

Word count: 7,500

GUNNY

By

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It was settled. Darren Murphy was going to die.

“Darren Murphy is going to die.”

Jason smiled a little shit-eating grin to himself. It was sort of nice, just saying it aloud like that; hearing the statement. He could almost see the words in front of him, perched on the moveless, humid air of his bedroom. He said it again:

“Darren Murphy ... is going ... to die.”

His smile broadened with each pause, slowly bearing a row of little off-white pearls jammed into a gummy plinth. Repeating the words made him feel all sorts of ways; nervous, light-headed, excited, and — strangest of all — calm. It was a mix of emotions he could only recall having felt a few times in his short life. He had been five or six years old the first time he'd felt like this.

He had happened across a fallen robin one day whilst playing in the garden. He had crushed it to death, carefully applying pressure to it as it writhed and squirmed beneath the sole of his green wellington boot, before stomping the bird until it was nothing more than a pile of broken feathers and viscera.

The blood had tasted good too, he recalled fondly, continuing to smile in a serene way.

He wondered if these feelings were similar to what a musician or athlete might feel right before they performed. The woman who gave birth to him was a musician; a pianist. He didn't like music. Her own or otherwise. He had cried many times as a baby when she had begun to tinkle on the foul instrument in the living room, now gratefully abandoned under a vinyl dust cover. In a dim way, he was aware that this was one of the many reasons he wasn't well liked by other people. The people he begrudgingly shared this place and time with.

His head sunk deeper into the pillow and he let the crisp white sheets, freshly laid by the older, poorer woman who came by to clean every other week, envelop him. He was gazing directly into the light above his bed and the sides of the large duck feather pillow

obscured his peripheral vision; his small, pudgy head coming to a gentle halt in its soft carriage. To Jason, this seemed to have a focusing effect on the light, white and harsh, boring painfully into his little round eyes. He didn't really mind though. If anything, he enjoyed the sensation. As minutes passed, thoughts of Darren Murphy's imminent death gliding pleasantly through his mind, he began to feel little bursts of red hot pain behind his eyes. The glowing orb buried in the ceiling appeared to be changing shape, dancing painfully in the jelly of his eyes like high heels in mud. First an amorphous white blob, then a distorted red one. Suddenly, it was punctured in its centre by a little black spot that began to grow and grow, revealing a black and white static. It reminded him vaguely of what the TV looked like whenever the man he lived with was messing about with house aerial. The pain was becoming exquisite; pulsing and snarling like a caught dog. He could feel the dormant twig between his legs begin to harden as the stabbing pain intensified. He was on the verge of vomiting.

"No," said a familiar voice somewhere in his dulled prefrontal lobe. "Stop it now, Jason."

He sat up suddenly, dribbling saliva as the self-induced migraine sent a wave of nausea through him.

"You'll need your sight tomorrow, *idiot*," said the voice, a note of derision in each word. It made him feel small and stupid, the words clanging around the cavern of his head like many piercing anvil strikes.

He rubbed his eyes with one hand and bore down on the meat of his skull with the other. Applying pressure made the pain temporarily abate. After a while, he opened his eyes and dozens of white, red, and orange swirls obscured his vision. He paid no mind to these ephemeral strands, instead straining the muscles in his head; trying to hear more of what the voice was saying to him.

“Afterwards? ... yes. Perhaps afterwards Perhaps we can leave this world ... and it would be up to you of course. We could go in *whatever* way you see fit Whatever way you'd *like*, Jason. Whatever way ... you'd *like*.”

He smiled again; it was utterly insane this time. The same toothy, lunatic grin that had caused all this trouble with Darren, and JJ, and Jordan, and Will, and Toby, and all the rest of the morons he was forced to share most days with. He couldn't stand any of it anymore. The *constant* name calling. The way they jabbed at his mannerisms, his portly appearance, his monotone voice. *Insisting* he was a homosexual. Insinuating he was a woman because of his unnatural, fatty breasts that made shirts ill-fitting, and changing for PE a ritual of torment. In contrast to these accusations and obvious falsehoods, the voice — as always — had the true measure of him. He wasn't afraid to die, if anything he was looking forward to it, but he was afraid of continuing to exist on a plain that was occupied by these *others*. These daily harbingers of cruelty and humiliation. ‘Peers,’ the woman he lived with had told him. ‘Boys being boys,’ the man he lived with had said.

