Tattooed Hands

by G.E. Simons

Maher smeared thick, white toast with potted meat and licked the marbled residue of victual paste and butter from the blade of the knife he had used before dropping it into the slimy water of the sink.

He gripped the corner of the laden bread with his yellowy teeth and snatched his car keys from the kitchen counter, walked down the short, sticky linoleum hallway and left the flat.

The front door had a smashed glass panel, which was covered with wooden board and he slammed it hard behind him. It hadn't closed too easily since that night.

He descended the external, iron stairwell that zigzagged across the front of the housing association block that sat on the main carriageway to the east, and on the once industrial outskirts, of the city.

There was a car park located to the side of the building. It was tucked behind the long dormant groaning metal and blackened oak of the commercial piers and jetties that were steadily corroding back into an ocean. A watery commerce that they had once so majestically straddled.

Snowdrifts of coarse beach sand clung in the corners of the car park. They stacked in layers against broken pallets, bags of refuse that cats had infiltrated before dragging out carrion in rinds and sodden rags that had maybe once been clothing.

Maher slid behind the wheel of his mustardy orange Opel Manta and adjusted the angle of the rearview mirror.

The car was nearly 30 years old and felt every year of those decades.

He slid the key into the ignition and turned it.

Replacement engine parts moved against each other and sent a hacking plume of oily black smoke into the air, which rose up in curls before being pulled out across the frothy bay of ocean on grasping coastal winds.

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The engine fired into life with a reluctant roar and a clattering rattle of components under the rusting bonnet, as the radio broadcast into life inside the car at the same time.

Maher accelerator padded more fuel into the carburetor to ensure the car was fully awake and the engine roared in a judder that subsided to spindles of uneasy tick over.

He listened to the local bulletin for a moment with his head cocked to the left as he strained to hear the details through crackling reception and the noisy idling of the car.

He turned the volume up as the newsreader detailed a further police appeal for information, in relation to a stabbing that had taken place in the City's Seven Sisters pub last Tuesday.

The incident had left two teenagers from the West Midlands critically ill in an intensive care unit. Their lives had only been saved by quick-thinking patrons who had staunched the blood flow with coats and the fast arrival of an air ambulance from Cardiff.

He listened until the bulletin dissolved into a weather forecast that promised falling temperatures and heavy weekend rainfall.

Maher finished the last of the meaty toast and wiped the greasy residue from his moustache with the back of his left hand before gripping the passenger seat headrest. He craned his neck and checked through the rear windscreen.

He snapped off the radio, reversed in an arc of smoking tyres, then sent the car clanking through open mesh gates and onto the main road out of the city.

Maher gripped the black, padded steering wheel with both hands as he accelerated.

His left was a bluish mess of ink that was corroding with the years like the old piers. But you could still make out a pistol, self-administered crucifixes, badly drawn demonic eyes, numerous dots and jags, a seagull's head, a date from the early 1970's, teardrops and the word ‘fuck'.

The right hand was much the same but was dominated by a skull with the words ‘rise from the nautical' beneath it, botanical flower heads, a ship's sail and the tail of a scorpion.

As he gripped the wheel in impatience and revved at a red traffic light, the scabbing on the knuckles of his left hand began to crack and released a thin ribbon of red which ran across the tattooed gull's head.

He licked the blood clear with the tip of his tongue, before lighting a cigarette as the lights changed to amber and then green.

The grazing on his right knuckles remained bloodlessly coagulated.

His bare forearms also screamed a similar mayhem of fading blue ink. But they were also startlingly punctuated with jet-black recent tattoos that showed Celtic swirls and Japanese lettering that could have spelled out something he considered spiritual.

As he reached the dwindling outskirts of the City, the retail parks and drive thru restaurants gave way to industrial estates and warehousing facilities. These dissolved further into terraces of steel shutters across windows and artless graffiti across bricks and mortar. Albeit with the type of cosmopolitan sea views that the immigrant second homers would die for.

It didn't take long before Maher had left the city boundaries altogether and he pushed the Manta hard along the coast road. It skimmed past a blur of green sand dune razors, which soon transformed into the stony banks of coastal estuary.

The car was a rattle of engine parts as he pushed the speedometer needle towards 80 miles per hour. He crushed out the remains of his cigarette in a bulging ashtray dusting embers onto a carpet that was already a mess of rags, burns, dirt and spills.

After a few miles, the coast road started to noticeably pull away from the tidal river. Soon the flatlands were replaced with dense green vegetation that was penned in by hand made slate walls, mortared together and teased into an Occam's razor of triangular tops.

Beyond the low walls, a thatched lattice of tall conspiring native oak and rowan trees knitted together in a dense thicket. A place that held deep secrets in its trunks and limbs with the consorts of bilberry and dog's mercury all dense and tangled below them.

