as he'd tended to her, the soreness of the wound dissipating. It still stung a little now when she put her fingertips to it through the fabric of her dress, but it would heal in a few days. The wound had not been that deep, after all. At one o'clock, she went to return to her desk, dismissing her over-reacting as mere foolishness. Mark was a wonderful man, a once in a lifetime catch, and she was not about to risk losing him just because she turned him on so much that he couldn't control himself.

For the fourth night in a row, Melissa drove to his flat after work. He was home as usual, and he greeted her on the threshold with a grin and a warm lingering hug. She sat in the living room as he made her a coffee, and once again she noticed his little notebook sitting

on the edge of the coffee table, half concealed by the spread of magazines littering its surface. Once she could hear the clink of a spoon in the mugs, and knowing that he was occupied and not about to come back through the door and catch her reading it, she eased it out from beneath the magazines and had a quick leaf through.

There were a few more pages filled in, she could see, Mark's handwriting too spider-like to discern much of what he was making notes about, but here and there she could make out the odd word. 'Neck' was one, and later a reference to 'sickly blood', and towards the end of one paragraph a whole section about a 'warm glow burning inside'. She could only think that he was writing notes about her and about their relationship, but there was suddenly no time to read any more because she heard him coming back in from the kitchen. She just had time to set the notebook back down - her eye catching the inside cover where she was sure that his tally had now stepped up one notch to thirteen, although she couldn't be sure - before he reappeared in the doorway clutching two steaming mugs of coffee.

Glad of the warming drink inside her, she barely kept track of their conversation as she turned over the relevance of the numbers at the front of his notebook. Sure it was sweet that he was keeping a diary about their lovemaking, probably even making little asides about her and making notes for future reference - birthdays, that kind of thing - but it was the tally of numbers at the front that made no sense to her. They weren't the number of days that they'd known each other, or the number of times that they had actually dated, or even the number of times that they'd slept

together. She thought momentarily, and with a turn of her stomach that made her feel sick, that perhaps it was the number of women that he'd been with. But that suddenly seemed ridiculous somehow. She had been with him for four consecutive nights. There wouldn't have been any time for him to squeeze in another. Surely. Unless he had found someone in a rapid space of time that didn't work during the day and didn't mind leaving the flat quickly before his girlfriend made an appearance. No, it was definitely not another lover. She ruled that out as best she could. It was something else entirely. She just didn't know what yet. They continued to chat for a while longer about work and about home, Melissa's doubts ebbing away by the second, until Mark suggested food and got back up to go into the kitchen to make something for them both to eat. She resisted the urge to linger behind in the living room just so that she could have another quick nose through his mysterious notebook, deciding that she should trust him, and that she wouldn't want her distrust of him returned, and have him have a secret nose through her diary instead, even if she did keep one, which she didn't. She got up and followed him through into the kitchen instead, giving him a hand with the meal, a brief supper of ham and potatoes, and another bottle of red.

It was not long after dinner, probably not much more than ten minutes, before they were back in one another's arms again and locked in a passionate kiss, their hands roving beneath each other's clothes, unbuttoning and unbuckling. Mark's head was at her lap before she had even hoisted her dress, his tongue

tracing lines across the insides of her thighs, rising up towards her sex, where it found her already wet.

She gasped aloud as he raised her dress up and over her head, her hands clutching her own breasts firmly and squeezing them with ecstasy. Mark seemed not only eager to have the tip of his tongue flicker effortlessly across her clitoris, but also to push his mouth over the whole of her sex and drink deeply from her hole.

The sensation was more erotic than anything else he had done so far, his tongue stimulating her clit as his lips clamped around her and fed. A wave of stimulating heat coursed throughout her loins as she rocked back and forth against his mouth, inclining her hips to allow him even greater access to what he wanted.

With her head swirling as though drowned in some kind of glutinous soup, she barely noticed the change in his attentions, not even as his teeth found her clit once more and bit into it. Her buttocks clenched with the pain, her stomach churning with a sudden spasm, but so delirious was she with the headiness of his lips and tongue, that she could not stop the motions of her own body. A memory of something said before flitted briefly into her head, something about not denying him anything, and it gave a helpless credence to her apathy. She let him bite into it again, feeling the pain deep inside her, but letting it come, letting the pleasure still stimulating the rest of her overtake it, envelop it.

