

Greg Egan

SCATTER MY ASHES

Every night, at exactly a quarter past three, something dreadful happens on the street outside our bedroom window. We peek through the curtains, yawning and shivering in the life-draining chill, and then we clamber back beneath the blankets without exchanging a word, to hug each other tightly and hope for sound sleep before it's time to rise.

Usually what we witness verges on the mundane. Drunken young men fighting, swaying about with outstretched knives, cursing incoherently. Robbery, bashings, rape. We wince to see such violence, but we can hardly be shocked or surprised any more, and we're never tempted to intervene: it's always far too cold, for a start! A single warm exhalation can coat the window pane with mist, transforming the most stomach-wrenching assault into a safely cryptic ballet for abstract blobs of light.

On some nights, though, when the shadows in the room are subtly wrong, when the familiar street looks like an abandoned film set, or a painting of itself perversely come to life, we are confronted by truly disturbing sights, oppressive apparitions which almost make us doubt we're awake, or, if awake, sane. I can't catalogue these visions, for most, mercifully, are blurred by morning, leaving only a vague uneasiness and a reluctance to be alone even in the brightest sunshine.

One image, though, has never faded.

In the middle of the road was a giant human skull. How big was it? Big enough for a child, perhaps six or seven years old, to stand trapped between the jaws, bracing them apart with outstretched arms and legs, trembling with the effort but somehow, miraculously, keeping the massive teeth from closing in.

As we watched I felt, strange as it may sound, inspired, uplifted, filled with hope by the sight of that tiny figure holding out against the blind,

brutal creature of evil. Wouldn't we all like to think of innocence as a tangible force to be reckoned with? Despite all evidence to the contrary.

Then the four huge, blunt teeth against which the child was straining began to reform, tapering to needle-fine points. A drop of blood fell from the back of each upraised hand. I cried out something, angry and horrified. But I didn't move.

A gash appeared in the back of the child's neck. Not a wound: a mouth, the child's new and special mouth, violently writhing, stretched open ever wider by four sharp, slender fangs growing in perfect mimicry of the larger fangs impaling the child's palms and feet.

The new mouth began to scream, at first a clumsy, choking sound, made without a tongue, but then a torn, bloody scrap of flesh appeared in place, the tongue of the old mouth uprooted and inverted, and the cries gave full voice to an intensity of suffering and fear that threatened to melt the glass of the window, sear away the walls of the room, and drag us into a pit of darkness where one final scream would echo forever.

When it was over, we climbed into bed and snuggled up together.

I dreamt that I found a jigsaw puzzle, hidden in a dark, lost corner of the house. The pieces were in a plain cardboard box, unaccompanied by any illustration of what the assembled puzzle portrayed. Wendy laughed and told me not to waste my time, but I sat frowning over it for an hour every evening, until after many weeks only a handful of pieces remained unplaced.

Somehow, even then, I didn't know what the picture was, but as I lazily filled in the very last gap, I felt a sudden overpowering conviction that whatever the jigsaw showed, *I did not want to see it.*

I woke a little before dawn. I kissed Wendy very softly, I gently stroked her shoulders and breasts with my fingertips. She rearranged herself, pulled a face, but didn't wake. I was about to brush her forehead with one hand, which I knew would make her open her eyes and give me a sleepy smile, when it occurred to me that if she did, there might be small, fanged mouths behind her eyelids.

When I woke again it was half past seven, and she was already up. I hate that, I hate waking in an empty bed. She was reading the paper as I sat down to breakfast.

“So, what's happening in the world?”

“A fifth child's gone missing.”

“Shit. Don't they have any suspects yet? Any evidence, any clues?”

“A fisherman reported something floating on the lake. The police went out in a boat to have a look.”

“And?”

“It turned out to be a calf foetus.”

I gulped coffee. I hate the taste of coffee, and it sets my stomach squirming, but I simply have to drink it.

“It says police will be diving all day today, searching the lake.”

“I might go out there, then. The lake looks fantastic in this weather.”

“When I'm snug in my office with the heater on full blast, I'll think of you.”

“Think of the divers. They'll have the worst of it.”

“At least they know they'll get paid. You could spend the whole day there for nothing.”

“I'd rather take my kind of risk than theirs.”

