



Paul's Date With Darkness

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For a moment Greggs Bakery became dark. Outside the shop, a giant shape, dark as death, pressed against the glass.

Paul examined his tray of baguettes. Get a grip, he told himself. He must be nervous about tonight, blind date and all that. And anyway, when he looked back, the thing was gone.

He broke for lunch at two. An ambulance had chosen to stop right outside the shop, siren screaming. To get away from the fuss, Paul took his sandwich to the churchyard in Bermondsey Street, managing to find bench-space next to a bloke in a suit.

He fed the birds. One pigeon darted over to the road, taking Paul's gaze with it. That was when he saw the thing again, stood on the street about fifty metres away, a man sized shape, seeming to peer though the railings.

It was deep and featureless black. Paul tensed, glancing at his companion on the bench. The bloke's eyes were fixed on Men's Health magazine. Meanwhile, the thing ambled a few steps to the left. It had a bouncy jaunty walk as if its legs were slightly too bendy. As it turned, you could see that it was something like a cardboard cut out, quite flat. It nodded to itself and lolloped off behind some bushes.

When he was quite sure it was gone, Paul got up and went to examine the railings. The chipped black paint was warm from the spring sunshine. There was nothing unusual to see. He rarely felt cold, but he was aware of the hairs prickling on his back. Perhaps he'd fallen asleep for a minute, had a dream or something. Yeah probably that was it.

At six o'clock he caught a bus to the Superbowl. The filmy gold twilight made the whole place feel quite romantic. Paul hovered by the doors, listening to the thump of music rattle the glass. He scratched a speck of dirt from his white jeans. Someone called Nadia Wilkinson was in there waiting for him, a girl, a woman. His blind date.

He reached into his jacket pocket for some more Revels. Popping three into his mouth, took a deep breath and walked inside.

The music hit him like a wall, comforting and distracting. He bought two tickets and mechanically swapped his shoes at the counter. What if there was no such person as Nadia Wilkinson? His eyes wandered over to the amusement arcade where his mate Kendrick might be hiding, watching, laughing.

He ate three more Revels and with a second deep breath, walked over to lane five. There was someone waiting there. Christ it was a woman.

"Nadia?" he yelled. She turned around looking pained.

Her shiny black hair was cropped short, her wide-set eyes were slathered in kohl. When she stood up, he could see that she was short and very athletic, something like a Persian aerobics teacher. "You're Paul, right?"

He nodded and took her outstretched hand, wondering if he should kiss her. Kendrick would have done.

Her eyes went briskly up and down. Paul became aware of his cheap gold necklace and stubbly chin. Meanwhile, the music blammed out Blur's parklife. It was one of Paul's favourite tracks.

"Let's get out of here!" she yelled.

The 188 stank of fried chicken. They sat upstairs. "That's better." Nadia announced. "I hate that music... Are you hungry?" She patted his hand. Hers felt strong and dry. "We could eat." Someone's half-empty bottle of Wkd rolled distractingly along the floor. Nadia

was not distracted. She talked about her studies, her family and her ambitions. "I've never been on a blind date before" she told Paul. "That's why I came. I love trying new things. It's really working out quite well isn't it? Here we are!"

She jumped lightly off the bus. The road was taped and blue light bounced off the shrubs and railings. It was immediately obvious that there had been some kind of incident. A crowd of people peered over the tape, rustling with excitement. Police cars blocked either end of Long Lane and bored-looking officers were stationed at each corner, directing people back through the square.

Without thinking, Paul stuffed the last six Revels in his mouth. Then he pushed his way to the front. "What happened?" He asked.

"Shooting in the churchyard," someone said. "Feckin' immigrants."

"Excuse me." Nadia's voice interrupted. "My *mother* was an immigrant to this country."

"So feckin what. I'm not talking about our feckin' mothers."

Paul opened his mouth. "When-?"

"About eleven, mate." The policeman's voice caught everyone by surprise. "They took his body off ages ago and there's nothing to see, believe me."

"Shall we go?" she said in his ear. "There's a nice place in Borough Market. Do you like fish?"

They walked up the road a little way. "I was there." Paul said slowly. "Just before it happened. On that bench."

Nadia stopped. "You should tell someone. Maybe you saw something."

"I did see something." Paul told her about the black shape he'd seen behind the railings. Then he explained that he'd seen it earlier in Greggs. Nadia listened with focus, standing

as straight as a major general. When he'd finished, she rubbed her face. "That's ridiculous."

"Do you believe me though?"

"Yes." She said decisively. She sighed and looked around. "I'm starving."

"They do chips at the Halal place."

Ten minutes later, Paul and Nadia were wedged on plastic chairs, bathed in the unforgiving light of the Halal take-away. Lebanese pop music twanged in the background. Between them, on a plastic table, was a box of thin yellow worms

"Maybe it was your spirit guide," she said, dipping a chip in bright red sauce. "Guardian angel type thing."

"Maybe." Paul agreed politely.

"Or someone in a black coat?"

