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1

The Pedestrians

‘Course they’re all dead now.’

‘Murder?’

Well now hold on a minute. Let’s not be hasty. Have you never heard of extenuating circumstances?

From the beginning?

Well . . . I don’t know. Where did it start? Like anything else, I suppose. One thing leads to another, you know. You don’t think about things starting at the time, you only see that later, in retrospect. You see, they were always there. Even before I knew them, I was aware of them. I must have seen them even then, just glimpsed them out of the corner of my eye. Like road signs on a route that you travel every day. You know they’re there, but you don’t actually see them every time you pass them. You wouldn’t notice if they suddenly weren’t there. Furniture? Yeah, that’s probably a good analogy. They were just a part of the background scenery. They’d have had to be bouncing off my bonnet for me to have noticed them. When did I first see them? You mean actually see them, don’t you? Recognise them, realise that I knew them, yeah?

Well . . . I suppose it would have to have been the time when the captain got hit by the airport express. I saw him go down. First time I’d seen him without his cap—I’d never thought of him as a baldie before. Odd, really.



But that was the first thing that struck me. There he was sprawled across by the bypass in a tangle of splattered fruit and veg and I all could think about was ‘where’s his hair?’ I’d kind of built up a picture of him in my mind, standing on deck behind one of those big steering-wheels, one hand guiding the boat, the other holding a brass telescope to his one good eye.

Did he? Did he really? Well that just shows you how much I hadn’t noticed him, doesn’t it. Two eyes, you say. Ha! So no eyepatch, then. Hmm. Suppose not. That would be silly. No, I know that now. But he did look like a captain, didn’t he? He had that weatherbeaten, leathered skin look—and the beard. You must have noticed the beard?

He lived on one of those old houseboats down on the canal. Well no. I know he doesn’t actually live there, I know that now, but at the time, the time of his accident, that’s where I thought he lived and that was where I thought he was going. Yes, that was what I told the police. I didn’t know his name at the time, but I’d seen him about so often that I felt I knew him. I was only trying to help.

And the librarian?

Well, again, I always passed him in the same spot on the same day. Very punctual he was. No more than five minutes walk from the library, and only seven minutes before opening up time. Give him a minute to unlock, switch off the alarm and collect the post, a minute to hang his duffel coat and his bag in the cloakroom and he’s ready to serve.

No, that wasn’t the only reason I thought he was a librarian. I told you. I never really looked at these people, I just kind of took them in—you know, subliminally. He had this hair, almost to his belt. Wiry, smelly and grey. He tied it back in a ponytail. And a beard. Yes another beardie. But unlike the captain’s muffler, this one was like . . . Jesus. And he wore clogs as well. Wooden clogs. Tie-dye T-shirts in the summer and a scarf like Doctor Who’s in winter. What else could he have been? What other job would’ve employed him?

No. But then I never went in the library, did I? He played the



guitar too. No, I never actually heard him play it . . . but it was obvious wasn't it?

I always wanted to be able to play the guitar. I thought maybe he might teach me. Her? You mean the witch? Nah, I never liked her. I didn't like that look she always gave me. That supercilious: 'I've got your number' look. Contemptuous. Like she held me personally responsible for her life of pain and misery.

Yeah. She noticed me alright. No, she never spoke to me. She didn't have to. That dismissive sneer of hers said it all. She had a flat somewhere, a council flat. I was paying for it, of course—well, we all are really. She liked that. It was a kind of punishment for all these things she thought I'd done to her. She pulled out in front of me on that rusty old bike of hers. That's right, the one with the wicker basket and the kiddie seat, no indication, she just looked at me. Like she was putting a hex on me. Like I'm supposed to just realise the extent of her powers and just let her in!

No. Emphatically no! I do not hate women! I only followed her because . . . well you know why I followed her! For the same reason I followed the assassin.

Well, no, of course they didn't find a gun. He's a professional! He may have fooled you, but remember—I saw him every day. I notice things. That nonchalance—it was just a façade! He was furtive. Yeah. That's what struck me about the assassin. He thought he was a master of disguise, thought he could just blend into the crowd, but I had his number! He always wore just the right things and they were always new, but I've seen plainclothes policemen looking more natural. A classical musician?

You know your problem, don't you? You're too damn trusting! No, that's what we're supposed to think. That was his cover. It was the classic double-bluff.

There was no Strad in that box, y'know.

Well, no. I didn't see his gun either, I told you, this bloke's good! I mean, how many self respecting hitmen walk around with an Uzi inside a violin case these days? I expect it's all done with mirrors.

Hate them? No I didn't hate them. I looked upon them as my friends. Well, except for the witch. I didn't like the witch. I even felt sorry for some of them. Hmm? Well the roadie for a start. Poor guy. He just looked so aimless. But you can see it in his eyes. I've got a sixth sense for that stuff, you know. I see someone and I just know where they've been, what they've done—who they are. The roadie had really lived. In the seventies. He'd been into everything. He was a real pleasure-seeker. Then one day he just took too much. He woke up late and the circus had left town. They'd gone without him. All he had were the clothes he stood up in. So he sobered up there and then. He's spent the last thirty years waiting for them to come back. Poor guy. Ready-meal dinners for one. He lost his mind. He couldn't quite believe they'd do that to him. He still wears that same tour shirt. He's got the same haircut and cut-off denim jacket. I feel for him. They're never coming back, you know. The band split up in '74. Nobody told him.

Nobody made me follow them. They intrigued me. I saw these people on a daily basis, like I said. I felt I'd got to know them. You know, like they were old friends. I waved to the captain the next time I saw him—was a while later, mind. He had a bit of a limp by then. Ha! I dunno, I think they might've taken his leg off, given him a wooden one. Yeah, I waved at him. I tooted and waved. And you know what he did? Two-fingered salute, that's what!

