

One night

two liars

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Brian G Burns

Be-B-Books

Paperback edition published by Be-B-Books 2015

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Kindle edition originally published by Be-B-Books 2014

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Kindle edition published with new cover artwork and minor text changes by

Be-B-Books 2015

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ISBN-13: 978-1515074397

Cover picture copyright: kallejipp/Photocase.com

Cover design, typesetting and unfailingly generous support:

Rita Wüthrich

Thanks also to Robert Saunders, John Clarkson and Kate Flagg

*For my parents, who didn't get to see this book.
I don't flatter myself it would have been to their
liking, but they would have been pleased all the same.
More than that, you cannot ask.*

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A blow to the head

He turned the corner into Camden Passage and stopped to catch his breath. In the swelling humidity, he rested his left hand on a shop windowpane. Pink sweat trickled into his right eye. His head hurt badly.

Through the glass, he could make out a woman behind a counter at the back, wrapping bowls in newspaper. A man walked down a flight of stairs behind her and out through the back door. She stopped what she was doing and followed him out.

He squinted and a large trunk shoved against a fireplace tuned into view.

That'll do. I'll get it all in there.

Inside, it was cool. Out back, the man and woman were talking, her voice blunt, his clipped, and nothing between them clear.

The trunk was guarded either end by Chinese screens, their latticework chipped and faded. A bone-handled hunting knife on the mantelpiece caught his eye. In the fireplace, in a murky tank on a rickety wooden trolley, two fish chased each other's tails. On the wall above hung the head and gutted pelt of a fox, its mouth snapped open in fixed surprise.

In the mirror, a face more brutish than handsome surprised him. His fair hair had darkened, and hung greasy and limp. Eyes once bright were drilled deep into blue-black shadows. He could hardly see the bloodshot for the pink.

How big was that last one? Very. How many big ones? Too many.

He draped his jacket over his left forearm to hide the blood on his shirt, and knelt to examine the trunk. It was splintered in places, and damp on one side, but it would do.

He heard a noise at the back step and stood up, his right hand on the mantelpiece for support. Through sparks of light he saw the woman standing there, a silhouette, soft, small, round and silver.

'Sorry,' she said, 'I didn't hear anyone come in.'

'That's OK.'

'Interested in the trunk?'

'Yes.'

She turned her head and called out back, 'Jack, you have a customer. Likes the look of the big trunk.' She turned back to him and said, 'He's in the workshop. With you shortly.'

'Thanks.'

She nodded and went back behind the counter.

The walls rushed towards him, then away. The floor rose and fell. He searched and found a fixed point in her soft, creamy hands, once more wrapping crockery and silverware in sheets of newspaper. The image dissolved and he flowed deep into the print smudges, oily in the heat, inking the deep creases of her knuckles, a viscous membrane forming on her ring finger, between the gold and the flesh.

She stopped, alert like a bird on a branch.

He snapped back into himself.

She placed her bits and pieces in a grimy waxcloth bag, walked to the front door, turned and called towards the back, 'Jack, customer. Trunk.' Another nod and she was gone in the tinkle of the bell above the door.

Jack came in from the back, trailing dried dirt, grinding it into the mat. He wiped his hands on his cracked, red-brown leather waistcoat and baggy trousers thick with paint and wood stain.

'You're interested in the trunk?' Jack stood, feet wide, wiry arms folded across his bony chest.

'Yeah.'

'Any particular reason?'

'Packing up.'

'Right.'

'How much for it?'

'Everything in your wallet.' Jack grinned like flint.

'I think you saw me coming.'

'Maybe I did.'

A thin trickle of blood ran down his forehead.

'You're bleeding,' Jack said, fixed to his spot.

'Am I?' He wiped it away.

'What happened?'

'Think I got hit with a spade.'

'Was it trying to get your attention?'

'Is that funny?'

'I'm not laughing.' Jack looked deeper, sniffed closer.

'Heavy night, was it?'

'All the way to morning. And a bit more.'

'One of those, eh? Still, a blow to the head can be a dangerous thing. We should get you to a hospital.'

'No.'

'Sit down then.' Jack gestured towards the yard.

'No.'

'As you wish,' Jack said. 'What's your name?'

'What's yours?'

'Jack Cronin. Yours?'

He offered a blank face.

'Have you any identification? A wallet maybe? In your pocket there, for instance?'

