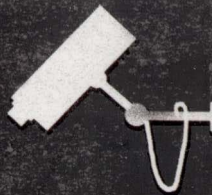


OMEGA PLACE

GOING UNDERGROUND . . .



Graham Marks

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*This is for my Ma, who lit the flame of story in my head,
and for Maggie Noach, who kept it burning bright.
Goodbye to both of you.*

For some must watch, while some must sleep.

Thus runs the world away.

William Shakespeare, Hamlet (1600)

Quis custodiet ipsos custodies?

(Who watches the watchmen?)

Decimus Junius Juvenalis (1st century AD)

Monday 21st August, Gosforth, Newcastle Upon Tyne

The doorbell *bing-bonged* in the hallway as Sandra Tennant was about to pour boiling water into the two coffee mugs on the work surface. Her husband, Mike, looked up from the paper, glanced at his watch – 5:50 p.m. – and frowned as he started to get up.

‘Wonder who that can be at this time?’

‘Well, it’s not the postman, is it?’ Sandra put the cordless kettle back down on its stand. ‘Don’t worry, love, I’ll go . . .’

Through the open kitchen door, down at the end of the hall, she could see what looked like two figures, men, through the reeded glass. For a second she’d thought – hoped – it might be Paul. That he’d finally decided to come back home. But she could see it wasn’t him as these people were wearing suits, and it occurred to her that it was probably Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons. Someone selling something she didn’t want, that was for sure. Getting to the end of the hallway she twisted the Yale lock and opened the door.

‘Mrs Tennant?’

Sandra nodded, looking at the two men, one standing slightly behind the other. The boss and his assistant. Funny how you could always tell. She noticed their car, a dark blue Vauxhall saloon, parked in the drive; not the religious nuts,

then, they always seemed to walk everywhere.

‘Yes . . . What can I do for you?’

‘My name’s Detective Sergeant Maynard.’ The man briefly held up and flipped open what looked like a black credit card holder. ‘And this is Detective Constable Chambers. May we come in?’

‘Who is it, Sandra?’ Mike called from the kitchen.

‘It’s . . . it’s the police, Mike . . .’

The atmosphere in the front room was one of anxious, almost fearful anticipation. As the two police officers had walked into the house, Sandra leading them down the hall, she could tell they’d brought bad news. It came in with them, along with the smell of stale cigarette smoke.

She’d immediately gone into delay mode, insisting on making the two men tea and leaving Mike to sit, uncomfortably, with them while she was in the kitchen. And now the tray – cups, saucers, side plates, teapot, sugar bowl, milk jug, biscuits and spoons – was on the table and she was sitting next to Mike. Nothing left to do. Time for the axe to fall.

DS Maynard looked at the biscuits but didn’t take one. ‘Is your son called Paul Hendry, Mrs Tennant?’

‘Yes, yes he is . . .’ Sandra looked at Mike. ‘He never changed his name when I, when we got married.’

‘Is something wrong, officer?’ Mike took Sandra’s hand.

‘How long has he been missing?’ DS Maynard appeared to be directing the question to both Mike and Sandra.

Sandra took a deep breath. ‘Four . . . five weeks?’

‘Why didn’t you report it, Mrs Tennant?’

Sandra, chewing her lip, looked at the silent detective constable, who appeared to be making notes of everything that was said.

‘Mrs Tennant?’

Mike shrugged. ‘Look, officer, we thought he . . . we thought Paul was staying with friends, or maybe his dad.’

DS Maynard picked up the cup of tea Sandra had poured for him and took a sip. ‘You didn’t check?’

‘It’s been, I don’t know, things have been . . . you know, *difficult*, haven’t they, Sandra?’ Sandra, staring at the floor, nodded slightly. ‘I’ve tried, but we just don’t get on. And he’s a teenager, seventeen and some, but still a teenager, and you must know how they can be, officer: rows, unreasonable behaviour, acting like the world revolves around them . . . After the last shouting match he walked out with his rucksack. Broke the glass in the back door slamming it.’

‘Why are you here, Detective Sergeant?’ Sandra’s voice was hushed, but had a distinct ‘cut the crap’ tone to it.

DS Maynard put his cup and saucer down. ‘There’s been an . . . incident . . . in London. And the information we’ve received, Mrs Tennant, indicates that it’s possible your son has died.’

The words hung in the air like dust motes.

They made so little sense it was almost as if they’d been spoken in a foreign language. Sandra felt the breath sigh out of her and she thought for a moment that she was going to faint. Mike, picking up what might happen, moved closer to her and put an arm round her shoulder as she felt her eyes fill with tears.

Sandra shivered, even though it wasn’t cold, and hugged herself, the words ‘it’s possible your son has died’ echoing in the distance as the tears spilled down her cheeks.

‘London? What was he doing in London, for Pete’s sake?’

‘We don’t know for sure, Mrs Tennant. We were only

contacted last night, and I'm sorry, but we don't have very many details.'

'He's *dead*?' Sandra whispered.

Mike patted her shoulder as he gave her a couple of serviettes, the nearest thing to a tissue within easy reach.

'He just went, officer, never called us or anything . . .'

'Um . . .'

Silence. All heads turned to look at Sandra.

'I, um . . .'

 Sandra blew her nose. 'I had a text. You know, just saying he was OK?'

'Why didn't you say, love? Why didn't you tell me?'

There was no reply and the room fell silent again, this time for longer than was comfortable, no one knowing quite where to look; certainly not at this woman, trying to deal with the unthinkable. Then DC Chambers coughed and began checking back through his notes.

