

Townsend knew it was over. He'd really fucked it this time. Rheaden would get off. He could picture him now, sliding down the steps of the police yard with a spring in his step, with his ridiculous shit-eating grin, got one-over on the cops again. And Townsend would be out of a job at best. At worse, he'd be the new occupant in Rheaden's cell.

Townsend paused at the door of the corner office. He felt eyes burning the back of his head. The clack of typewriters in the bullpen had slowed to a crawl; all the detectives had paused to watch the condemned man walk to his death. Waiting for the show to begin. He shot a look over his shoulder, back at the other detectives, who quickly tried to look busy, back to their desks or to each-other. The little act of defiance sent a rush of heat through Townsend's chest, momentarily melting the knot of humiliation that had gripped it.

"Let's get this over with," he said, and rapped the glass of the Inspector's office.

The thin glass rattled in the pane, and a voice from inside bid him enter.

The Inspector's office was lit by a single buzzing bulb without a shade. He sat cramped into the far corner behind a battered coppertop desk. The divots and dents in its polished surface reflected distorted versions of the blazing white light bulb, and the far reaches of the room, around which were a dozen or so filing cabinets, were cast in grey shadows. The room had that arclight smell of electrical burning that burned Townsend's nostrils.

"Detective Constable," said the Inspector, "Sit."

Townsend took the chair on the near side of the table. Its flimsy metal legs squawked, and the entire frame juddered in protest as Townsend occupied it.

The Inspector had Townsend's case file open in front of him, its contents fanned out artfully for ease-of-access. There were snippets of typed, witness reports replete with Townsend's blocky handwritten notes along the margins, silvertypes of the crime scene and the various pieces of evidence that composed Townsend's case against Rearden. Rearden's mugshot leered at him, half hidden by a page from his own duty ledger. His gap-toothed grin seemed to say 'Nice try, copper.'

"I've been going over your case, constable, before I file this with the Magistrate."

"Yes Sir," said Townsend, still absorbing the file in front of him. What had the Inspector been looking at the most? - Could he tell from the crumples and dogears in the pages, which parts he had gone back to? Maybe the Inspector hadn't figured him out, maybe Townsend was just overreacting; he was here to be told job well done, good work for building a solid case against this one. You're a proper thief-taker, Robby my boy.

"Take me through the chain of events," said the Inspector, calling Townsend out of his hopeful, reality-denying daydream. No, this was not pat on the back time. This was you-better-fucking-explain-yourself time.

"Spareday last," began Townsend, "At approximately ten-o'-five in the morning, two suspects entered the post-office on Merrow Street with the intent of robbery. They threatened the postmaster and told her to relinquish cash, and soup ration cards. The post office had received two hundred cards; twenty thousand soup tickets, that morning. One of the suspects shot and injured a post-marshall with a slamfire shop-gun."

The Inspector leafed through the silvertypes in Townsend's report. The post-office, littered with ration cards where the thieves had made off with them. The post-marshall's injuries; serious, but not life-threatening. The tubular shape of the slamfire shotgun they'd recovered from the getaway vehicle, along with the shells found in Rheaden's gaff. The Inspector lingered on some of the blue-grey prints more than others. Why? He'd had ample time to look through them.

Townsend stalled as the Inspector reached the end of the packet of silvertypes. He cleared his throat, buying time, trying to compose himself. The Inspector was putting him off, trying to unnerve him. Townsend thought there'd be shouting; normally there was shouting. He'd seen plenty of other detectives get the treatment, and the Inspector didn't normally hold back. Maybe the shouting was to come. Maybe this was just another tactic. Make him sweat.

"They made off in the direction of Tile Lane with around a hundred or so ration books. There, they had a gondola waiting, but they got into trouble at Dead Man's Corner,"

"Where the water runs out. Dried up." said the Inspector.

"Yes Sir. We later recovered the gondola, along with a quantity of the ration books, the firearm, following a tip from a member of the public."

Townsend caught a whiff of the stinking mud he had waded through to reach the stricken gondola. The thieves had turned it over, to hide their loot. They were hoping to come back for it, but never quite got that far. The home-made shotgun had been found a few feet away; one of them had hastily tried to bury it in the mud. Concealing evidence; another charge for Rheaden's voluminous rap sheet.