Once she was gone, I cut out the article on the vanished child. The walls of my study are papered with newsprint, ragged grey odd-shaped pieces affixed only at their top corners, free to rustle when the door is opened or closed. Sometimes, when I'm sitting at my desk for a moment after I've switched off the lamp, I get a strong impression of diseased skin.

“Put them in a scrap book!” says Wendy, whenever she ventures in to grimace at the state of the room. “Or better still, put them in a filing cabinet and see if you can lose the key!” But I need to keep them this way, I need to see them all at once, spread out before me like a satellite photograph, an aerial view of this age of violence. I'm looking for a pattern. My gaze darts from headline to headline, from STRANGLER to STALKER to RIPPER to SLASHER, hunting for a clue to the terrible unity, hunting for the nature of the single dark force that I know lies behind all the different nightmare stories, all the different fearful names.

I have books too, of course, I have shelves stuffed with volumes, some learned, some hysterical, from treatises on Vlad the Impaler to discussions of the entrails of London prostitutes to heavy psychoanalysis of the Manson gang. I have skimmed these works, read a page here and a page there only, for to clutter my mind with details can only distract me from the whole.

I recall precisely when my obsession began. I was ten. A convict, a murderer, had escaped from a nearby prison, and warnings were

broadcast urging us to barricade our homes. My parents, naturally, tried not to alarm me, but we all slept together that night, in the room with the smallest window, and when the poor cat mewed to be let in the back door, my mother would let nobody, not even my father, budge.

I dozed and woke, dozed and woke, and each time dreamt that I was not sleeping but lying awake, waiting for the utter certainty of the unstoppable, blood-thirsty creature bursting through the door and slicing us all in two.

They caught him the next morning. They caught him too late. A service station attendant was dead, cut up beyond belief by an implement that was never found.

They showed the killer on TV that night, and he looked nothing like the stuff of nightmares: thin, awkward, squinting, dwarfed between two massive, smug policemen. Yet for all his apparent weakness and shyness, he seemed to know something, he seemed to be holding a secret, not so much about murder itself as about the cameras, the viewers, about exactly what he meant to us. He averted his eyes from the lenses, but the hint of a smile on his lips declared that everything was, and always would be, just the way he wanted it, just the way he'd planned it from the start.

I drove to the lake and set up my camera with its longest lens, but after peering through the viewfinder for ten minutes, keeping the police boat perfectly framed, following its every tiny drift, I switched to binoculars to save my eyes and neck. Nothing was happening. Faint shouts reached me now and then, but the tones were always of boredom, discomfort, irritation. Soon I put down the binoculars. If they found something, I'd hear the change at once.

I drank coffee from a flask, I paced. I took a few shots of divers backflipping into the water, but none seemed special, none captured the mood. I watched the water birds and felt somehow guilty for not knowing their names.

The sky and the water were pale grey, the colour of soggy newsprint. Thick smoke rose from a factory on the far shore, but seemed to fall back down again on almost the same spot. The chill, the bleakness, and the morbid nature of my vigil worked together to fill me with an oppressive sense of gloom, but cutting through that dullness and despair was the acid taste of anticipation.

My back was turned when I heard the shouts of panic. It took me seconds to spot the boat again, forever to point the camera. An inert diver

was being hauled on board, to the sound of much angry swearing. Someone ripped off his face mask and began resuscitation. Each time I fired the shutter, I thought: what if he dies? If he dies it will be my fault, because if he dies I'll have a sale for sure.

I packed up my gear and fled before the boat reached the shore, but not before the ambulance arrived. I glanced at the driver, who looked about my age, and thought: why am I doing my job, and not his? Why am I a voyeur, a parasite, a vulture, a leech, when I could be saving people's lives and sleeping the sleep of the just every night?

Later, I discovered that the cop was in a coma. Evidently there'd been a malfunction of his air supply. I sold one of the pictures, which appeared with the caption KISS OF LIFE! The editor said, "That could easily win you a prize." I smiled immodestly and mumbled about luck.

Wendy is a literary agent. We went out to dinner that night with one of her clients, to celebrate the signing of a contract. The writer was a quiet, thoughtful, attractive woman. Her husband worked in a bank, but played football for some team or other on weekends, and was built like a vault.