Now, closing his eyes — sparks dancing in front of his burnt corneas — he listened for the voice, waiting for the silky sound of the only real friend he had ever really known. A friend who had seemingly appeared from nowhere at all. The friend who knew and understood why he was the way he was. The friend who comforted and consoled him after torturous weekdays. The friend who conspired with him, and bent his mind to the things that brought him — and only him it seemed — real pleasure.

“If you do everything sensibly, thoughtfully, ... *methodically*, and ... with a little luck...”

He listened eagerly to the voice. Wiping saliva from his mouth, he brought his knees under himself, steadying the sway in his nauseated frame.

“Maybe, maybe... we can have JJ Damerl, Jordan Smith, Will Tillborne *and* Toby Longle We could have them all if you played things in *just* the right way.”

And why not? Why was Darren the only one that had to die? He was the biggest and meanest of the bunch of course but, it would be silly not to attempt to take them all? Right? Especially if he was planning on taking himself out of the equation soon after.

“JJ, ... and Jordan, and William, ... *and* Toby too?”

He had, of course, no idea what the owner of the voice looked like. Both inhuman and genderless, swaying between low, musical baritones, raspy, pitchy tenors, and everything in between; it was impossible to conjure a picture of the thing. Still, he inferred a little smile all the same in the silence that followed his question, despite *seeing* nothing of the thing buried somewhere in the grey-gloop of his mind.

He pulled himself off the bed, stood and lumbered over to his en-suite, the white marble glaring in the late afternoon sunlight. He took some medication out of the cabinet and swallowed a handful of pills — dry. He wandered back into the room and lay down for almost four hours. He did not sleep. He simply stared at the wall to the left of his resting place, occasionally flicking his vision to the air rifle sitting against the wardrobe on the other side of the room, enjoying the dregs of the slowly diminishing pain in his head. Sad to see it go, but aware that he needed to be in a sound state for tomorrow's endeavours.

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As the fourth hour rolled by in the diminishing light of that Sunday, he heard the woman's car pull into the driveway. His ears pricked at the sound. He listened closely to the engine turning over, then off, the opening of a car door and footfalls on the tarmac outside. When he heard keys rattle in the lock, he closed his eyes and pretended to be napping. If he had learned one thing about himself in the last twelve years, it was that he was a good liar and

therefore a believable actor. When the door opened and she looked into the room, seeing his plump, curled form on the bed, she whispered into the orangey glow of the late afternoon.

“You ok, darling?”

“Yes,” he said in a little sheepish voice. “Just tired.”

“Of course,” she crooned.

“I saw Brian today.”

Brian was a school friend he’d invented during a brief moment of inspiration. He had intercepted a letter to his parents from his form tutor, Mrs Waters, and the letter had stated concern about Jason’s lack of interaction with other pupils. It had even suggested several local counsellors and one child psychologist to ‘... help develop his social skills.’

“We played football and then we played on Brian’s Wii.”

She smiled. “Aww, that’s lovely darling. And the air rifle stayed here, I hope?”

“Yees!” he said in an exasperated, of-course-I-didn’t-take-the-air-rifle voice and — because good lying was about committing to it — rolled his eyes for full effect, even though she couldn’t see them from where she stood in the doorway. This was the only true thing he said during their final, short conversation.

“Good boy,” she said, looking around for the silhouette of the weapon propped up against the wardrobe near the window. A twilight breeze twitched at the lace curtain lining.

“Well, I’ve just popped back to check how you were.” She looked down into her pocket, checking her keys were still where she had put them less than a minute ago.

“I’m off out again now. Going to see your Auntie Barb in Chalkwell so won’t be back till late. Think you’ll be ok?”

“I think I’ll be ok, yes.”

“Ok,” She said, smiling more broadly and beginning to close the door. “There’s leftover lasagna in the fridge and”

She paused then and wondered about touching him; just lightly placing a hand on the exposed round of his right shoulder. As her fingers began to push the door open again, she noticed the gold of her watch flash in that light. It was getting late and Auntie Barb — who'd finally seen sense and left that penniless, dipshit Joe Moulding from Canvey Island — had begun telling her a story about some new man she'd met on a visit up to Norwich a few weeks back. She was eager to hear the end of the tale, in detail preferably.

“Love you, darling. See you tomorrow.”

“Love you.”