"Ashday last," Townsend went on, "I, and Detective Constable Rushford conducted a search of an address in Stiltown where we suspected Rheaden may be residing. That information came from an informant of mine."

The Inspector's hand moved off the packet of silvertypes and thumbed through another selection of documents. His grey eyes flicked from the corner of one document to the next, his expression unreadable. Was he looking for something in particular? - Or did he just want Townsend to think he was?

"I didn't see a petty cash claim," he said.

"No sir," said Townsend. "I have good eyes in Stiltown."

He hadn't had to have shaken many trees there amongst the rambling ghetto in the silt at the north of the city where the sea had begun to recede towards the horizon. Populated by the unfortunate and the desperate, but still a class above the Sunken District further down the bay. It wasn't hard to find someone Rheaden had pissed off recently, someone who was all too happy to give him up for gin money. Townsend had paid out of his own pocket, and gladly too; a couple of shilling was worth it if it meant really nailing Rheaden this time.

"We arrested Rheaden on the premises and transported him to the station. A follow-up team conducted a search of his abode whilst Detective Constable Rushford and I questioned the suspect."

They'd questioned him pretty hard. For six hours. Rheaden made out that he knew nothing, that it wasn't him. Rheaden always said that; little shit-prick had a rap sheet as long as Townsend's arm and he 'never done any of it'. This was exactly Rheaden's way of operating. He was a born mugger, city native, who'd diversified into stamps and ration cards after the sea began to wither. Townsend had known him for years; he'd do a few months inside, a few more out on the street before getting caught for something-or-other. But it never stuck. Rheaden was as slippery as an eel.

During the interrogation Townsend and Rushford had failed to wipe that damn shit-eating grin off Rheaden's face. He knew. He knew the follow-up team wouldn't find anything, or at least nothing that would tie him to the crime. They found a little cash, some stamps, the shells, but none of the ration cards. Shitbag was learning, getting smarter. Smart enough not to keep stolen goods at his gaff.

The boys in forensics found Rheaden's fingerprints on the shells, and they would work in the shop-gun found with the gondola, but that wasn't conclusive. Rheaden said he'd confiscated them from some kids who must have found them, or something. He was doing his civic duty, and no, he couldn't remember what the kids looked like.

They paraded him in front of the postmaster, but she couldn't pick him out of a lineup. Both he and his accomplice had been masked. They appealed for eyewitnesses who may have seen two men commandeer a gondola on Tile Street, but they weren't much good either. Time was slipping away. They needed to find something to pin on him, or he'd walk. And next time, the post-marshall might not be so lucky to walk away.

"You had no physical evidence tying Rheaden to the crime," said the Inspector. His tone wasn't reproachful, just a dry statement of fact. The hairs on the back of Townsend's arms prickled. This was the Inspector gearing up, he knew it. Handing him the rope with which he would hang himself.

"So," the Inspector continued. His eyes sought out Townsend's and locked on them. "You conducted another search of Rheaden's abode in Stiltown."

"Yes, Sir."

"What led you to that?"

"Just a hunch, sir."

Lie. There was no hunch, only desperation. Townsend wasn't about to let Rheaden slip through his fingers.

"Good hunch, Detective," said the Inspector. It was an accusation. He knew horseshit when he smelled it.

He found the report on what Townsend had found in his second search and pulled it to the front. One row of stamps, found rolled up into a cylinder and stuffed into a crack in the floorboards. Forensics confirmed they had Rheaden's fingerprints on them, and that they were from the same print run as the stash recovered from the canal. It was exactly the physical evidence needed to tie Rheaden to the crime. Exactly what was needed to put him away for a long time, years and years.

"You showed Rheaden some of the soup tickets in evidence during your questioning," said the Inspector.

"Yes, Sir."

"He didn't handle the exhibit at all, did he?"

Townsend paused. What did the Inspector want to hear? Why all these games? It was obvious he knew Townsend had fabricated evidence - the crucial evidence, against Rheaden. So why all the pussyfooting around? Why not just chew him out and tell him to sling his hook? That he was a disgrace, unfit to bear a warrant card? That was the Inspector's style, not this softly-softly stuff.

"No, Sir," said Townsend, "He denied knowing anything about these particular books. 'Fuck all to do with him' was his exact verbiage, I believe. Sir." he added after.

