

A TAPPING AT MY DOOR



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DAVID JACKSON

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In loving memory of my mother



Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

—‘The Raven,’ Edgar Allan Poe



1

Listen.

There it is again. The sound. The tapping, scratching, scrabbling noise at the back door.

Terri Latham gives it her attention and then, when the sound stops, chides herself for wasting the brainpower. It's nothing. Just the plants, probably.

She laughs at that. Laughs at the way it conjures up the image of an eight-foot Venus Flytrap or some such, banging its leafy fist on her door and demanding to be fed. Like that film – what's it called? – *Little Shop of Horrors*, that's it. Because it's funny. Sitting here alone, getting all jittery over nothing but a plant – well, that's hilarious.

Actually, she has a whole crowd of plants in pots just outside the door, but she's not thinking of them. Most of them aren't capable of knocking for attention.

No, what she's thinking of is the climber that clings to and has seemingly devoured the arched trellis that surrounds her back door. The thing seems to push ahead daily at a rate of knots. She still remembers being reduced to tears of laughter with some girlfriends when they joked that she obviously spends too much time stimulating her clematis.

The problem is, the trellis is old and rotten. Just the other day a section of it collapsed, leaving a mass of tangled fretwork and plant rubbing and knocking against the glass panel of the door. She did her best to tie it back up with string, but wasn't convinced she did a great job of it. Now she's sure of it. The thing has fallen apart again.

Well, it can wait, she thinks. It's late and it's dark and I'm not standing outside on a chair in the middle of the night just to put a stupid clematis back into position. Besides, *Sleepless in Seattle*

is one of my favourite films of all time, and I don't want to miss any of it.

So she stays put. Settles into her comfy Ikea sofa in front of her Samsung flatscreen and Tom Hanks. Sips the special-offer Chardonnay that she bought from the off-licence on Derby Lane, and tells herself to relax so that she can look forward to the next soppy scene.

Tap . . . Scratch . . . Tap.

Oh, for Christ's sake, she thinks. She raises her head over the back of her sofa. Beams a thought wave towards the rear of the house that says, *One more creepy noise from you and I'm cutting you off at the root. That'll be painful. Think about it!*

A part of her knows that her anger is forced. It's a mask, a cover for the unease swiftly gaining traction within her. She also knows that this mask won't stay in place forever. It will crack and it will crumble and it will fall away, and all that will remain will be the fear. But if that's not to happen, she needs to make a pre-emptive strike.

'All right, then!' she calls out loud, as though yelling at a naughty but persistent puppy. As though giving into its demands under protest, when what she is really surrendering to is her own craven desire for reassurance.

I'll go into the kitchen, she thinks. I'll go there and I'll see exactly what I expect to see, which is a whole load of leafy crap dangling and scraping at my door, and then I can get back to my film and my wine and a good night's sleep, even though I shouldn't feel the need to check, because I know exactly what this is and I'm being a complete wuss about it.

She beheads the next thought before it can do any damage. The thought that begins, *But what if it's not . . . ?*

She tops up her courage reservoir with a swift mouthful of wine, then abandons the comforting support of her sofa and heads into the kitchen.

She hates this kitchen. Top of her list when she was looking to buy a house was one with a beautiful bathroom and a stunning kitchen, and she ended up with neither because she couldn't afford it. This kitchen has a minimal set of units that must have been cheap even when they were installed. Half of them are falling apart. The washer on one of the taps has failed, there are ugly lengths of gas and water pipes showing everywhere, and several of the wall tiles are cracked.

When she enters, she doesn't put the light on because all it would do is reflect back off the windows and present her with multiple views of the depressing interior. Instead, she forces herself to stand in the gloom and wait with anxiety-tinged impatience for her tired eyes to adjust.

With the gradual emergence of broad angular shapes of furniture comes a slight easing of her tension. She releases a long outbreath and steps further into the room.

Through the grime-caked picture window over the sink she sees a yellowish quarter-moon emerge from behind a solid-looking cloud. As its weak light filters into the room, her eyes seize the opportunity to suck up information.

She moves closer to the back door, her pupils hungrily dilated. Like the kitchen cupboards, the door is cheap and thin, and inspires little confidence in its ability to fulfil its transit prevention role. The upper half contains a panel of frosted glass that could easily be broken and perhaps even used as an entry point by someone small and limber enough.

She should have replaced this door ages ago. But then she should have done many things to make this house more secure. She knows this. Has known it ever since she moved in.