She grabbed hold of his hair as he bit into it a third time, this time much harder, twisting it between his teeth as though it was gristle from a bad steak. Melissa cried out in pain, her eyes stark, and as she gazed down at the man between her legs, saw that his face was

once again stained with her blood.

Melissa had failed to notice through the pleasures and pains that he had instilled upon her, that he had been biting through the delicate layers of the flesh of her vagina, tearing them open in order to get to her more tender meat inside. Judging by the amount of blood smeared across his face, and it was so very awash with it, she must have lost a lot of it already. Even as she grasped his hair in two great fistfuls, attempting to yank back his skull, he strained to be back at her, strained to push his face back against her blood, to drink it and wash his skin in all that he could get.

The sight of him sickened her beyond measure. This was surely so far beyond forgiveness that she would not be able to even think about. She screamed at him to get the fuck away from her, yanking at his hair with all her strength now. But his grin came again, hideous through a mask of scarlet. And it came so very quickly, with his teeth stained red, his cheeks creasing and forcing rivulets of crawling blood out of them, that his fist, when it came, connected with her face so swiftly, that she saw nothing until her consciousness returned to her nearly an hour later.

When her eyes did finally open, it was to his bedroom ceiling. Her nose was throbbing incessantly, her eyes heavy and dulled, but even through all of that, an agonising sting of pain seared throughout her groin, up through her stomach, and shuddered the rest of her body. She remembered in an instant all that had happened, even through the haze of black shapes that still pulsed inside her head. Tears suddenly began to well, for herself and for her pain, for her anger and for

Mark, but mostly for how he had ripped her and punched her.

She lifted her head to see if he was near, but an agonising churn came as she realised that she could barely move. A cutting sensation burned at her wrists. She glanced sideways to see that he had tied her wrists to each bedpost, had tied her ankles at the bottom of the bed too. She struggled momentarily, but shafts of pain speared her body, and left echoes of fire burning throughout her groin and limbs.

A motion in the darkness at the edge of the room suddenly caught her attention, and she turned her head to try and make sense of the shadows. It was Mark, who else could it be, and it seemed that he was suddenly afraid to come any closer. Tears came freely now as she strained to make out his shape, standing there with his arms crossed, one hands playing nervously at his lips. She could not tell if he was sobbing himself, however, or just breathing heavily, but her tears began to obscure her vision even more, and she simply turned her head away from him and clenched her eyes shut against the whole room.

Between her own helpless sobs she could hear his footsteps pad slowly across the room until he was at her bedside. She resisted the urge to turn and look at him, but instead just listened to the hollow sound of his breaths, wondering what else he might do to her, how else he might hurt her in the name of passion. His breathing wasn't ragged as she had thought it might be, however, suggesting that he hadn't been sobbing, but it was irregular. It continued for a few minutes, drawing and fading, haggard breaths that came erratically as he gazed down upon her. But it wasn't until she eventually turned her head to find him, to

find his eyes taking in the sight of her helpless naked body, of her bloodied hips, that he eventually spoke to her.

"I'm sorry," he said to her, his voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

The memory of her own words to him the last time he had apologised came rapidly into her head, urging her to repeat them this time also, but there would be no way they would ever come from her lips again. No way. Her eyes began to sting now with hatred for him, her nose still throbbing from where his punch had landed, and it felt like it had ballooned to twice its normal size, making it difficult for her eyes to even see past it.

Even as he apologised again, she could find no words to spit at him. Her body was wracked with pangs of agony, pulsing and churning deep inside her groin and her abdomen, her head a groggy soup where her thoughts struggled to keep coherence. Even as he leaned over her and pressed the gagging strip of black tape across her mouth, her throat could offer no final curse for him, bastard that he was.

And so Melissa's eyes clenched with a stifling agony as the man at her lap resumed his sickening meal of her, his fingertips peeling back folds that had been opened, his teeth opening new folds that he now made, tearing off slivers of red meat and swallowing them whole. Her body shuddered and writhed with an unequalled suffering as he assaulted her utterly, drinking her blood, devouring her flesh, undoing her body. The agonies seemed to last for hours until her consciousness finally slipped, allowing her passage into an inky black nothingness where she could feel no more harm.