The door clunked shut and he heard her footfalls disappear down the corridor and onto the carpeted steps. As soon as he heard the front door close, he jumped from the bed and made a beeline for the air rifle. In a motion that could have been rehearsed, he whipped the weapon from its standing place and threw the wooden butt into his shoulder, kneeling down and pointing the barrel out of the window and down onto the driveway. The woman's head came into view and he followed the muss of dirty blonde hair with the marksman's scope. Despite his rest, he still felt nauseous and he struggled to keep the crosshairs in line with her bobbing bob. A weighty slag of anxiety slid into his chest then. His arms began to shake, but he forced himself to remain calm. He imagined pulling the trigger, the ‘pfft’ noise as the gun discharged. The spray of red highlighted beautifully against the peroxide curls. He could almost hear the sound of her skull shattering as the metal pellet embedded itself in her head. He knew an air rifle could do that at short range. The man he lived with had told him so.

As his aim began to level out and his breathing returned to normal, he could feel himself getting hard again. The idea of watching her collapse, twitching and writhing in an ever growing pool of thick, syrupy blood excited him tremendously. She could be this year's 'little bird' if he really wanted that to happen. He had the means. He could make it happen, just as easy as snapping his fingers, or reheating the evening's lasagna. At this last, he

wondered in some deep, feral part of his mind, what her brain might taste like, if he managed to dig some out of her. No doubt he'd probably be forced to kill a nosy neighbour or unlucky pedestrian on their way past the property, but it would be more than worth it to know what it felt like to taste something that ... hidden. That guarded from reality. The meat of thought itself, gliding over his tongue, processed by his jaws before being absorbed by his powerful, terrible totality. Though *they* didn't know it yet, he was an apex predator; a terrifying animal in disguise. But people would know the truth soon. Everyone would know the truth before long. Most importantly though, JJ, Jordan, Will, and Toby would know.

The car door slammed and he snapped out of his momentary daze. She put the car in reverse and, sighing a little, Jason pulled the rifle back into the room.

“Oh well,” he said in a flat, bored voice.

He put the air rifle back in its original position and watched the car back out of the driveway and exit the cul-de-sac. He was in no great despair about missing the opportunity. Not only did he have bigger and better plans in the pipeline but, if he were to actually sit down and think it through, he bore no real ill will towards the woman. Sure, she'd been a bit of an idiot, and — more often than not — a constant nuisance most of his life. But, to her credit, she had done her best with him. He understood that he'd been ... well, *difficult* much of the time. If anything, he was mildly grateful to her; the standardised meals and rent-free accommodation had been welcome perks.

He noticed a sudden, desperate need to eat come over him. He hadn't eaten anything since the air rifle had been delivered that morning by some relative. That'd been roughly at 9AM. He looked down at his watch and saw that it was now nearly 7PM. Taking one last look out at the dwindling summer light, he began to turn away.

That was when he noticed the cat.

The cat was sitting — or sleeping rather — on a short, red brick boundary wall running between the two houses directly opposite Jason's own. The wall was old and had several chunks missing from its narrow, mossy top. Near the middle, the cat lay half-in, half-out of one of these crumbling gaps. Ears low, legs tucked under itself, its white fur gently moved back and forth in the light breeze.

From where Jason was, the cat looked like a light leak in a polaroid picture. There were many polaroids magnetised to the fridge downstairs, some of which had odd, imperfect flashes of white and blue in them. The man he lived with had called them 'Opacification failures' when he had asked what they were. He had been smaller then and had had trouble saying the new words properly at first:

"Oh ... pack ... fffigation fail yours."

The man had then gone on to explain that these occurred when too much light had accidentally hit the film, over-exposing certain parts of the picture. Jason had been puzzled by this. He looked back to the photographs, stared at them, then turned back the man:

"Why do you keep these, Daddy?"

"Well," he began, puzzled himself now. "Because ... they're nice pictures ... of people I love!"

"But they are 'fail yours'?"

The man laughed.

"*Failures*," he corrected. "and only in a technical sense! The actual picture itself ...," he prized one from a magnetised miniature of a Portuguese landmark "is quite nice, isn't it?"

Jason had plucked the photograph from the man's hand and stared at it. He'd stared at it for a long time, attempting to wrap his mind around the contradictory concept he'd been presented with. He'd even returned later that night, taking the Polaroid to the kitchen island and staring at it so intently and for so long that he'd fallen asleep. The following morning,

Jason had awoken in his bed and returned to the kitchen to find a kind of meta-surprise waiting for him. The Portuguese landmark was holding a new Polaroid, one which depicted Jason, his small round body slumped over in the kitchen high chair, head resting on the Formica island, his fist clutching a small, white square with a picture of his Mummy and Daddy on it.