He pulled out a leather wallet and handed it to Jack. A piece of white card, torn at one corner, a dry nail of Sello-tape clinging to the ragged edge, fell to the floor.

What's that? Not money. Can't matter.

Jack placed his foot on it and pushed it under a small side-table. He then pulled out a bank card and a credit card.

'William, is it?'

'What?'

‘According to this, you’re called William R Deal.’

He thought for a moment. ‘Bill,’ he said. ‘Call me Bill.’

‘And what’s this?’ Jack took out another card. ‘You’re an actor? Fully paid-up union member.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Noble profession.’

‘Some say.’

‘And some don’t?’

‘Everyone’s a critic.’

‘So, you remember that much?’

‘It comes and goes.’

‘Does it indeed?’

Jack slipped the wallet into the right-hand pocket of his waistcoat and walked to the front door. He locked it, flipped the sign to ‘Closed’ and pulled down the blind. He took some coins from his trouser pocket and dropped them into a glass sweet jar sitting next to a small silver bell on the counter.

‘My wife...’ Bill lifted the knife off the mantelpiece.

‘What about your wife?’ Jack fixed one steady eye on the knife, and the other on Bill.

Bill set the knife back on the mantelpiece.

‘You really should get to a hospital,’ Jack said.

‘No.’

‘Not keen on hospitals?’

‘Like that’s a bad thing?’

‘Could be, in the circumstances. Unless you’re the kind of man who’d rather be dead and buried before he even knows

he's ill. Are you that kind of man, Bill?

'I've no idea what kind of man I am.'

'I see.'

The room began to dissolve again, and himself with it, his thoughts seeping into the coarse pores of Jack's lean face, rancid as old butter on a dirty dish.

Jack wiped his cheek with his cuff, and tucked greasy stragglers behind his ears. Bill felt saliva rising, an acrid whiff triggering a tiny electric spasm in his throat.

Fuck, he reeks.

Bill tasted sugar, salt and something like burnt rubber rising up from his own hot skin, and something else too, something metallic – the tang of iron.

'Tell me,' Jack said. 'What else do you remember? As it comes and goes?'

'I remember lying in the dirt. Something green hopped onto my face and woke me.'

'Something green?'

'A frog. Maybe a frog.'

'So maybe not a frog?'

'Maybe.'

'Uh-huh,' Jack said. 'Anything else?'

'A swing close to a tree and a man looking over the fence.'

'Young? Old?'

'Not that young, not that old.'

'Did you know him?'

'Don't think so.'

'What did he want?'

‘No idea.’

Bill lifted the knife again. ‘Where do you get all this stuff?’

‘House clearances, gutted buildings, skips, contacts, the recently bereaved. I restore bits, sell some as found, do what’s needed—’

‘All in there?’ Bill nodded towards the workshop out back.

‘Not everything. I have a factory shop down by Old Street—’

‘Where did you get this?’ Bill waved the knife.

‘We need to get you to a hospital.’

‘No.’

‘Then let me fix you a drink,’ Jack said. ‘I have just the thing. I was just about to have one before you arrived. I like a good drink on a long summer’s day. Cools me down. It’ll cool you down, too. Steady your nerves, clear your head. Help you get home under your own steam.’

‘No.’

‘Just the one. I can’t stay long myself. It’s time to shut up shop.’

‘No.’

‘Hair of the dog. Bite it in the balls. Show it who’s boss.’

Bill shook his head.

‘You’ll come to no harm.’

Bill lit on the words. Jack, he decided, was a dirty little man. ‘I can look after myself,’ he said. ‘I’m not that weak.’

‘I’m sure you can.’ Jack’s mouth pencilled itself into a thin, dark line.

‘My wife...’ Bill said again.

‘What about your wife?’ Jack asked again.

‘I better go.’

‘One drink.’ Jack turned and walked out into the yard.

Despite himself, Bill followed him to the back step.

‘Sit,’ Jack said, rattling free a light aluminium chair from under a battered heavy-metal table that fitted, more or less neatly, into the coolest corner of the small, off-square yard. He picked up the stained, lumpy cushion, snapped it tight and punched it flat. He pulled out another chair and did the same.

On the table sat a scratched glass and a full bottle of cloudy, light-brown liquid.

‘No,’ Bill said, turning away.

