

THE DEVIL'S SMILE

By Daniel Sellers

The Lollipop Man

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For Anna and Alison, ladies of Leeds

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Thursday 12th October, 1995

Someone had been sick on the stairs down to the club. Adrian would have stepped in it if the bouncer hadn't grabbed him and steered him past.

'Thanks,' he said, hoping he sounded sober.

She narrowed her eyes, mock-suspiciously. The club had a policy of turning away anyone who was too drunk – mainly because of incidents like this. Adrian wasn't drunk, just tipsy, after three pints in the Wharf with a girl from his course. He gave the bouncer a reassuring smile, determined not to forfeit the fiver entry fee, and descended the curving, neon-lit staircase, meeting a cross barman on his way up with a mop and bucket.

Downstairs was banging with European techno dance music, but the place was half-dead. No one on the dance floor, only a handful at the bar and just a few people in the seating area, installed in wicker chairs round low tables. He assumed the puker was long gone.

The club was dimly lit, except for a few uplighters, the lights round the mirror-backed bar, and the dance floor, where coloured spotlights danced and a glitterball threw stars over the ceiling, pillars and puffs of dry ice.

Adrian got himself a bottle of Corona, then made his way deeper into the club, where people went to snog and where, on Fridays and Saturdays, there was a hatch into a kitchen through which you could buy chips.

He squinted into the darkness but saw only a couple of girls necking in a corner.

No Lee.

Fuck.

In the Wharf Inn, he'd heard second-hand that Lee and his mate Tall Jason were planning to come here, but that intelligence was clearly faulty.

He'd been introduced briefly to Lee one Sunday night in the Wharf a couple of months ago. He was spot-on Adrian's type – stocky, black hair worn in curtains that framed his pale face and sleepily sexy blue eyes. He dressed alternatively, always looking casual but stylish. It was the superior way he behaved in a crowd that clinched the deal, the way he was always scanning, searching, but eternally dissatisfied. Adrian was infatuated.

'Tell him you like him,' his mate Gav had said, doubtless sick of Adrian's droning. 'What's the worst he can do?'

'Laugh,' Adrian told him.

He didn't believe Lee would laugh. More likely he'd sneer and turn away.

No, his plan remained to put himself in Lee's eyeline as often

as possible, while looking as moodily handsome as a short, grungy student could manage. And so here he was, drinking overpriced beer, alone in a basement club behind Leeds Market, with no Lee in sight.

A man coming back from the toilets banged into Adrian and mumbled an apology. They made brief eye contact. He had intense round eyes under tight curly hair. Adrian didn't recognise him and looked away.

He propped himself against a pillar, with a view of the entrance, and lit a menthol fag. It was damp down this end, and stank of bleach from the loos. It was dungeon-cold too, with a chill that emanated from the walls. He'd seen a rat here once, sitting on a table, washing its face.

It was past eleven now, and as the pubs shut, the club filled. He recognised some faces, regulars from the Wharf and the Old Penny.

The music was better, trancey and euphoric. The dance floor filled up. He drank his beer and smoked, enjoying the feel of the beat through the floor.

Two Coronas in, he'd entered a spiral of self-pity, resolving to embrace the single life. He was nineteen and had never had a boyfriend. Not a real one, anyway. He got sex as often as he wanted it, but he rarely fancied the blokes. There was Ste, his old school friend, still living at home with his folks and working for his dad. They met sometimes if Ste was in Leeds, after a match, when he was pissed. He'd made the journey from Elland Road to Adrian's shared house a couple of times now, smelling of booze and sweat in his Leeds United top.

It was fun and dirty, but unsatisfactory.

He took the last fag from his packet and mentally prepared for the long walk home to Headingley. In the flash from his lighter he saw a man had appeared in the dark area, standing only feet away but looking away from Adrian. It was the man who'd bumped his arm, the one with the intense, staring eyes. Adrian studied him, noting the way the light caught his long eyelashes. He wasn't horrible-looking, but not at all Adrian's type. He was too old, for one thing – at least twenty-five – and his leather jacket made him look grim and aggressive, an effect that wasn't softened by the strings of beads wound round his throat.

The man caught Adrian watching him. He smiled. His lips stretched and became thin and shiny. Adrian recoiled, but suddenly the man was at his side, in his space. Adrian could smell his aftershave. Something sharp and woody.

'I haven't seen you here before,' the man said.

Adrian shrugged, clicking into too-cool mode and scanning the club as if yearning for alternative company.

'What's your name?'

'Adrian.' He lifted his chin. 'What's yours?'

'Tell you if you let me buy you another one of those.' He nodded at Adrian's near-empty bottle.

'I'm all right, thanks.' He didn't mind games, but this guy creeped him out. 'Going home soon.'