In the end, Jason decided — like almost everything he had no control over — that he hated photographs. They reminded him of life: constantly inconsistent. Photographs were chemical lies as far as he could see. The belonging he had wanted to understand and feel, a state that had eluded him at every moment of consciousness, was supposed to be somewhere on the other side of these thin, little windows. Both there and not there.

Now, he stared through a real window and his left hand reached instinctively towards the air rifle again. This time he slowly knelt and brought the wooden butt into the crook of his arm with silent precision. He searched with the scope and found the small white bundle. The smile returned and he could feel the sweat on his palms creating slippery surface tension on the grip. The ball of fur began to move and he realised that the heavy air rifle was shaking in his arms again.

‘Hold it tight and breathe normally.’

Yes. That was what the man had said that morning when they had gone out to the garden and taken a few shots at the oaks back there. His hands tightened. The shaking grew worse. He relaxed and made an effort to breathe normally.

“In.” He inhaled.

“And out,” a voice whispered somewhere in the far, far back of his mind.

He breathed out.

The rifle began to level out again. He edged closer to the window frame and realised that he could prop the air rifle against it for even more stability. Still reciting the ‘in-out’

mantra in his head, he took his eyes from the scope and lowered the barrel until it touched the peeling white paint of the frame. Feeling a bead of sweat trickling down his nose while another moved with glacial speed towards his arse crack, he aimed again.

The cat was sitting up now. A sudden rush of anxiety swept him and his eyes widened as the cat's golden yellow eyes looked up towards his position. He could see its collar and, such was the quality of the scope, read the tiny inscription on the silver tag that dangled from its neck: 'Lucky'.

Perfectly still, it gazed up at Jason, its eyes boring into him as his room lights had hours before. He stared back, transfixed by its gaze. This went on for around 30 seconds or so.

"It's taunting you," said the voice in a low, deep register. "It thinks you're a faggot. It's hypnotising you."

He closed his eyes and tried to refocus himself. The anxiety remained. Thoughts of being discovered rushed in but he quieted these with ease.

"You've never been discovered before. This is the same as the rest. No one can see you. No one will hear you. No one will know."

The sound of the motorway, not half a mile from his home, came back to him then. He opened his left eye and peered down the air rifle sight again. The cat slowly swam back into focus and a swell of dread enveloped him at the sight of it. The cat's eyes were two different colours now. The left was the golden yellow he'd seen before and the right, a luminous blue. They'd been staring at each other for almost a minute just before this. How could he have missed that? Maybe the cat was hypnotising him? He blinked again and saw now that he had been mistaken on both counts. The cat's eyes weren't yellow or blue. They were green. A deep emerald colour that made the hair on the back of his neck rise like the hackles on a dog.

"What are you doing?" said the voice, cadence rising. "Kill it now, Jason. Quickly."

Yet Jason continued to stare down the scope into those ever-changing eyes, the black slits the only constant. Distantly, he thought of that old story about Medusa and the way she had turned those unlucky men to stone. That was what was happening right now. The cat *was* hypnotising him.

“Do it. Do it ... DO IT! NOW!”

He pulled the trigger and the loud ‘pfft’ noise forced his eyes shut.

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The rifle bucked and Jason let out a yell as the scope punched his left eye. It slammed back down with a thud on the window sill. Flakes of old, white paint became airborne and floated off into the dwindling orange glow. He frantically wiped away the tears in his eyes and peered out, searching for a candy-cane-coloured bundle somewhere near the brick wall. The rifle slipped from his sweaty palms and almost fell out of the window and down onto the knoll beneath. Jason pulled it back into the room artlessly, the heavy weapon tumbling out of his grip and onto the bedroom floor. He ignored the loud sound as it clattered down and quickly stuck his head back out the window, searching around for what remained of the cat.

“Oi!”

Jason froze. A new voice. A woman’s. Coming from somewhere in the cul-de-sac.

“Hey! You little shit!”

He pulled his head sharply back and smashed his skull on the raised window frame. The pain was immense but Jason barely noticed it. He ducked down, his heart pounding. Dread had fallen over him like an actor forgetting his cue at the apex of a performance.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” the voice screamed from somewhere outside.

Jason didn’t answer. He was frozen beneath the sill.

“Caught,” he thought wildly. “Caught. I’m caught. I’m caught. Shit, I’m caught!”