‘I’ll get another glass.’ Jack slipped off his waistcoat and hung it over the back of his chair. ‘One drink won’t do you any harm.’

Bill made for the front door, managing just a few steps before the room sucked itself into a hole. He crumpled to the floor, clutching wildly at the Chinese screens collapsing around him.

Happy hour

Bill woke up, shaking, saliva running down his chin, moistening the crust already formed. He curled his tongue, stuck it out and tasted the air, licking warm beads of moisture off its taut surface, stretched like plastic to bursting. Sensing a blanket over him and a pillow between his head and the ground, he jolted upright and patted himself all over. He summoned his feral brain to scout for cuts, tears and bruises – anything that smelt strange or off.

For a moment he hung suspended in a grey-white blindness, panicking as a succession of filters rattled across the lenses of his eyes, self-selecting, adjusting. Slowly, the frames overlapped and aligned, the yard sharpening into focus.

No sign of Jack. On the table sat the bottle, two glasses and the knife.

He turned and looked up. A light went out above, followed

by deliberate footsteps on the stair. Jack emerged out of the doorway like a developing print.

‘Welcome to happy hour.’ Jack slipped his mobile into his trouser pocket.

‘So you did call someone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who?’

‘A very friendly woman.’

‘Dropping by, is she? To entertain us?’

‘No,’ Jack laughed. ‘Though it could be very interesting if she did.’ He sat down, lifted the bottle and poured a little into one glass. ‘It was business.’

‘At this time?’

‘The work’s never done.’

Bill went to stand but his legs refused him.

‘Everything still intact?’ Jack asked.

‘How long have I been out?’

‘An hour. Longer.’

Bill sniffed his hide, and then the blanket. ‘Is this clean?’

‘Clean enough.’

Throwing the blanket off, he dragged himself closer to the table and pawed at the chair.

‘Need a hand there?’

‘I can manage.’ He righted himself just long enough to drop heavily onto the chair and take a breath.

‘That’s it,’ Jack said. ‘Get comfortable. Relax.’

They eyed each other in silence, a smile twitching at the corners of Jack’s mouth.

‘So, what’s this then?’ Bill asked. ‘Your big night in?’ Then he groaned as a needle drew a thread of pain through the back of his eye.

‘Sounds bad,’ Jack said.

‘Maybe I should get to a hospital. Thing is, I don’t think I can walk far.’

‘I could always call an ambulance?’

‘No, best not.’

‘Best you rest and keep warm then. This stuff will perk you up.’

‘Make me feel better, will it?’

‘It’ll make you exactly what you are.’ Jack smiled, eyes like nails. ‘Maybe you’d like to wash your hands.’

Bill looked at the blood and dirt on his hands, half stood, lost his balance and dropped back onto the chair.

‘Maybe later.’ Jack lifted the empty glass, tapped the side with a hard yellow fingernail, poured and set it down for Bill. ‘Cheers.’

Bill eyed the drink with suspicion.

‘Do you live close by?’ Jack asked, pointing suddenly, vaguely, towards Angel station.

‘Could do. What’s it to you? Do you?’

‘Used to. Moved on.’

‘Good for you.’

Jack smiled. Bill didn’t.

‘I notice you’re not wearing a wedding ring,’ Jack said.

‘What?’

‘You mentioned a wife.’

Bill had a think. 'I think I threw it away.'

'Did you have a row?'

'Can't remember.'

'Do you fight a lot?'

'No,' Bill said. 'She's good as gold normally.'

'Is she now? You remember that.'

'Memory comes and goes. And, yes.'

'Yes what?'

'Yes, she is. Good as gold.'

'Well,' Jack said. 'To your wife, wherever and however she is.'

Bill stared at the table.

'No? What shall we drink to then?'

'Let's drink to this.' Bill lifted the knife, balancing it on his fingertips.

'Why not?' Jack raised his glass again.

They chinked glasses and drank. Bill choked as the fire of it set his chest alight. The aftertaste was like fungus or wet wood, something rotten. As the heat of it passed, his body cooled, loosening rivulets of sweat from his chest, neck and armpits. No mistaking it, he had to puke.

He staggered towards the back wall. Legs straight, he jack-knifed at the waist, lashing the tiles and the thin patch of soil by the wall with the rope of vomit that twisted its way out of his innards.

Relieved, he sat down. Jack was gone. He reappeared suddenly with a bucket of water.