She lives in a small residential area of Liverpool called Stoneycroft, close to the busy dual carriageway that is Queens Drive – one of the city's main arteries. When she explains to people where she lives, they say, 'Oh, you mean Old Swan,' and she says, 'No, it's called Stoneycroft,' because she thinks it sounds posher.

It's not posh, though.

The way she sees things, she has her foot on the first rung of the property ladder. It's not the nicest house in the world, the area has its problems, but at least it's hers. In a few years she'll sell it and move up to something better – maybe in Allerton or Woolton or even over on the Wirral. For now, this will do.

The estate agent described the house as a quasi semi-detached, which was a bullshit way of describing a house that is joined to one of its neighbours on the upper floor but not the lower. Between the two front doors, a brick tunnel runs straight through to the rear of the properties. Some of the houses in this road have lockable iron gates on their passageways. Terri's doesn't, which means that anyone can go for a stroll down it. What's more, her wooden door at the other end of the tunnel doesn't have a lock either. And even if it did, there's another way into her rear garden because it backs onto a small park that anyone can enter and then scale her panel fencing unseen.

All in all, this house is not exactly Fort Knox.

These thoughts have reared up in Terri's head many times. On each occasion she has made a mental note to do something about the situation, and on each occasion she has immediately lost the note in the untidy recesses of her memory.

The reason these thoughts are rushing and cramming into her mind like peak hour traffic right now, though, is because of what she sees. Or rather, because of what she doesn't see.

There is no wayward clematis on the other side of the glass panel of her door.

Although the glass is translucent, and although it is undeniably in dire need of cleaning, the diffused light of the moon makes the absence of leafy matter apparent.

And what that means is that something else has been causing the noise. The noise that goes . . .

Tap . . . Tap . . . Scratch . . .

As the sound starts up again, Terri takes a step back into the shadows. As if their dark embrace is more comforting than whatever denizen of the night might be outside.

It is busily working away on the bottom section of the door. Ground level. Something small, and yet fiercely determined to bore its way into her house. Why? What can it want?

Her first thought is that it's Shit Sue. The yappy little mongrel from across the road. Which, as it happens, is not a Shih Tzu at all. Terri calls it that because, instead of taking it for a walk, its irresponsible owner simply shoos it out of his front door, at which point the mischievous little bitch runs across the street, threads its way through the bars of Terri's front gate, traverses her moss- and weed-infested driveway, scampers up the side passage and then takes a dump that seems almost equivalent in mass to that of the dog itself.

That's Terri's first thought.

Three problems with that. One: inconsiderate prick though he is, Shit Sue's owner never usually lets his excrement generator loose this late at night. Two: even though the wooden door at the rear end of the passage has no lock, it does at least close. And when it's closed, which she is sure it was the last time she looked, even the irrepressible turd machine cannot slide its way under to reach her patio. And three: this doesn't sound like Shit Sue. It doesn't sound like a dog of any kind. The scratching is from feet much smaller than those of a canine. And there's the additional tapping sound, intermixed with the scrabbling. A dog just wouldn't create those noises.

So, what then?

A cat? Possibly, she thinks. Cats scratch at things, don't they? And – yes! – I had tuna for my tea, didn't I? Cats love tuna. It can smell the fish, and it wants some. It—

No. Don't be stupid. Listen to it. Hear that tapping again? Well, cats don't tap, do they? They just don't.

Fuck.

Pull yourself together, she tells herself. This is what you get for living on your own. It's what you wanted. You didn't want to stay in a flat with your mates, and you certainly had no intention of moving in with a bloke again any time soon. You wanted your own space. Well, you've got it. You're a grown-up, so start acting like one.

She takes a deep breath. Covers the distance to the door in one stride. Reaches for the door handle.

You can do this, she thinks. It's not a rapist on the other side of the door. Rapists don't scratch and tap at your door in such a pathetic way. They leap out from bushes and poorly lit doorways. They run up behind you and—

Okay, enough of that. Open the bloody door. It's a squirrel banging its nuts. Or a hedgehog trying to mate with the boot-scraper. Or something else that your pathetic imagination just hasn't conceived of. When you open the door, it'll be more scared of you than you are of it, and it'll almost burst with the shock of seeing you standing there, and its tiny beady eyes will water as it craps itself and scurries away as fast as its stumpy little legs will take it.

She starts to turn the handle.

Tap . . . Scratch . . .

Turns it as far as it will go.

Scrape . . . Tap . . .