"So, what do you do for a crust," he asked.

"I'm a freelance photographer."

"What's that mean? Fashion models for the front of *Vogue* or centrefolds for *Playboy*?"

"Neither. Most of my work is for newspapers, or news magazines. I had a picture in *Time* last year."

"What of?"

"Flood victims trapped on the roof of their farm."

"Yeah? Did you pay them some of what you got for it?"

Wendy broke in and described my day's achievement, and the topic switched naturally to that of the missing child.

"If they ever catch the bloke who's doing it," said the footballer, "he shouldn't be killed. He should be tortured for a couple of days, and then crippled. Say they cut off both his legs. Then there's no chance he'll escape from prison on his own steam, and when they let him free in a year or two, like they always end up doing, who's he going to hurt?"

I said, "Why does everyone assume there's a killer? Nobody's yet found a single drop of blood, or a fingerprint, or a footprint. Nobody knows for sure that the children are dead, nobody's proved that at all."

The writer said, "Maybe the Innocents are ascending into Heaven."

For a moment I thought she was serious, but then she smirked at the cleverness of her sarcasm. I kept my mouth shut for the rest of the evening.

In the taxi home, though, I couldn't help muttering a vague, clumsy insult about Neanderthal fascists who revelled in torture. Wendy laughed and put an arm around my waist.

“Jealousy really becomes you,” she said. I couldn't think of an intelligent reply.

That night, we witnessed a particularly brutal robbery. A taxi pulled up across the road, and the passengers dragged the driver out and kicked him in the head until he was motionless. They virtually stripped him naked searching for the key to his cashbox, then they smashed his radio, slashed his tyres, and stabbed him in the stomach before walking off, whistling Rossini.

Once Wendy had drifted back to sleep, I crept out of the bedroom and phoned for an ambulance. I nearly went outside to see what I could do, but thought: if I move him, if I even just try to stop the bleeding, I'll probably do more harm than good, maybe manage to kill him with my well-intentioned incompetence. End up in court. I'd be crazy to take the risk.

I fell asleep before the ambulance arrived. By morning there wasn't a trace of the incident. The taxi must have been towed away, the blood washed off the road by the water truck.

A sixth child had vanished. I returned to the lake, but found it was deserted. I dipped my hand in the water: it was oily, and surprisingly warm. Then I drove back home, cut out the relevant articles, and taped them into place on the wall.

As I did so, the jigsaw puzzle dream flooded into my mind, with the dizzying power of *déjà vu*. I stared at the huge grey mosaic, almost expecting it to change before my eyes, but then the mood passed and I shook my head and laughed weakly.

The door opened. I didn't turn. Someone coughed. I still didn't turn.

“Excuse me.”

It was a man in his mid-thirties, I'd say. Balding slightly, but with a young, open face. He was dressed like an office worker, in a white shirt with the cuffs rolled up, neatly pressed black trousers, a plain blue tie.

“What do you want?”

“I'm sorry. I knocked on the front door, and it was ajar. Then I called out twice.”

“I didn't hear you.”

“I'm sorry.”

“What do you want?”

“Can I look? At your walls? Oh, there! The Marsden Mangler! I wonder how many people remember him today. Five years ago there were two thousand police working full time on that case, and probably a hundred reporters scurrying back and forth between the morgue and the night club belt. You know, half the jury fainted when they showed slides at the trial, including an abattoir worker.”

“Nobody *fainted*. A few people closed their eyes, that's all. I was there.”

“Watching the jury and not the slides, apparently.”

“Watching both. Were you there?”

“Oh, yes! Every day without fail.”

“Well, I don't remember you. And I got to know most of the regular faces in the public gallery.”

“I was never *in* the public gallery.” He crossed the room to peer closely at a Sunday paper's diagram detailing the *modus operandi* of the Knightsbridge Knifeman. “This is pretty coy, isn't it? I mean, anybody would think that the female genitalia —” I glared at him, and he turned his attention to something else, smiling a slight smile of tolerant amusement.

“How did you find out about my collection of clippings?” It wasn't something that I boasted about, and Wendy found it a bit embarrassing, perhaps a bit sick.

