

the noise of
strangers

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The city of confusion is broken down: every house is shut up, that no man may come in.

There is a crying for wine in the streets; all joy is darkened, the mirth of the land is gone.

In the city is left desolation, and the gate is smitten with destruction.

From the uttermost parts of the earth have we heard songs, even glory to the righteous. But I said, My leanness, my leanness, woe unto me! the treacherous dealers have dealt treacherously; yea, the treacherous dealers have dealt very treacherously.

Fear, and the pit, and the snare are upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth.

The earth is utterly broken down, the earth is clean dissolved, the earth is moved exceedingly.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

PRAYER MEETING

Thou shalt bring down the noise of strangers, as the heat in a dry place; even the heat with the shadow of a cloud.

All Saints Church, 6.00 pm–8.30 pm
(No firearms)

Denise

Denise hated the drive home. At night, driving across town was as bad as driving through the countryside. Once through the security gate at the bottom of Southover Street the only visible lights were the squatters' campfires on the Level. Except at a checkpoint or guard post the roads would be black, the pavements lost in shadow, with only the occasional candle in an upstairs window to show they were passing houses where people lived. Their own house was only a few miles away, but the journey always inspired the same nausea.

And then there was Jack. 'This is the kind of nonsense I mean.' Denise didn't know what he was talking about. 'I mean, this can add, what, ten minutes to the journey.'

She realised he was talking about the new one-way system. 'You can't complain,' she said, although she knew he always would. 'You designed it.'

Jack tutted and turned right, heading towards the Lewes Road. 'Actually, this one was Alan's.'

'But you approved it.'

'That's not the point. Oh, bloody hell.' He braked

sharply. At the top of the Level the traffic lights were still working, and showed red. He stopped, even though it was after midnight and there were no other cars on the road. Denise said nothing. The way Jack followed rules when there was no need was one of the things they argued about. Jack would say that he was maintaining standards, setting an example. Denise thought it was safer to keep moving.

The squatters worried her. She knew they were harmless, that they would drink their moonshine, sing their hymns, and then wait, as they did every night, for the end of the world. In the morning T & E would drive them back into the slums around Russell Street, where they would sit on the pavements until it was dark enough for them to return, when they would once again drink their moonshine and sing their hymns. Denise was not scared of the squatters themselves: what made her uneasy was what they represented. She thought she could remember a time when, except for a few known tramps, the Level was empty at night.

‘Look at them.’ Jack glared at the campfires. ‘Useless scum.’ His anger was at more than the squatters or the one-way system, but Denise was too tired to care about its real object. Jack was always angry at something. Sometimes he pretended it was amusement or scorn or principled outrage; for now it was just anger.

The lights changed. He headed towards London Road, passing the boarded-up windows of Baker Street. ‘I suppose you’d prefer it if we lived in Hanover.’

‘You know I would.’ Hanover was something else they argued about. It was the ward where, somehow, everybody they knew lived. At least once a week they would make this journey to some dinner party or other. ‘You have to

admit it would be more convenient.’ Denise could have said more but was distracted by the stray dogs prowling outside the shell of the old Co-op building. There was supposed to be a nest of them, if that was the word, in the basement. Supposed to be: one of the rumours that, in this town, passed for knowledge. The council had plans for the building: another depot for Transport and Environment, or a holding centre for Welfare – anything to stop the rot spreading north from the Russell Street slums. ‘At least we could walk home afterwards,’ she offered. ‘You’d be able to drink.’ And she would need to drink less.

‘The houses are too small.’ Jack frowned into his rear-view mirror. ‘And we’d have to listen to Alan and Margaret arguing every night.’

The tiredness was like a weight behind her eyes. Where did he get this idea? ‘Alan and Margaret don’t argue.’