"No way!"

"Calm down." She leaned forward and pulled his jacket until she was able to whisper in his ear. "Want to come back to mine?"

She looked at him and smiled. He suddenly noticed that her eyeliner had streaked down one cheek, like a child's face paint. Without thinking, he licked his thumb and rubbed it away. Then, blushing, he crammed a handful of chips into his mouth. Clumsily chewing, he stood up. Nadia trotted out of the shop after him, carrying her can of diet coke.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"On the river."

He nodded. Of course she did. That was where all the posh houses were.

"Shall we walk?" she slipped her arm into his. "Buses are so ordinary. Are you always psychic?"

Paul shook his head. "I'm like a bus. I'm very ordinary."

She tipped her head curiously. "What would you like to be?"

"Dunno." He shrugged.

She gazed into his eyes, as if she was reading out his secrets. "Why did that black shape scare you?" she asked eventually.

"It's just..." he struggled to find the words. "It was like the opposite of everything that's good. And I can't get it out of my head."

"I think you ARE psychic." She said. "I think you saw that poor boy's death. You said that shape was flat as paper. Well, death is flat. It's one dimensional. I think you saw death."

"But what about in Greggs?" Paul didn't like to contradict her but he wasn't going to admit to being psychic either. "No one died in Greggs did they?"

"People are always dying." Nadia announced with intellectual intensity. "We don't always see them. We don't always know them, but they're dying. They're dying to the right and to the left of us. Three hundred thousand people die every day."

Paul said nothing.

"You could eat the dust tonight," she smiled. "Or I could."

"Cheers, Nadia." Paul huffed. "It just felt too close, that's all. I mean, that boy sat on the same bench as me, at almost the same time as me. Now he's meat."

They were getting near to the river now. The air smelled slightly salty. Seagulls cried in the darkness above. Nadia's place was in a spotless mews near Tower Bridge. A concierge let them into the lobby. Paul gazed around at the lemon paint and marble desk.

"It's floor six, but I always take the stairs." Nadia explained. "It keeps me fit."

She started to canter up the stairs. Paul followed behind. The stairwell was obviously an afterthought, it was functional and windowless, with grey linoleum and blue metal banisters. By the time they reached floor four, he was sweating like a wrestler.

Nadia vanished easily up the next bend of stairs and Paul took a deep breath and carried on climbing. He grasped the handrail to pull himself up and as he did so, he realised someone was coming down. All at once the black thing was there, walking down the stairs towards him. He pressed his body into the banister, but it was not enough to stop the thing brushing his jacket as it continued down.

Just a hair. In that instant, he became aware of something like an endless well. A bottomless pit. And then the thing was gone, lolloping down the stairs.

In that instant, Paul's body went cold. It happened so fast that the sweat on his face felt like streaks of ice. All the hairs on his back stood upright. Inexplicable tears filled his eyes. It was as if he was crying for all the children he might never play with.

"Nadia!" he hissed, his voice shaking. "Wait!"

"What?" Her voice floated down the stairs. Paul ran up, his fear giving him an agility he never normally possessed. Without thinking, he seized her in his arms and pulled her towards him.

"What is it?" her muffled voice sounded surprised but quite pleased.

"I saw it!" he breathed, speaking through a mouthful of her glossy hair. He was soaking. His sweat was getting on her clothes. Suddenly embarrassed, he let her go and wiped

his face with a sleeve. "Sorry. But it passed you. Didn't you see?"

She shook her head. "I didn't see anything. Let's go in my room."

"No way!" Paul exclaimed. "That thing was real. What if there's someone dead in your flat?"

"Someone's dead somewhere." Nadia sighed "But not in my room." She pulled out her keys. When Paul hesitated, she got behind him and pushed, ushering him through the door. The first thing he noticed was the smell- a mixture of spicy perfume and unwashed tee shirts. She turned on the light.

Books covered every possible surface. The bed was a mess of silk, a brown apple core added as afterthought. There was no other furniture, not even a wardrobe; all clothes were apparently kept on the floor. Mum would have had a fit. But the good thing was that there was no possible place to hide a dead body.

Cautiously, Paul sat down on the bed. Nadia sat beside him. "It's alright." She said slowly. "That thing didn't get me this time. And it didn't get you either."

"But what is it?"

"I felt something." She said slowly. "...On the stairs. I wanted to cry. I was just thinking of all the things I might never see- all the places I might not go..."

"But so did I!" Paul exclaimed. "I was thinking about all the kids- how they would grow up and I might never get to play with them-"

"All what kids?"

Paul blushed like a rose. "I dunno." He hesitated, "I love kids that's all. Mum reckons I should be a nursery nurse."

"Maybe you should." Nadia remarked calmly.

Paul nodded. Then he reached his hands around her square-looking shoulders and pulled her close.

"Tonight's been good hasn't it?" she said as she snuggled into his chest. "And I think you *are* psychic. Honestly."

Paul didn't answer. Life was too short to argue. Instead, he leaned forward and kissed her.