THE MOON TUNNEL

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The man in the moon tunnel stops and listens to the night above, shivering despite the sweat which trickles into his ears, making the drums flutter like the beat of pigeons' wings. He stops crawling forward, bringing relief to the agony in his elbows and knees, and places his torch ahead, resting his forehead on his hands, shielding his face from the damp clay floor. The ring on his finger glitters by his eye and he thinks of her, feels her skin and traces, in his imagination, the S-curve of her waist and thigh. He holds the image like a talisman, pushing back the panic which makes him choke, feeling the mass of the suffocating earth above his head. His heartbeat fills the narrow space and he tries to conjure up the image of the sky above.

At that moment, as he lies paralysed below, the shadow of the night cloud begins to drift across the moon. Over the Fens life freezes as the shadow falls on the land, bringing darkness to the soaking fields and the silent river. Rats float with the sluggish stream on the Forty Foot; and pike in the Old West, moonbathing, slip to the safety of the banks. Eels, thrashing through the long grass to forage on the rotting carcass of a sheep, turn instantly to stone. Finally, the newly

shrouded moon is gone, and the world below lies still and waiting.

He must go on, or die here. So he feels for the wooden panels in the tunnel side and counts on: 185, 186, 187. He focuses only on the numbers, blocking out the reality of what he is doing, of where he is, and what is above. The camp sleeps inside its flesh-tearing wire. A village of shadows, more substantial than the men themselves had ever been, diminished by their exile. The dreams of prisoners still pushing that night at the double-locked wooden shutters.

Buried alive, he thinks, and the fear makes him cry out despite himself.

He counts again, trying to ignore the panic that constricts his throat: 230, 231, 232, 233. He stops and curls his body so that he can play the torchlight on the wood. There it is, emblazoned on the single pine board in faded stencil: RED CROSS.

He slips the jimmy from his belt and between the panel edges, easing the wood out from the earth behind. A neat chamber beyond, panelled, like a subterranean letterbox. Inside a tall waxed, oilskin pouch. He grasps it, like a tomb robber, knowing his face will be ugly with the greed that had driven him there.

He lays the torch down again and taking his penknife cuts the twine so that the pouch falls open. The candlestick catches the light, the silver tarnished. Judging its worth he sets it aside. Only the rolled canvas remains, and so his anger mixes with disappointment: is this really all? He cuts a second thread and the picture unfolds: sepia clouds, a visionary shepherd looking up, and the half-obscured disc of the full moon, and lying on the picture the pearls, as white as teeth, making him smile.

'Beautiful?' asks a voice, but not his own.

He fumbles with the torch but is too slow to see his killer. The flash of gunshot lights the tunnel ahead like the arcing lightning that

marks the passage of the night train. Deafened, he never hears the sound that kills him. But he feels the hand, clawing at his fingers and the ring, before the panels above his head, splintered by the percussion of the blast, begin to twist and the earth first trickles, then falls. And, as the weight of the clay crushes his ribs, he hears a scream, and knows it isn't his.

The gunshot, heard above, breaks the spell. A cloud of lapwing rises like smoke over the river and a starburst of light touches the upmost edge of the darkened moon, and time begins again for almost everyone.

THURSDAY, 21ST OCTOBER 2005

CHAPTER ONE

Humphrey H. Holt's licensed minicab stood on Ely market square in the dense, damp heart of an early morning smog. Humph cleaned a fresh circular porthole in the steamed-up windscreen and peered out: nothing; he could have been shrouded on an ice floe in an Antarctic mist. Shivering, he realised he could just see the outlines of the nearest buildings, the old Corn Exchange and the cinema, and a single postbox like a hunched figure, just on the edge of sight. Beyond them the vast bulk of the cathedral loomed, but only in the memory. A duck stood on one leg on the glistening red bricks of the square, its head tucked under a damp wing, while a cat tiptoed by and was gone.

An autumn leaf fell from an invisible sycamore and settled on the windscreen of his beloved Ford Capri. The cabbie considered

it morosely before swishing it aside with the wipers. The smog had enveloped the town for three days now, a suffocating blanket which left an acrid taste on the tongue and made Humph's small, baby-blue eyes water. He rubbed them, and thought about a nap, but decided the effort was too great this early in the day. Instead he turned up the aged cab's heating system, and gently wriggled his body until every one of his sixteen stones was comfortably arranged. He was not so much sitting in his cab as wedged into it.

He punched the 'on' button of the tape deck with a nimble, lean finger. The first instalment of his latest language course flooded the cab with sound: conversational Polish for beginners. As he repeated Justina's greeting to the old village lamplighter he looked east himself, down Fore Hill, towards the Black Fen below. The mist buckled briefly, like a giant duvet being aired, and through the gap he glimpsed the blue smudged horizon as distant and flat as any on the great plains of eastern Europe.