‘No?’ He took a left up New England Road, towards the looming Victorian viaduct on which Denise could remember having once seen a train. She’d been a child; it might have been the first train she’d seen, though sometimes she wondered if she’d seen it at all, or simply been told about it so often she now believed she had. She wondered if dwelling on this kind of uncertainty was a sign of age. Or was it the wine? There had been seven people and five bottles of wine; Siobhan hadn’t drunk any, Jack had nursed the same half-glass the whole evening, Alan and Margaret and Tim and Louise ... She made the familiar, depressing calculations. Jack sighed through clenched teeth. ‘Did you see that graffiti? Couldn’t even spell Henderson properly.’ Denise looked, but the words were behind them now, and the walls ahead were covered with posters bearing a cross, the sign of the Helmstone mission. There were

no words, but then most of the Helmstoners couldn't read, and weren't so different from the squatters on the open ground. They didn't drink, lived in houses and sang different hymns, and most of them had low-level council jobs, but they waited for the end of the world as fervently as any of the derelicts on the Level. Denise almost envied them their hope. She knew the world was not going to end: it would grind on and on until they and all their dismissive taxonomy (Stoner, Scoomer, squatter, scum) were dead and forgotten. 'And how can you say they don't argue?' Jack asked. Denise forced herself to concentrate: he was still talking about Alan and Margaret. 'They barely spoke to each other.'

'That's not the same as arguing.'

'So you think they're happy?'

'I don't know. But they don't argue.' Denise wondered how Jack could be so wrong. Alan and Margaret were too intent on presenting themselves as a successful couple to disagree in front of outsiders. 'And I don't know where you've got the idea they do.'

'Don't you?' They stopped for more lights. Again there was no other traffic in any direction. 'For crying out loud. This is the kind of thing I mean.' This time she couldn't tell what he was talking about: the pointless lights or her lack of perception, or something else he expected her to guess. His anger was indiscriminate. He turned to her. 'Alan can be such a bastard. The way he carries on with Louise. And Margaret is sitting right there.'

'Tim doesn't seem to mind.'

'Tim doesn't seem to notice. Here's Alan, flirting outrageously with his wife, and he's – I don't know what he's doing.'

‘Lights.’

‘Right.’ He eased across the junction, where, surprisingly, more traffic had appeared: two dirty white Fiats, Scoomer cars, spluttering up from the other direction. The passenger of one was leaning from his window, as if trying to climb out. He shouted at them and waved, laughing. Both cars weaved as they headed away.

‘Careful,’ Denise said.

‘They weren’t a problem.’ Jack, for once, sounded tolerant. ‘They’re gone now.’

Denise couldn’t relax until the cars were out of sight. ‘They’re dangerous because they don’t care. Henderson voters.’

‘If they’re Scoomers they’re Labour. Besides, I don’t think they were old enough to vote.’ Jack checked the rear view again. He might have pretended to be unconcerned, but he didn’t want those cars to turn round either. They drove on for a few seconds without talking. Then Jack sighed. ‘Alan is such a bastard.’ So he was back on that hobby horse. ‘That’s *why* I was talking to him, to keep him away from Louise. I mean, do you think I want to talk about one-way systems all night? I get enough of them at work.’

‘I get enough of them at home.’

‘I’m sorry. Sorry. It’s just such a big deal at the moment. Force the motorists on to the toll roads. Maximise the income.’

‘That’s Henderson’s thing, isn’t it? Abolish the toll roads.’

‘Henderson’s a nobody.’ Prestonville Road was empty. Jack, she noticed, was still checking his rear view. There were stories of children in stolen cars driving without

lights, for fun. It was supposed to be called 'blinding'. You didn't see them until it was too late. Another rumour that passed for fact. 'He'll never win anything. And even if he did he wouldn't do it.' Jack's voice softened to resigned bitterness. 'Not when he finds out how much money it makes.'

'Jack, I've heard enough about it for one night. It wasn't supposed to be a summit meeting. Alan and Margaret invited us there to eat.'

'I know, I know ...' They slowed at the foot of the hill. A Bentley with an escort of four motorcycles swept past them. 'Councillor Goss.' Jack narrowed his eyes. 'Where's he been this time of night?'

'Don't ask me.'

'I thought Audit knew everybody's dirty little secrets.'

'Probably a dinner party. Just like us.'