"And if someone were to reexamine the evidence, they wouldn't find anything amiss with the ration books you recovered from the gondola? - No 'missing tickets'?"

So this was it. Either the Inspector wanted to hand him a good amount of rope, or he wanted Townsend to fess up. He'd already figured out what Townsend had done, and how. He wanted honesty.

Or, not that. Maybe this wasn't about Townsend. Maybe what he wanted to know was how well Townsend had covered his tracks. If there would be any blow-back, if the Magistrate would send the case back to them, and Rheaden back to his shack in the stilt-borne shantytown, laughing all the while. Maybe that's what he'd wanted all along; to proceed with the next step, in confidence.

"No, Sir," said Townsend, "nothing like that."

There was a beat. The arc-bulb overhead spluttered and fizzled slightly. The Inspector swept up the papers of Townsend's report and gave them a light tap on the desk before slipping them back into the manilla folder they were bound in.

"Okay then. That's all Detective."

"Sir," said Townsend. He rose from the chair, parked it back under the desk and left the office. He went around the side of the bullpen, watched the other detectives pretend not to watch him. He went out to the yard and smoked half a ration of cigarettes one-after-the-other, trying to calm his nerves. Then he went back to his desk. It was over. He didn't know what it meant, but it was over.

Rheaden's trial came and went. Townsend was called to give evidence before the Magistrate. It was easier to lie the second time, now that it wasn't just his lie, it was *our* lie; the precinct's, the police's. Rheaden got eight years. The Inspector bought a round of drinks. No-one ever spoke of it again.

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“Sir, could you come with me a moment. There’s a matter downstairs which requires your attention.”

Birkenwell lowered the morsel of meat from his mouth, and set both it and his cutlery down on the far side of the plate. A dribble of jous, which had been ready to be eaten, dribbled down the handle of the fork.

The waiter took a short step back, but continued to hover. A polite way of saying ‘Yes, immediately.’

Birkenwell leaned to his right, and gently touched the forearm of his wife, who had the misfortune of being captured in conversation by some tedious old judge of the second or third circuit, Birkenwell wasn’t sure which, with a perforated neck goiter that he scratched between helpings.

She looked up at him as he rose from his seat, folding his napkin with the other hand and depositing it on the seat of his chair. The corners of her lips turned down as she looked between her husband and the waiter hovering behind him, as if to say ‘You can’t leave me like this.’

“Telephone call,” he said softly, rubbing her forearm reassuringly. “Won’t be a minute.”

“A Magistrate’s work is never done, eh Birchwell?” croaked the insufferable old fart.

Birkenwell chuckled politely and demurred something noncommittal in response. He gave his wife a peck on the cheek, before following the waiter out of the Chambers’ dining room into the backrooms of the courthouse.

The waiter didn’t know what precisely required Birchwell’s attention. A disturbance of some kind, outside. Dealt with now. A woman.

Unfortunately, that was all Birkenwell had to hear.

He quickly outpaced the waiter. He knew where he was going, he knew what ‘downstairs’ meant in the context of polite euphemisms in the courthouse. The cells. He’d been there plenty of times when he was still a uniformed officer, before he’d matriculated into the role of Magistrate.

The corridors were otherwise empty. It was long past business hours. Come morning, the courthouse would once again be thronging with people. The once brightly-coloured tiles underfoot were brushed and faded from the trudging of guilty men through them, gouging out a path over decades, with the soles of their shoes and the chains around their ankles.

Birkenwell found the discreet door, well camouflage by the glazed tiles lining the hall to the courtroom, and went inside. The stairwell was lit from below, and echoed the tap of his feet as he descended. From the other end rose muffled guffaws, the clatter of dice and glass bottoms

on wood, the dull-throated protestations of prisoners awaiting their trials; roused from their uneasy slumber by the disturbance.

He was met at the gate by the guard captain, who unlocked the heavy metal grill with a key from the set on his belt. Birkenwell removed his dinner jacket and threw it into the guardroom, where it narrowly missed one of the dicing jailers. Something reeked of soiled cloth; whether them, the prisoners, or even the old, crumbling bricks themselves.

