

STARWARD

Williams, Liz

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Starward

McNair was working on a story layout when the suicide bomber stepped through the door. At first, he failed to register her presence: she was nothing more than a shadow in the corner of his eye. When he realised someone was there, he looked up, expecting Jules with the coffee. Instead, he saw a pair of mad blue eyes, a mouth open in a soundless O. The girl was wearing a shapeless black parka, perhaps a military cast-off. As McNair stared, startled, the girl slowly opened the parka in a parody of a striptease, to reveal a T-shirt criss-crossed with an arrangement of straps and buckles.

Later, McNair did not remember seeing anything that resembled explosives. It had been, he thought, trembling over a double scotch in the Dark Horse, the madness in her eyes that had sent him fleeing from the room in unthinking flight, moments before the blast ripped through the makeshift editorial offices of 'Futures' magazine.

As bombs go, this one turned out to be small and home-made, the bomber, an Ontological Fundamentalist from the Leeds area. The anti-terrorist squad made a detailed and suspicious inspection of the premises, even though it hadn't been McNair who had called them in. The landlord watched the progress of the investigation, with equal suspicion, eyes resting on McNair with a chilly kind of speculation. Eventually, the ATS went away, but McNair knew that they had noted him. His name was already on the records on both sides of the border. The bomb hadn't left much of the premises intact. To the minds of McNair, Jules, and Greer, this was just as well.

"You realise, don't you," Greer said over the whisky, "That if they'd found anything, we'd be in Barlinnie by now?"

"Barlinnie would be a picnic," Jules said. She took a long, harsh sip. "More like one of the internment camps on Uist or Mull. Some island gulag well away from the mainland."

"It could have been worse," McNair said, staring out through the crack in the blackout blind at the Great Western Road. The curfew was in force: the street was empty. They had come into the Dark Horse through the back entrance, like the handful of other customers still brave enough to meet in forbidden pubs. "Stupid fanatical bitch could have killed me."

Jules patted his hand. His spirits fleetingly rose.

"Well, she didn't. How far along were you with the latest issue?"

"I'd nearly bloody finished it. It was ready to go to press in the morning."

"Typical." Greer poured another shot. "Do you have copies of anything?"

"Actually, yes. Five stories. I photostatted them last night. They're under the floorboards, under my bed."

"Go back and get them. I'll mock up a cover, write some sort of editorial and we'll try to find a printer. God knows where, though."

"Which stories were they?" Jules asked.

"One was about a British space program. The others were political allegories. One was about the Internment Bill, but set on another planet. The last one's a satire on the British government, giving information about forthcoming censorship. All good stuff." There was no point in telling them the names of the authors. Pseudonyms changed from week to week.

"Fine," Greer said. "If we can salvage something, it'll be worth it."

McNair heard the back door creak open and turned. Four people entered: a young man, a middle aged woman and two girls. They were almost parodies of themselves, he thought, wan from lack of sunlight, clad in soot-coloured clothes, dripping with sharp silver.

"Not seen that lot in here before," Greer said, voice tight.

"They're not officials."

"These days, you never can tell."

The woman was coming over. Her throat was banded by a tattooed spiderweb collar and now McNair thought he remembered seeing her a couple of times before: once at a demonstration before the last crack-down, ten years ago now, and once at a gathering on the outskirts of Glasgow. But he was pretty certain that he'd seen her before that, too: perhaps at one of the Horror.com meetings back in the late nineties, or at a convention. She must be in her mid-forties, now, with a pinched face and cropped black hair. Patches of skin showed through the crop and McNair glimpsed the thin shine of acid burn: she had once had an unapproved hairstyle. He thought her name might be Rath: it was the sort of name fans of her ilk had tended to choose and it rang a vague bell.

"Mind if I sit?" the woman said. Greer muttered something non-comittal.

"I heard about the incident," the woman said. "Sorry to hear it. But at least you're still alive." Greer stared at her. "You know who we are?"

"Yes. But it's not common knowledge, don't worry. We're just very well informed about the -" she smiled, "-competition."

"And you would be?"

"We produce a little thing called Neurogothic," the woman said.

"Yeah, I see it around," Jules said. "Dark satire samizdat zine, isn't it?"

"That's right." She looked at McNair's dishevelled appearance with what seemed to be genuine sympathy. "Bloody government supporters, though. It's not enough that we have the authorities coming down on us every which-way, we have to put up with these lunatics, too."

"Thanks," McNair said. He took another sip of the whisky. "She was really young."

The woman snorted. "Yeah, well, they're the worst. They send them out of the Deserving Poor homes at fifteen with their heads full of propaganda about anti-government terrorism north of the Wall and next thing you know, they're all fired up and raring to fight the good fight. You can't blame them."