I don't know. Did he recognise me from the incident? Maybe I just shook him up with my airhorn. Who can tell? So you've said. So they said at the time, but I suppose that's why I decided to follow him. I wanted to explain. I hadn't run him over. I'd helped pick him up! And I'd told the police everything I knew.

Well who was to say? He could have been lying. Maybe he hasn't got a mooring licence, maybe he smuggles stuff. I don't know why he gave them a false identity. So I followed him. I didn't stalk him like the papers said. I just followed him one day, to see where he went.

I was practically a mate! I saw him every day of the week, had done for longer than I could remember.



No, I didn't know his name!

Is it relevant?

I followed him home. I just wanted to see where he lived. That was all.

Nothing sinister. I didn't break in, no.

He didn't invite me in either.

I sort of . . . *fell* in, I suppose. No, I didn't hit him, I *blocked* him.

Yes. That was when he hit his head, yeah.

I caught him as he fell, sort of, overbalanced and found myself inside.

I didn't take anything. Yeah. I had a bit of a look round. Just tat, really, bric-a-brac. A bit chintzy. Not the sort of stuff I'd expect of a sailor. No, I didn't report it to the police. Well, I hadn't realised he was . . . you know. I thought he'd just knocked himself out. Well, because he was a liar, wasn't he. He'd have blamed me! He already had them convinced he was a retired chemist!

And the librarian?

Hmm. Well that was just stupid. I asked him to teach me to play the guitar. He didn't have to react like that. We were mates. Well . . . sort of. No, I didn't know his name!

He was a civil engineer? Well I don't know how well that pays, but he looked like he could have done with a bit of extra cash. I was offering to pay him. I know he said I was trying to mug him but I offered him money. He could've just said no. He didn't have to swing that bloody rope bag at me. No, he fell. It was those clogs of his. He'd have made it to the other side if it hadn't been for those stupid wooden shoes. No, I don't think he saw the lorry. Wouldn't have made much difference if he had.

Alright, so maybe the witch was deliberate. She was always doing it, stepping out on crossings or pulling out in front of me on that bloody old bike! It wasn't murder. I hadn't planned to run her over. She just didn't look where she was going. Alright, well I'll admit I might've made a slight miscalculation when I tried to pay the assassin to kill the roadie. I'm not a killer, alright! I just wanted to help him, to put him out of his misery. No, look!



You've asked me that before and I told you then. I'm not a serial killer. There's no link between these people. They were just always there. They got on my nerves!

They were just . . . pedestrians.



2

Random Selection

Fleur had been perfectly content. She had a job that she absolutely loved, two completely distinct social circles: the girls from the salon and her old mates from school, and for the last six months had been sharing a ground-floor flat on the edge of a ‘newbuild development complex’ with her apprentice footballer boyfriend, Brian.

She was proud to have achieved so much more in her first twenty years than her parents had achieved in forty. Brian even had a car, and as a step up from her mother’s high-rise window box, they had a slabbed area beside their front door with four large pots on it that she and Brian liked to call their garden.

When she wasn’t out clubbing with Brian or her mates, Fleur liked to watch the television. She followed her soaps religiously, gobbling up the intricacies of the character’s fictional lives with the same zealous fervour with which she so completely devoured her other great passion: the celebrity gossip magazines. She was a great reader. Not much got past Fleur. She had her finger on the pulse, she knew how it all knitted together, she knew what life was all about and she loved nothing more than to yack endlessly to anybody who stood close enough to her for long enough about who was doing what to whom behind whose back.

Fleur knew where she stood. She knew what was going on in



the world. She knew exactly what to buy and where to buy it from because the adverts kept her up to date.

But she didn't know everything. She didn't know all the boring stuff that happened to other people whom she didn't know and who led weird lives in countries that she couldn't point to on a map and who didn't have television or magazines. She didn't read those bits in her newspaper, she just stuck to the important bits. And the adverts. She did like her adverts.

The adverts gave her mind a chance to catch its breath between ideas.

One of the things that Fleur didn't know about was the existence of aliens, and so when she got abducted by one whilst walking home from the salon one night, she found herself utterly flummoxed and, for once, completely lost for words.

The aliens in question had been attracted to Earth after unexpectedly picking up a series of random transmissions as they coasted past the outer planets of the solar system on their way to a party. Curious, as their galactic satnav seemed convinced that there was no sentient life on any of the ten planets of this system, they chose a continent and a life sign at random and sent down a transmat beam to extract it. The transmissions that had been beaming out into space had been quite unintelligible, even after their translation software had converted the squall into standard, leading the visitors to presume that a society must have evolved here so cut off from the rest of civilization that it could have developed an entirely unique technology.

Fleur woke up to find herself naked and strapped spreadeagled to a table with two huge catlike things in spangly suits staring down at her. They shot questions at her like her friend Marnie did on a Tuesday morning if she'd missed the previous evenings edition of the soaps. They spoke fairly good English for cats, she thought, but she hadn't a clue what they were going on about. It was all 'socio-politico' this and 'eco-techno' that—none of which she knew anything about. Eventually they showed her what they said were some random transmissions that they had picked up



from space and asked if she could interpret them. *Could she??* So she filled them in on the last ten years worth of soap storylines, reality shows and advertising campaigns as they stood silently above her. When she had finished they returned her clothes in silence and set her back down where they found her.

As they left the system they dropped a marker buoy into orbit as a warning to other shortcutters that the planet below was some kind of long-lost asylum colony that should be avoided at all costs for the sake of sanity.

Fleur, on the other hand, put the whole experience down to a spiked Bacardi Breezer.