Captain Raines explained what had happened, but it came as no surprise to Birkenwell. A woman had been causing a disturbance outside the courthouse. Ranting and raving, dosed out of her mind. They'd put her in one of the holding cells temporarily, but she had wanted Birkenwell by name. They thought it best to bring him down first, before summoning the police, or letting her go.

Birkenwell didn't agree. They should have moved her along. The absolute last thing they should have done is tear him away from this very important dinner. All the Chamber judges were there, the Magistrates. His gods-be-damned wife. This was meant to be an evening of celebration, where he could be introduced to all the important people he *needed* to know if the next stage of his career was ever going to get off the ground.

The last thing he needed was some caned-up junkie whore calling for him *by name* on the steps of the damn courthouse.

Birkenwell peered around the corner from the guardroom, to the only open-faced holding cell which was occupied.

She was lying on her back, trying to shield her eyes from the buzzing arclight set into the wall at the back of the cell. She wasn't succeeding; too fidgety. She alternated between covering her eyes with her forearms and hanging into the floor for dear life. She had her legs crossed, knees together, rubbing her feet together. These were the cane-labours; the onset of a comedown.

Birkenwell had seen it before, countless times, and it never failed to disgust him. He'd seen junkies writhing in their own filth, completely numb to the world as their insides burned up. This one was no different, except he knew this one's name.

"Telephone," said Birkenwell, turning away from the cane-stricken woman and back to Raines. The Captain pointed back towards the guardhouse. Birkenwell swept in, snatching the receiver from its hook on the wall. The jailers abruptly adjourned their dice game and snatched their ration-wagers and bottles from the table.

Birkenwell tried one number, but it failed to connect. He tried another, but the phone just rang and rang, nobody picked up. He tried a third; the number that Tommy Moors didn't think he had.

He waited. There was a crackle on the line. The dial tone warbled and shifted in pitch as the phone tried to connect through a ramshackle and creaking infrastructure to the other side of the city. There was a click, and it began to ring. After three, Tommy picked up.

There was something going on in the background. A party. There were people laughing, chattering. Brass instruments. A beat for dancing. Tommy must be having the time of his life.

"Hello what?" said Tommy, a hint of irritation in his voice.

"Tommy," said Birkenwell tersely.

"Oi Oi, Lewis, nice to hear from you, how'd you get this number?"

"Don't think you have any secrets from me Tommy," said Birkenwell. "I know all your grubby little secrets, including your club."

"It's not a *secret*, Lewie," said Tommy. There was a cackle of womens' laughter. Birkenwell didn't know what was so fucking funny. He could picture him now; girl on each knee, probably high on cane the three of them. Laughing at his expense.

"There's a problem here, at the courthouse."

"Sounds like your problem," said Tommy.

"No," snapped Birkenwell. "It's your fucking problem. She's here, the girl, at the courthouse."

"Which girl?"

"Caitin fucking something."

"Who?"

Birkenwell wanted to scream. 'The girl' could describe almost anyone to Tommy Moor, there were so many of them. And he never remembered any of their names.

"Katy Kiss," said Birkenwell. The words tasted disgusting coming from his lips.

"Oh, ohhhhh," said Tommy. That name, the name he gave her, rang a bell. "Well, if she's there, sounds like the right place for her. You've got that dinner thing tonight, don't you?"

Another round of raucous laughter. He was loving it. He loved to see Birkenwell sweat, fall over himself trying to un-fuck Tommy Moor's messes. This was obviously comedy gold.

"You need to send someone here to take care of it, now. I can't do this right now Tommy. My fucking wife is here, Tommy."

"She's not my problem anymore, I.."

The line fuzzed. Tommy's voice distorted and warbled, slowing down and speeding up like a broken phonograph. Birkenwell couldn't make a word out.

".. You still there, Lewis?"

"Send someone, now," said Birkenwell, through gritted teeth.

The line went down. Birkenwell mashed the receiver a few times and tried to redial, but it refused to connect.

He ran his hand through his hair, and it came away wet; his own ice cold sweat. His wife would be wondering where he is by now, the others too. Would she, or anyone else come looking? The girl wasn't a danger right now; too strung out on cane, but he couldn't afford to leave her overnight to sweat it out. Tomorrow she'd be sober, lucid, coherent. She'd talk. She knew names, faces. She knew him.

A plan formed in his mind. He had to get her out of here, away to another part of the city. With enough cane in her system, maybe she wouldn't remember even being here. Talk to the guards, nobody would say a peep.

