

Cold Call

By Colin Llewelyn Chapman

Extract

Adam Pickering strode along the balcony of the tenement block with his usual sense of urgency. Like every day of his life he was ten minutes behind pace, late for work as usual. Adam worked in a bustling seafront bar in Southend's main tourist hotspot collecting glasses, wiping tables, and other menial tasks. He longed for the favour and limelight that was bestowed on the bar staff, rather than the disparaging comments and 'Pot Man' insults he suffered almost daily. At 22 Adam had seen plenty of the brawls and bust ups that Southend's drunken revellers indulged in every Friday and Saturday night. The bloodshed bruises and broken bones were commonplace, and even at his tender age he thought he had seen it all.

As he stepped out of his flat the stench of stale urine and discarded beer cans greeted his nostrils. Below him in the street, amongst the litter, broken benches and dog excrement, three hooded white lads shouted at each other as they kicked their ball against the rusty garage door that bore the tags of every youth in the district that could lay their hands on a paint can or permanent marker. The tinny twang of a mobile phone speaker filled the echoing passages with its inaudible drone of rap music, distorted and scratchy. Glancing back over his shoulder he caught sight of his neighbour's door ajar. He paused. A cursory glance at his watch told him that he was well behind time. The door ajar, the watch ticking, he gave a deep sigh and turned towards his neighbour Katya's flat.

"For fuck sake!" he raged silently to himself. "Like I need this - silly bitch always leaving that fucking door open!" he couldn't just leave it ajar; some of the estate urchins made easy money as sneak thieves and he didn't want her to be their next victim.

"Katya!" he bellowed with one hand on the door, one foot in the hall and one eye fixed on his wrist. Time was speeding away from him: another late showing at work and he really would have more spare time than he wanted.

"Katya, you've left your bloody door open again..... Katya?" Silence met his frustrated calls. He rounded the door into the warmth of Katya's first floor flat, anxious to complete his neighbourly deed so that he could get to work. Adam's helpfulness was more selfish than it would first appear, trying to get into Katya's good books and ultimately he hoped, her knickers. Adam held a torch for his sweet foreign neighbour despite her elusive and introvert nature. The entrance to her flat smelt of cigarettes and perfume, but was bitterly uninviting. The dated carpet was threadbare and the

wallpaper was peeling at the edges, but there was something alluring about the place - Katya. She always looked better than this flat, this estate.

Passing the empty kitchen, Adam moved through to the lounge, where the TV filled the small room with the dulcet tones of some wannabe teenager singing on yet another 'get famous overnight' talent show. Nothing! No sign of his pretty Polish neighbour. Adam was struck by how sparse her flat was; compared to this his parents' place looked positively palatial. He exited back into the hallway and turned sharp right to her bedroom door, a room he longed to be invited into. Tonight he would enter Katya's bedroom for the first time, hoping, dreaming that she might be asleep. Perhaps she would be half naked, and then he could finally leer over her lithe young body. He stood hesitating for a moment; it didn't feel right entering her room without consent, but something inside him drove him on. "Katya?" One last call out to her, before he went in. Then more softly, as if not wanting to disturb her, he uttered her name again, imagining her sprawled naked across the bed. He could feel himself getting excited as he slowly pushed the door open.

Instead, what met his gaze in Katya's bedroom caused him to reel sharply backwards, banging his elbow on the door jamb. He all but fell back into the hall, his hand clasped to his mouth, stifling a cry of horror. Retching from the very depths of his gut, he vomited uncontrollably, the contents of his hastily consumed dinner bursting through his clenched fingers onto his coat and splashing across the hall floor. He crashed through the flat to the open door and hit the waist-high balustrade. "Help!" He screamed with a mix of terror and desperation. The fish and chips he had scoffed earlier that evening surged once more from his gullet, billowing over the balcony and cascading onto the squalid pavement below. Initially only one of the boys looked up, clearly aggrieved that he had nearly been spewed on. "Watch it, you fucking tosser!" he snarled. To start with, the lad thought it was just another rowdy piss head having a domestic, or getting ready to moan about the persistent noise they made. The long-suffering residents were always moaning about one thing or another, but the gang usually just ignored them!

Adam was now screaming at them to call the police, and suddenly the lad realised something was badly wrong: this was not just some normal occurrence on the Estate. The boys knew Adam well, and the terrible distress in his voice was clearly genuine. They couldn't possibly have imagined what horror he had seen. What could be so vile it would cause their neighbour to be screaming blue murder? Fumbling for his mobile, the hoody Adam had narrowly missed with his vomit hastily struck three nines on the keypad of his mobile and engaged the operator at the Emergency Centre.

