

# NIGHT ON EARTH

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**NIGHT ON EARTH**  
**BY**  
**AMOS KEPPLER**

A London Story



**MIDNIGHT FIRE MEDIA**  
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*a few years from now...*

## CHAPTER ONE

The rain poured. The water was hot before it hit the ground. The droplets jumped hissing back up in the air. Water flowed into the sewers. Steam drifted as thick and high as the buildings from the ground up. The ground had yet to cool from the white-hot day. This flood, after a dry and glowing hot sunny day shouldn't be a surprise to anybody living here. This happened often in London during the summer. Rain poured and ten minutes later the streets were just as dry as before the rain.

It was December...

Christmas trees were clearly visible in Camden High Street this evening. Christmas decorations did dominate the store windows.

The man stumbling from Camden Town Underground station turned soaking wet in an instant. He didn't seem to notice, but kept moving forward. Every time one of his feet touched the ground he revealed how unsteady he was. To the few who bothered to take a closer look at him, he seemed to have trouble with his vision as well. He ran into poles and corners. Something was clearly wrong with him. The eyes had a strange, rigid quality and his entire behavior was... weird. People hurried on, not revealing even the slightest willingness to help him.

He stumbled across the road. It seemed like a miracle that he wasn't run down. Angry horns were muted in the torrential rain. People couldn't fathom how he could avoid reacting to his surroundings, to its obvious dangers, but his face remained stoic, and he kept stumbling forward, as if there was no other course of action available. It dawned on those who followed his plight with a certain, indifferent interest that he followed a kind of pre-programmed route. It seemed to be a somewhat correct conclusion, because he was evidently on his way to the Inn called the Green Rose not that far ahead. Perhaps it was luck that his walk led him to the door and not on a collision course with the wall, but he managed (somehow) to push down the handle, and stumble inside. He practically fell inside. Fell from the quiet rain, to the lively noise inside.

Very few inside noticed every time the door opened and closed. The noise level in the bar wasn't necessarily that loud, but still loud enough to suppress most other sounds. The door opened and closed. People might see it, but no one heard it. People arrived and left all the time. Nothing strange about that, nothing strange at all.

Water flowed from the newly arrived. It vaporized quickly, almost before reaching the floor, and added to the steam and mist already present in the room, from sweat and heat and empty glasses.

Barkeeps, women and men, were busy behind the counter. The night was unusually busy. They moved constantly and hardly even slowed down. There was a certain energy here, one who might also be present in other places, but not to this degree and intensity.

One of the first things a newcomer would spot would be the *damaged* TV above the bar, black and broken and still smoking. People looked at it, looked a lot... before looking away.

– It was attacked during the news earlier tonight, an eager beaver explained repeatedly to all newcomers that happened to end up by his side. – The news got to be too much for the poor guy, I guess. Not so strange that. No one watches or listens to the news anymore.

– It's unusually crowded here tonight, a woman remarked. – I've never before seen it so crowded.

– People get an ever stronger need to celebrate, the man who enjoyed speaking to newcomers about damaged TVs remarked. – It's getting crazier and crazier out there, so it stands to reason that places such as this mirror that... right?

His voice fell to be almost subdued at the end of the sentence, drowning in the buzz.

The man who had stumbled through the rain kept stumbling across the floor.

– He stares at you, Claudette Francis said to the owner, Evan Shelby.

– Not really, Shelby said lightly. – It just looks that way.

Claudette nodded. He was right. She and Shelby stood behind the bar and the man was heading for the bar, his muddy eyes hardly focusing on anything. Claudette shrugged, and then she turned fully towards Shelby, turned to him with her revealing clothes and demeanor. He looked at her, but not with the interest, the desire she wanted, desired. She smiled at him, but he didn't return her smile, her inviting smile.

– Everything seems to be falling apart out there, she said helplessly. – The world is turning more dangerous every day.

– Old allegiances crumble, he nodded. – The new are more informal.

– A girl can go far to secure her future these days, she said softly.

The newcomer asked for a glass of beer, sniveling to a point of being almost unintelligible. After waiting impatiently for it he emptied the entire pint in one big gulp. He immediately asked for another. The maid serving him caught a glimpse of his eyes and shuddered. There wasn't... anything in there.

The man brought two full pints from the bar and found himself an empty table, incredibly empty, in the crowded room. It didn't seem to dawn on him that many of the guests didn't have a table and could easily have sat down there, if they had wanted to.

Four guys at the neighboring table, involved in an intense poker game scowled at him. One froze and was about to rise when another stopped him.

– Not yet, he hissed. – Remember, we're new here. Let it sink in...

And it did sink in, in other people present in the Green Rose, and the talk wandered across the room.

– They had their own tables at Uniforms and Arms, an old sailor whispered to his companion. – But someone blew the place to smithereens. It left them in a rather foul mood. And the rumors are flying. People say they deliberately chose this place as their new haunt, since many of those present here tonight quite conceivably could be the perps.