'What the fuck was in that drink?' Bill asked.

‘An old recipe refined over many years.’ Jack emptied the bucket onto the steaming tiles.

‘Where did you get it?’

‘An old friend travels widely. He keeps me well stocked.’ Jack grabbed Bill’s wrist and checked his pulse. ‘Give it a minute and you’ll be ready for another.’

‘Another?’ Bill took a long, deep breath.

‘Feel it yet?’ Jack asked.

‘A bit.’

‘Scared?’

‘A bit.’

‘It’ll pass,’ Jack said. ‘Now, tell me. How did you get that scar on your forehead? And the one on the back of your head?’

‘Cop a feel while I was sleeping, did you?’

‘I had to dress the wound.’

Bill set the knife on the table, reached around and felt fresh bandaging on the back of his head.

‘Don’t worry. It’s nothing serious. Must have been a very polite spade,’ Jack said. ‘Still, you’re very accident prone.’

‘And you’re quite the nursemaid,’ Bill said, angling the blade towards Jack. ‘Where did you get this?’

‘It belonged to a young man I knew. A young man called Jon.’

‘Is that right? What’s the story with him then?’

‘Oh, he got himself into a whole heap of trouble, not of his making, you understand. At least, that’s what he’d say. If you were to ask him – if you could ask him – it’s a fair bet he’d lay the blame at Peirce’s door.’

‘Who’s Peirce?’ Bill took another sip, relishing now the slow, strange burn.

‘Ian Peirce, his next-door neighbour.’

‘And what did he do?’

‘He did what everyone does,’ Jack said. ‘He died.’

A bit of a shock

The first Jon knew that his next-door neighbour, Peirce, had died was when he heard the police breaking down the door one evening, shortly after he got home from work.

‘Dead?’ he said to one of the policemen. ‘When?’

‘Two days ago, twenty-first of March,’ the policeman said, unblinking. ‘Killed himself. Threw himself off the bridge in Prague, up by the castle I think it was.’

‘That’s a shock.’

‘Did you know Mr Peirce at all?’

‘Vaguely. We spoke from time to time. He always seemed...’

‘Yes...?’

‘Like he always had somewhere to be, something to do.’

‘Like what?’

‘I’ve no idea. I didn’t really know him. I know he was of German extraction.’

‘German extraction?’

‘And proud of it.’

‘Oh,’ the policeman said, nodding. ‘Did he tell you that?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you did talk?’

‘Rarely.’

‘German extraction.’ The policeman scribbled in his notebook.

‘Now that I think of it, he had mentioned that he was going to Prague.’

‘Won’t be coming back though, will he?’ the policeman said at last, brightly – a bit too brightly.

‘Not even to be buried?’

‘They’ll need to find the body first.’

‘The body?’

‘No sign of it.’

‘If there’s no body, how do they know he’s dead?’

‘Stands to reason.’ The policeman pushed out his bottom lip.

‘I see what you mean,’ Jon said, not seeing it at all.

After the police had secured Peirce’s door and gone, Jon left for Mark’s studio, even though he knew Mark didn’t like him – or anyone else – turning up unannounced.

They had been together for about eighteen months. Mark had come as a total surprise to Jon.

That, people told him, smugly, is how it’s supposed to be. They had met at a party. Jon liked Mark immediately, which

worried him. He'd learned that it wasn't always good for him to like people immediately. Mark told him he was an artist. Jon told him he wrote. Business, healthcare, corporate communications, that kind of thing, he added quickly, concerned he'd sound boring.

'It pays the bills,' he said, the words big, unapologetic and empty.

'Do you want to do something else?'

Jon instantly read 'else' as 'better', but shrugged as if to say he was fine with it. It was important to let people believe he liked what he did. He'd learned that too.

They slept together that night. Jon told him that he was mentally ill.

'You get straight to the point,' Mark said, after a moment.

'I didn't want you to think I was boring. Artists hate boring people, don't they?'

They stared at each other.

'Am I ugly?' Jon asked, suddenly.

'No,' Mark said.

'But I'm not beautiful.'

'No, you're not.'

'But not boring?'

'Worryingly not. So far.'

'What do I look like then?' Jon asked.

'Like a person.'

'Like how a person imagines?'

'No, like how a person is.'

'How disappointing.'

‘If you say so,’ Mark said. ‘So, what’s wrong with you exactly?’
Should he tell him about the Doorman and the rest?
Not yet.