“*Collection of clippings!* You mustn't call it that! I'll tell you what this room is: it's a shrine. No lesser word will do. A shrine.”

I glanced behind me. The door was closed. I watched him as he read a two-page spread on a series of unsolved axe murders, and though his gaze was clearly directed at the print, I felt as if he was staring straight back at me.

Then I knew that I *had* seen him before. Twenty years before, on television, smiling shyly as they hustled him along, never quite looking at the camera, but never quite turning away. My eyes began to water, and a

crazy thought filled my head: hadn't I known then, hadn't I been certain, that the killer would come and get me, that nothing would stand in his way? That the man had not aged was unremarkable, no, it was *necessary*, because if he had aged I would never have recognised him, and recognition was exactly what he wanted. Recognition was the start of my fear.

I said, "You might tell me your name."

He looked up. "I'm sorry. I have been discourteous, haven't I? But —" (he shrugged) "— I have so many nicknames." He gestured widely with both hands, taking in all the walls, all the headlines. I pictured the door handle, wondering how quickly I could turn it with palms stinking wet, with numb, clumsy fingers. "My friends, though, call me Jack."

He easily lifted me over his head, and then somehow (did he float up off the floor, or did he *stretch* up, impossibly doubling his height?) pinned me face-down against the ceiling. Four fangs grew to fill his mouth, and his mouth opened to fill my vision. It was like hanging over a living well, and as his distorted words echoed up from the depths, I thought: if I fall, nobody will ever find me.

"Tonight you will take my photograph. Catch me in the act with your brightest flashgun. That's what you want, isn't it?" He shook me. "Isn't it?" I closed my eyes, but that brought visions of a tumbling descent. I whispered, "Yes."

"You invoke me and invoke me and invoke me!" he ranted. "Aren't you ever sick of blood? Aren't you ever sick of the taste of blood? Today it's the blood of tiny children, tomorrow the blood of old women, next the blood of ... who? Dark-haired prostitutes? Teenaged baby sitters? Blue-eyed homosexuals? And each time simply leaves you more jaded, longing for something crueller and more bizarre. Can't you sweeten your long, bland lives with anything but blood?"

"Colour film. Bring plenty of colour film. Kodachrome, I want saturated hues. Understand?" I nodded. He told me where and when: a nearby street corner, at three fifteen.

I hit the floor with my hands out in front of me, jarring one wrist but not breaking it. I was alone. I ran through the house, I searched every room, then I locked the doors and sat on the bed, shaking, emitting small, unhappy noises every few minutes.

When I'd calmed down, I went out and bought ten rolls of Kodachrome.

We ate at home that night. I was supposed to cook something, but I ended up making do with frozen pizzas. Wendy talked about her tax problems, and I nodded.

“And what did you do with yourself today?”

“Research.”

“For what?”

“I'll tell you tomorrow.”

We made love. For a while it seemed like some sort of ritual, some kind of magic: Wendy was giving me strength, yes, she was fortifying me with mystical energy and spiritual power. Afterwards, I couldn't laugh at such a ludicrous idea, I could only despise myself for being able to take it seriously for a moment.

I dreamt that she gave me a shining silver sword.

“What's it for?” I asked her.

“When you feel like running away, stab yourself in the foot.”

I climbed out of bed at two. It was utterly freezing, even once I was fully dressed. I sat in the kitchen with the light off, drinking coffee until I was so bloated that I could hardly breathe. Then I staggered to the toilet and threw it all up. My throat and lungs stung, I wanted to curl up and dissolve, or crawl back to the warm blankets, back to Wendy, to stay hidden under the covers until morning.

As I clicked the front door shut, it was like diving into a moonlit pool. Being safe indoors was at once a distant memory, lying warm in bed was a near-forgotten dream. No cars, no distant traffic noises, no clouds, just a huge night sky and empty, endless streets.

It was five to three when I reached the place. I paced for a while, then walked around the block, but that only killed three minutes. I chose a direction and resolved to walk a straight line for seven minutes, then turn around and come back.

If I didn't turn around, if I kept walking, would he catch me? Would he return to the house and punish me? What if we moved, to another city, another state?

I passed a phone box, an almost blinding slab of solid light. I jingled my pockets, then remembered that I'd need no coin. I stood outside the booth for two minutes, I lingered in the half-open doorway for three, and then I lifted and replaced the handset a dozen times before I finally dialed.