Birkenwell rounded on Raines. The guard captain jolted slightly, confronted by Birkenwell's steely glare.

"Did you search her on the way in? She have any more cane on her?"

Raines started to speak, but Birkenwell cut him off.

"Get it, now. You two," he said, snapping his fingers at the two jailers, "Open the cell, get her in here."

They looked at each-other, then to Raines.

"Now, you dimwits! Get her out of the cell."

They obeyed. Birkenwell was, after a fashion, their superior. Steady work wasn't an easy thing to come by in the city these days. They couldn't afford to piss him off.

Raines opened a locker with his keys. Inside were boxes of the meagre possessions prisoners came into the courthouse with. On a shelf at the top, unboxed, is where he had placed Caitin's effects.

Birkenwell snatched the purse first; little more than a cloth pouch with a broken-toothed zip that didn't close. Inside were a few coins, and a ratty bundle of soup stamps. Barely anything at all. He grabbed a few notes from his jacket pocket; real currency, the kind most people in Caitin's position would never see. He grabbed the other items on the shelf; house key, streetcar pass, a box of matches, and stuffed them into the purse too. Then, finally he reached for the cane.

He broke off about a fingernail's length from the end of the graphite-grey stick. It was a little tacky, and gritty; cheap garbage.

"What are you going to do?" said Raines, looking between the frenzied Birkenwell, and the cane as Birkenwell massaged it into a putty, the warmth of his fingers making it more malleable. Birkenwell didn't answer.

"What if she overdoses?"

"She won't," snapped Birkenwell, "she'll be fine."

He wasn't sure if she would be. But this was the plan now.

There was a ruckus from the holding cell. Birkenwell rounded the corner to find Caitin alert and wailing. The jailers had her by the legs, one each, dragging her along the floor by her ankles. She'd gripped on to the frame of the sliding cell door, her knuckles turning white. The two jailers heaved, but couldn't shake her grip.

She looked at him, and for a moment there was a glimmer of recognition - like he was someone she had crossed paths with maybe once before, and wasn't sure why this person was familiar. They struggled for a few moments longer. Raines tried to prise her hands off the frame, but she kept managing to claw her way back on.

Birkenwell stepped forwards, and closed his hand around the sliding bars of the cell. She was going to let go.

He swung the sliding bars shut. There was a crunch. Caitin screamed. Raines swore. The arclight buzzed, or maybe it was just the ringing in his ears. Caitin's lurching, ragged sobs waxed and waned like the sounds on the busted telephone line.

Caitin curled into a ball, clutching her hand to her face; the one that hadn't been free of the slamming door. Her fingers were a bloody, broken mess. There might have been bone.

This was no longer the plan.

Birkenwell grabbed the hem of her skirt and dragged her out of the gap. She didn't resist this time.

“Listen to me, you filthy junkie bitch. If I so much as smell you anywhere near me again, I’ll give you a matching pair of these.”

He squeezed down on her shattered hand. Not hard, but any amount of pressure was a further agony. Caitin yowled, tried to pull her hand back to her chest, but he held firm. He wanted her to get the message, he wanted her to know that he really, really meant it.

She fell limp, silent, and Birkenwell let go, smearing what remained of the molten cane onto her dress as he got back to his feet. Raines and the two jailers stood there, stunned.

“You two, said Birkenwell, his calm returning, pulse normalising. “You like the sound of extra rations this month? Five, ten, extra beer rations, for both of you. Get her to a surgeon, somewhere away from here. Say you found her in a bad way. Here”

He fetched his jacket, and Caitin’s purse. He threw her purse at his feet, and thrust another pair of notes at the jailer, who was moving to manhandle Caitin’s good arm into a carrying position.

“There won’t be any more problems, will there Captain?”

Raines shook his head, and mumbled an answer Birkenwell took to be a close to a ‘no’.

“Glad to hear it. Now give me the key to the washroom, I need to freshen up before the next course.”

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Farrow squeezed in between a hulking ursman, the tips of whose bristles had begun to turn grey, and another layered-up person who may have been man or woman, it was impossible to tell. Neither protested. She squatted on her haunches and, balancing her tin bowl above her knees, made a tent with her coat to trap the warmth from it, so long as it may last.