Mark, however, continued his meal until he was done, leaving her where he had tied her while he went through into the bathroom to shower and wash her blood from his face and neck, removing all trace of her, cleaning his teeth twice, removing the sickly odour and taste from him altogether. He went back into the bedroom, opening the wardrobe where the hardening corpse of his thirteenth victim still hung from its wire noose, reaching past it to take out some of his clothes for the rest of the evening. Once he had dressed and combed his hair back neatly in the mirror, he went through into the living room, perched on the edge of the sofa as he took up his notebook hidden under the pile of magazines, and etched another line in his tally. Melissa could stay where she was, he thought to himself as he closed the book. He'd have a few weeks of gentlemanly behaviour before he'd have to worry about hanging up her body, a few weeks to dine at his new bedside table, her delicate menu open twenty four seven.

Pushing himself to his feet, he slipped on his black leather jacket and took up his keys from the counter, checking his look in the mirror one last time before making his way out into the night. It was only a few miles to the nightclub, a ten minute drive at the most. Best to plan ahead, he thought. Don't want to be left hungry in a fortnight's time.

The Black Woods

I had been lucky to save it on the wet road, that's all I could think at the time. The rain had washed so much mud and muck down off the steep banks that the hill had become more treacherous than it might otherwise have been.

But the blown tyre's not the only thing that's shaken me up tonight. There's something else, something that I'm not sure even happened now. The only thing that holds my certainty are the jitters that still have hold of my chest. My hands are still shaking after my third measure of Remy Martin, downed from one of the tumblers we'd received last anniversary from my wife's sister. My wife; I was supposed to pick her up over an hour ago - she's going to be mad. But I don't want to go back out there, not just yet, not through the Black Woods outside Cookham.

Its just gone four past midnight, a chilling coincidence that echoes the title of that Stephen King novel. The sight of the narrow hands on my watch that point to that time turns a dull flat slab over in my stomach that has the weight of a gravestone. I know Kathryn will be waiting, twitching the curtains at Jenny's house with every car that passes, but I can't face driving back out into the dark and the rain, not just yet, and not on that silent hill that has no streetlights.

My tumbler's empty, and I try to pour another measure as steadily as I can. Some of the sombre liquor spills down the side of the crystal and drips in perfect circles across the dark wood of the table. I can see an ebony reflection of myself in the wall of the tumbler,

distorted against the cut glass and the deep rich colour of the brandy. I do not look well.

Did I see anything at all?

That's what I keep asking myself.

It's starting to become vague now, what actually happened, just a series of blurred static images clutched together with uncertainty and irrational childhood fear. I was out in the woods alone, out in the Black Woods, no less, and that's all that I really know for sure. Who knows what's out there, in an ancient woodland unbounded by any fence or city. This is rural country, out in the sticks.

Let me first explain what I was doing out there, it may well help me get the events in some sort of rational order at least. Kathryn, that's my wife, had one of her socials at Jenny Maxwell's, and I took her over there around nine o'clock. It's only a short drive between Burnham and Cookham, but there's no real direct route, and the country roads are generally quicker anyway. The outward trip was nothing special. The rain had picked up from a drizzle to a light squall, a cold wind whipping it up and making visibility a bit of a handful, but it was nothing too untoward. Hedsor Hill was a little slippery, but then with the steep muddy banks either side, it usually is when it's wet. All was fine when I dropped her off, but with a miserable selection of programmes on TV, I thought I'd stop off for a quick pint on the way back. One pint led to two, however, and by the time I came out, the rain had picked up considerably. It wasn't yet ten o'clock, and I still had an hour or more to go before Kathryn would be ready, so I hurried back to the car with the collar of my coat pulled up over my head.

Heading out over the river, I took the next turning

right towards Hedsor Hill, out of the lit B-roads of Cookham and onto the unlit narrow thoroughfares cutting through the farmers' fields and open woodland. I'd only gone a few hundred yards at most, when suddenly through the heavy rain, I made out the shape of a walker hunched miserably against the downpour with a wretched hound soaked on the end of a sagging lead. I remember thinking what a pitiful sight it was to see a man and his friend out taking a constitutional in such foul weather, but then that's the burden of dogs, I guess. They've got to be walked, rain or shine. It was only a passing sight, and they were both gone from my mind once I was past.

The phone's started to ring out in the hallway. It'll be Kathryn. If I answer she'll want to know where the hell I am and why I haven't picked her up yet. What could I tell her? I have no idea. She'll have to wait for now, I'm in no condition to drive.