“I know you’re up there you little shit! I saw what you were doing! Trying to harm my defenceless, little Lucky! Sick!”

Gooseflesh puckered his arms at these words. He turned his head to the left and looked at the air rifle. It somehow looked bigger now on the floor; its length unnaturally elongated by the long shadow of near-evening. He went to reach for it when a sudden, loud rapping on the door downstairs stayed his hand.

“Hello?! Peggy?! Christian?!” the voice cried out, much closer now.

He turned back to the window and, carefully moving his chubby head out of it again, looked down to see a white haired woman banging away at the front door. Her hair danced with the rhythm of her furious knocking, as did her wrinkly bosom. Jason noted this last with dull, absent humour. He looked up and another icy jolt passed through him. The woman’s hysterics had attracted several onlookers to the scene. A few members of each household in the cul-de-sac represented.

“He’s up there, Chloe.” called out one bald man standing on a doorstep with a little girl.

Jason pulled his head back in once again, minding this time to avoid the sliding window frame and ducked beneath the sill again. He could hear murmuring outside, punctuated by giggles and the occasional high pitched voice of a child or two. The banging downstairs stopped and he heard footsteps backing down the drive.

“Where, Clive?”

“Window just to the left of the door. Just saw him. He’s hiding away now.”

Jason’s heart pounded in his ears. He tried to do a mental analysis of the scene and, like a computer encountering an error, returned a nil result. He couldn’t see a way out of this no matter how he looked at it.

“When your parents get home,” cried the unmistakable squall of the woman, “you’re gonna wish you’d never been born!”

“Go away!” he cried out in a sudden, high pitched wail, the sound frightening him more than the situation he had landed himself in. Instant laughter from outside. He felt his face go red and hot at the sound. A poisonous mixture of fear and anger began welling up in him and he made a sudden wild reach for the air rifle, his nails catching on the end of the butt and leaving faint grooves in the wood as he clawed it back towards himself.

“Oh!” laughed another voice somewhere out on the street. “We’ve got our very own Rambo up there, don’t we?” There was a murmur of sarcastic agreement and more laughter.

“Just a little coward with a new toy, I think,” said Clive. “Come on, darling. It’s past your bedtime.”

Jason crawled, air rifle in tow, across the way to his bathroom. He let out little moans as he dragged his rotund body across the carpet and eventually onto the cold tiles. The blind in there was down. He got up, leaned over the sink, and twitched the right hand edge of the beige fabric, peering out once more on to the cul-de-sac below. They were all still standing out there. The little kids had been dragged back inside, but the grownups had taken the sudden event in their stride; chatting and laughing with each other, occasionally pointing up at Jason’s bedroom window. The man called Clive returned from his fatherly duties and was clearly relishing the situation. He was practically shouting certain parts of his conversation so Jason could hear them through the open window. Phrases like ‘call the police’ and ‘serious trouble’ echoed up to him. He let the blind fall back into place and — allowing the full weight of what was going on to hit him — crumpled into a heap on the floor, the rifle clattering loudly beside him again. There was another loud burst of laughter outside, and at this last, the tears started in Jason’s beady little eyes; angry, fearful, and bewildered. His heart was thudding away somewhere behind his fatty breasts, and his skin was glistening with

anxious, cold sweat. He pulled his knees up into his chest, and again tried to jam the event through the manipulative framework that had always served him so well. He could see no way out. The predator had revealed itself at the exact wrong moment. The hunters, the stalkers, and the poachers — all onto him now. All wise to the game.

“Everyone will know now what I am,” he thought, panic highlighting each word and making them throb in his mind. “They’ll ... they’ll take Gunny from me ...”

With a wild jolt, he grabbed the air rifle from his side and pushed himself up off the bathroom floor, gut swinging. He wobbled on his feet momentarily but remained upright. Walking quickly back into his bedroom — not caring as he walked to the window and someone down below shouted “Look he’s back!” — he grabbed the small tin of pellets that had come with the rifle off the sill, and slammed the bedroom window, muffling the various jeers outside. White paint flakes floated down onto the floor but Jason didn’t notice this. He had already crossed the room and was sitting on his bed, putting a fresh pellet into the barrel of the rifle. He performed the act shakily but enjoyed the mechanical sound of breaking the barrel and clicking it back into place. It calmed him somehow, lessening the panic flooding his nervous system and threatening to derail some of the clarity he’d regained.