‘I have fits. I get irrational. Sometimes, I see people who aren’t there.’

‘Are they nice?’

‘Not usually.’

‘Do you take anything?’

‘Pills.’

‘Do they work?’

‘When I take them.’

Mark thought for a moment. ‘I’m a bit moody myself,’ he offered, at last.

And then they had sex again, like hungry people with no manners.

Jon didn’t think they’d see each other again, though Mark had suggested it – maybe precisely because he’d suggested it. But they did. Mark took him to his studio that first time, a great cavernous space in an otherwise deserted industrial space by Old Street. He lived there too. It was a mess, of course.

Mark worked with heavy, base materials, mostly stone. Not fashionable, Jon thought, but then what did he know? Well, he knew he liked it.

Don’t say that though, whatever you do.

Mark wasn’t that big – slight in fact, masculine yet pretty. His work, however, showed real strength and purpose. Jon assumed there must be anger beneath that.

‘I like working with stone,’ Mark said, smiling. ‘I like turning it soft.’

Jon came to need that smile, but noticed, too soon, that he saw it less often.

That, people told him, even more smugly, is how it’s supposed to be.

Jon quickly drifted away from a lot of the people he’d known before and saw no reason why Mark need ever know too much as long as he kept taking his ‘meds’.

So, all things considered, the ‘bad patch’ was definitely behind him. No more intense conversations with caring people in pastel-coloured rooms. Work had never been better – too much, if anything – and the debts were slowly shifting. All was fine.

The frictions and calibrations of their relationship were in place before they knew it. This was disappointing. It confirmed Jon’s suspicion that if you want to like people, you’re better off not getting to know them. But too late, he was already locked in, addicted to patterns of pain and reward.

They indulged in haphazard afternoon epiphanies of alcohol, drugs and sex, sweet and sharp, before sleep, dislocated and careless, on sheets twisted into salty tourniquets. But there were also sullen opaque evenings, ugly mornings and narrow late-night escapes, some of them bodily and bloody, from gutters, roadsides and oncoming traffic.

Whatever the tenor, one thing was consistent – Jon wanted. He did not know why or what, simply that he wanted. He assumed he wanted Mark because, for some reason, Mark

was still there. But surely not for much longer? And so he wanted him all the more.

‘What do you want exactly?’ Mark asked once, in puce frustration.

‘Another life,’ Jon said, snatching the thought out of the dark. Oddly, it seemed to fit.

‘How would you know?’ Mark asked, no less frustrated. No less puce.

What Mark wanted was enviably clear: to do his work and live largely untroubled. He had his appetites though. They were plain to see for anyone who looked. Jon looked. He saw them. Then told himself he hadn’t.

With Jon’s thirty-fifth birthday approaching and Mark’s work going well – money in fits and starts, the occasional grant, a substantial sale here and there, the odd handout from Jon – they’d even begun to talk about finding a place together. He was sure they had. When Mark made a big sale, Jon immediately saw an opportunity for a double celebration. Jon Young and Mark Fludd invite you, and all that.

‘They’ll say it’s a wedding,’ Mark laughed.

‘Let them.’

Mark didn’t reply. He often didn’t reply. Jon knew to change the subject. Let’s just plan the party, the silence said. Forget what it signifies. No, in retrospect, forget *that* it signifies – anything at all. That was probably closer.

The party was just three days away, so it must be wrong that he questioned his right to reach for the buzzer marked ‘MF, Artist’. There was a telling pause when Mark heard

the voice on the intercom, but he buzzed him up anyway.

Jon waited in the darkness for the lift, the dusty silence suddenly disturbed by industrial whirring and trundling. That always made him feel anxious, uneasy that it would draw attention from someone lying in wait on the stairs – the winos or the druggies who got in from time to time.

Mark stood with his back to him, looking down, in the middle of a pile of circular and oblong stones, weighty brutes all.

‘This is new,’ Jon said.

‘Yes.’ Mark dried his hands on an old rag, without looking at him.

‘What are you going to do with them?’

Mark glanced towards a crumpled sketch on his worktable, a rough diagram in stubby pencil of four corner pillars and, within the square they formed, three more in a triangle. At the centre of the triangle was one final solitary pillar. The entire arrangement was enclosed in a circle of stones and pebbles.

