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# DIFFERENT SKINS

Double Novella

by

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Contents and layout subject to change in the final version

Sample extract from one novella

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## EVEN THE DEAD DIE

It took a while for the information to sink in. All the time I'd been dodging the ghost of my sister's rapist, she'd been slipping away, getting closer to him, drifting further away from me. I felt suddenly guilty about moving away from home, and wished that I'd stayed put, where my presence might have done some good. Then I realised that even if I'd gone to visit Jen every day, holding her hand as she stared at the dull white walls of her room, the end result would have been the same. All I would have done was prolong her inevitable decline.

I turned off the TV, dimmed the lights, and put on some music: Norah Jones, singing some easy blues. It was the obvious thing to do, but I cracked open the whisky anyway. Ask any man and he'll tell you, alcohol eases the pain, makes it recede just enough that you can breathe again.

I tried to cry but no more tears would come. This distressed me more than I can say; you're supposed to cry when something like this happens. It's the normal reaction, the done thing. Maybe Aunt Hilda was right, and I was a selfish little shit.

At 2:00 A.M. someone knocked on the door to my flat. There was a quick rapping of knuckles on the wooden door, and because I was a little bit drunk I struggled to my feet and walked down the dark narrow hallway to see who the hell it could be. It didn't even cross my mind that anyone calling at such an ungodly hour could only be bringing trouble.

"Hello. Who's there?"

No one answered my call, so I asked again: "Who is

it?"

There was a sound like a cat mewling, only softly, quietly, as if from a great distance. The mewling became the keening of a baby, perhaps locked in a room along the corridor. I strained to hear, realising that nobody in my block had a child – it was occupied by mostly single, mostly professional people, who kept themselves to themselves. Mostly.

The noise stopped.

"Who's out there? I'm not opening the door until you tell me."

I felt like a frightened old lady, but even the shame of that couldn't get me to open the door. I put my eye to the security spy hole that was set into the door, and stared out at a distorted fisheye representation of the empty corridor outside my apartment. I could see the door opposite, which was closed, and the scratched red fire extinguisher that hung on the wall beneath the No Smoking sign.

I blinked my eyes, trying to clear them; the whisky had blurred my vision, and the attempt to focus was causing my eyes to water. When I opened them again, and locked back onto the view outside my door, I was staring into the smiling face of Tony Harris.

I reared back from the door, my feet scuffing on the laminate flooring, and my left arm shot out instinctively, as if to ward off a blow (I've always been a southpaw). I grazed my knuckles on the wood, breaking the skin.

Then slow, tired, chuckling laughter started up from outside, growing louder and higher in pitch. Soon it was deafening, that horrible, horrible laughter, and rather than being repelled, I was compelled to take another look through the spy hole.

Harris was still there, but this time he looked different. His mouth had stretched, the grin forming a sort of horizontal gash that reached around the bottom of his

face, effectively cutting his head in two. The mouth hinged open and a pointed tongue curled out of the fissure, lolling suggestively, moving back and forth across his chin like a fleshy pendulum.

That tongue must have been as fat as a grown man's forearm near the root, and it was coloured a livid purple, like a recent bruise or spoiled meat. Its narrow tip was pointed, and some kind of clear, thick liquid dripped from it, covering his suit jacket.

Harris's arms were locked down tight at his sides, but his fingers flexed rapidly, like scurrying insect legs. There seemed to be far too many fingers at the end of each hand, but that could've been due to the combined effect of the poor lighting, the speed of his finger movements...and also the fact that I'd downed half a bottle of Jameson's earlier that evening.

Of one thing I was certain: his feet were not touching the floor. He was hovering a clear inch above the chequered tiles, the narrow tips of his shiny shoes pointing downward but definitely not touching the floor.

When I raised my eyes I saw that the tongue had unfurled to reach his waist, and his eyes had narrowed and tilted into horizontal ovals, becoming elongated, like those of a cat. The pupils had disappeared, probably rolled back into his head, and the whites bulged like squashed eggs from their slitted sockets.

"She's down here," he said, in a gentle voice that sounded like the whisper of a close friend, or an elderly relative. "She's down here with us."

Of course, I knew exactly who he meant; and I knew that he was telling the truth. The dead, it is said, tell no lies. And why should they? They have nothing to gain from deceit.

Then Harris turned, slowly and jerkily, like a wind-up toy, and floated off down the corridor. Before long, he was

out of sight, but his terrible laughter remained, and followed me back to my chair, where I took another swig of whisky, this time straight from the bottle.

Most of us go through our lives without ever noticing the dead. They move among us like a light wind, leaving no trace, barely even registering on the surface of our lives. They take our money in petrol stations, or serve us fast food when we roll out of pubs and clubs in the early hours. They even launder our clothes and rent us videos and DVDs.

Before all the low level and mostly black market jobs were taken over by immigrants and asylum seekers looking to make a better life away from cruel regimes and political unrest, the dead held sway, doing the jobs we won't, working the hours we refuse.

It was easy for them when our country's borders were more rigidly defined, but these days, with the world becoming a smaller place through communication and travel technologies, they are forced to find other ways to exist under our radar.

I didn't sleep at all for the rest of that night. Instead, I sat up watching a twenty-four hour news channel. The programme was taken up by the news of another massive haul of illegal immigrants being smuggled into the UK via three HGVs and a disused railway. I watched pictures of pre-teen girls wrapped in soiled blankets being led to waiting police vans. Their faces held expressions of utter confusion, total bewilderment. Some of them were in tears. A few of them were even screaming, terrified of being sent back to whatever it was they were running from.

The girls had been bound for London, and the sex trade. These days, Soho is full of eastern Europeans with enforced heroin habits, stuck in a cycle of abuse and paid

sex.

I turned off the TV as dawn finally broke. When I walked to the window, a thin duvet wrapped around my shoulders, pale sunlight struggled to reach me through the dusty venetian blinds. I stared down at the street, watching it come alive. Someone was setting up a flower stall near the tube entrance. A man who was so small he must have been a midget came out of a burger bar eating breakfast on the run, his briefcase swaying from one elbow. A woman on a racing bike speeded up to beat a red light but didn't quite make it, and was clipped by a black cab. Her bicycle swerved violently but did not fall, and she raised a fist into the air, as if she'd won some kind of victory.

Life went on. But so did death.

I turned to face the bus stop, and saw a man in a black single-breasted suit and wearing thick black sunglasses bury his head into a newspaper. The paper was upside down; I'd caught him in the act of observing me, just as I was supposed to do. It was obviously a warning of some kind, a message that someone was watching. Always watching.

I retreated into my apartment, reaching out to dip the blinds as I headed for a table near the bathroom door. I picked up a framed picture of Jen, feeling my chest tighten. The photograph had been taken many years ago, during a searing hot summer when we'd spent long, easy days on a beach in Tyneside. Jen was fourteen; she had not yet been violated. She was smiling at the camera and clinging onto Mr. Tweety, the silly wooden bird she'd made for me when she was little more than a baby and then claimed back because she couldn't bare to let it go. It pained me to think about the reality that I might never see that carefree young girl again. Just like Mr. Tweety, she'd somehow got lost along the way.

I put down the photo, taking care to position it just right, in the exact same spot where it had rested since I'd moved into the flat. I smiled at my sister, and turned away.

Despite the fact that I'd always looked out for her when we were younger, I seemed to be failing Jen at every turn. I'd failed to protect her when Tony Harris raped her, and then again when I put my faith in the courts. I'd turned my back on her by running away to London exactly when she needed me most. And right now, miles away from where she lay in an uncertain darkness, I was failing her all over again.

That was when the telephone rang.