“No one is taking you from me,” he said aloud, staring down at the long weapon laying on his lap, admiring the marriage of carved wood and lathed gunmetal. His heart rate began to drop, and his left hand started to trace the contours and groves of the firearm. It soothed him.

“Darren Murphy IS going to die,” crooned the voice in the back of his mind.

That was right. That was *more* than right, actually — it was fact. He could feel his smile returning now. He wiped at his fat-buried red eyes and snotty nose. All was not lost after all. He inhaled deeply and let out a long sigh, the fear and panic seeming to dissipate in the air as he did so.

How could I have been so stupid to think it? he thought, shaking his head with an amused grin. *I got careless in my excitement, sure. That was a mistake. But it doesn't mean the plan is all for nought now ... does it?*

“No. It doesn't,” said the beautiful voice in his mind. “You'll need to move quickly now though. Get your things, Jason. We can't be here when the woman or the man return. We'll camp somewhere, near the school, and wait for them as they come down the entrance. Pick them off ... one by one.”

His broad, insane grin was back in full force now. He laughed aloud; a weird, tinny echo reverberating off the oddly blank walls of his bedroom. He placed both hands underneath the rifle and stood up, holding it out in front of himself like an offering. He loved the weight of it in his hands; the solidness of its form and the power of its function and purpose.

“Jason...” cawed that lovely, soothing, humanless voice. “Quickly now. No use hanging about.”

He put the rifle down on the bed and started for the wardrobe, grabbing his school rucksack, the soft case the rifle had come in, his school clothes — these would be very important for the next day — as well as a purple sleeping bag, a roll mat, and a Virgin Airlines branded travel pillow. There was no need for provisions or toiletries. He would simply grab the cold lasagna on the way out — along with any other food he could shove into his rucksack — through the backdoor, sneak around the bushes at the back, and out into the night. Where would he sleep? *Somewhere*, he supposed. *The woods? A field? Someone's back garden?* Whatever the case, it didn't really matter right now. He just needed to remain calm, and carry out the plan a little earlier than he'd anticipated. After hurriedly packing everything he could into the school bag, bar the roll mat and sleeping bag, he took the soft case to the air rifle. He stared down at the weapon again, feeling that familiar, wild excitement overcome

him. He dropped the bag and picked it up. An unexpected tear rolled down one bulbous cheek.

“I’ll never let anyone take you from me, Gunny,” he said, stroking it again. “I’d kill them if they tried.”

He imagined the man named Clive from across the road reaching for it, attempting to take it from him, and firing a shot point blank into his open mouth; blood splashing over his yellowed, crooked front teeth and catching in his salt and pepper moustache. He giggled a little as he imagined the look of utter surprise on his face.

“How could a little fat boy... a little retard ... a little faggot ... do this to me?” it said.

He looked up and noticed a glimpse of himself in the full length mirror hanging on the back of the bathroom door. He walked over to it, seeing himself for the very first time with the air rifle in his hands. The effect was amazing. He no longer looked like a porky, sweaty, friendless boy — he was a man now. The rifle had simply been missing from him, like a lost limb. This was the complete picture. No opacification failures in sight. He was so powerful in this moment, he could almost feel it resonating through him. He was born to have this thing. To use it. To use it on others. Continuing to stare at himself, he brought the rifle round in an arc and put the butt into the crook of his collarbone once more. He could see his left index finger and thumb wrapping round the forestock, as well as the right hand on the grip. The ‘O’ of the barrel stared back at him with blank indifference. He stood up straighter, and his stomach jutted out over his beige shorts pushing his too-small white T-shirt up, revealing a collapsed belly button, along with several rolls of “puppy fat” as the woman had put it so many times. He didn’t care. All he cared about was the feeling of pure serenity that had fallen over him, a feeling he hadn’t felt before — maybe ever.

“Darren Murphy ... is going ... to die.”

Like a religious affirmation, the words brought unshakable clarity to the glorious image before him. Grinning more broadly than ever, he looked down the marksman's scope. What happened next, occurred in less than a second:

Directly behind him, the cat was sitting on top of his wardrobe. As his left eye focussed down the sight, its brilliantly white, reversed image appeared in the mirror. The hate-filled, now blood red eyes stared back at him. Sensing some change in the room, it bared its small fangs and hissed. The sound pierced the silence like a needle to a balloon. The red eyes grew huge in the scope, their black slits like endless oblivions ready to swallow him. The white fur seemed to bulge and dilate as the creature's hackles stood up, enveloping the small field of vision the scope offered. In an instant, Jason's sanity — what little there was of it — shattered like glass. The fur and skin began to peel away from the cat's face. The red eyes fell back into its skull and maggots crawled from the hollows with unnatural speed. The hiss changed from a high pitched squeal to a distorted howl of rage. Its claws gouged the cheap MDF of the wardrobe, and Jason could feel the heat of an eternal fire radiating from behind him. The impossible visage, now blackened and smoking, made to pounce. A voice, not his own, screamed within his head.