And . . . pull!

She yanks on the handle. The door rattles in the frame but doesn't swing open.

Bollocks, she thinks. It's locked. Of course it's locked. I always lock it when I'm alone at night. Why should tonight be any—

Listen!

The noise. It's stopped.

She pictures the timid little animal, scared witless by the clatter of the door, its marble-sized heart fluttering frantically in its chest.

She considers going for the key, unlocking the door, checking that it's all clear out there. Decides against it.

It's gone. Back to its lair. And if it hasn't gone, then she doesn't want to know about it. If it's still at her door, rolling up its furry sleeves in preparation for a renewed and more vigorous assault, then it's not the kind of foe she wants to face, thank you very much.

She shakes her head. Expels a mirthless laugh. Goes back to the living room, where Tom Hanks awaits.

She sits, crosses her legs, stares at the television without taking in what it's showing her. It's all just pictures and noise. She's not comfortable, either physically or mentally.

She reaches for her wine glass and drains it, then empties the bottle into it and takes another swig. Okay, that's better. Now she can unwind.

She swings her legs onto the sofa. Commands herself to relax and enjoy the film. The kid, the one with the backpack, is in the Empire State Building. This is a good bit. It's getting near the end now. Time to get the Kleenex ready. This is going to be—

Shit!

The scrabbling is loud now. More frantic.

Terri spills wine down the front of her dressing gown. She turns again to look into the adjoining room. The thing – whatever it is – sounds closer. As if it's in there, inside the house, inside her kitchen.

But no, it can't be. That's impossible. She tried the door herself just a moment ago, didn't she? It's locked. The windows are locked, too.

She stands. Grabs the remote and mutes the sound of the television. Stares through the doorway as she listens to that awful racket. The tapping and the scraping and the scratching. But it's different now. Why is it different?

She retraces her steps into the kitchen, accepting that she's moving more slowly now, more cautiously. Like wading through treacle.

She gets through the door. Holds her breath. Eyes darting as she waits.

There it is!

Not at the door now, but at the window.

Not the picture window over the sink – the one through which that moon still beams its skewed, pitying smile at her – but the other window, the one next to the door. The one with the curtains closed over it.

The window is a good three feet off the ground. How did the thing get up that high? No dog or squirrel or hedgehog or whatever could get up there – not unless it's on a pogo stick. A cat, maybe. A cat could leap onto the sill. But hasn't she already discounted the cat theory? Hasn't she already established that cats, while excelling in the scratching department, are somewhat less adept when it comes to tapping skills?

She suddenly finds herself breathing again. But it's fast, ragged breathing. Panicky breathing. It shouldn't be like that. Stop it, she thinks. There's nothing to be afraid of. All the precarious situations you've been in, and you're frightened of a little woodland creature?

Woodland? Where are we now – in a fairy tale? This is Stoneycroft. Which, despite its rustic and idyllic name, is right next to Old Swan. There are no Seven Dwarfs here.

She tells herself that if there is in fact a dwarf or a diminutive person of any kind on the other side of that window, she will shit herself.

Suddenly her mind is racing off in the direction of evil dwarfs. And now all she can think about is *Don't Look Now*. Which is another of her favourite films but for totally different reasons. Scare-the-pants-off-you reasons.

It's not a dwarf, she thinks. It's not a gnome. It's not a fucking gremlin that tears the wings off planes at 10,000 feet. If you want to know what it is, open the fucking curtain and see.

So she does.

She steps closer to the window, her feet dragging even more than they did before. The noise comes in bursts – sudden energetic flurries punctuated by moments of silent exhaustion. She reaches out a hand. Draws it back when the beating on the window seems almost enough to break the glass. Reaches out again. Takes hold of the thick blue material she spent far too much on in John Lewis. Takes a breath. One . . . two . . .

Three!

She yanks the curtain open just as the noise abates once more. Through the glass she can see nothing. No animals, no dwarfs, nothing.

She leans her face into the window. Moves it so close that her breath starts to fog it up. It becomes difficult to see through the mist. She pulls her hand into the sleeve of her dressing gown and begins to raise it to clear a porthole.

And that's when the thing makes its appearance.

It shoots up from below, as if thrown at her face. She gets a glimpse of claws and sharpness and malicious intent and shiny blackness as she screams and leaps backwards, banging hard into a chair behind her but unable to take her eyes off this demonic creature that now opens its mouth and starts to issue eerily deep-throated and human-like calls.