When the operator answered, I slammed the phone down. I needed to

defecate, I needed to lie down. I dialled again, and asked for the police. It was so easy. I even gave them my true name and address when they asked, without the least hesitation. I said “thank you” about six thousand times.

I looked at my watch: thirteen past three. I ran for the corner, camera swinging by the carrying strap, and made it back in ninety seconds.

Someone was climbing out through a dark window, holding a gagged, struggling child. It wasn't the man who'd called himself Jack, it wasn't the killer I'd seen on TV when I was ten.

I raised my camera.

Drop it and *do something*, drop it and save the child, you fool! Me against him? Against *that*? I'd be slaughtered! The police are coming, it's their job, isn't it? Just take the pictures. It's what you really want, it's what you're here to do.

Once I'd fired the shutter, once I'd taken the first shot, it was like flicking through the pages of a magazine. I was sickened, I was horrified, I was angry, but I wasn't *there*, so what could I do? The child was tortured. The child was raped. The child was mutilated. The child suffered but I heard no cries, and I saw only the flashgun's frozen tableaux, a sequence of badly made waxworks.

The killer and I arranged each shot with care. He waited patiently while the flash recharged, and while I changed rolls. He was a consummate model: each pose he struck appeared completely natural, utterly spontaneous.

I didn't notice just when the child actually died. I only noticed when I ran out of film. It was then that I looked around at the houses on the street and saw half a dozen couples, peeking through their bedroom windows and stifling yawns.

He sprinted away when the police arrived. They didn't pursue him in the car; one officer loped off after him, the other knelt to examine the remains, then walked up to me. He tipped his head at my camera.

“Got it all, did you?”

I nodded. Accomplice, accomplice, accomplice. How could I ever explain, let alone try to excuse, my inaction?

“Fantastic. Well done.”

Two more police cars appeared, and then the officer who'd gone in pursuit came marching up the street, pushing the hand-cuffed killer ahead of him.

The best of the photographs were published widely, even shown on TV (“the following scenes may disturb some viewers”). A thousand law-abiding citizens rioted outside the courthouse, burning and slashing effigies, when he appeared to be placed on remand.

He was killed in his cell a week before the trial was due to start. He was tortured, raped and mutilated first. He must have been expecting to die, because he had written out a will:

Burn my body and scatter my ashes from a high place.

Only then will I be happy. Only then will I find peace.

They did it for him, too.

He has a special place on my wall now, and I never tire of reviewing it. The whole process can be seen at a glance. How the tabloids cheered him on, rewarding each presumed death with ever larger headlines, ever grislier speculations. How the serious papers strove so earnestly to understand him, with scholarly dissertations on the formative years of the great modern killers. How all the well-oiled mechanisms slipped into gear, how everybody knew their role. Quotes from politicians: “The community is outraged.” But the outrage was bottled, recycled, flat and insincere.

What would-be killer could hesitate, could resist for even a second, such a cosy niche so lovingly prepared.

And I understand now why he wanted me there that night. He must have believed that if people could see, in colour, in close-up, the kind of atrocities that we treat as an industry, an entertainment, a thrilling diversion from the pettiness and banality of our empty lives, then we would at last recoil, we would at last feel some genuine shock, some genuine sadness, we would at last be cured, and he would be free.

He was wrong.

So they've burnt his corpse and scattered his ashes. So what? Did he really believe that could possibly help him, did he really hope to end the interminable cycle of his incarnations?

I dream of fine black cinders borne by the wind, floating down to anoint ten thousand feverish brows. The sight of the tortured child, you see, has exerted an awful fascination upon people around the world.

The first wave of imitators copied the murder exactly as portrayed by my slides.

The second wave embellished and improvised.

The current fashion is for live broadcasts, and the change of medium has, of course, had some influence on the technical details of the act.

I often sit in my study these days, just staring at the walls. Now and then I suffer moments of blind panic, when I am convinced for no reason that Jack has returned, and is standing right behind me with his mouth stretched open. But when I turn and look, I am always still alone. Alone with the headlines, alone with the photographs, alone with my obsession. And that, somehow, is far more frightening.

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The End