I reached Hedsor Hill shortly afterwards and started up the incline. I could see the washes and rivulets of the rainwater cascading down the road from the light of my headlamps. I drove steadily in third gear, an easy forty mph, towards the summit. It would be slippery, mud and all, but by no means treacherous. The beer had made me slightly light-headed, I'll admit, perhaps even a little distant and lacking in concentration, but I still sat bolt upright when the tyre blew and threw the car across the road. Mud or no mud, the car slid sideways, lurching towards the ditch at the side of the road like a felled ox. I wasn't going that fast, I'm certain of that, no more than forty. But I was still lucky to save it.

Hush. The phone's stopped ringing. I'm probably making her worry unnecessarily, I know, but what can

I do? She'll phone again in a bit. Perhaps I'll be calmer then. Have a better story to tell. A sane one.

I crawled out into the horrible night cursing. The overhanging trees seemed almost to act like some kind of cruel wind tunnel, and it whipped the rain hard into my face and it fell through the canopy, stinging my skin like tiny needles of cold and wet, almost blinding me as I stomped round to the front of the car to find the tyre bunched up at the base of the wheel.

I gazed back the way I'd come, back down the dark unlit hill, the lights of Cookham spread out and glittering snugly on the other side of the curving black mass of the Thames. It was probably only about a mile and a half back to the village, but I wasn't about to start walking back to Jenny Maxwell's house just to phone the RAC. My hair was already soaked, and trickles of icy water slid down my collar and settled at the base of my neck like a cold washcloth. My coat was still damp from when I'd left the pub, but now it was pretty much sodden just from stepping round to the front of the car. I had very little choice, I knew, although I wish now that I'd left the car where it was and ran all the way back to the village. But for some reason I had already resolved myself to going back home soaked to the skin. I was going to fix the tyre myself and drive back. I guess you'd call it dumb stubbornness or something, I don't know, but I trudged round to the back of the car, unlocked the boot, and set about tugging the spare out from beneath the coarse grey carpet.

The canopy of beech trees that towered overhead showered me with huge drops of water with every blast of wind that came, adding to the fury that gusted down the hill and the freight of rain that it carried. My clothes were wet through and stuck to my skin like

freezing adhesive before I had even jacked up the car. I began to shiver violently with the cold, the wrench slipping repeatedly in my numbed and weakened fingers, but once the nuts were loose, I knew I could no longer change my mind. I had to continue.

I could feel the steam of frustration and hard work rising off my forehead as I tugged at the wheel, lifting skyward like some fragile and benign ghost, losing its tentative substance almost immediately in the cold midnight air. No traffic passed me on that quiet winding hill, and I was too far from the village to distinguish any sounds coming from its streets, the shrouding grasp of the rain suffocating any noise that might have come from as far away as the river. The only sound around me was the metallic grind of the wrench slipping against the wheel nuts, the car gently ticking towards silence, and my own heartbeat thudding erratically in my ears.

My watch now reads twenty minutes past midnight. No novels about that particular time I'm sure. Kathryn will be getting really concerned by now. I should phone her really, but what excuse could I possibly think of? Sorry honey, I'm going to be a bit late because I'm chicken-shit scared of the dark. I'm acting like a kid, a big dumb kid, and I know it's irrational and I know that if I even had kids and one of them was behaving like this I'd grab hold of them and shake some good honest sense into them. Except now perhaps I wouldn't. Perhaps now if I had a kid and he gave me good reason why he was scared of the dark, like the reason I have now, then maybe I wouldn't shake him. Maybe I would settle him down and say, yes son, there are things to be scared of in the dark. It used to be irrational, but now it's not. Not after what

I've seen. But who am I to say any of that? I'm still here, aren't I? I haven't been killed by the dark, or what lurks behind its grim translucent veil. I'm still sitting here in my own home throwing brandy down my neck like it was water. I'm not even sure now whether I saw that shit or not. God, I've got to get a grip. Go pick Kathryn up. That's the sane thing to do, the rational thing to do. At the very least, then there'd be two of us in the house.

I'm getting lost again, nervous, perhaps it's even hysteria. I've never felt like this before so it's kind of hard to tell if it is hysteria. I'm sure I don't look like one of those hysterics in films that need to be slapped. It's all in the mind, sitting there, shaking. Shit, where was I? Oh yes, the wheel.