'Councillor Goss? I doubt it.' The lights changed. Jack took a right. 'Even so ...'

'This isn't the way.'

'I know.'

'So what are you doing?' Denise put her hands on the dashboard as if bracing herself for a sudden stop. 'You're not following him, are you?'

Jack grinned at her. It was the first time he'd smiled the whole evening. 'If he's going through the Ditchling Road toll I can tailgate, and avoid Preston Road.'

'You'll add ten minutes to our journey to save five pounds?'

'Seven minutes. And every little helps.' They'd caught up with the councillor's motorcade. Jack slowed to match its pace. One of the motorcyclists glanced back, but

otherwise they were ignored; the benefit of having a good car with a blue council badge in the windscreen. Jack bit his lower lip, a sign of concentration. 'I thought you'd appreciate that, being in Audit.'

'Audit isn't about money.'

'Everything is about money.' He glanced in the rear view. 'Looks like somebody else has the same idea.'

She turned. Another car was coming up behind them, headlights full on. 'Scoomers,' she said. 'What are they doing here?'

'You can't say they're Scoomers just because it's a Fiat.'

'It's a good rule of thumb. Shit, they're not slowing down.' Famous last words, she thought: it would be just my luck ... When it was inches away the car swerved, overtaking them and the motorcade. 'Maniac,' she said – or possibly only thought. For a moment she wasn't sure.

'Close,' Jack said.

'You should have gone the usual way. This road's a menace.'

'And paid the Preston Road toll? He missed us, didn't he?' He grinned again. Yes, he was amused by her terror. It probably made him feel manly. 'So, what were you and Margaret talking about all evening? Her miserable marriage?'

'Margaret and Alan aren't married.'

'You know what I mean.'

'Actually we were talking about Doug and Sarah.'

Jack kept his eyes on the road ahead. 'I think that counts as talking about her miserable marriage by proxy.'

The way he said *I think that counts* made her head ache. There were times when talking to Jack was like

banging your shin against a familiar piece of furniture. You knew it was there and were still surprised it could make you wince. 'Doug and Sarah aren't unhappy. As far as anybody knows.'

'No.' Jack gave the mirthless smile that usually preceded a witticism. 'But I sometimes believe you lot think they ought to be.'

You lot: the women. 'That's not fair.'

'But you're always wondering how Sarah ended up with someone like Doug.'

'You have to admit it was unexpected.'

'Doesn't mean it was wrong.' Now he was disagreeing with her for the sake of it. 'I know he doesn't have our education. But you talk about him as if he were a Scoomer.'

'So do you, half the time. Besides, he's a Henderson voter.'

'Rubbish.' He glanced at her, suddenly concerned. 'Or do you know something?'

'That's what Sarah says.' She corrected herself. 'That's what Margaret says Sarah says.'

'Then she should leave him. But she won't because he isn't. Here we go.' Ahead of them they could see the barrier beginning to rise. Jack concentrated on maintaining his distance from the motorcade. 'See? That's five pounds saved.'

'I hate going through these.' Denise stared dead ahead as they passed under the barrier. Two guards stood to awkward attention beside the booth, their rifles slung over their shoulders, their faces carefully blank beneath their uniform caps. 'They worry me,' she said, seconds later, when the barrier was down behind them. 'I always

think one of them is about to crack up and start shooting at people.’

‘You say that every time. There are vetting procedures, you know.’ He slowed, allowing the motorcade to pull away. ‘Thank you, Councillor Goss. And now ...’ He had no sooner turned off the road than she heard horns blaring behind them, then a screech and metal crashing into metal, followed a moment later by what sounded like a second, heavier collision.

Jack swore. Denise looked back, but couldn’t see anything. ‘Don’t stop.’

But Jack had already stopped and was reversing back down the street. In the upper windows lights were starting to appear. ‘I’m only going to have to deal with this in the morning. I might as well see what it is now.’

‘Yes, in the morning ...’ There were four motorcyclists – council officials – already at the scene. It was their job to handle this kind of incident. ‘What difference can you make now? You can deal with it in the morning ...’