Maher was heading for a tiny roadside plunge pool that had been naturally carved by a sluice of mountain water that cut over the rock and had drilled its own hollow. The water then ran as a tributary under the road into the main river that flowed through the centre of the nearby village and ultimately out into the estuary.

The pool was incredibly deep. At least eight feet but crystal pure and so clear that you could easily see the flinty shale at its bed. Albeit through the constant foaming kaleidoscope of icy mountain water that hit it from the craggy rock that fell to meet the roadside above it.

He pulled the car into the muddy recess of a five-bar metal gate arousing the attention of the few sheep that scudded like clouds across the green of the meadow beyond it.

He turned off the engine and the car shuddered as if someone had just walked over its breaker's yard grave. The corroded exhaust gasped 21 grams of petroleum soot into the clean air.

Maher's father had first shown him this watery hollow sometime back in the late 1950's. Back then, they would regularly walk out across the fields together from the riverside village where they had lived on a smallholding growing cabbages, cauliflowers and an abundance of root vegetables in the verdant soil.

For decades the Maher family had made a living that way.

Just after the war their trading had mainly been amongst the local community itself. As the region and the country slowly came to terms with the cost of victory but the real price, for many, of rebuilding their lives.

Later as the 1960's ended and the occasional passing trade of holidaymakers on their way to the coast started, they began to place wooden crates of produce at the roadside with hand painted signs and an honesty box for fresh eggs.

He reached across the passenger seat, opened the glove box and removed a neatly parceled oilcloth, along with a cigarette from a half smoked packet that nestled alongside it.

The leafy, back road was deserted. He closed the car door and paused to paste the cigarette to his lower lip, before walking briskly

down the verge, glancing over his shoulder as he carefully unwrapped the parcel.

Maher hadn't been out to the hollow for more than 30 years now. His last visit would have been sometime in the very late 1960's. But as he got nearer and nearer, the unforgettable silvery chiming of aqueous chords playing down the rock, took him right back to the very day that he had last peered down into the water.

He paused amongst the tall grass of the verge for a moment and chinked back the hood his old brass Zippo before lighting the cigarette and letting tarry smoke drift down both of his nostrils.

With eyes tightly closed, he stood for a few seconds with his hands at his side, listening to the rhythm of the water as it slid down the rock. A Washington correspondent satellite delay of the torrent hitting the crystal pool eight feet below followed.

He also vividly remembered his father gently holding him back from the open edge on that final visit. He particularly recalled warnings of the water's depth as he excitedly pointed at a spasm of silver fish belly that disappeared in a muscular swirl of currents out under the road where the water flowed.

All at once he vividly recalled a 1950's of helping with spring sowing on the smallholding. Then chasing the chickens around the little cobbled yard behind the house where his mother would mangle-dry the laundry. A 1960's of walking sugar beet fields to remove the rogue bolters by hand and on other days painting the ironwork of cattle sheds with red oxide. Then a 1970's when the self-inking explosion of tattoos on his hands and then his body began.

As for the decades that followed, he could recall nothing.

He opened his eyes and took a long, hard drag on his cigarette. Before flicking the remaining un-smoked half into the hawthorn thicket that separated the roadside verge from the meadow of grazing sheep.

A nearby dual carriageway that had been completed and opened to great fanfare by the local chamber of commerce in 1983 had reduced the traffic past the hollow to almost nothing now.

Even so, at some point since that last visit a solid wooden barrier had been installed around it. So that you could now lean over the edge in comfort and watch the water tumble into the hollow in modern safety.

The cliff itself still jagged down to the verge. It was spotted with battleship lichens but brightened by the occasional spur of bright yellow globe flower and the purples of ivy leaved toad flax. They had all found a rooted foothold in the wounds slashed across the face of the rock.

Around the opening of the pool itself was a green mayhem of common ferns, lemony sorrel, wood rush and mountain grasses. They made flimsy gate keepers, bending as they did with the pull of the falling water when they grew to their mature height and ended up dangling like hung men. The extremities of their leaves browned, wizened and bloodless.

He placed both hands on the top bar of the wooden barrier, which stood just above waist height. Then took a long deep breathe through his nostrils and swallowed the familiar tastes of clean water, spicy ferns and slippery, wet rock amongst ripe vegetation, plump to the gourd and pulsing.

Maher remembered again that slivery fish belly, spasming and then disappearing somewhere deep and distant on the shoulders of the river all those years ago.

Then he held the knife by the point of its vicious metallic blade and dangled it above the hollow, between fingers all scarred with blue zags, illegible lettering and random ink dots.

He let it hang for a few seconds, its curved edge catching the last of the morning sun, before releasing it into the icy, falling water.

Maher briefly looked up at a rock face that had been abandoned by God many decades ago before turning and walking back to his car, parked over in the muddy gateway of a green meadow hidden by hedgerows and trees.

As the engine rattled back into life the knife began to settle on the shale bed of a watery hollow, eight feet closer to Hell.