Spoon held awkwardly in her fist, she mashed the chunk of loaf more extender than true bread, until she had made the whole thing a beery-soupy-bready porridge suitable for eating. She raised a spoonful to her lips and raised the scarf wrapped around her face just enough to let it pass, sucking in the mash, trying not to let it touch her tongue. Something prickly snagged at the back of her mouth and she spat it out into the dirt beneath her legs. A fishbone.

The ursman to her right chuckled. "Winner," he said, reaching into the gap and taking the fishbone for himself. He popped it into his mouth and crunched. Farrow didn't mind; you had to do what you had to do out here.

Work on the canal never stopped. Neither rain nor shine, nor heat that baked the silt harder than stone, or chill that froze it solid. Even as her shift broke for lunch there were hundreds of other navvies still working on her section, and thousands in total on the other sections combined, snaking their way across the dry seabed, working night and day to rejoin the city and the sea.

Her section was in the shadow of the *Ready Knock*, the ship too large to go around, and so in the tradition of the navigators of old, they would be going through it. Knock Section was a good one to work at; the bulk of the stranded ship shielded the navvies from the worst of the rip-winds which rolled across the dry sea, picking up silt and stones as they went, and pelted and buried the works almost daily. But there were downsides too; winter was even colder in its shadow.

On the other side of the queue for the soup wagon was a throng of men, women and others crowding around for their turn for some warmth. Someone had set up a bunch of little gas heaters for strictly a ticket-a-minute. The time was ruthlessly enforced by an ursman with a billhook, with which to yank anyone who overstayed away from the sputtering gas stoves. A girl wrapped from head-to-toe in what looked like old steamer flags took payment. Besides from a meal of beer-soup and bread or a minute by a heater, a soup-ticket was the only way to get what you needed out here; a new shovel for your handle, the rent of a blanket for the night, fifteen minutes of sex. These things were luxuries Farrow couldn't afford. She preferred to eat, and the navvies' pay could scarcely even cover that.

She would have to be content with bunching together with the other navvies and making the most of what warmth that was worth. It was almost cosy inside of her coat-tent. The soup wouldn't stay hot for long, and she savoured the sensation, if not the taste, as each spoonful went down her throat and settled in her stomach. The cold nipped her chin each time she had to uncover it to let the food in. A pleasant heat radiated from the bowl to her legs and chest, but her extremities remained as frozen and numb as ever.

She hadn't taken her boots off since the cold snap had set in, and now she was too afraid to. Afraid she might find her toes black and lifeless, or that they might snap off like brittle icicles if she tried to move them. Her fingers at least, numb and crippled as they were, she knew were alright; they still hurt.

On the other side of the path, a few feet away, another navvy, a woman, Farrow thought, was tearing up strips of old newspaper and shoving them inside her coat. She was well-practiced at it, folding a crease and then tearing down the page into perfectly parallel, thumb-width strips. The woman's arms rattled as she did so from all the added insulation inside them.

Farrow watched the woman's hands work, uncomfortably reminded about how clumsy her own were. She could grip the handle of a shovel or a mug of broth, or hold a spoon or a pencil in the awkward, whole-fisted way a child could. But something as simple as tearing strips from a newspaper was still, and probably would always be, beyond her. She felt a pang of shame, which blossomed into righteous anger, for the part of the world that had been stolen from her. Hers was a shallow half-life, squatting in the mud, eating shit and never feeling full. Safe, away from the city, amongst the throng of navvies indistinguishable from one-another by their motley dress and thick crust of mud. Alive, but not living. Never able to truly live again.

The anger felt good, but it didn't last. Something stopped it dead in its tracks. A face, *his face*. The navvie opposite had torn through it, crumpled one half and pushed it behind her head into her hood. The other half dangled at an angle. He was smiling, uniformed, arm outstretched, embracing someone in a handshake on the steps of the councilchamber. Both were smiling for the camera.

None of that looked like the Tommy Moore she knew. The rail-thin, menace-fuelled thug who hid behind his badge and thought, somehow, he was better than the men that traded in the exact same things he did because of it.

"Stop!" shouted Farrow, just as the navvie's fingers began to tear the next strip. The woman looked up, her expression rendered unknowable by the slit-like dust goggles across her eyes. But she hadn't torn the next strip off yet.