When looking at the four those rumors looked very conceivable. And the music being played here didn't exactly make them any friendlier. It was a rare mix of pagan music and modern rock, called Mystical Rock, the new underground fave of the twenty-first century. Not their type of music. Absolutely not.

The stumbling man sat there and stared deep into the second glass, long after he had emptied it. In a way they couldn't explain he became a kind of variation in their conversation. A conversation that wasn't really that deep. But now even the most innocent word took on a different, sinister meaning.

Claudette put a hand on the man's shoulder. He shook and his eyes burned her. She froze. Didn't dare do anything else.

– Can I help you with anything, sir? She wondered, attempting to speak kindly.

He turned his attention back to his glass. She heard him mumble something. Was it anything like: «I can't be helped»?

A young couple sat face to face. The girl was pregnant. They held hands and warmed each other with their eyes.

– I wonder what his problem is, the boy said curiously.

– It's big, no matter what it is, the girl emphasized.

They rocked with the beat, the music giving relief, but it also made sure they didn't forget.

– He's like a smooth surface, the girl said wondering and frightened. – His eyes don't mirror his soul, but ours.

– So deep.

The boy was unable to emphasize the humor he wanted in his voice and demeanor. And she couldn't either, when she smacked his fingers.

Needles of rain kept passing the windows, kept hitting the nascent sea on the ground. It fell straight down. There wasn't even a breath of wind outside that could make the droplets deviate from their course.

– I wonder how high the UV-reading truly was today, the girl said distantly.

– High, the boy grunted. – We can say that for sure.

– I mean... it would be great to hear the correct numbers, hear the truth for once.

– It's the same as with the dam, he said sarcastically. – *Officially*, we'll never hear anything except that it will be able to take the pressure of any given amount of water pushing at it, at any time. The number of cancer cases will never rise and it isn't proven that cow disease can be transferred to people...

The biggest man at the poker table swore. He had lost an important game. The other players were used to him winning, and smiled scornfully behind their masks.

The stumbling man belched, prolonged and thoroughly, uninhibited and unlimited. The four players raised more than one brow. The man rose and stumbled on unsteady feet towards the toilets. There was something pathetic and strangely threatening about him at the same time. The players exchanged glances.

– Perhaps he won't be back, one said.

– Perhaps not, another said, both with reluctance and expectation in his voice.

The entrance door opened and closed briefly again, way too briefly.

– Damn, the man dealing the round said. – More worthless lowlife. If at least some of them had drowned tonight, I would be happy.

The man, not less unsteady, returned from his expedition to the toilets, and dumped down on the same chair at the empty table. The four card players raised more eyebrows, but remained in their chairs. They couldn't avoid hearing the snickering in the room, knowing fully well it was at their expense.

The entrance door opened again, and this time it stayed open for quite some time. The four grinned widely. Six people entered the room. The leader towered above everybody, but all of the six filled the doorway well when they walked through it. Two of them were women, and they hardly seemed much smaller.

Claudette fearfully accepted their coats. They didn't seem to care about either her or the surroundings, and for once she didn't mind. The last

thing she wanted was attention from these people. She almost felt sorry for the lone man at the table. Almost.

The leader seemed to take in the situation with a single glance. He led his entourage directly to the two tables, exchanging brief nods with the card players, until he slowly and deliberately turned to the lone man at the neighbor table.

– I'm gonna explain something to you now, he said, as if he was talking to a child. – Listen carefully, because I won't repeat it

The lone man at the table just kept staring at his glass and his beer, seemingly not hearing anything.

– We're ten people who have reserved these tables to drink and to play. Five on each table, get it?

– As far as I know there isn't... table reservation in this place.

The man hadn't looked up or moved, and at first no one nearby could be certain that he had actually spoken. Not until they saw the large man's reaction.

– You don't *get it*. These tables belong to *us*.

The stumbling man began moving his hand over the table and under it as well, looking under it, before looking up with a silly grin, with eyes with the same empty expression. It looked like there was no one home, no one at all.

– *What?* The large man exclaimed impatiently.

– I don't see any... brand, the man with the muddy eyes said in exalted triumph.

– You're retarded, ain't ya? The large man nodded. – Well, you should know I've never cared much for those shitheads.

The people in the room waited for, anticipated the explosion, and knew they would be rewarded.

– There's no table reservation.

They all turned, changed their perspective. Shelby, the owner suddenly stood close to the table, without anyone actually seeing him go there.

– First come, first served, that's the «rule». But there are empty chairs here, to be filled, if there are no objections.

– There are many, the large man spat. – By damn!

Uncertainty gnawed at him, and he signaled to the nine in his entourage that they should keep their calm.

– I've heard about you, Shelby, he said. – Heard your name whispered in fear. It's said it's very dangerous to cross you.

Shelby stood there, clearly waiting. People held their breath.

– You don't take shit from anybody... I can respect that.

And thus it ended, with no one losing face. People let out their breath. The buzz returned.

– You can take the extra chairs, Shelby said gracefully. – No one else seems to want them...

All ten of them were able to sit around the other table, tight, but not too tight.