Sandra hugged herself tighter. 'I thought, you know, he'd be home any time . . .'

 She looked across at the senior of the two policemen. 'Are you *sure* he's dead, that it's him?'

DS Maynard turned, making a 'give it to me' gesture at DC Chambers, who handed over a buff-coloured A4 envelope. Opening it, the detective sergeant took out two inkjet colour prints and put them side by side on the table facing Sandra and Mike. One showed a close-up of a silver ring with a distinctive Celtic design, the other a small, gold shark's tooth on a gold chain.

'Do they belong to Paul, Mrs Tennant?'

Sandra Tennant nodded silently, collapsing against her husband.

DC Chambers backed the dark blue, unmarked Vectra out into the road, braked, and flicked the gear stick down,

across and up into first. But instead of driving off he waited for a moment, looking back at the house, with its neat garden and trimmed hedges. In the sitting-room window he thought he could make out a figure looking back out at him.

‘Doesn’t seem like such a bad place to come from.’

‘True.’

DC Chambers accelerated away. ‘Didn’t think the stepdad gave much of a shit.’

‘Probably right there.’

‘Maybe we should get him to do the ID, when the body comes up.’

‘Maybe we should.’

‘Why’d you just show them the two pictures, then?’

DS Maynard opened the buff envelope and pulled out a couple more prints of the scene-of-crime pictures they’d been emailed. The top one showed the naked torso of a young man, his head, what was left of it, lying in a dark pool of blood. The harsh lighting did nothing to lessen the brutal evidence of extreme violence against the person. The second picture was no easier to look at.

‘I couldn’t’ve shown a mother these, man . . .’

Standing back from the window, Sandra Tennant saw the police car finally drive off, aware that Mike was on the settee behind her, watching. She felt numb with shock, unable to make sense of the information she’d been given, of what those two men had come into her house and told her.

Paul – *little Pauly* . . . *her baby* – was dead?

It could not be.

She didn’t want to turn round and have to deal with Mike, who was going to want her to reassure him that he’d had

nothing to do with what had happened to Paul. Except that, if the man had only tried a *bit* bloody harder to get the boy to just tolerate him, he wouldn't've stormed out and gone and got himself killed. Would he, Mike?

And then Sandra's mobile on the dresser started to ring. Some annoying tone Paul had downloaded and installed on to her phone and she'd never got round to asking him to change, because she didn't know how to do it herself.

'Want me to get that for you, Sandra?'

Sandra shook her head as she walked over to pick it up. It wasn't a number she recognised. She never took those calls and put the phone back down.

'I don't want to talk to anyone right now.'

They both stayed where they were, waiting for something – neither of them knew what and neither of them wanted to be the first one to talk about what they'd just been told. It was an event, a cataclysm, that showed up and magnified all the cracks in their relationship.

And then the house phone, the one in the hall, began to ring.

Sandra took a deep breath, turned round, glanced at Mike and started walking out of the room.

'Where you going?'

'To answer the phone, you never know . . .'

2

Tuesday 25th July, Gosforth, Newcastle Upon Tyne

Paul Hendry was standing, waiting for a bus, still jumpy and hyped from the massive, face-to-face shouting match he'd had with Mr Mike Bloody Tennant.

That was it.

The absolute and final straw.

Jee-zus! He'd had enough . . .

He was not going back to that house.

Ever.

Nervously twisting the silver ring on his little finger, Paul checked back in the direction he'd come, half expecting to see his mam's car driving his way, looking for him so she could persuade him to come home. He knew she'd forgive him. Even though he'd called Mike every name he could think of, and had then managed to break the window in the kitchen door when he'd slammed it on his way out.

Now *that* was what you called an exit, man!

That was goodbye in anyone's language.

He put his backpack on the pavement and leaned against the bus stop, letting what he'd said and done properly sink in. He really did not want to go back home – to the house he'd grown up in, *his* house, not that bloke's – as his mam was sure to try and make him apologise. And that was just not going to happen. But if he wasn't going to go back,

where was he going?

Dave's would be no good as he'd been getting the distinct impression his mam was getting fed up of him and how much time he'd been spending there. Turning up at Dave's with a stuffed backpack wasn't going to work. And neither was going to his dad's right now, not since he'd got the new girlfriend. Cheryl. Blonde, young, only twenty-three, or something. Wait till his mam found out! Anyway, bunking over there in his dad's one-bedroom flat wasn't going to be on the cards until the gloss had worn off the old man a bit. Which left what?

In the distance he could see the bus approaching. The one that went past the Metro station, from where he could get right into town. It was too late in the day to put into action the plan he and Dave had been talking about, on and off, it seemed like for ever. The one about hitching down to London, the two of them. Except he kind of knew Dave was never really going to be up for it, not really. He was, though. *Now* he was.

The bus slowed to a halt, pulling up next to the stop. The doors hissed open and the driver looked down at him and then away again. A couple of old dears took their time getting off the bus, giving Paul a few more seconds of make-your-mind-up time. What the hell. He picked up his backpack and stepped up into the bus, paid the driver, took his ticket and made for a vacant double seat down the back. He'd rough it for the night. Just the night, mind. And tomorrow, in the morning, he'd get himself on to the London road, the A1(M) – he and Dave had spent hours looking at maps and stuff and he knew the route by heart now – and he'd get a lift. All the way to the Smoke.

Simple.