She stares in incredulity, but also with a sense of relief. Why didn't she think of this before?

A bird.

But what a bird. Huge and so very black. Even its beak appears to be fashioned from ebony, and its eyes seem to swallow up the moonlight. Its neck looks muscular and powerful, as if built to help it tear things apart in that vicious mouth. Its wings pound against

the glass as it struggles to maintain purchase with its grasping talons. And, every so often, it takes another fierce peck at the glass, threatening to crack it and allow it entry.

A crow, thinks Terri. Something like that. She knows sparrows and pigeons and robins and starlings, and that's about as far as her avian expertise goes. She has never seen a bird like this in her garden before.

She doesn't want it here now either. It's big and it's freaky and it's acting weirdly. It's like something out of that Hitchcock film. *The Birds*. Where they all turn on the humans and rip them to shreds.

It has to go. That much is certain. She can't go to sleep with a thing like this hammering to come in. What if it follows her up to her bedroom window? Starts its tapping in the middle of the night? How could she sleep with even the prospect of that happening?

So, okay. How do you get rid of a bird like that? Most birds, you just clap your hands and off they go. Even the stupid, chewing-gum eating pigeons have worked that one out. But this bird? This one looks like it's either insanely malevolent or supremely intelligent. This one looks like it'll take your face off if you go anywhere near it.

I should call someone, she thinks. I should get in a bird expert. Or someone with a shotgun.

At half past midnight?

Okay, then, the police. No, definitely not the police. The police are the last people I should call unless I want to be made a laughing stock for being a total chicken over a stupid bird.

Chicken, bird. That should be funny, but I'm not laughing.

She lets out a growl of furious acceptance that the only one who can do anything about this ludicrous situation is herself.

It's a bird. Shoo it away or batter it to death. Either solution is acceptable. Okay, Terri?

First things first. Lights on.

She finds the light switch. Clicks it. Blinks against the brightness.

She decides she needs a weapon. Preferably something that doesn't require her to come within several feet of the creature.

She deliberates for a few seconds, then goes to the cupboard under the stairs. Comes back with a sweeping brush. Then she takes a key down from a shelf and unlocks the back door.

'Okay, birdbrain,' she says. 'Here I come. You have five seconds to get out of my garden before I sweep you to death.'

She opens the door. Sticks her head out into the night. The bird is resting on the sill, cocking its head as it stares a challenge back at her. It reminds her of something. *The Omen*? Wasn't there a creepy black bird in that?

There I go again, she thinks. This isn't the devil in animal form. Not even a dwarf in a costume. It's just a bird.

She steps onto the patio, feeling the cold of the flagstones against her bare feet. She holds the brush out in front of her. Thrusts it towards the bird.

Unimpressed, the creature merely angles its head a little more.

'All right, matey. You asked for it.'

She pulls the brush back. Thinks, Please don't come at me. Not the hair. Don't get tangled in my hair. Bats do that, don't they? They get all tangled in your hair. Please don't do that.

Another thrust. Right up to the bird. She prepares to drop the brush and start running as the creature bursts into action again.

But it doesn't come at her. It doesn't even move away from the windowsill, for that matter.

It doesn't, because it can't.

Terri keeps hold of the brush, but lowers it, like a knight might lower his sword. She takes a couple of small, hesitant steps forward as she squints against the fluorescent light pouring through the window.

The bird is not moving freely. It is caught on something. It can't get its legs free from some kind of thread or wire.

She realises now why it has been acting so strangely. It got tangled up, and now it's panicking. All it wants to do is be free. It's not evil at all. It's frightened. It's—

The blow is as loud as it is painful. Something hard and heavy ramming into her skull. It seems to echo around her garden.

She lets out a yelp and starts to turn. Sees the dark figure of a man behind her, his hand coming up for a second strike. She starts to raise her own arm in defence, but she's too late. The object the man is holding – a brick or a stone – collides again with her forehead with a sickening hollow crunch that sends her reeling backwards. She feels her back slam into the wall and hears a screech that might come from her, the man or even the bird. Her head is swimming and the pain is agonising and her eyes are misting over. She knows she can't allow the blackness to swallow her, she has to get out of this situation, call for help somehow, and so she opens her mouth to cry out, but receives another blow for her effort, this time in the throat. She lashes out blindly, feels her hands connect with something, but also feels him grab hold of her sleeve and pull her towards him, so she uses her feet, kicks low and hard into where his groin should be, and yes, she feels it connect and she hears a grunt of pain and a loosening of his grip. She pulls away and runs to the back gate, because her attacker is preventing her getting back to the house, and she opens her mouth again to scream as loud as she can, please help me, anyone, I don't care who you are, but please come and help me.