Philip Dryden, chief reporter on *The Crow*, slapped his hand on the cab roof, pulled open the passenger side door and crashed into the seat. At six foot two inches his angular frame had to be folded to fit into Humph's cab – the knees up, and the neck slightly bent. He wore a heavy black overcoat which was spangled with droplets of mist.

'Well, that was highly entertaining,' he said by way of greeting.

He tossed his notebook into the glove compartment, swapping it for one of the miniature bottles of liquor Humph collected on his regular trips to Stansted Airport. Dryden snapped off the bottle top and took a swig of Talisker, single malt. Humph, sensing a sociable moment in their otherwise adversarial relationship, helped himself to a small *crème de menthe*.

Dryden closed his eyes and threw his head back. His face was Early Norman, a medieval arrangement of sombre, geometric features which could have graced the back of any coin from the Conquest to Henry V: a straight brow, jutting cheekbones, and deep-set green eyes, while the black hair was thick and short. His age was thirty-something, and would be for a decade yet.

'I feel like I've been injected with concrete. I was so bored I nearly passed out,' said Dryden. 'Two people did.'

Humph laughed inaudibly, emitting a vaguely suspicious odour of cabbage and curry. Dryden lowered the window despite the damp, and took a second swig. One of the shops on the square had just reopened after a decade of stately dilapidation and now specialised in camping, climbing gear and outdoor pursuits. A mildly famous Alpine climber had been drafted in to cut the red tape. Dryden had just been there to find a story.

'The Fens' own mountaineering supply shop. Brilliant. That's really going to bring 'em in,' said Dryden.

'It might take off,' said Humph, firing the Capri into life and pulling away.

Dryden considered his friend. Humph might be at conversational level in eight obscure European languages but his conversational English was as underdeveloped as the East Anglian Mountain Rescue Service.

'That's quite a recommendation from the owner of the only two-door taxi cab in Ely. That's your unique selling point, is it?' said Dryden, enjoying himself. 'You have a hackney carriage accessible to only half the population. And only half of those who can get in, can get out again.'

'It's good for tips,' said Humph defensively.

'I bet it's good for bloody tips!' said Dryden.

Humph allowed his rippling torso to settle slightly, indicating an end to the subject. He scratched his nails across the nylon chest of his Ipswich Town FC replica shirt and brought the cab to a sharp halt in a lay-by in the cathedral close, realising they were going nowhere. The mist, suddenly thickening, caressed a buttress of the cathedral down which the damp was running in rivers.

'Where next?' said Humph, by way of a challenge.

Dryden was in no hurry, and indeed had not been in a hurry for several years. He turned to the cabbie. 'So. What did the doctor say?'

Humph's physical deterioration had been almost completely masked by the fact that he never got out of his cab. But a recent bout of breathlessness had prompted a surgery visit that morning.

'Well?' Dryden foraged in his overcoat pocket and, discovering a slightly bruised sausage roll, began to munch it with the Talisker.

'He said I should lose three stone – quickly. He gave me a diet sheet. No chips.'

Dryden nodded. 'What you gonna do?'

'Get a second opinion. So, where next, then?'

It was a good question, and one which would have haunted Dryden if he had allowed it to. Humph, a divorcee who pined for his daughters, was stalked by the same ghost. They shared an aimless life punctuated by the relief of regular movement. *Today, tomorrow, for the rest of my life*, thought Dryden: *where next?*

There was no copy in the shop opening. *The Crow*'s deadline was just a few hours away. The mountaineer was strictly C-list celebrity status. Dryden couldn't remember what he'd said if he tried. He'd taken a shorthand note, but like all his shorthand notes, it was unreadable. In fact, come to think of it, he'd forgotten the bloke's name.

'Let's check the dig,' he said, running a hand back through his close-cropped black hair. Humph swung the cab out into the traffic, its headlights scything through the gloom. The dig. Dryden had picked up a series of decent tales that summer from a team of archaeologists working in a field on the western edge of town. The onward march of the Barratt Homes generation threatened the site – indeed the whole western side of the town.

'The invasion of the little boxes,' said Dryden as they swept past the latest outcrop of executive homes, their carriage lamps dull orange in the gloom.

'You're an executive,' said Dryden, turning to Humph. 'An executive operator in the rapid transit sector.'

Humph burped. The Capri turned off the tarmac road onto a gravel drive and trundled forward, mist-wrapped pine trees just visible on either side. As they crawled forward Dryden felt they were leaving the world behind: the world of shop openings, deadlines and doctor's appointments. Ahead lay the past, buried for more than a thousand years in the sticky clay of the Isle of Ely, and around them the trees dripped rhythmically, like clocks.