He turned his head and his heart skipped. Lee was by the bar, Tall Jason looming at his side.

'Gotta go,' he told the man, and was off without another look.

He planted himself next to Tall Jason and contrived to catch his eye.

‘Oh, hiya,’ Tall Jason said.

Lee’s pal was a bit gormless, but Adrian envied him his friendship with Lee. The thought of being daily in Lee’s orbit made him weak. He peered past Tall Jason but Lee seemed focused on catching the barman’s eye. He glanced this way and seemed briefly to notice Adrian.

‘All right?’ Adrian called.

Lee looked sharply away, not just uninterested but dismissive. Adrian steadied himself in the cold wind of rejection. He lifted his chin, determined to look unbothered.

But he was bothered. His cheeks burnt with it.

Lee ordered, then he and Tall Jason peeled away in the direction of the wicker seats without a backward glance.

The barman asked Adrian what he wanted.

‘I’m buying,’ the smiling man said, materialising at his side.

Adrian glanced quickly to where Lee was talking to a woman and laughing.

Fuck it.

‘Fine,’ he said to the smiling man, his face still on fire. ‘Bottle of Corona, please.’

Back down the dark end of the club, the man told him his name was Edmund. Adrian pretended interest. He worked in ‘high-end security’, he said.

‘Securing what?’ Adrian asked.

‘Stuff.’

He felt suddenly a lot drunker, as if the music was inside his head, stirring his vision and blocking his thoughts. His hearing came and went and he felt himself sway.

‘Steady,’ Edmund said, and had hold of his arm.

‘I don’t feel very well—’

‘You need fresh air,’ Edmund said and grasped his arm tighter.

They were in a car, going fast through an interchange where roads crossed over each other, then through lights, including a set that was red.

Adrian felt sick and his head swam, so that he had to keep his neck very straight.

Edmund was driving and at the same time extracting a cassette from its case. Edmund’s place was being renovated, he said. They’d have to go to Adrian’s. He tossed the case at Adrian’s feet and pushed the cassette into the player. Music blasted: Culture Beat, ‘Mr Vain’. The whole car shook.

It’s OK. He’s taking me home.

Had he told Edmund his address? It seemed so. They were passing Woodhouse Moor now, heading for Hyde Park Corner.

Edmund’s driving was aggressive, all acceleration then sudden braking, yanking and shoving the gear stick.

Then they were in the warren of streets.

‘This it?’ Edmund asked. They were stopped and Edmund was breathing funny, excited.

They were out; Edmund took Adrian’s key off him and opened the door, then shoved it closed behind him.

Adrian fell into the kitchen and groped for the sink where he filled a glass with water.

He swigged.

Drink. Keep control. Tell him to leave.

No music here, but in his head it still throbbed, like the start of a headache.

Edmund was in his face now, pressing him hard against the counter, knocking a cereal box so some of the cereal spilt.

‘No—’

‘Shhh.’

Edmund’s mouth was firm against Adrian’s, those thin, shiny lips like hard rubber. Adrian clamped his teeth and squirmed to get out of the way.

‘I want – you to *go*,’ he managed.

‘I drove you home!’ Lips again and his bony chin. ‘Fucking tease.’

Adrian pushed him and he staggered into the kitchen table, dislodging papers and a mug. A knife spun – a normal one, not sharp – but Edmund grabbed it, and jabbed it towards Adrian. ‘Think I’m fucking going anywhere?’

Edmund lunged and pressed himself into Adrian, the blade close against Adrian’s belly, while he yanked at his own belt buckle with his free hand.

Outrage exploded. He shoved Edmund in the chest. Screamed, ‘No!’

A clattering noise. Something falling: a bang.

‘What you talking about?’ Edmund’s teeth were bared. He dropped the knife and was on Adrian with both hands.

‘I killed a man,’ Adrian cried.

A sneer of disbelief.

‘I did! I’ll fucking kill you if you don’t get out!’

Edmund yelped out a laugh – just as the kitchen door flew open and smashed against the wall.

‘What’s going on?’ Adrian’s housemate Gav demanded. He came into the kitchen, his face entirely white with make-up, his dyed-black hair out at all angles.

Edmund screamed in fright and dropped the knife.

‘Adrian, man—’

‘He’s leaving,’ Adrian gasped, bending in response to a sudden pain in his belly. ‘Make sure he goes.’

‘Too fucking right.’ Gav strode into the room. Adrian saw Gav’s girlfriend cringing back in the hallway.

Gav took Edmund by the arm and dragged him, snarling, from the kitchen.

Adrian heard the front door slam. The pain grew. He lurched forward and vomited all over the ripped kitchen lino.