She hears nothing and she doesn't know why. She is yelling at the top of her voice and yet nothing seems to be happening. It is as if the knocks to her head have deafened her. But then she trips and falls against the garden fence, and she hears the thin, brittle panels rattle and crack against their concrete support posts, and even in her confused state she wonders how it is that she can hear that and not her own voice. So she reaches up a hand to her mouth to check that it's working as it should be. Only it doesn't get that far.

It doesn't reach her mouth because it feels the hot, sticky wetness that seems to be all over her neck. And when her fingers investigate further, they discover the reason for her silence. They disappear into the huge hole in her windpipe, and she freezes with the horrific realisation that this man has cut her throat.

And then there is no more time for thinking, because he is on her again. He is pulling her away from the fence and dragging her down to the ground, and she sees a smug smile on his face that tells her he knows he has won and that she cannot summon help and that she cannot fight back. Because she is dying. She knows this. Her wounds are too great, too life-threatening. Her mind is going into shutdown, and she wishes it wouldn't. She wishes she could hold on to something. A chance. A possibility. But her mind has decided otherwise. It has weighed things up and decided to cut its losses, to put what is left of its energy into closing down its consciousness and detaching itself from a reality that is too appalling to take in any longer.

And if that were the end, it would be a mercy. But there is more to come.

The man straddles her. Takes hold of her chin and turns her head to face him. She sees his face again, and as the blood continues to pour from her throat she wonders with almost serene detachment what might be going on in this man's mind. She wonders what experiences, what tragedies in his life have led him to this. She wants to know why.

As if in answer, he shows her the knife in his hand. Shows her from a couple of feet away, then brings it closer and closer. Until she knows what he is going to do with it.

She somehow finds it within herself to scream again then. But her pleas never escape her body. They remain locked within, tearing her apart, shredding her from the inside.

On the windowsill, the bird dips its sleek head and watches in rapt silence.



2

All eyes are on him when he enters the room.

There's a little shuffling. A little unrest. A little trepidation, perhaps. But they all watch and wait. Every one of them.

'I did it!' he yells, pumping his fist in the air. 'I bloody well did it!'

The room erupts. Becomes a maelstrom.

He shines his cheesiest grin at them.

'I didn't think I could do it,' he says. 'I thought it would be too hard, you know? I wasn't even sure I'd get over the fence at the back. Not that it was too high or anything. I mean, I could climb it no problem. But I thought I'd back out. I thought I'd end up coming home again with nothing to show for it. But I did it. I actually did it.'

For a moment he can't say anymore. He is too overcome with the emotion of it all. He stands there with tear-filled eyes and pushes his hands through his hair and listens to the chattering around him.

'I need a beer,' he says. 'Wait there while I get myself a can.'

He hurries off to the kitchen. Reaches out a hand to open the fridge. Sees that it is caked in blood. Her blood.

Suddenly he is dashing over to the sink and being violently and copiously sick.

When his retching is over, he turns the tap on full force and washes the mess away. Squirts some Fairy Liquid onto his hands and washes those too.

He heads back to the fridge. Takes a can of Carlsberg from the shelf, pops it open, then takes half a dozen deep swigs before coming up for air.

When he gets back to the room, he has calmed a little. His hands are less shaky as he raises the can to his lips again.

'She deserved it,' he says. 'Bloody hard head, though. I hit her twice with a brick – twice! – and she still didn't go down. Had to use the knife in the end. Got a bit messy then . . .'

His thoughts drift off, and it's a while before he can drag himself back into the present.

'She knew why, though. I told her before she died. I explained to her exactly why I was doing it.'

With his free hand he points at one of his onlookers, then another, then another. 'You all know why I'm doing this, don't you? It's for you. Every one of you. They've got to learn. They've got to be taught a lesson.'

Exhaustion hits him then, and he stumbles across to one of the high-backed chairs.

'I could do with a rest, George, after the night I've had.'

George seems to take the hint, and relinquishes his position.

He slumps heavily into the vacated chair. Takes another long slurp. Scans the faces watching him.

'You'll all get your turn. Every last one of you. Don't worry about that. Tonight was just the start.'

He puts a hand out. 'Well? Is this the best welcome you can give me?'

As if in response, one member of his audience crosses the room and sits on his lap. He strokes her head softly.