‘Maybe you should paint them,’ Jon said, ‘in bright colours, you know, like classical statues before they...’

Big mistake. He’d learned, being around Mark and the people he knew, that they never welcomed an idea or a suggestion. If they liked it, they wouldn’t admit it. Even if they did admit it, they certainly couldn’t use it, so had no reason to be grateful.

No, the way it worked was this: they had ideas and he did not. What they wanted from him, if they wanted anything,

was not ideas or approval or even understanding. His interest, preferably silent – awed if he could manage that – would do. They hoped he'd got that, but they had an uneasy feeling he hadn't, that he just couldn't get it at all. Or, worse, pretended not to, just to annoy 'they'.

They were too right.

Jon had also noticed that, in their company, Mark's accent travelled further east, depending on how close 'they' were to the imagined centre – of art, access and all that.

'Next stop, East Ham,' Jon once blurted out, to blank looks all round.

They loved it, of course. Not because they were taken in, but precisely because they knew how bogus it was. Bogus was kosher. It sealed an understanding of unspoken rules.

And when 'they' weren't around? The soft-spoken librarian's son, raised upwardly mobile here and there between Hackney and the borders of Islington, loosened his glottal contortions and relaxed his pose.

'I'm not going to paint them,' Mark said.

'Of course not. Don't know why I said that.'

'I'm going to coat them in animal fat.'

'Animal fat?' Jon stood there, in faint hope of an explanation.

'Yes, animal fat.' Mark's tone signalled that none would be forthcoming.

Don't need one, eh? Even silence could travel east.

I'll bet you're not. Bet you said that just to let me know you have ideas of your own, thank you very much, and it'll be a long time yet before you come begging.

Jon nodded, looking, he hoped, suitably impressed.

‘I’ve just got to...’ Mark nodded towards the bathroom. ‘Sit down. There’s beer and wine, and stuff...’

Thank God for ‘stuff’. How many evenings were made more tolerable by ‘stuff’?

Jon sat on the sunken sofa and reached for an open bottle of red wine sitting on a heavy trunk now acting as a coffee table. It, too, was new and looked like it was made out of lead. On one side, low down, there was an odd set of markings, an equation perhaps, or a formula of some kind.

On top, pushed to the far-right corner of the trunk, something caught his eye: a bone-handled hunting knife on top of a pile of letters, mostly bills, mostly unopened.

He liked the look of that.

At the sound of the shower convulsing into life, he sank back into the sofa. At times, in the right light, the studio could seem grand and enveloping. At other times, its dust-bowl grubbiness was everywhere he looked.

The kitchen’s steely minimalism sulked in a corner beneath greasy dullness. The sink was generally full of half-swilled coffee mugs, and the plughole clogged with dregs. A blackened frying pan, its surface blistered like a mouthful of gum disease, was usually in evidence.

For all its tiles, mirrors, discreet lighting and style-magazine aspirations, the bathroom already stank of mould for lack of a window, its once crisp, vertical lines sagging with damp.

The rest, apart from where Mark worked, was mainly empty space that fizzed with dormant irritation, bristling

invisible. The red-and-black Chinese screens added a touch of antique elegance, a hint of division between the bed and the rest.

At the far end, there was a small, rectangular room, more of a cell really, with plain concrete walls and a solid wooden door, always shut.

‘What’s in there?’ Jon once asked.

‘Shameful, dirty things,’ Mark said.

Jon hoped that, when they lived together, Mark would find somewhere smaller, somewhere just for work. But, as Mark frequently reminded him, the place was cheap.

The owner, so the story went, had left in a bit of a hurry when some business venture went to the wall – he’d gone back to Poland, or somewhere in Europe, he wasn’t sure. It might be sold from under him any day. But Mark wasn’t bothered. Enjoy it while it lasts, he’d say. He’d find somewhere else when he had to, he assured him.

He was assured all right, for Mark moved in the sort of circles where things could always be found. So while it awaited a buyer and a new purpose, some bright-eyed, entrepreneurial reinvention, it suited Mark’s needs perfectly. And, as it was only about fifteen minutes from the Angel, it more or less suited Jon too.

The bathroom door opened and Mark stepped out, wearing baggy linen trousers. With new sweat already blistering his red-white flesh, he screwed the twisted finger of a balding towel into his ears, snapped it in the air and rolled it around his head. Then he sniffed it, squeezed it into a ball

and fired it at the bathroom door. He sat at the other end of the sofa, rubbing his thighs, saying nothing.