Instinctually, without thought, as though he had planned it this way all along, Jason pulled the trigger.

#

“Terrible Just terrible.”

The tuna sandwich dropped back onto the cardboard plate. It tasted perfectly fine, but the man didn't have much of an appetite after hearing the whole story from this odd, bald man, Clive, who had apparently been there that night.

“Yep,” Clive said, swirling a glass of red wine and leaning in to continue more quietly. “Bounced off his wall mirror and went straight into his eye. Amazingly powerful

those old things are. The pellet didn't hit his brain, but it went right the way through his eyeball and buried itself somewhere in the middle of his head. Bled out of course. They think he thrashed about a bit on the floor too. We didn't hear anything out on the street. Some of the stuff in his eye was spread out along the floor and, well, goes without saying of course I suppose, but there was blood everywhere. All over the wall apparently. Soaked right into the rug around him."

"Jesus"

"Nasty stuff. Oh and ...," he scanned the room quickly then lent in and whispered, "they found Chloe's cat in the room with him. The kid's blood was all over it and ... and it was, errr ... eating."

The man stared at Clive.

"Eating the eye stuff that had come out of his head."

The man put the plate down on the nearest table, wiping at his mouth compulsively with the provided napkin.

"Chloe reckons it was quite fitting. Revenge, maybe, for what he'd try to do to it, y'know!?"

Clive grinned at the stranger, showing all his stained, crooked teeth, and raising the eyebrows that matched his salt and pepper moustache; the crumpled, bald dome of his head looked like a shrivelled scrotum. Seeing the man's horrified reaction, he changed tack.

"But obviously still very sad of course"

"Yeah No, sure" said the man, searching around in his head for a way to exit the conversation. "Know where the bathroom is?"

"Upstairs, I think," Clive said, throwing a cocktail sausage into his mouth and peering down into his nearly empty wine glass.

The man began to walk through the sea of black-clad mourners; an “Excuse me,” here and a “Could I just,” there. They parted for him easily. He took note of the boy’s mother and father, standing and staring at some polaroids on the fridge as he passed by. They were quiet now, though they hadn’t been when the button had been pressed and the too-small coffin had begun to descend in the crematorium earlier in the day. She had practically screamed at one point. He escaped the modulating chatter and walked through the living room, taking note of the vinyl-covered piano and the many bouquets of flowers resting on it. He found the staircase and climbed up onto the landing. All the doors on this level looked the same. He sighed a little and started the boring task of opening them one by one. A master bedroom, a closet, an office, a

“Oh.”

He knew immediately what room he was looking into. A huge segment of the carpet was gone. A spongy underlay reading ‘Wilson’s Plushwalk’ was uniformly printed across the place where it had been. The bed, two workman’s trestles, a pale-style toolbox, and a modern Ikea-ish wardrobe were the only things left in the room. The walls didn’t show a trace of the blood Clive had mentioned downstairs. They were a uniform white, as was the skirting, and the bathroom door.

The man looked around the hallway. It seemed everyone was still downstairs. Quickly, he walked into the room and shut the door behind him, trying to make as little noise as possible. He walked over to the window, minding to tread around the rectangular hole in the carpet, and looked out at the cul-de-sac. It was one of those muggy, overcast, painfully hot days. There was a guy smoking and talking on a mobile phone, his black suit jacket resting in the crook of one arm. He had huge sweat patches on his white shirt, and looked irritated with whoever was on the other end of the call. Not even putting the effort in to shrug at this, he turned to his right, pushed open the bathroom door with his finger tips, and stared

in. A toilet stared back. He thought about using it, but suddenly remembered that needing the bathroom had been a lie. Not to mention the fact that using the deceased's en-suite felt a bit tasteless. Why was he even in here anyway? Morbid curiosity? Possible. Seeing the big weird hole in the carpet had been sort of interesting. He looked more closely at the walls. They'd done a very good job clearing up the mess. They were totally spotless.

