

## The Hunted

By James Wiffen

I open the door a crack and peer out, surveying the scene. The rain is falling with an unforgiving ferocity, and the leafy suburb that my flat resides in is deserted. 'Good', I think. This will keep people indoors, in the comfort and safety of their living rooms, and make it easier to spot him following me. After all, what sort of madman would go out in this weather? I draw my coat tighter around me, enjoying the warmth that the sheepskin inner layer provides, and step out onto the pavement. A stream of water is flowing along the base of the curb, carrying a discarded cigarette butt, and reminding me of a fishing boat being buffeted along the Nile on a school trip. I look both ways, and once satisfied that I'm alone, I set off.

He has been following me for 10 years now, an ever present spectre wading through the fog, intent on tormenting me. I first encountered him at school, and he took an instant dislike to me. I found this quite harrowing at the time, as ever since playschool I had exuded a sunny disposition, and had never fallen out with anyone. I was, dare I say it, popular. But he took against me from the first day I met him, and he has hunted me ever since. I can feel his presence even when I can't see him. He's always there, lurking round a corner, masking himself in a crowd, or skulking on the very fringes of the horizon. I can't tell anyone my suspicions about him, or reveal the constant bullying I have received at his hand for over a decade. They'd say, 'but he's such a lovely boy, he wouldn't hurt a fly. You're worrying over nothing, it's all in your head.' A clap of thunder jolts me from my reverie, and I quicken my pace, well aware that he is probably watching me. But for once, that is exactly what I want.

I have waited weeks for this day, berating the weatherman each night as he failed to play his part in my plan. But finally he gave me what I wanted, a way to draw my tormentor out into the open, out of the crowds, and to confront him once and for all. A year ago I would have lacked the courage for this, but somehow something had changed, as though a switch had been flicked. Maybe it was because turning 26 had reminded me of all the years that had been wasted at his hand, or maybe it was the fact he had followed me across the country as I moved from town to town, thwarting my attempts to wrestle free from his grip. Either way, I was not going to let him define my life any longer. I was not going to continue to exist in a perpetual state of fear, constantly looking over my shoulder, terrified of seeing those familiar haunting eyes. I was going to smoke him out and end it. I was not going to go down without a fight.

I wave the bus down, and it pulls up beside me, a lone vehicle on an otherwise deserted road. I choose a seat at the back so I can be forewarned of his presence should he follow me on board, as I'm not quite ready to face him just yet. However, no one else gets on, and the driver pulls away. The windows of the bus have steamed up, and the thunderous rain clouds outside cause a premature darkness to envelope the bus and its surrounds. I wipe away some of the condensation from the window with my sleeve so that I can see the street beyond. The gale outside is unrelenting, and great puddles of rainwater have formed on the pavement. Inside the cocoon of the bus the silence that surrounds me is absolute; the

constant swishing of the windscreen wipers the only sound to assure me that I'm not in a dream.

I rest my head on the window, the cold glass soothing the ache that is forming in my temple. The bus's vibrations, coupled with a sleepless night, make me feel drowsy, but I must not get dragged down into the welcome oblivion of sleep. I sit back upright, shaking my head, trying to banish this unwelcome stupor. I can't let my guard down, I must stay alert. I need all my wits about me. There will be plenty of time for sleeping when this is done.

The bus comes to shuddering halt, and I step off onto the pavement, examining the scene before me. The usually golden sand that adorns the beach is grey and sodden, and reminds me of photos of the mud ridden trenches of the first world war from my school textbook. How apt this comparison is, as I am going into my own battle after all. I make my way along the promenade, unable to see more than a few metres ahead of me due to the unwieldy mist that has descended. A shiver runs down my spine as I survey this ghost town. There's not even the presence of a distant car headlight to penetrate the darkness and provide some comfort, some proof of human existence. I reach the pier which stretches out into the sea, disappearing into the gloom, and providing a pathway into the unknown. There is not a soul as far as the eye can see; the savage swell of the sea the only form of life on show. And yet I know he is here. I can feel his presence. I can see him out of the corner of my eye. I start walking down the pier into the fog, my entire body drenched, the rain water running pitilessly into my eyes, and saturating my jeans. My legs feel like dumbbells, each step towards my reckoning becoming harder and harder to take.

I reach the end of the pier, and stop by the railings, next to a closed ice cream stall, the glass window permeated with a layer of condensation. I peer at the glass and freeze when I gaze upon the reflection. He is there, looking directly at me, no longer hiding in the shadows, no longer a concealed spectator, no longer a veiled purveyor of malevolence. 'I know you're there, I can see you' I whisper, my voice surprisingly steady under the circumstances. I stare into his cold, unrelenting eyes. 'Can't you see, I brought you here? You weren't following me; I was leading you'. He looks at me unblinkingly and suddenly my new found confidence falters. I turn around, away from the window and it's terrifying echo of my tormentor, knowing that I must face my foe directly. The real him is more terrifying than I can possibly imagine, and I back away, suddenly afraid, and he mirrors my steps. My back hits the metal railings that mark the end of the pier, the cold metal chilling my skin despite the many layers I'm wearing. I look to my side and stare down into the dark grey face of the English Channel, noting that it is momentarily calm, despite the continuing downpour. This temporary tranquillity has a soothing effect on me, and I climb up onto the railings, making my way to the top rung, where I sit, and turn back to face him.

'You may think you have won, but you haven't. Don't you see, I've ended this on my own terms. You must now find another desperate soul to torment.' The sounds of the howling wind and driving rain begin to recede, and I'm enclosed in total silence once again, as though existing within a vacuum of time and space. I regard him one last time, framed as he is by the curtain of mist, almost translucent, ethereal, and not of this world. With only the slightest hesitation I fall backwards, briefly engulfed by a wave of euphoria as the wind rushes through my hair, and I descend towards the ocean. Time seems to stand still. I

remember myself as a happy child with a lust for life; I remember meeting him for the very first time, not knowing who he was or what he wanted from me; I remember the moment I knew that he had achieved too tight a grip on me, one from which I must escape. My eyes settle on him staring down from the pier edge, expressionless, and without any hint of remorse. For a lingering moment, before my back bursts the surface of the water, I see his spectral form vanish from the pier, extinguishing like a streetlight in the fog, smothered like a candle in the wind. He will hunt me no more.