



DIFFERENT SKINS
GARY McMAHON

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Screaming Dreams

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“From Plato to Descartes and modern idealism, the belief has been that the true self or the real man is somewhere within, and that the body is an appendage or a framework of some sort. This is the understanding that Gilbert Ryle castigated as the ‘ghost in the machine’ theory...”

-John Macquarrie

“This town is coming like a ghost town”

-The Specials

PART ONE

MY LONDON GHOST

London is an open wound, a festering tumour upon the skin of England through which oozes the rancid puss of society.

Overcrowded streets filled with vacant, directionless zombies who see nothing past the bubble that surrounds them; gridlocked traffic stretching for miles and miles, across and beyond the city boundaries, snarling up the woefully inadequate road layout; a Third World public transport system, packed way beyond capacity with silently seething commuters who are all far too near their wits' end to be properly sane.

Forget what you read in trashy Style publications aimed at impressionable fifteen year olds; in London-set novels written by trendy young authors trying to be the new *enfant terrible* of English letters; in cookie-cutter arts reviews from the pages of middle-class Lifestyle Magazines that fold and go bust a week after their first issue. Forget also the achingly hip images you see on popular TV, or in films starring the new Hot Young Things – the media-created “Brit Pack” – and set in the hustling, bustling, cool and utterly fictional metropolis that beats like a heart at the centre of our nation.

But remember when I tell you this: London is a ghost town.

My name is not important, but you can call me Mike. Mike Angelo. It isn't my real name, but for the purposes of this narrative, it will suffice.

Everyone who has ever lived in the capital for any prolonged length of time has their own story, and this is mine. Here's Mike Angelo's London Story:

It started for me on a packed Monday morning tube platform at the

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beginning of my daily epic journey into work. I was living in West Finchley and back then work was a freezing cold office five minutes walk along Charing Cross Road. The trip should take about forty minutes, but owing to what seems like the entire population of North London attempting to board a train on the Northern Line every week day morning, it's usually more like double that time.

I'd already let two trains go by without even thinking about getting on: the pale faces smeared against the glass doors as the vehicle pulled into the station put me off immediately. The carriages were so full that, when the doors slid open, five or six passengers would tumble out onto the platform, the closed doors being the only thing keeping them on their feet while the train was in motion. It was an all-too-familiar sight, and one that built up the rage inside me like the steam in a pressure cooker. I'd already had two near-fistfights on the way to work this month, and I really couldn't be arsed with another.

I stood reading that morning's edition of the Evening Standard over the shoulder of the guy who stood to the left of me – a short, stocky man in a cheap grey suit who kept snuffling, as if he had an early winter cold. The main feature in the newspaper was an article about the influx of European women into the London sex trade: an increase in human trafficking at an unprecedented rate. According to what I could see of the histrionic piece of journalism, authorities had recently uncovered a smuggling plot to bring a thousand underage girls into the country in a series of delivery vans, travelling at night, with Red Cross stickers stuck on the sides. Only the drivers of the vans had been arrested; no one was talking about who'd organised the scheme.

Eventually a train arrived where you could see daylight between the passengers, so I forced my way on, grasped a greasy handrail, and breathed in a charming concoction of other people's farts and body odours. Some prick next to me kept catching my left cheek with the pages of his huge newspaper; after the third time, I slapped the thing from his hands and glared at him as if I was a psychopath. As usual, this technique worked a treat, and the guy quietly folded up his paper and tried to sink his head between his shoulder blades.

I'm not really crazy, but sometimes in this life, and possibly in the next, it serves to generate an illusion of insanity.

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As I swayed from the tacky metal pole above my head, my knees knocking against the seated woman whose face was directly in line with my crotch, I closed my eyes and began to grind my teeth. I imagined myself somewhere clear and bright and without the stale sweat of strangers invading my nostrils. It passed the journey, making this train ride through Hades a little less nightmarish.