Jon filled a glass and pushed it towards him. A fragment of 'thanks' blew off the sill of his lip.

'Where did you find this?' Jon asked, nodding towards the trunk.

'In the basement.'

'What's in it?'

'No idea.'

'Aren't you curious?'

'It's more interesting not to know,' Mark said. 'To leave things to be guessed at.'

'Hasn't that been done already?'

'Everything's been done already.'

'Why bother then?'

'Not much choice.'

There was a silence. Then they both laughed. Maybe, though, only Jon laughed.

'Anyway, I can't open it,' Mark said.

'No key?'

'No lock.'

Then, just to needle him, as if the thought had only just occurred, Mark said, 'Did you know this place used to be a printing works for the Bank of England?'

'No, why would I?'

Mark shrugged.

'There might be money in the trunk,' Jon said, after a pause.

‘Is money all you ever think about?’

‘I find I have to. No one thinks about it for me. Certainly not you.’

‘Old wounds.’ Mark tut-tutted.

They sat silent for a time, Jon staring at the wall, Mark thumbing through a glossy magazine.

Stew in it. I don’t owe you any apologies. Just for once, let’s have a proper row. Let’s do some proper damage.

The truth was, though, they rarely rowed, not really, because Mark didn’t allow it. His line was clear: few things were worth getting into a fight over, and he knew what they were.

Finally, Mark got up and went off to potter among his stones.

Say nothing. Just leave him to it.

Inevitably, Jon went over to him.

‘I’m sorry...’ Jon said.

‘It’s all right. No harm done,’ Mark said.

Jon wasn’t sure whether that was a question, an observation or an instruction.

‘Maybe I shouldn’t have come,’ Jon said.

‘What’s the matter?’

Jon told him about Peirce and the policeman.

‘That’s a bit of a shock.’

‘Yes, it was.’

‘But...’

‘I know, I didn’t really know him. It’s just...’

Mark reached for Jon and looked towards the bed by the wall.

‘Do you know what else this place used to be?’ Mark asked.

‘No idea.’

‘A mental hospital,’ Mark laughed.

‘Really?’ Jon tried for a grin that came out as a wince.

‘Yes.’

Mark pulled him closer.

You see, no harm done.

They lay in the dark, a single candle burning on one of the stones. Jon watched over Mark until he slept. When he was sure that he would not disturb him, he wrapped himself around him, fingers spread out to gather in his whole upper body, tense and warm and wiry. He slipped his fingers into the hair on Mark’s chest and stomach, curling above the deep bone, and took his animal warmth to his nose and lips, tasting it, breathing it in and out, giving it back in kisses between his shoulders, promising that he would never lose him or let him lose himself.

Jon held him softening into sleep, its rhythmic bands deepening in his chest. He leaned over, took a kiss and held it on his tongue, a tiny parcel of breath.

Here, Jon knew Mark as ‘they’ did not, and saw what ‘they’ did not. That he was slender and bruised, slighter in his hands than they could ever imagine. That he was in need of protection.

And Jon, of course, was the only one to give it.

Mark’s breath sawed lightly across the pillow as his body cooled and the candle burned to nothing on the stone.

Love belongs to others. But you belong to me.

Eggs

As Jon reached the first floor, he saw Eddie sitting on the mat, with his back to the shut door of his flat, his arms folded in embarrassment, unshaven, a smudged look about him. Sarah must have locked him out – again. She'd be inside now, protecting the children, Laura and Tommy, if not from harm, from foolishness. Relentless, red-eyed foolishness.

A dull flash in Eddie's eyes told Jon that he'd like to talk, but he was tired after a late and fairly indulgent night at Mark's, and a long day at work. He simply nodded and walked on up to the next floor.

He'd barely reached the third floor when the door to his right opened. Well, it had been some time and, as always with Mr Rose, he caught him when he was least in the mood. Like he'd decided that the wrong time for Jon was the right time for him. Somehow, he always knew instinctively when that was.

Mr Rose was, Jon guessed, in his early to mid-thirties. Jon didn't know his first name or much else about him. He didn't appear to have a job of any kind, was rarely to be seen during daylight hours and, as far as Jon knew, had never had visitors in the five years he had lived there. Sarah had once mentioned a guardian – a man called Fisher, a doctor, she said – who dropped by once in a while, but that was it.