"Let me see that, I want to see." said Farrow, shuffling towards the woman on the balls of her feet. The navvie recoiled, folding the newspaper under her arm. Did she think Farrow was a thief? Or a threat? Mad, most likely.

"That man, I want to read it." The urgency in Farrow's voice was rising. What was this absurd need? What was the danger? It was only a silvertype in an old newspaper. It wasn't him, he wasn't here. He hadn't found her.

The navvie still wasn't getting it. The madwoman was becoming more agitated. She got up to leave, get away.

“Wait!” said Farrow. “Here, look.”

Farrow scraped the rest of her mash into the woman’s bowl, the spoon rattling over the chips in the battered enamel. People were staring now, bewildered, bemused. Farrow’s stomach growled. Old newspaper wouldn’t sate it, her gut knew this was a bad decision, to waste food, but Farrow didn’t care.

“Now we have to trade. Just that sheet, him, there.”

The navvie was done. She slipped a few sheets free of the newspaper and flung them at Farrow, hoping to distract her whilst she grabbed her bowl to make a getaway. Farrow snatched at the top sheet, the only one that mattered, leaving the rest to catch in the wind and spiral away.

She needed seclusion. Somewhere to look at this properly, away from these gawkers. Fuck them, fuck what they thought. She stumbled back down towards the canal bed, clutching the paper tight to her chest, tight enough that no-one else could see. She didn’t want them to see. She found a heap of spoil to hide behind, safely out-of-sight of the others. The *Ready Knock* loomed over her. Breakers, suspended by ropes, scuttled over her hull, breaking it down, ready for the passage of the canal through the ship’s belly.

She peeled the sheet away from her chest and pushed it down into the dirt, placing her hand over Tommy Moor’s face. She wanted to look, not be looked at. Especially by him.

The words leapt out at her, nothing but whirling nonsense. Take it slow, one word at a time. Breathe, and let it breathe.

It was an obituary. Tommy Moor was dead. Detective Superintendent Thomas Moor, pillar of the community, who held down law and order during the city’s darkest times. Thomas Moor, beloved husband and father.

Not Tommy Moor the pimp, Tommy Moor the pusher. Tommy Moor the murderer. The Tommy Moor *she* knew. The obituary carried none of that; the *real* Tommy Moor. It was nothing but a pack of lies. Or if not lies, certainly not the whole truth.

Farrow’s breath was heavy in her chest. Her legs were shaking. They didn’t feel her own, these sensations, what she had just read, didn’t feel like her own. It had happened to someone else, some other Caitin Farrow who wasn’t her. She was a stranger in her own skin, the runaway panic belonged to somebody else. She was trapped in somebody else’s body, somebody else’s life.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. In her early days, in her dreams, Tommy Moor had come for her, calling her by a name that wasn’t her own. Come to claim her, take her back. Every time it happened, she moved. Months on the run, trying to stay ahead of him. Constantly

on the edge of exhaustion, of falling apart completely. She'd got clean, got work, and slowly the dreams abated, growing less-and-less frequent with each passing month where he, in fact, did not send his goons for her. The only Tommy Moor that cared about her was the one inside her head. But she never felt free. She was always cold in his shadow, and could never escape it.

Tommy Moor was meant to die in prison, and Farrow would spit on his body and dance on his grave, triumphant. She, and all the other victims would be vindicated. And everyone that had ever helped Tommy, or protected Tommy, or turned a blind eye to him, they'd be the outcasts, they'd be the ones constantly looking over their shoulders, sleeping with one eye open, knowing that justice would be coming for them too.

Not this. Not this.. *nothing*.

There was nothing inside. None of the relief, the joy, the *release* she should feel. She was empty, and she knew nothing would ever fill it. Tommy Moor was gone, but his shadow was still heavy over the city, over her.

Someone else found her before she found her body again properly. Maybe they heard her crying, or shouting, or cared enough to notice she hadn't come back from break. They took her to the gang foreman, a man she liked, and lucky for her liked her well enough too. He gave her coffee and let her rest.

She slept, and began to feel more normal. She got rid of the newspaper, forgot she had ever read about it. Go back to how it was before. The dirt, the pain, the hunger and cold. They were never going away.

Nothing had changed, and now nothing was going to change.

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