When I changed at Euston, slamming my palm into the chest of the idiot who stood blocking the doorway as I tried to disembark, the anger returned. As the bloke fell flat on his arse, I kicked his suitcase across the platform and snarled like a dog. This city was turning me into a lunatic; I could feel my mind straining more and more each day. The place brought out the very worst in me - like a dirty, sluttish woman who appeals to your most base desires.

Faces blurred into inchoate pink smudges as I barged past city-soft bodies to reach my platform. Commuters were lined up three deep when I got there, and I stood in my allotted place and closed my eyes once more. As trains hissed to a stop at the platform, allowing a single row of commuters to board before continuing on their way, people moved in unison. Swaying from side to side and shuffling back and forth, like a crowd at a football match. It was hypnotic, and I found the proximity to complete strangers nothing less than repellent. Standing shoulder to shoulder with someone who could be a wife-beater, a paedophile, a fucker of chickens, was unnerving in the extreme. I kept my eyes closed, trying not to think about whether or not the six foot black man to my left, dressed in a filthy ankle-length leather coat and some rumpled nondescript 1970s style suit, had bathed in the last seven days.

Eventually I reached the edge of the platform, halting an inch or two over the painted yellow line that you aren't supposed to cross. I could feel the deadly weight of a platform full of people pressing against my back. It would only take a single push from someone who had lost the plot entirely to turn me into strips of meat moulded around the rusty steel tracks and the wheels of a speeding tube train. The thought did my mood no good at all.

As I stood moving with the masses, I looked along the track and into the black maw of the tunnel. A slight wind gusted out of the entrance, and there came a faint high-pitched humming sound as the tracks began to vibrate with the thrum of an approaching train. I

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wondered what cold, half-blind and ancient creatures might live in those labyrinthine catacombs beneath the city, crawling over unused platforms at forgotten stations situated deep underground. Consuming crippled rats and drinking from puddles of condensation; but hungering for something more, something warm and living and breathing. Something human.

Suddenly there was a braking train six inches from my face; a line of windows showing a multitude of wide-eyed faces smearing past my vision and a surging sweaty wind blowing my hair into disarray. Doors ratcheted open before me, and I struggled to step aside and allow alighting passengers a clear route off. When that failed, owing simply to the number of immobile bodies around me, I just forced my way on instead, stepping on toes, kicking briefcases and head-butting huge rucksacks that hung like physical deformities from the backs of grungy Australian travellers on their way to tend bar in city pubs.

That was when I saw him.

He pushed past me as I struggled onboard.

His face was familiar; that of someone I had once known, perhaps a friend of a friend. Something about the set of his eyes or the line of his jaw...these were the features of someone I'd known long ago, but didn't quite recognise anymore. Like a familiar body beneath a thin sheet, or a face glimpsed through heavy fog. I just couldn't find the name or time or place in my mind to associate this person. Then he was gone, just another body in the mass: another drone in the endless swarm that moved like insects through the Shitty City.

All that day at work, my mind returned to the face I'd seen and failed to recognise that morning. For some reason, I couldn't leave it alone. It was like a bad tooth, or a hangnail; I kept pushing it with my tongue, chewing it with my front teeth.

Who the hell was he? I had a feeling that I really should remember, but couldn't. There was a sense that it wasn't really his name that mattered, but rather the time and place in my life that I had encountered him.

An old school friend from my younger days in the North East? Perhaps part of the circle I'd hung with when I attended Scarbridge Comprehensive, the State-run hellhole that trained kids to bully each

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other, fight without losing, and steal cars?

I wracked my brain for an identity, but kept coming up blank.

This kind of thing was always happening to me. I have a total recall with faces, even remembering the features of people who I've met just the one time, and then only briefly. The problem is that I also remember the faces of folk I might have seen in the street two or three times, my mind retaining their image but not registering why. So I spend hours trying to put names to faces, even when I don't know those names to begin with. I've even been known to say hello to complete strangers, having seen them a couple of times in Tesco, or in the queue at Blockbuster Video, but certain that I know them from somewhere.

It can get very embarrassing...

However, I knew that this time it was different. I had actually *met* this person, and an indelible mark had been left somewhere deep within me. I just couldn't find it in the vaults of memory. Not yet.