"I can," Greer said.

The woman shrugged. "No point. They're just kids who've been filled with shit. What do you expect? They don't know any better. Twenty years ago, I'd have agreed with you, but things were different then. We still had the Net, for a start, and something that called itself an independent press. Anyway, what I came to tell you was that if you want to use our print facilities for a bit..." Greer stared at her. "You'd do that?"

"We're in the same game, aren't we?"

McNair smiled. Greer shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"OK. Thanks," McNair said, avoiding Greer's eye. "I might take you up on that."

The woman nodded, standing. "You won't know where we are. I'll get a message to you."

"All right."

As soon as she was out of earshot, Greer leaned forward.

"Bloody goths. Have you read any of their stuff?"

"Neurogothic? I've seen it."

"It's all about sodding vampires. Return to some mythical late-Victorian age when we all lived in freedom and harmony."

Jules smiled. "It's satire, Ed. Like she said. Just like what we write."

"Yeah, but -"

"It's all samizdat literature," McNair said, peaceably. "We're all aiming at the same thing."

"No, it isn't the fucking same and you know it. What we do is political commentary, yeah, but there's a whole other dimension to it. We're looking at the future. We're pretending - at the bloody least - that there is a future beyond the shite that the British government are currently laying on us. That's the function of the kind of thing we write - to give hope, to point out the fundamental flaws in society. Otherwise what's the fucking point? You and I might just as well get jobs in the service industry and she could go and work for some corporate brothel in Birmingham."

"Thanks," Jules said, very sour. "I doubt they'd have me."

"You fancy that, McNair? Going to make cheap shoes for some Euro corp? Protest and survive, mate. Protest and survive."

"I nearly didn't."

"It's the future that we're writing for, not just the present. It's the future we're trying to re-create. Not like that lot, living in bloody fairyland."

McNair nodded. "All right. Fair enough. I don't like the sort of stuff they write, it's not my thing, but that isn't the point. The point is that we have an issue to bring out, we've got nowhere to do it, and if a bunch of black-clad retroactivists want to give us a hand, I suggest we take what's offered rather than bickering over whose genre is more authentic. There's too much of that kind of thing and you know it."

"That's the trouble with bloody fans. Especially Glaswegian fans. After everything that's gone down, they still can't help behaving like Celts," Jules said, with gloom. They both looked at her.

"What?"

"It's how the Romans conquered you. Always bitching and back-stabbing. Couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery. I'm going to talk to Rath." Then she was gone across the pub, whisky in hand.

Next day, instructions memorised, McNair went in search of Neurogothic. According to Jules, the current location of the samizdat was supposed to be somewhere in Kelvinside, underneath the rotting remains of what had once been the botanical gardens. McNair made his way past the stumps of palm trees, past ruined greenhouses filled with the skeins of dead vines, through tunnels of ivy and briar. In this cold dusk he could see why Neurogothic's staff might hang out here.

At the heart of the wrecked gardens, he came to a domed glass building. The door was heavily padlocked. McNair made his way around to the side of the greenhouse, as instructed, pushed aside a veil of dead clematis and paused. The instructions given to him had stated that he was to give a nightjar's call, but McNair had no idea what a nightjar sounded like, or even if they lived in Glasgow. He emitted a vague hoot and hoped it would do.

Next moment, Rath was standing in front of him as though she had risen out of the ground. Her hands were jammed into her pockets; her face looked sullen and sunken beneath the black crop of hair.

"You made it. Come down."

McNair followed her down a flight of steps leading from a hatch. Her sudden appearance was explained.

"It's an old place," she said over her shoulder. "Victorian, probably. Some kind of cellar where they kept the seedlings."

"Good place to hide."

"Yeah, that's what we thought. But it won't last. They'll find it sooner or later. They've got heat seekers that could see through Ben Nevis. But we'll have moved on by then."

McNair was about to ask how many times they shifted the base of their operation, but you didn't ask questions like that these days. He held his tongue and followed her into the dankness of the cellar.

People were waiting for them: the young man and the two girls, and a figure in a wheelchair.

McNair halted, unable to see much.

"Hello, McNair, mate," the figure said. "Haven't seen you since Worldcon in 2004. Must be a good twenty years. Innocent bloody days, then, eh?"

McNair squinted into the gloom and saw a pasty moon face squinting back at him. "God, it's you. I thought you were dead."