That guy — Clive, was it? — sounded like a bit of an exaggerator, he thought. 'Eating the eye stuff that had come out of his head'?! Do we even have anything in our eyes that can 'come out'?

He pondered this for a few moments, and then thought about how many enemies he would make if he asked on the way out "Who did the wonderful painting and decorating job upstairs in the fourth room down?". Some air escaped his nostrils, and he turned to leave.

As he grabbed the handle of the door heading back out into the hallway, he turned and took the wardrobe in again. It was black, and looked like any other cheaply-made bit of furniture, save for some tiny scratches exposing the wood near the top. Undeterred, he let go of the handle and walked over to it. Opening it yielded no more excitement than the rest of the room. It had been emptied. Only some dust floated around in the bottom as the rush of air from the doors opening made its way in. Disappointed, he made to close them again. As he did this, the quality of light changed inside the wardrobe, and he noticed something on the floor he hadn't before. Reopening them, he got down onto his knees and peered into the very back of the wardrobe. There were lines back there, slightly off centre. Like the absence of carpet though, the lines created a shape; a rectangle. It had clearly been done by hand with some kind of knife; tiny, jagged splinters lined each mark. He poked at the rectangle. It gave way a little bit. He poked it again, harder this time. It collapsed and landed with a small thud onto something no lower than a couple of centimetres beneath it. Heart racing, he pushed aside the dissected bit of wardrobe and grabbed the thing underneath. Pulling it out into the

light, he saw it was a translucent, dark red, miniature stationary box; the kind you see stacked on top of each other in workshops. It weighed almost nothing, but he could clearly see something inside it without needing to open it. Peering back into the cupboard, he saw that there were several more in the hole; all different colours, but all obviously full with something or other. He went to open the tiny plastic catches on either side of the box in his hand, and stopped after just one. He wiped at his face. His nose was bleeding. A long streak of blood lined the side of his index finger. A few droplets fell and landed on the tip of his black tie.

Pressure, he thought, absently. He was one for getting nose bleeds like this in summer, especially in his right nostril for some reason.

Putting the box down, he grabbed at some crumpled up Kleenex in his pocket and dabbed at his nose. He looked at the blood on the tissue. There was a lot. More than he had thought possible from a single nostril. He lightly touched the bottom of his nose and realised both sides were dripping. A prickle of something ominous cascaded down his spine, but he ignored this and set about plugging his nose; tearing and rolling up little plugs for each nostril. This done, he picked up the box again and felt that same prickle. It was stronger this time, bleeding over into his shoulders and arms. His hand, the one holding the box, felt funny too all of a sudden. He was reminded of the times when he put petrol into his car without a disposable glove, and his hand would feel weirdly painful afterwards. This was that same way; an odd pain was pulsing there.

Leave.

The word came to him like a fire alarm, sudden and sharp. Though he couldn't see it, the plugs in his nose had swelled with blood, beginning to drip again, some of it landing on his white shirt.

“No,” he thought ... or had he thought it? It was strange. The sound of his internal monologue had changed somehow. It had moved place and felt ... further back somehow. That single word, ‘no,’ had had an oddly soothing effect on him. He felt calmer suddenly, despite the rapid heartbeat in his ears, the cold sweat, blood trickling down his face, and the numb pain in the hand that held the box.

“Let’s just ... see what’s inside.”

He liked that voice. Kind and gentle. He wanted to please it. To play nice. To open all these little boxes here, and see what each one had in store for him. He felt like a little kid again. Like his Dad — dead nearly 12 years now — had told him he could open all the advent calendar doors at once and munch on the delicious treats behind each number.

With his right hand, he flicked the remaining catch open. One of the nose plugs fell out, sodden with blood, and spattered its load on the carpet. Carefully placing the tip of each finger and thumb on the lid, his left hand burning now with a numb, bizarrely *delicious* pain, he lifted it. He peered in, saw what was inside, and something in his mind broke like the snap of twigs in a dry forest.

“Enjoy,” said the voice.

He moaned. The box fell from his hand. Its contents, musty and rotten smelling, cascaded out into the wardrobe and partially onto the floor. Some of the loose feathers remained airborne. The stiff, mutilated body landed with a dull thud against the fake wood grain of the wardrobe floor. His moan turned to a scream, as something other than himself forced his hand into the wardrobe once more, and pulled out another little box. Then another. Then another. Then another

The End