Tuesday evening I had a phone call from my Aunt Hilda. My sister, Jen, had had another episode. The people from the Cherry Tree Institute had been in touch, and they wanted me to visit Jen again in the near future; according to the staff, my visits seemed to calm her.

That got me thinking about the rape again, and I had to drink most of a bottle of malt whiskey to make it all go away. She'd been in Cherry Tree for six years now, since she was sixteen. She was getting no better, and in fact only seemed to sink deeper into herself as the years went by. She had always been a little weak, a little susceptible to life's knocks and tumbles. If she were stronger, perhaps she wouldn't have ended up in that place, with the psychos and the failed suicides, and the folk who just sat in plastic chairs and nodded vacantly at the bare walls as they wasted away to nothing.

On her third night in there, all those years ago, she had woken at some point way after midnight to witness the girl who occupied the bed next to her attempting to hang herself with a towel from the back of the ward door. Jen, still reasonably lucid at that point, had raced over and taken the girl's weight in her thin arms, screaming for help. After about ten minutes, someone had eventually arrived, but the girl had later died in the infirmary. The episode had set Jen back a lot, and since then she had simply slid further and further into an

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almost catatonic state.

Yes, Jen was the fragile one, the one with the paper-thin skin. I was the tough guy, the one who let it all pass like water off a duck's back. Even when our parents had left us with Aunt Hilda, and run off to God-knew-where, I had somehow held us together, looking after my sister even though I was only two years older.

Jen met Tony Harris at a friend's party when she was just three months shy of turning sweet sixteen, and she thought that her prayers had been answered. He was tall, good-looking and popular – the star striker on the school football team, played lead guitar in a band, and had every girl in school swooning after him. When he led her upstairs to “talk” and locked them both in the master bedroom, then pushed her down on top of the coats that were heaped like corpses on the bed, she initially thought he was just messing about. She only realised her error when he punched her in the face and pulled up her skirt, ripping off her sensible knickers and telling her that he knew she wanted it rough.

I won't go into details (thankfully, I don't know them all), but afterwards, my weak-willed little mouse of a sister did the bravest thing in the world and went to the police. She held up amazingly well throughout the whole investigation, only breaking down in court. It was the sentence that put her in Cherry Tree; the bastard got six months in a young offenders centre. He would serve his time in a comfortable private dorm, watching TV and smoking cigarettes brought in by his family on their weekly visits. The only reason he was still alive to put there was because I was fool enough to trust in the law, to put my faith in our puny fucking judicial system; a system that treats the scum as if they are the victims.

Wednesday I slept late, deciding to cash in a day off work I was owed for some unpaid overtime I put in three weeks ago. I spent the morning in bed, then showered and went online to book my train tickets north for the weekend. As usual, the cheaper tickets were all sold out, so I had to find nigh on a hundred quid just to spend woefully insufficient time with my sister over a rushed weekend.

That night I dreamed of a sea of living faces perched on stiff mannequin bodies; they were all vaguely familiar to me, those faces, and they all called my name in identical high-pitched voices that rose

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to merge into a single ear-aching note, pitched somewhere up near the high end of audibility. I fled silently through wet night-time streets, along narrow back alleys and eerily empty lamp-lit main drags, but those expressionless faces followed wherever I went. There was no escape, and I knew that eventually they would catch up. What would happen then, I had no idea. All that I felt was fear, and the stark certainty that I had to keep away from those wailing faces...

At 3am I was pacing the length and breadth of my tiny flat, trying to outdistance the nightmare in three small rooms. Eventually, I turned on the TV and watched a bad horror film, something Japanese, featuring weird black-haired ghosts and a disturbing disembodied chuckling. Then I went back online to answer a few emails and log onto a website that featured women who'd filmed their own orgasms: stark close-ups of soft, blurry faces not unlike those from my dream; eyelids fluttering, lips trembling, features slightly out of focus. By the time the sun came up, I felt that I'd outrun the dream, but those nightmare-faces hovered at the edge of my consciousness, a constant reminder of the nameless fear I had felt upon seeing that guy on the train.

