

Returning

by David Martin

YOU cross the park as the evening gathers, the playground is deserted, streetlights spark up orange beyond the trees that veil the main road. You feel your journey pushing at your back, the last scraps of the energy of a train hammering north.

At the far edge of the open ground the last passers-by empty out into the shadows, called home by evening. A few cars pass, defying the descending quiet, but you barely register them.

The street is a long, slowly curving avenue of grand but neglected townhouses, subdivided into flats and bedsits, hedged in by darkly overgrown patches of garden and yards buried in drifts of junk. A cat glares from the wreck of a bin bag, rusting cars and white vans form an outer defensive wall at the kerbside. Traffic lights in the distance signal the way to the city's invisible heart and what life may still beat there. And there is the house, second to last in the terrace.

Your feet guide you through the gate, that rusting shriek instantly familiar, as is the comfortable fit of those few paces to the door. But something jars.

You take out your keys and for a moment stand puzzled. The lock looks wrong. It is not the one you remember. The door itself seems different. You try your key anyway, it scrapes, won't even go in, never mind turn. But the lock is not new, like the door itself it is weathered and discoloured.

You reach for the bell and find not the panel of six for the shabby bedsits, one of which you still call home and every shadow and smell of which you can instantly summon to mind, but only a single bell push, and no mark on the whitewashed wall where the panel should have been. You step back. This is the house, unmistakably. This is the street, the number. But there's no sign of life behind the curtains of the front room.

You push the bell firmly and then snatch your hand away, as an unfamiliar summons shatters the silence. A pause that lasts, then you hear movement. For a moment you feel relief.

You have never seen the man who emerges. An expensively-dressed but tough-looking 40-something, the hallway beyond him is brightly-lit and cleanly painted, there's no trace of that musty twilight of junk mail and old bikes. You realise he has asked you who you are several times and looks unimpressed. "Who are you?" you blurt back, panicked. "I live here. What's going on?"

It is not only the brutal fact of his presence, but the assurance which radiates from him of his right to be there, which makes your words wilt in your mouth. You don't even convince yourself.

"I've never seen you before in my life. I've lived here for eight years. Now leave. Please." The word "please" has never sounded so much like a warning.

"What's happened? I've only been away for..."

You scramble for concrete facts to fight back with, to put this imposter, this joker in his place, but find yourself grabbing only at images, as though a false floor has suddenly given way beneath you.

Light through aged curtains filtering into a room. That rented smell of gas and damp.

A woman's voice, her silhouette in the half light of early morning, the smell of her hair falling down on your face, her bones hard against yours in a single bed. And then an echo of a feeling, like the sensation that sometimes lingers after awakening of that primal, childhood sense of loss which we only fully reencounter in dreams.

The feeling of a railway station on a winter Sunday, the tannoy's ghostly litany echoing in its empty spaces like the names of the dead, the rails telegraphing messages of distance and absence. The need that drew you back here. But you can't remember her name. How can you not remember her name?

The door shuts firmly in your face.

Who lived here? You saw the old house beneath the new in that brief glimpse of the hallway. An incomprehensible time has passed since you last stood here.

You stand for a moment and then shuffle away. But a few yards down the street (and where would you go?) a new, determination takes hold of you. This is a wind-up, a joke. You probably deserve it,

but it's cruel. You grasp for fragments of that purpose that drove you here.

The yawning mouth of the alleyway offers you a chance, to catch whoever's pulled this stunt red-handed. You duck into it and find your way to the house's back gate. It too is unfamiliar and heavily padlocked, but you heave yourself up enough to look over the parapet of the wall. The back extension looms shiplike in the blue dusk above you, upstairs windows bright with welcome.

There's a yard, oddly small like you remember for such a substantial house, and a brightly-lit ground floor window gives onto a brand-new kitchen. A middle-aged woman with expensive hair is chopping something up, while a teenage girl sits at a table pretending to do homework. The girl looks out into the dark, she looks right at you without seeing you. And something about that look finishes it.

You walk away, dazed and purposeless, a breath of wind brushes along the brick walls. You gradually become aware of the alleys around you, a penumbral maze of secret connections, the grooves on the cerebellum of some vast stone brain. Unfamiliar side snickets open up, offering glimpses of the streets beyond: ancient tracks running unseen through the everyday life of the parallel terraces. You imagine or half sense someone shadowing your walk a few streets away, glimpsed in the moments when you both pass the same opening. When you look, there is of course no-one there.

Further in now, there should be an exit ahead but the alley keeps curving, the way obscure. The side openings grow darker and smaller, no longer gateways to new places but negative spaces, hungry voids. Rusted phone wires carve up the sky.

You panic now as you plunge on, walls and firmly shut gates flicker past, the alley is winding in on itself, you must have gone round in several full circles. There are no glimpses of the streets beyond any more.

You briefly remember this city, its long history piled up in confusion, where the shouts of drunks echo through the tread of ghostly legions, and the distant chanting of monks filters into the

gloom of rented rooms where laden ashtrays and empty cans bear witness to the other ghosts, the lives that never properly began.

Airless summer nights when the city shares your bed, whispering to you, and the long winter of rains that labours to wash the dark ooze of life clean and bury all secrets in the murk and bones of the riverbed.

And for a moment, there is again her face, and again the echo of that loss, but clearer now, as everything else becomes obscure. For a moment she cries out and gives you a look of loathing, summoning a memory of a terrible rage welling up blood-red. Then even the face slips away from you as you lurch onwards, winding towards the centre of the maze. And then ahead a wall.

Once again you stand in front of the door to the house you are shut out from but cannot leave. A dead end. All possibilities finally swallowed by shadow, all options closed, streets, towns, railways and alleyways have all faded out. The world shrunk to a crumbling singularity, the point where it all began.

Above the wind rattles the old wires. The outlines of the wall and the door itself start to fade into the deepening night. All around you, the alley silts up gently with the debris of lives, a slow landslide of lost time, the knowledge that something vital was once lost, a turning missed.

Unfamiliar constellations wheel above in a ragged, moonwashed sky. You remember nothing.

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