

Odd that.

How it was always the feet that captured his attention. Mesmerised him almost. Not the white hairless thighs or curveless hips or the stretched ribcage and dangling arms. Nor even the hairless mound or young breasts, nipples pointing like sightless eyes at the ceiling. Neither was it the twisted neck in the grip of the noose or the bulging, comical eyes that drew his gaze. And never the grotesque mask, the slack mouth and lolling tongue or the bluegrey pallor of the skin. No. It was always the feet that riveted his attention, held him spellbound.

Why, he neither knew nor cared.

Tiny feet, even for a girl of her tender years. Like dolls' feet. Now lifeless, they turned inwards, big toes touching, sheathed in cotton socks.

He wondered why he hadn't removed the socks. Perhaps a momentary impulse - he couldn't remember. The motives behind his actions had become so obscure recently they no longer merited contemplation. Leave the final analysis to the psychologists - it would be their problem, not his.

He stood before the girl, her dead eyes level with his. He saw nothing new. He ran his hands over her skin, cold and bloodless beneath the pads of his fingers. A globule of dried blood clung to her left breast. He smeared it off with his forefinger, saw the small break in the skin where he'd bitten too hard. Forced to stir her from apathy, he'd become angry in the process. Too bad. For her.

He removed an ivory-backed razor from his pocket and with a single slash, cut her down. She sprawled to the ground in an untidy heap, face in the dirt floor, buttocks in the air.

So ungainly.

He donned gloves and set to work. In ten minutes he had her wrapped and tied in bin-liners. It was the fashion, after all.

He left her by the door, removed his gloves, and stepped out into the evening. He climbed the garden path, humming tunelessly, the July sky pinkening like a spreading, watery bloodstain. He entered the house and went upstairs to his study. He could hear the tinny orchestrations of Mother-dear's television downstairs, but the sounds retreated when he shut the door.

**I**f rooms reflect personalities, then he was not only unpretentious, but his life sparse. In the corner behind the door stood an old oak desk which had belonged to his father. It had lions' mouths for handles. Three folders lay open on its top, along with a sheaf of black and white photographs. The walls were white and unadorned; the mantelpiece, a dusty ledge. The varnished pine floorboards bare except for a white mohair rug, in the centre of which stood a tall leather-backed armchair commanding a broad view of the garden through the dormer window. To anyone else, a cold characterless room. To him, retreat.

He sank into the armchair and stared out at the twilight, his thoughts turned inward. They careered down well-worn paths as he waited for darkness to fall.

Darkness, because in darkness there is anonymity.

**I**t was time. Suitcase primed, camera-case primed, Janice Young bagged and ready for the car. He carried his suitcase out to the car and positioned it carefully on the back seat. Then he opened the boot and unfolded a transparent plastic sheet which he spread carefully across the floor. He was a man who recognized the value of traces.

The sky was metallic-blue and starlit. Light slashed across the lawn from the downstairs window. He made his way cautiously back down the garden path. A goods train rumbled by, clattering over the points beyond the line of trees. He could feel the vibration through the soles of his shoes. He carried the packaged body to the car. The girl seemed heavier now, as though congealed blood and stiffening tissues exerted more strain on gravity. Janice fitted neatly into the boot. How considerate.

**M**other-dear was a shrivelled-up prune. Folds of sagging flesh had transformed her cheeks into jowls, and her dark eyes had sunk into lined craters. She had a hairline mouth with pursed lips which puckered when, like now, she was without her dentures. Her hair was white and greasy beneath the hairnet. She wore a grey pleated skirt, cream blouse, navy-blue cardigan and fluffy pink slippers. Sometimes she revolted him. She did so now.

'Good evening, Mother-dear.' He picked up the remote-control for the television from the small table by her chair and lowered the volume.

Mother-dear glared. 'I was listening to that.'

'And so was half the neighbourhood.' He walked to the window, checked the lock.

'You know my hearing's bad.'

'Not so bad you can't monitor every move I make in this house.' He replaced the remote-control console and adjusted a pack of cigarettes on her table so that it lay aligned to all four corners. 'I'm going away for a few days,' he said. 'There's plenty of food, so you won't starve. The exercise should do you good.' He touched the walking-stick which hung over the back of her chair and smirked. 'You should get about more, see the world.'

'I've seen all I want to see.' Her voice was flat and toneless as always. She grabbed the remote-control the way a junkie grabs a packet from a dealer. But she didn't turn the volume up.

'That's a different world out there,' he said, crossing to the window and drawing the curtains. 'It's not like television.'

'I happen to prefer television.'

'Cut the self-pity, Mother-dear. No-one cares.'

'I care.' She was watching the screen again. She'd been pretty once, he recalled. But she'd been in love then - and not with his father.

'I'll be back Monday,' he told her. 'You be good, okay?'

'You're always going away. You never spend any time with me anymore.'

'Things to do, places to go.'

'We used to do so much together,' she said wistfully. 'Now you spend your time getting drunk or down in the barn. What on earth do you do in there?'

'Clearing up. You know, looking after the boys.'

'You and your damn snakes. I think you prefer their company to mine.'

'Don't be silly, Mother-dear. They need looking after, just like you. You know me - try to keep everyone happy.'

'Mm.'

He planted a kiss delicately on her hairnet. 'Goodbye, Mother-dear,' he said, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. She didn't move, she didn't speak. He closed the door behind him and the television began to blare again.

The car started immediately. In two minutes he was on Morningside Road. He passed the clock, on up Comiston Road. The roads were busy with Saturday night traffic. People coming in from Oxgangs and Comiston for a night on the town. Poison for their minds, flesh for their flesh. Compromised fantasies.