Friday morning it happened again. But this time I knew the geography of the face I saw as intimately as that of my own.

I was forcing my way through the barrier at Charing Cross Road Station, when someone I knew commuter-walked briskly past the newspaper stand and out of the exit where aggressive homeless men sat sullenly smoking their morning roll-ups. Shock descended upon me like a sack of bricks, and weighed me down in my place. I couldn't move, couldn't think. Everything seemed to waver in and out of focus around me, and a strange pressure built up in my ears, as if I was underwater.

The man, now long gone, was Tony Harris: the boy who had raped my sister. His still-handsome face was older, with lines at the edges of his thin, cruel mouth and dark hollows beneath his big brown eyes, but there was no doubt in my mind that it was Harris.

A large Asian woman pushed me from behind, clearing the way as I was blocking the turnstile. I felt panic, and ran through the subway and up onto the street, looking for Harris. I couldn't see him in the mindless crush of the crowds, but still felt his presence in the

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air like an approaching storm.

Fuck, fuck, fuckfuckfuckfuck...

I repeated the obscenity like a mantra, or a spell to ward off evil spirits. I had entered new territory here, and I had no idea how I was supposed to react. This couldn't happen; it was impossible. What the fuck was I supposed to do next?

Ten weeks into his six-month sentence in the Scarbridge Remand Centre, Harris had entered into an argument with a fellow inmate in the centre's well-equipped gym. The other boy, a seventeen-year-old drug pusher named Billy Whitehouse, had learned that Harris was inside for rape. Rapists, child molesters and those who harm pensioners are generally frowned upon in most institutions of incarceration, and this one was no different.

Harris, not used to being unpopular, thought that he could make a name for himself by taking on this kid at his own level, on his own terms. Whitehouse, being an experienced street fighter, decided to nip this attitude in the bud and stabbed Harris with a homemade chiv – a sharpened spoon handle bound to a six-inch hunk of hand-carved chair leg with a length of course fishing line.

I'm happy to report that Harris died in agony. The chiv got him in the throat, and he lay flapping in his own blood for a long time before he went. I just pray that he suffered immensely, that his pain was intolerable for the time that it took the bastard to die.

So, I had seen the dead man who had raped my sister in a London tube station on a chilly Friday morning in mid-October. The event acted as a kind of watershed; the mental force of seeing Harris tore down the walls and forced me to recall the identity of the man I'd seen on Monday. Ernie Brookes: the biggest bully in Scarbridge Comprehensive, a kid who had made a misery of the lives of so many of his classmates. He had died in a car crash at the age of nineteen, killing himself and his latest girlfriend on some desolate winding road late one night in the wilds of North Yorkshire. He was mourned by few, missed by none.

Another dead man. Another ghost.

I began to think of all those other faces I'd seen and almost recognised throughout the years, people whose appearance had

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tugged at my memory for reasons that I could never define: familiar features seen in the queue at some generic coffee shop, filing into a cinema, or waiting to be served in a city centre pub. Who were they? Deceased bad people from my own past? Long dead killers and rapists and thieves that I'd read about in newspaper reports or seen in grainy photofits on the television news?

I ran home after that, not even bothering to ring work and explain my absence. All I could think of were these dead people and the fact I had seen them, here and now, larger than life, truer than fiction.

London is a tumour. A cancerous growth, a series of mutated cells that have turned cannibal and are consuming themselves, like a snake swallowing its own tail.

I didn't leave my flat after seeing Tony Harris; I didn't know who to trust, or whom I might bump into if I went outside. There are hundreds of streets out there in the Shitty City, and millions of obliquely familiar faces marching up and down its litter-lined avenues, hopping on and off buses, eating in high-priced restaurants, drinking in old bank buildings that have been gutted and turned into trendy wine bars.

They say that only the good die young. Maybe. But the bad, the really bad, don't die at all; they just move to the capital.

Forget everything you've ever heard or read or thought about London, but remember this: London is a ghost town.