It wasn't until I'd managed to fit the spare and was doing the nuts back up by hand that I first paid any attention to the crackling sounds coming from amongst the trees at my back. I must have been vaguely aware of the sounds of the woods - the wind gusting through the boughs, the scrabbling of some midnight creature - and yet the branches that began to break so very close to me suddenly caused a shiver to run down my spine. Resisting that dumb kid's fear of spinning round to study what might be lurking there in the dark, I continued to tighten the wheel nuts without slowing, picking up the wrench beside me in a measured fashion, feeling a sense of comfort at its weight in my hand. The sound of branches breaking came again, and this time only yards behind me. My mind ran with images of some horrible mutated being, something shambling and groaning like a rotting zombie pulled straight out of one of George A Romero's undead movies. I fought the urge to yell out,

to swing that wrench about my head like it was an axe, but allowed myself the simple but ridiculous comfort of a quick glance over my shoulder.

The woods were black, the darkness total, enveloping, almost as though it was sucking me into its deathly void, and I could see nothing but the trees. If there had been a moon that night, the rain clouds had simply swallowed it whole. I was in darkness. The world outside was not to be scrutinised this cold wet night. I was alone with a broken car, easy pickings for whatever might live out in the woods.

And then my imagination played me a desperate card of sanity.

The dog walker.

Perhaps it was him, made his way up this far, marking his route home through the woods away from the danger of the unlit roads where he might not have been so easy to see. That must be it, I remember thinking, and yet my unease would not go, despite the reassurance my subconscious sanity had offered me.

I had at least a few more minutes outside in the dark shrouding rain before I could return to the safety of my car and lock the doors to seal me in. The creaking and cracking of the woods halted and yet I continued to flap at my labours, my stupid fingers fumbling with everything they sought to touch, the wrench, the tyre, the coarse grey carpet. I returned it all to the boot without incident, however, with no zombies, and no ghosts, even though my heart was hammering like a smithy's anvil, pounding blood like hard steel.

I wanted to run, wanted to fall down onto the ground and cry out the admission that I was scared, terrified, but I didn't want this stranger, this midnight

dog walker, creeping around the woods in the middle of the night, to see how petrified he had made me. I strode back to the car as collectively as I thought I could manage, puffing out my chest to ward off any thought of his scaring me further. I pulled open the car door and clambered inside, shutting it firmly before the chill of fear returned to my trembling bones and caused my hand to fly to the lock to hammer it down. I was thankful for central locking that night, and breathed a sigh of relief rather more loudly than I would have thought possible as they all clunked around me. And then, with a deep breath of resolution, I reached down to take a firm hold of the key in the ignition.

It sounds like the wind is gusting up again outside. I can hear it whistling through the trees out back, hear the rain begin to slap against the window pane too. The storm isn't subsiding yet. I can't go out in this. Not yet.

The engine turned immediately, and I put the car into gear. Then a motion to my right snagged my attention like a fish snagged on a hook, a movement out in the Black Woods. Without thinking, I turned my eyes towards it. Something was gazing back at me from the depths of the woods, something black and with a face twisted from matted fur and death. Teeth grew from its maw in a ghastly growl. It bore no resemblance to anything I had ever seen before, not animal, not alien, and certainly not human. It was horrid, and even through the glass I could hear it grunt and snort at the air. I shook with absolute terror as it stood there and watched me, our eyes connected in an icy gaze that clutched at my heart. And then suddenly, as the wind gusted up again and lifted the branches of

the trees, the blackness of the woods shifted and swirled, and stole the face of the fleeting beast. My eyes clutched at the darkness in the wake of its disappearance, but it had simply vanished.

Its eyes still hang before me now, orange and sharp, focussed like that of a hunting animal, even as I gaze at the familiar objects of my house through an ever-thickening fervour of brandy. It chilled me more than the cold and the wet, chilled me in a far deeper place than any weather ever could. Did I even see it? That's the question that still remains. I'm sure I did, I'm certain that I did, but what could I possibly say? It's not rational. The darkness has no monsters.

The phone in the hallway has started ringing again. Kathryn must be getting furious by now, and the wind and rain are coming even stronger now. I can hear the tips of the branches tapping on the glass now. They sound like bony little fingers. Or even bony little claws.

Tap. Tap. Tap.