"Which service do you require?"

"Police, innit," replied the lad with some trepidation.

"Hold on while I connect you!"

There was a pause while the operator connected him to the Police Control Centre.

On the first floor balcony Adam was looking increasingly unsteady. "There's been a murder! She's been fucking murdered!" he screamed.

The hoodie was now talking into his phone "There's some guy here and he's bangin' on 'bout a murder and shit, the bleedin' muppet! Reckons there's blood everywhere an' that. Ya better get dem cozzers down 'ere!"

"Can you give me your address please, Sir, and we'll send a car straight away." The operator was used to handling emergency calls and filtering the usual panicked waffle, prank calls and needless domestics that deluged their office every day without fail.

"I think it's Flat 34 or 36. I'm not sure, innit," the hoodie replied. "Peldon Rise, first floor. You know," he added, "near the council offices."

Meanwhile, Adam had started to sway backwards and forwards as his head began to spin. He was struggling to regulate his breathing, his heart thudding in his ears louder than a nightclub bass. His vision blurring he slumped forwards, stooping down to his haunches. Then his body went limp as he passed out, falling forward onto the damp asphalt walkway. The hoodie saw Adam dip slowly behind the concrete barrier and feared the worst. Having no desire to rub shoulders with the Old Bill, the rest of his gang had already fled the scene, leaving him to face the music all alone. The operator listened intently as he reported that Adam had collapsed, and then kept him talking while the Police made their way to the scene.

Peldon Flats was a regular haunt for Southend's Emergency Services. If it wasn't the communal bin store ablaze, it was one of the countless junkies comatose in a pool of their own vomit and urine, or the Flanagan family beating seven bells out of each other or any other mug that dared look in their direction. As soon as the sirens began to close in on the tenement block, the hoodie thought better of it and was on his toes, into the warren of rat runs and alleyways within the estate. Next moment, with siren blaring, a Police car sped into view and screeched to a halt. Two officers leapt out, leaving the doors open behind them, and raced up to the balcony where Adam had passed out.

"Here we go, another pissed up fucking idiot! Probably had a scrap with his skank of a wife," remarked the young rookie copper, Paul Semple.

His older, far more experienced colleague shook her head in disapproval, aware that he was still novice enough to be excited at the prospect of a Murder Scene. "The report was of a murder," she reminded him acidly, "so just be careful - and watch what you touch!"

WPC Vicky Ward moved like an agile cat as she made her way up the stairs. She kept herself fit, and even though she was in her mid-thirties had the body of a younger woman. In her eighteen years' service Vicky had mentored countless young PC s like Semple, full of vim and vigour, diligently exercising all the authority and knowledge they had gleaned from their brief but intense training regime. Still in their formative years, they had vowed to change the world, to make a difference. Then the stark reality of life on the beat slowly crept into their lives: instead of the excitement depicted in the crime dramas and movies of their youth they would find themselves confronted by endless paperwork, politics and red tape.

PC Semple knelt beside Adam and shook him gently, slowly bringing him back to consciousness. "Hey Sir, are you OK? What's happened?"

Adam looked up at him through bleary eyes. "She's in the bedroom – she's been murdered!" he moaned.

Vicky leant down towards him. "Come on fella! Take a deep breath, breathe slowly." She spoke with compassion and patience. "Who has been murdered?"

Adam pointed to the open door and shook his head vigorously. He was fighting hard to speak but found himself devoid of words. His emotions were in tatters; all he could muster was "Katya..... Katya!" Then he collapsed once again, distraught and inconsolable.

"Get him an ambulance!" Vicky told Semple. "I'll take a look in the flat, and you stay with him until the ambulance arrives. He's in shock."

She took a deep breath and then made her way into the flat. On the left hand side of the hallway the small bathroom was empty; to the right the kitchen was equally bare - nothing untoward in it, just fast food remnants and surfaces laden with unwashed crockery. Further along to the left was the lounge, a barren room which contained very few comforts. The ageing two-seater cloth sofa was stained and frayed. A TV was on inside a dated black cabinet with shards of laminate fractured from its edges. On the nest of tables in front of the sofa lay a clutch of old magazines, some in Polish and others tattered and dog-eared like those in a doctor's waiting room. A solitary cigarette stained with vivid pink lipstick fresh from Katya's plump lips had been stubbed out in the bottle brown glass ashtray. With nothing particular in there to attract her attention, WPC Ward moved on to the bedroom and pushed open the door.

The sight of Katya's mutilated body smashed across her consciousness with the impact of a crashing freight train.