At the top of the hill he turned into Greenbank Drive, leaving the traffic behind. He drove slowly to where the road divided, pulled in and waited a few minutes, saw nobody. Okay. He turned and drove back, stopping by a padlocked gate in the fence which ran the length of the drive. He donned gloves and left the motor running.

The chain on the gate could have been a daisy-chain the way it snapped in the teeth of his pliers. He dropped both in the boot of the Escort, dropped his camera in his pocket, scooped out the neatly packaged Janice and carried her through the gate. He pushed through dense undergrowth and thorny bushes. Through a line of trees to a low stone wall beyond which lay the dried-up bed of a small stream. He tossed the body over the wall, took out his camera and shot off five exposures on automatic, the flashes bright explosions in the quiet dark. His heart pumped faster as adrenalin coursed his veins. He returned briskly to the car. As he pulled out,

he had time to notice again the sign just inside the gate that read NO TIPPING. He allowed himself a smile.

Traffic flowed like a sluggish metal river down through Tollcross onto Lothian Road. It took him longer than usual to reach the Glasgow road, but once there, the traffic thinned and all but disappeared. It wasn't long before he joined the M9, mild cross-winds tugging gently at the wheel beneath his fingers. He maintained a steady speed of fifty-five, taking pleasure in the dark passing countryside.

Ninety minutes later he passed through Callander. on the outskirts of town he left the A84 and took a small B-road west. He slowed as the road narrowed, then twisted and turned through leafy tunnels, the glint of moonlit river to his left, the steep forested slopes to his right. Then, past the surging black mass of the falls, the more tranquil expanse of Loch Cruik came into view through gaps in the shoreline trees. Then the village came up on him fast, fast as it always did.

Ballaig.

White stone cottages, set back from the road by a wide pavement where cars were parked. Signs in windows offering 'Bed & Breakfast'. A small craft shop on the left, a group of wooden chalets just this side of the river. A garage, ever the way he remembered it, with its solitary pump out front and ramshackle workshop behind. Further on, where the road began to bend out of the village, Bovellie the Grocers and opposite, the Ballaig Hotel. The only sign of life, the lights and shadows that moved behind drawn curtains.

He pulled over onto the pavement and parked outside a guest-house. Vacancies, said the card in the window.

He collected his bags, locked the car and knocked at the door, noticing the new coat of paint and the wooden tub of flowers by the door before it opened.

'Cathy,' he said.

'Dominic. Come in.'

She was in her late thirties, with long dark hair tied back. She wore baggy jeans and a yellow granddad-shirt unbuttoned low enough to see that she wore no bra. She used no make-up apart from the shadow of blue around her eyes. He walked past her into the narrow hall.

'Good drive?' she asked, closing the door.

The hall was low and narrow, she had to squeeze by. He caught the familiar scent of her body as she passed.

A man's angry voice came from a room off the hall. 'Who is it?'

'It's Dominic, Joe,' Cathy called. 'I told you he was coming for a few days.'

'You tell me nothing, woman,' the voice growled. 'I might as well be dead.'

'Don't start that again. I've enough on my hands already. I'll show Dominic his room.'

'He should know where it is by now. And ask him what bloody time is this to arrive.'

Cathy led Dominic up the stairs to a small room at the back of the house. of course he knew the way: eleven years was long enough to learn your way around any house. The room overlooked the courtyard, the garden, and the heath beyond. It had been his room once.

'He's getting worse every day. I don't know how much more I can take,' Cathy said, switching on the light, walking across to draw the curtains. 'I suppose it's what you get if you marry an older man. You end up with a patient.'

Dominic dropped his cases on the bed. 'I don't understand why you married him in the first place.'

'You wouldn't, Dominic, would you? You left, remember. You moved to the city. You don't know what it was like.'

'I could have known.'

'So you always say. But you always go back.' She hadn't moved from the window, was watching him unpack. The bitterness in her voice did not escape him. He went over, closed her in his arms. She pushed him gently away.

'Don't, please.' Weariness replaced the bitterness.

Dominic laughed. 'He won't last long, Cathy. He's on his last legs. You'll soon be free of the old sod.'

'Don't talk like that!'

'And then you'll be able to live, do what you like. Think of it...'

'I do. That's what's so damned...'. Her voice trailed off in frustration. She came over, took his arm. 'I'm sorry, Dominic. Not much of a welcome, I'm afraid.'

Joe Gillespie's hoary voice drifted up the stairs. 'What's taking so long, woman? Think I don't know what's going on up there?'

Cathy made a rueful face. 'I'd better go. See you tomorrow. Breakfast's at eight.'

He locked the door behind her and went over to the wash-basin where he stood for a long time studying his reflection in the mirror.

Forty-one years old, with an almost boyish face that belied his age. Delicate curves, large brown eyes. Straight nose, if a little small. Fair hair, cropped short, ears flat against his skull. A generous mouth with full-blooded lips.

There was a change in his reflected image. He could feel it. Something strange about his eyes. Nothing he could define - just that they were different. Alien.

He laughed, a short bark.

He finished unpacking, then stripped off, washed and dried with the towel provided. There'd been no washbasin in his day, no light green wallpaper, no dressing-table, no 'Highland Scene' prints on the wall. It had been a child's room then. A strange child's room.

He brushed his teeth, counting each stroke of the stiff brush. Memories collected on the borders of his consciousness like stormclouds gathering on the horizon. He pulled back the covers of the bed, checked for snakes. None. Patted the pillows, then crawled naked between the cool white sheets. He lay back, arms by his sides, legs straight, like a corpse embalmed.

For a while he stared at the ceiling, letting the day's events filter through his mind with slow precision as night-sounds came to him through the open window.

Sleep fell out of the sky like a shot bird.

Home again, was his final thought.