'Thanks, Freda,' he says. 'I can always count on you.'

Freda looks up at him. Stares at his face without appreciation, without empathy. Without even a glimmer of comprehension.

Freda is a pigeon.

From every vantage point in the room, almost one hundred pairs of eyes peer similarly at the only human in their midst.

3

And now he's not so sure this was a good idea.

He didn't give it a lot of thought at the time the request was made. It seemed like it would be a piece of cake. Not a patch on the stuff he used to get up to.

But now Nathan Cody feels the unease building inside him, the pressure in his chest increasing. It seems uncomfortably warm to him, even though it's the middle of October and everyone is wearing dark, drab coats to blend in with the dark, drab days.

Play, he tells himself. Play like a bastard to take your mind off it.

So he does. Starts banging away on his guitar like he's been doing for the past hour. Singing his heart out like it's his only route to a square meal today.

He's standing at the bottom end of Bold Street. He's wearing a ragged, stained coat and greasy denim jeans, and there's a week's worth of itchy stubble on his chin. He hasn't played in public for a long time, but if he says so himself, he's sounding damn good. People have actually been tossing coins into the battered case yawning open on the pavement in front of him.

'Paperback Writer' is what he's singing now. Which couldn't be any more apt given that he's mere feet away from where Waterstones used to stand. Not that many of his passers-by are making the connection. Bit subtle for most of them at this time of the morning. They'll know it's a Beatles song, all right. Cody is trying to maintain a local flavour in his repertoire. Not doing 'Ferry Cross the Mersey', though. He hates that song. He can never resist the temptation to slip into an absurdly exaggerated Scouse accent when he attempts it – so much so that he ends up sounding like Harry Enfield doing his 'Calm down, calm down' sketch.

It's nine o'clock on a Tuesday. Most of the people passing are on their way to work, but some are hitting the shops early. He wonders if any of them miss Waterstones as much as he does, or whether to them it was less about the books and more about being just another place to grab an espresso and a pastry to kick-start their day.

The thought saddens him and provokes him to give extra emphasis to the last lines of the song, but they get carried away on the breeze and nobody notices.

He takes a moment to look around. Opposite is the grand old Lyceum building, originally one of the first lending libraries in Europe, and more recently a post office. Now a homeless man sits hunched up on its otherwise deserted steps, his head resting against a stone pillar.

Farther along the street, a dark-complexioned woman stands at the entranceway to Central Station and tries to sell copies of the *Big Issue*. She is short, but probably not as stocky as her many layers of clothing make it appear. Cody suspects she would never win saleswoman of the year with her timid, mumbling technique. He decides that, when his own stint here is over, he will donate to her the money he has been given.

His gaze shifts up the street. Between him and St Luke's Church at the far end lies an eclectic mix of cafes, coffee houses, art shops and clothing retailers. He has always liked this part of town. He can almost picture a time when the length of Bold Street was employed as a standard measure for ships' ropes, and the surrounding buildings were being erected to house the rich merchants.

He is well aware that the city has its problems, just like any other. A few minutes of travel in almost any direction from the town centre and its tourist attractions leads to areas of dilapidation, decay and poverty. Toxteth, infamous for the rioting of the eighties, is not far from here. Unlike many other cities, though, Liverpool has long been looked down upon, certainly by politicians and the media, and usually by those who have never visited the place. Its

people have often been the subject of cruel stereotype, spectacular prejudice, and ill-considered attempts at humour.

Things are changing, though, and rapidly. Following decades of stagnation, the city is being transformed. Money is pouring in. The docklands and shopping areas have been regenerated and revitalised. Liverpool has always had its history and its architecture and its football and the Beatles. But now there is a Debenhams and a Hilton, too. New restaurants and bars are popping up everywhere. Tourists are flocking here like never before.

And what all this brings to the inhabitants of Liverpool is a growing sense of optimism. Despite all the dirt and decay that may still lie on the outskirts, the people can look towards the shiny-bright heart of their city with pride, and with hope that some of the prosperity will trickle their way. But whether that happens or not, it will never deter them from the mission that seems to be written into their genes to make this the friendliest and most welcoming city in the land.

Cody sees and feels this as he looks around now.

But what he doesn't see is what he came here for.

He spends a minute deciding what to play next. Opts for 'Eleanor Rigby'. Gets all the way to the end without making a penny. But then two teenage girls stop in their tracks and smile at him. He smiles back.

'What was that?' one of them asks.