He could barely remember the man's name. He recalled one of the fatter members of fandom, a stout, self-satisfied boy wearing one too many silver pentacles over grubby black, who was always hanging around the fringes of editorial parties and informing people about clearly mythical sexual exploits. Merciless fun had been had at his expense. He had not appeared either to notice or mind. And now here he was, engaged in revolutionary struggle.

"Toutonier Fo," the figure said. "That won't be the name you remember, of course."

"No, it isn't," McNair said, with perfect truth. He could not for the life of him remember what the boy had originally been called.

"So, you had a deconstructionist come visiting?" Fo said. He wheeled the chair forward.

"A what?" McNair could see Fo smiling in the half-light.

"A deconstructionist. That's what I call them. After the film - 2006, produced by Rog Elliott, directed by Stan Vincent Hall. Came out under the Bloodhead label on DVD, when we still had them."

"I must have missed it," McNair said. Twenty years, two decades of political crackdown, and a fan was still a fucking fan. "Anyway, yes, we got targeted by some nutter with a body-bomb, if that's what you're referring to."

"Terrible." Fo did not sound particularly put out. "So you want some help with the mag, eh?"

"I'd appreciate it, yes."

"So what's in it?"

"The usual." McNair had forgotten how much that fanboy - Bram someone, that had been his name, just as obviously assumed - had irritated him. He remembered trying to hide in a bar with a bunch of cronies, but the kid had buttonholed him for a good twenty minutes.

"Still writing that retroactive stuff, are we?" Fo was very arch. "Space flight and moon units? Very fifties. All good nostalgic stuff if you're into that kind of thing, I suppose."

"And Neurogothic is what, precisely?"

"The past, is what. Going back to Victorian values, but with freedom of speech, dress, action and the Net. None of this futuristic science nonsense. In case you hadn't noticed, we've got a bunch of religious fascists in power who don't believe in the power of science, unless it's applied to weapons tech. Why bother to keep a dead dream alive?"

"I'd noticed the nature of the British government," McNair said. "So why are you offering your printing apparatus, if you don't like what we do?"

"Because we're both in the same game, aren't we?" Fo said, echoing Rath. "Genre's got to make a stand. Well, give me the stuff and take a seat upstairs. Enjoy the evening air. Rath's even got some cigs."

Later, on his way to sort out distribution of the zine, McNair thought back to the past.

The 2004 Worldcon. That had been the last large gathering of the genre community in the British Isles. Eighteen months later, the City had gone up in a ball of flame, a delayed reaction from the Middle Eastern mess, and that's when martial law had been declared. The Middle East was a sea of ruin from Ankara to Damascus these days, posing bugger all threat to anyone that McNair could divine, but somehow, martial law had never been revoked. He supposed that this was par for the course. And now no one seemed to be aiming starward, the country concerned only with maintaining a patchy degree of ethnic purity and that lot in Parliament hanging on to what power they'd managed to cobble together. Which was a lot, and clearly they were intending to keep it. McNair was perpetually aware of a slow fire of slower anger, just kept to a twenty year simmer on the neural backburner. Sometimes, as now, it threatened to erupt.

He remembered back to the Worldcon. It was pretty hazy, after everything that had happened. He recalled a couple of the guests of honour, a monumental hangover, and too much money spent on too many books. He'd agonised about that for weeks afterwards, unable to pay the gas bill, little knowing what was to come. He was just a wannabe writer, then, with a couple of short pieces in the very small press to his credit.

There had been a lot of scenes in the hotel bar: hanging around the pro writers and editors. Some Scottish guy with glasses... a writer who looked like a bouncer with an earful of metal... There had been a crazy Australian and two nice women who ran a small press magazine down south. Other people: a dark, witchy woman with books out in the States whom he'd never heard of. Everyone complained about the publishing scene. There had been some really stupid in-jokes that he couldn't now bring to mind. It was like looking back on play school: the weirdness before the storm hit.

And suddenly, it had become serious. The magazines finally meant something, little sparks in the new dark, the only media that told the truth, for a little while. But still marginal, still reviled. And now everyone wanted to read it. 'Futures' always vanished off the streets on the first day of publication. McNair gave a brief, bitter grin. Finally, genre got popular.

He wondered what had happened to the people in that bar. He thought he already knew. Most had been rounded up a year or so later. That little group would be either dead in the resistance years, or interred, unless they'd got out to Eire or beyond. A lot of pro writers had ended up in camps on Mull. He wondered whether any of them had escaped, were even now running the samizdat operations down south under different names. He knew of similar zines in Cardiff and London, but these things moved around, of necessity.

Greer was waiting for him in the Dark Horse. McNair passed on the information about the pick-up.

"I'll let the runners know," Greer said. "First lot should be out with cell one in the morning."

