

# The Witnesses Are Gone

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# ONE

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**M**aybe if I hadn't bought the house, I wouldn't have found the videos and none of this would have happened. Judith would still be alive, and I'd have lost nothing except some memories I could live without. But I'm not convinced. I think it would just have found another way of happening. Even before it all started, I felt like I was living backwards. The future seemed more real than the past.

The house was in Tyseley, an industrial district on the south side of Birmingham. I moved there because I needed to be on the train line for my job in Warwick. The station was a bittersweet reminder of the days of adequate public transport: a beautiful, sombre Victorian building visited by more trainspotters than trains. Three of the four waiting-rooms were permanently closed. The toilets, which had an authentic scrolled iron screen in place of a door, were boarded up. Only the local trains stopped there, and not many of them.

My strongest memories of Tyseley are of waiting on the platform, watching the factories further down the line add their smoke to the clouds. In January the snow was grey, a sublimate of polluted rain. You'd know when a train was coming from the vibrations, just too low in pitch to be heard. Nine times out of ten it would be a freight train: dozens of jolting carriages, filled with new cars or toxic waste or nothing at all, going by so fast you had to turn away not to feel its wind on your face.

I was thirty-nine when I bought the house, and I suppose it had to do with needing to belong somewhere. It was a district in transition from industry to retail: new shops and wholesale outlets selling what local factories had once made—furniture, tools, carpets. I need to feel that I was in transition too, even if I couldn't say what to or what from. At the same age, Robert Smith had sung that he had *nothing left to burn*. I didn't feel burnt out, but I had a sense of time moving too fast. A certain nostalgia for the days when 'text' was a noun rather than a

verb. After twenty years of rented rooms, I had the chance to unpack all my boxes and survey all the pieces of my life: books, letters, records, souvenirs. Maybe I can be forgiven for assuming that the pieces would fit together into some kind of meaningful pattern.

Another reason for the house was that I hoped Judith would move in with me. We'd been seeing each other for two years, staying at each other's flats, even going on holiday together a couple of times. But somehow the house didn't appeal to her. An Edwardian terrace with no central heating wasn't her idea of comfort. Maybe it reminded her of the run-down terrace we'd rented for a rain-dogged week in Dorset, our first summer together. Or it brought back memories of her five-year marriage to a paranoid civil servant in Walsall. Whatever the reason, being in the house any longer than a night depressed her. "You wanted to make a new start," she told me, "but all you've done is hide in the past. There's nothing new here."

The irony was that I'd never felt so close to her as when we were in the house. Her tension excited me: I wanted to touch her whenever she passed by. In my mind, she was the house's natural occupant. Her touch drew me into her private world: it gave me access to her memories, the rhythm of her breath, the dreams she hid behind open eyes.

The one thing Judith enjoyed doing in the house was watching films or videos on TV, curled up with me on the Afghan rug in front of the gas fire, drinking red wine. She liked thrillers, science fiction, anything that took her out of herself. Apart from booze she disliked drugs, which helped to stop me falling back into bad habits. We watched the entire second season of *Angel* on video, the broadcast version having been cut to ribbons by Channel 4. "It's the potential for darkness that makes him so attractive," she told me. "Without that, he'd just be another pretty face. And if the darkness took over, you wouldn't go near him. Know what I mean?"

The creations of Joss Whedon certainly offered more insight into the nature of evil than anything issuing from the mouth of George W. Bush. It was a strange time. You had a president who'd corrupted an election talking about threats to democracy. And Britain fighting in a war against a country that was unable to defend itself. We were

told to be on our guard against 'terrorist reprisals'. It wasn't terrorism when US planes bombed a wedding party, or when they wiped out an entire village as a gesture of frustration because bin Laden had slipped through their hands. But it would be terrorism if the enemy did that to us. Despite the anti-war meetings and demos we attended, Judith and I both felt a sense of frozen helplessness. It was as if ordinary people no longer existed.

# TWO

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In March of that year, I decided to get the garden into some kind of shape. There were bushes to trim, weeds to pull, a damaged fence to straighten. I bought some gardening tools and cleaned out the shed. The previous owner had left several dead pot plants and boxes of rubbish; from their age and dampness, I suspected that she'd inherited them from the owner before. Newspapers twelve years old; paintbrushes whose bristles snapped when you touched them; densely printed books on railway history, the pages blotched and sticking at the edges. A cardboard box tore apart when I lifted it, dropping four black unmarked video cases at my feet. I wiped them clean and took them inside.