'You don't know it?' he says.

'If I did, I wouldn't be asking.'

The cheekiness amuses him. 'It's by the Beatles. You've heard of them, right?'

'Course. I'm not thick. My granddad is always going on about them. Says he saw them at the Cavern before they were even famous.'

'He's a lucky man. Wish I'd been there.'

'Do you know anything modern?'

'Like what?'

She shrugs. 'I dunno. Something by Beyoncé or Ed Sheeran?'

Cody scratches the stubble on his chin. 'How about "Single Ladies"?'

Her eyes light up. 'You can play that?'

'No. I can do the dance, though, if you want to see that.'

The girls look at each other and giggle. The one who so far hasn't spoken feels emboldened enough to put a question of her own.

'Ever thought of auditioning for *X Factor*?'

A presence. Behind the girls. Cody permits his eyes a swift glance, but doesn't allow them to linger.

He sees a tall man in a long grey overcoat and a beanie, but his view past the girls isn't great.

'Think I'm good enough?' he asks the girls.

'I've seen worse. Who knows? It could make you famous.'

Cody sees the man take a step forward, as if he's just curious to know what's being discussed, or perhaps waiting to hear a song.

Not yet, thinks Cody. Give him the benefit of the doubt.

'If I get famous, will you come and see me on stage?'

'Yeah, deffo. You better get learning something more modern, though, or you've got no chance. You're not much older than us, are you?'

Cody's mind is running on two parallel tracks. Trying to come up with a relevant response to the girls, but also trying to keep his attention focused on what the man might be about to do.

He gets questions like this all the time. About his age. About how he looks barely twenty when in fact he's closer to thirty. In some ways, his boyish looks have been the bane of his life. On the other hand, they're why he's here now, doing this. Being what he's not.

Another cautious movement forward from the man. He's right behind the girls now. He could reach out and touch them. Cody tenses. He's finding it almost impossible to focus on the girls. His eyes want to slide up and lock on to the man, but if he does that it will all be over. He makes nonsense sounds as if in search of a witty

reply to the girl's question still hanging before him, but his brain has already given up trying to multitask and is demanding that he stick to one frigging thing at a time.

And then it happens. But not in the way Cody expected.

A second man, as if from nowhere. Suddenly he's there, to Cody's right, but in full view of the girls. He too is wearing a hat – a baseball cap – and he too is wearing a long coat. But it's what he's doing with the coat that makes the difference. Because what he's doing is opening it wide and showing the girls that the only garments he has beneath it are a pair of black shoes and a pair of long grey socks, although these are less noteworthy than the part of his body that could currently be used to hang his hat on if he so wished.

The girls yelp. Cody makes a dive for the man, who turns and starts to run. Cody manages to grab hold of the back of the man's coat. He holds it good and tight, thinking, Got you, you bastard. Got you.

Except that he hasn't got him. Because what the man does then is simply to shuck off his coat and continue running. Naked except for his shoes and his socks and his baseball cap, he launches into a sprint worthy of Usain Bolt.

Shit, thinks Cody. And then he's running too. Swinging his guitar round to his back and chasing down his quarry. He is no longer a busker. He is Detective Sergeant Nathan Cody of the Merseyside Police force, pursuing a suspect and calling into his concealed radio microphone that he requires assistance, and cursing the fact that his plans have all gone wrong and that maybe pretending to be a busker wasn't such a great idea because now he's having to run and his frigging guitar is getting in the way and it's his own guitar and if it gets damaged he will be so frigging upset.

The naked man starts up Bold Street, but quickly jinks left into the entranceway to Central Station. Cody follows him down the slope. Ahead he sees people pointing and laughing at the streaker, but despite Cody's yells, nobody does anything to stop the guy.

Cody decides to save his breath and put his energy into picking up the pace.

He wonders if the man is going to head for the trains. How the hell can he expect to get past the barrier guards looking like that? But instead he takes a left turn at the cake shop, heading back up and towards the other exit. Cody feels he's getting closer, but boy, this bastard can run. And when the man bursts onto Ranelagh Street and hits the pedestrian crossing he doesn't even pause. Doesn't even check what the lights are doing. Just powers straight across the road, seemingly oblivious to the screeching tyres and the honking horns and the swearing taxi drivers. But Cody, being a little more conservative when it comes to risking his life, does slow down a tad, does take a little more time dodging the traffic and gesturing to the taxi drivers not to kill him.