'Ah, Jon,' Mr Rose said, stepping out onto the landing, which was unusually brave. Then he just stood there, staring, like some changeling half-life.

'Mr Rose.'

'Jon, I was wondering if, by any chance, you had any...?'

'Eggs, Mr Rose?'

'Yes, eggs. The very thing. How did you know?'

Jon knew because he was so used to Mr Rose's odd requests for eggs that he had started stocking up on them just in case. Sometimes, on those rare occasions that Mr Rose would stick his head out of the door in the daytime, he would ask Jon if, by any chance, he happened to be going shopping and could he, possibly, 'a half dozen, on second thoughts, a dozen, perhaps, if you would be so kind...'

It was as if he also knew, instinctively, when Jon would be going shopping. That was impressive, in its way, because Jon didn't imagine himself to be that predictable.

'How many would you like?' Jon asked.

'Ooh...'

The soft lips formed into a squashed oval, his eyes rolling to the ceiling and back. 'Would six be out of the question?'

‘Six is fine.’

Jon went upstairs to get them and returned.

‘You are very kind.’ Mr Rose slipped him some money. He always paid. At first Jon had declined, but it soon became clear that, whatever reason Mr Rose had for not buying the eggs himself, it wasn’t because he was mean or poor. He paid over the odds and made it plain from the start that refusal would offend.

Mr Rose’s grey-blue eyes wandered off to some place only he was allowed to visit. Jon wondered what went on in there when the door closed. What cooped-up thoughts did he marshal through the night, alone?

Mr Rose cleared his throat as if about to make a speech.

‘Well, Jon, what sort of a day have you had?’

‘Not bad, though my stomach’s been troubling me a little.’

The grey-blue eyes grew large. ‘Perhaps you’re egg-bound.’

For the first time, Jon wondered whether he was actually making a joke but, searching his expression – his only expression, inscrutable, adjustable, up or down, by only a few degrees – he couldn’t be sure.

‘I don’t eat eggs that often, Mr Rose.’

‘Why not?’

‘I rarely get the chance.’

For a long moment, Mr Rose gazed at him, quizzically, trying, perhaps, to decipher what he meant.

‘Ah,’ he said, at last, with great relief, ‘of course, you lead such a...’ He soared in wide, elegant circles for a moment before landing, startled, on the words ‘...dreadfully busy life’.

‘I suppose I do.’

Then, as Mr Rose gave him another long, looping look, Jon began to feel queasy. Was Mr Rose, of all people – having flickered out of his daily trance just long enough to consider his ‘dreadful’ busyness – looking at him with pity? A clammy, white anger crawled up from Jon’s stomach and rippled across his skin. But, as Mr Rose’s look held steady, as blank as it was unnerving, Jon saw that his expression – his only expression – signified precisely nothing.

That’s why you do what you do for him – remember. Because attention has to be paid, yes, even to the likes of this shattered soul, who bothers no one, except you. And for what? A few eggs, whatever he does with them to soothe his compulsions.

There should be more like him. At least he keeps himself to himself.

There’d been an awkward silence, so Jon said, without thinking much about it, ‘Terrible news about Peirce, isn’t it?’
‘Peirce?’

‘Yes, the man above you – my next-door neighbour. He died in Prague. Didn’t you know him?’

‘Oh no, I don’t really know anyone now.’

No, don’t imagine you do.

‘Well, it is late.’ Mr Rose retreated, the hint of a curtsy in his backward step.

‘Goodnight.’

A final, graceful bow and the door closed.

Jon went on up to the next floor. It was only then he

noticed that the boarding on Peirce's door had already been removed. As Jon closed his front door behind him, he could have sworn he heard Peirce's door quickly open and, just as quickly, shut again. He listened in the hallway, in the darkness, but heard nothing.

He watched the late news with practised suspicion, had a bath, drank some wine, despite feeling queasy, and went to bed. But he couldn't sleep, with the voice in his head, the old familiar voice, repeating, 'I hate you. I really hate you.'

He sensed a presence, the old familiar presence, at the boundary of the bedroom door, so he slipped his hand under the pillow and held tight the bone-handled hunting knife, which he had slipped into his pocket while Mark was sleeping.

In the morning, he woke, not wanting to or much able to, sick and tired before the day had even begun.