Judith was working that weekend, a freelance design contract. Her absence, as usual, left me feeling empty. I took a can of beer out of the fridge and sat down to watch the videos. The first was taped over with news broadcasts from the early nineties: the Gulf War, John Major, the Balkan conflict, the rise of le Pen. The second was a series of history programmes from BBC2's Open University service, including a study of film newsreels and their representation of the news. The third video was a blurred nth-generation copy of two German hardcore porn films, the poor quality of the images attaching ectoplasm to the flesh and filling the mouths and other holes with a ragged darkness.

The fourth video contained a French art-film, with subtitles rendered illegible by a fault in the copy that distorted the bottom edge of each frame. It was called *L'éclipse des sens*, and directed by Jean Rien. I thought his name rang a bell, but I wasn't sure. I'd seen a lot of French films at the Arts Lab, before it became the Triangle Cinema, before it became a derelict building. This could have been one of them.

It was shot in black and white, with heavy filters used to create a sense of enclosed, rain-blurred twilight. A group of four young people, maybe students, living in a house. You saw them drinking together,

dancing to old records; two went upstairs to make love, while one painted a shadowy landscape on a canvas and the other knelt on a balcony, praying to the night. There was a room at the back of the house that was always locked up.

The rest of the film was mostly a series of repetitions of that night. I wasn't always sure whether the scenes had been re-shot with variations or just touched up. From scene to scene, the occupants of the house seemed to undergo some kind of progressive sensory disorder. One boy played the piano, but his girlfriend heard only a kind of discordant screaming. The other girl looked in the mirror and saw a bruised, deformed figure. In one extraordinary scene, the couple made love frantically (and without apparent relief) in the garden while the other two walked slowly around them, either not seeing or not caring. Their blank faces scarred by rain. The painting developed over time to resemble a giant eye closing, with trees for lashes. Condensation filmed the windows, and damp began to streak the painted walls.

The later scenes had a religious feel. The piano player searched obsessively through a leather-bound book full of indecipherable, rune-like script. Hints of daylight and birdsong flickered to life, then faded. The records were played over and over, but the music had become a kind of deep choral lament with no tune, like the wailing of the damned. Yet the four never gave up dancing. The artist left his canvas, where the sun was eclipsed by a grey twilight, and started praying and chanting outside the locked door. Eventually he collapsed, lying in a foetal position on the filthy carpet. The door opened to reveal a darkness in which something like a child was crawling. The camera tracked slowly around the house: a cracked mirror, a horribly scratched record, a window coated with grease. A bed covered in fragments of plaster from a ruined ceiling.

There were no credits, or they hadn't been taped. I watched the blank screen for a minute or so, then switched the video off and ejected the cassette. The film hadn't really appealed to me, but I felt like it was trying to tell me something I needed to understand. Or perhaps it was just that I'd heard something about the director and couldn't remember it. Had I read an interview with him? The confusion depressed me. I

cooked myself a fry-up while listening to *Songs From a Room*, a record Judith hated. The flat's colours seemed unreal after the film. I thought of the solar eclipse in 2000, when Judith and I had stood at the lookout point on the Lickey Hills and seen night fall briefly onto the city. I was surprised by the sudden chill.

Later, I turned the spare room upside-down trying to find a box of film magazines. There'd been an article on Jean Rien; I remembered it clearly now. Some murky stills from his films, which were all in black and white. He'd made several offbeat horror films in France, one in rural Scotland and one in Mexico. The journalist had commented that copies of Rien's films had a tendency to disappear; he'd even tried to explain why, though I couldn't recall his theory. After emptying countless boxes I found the magazines in an old briefcase. Damp had got into the leather, and the pages felt thick and greasy to the touch. Two issues of *Screen Bizarre* were stuck between issues of a 1970s porn magazine that I'd evidently considered worth keeping.

The article was largely converted to wordless pulp by some kind of paper-rot that had soaked into the magazine's spine. I could only read the title: *'The Enigma of Jean Rien'* by W. Padgett. The damp made the photographs still more blotchy and shapeless than they would have been. At the bottom of the next page, I could just make out the words: . . . and be forgotten, as if they revealed some entity that wanted to disguise its own existence. The last film was . . . I tried to turn the page, but it tore in my hand and the yellowed paper disintegrated. The room smelt like a second-hand bookshop.

By now, a sense of dislocated time was adding to my loneliness. I managed to lose the rotting paper smell in a few glasses of whisky, then went to bed and tried to think of Judith. But her image kept blurring into the shadowy, misshapen figure of the girl in the mirror. At two a.m. I went back into the spare room, shivering, to retrieve the old porn magazines. It's come to something when even your masturbation fantasies rely on memorabilia. Like trying to call on a younger self to keep your need alive. Afterwards, I lay in the dark and told myself that the magazines falling apart meant they had no hold over me. The brittle photographs were no more important than the film.