Jack wasn’t listening. He reversed until they were back on Ditchling Road.

The first thing Denise saw, two or three hundred yards ahead of the junction, was a bright orange flare behind a barricade, as if a civic bonfire had been pitched incongruously in the middle of the dark street. She couldn’t see the councillor’s Bentley. Had it turned off the road? Had the noise they heard been caused by other cars? Then she realised the barricade *was* the Bentley, thrown on to its side, its roof towards them. As her eyes adjusted she could make out two of the motorbikes lying in the road beside it. One of the riders was leaning against a post and tugging frantically at his helmet as if he thought it was

on fire. He seemed to be the only person on the street. She couldn't see the rider of the other motorbike, and was surprised how quiet everything seemed. She could hear nothing other than the sound of their own engine: no cries for help, no other cars. The flames seemed to be burning silently, as if they were much further away than they looked. As Jack turned the car to face them they seemed to die down. Denise watched them, fascinated despite herself. Suddenly the rider staggered forward, bent at the waist. He pulled off his helmet as if he had finally remembered how to loosen the strap, then threw it into the gutter with what looked like disgust. He walked unsteadily towards the upturned car. 'You've seen it,' Denise said. 'Now go.'

'They may need help.'

'What can you do? They're not your responsibility.'

'If it's not mine ...'

Jack straightened the car. Immediately, Denise heard a popping sound that seemed to come from nowhere in particular. She thought they had driven over something, but then Jack swore. He braked and turned so sharply they jolted against the kerb.

The impact made her nauseous. She clutched the dashboard as he ground them through another wrenching turn. 'What was that?'

'It wasn't the engine.'

She swallowed hard. It had sounded too light for gunfire, unless it was from a sidearm: a bodyguard, terrified and in shock, firing at anything that moved. 'Are you sure?'

'No.' His sense of their danger was finally stronger than his work ethic. 'But I'm not staying to find out.'

The Noise of Strangers

They drove in silence for the next two streets. Denise clenched her teeth and took deep breaths and gradually felt better. From far off, and seemingly from different directions, came the sound of sirens. Jack said, 'This is going to be a headache tomorrow. If we have to close that road ...'

The job again. She said: 'What about Goss?'

'He's not my responsibility. The road is.' His hands drummed the steering wheel, as if trying to dislodge a thought. 'Shit. I need to talk to Alan.'

They reached their street. The security guard (Paul? Oscar?) let them through the gate after no more than a glance. He seemed to be listening to the noise of the sirens as raptly as a Helmstoner listened to hymns.

Jack eased their car into their allotted space and stopped the engine. Normally he would sigh and sit for a second or two. Now he jumped out of the car and skipped across the pavement as if he thought they were under fire. Denise hadn't seen him move as quickly in years. He was at their building before she could get out of the car. By the time she reached the security grille he had already unlocked the street door and was heading towards the staircase. Ignoring the lift, he bounded up the stairs with Denise clattering unsteadily behind him. When she reached the flat he was already standing by the phone. 'Let's hope the lines are working tonight.' He was panting from the exertion.

She limped behind him. 'What are you doing?'

He picked up the receiver and started to dial. 'I'm letting Alan know.'

'Can't it wait until the morning?'

'It's going to be a lot of work. We'll need to start as

early as possible.’ He placed the receiver to his ear and listened intently.

‘It’s two in the morning.’ But it was useless talking to Jack when he was in this kind of mood.

‘Alan? It’s Jack. We’ve just got in. You heard it? Yes, we saw it. You’re not going to believe this ...’

She went to the bathroom and threw up with a sudden violence. Her mouth was filled with the taste of red wine. She drank a glass of water and tried not to think about what she’d just seen, but couldn’t. For Jack, it was all a matter of one-way systems, but if Councillor Goss had been in that car then there were political ramifications and that would matter to Audit because everything, in the end, mattered to Audit.

It could wait until Monday morning. For now she was tired and her head ached. She wiped her mouth as the cistern refilled. When she came out of the room Jack was still on the phone, talking.