And when he gets to the other side he sees another obstacle in his path. A woman. A huge woman. Wide of girth and about to fill that gap between the fruit stall and the knot of people whose eyes have all turned to enjoy the spectacle of the naked man who has just rushed past them. And despite Cody's calls she does not hear him. Just keeps on approaching that gap like a ship sliding into dock.

He can't stop for this. He hesitated for the cars, but he can't pause for this, even though the woman looks like she could do him just as much damage. And so even as he yells at her to get out of the way he is already trying to overtake her. Already squeezing through a space that he knows cannot accommodate both of them.

When he gets through, he knows it has not been without consequence. He can tell from the cry of surprise and the subsequent crash and noise of tumbling fruit that it was not the most skilfully executed manoeuvre. When he hears the shouting and feels the impact of a large orange as it bounces off his shoulder, he is not surprised.

Ahead, naked guy runs into the Clayton Square shopping centre. Basing his judgement on his luck thus far, Cody knows – he just *knows* – that the automatic doors will choose this moment to close. And close they do. Almost perversely they start to glide together, and Cody also knows that they will be irritatingly unhurried in their reaction to his frantic gestures to reopen.

So he decides not to give them the satisfaction. Instead of slamming on his brakes, he steps on the gas. For a terrifying moment it looks as though it's going to be man versus glass, but still he doesn't stop. At the last instant he makes a huge leap, twisting his body sideways to fit between those jaws.

And forgetting.

Forgetting that he has a fucking guitar on his back. His beloved, cherished instrument. The one he bought with a substantial portion of his first wage packet. The one he has strummed every night in those empty hours when sleep evades him. The one he brought with him today because guitars tend not to be police issue and he didn't anticipate he would end up having to chase a naked fucking maniac through the busy streets of Liverpool.

But it's too late now to reverse his actions. He hears the final discordant crunching and wailing of his guitar as it is ripped from his back and tossed to the floor like a dying animal flung from the blood-stained teeth of a savage predator. He feels the sting of loss that only another musician would understand, but knows he cannot pause and grieve. Instead, he channels his emotions into fierce determination as he zigzags past a bemused woman trying to sell Sky television packages.

Cody issues an unintelligible roar and tries to tap into his energy reserves. He starts to close the distance again as naked man runs through the doors into Boots. Cody enters too, and realises he has more of a chance here. It is less open. The man is corralled because of the aisles, and up ahead there are people. Staff and customers who could help. Cody calls out to them.

‘Police! Stop that man!’

But he knows. Knows in his heart that they are unlikely to come to his aid. Most can be forgiven, because they won’t understand what the hell is going on. Others will comprehend but be too scared to intervene. A few – the more contemptible ones – will always want the criminal to evade capture and for the police to be seen to fail.

But sometimes there is one.

She steps forward from her station, perfume tester in hand. She takes aim. She fires. A good full spray of the stuff, right into his eyes.

The man issues a high-pitched screech and brings his hands to his face as he whirls away from her. Ironically, he collides with a display of reading glasses, sending them flying across the store, but then somehow manages to recover and resume his run.

Cody issues a breathless thank you as he passes the girl, who looks justifiably proud of her actions. Her gleaming smile renews his faith and re-energises him. You can do this, he tells himself. You can do this.

The flasher manages to get to the far side of the shop and through the other exit. He goes right, then starts up the yellow-edged steps leading to the sweeping curve of Great Charlotte Street. There are a lot of steps, but they aren’t steep, and Cody finds himself gaining ground. One last push, he tells himself, and he starts taking the steps two at a time, getting closer and closer to that man who is not offering him the most enticing view right now, and then he is almost within grasping distance but wondering what the hell he is going to grasp. And when the stairs come to an end, Cody realises it’s now or never because his lungs are about to burst, and he makes a last-ditch leap, jumping and stretching and snatching . . .

And he gets him. He snags an ankle, which is just enough. His fingers encircle that bony ankle and refuse to let go. They bite into the man’s flesh like a manacle. The man falls. A fleshy slap as he smacks into the pavement. And Cody is on him, pinning him to the ground, holding him there while he tries to push words out of

his heaving lungs so that he can summon his colleagues, and so that he can swear at this idiot for causing the damage to his precious guitar.

It takes him a while to become aware of his surroundings. A while to realise that people are standing around him, smiling and sniggering and holding up their mobile phones to take photographs and videos.

And he just knows. With a sinking heart, he begins to accept that these images of him sitting breathless astride the buttocks of a naked man are about to go viral.