After that, everything changed. The truth I thought I'd uncovered proved to be the tip of the iceberg, the viper at the entrance to the nest.

I was now officially absent from work: my doctor was an easy touch and had signed me a sick note for stress. My boss didn't care; I was expendable, my presence barely registering on his consciousness when I was there.

Most of my days were spent either at home in front of the television, watching rented movies on DVD, or washing my clothes in the local Laundromat. Occasionally, I'd risk eating out at a local café or restaurant, but most of the time I ate alone, at home, with a

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plate of pasta perched on my lap.

It was Friday night. I was home, as usual, not-really-watching some crappy celebrity dance show on TV: bland non-entities waltzing across the screen for the sake of some obscure charity in a pathetic attempt to resurrect their dying careers. If it wasn't so painful to see, it would be funny.

I was nibbling on a cold slice of pizza. Pepperoni. The slice had been in the fridge for three or four days, so it had started to harden. I didn't care; I wasn't even hungry, just felt that I ought to eat, just to keep my strength up.

When the telephone rang I almost left it alone. The only thing that compelled me to answer was the suspicion that something might be wrong with Jen. As it turned out, my fears were well founded.

"Hello Mike," said Aunt Hilda, her cool façade locked tightly in place. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No, no. I'm just watching some telly. Relaxing, you know." I put down the pizza slice, suddenly ravenous now that I was unable to eat.

"I thought you flash London types liked to go out partying on a Friday night: drink and drugs and loose women."

I paused, waiting to see if she would continue. The silence stretched between us like a rubber band, weakening but not even approaching the point where it might break.

"No, Hilda. Not all of us." I decided to change tack: "How's uncle Bill?"

"His hernia's popped out again. He needs an operation. The silly old sod still runs around like he's twenty years old. I keep telling him that something's got to give – and now it has."

Aunt Hilda was a cold bitch, but despite her chilliness I liked her a lot. I respected her strength of character.

"Anyway," she said, finally getting to the point. "I have some sad news." Her manner was so matter-of-fact that she might have been ordering a takeaway meal.

The cold pizza churned inside my gut; fear flipped within me like a fish dragged out onto the shore.

"It's your sister. She slipped into a coma yesterday morning. I'm sorry I left it this long to ring you, but we've been tied up at the

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hospital. Visiting her. Trying to make her aware that we were there, and that we care. ”

The accusation was implicit. I'd missed my last visit, opting to stay in my flat after what had happened. I was terrified to go home, back to the town I'd run away from, in case I saw more of the ghosts I'd spent my adult life trying to avoid.

“Are you still there, Mike? Mike? Say something, boy.”

Tears streaked down my face, leaving cold tracks on the flesh of my cheeks. I began to shiver, as if somewhere a door had opened to let in an icy breeze. “Yes. I'm here. I...I'm sorry I didn't come up there last weekend. Something happened. Something I couldn't get out of.”

Silence. Then, finally, she spoke again: “You always were a selfish little shit.” And she hung up the phone before I could even reply.

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 2am 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

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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 looked 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

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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.

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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 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

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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 bear 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 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.

"Hello, Mike. I have some bad news."

It was Aunt Hilda, and I knew what she was going to say before she even began to speak the words. I'd already been informed of the news last night, by that bastard Harris.

"She's dead, isn't she? Jen's dead?"

There was a lengthy silence on the line, which was soon filled by the sound of Aunt Hilda crying. I'd never known her to weep before, and it struck me as pitiful. I hung up the phone; didn't bother answering it when it rang again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary McMahon lives, works and writes in West Yorkshire but possesses a New York state of mind. He shares his life with a wife, a son, and the nagging stories that won't give him any peace until he writes them.

Other Books by Gary McMahon

Rain Dogs (novel) - Humdrumming

How to Make Monsters (collection) - Morrigan Books

All Your Gods Are Dead (novella) - Humdrumming

Dirty Prayers (collection) - Gray Friar Press

Rough Cut (novella) - Pendragon Press

For more information please visit the website

<http://www.garymcmahon.com>

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