"I can't believe we've even got the issue moving," McNair said, running his hands through his hair.

"Would never have done it, if it hadn't been for your mate," Greer murmured.

McNair smiled. "Yes, you can always rely on fandom."

Next morning, he discovered just how true that was. A copy of the magazine had been left in the hallway of his tenement block, prominently shoved into his mailbox with no attempt at disguise. When, frowning, he opened the familiar black-and-white cover, he found that the contents were hardly typical. None of the stories were those that he had handed over to Toutonier Fo. The zine was filled with unfamiliar names, presumably Neurogothic authors.

Immediately, he thought of running, but the authorities came for him as he was throwing some last-minute stuff into a bag. They took him first to Barlinnie, and put him in a cell next to Greer.

"He's stolen our circulation," Greer said, from the other side of the wall before the guard made them both shut up. "You do realise that? Probably engineered the suicide bomber, as well."

"Fucking fandom," was all that McNair could bring himself to say.
"Never bloody changes."

The trial was brief and little more than a formality. McNair had not expected it to be otherwise. Under the revised anti-terrorist laws, he was not entitled to legal representation and he was advised to plead guilty. He asked what would happen if he refused, and a languid clerk informed him that the result would be the same, with an added sentence for contempt of court.

So McNair pleaded guilty, before a small, quiet court which nevertheless had full television coverage. It passed in a blur. He had often wondered, watching similar show trials on the box, how the person in the dock must feel, and now he knew. It seemed curiously unreal, as though his life had become detached and was floating away from him. He heard the sentence through ringing ears and did not remember being led back to his cell. It was possible that something had been placed in the beans and chips that were standard prison fare, or in the water. Perhaps, however, it was simply shock.

Greer was sentenced separately and McNair did not see him again. Later, he learned that Greer had been sent to Stronsay.

McNair himself was dispatched to Mull. The sentence was immediately enforced. McNair was shipped from Clydeside that night, reaching the island in the morning. From the narrow window of the prison ship, he could see that the day had dawned rainy pale, but this was the last weather that he glimpsed for the next six months. He was kept in the holding cells of the internment camp, the place known as the Deep. When they let him out again, it was more than a week before he could face even the red sunset light without flinching.

Good behaviour got you a long way on Mull, and McNair managed to stay off the work parties for another year. He kept his head down, didn't say much, spoke as little as he could. But once he got out of the Deep, he kept seeing people whom he knew. A lot of them had been writers, once, artists, media types from the old days in Glasgow and London. He even saw a couple of people from that bar at Worldcon: the Australian, and a man with some kind of skin disease who had once been a young and eager fan. The witchy woman had died on a police barricade on the Welsh border. The young guy with the ear-rings was still involved in the struggle, it was rumoured, running cells out of Amsterdam. No one knew what had happened to the sisters. But there were others here, the Australian told him, and the Australian seemed to know a hell of a lot. People who had been well known in the nineties and the first years of the century. Not just amateur writers from the small press, but pros as well. People who had been involved in science as well as writing.

"You want to get on a work party," the man with the skin disease told him, one afternoon in the camp yard.

"Why the fuck would I want to do that?" McNair asked.

"Yeah, no, you do," the Australian said, with the flicker of an eye. "Work parties are where it's at these days. Trust me."

So McNair caused a fuss, and was duly enlisted onto a group clearing the machair grass from the ever-encroaching shore, something to do with the governor's seaweed farming operation. For the first two weeks, hands bleeding from the tough grass, he cursed the Australian every hour on the hour, but he got along well with the rest of the work party. He recognised them, too, and they knew him, and why he was here.

After a month, very late one night when the guards were hunched over cards and whisky, a woman from the work party took him up into the hills. At first, McNair thought it might be simply some kind of sexual excursion, but he didn't want to push his luck. He said nothing, and was glad he hadn't, for when she reached the top of a ridge, she pointed downwards.

"That," was all she said.

At first, he could not believe what he was seeing. It was not large, and if you didn't have the angle right, it would be completely concealed by the trees. He wondered how the hell they'd got the parts.

"We're on the coast," the woman said. "Eire's not far as the gull flies. The allies send in bits, carried by divers. When the time comes, they'll bring in fuel. If we can get it up before the winter, no one will know it's here."

"It's a bloody home-made rocket," McNair said, stunned.

The woman smiled. "Yes, it is. It won't carry all that many people, but we're planning on drawing lots. It'll get us off the island, anyway."

"Wouldn't it have been easier to build a boat?" McNair asked, but she just shrugged and smiled. He came to stand on the ridge beside her, and without saying anything more they both looked up into the cold northern heavens, staring starward.

END

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