One of the ten, one of the women hit the table with a fist.

– This place is dark as a crypt, she cried.

It was dark, unusually so, compared to other establishments. All lamps shone with muted light, and there weren't that many of them. The room was filled with shadows.

– I enjoy the dark, Shelby said, – and I own the place. The guests enjoy it as well. But I see no reason not to be accommodating in this matter.

CLAUDETTE!

– Yes, Boss? She spoke sweetly, moved sweetly, very accommodating.

– Put one bright bulb in the lamp above this table.

– At once, Boss! She grinned. – Right away, Boss!

Eagerness mixed with uncertainty burned within her, as it always did in Evan Shelby's presence. She rushed into the kitchen, knowing well she had always been able to handle men like Shelby, fully aware that she was unable to handle him. Shelby's presence... unnerved her.

The swing doors closed behind her. She stared at him through the small, round glasses in the doors, did it for a second or two, looking at his eyes, half turned away from her, before pulling back, heading for the drawers in the darker parts of the room.

– You look shitty as hell.

She shook, jumpy as hell. Her cousin appeared from the shadows.

– I can't help it, she said angrily. – He... *spooks* me, *okay*. I swear he has those eyes on me even when he's looking away.

Shelby turned away from the ten on the cramped table, and turned towards the man who seemed unsteady, even when sitting.

– If we can help you with anything, don't hesitate to tell us, he said pleasantly.

– You can't! There was an abrupt snarl. – Stay away from me.

Claudette returned with the bulb and changed it with flowing, sensual moves. Her entire female form was well displayed, both to Shelby and all others. The eight men didn't attempt anything, didn't even look at her with more than a passing glance. Their leader evidently had total control over them.

And Shelby controlled him, controlled the thug controlling the thugs. Claudette looked at him with eyes filled with desire and admiration.

She returned to her chore as waitress. The Inn sort of calmed down. The potential for trouble had passed, at least momentarily, and people turned their attention to other things.

– No game tonight, the leader said, deadly calm, to his compatriots.

– Patience, patience, one of the women stated with a pointed glance.

It turned quiet. Perhaps not in sound, but the high energy buzz clearly faded. But in the quiet darkness people talked and lived on. In the other, even darker room, a boy walked out on the dance floor, and began doing «Kacha», a special form of nature dance and gymnastics that had been popular for a while now. Several others joined in. And then, after a few minutes, when the music changed, the dance erupted in savage moves. Even during the calmer parts of the music the dance remained intense and wild. The mystery Rock and the dance kept going throughout the night, both loud and quiet.

The world is full of contradictions, Evan Shelby thought.

He registered that the stumbling man visited the toilet many times during the time he was a guest of the house. Evidently to throw up. Sharp eyes easily saw the vomit at the corner of the mouth.

The frustrated poker players didn't enjoy the drunk sitting close to them. They didn't enjoy it at all. He smiled and laughed and made a number of hiccups a minute, slurped and cried, and evidently had no control whatsoever over himself. They took every move and sound coming from him as a personal insult. Shelby grinned ugly. He almost had to admire their constraint.

Almost.

They left the place early, with a demeanor colder than ice, anything but overtly snarling. The time hadn't even passed midnight when a waitress passed them their coats.

– Thank you for visiting The Green Rose, she said politely, sweetly. – Please come again soon.

They didn't take that in a very positive way either.

It was hard to tell if the waitress actually meant it, if she was a dumb goose or one with a very fine-tuned irony.

People made bets about it, as they easily did on such matters these days.

A while later the stumbling drunk broke down in laughter.

– «Thank you for visiting The Green Rose», he cackled. – «Please come again soon». HE HE

He buried his face in shaking hands and he sat like that for a long time. This time, when rising and heading for the toilet, he didn't manage more than a few steps before throwing up. He vomited over two married

couples eating. One of the women rose and punched him so hard that he flew across the room and turned over several tables on his journey.

The guests laughed themselves silly. Including those he had landed on.

– We'll make more food, for free, Shelby said hastily, before the discontent spread.

– C'mon, do you want some more?

The woman snarled and posed in a defensive position.

– Damn bitch, the man's mouth hissed hatefully. The rest of his face didn't rid itself of the dull look. – Damn you all!

– Beware! A man jumped angrily to his feet.

The drunk took a stab at him, but missed by a mile. His coordination wasn't better than it had been. He struck nothing but air and fell, and hit the floor hard.

– I curse you all, he mumbled, as he crawled on the floor. – *Curse* you...

He pulled himself up on the chair and once again dived deeply into the swimming pool of a glass. Suddenly, without notice, he seemed to have forgotten everything that had happened.

– One free drink to all, the owner cried, once again rising to the challenge of strategically calming the guests. – Kindly remain in your chairs, and we will serve you all.

Also the guests seemed to have delegated the memory of the drunken man's hatred a few minutes before to the depth of their mind. Bar guests behaved strangely sometimes.

It turned out to be a bizarre night for the people visiting the Green Rose. And the lone man caused most of it. There were episodes. People kept changing their opinion of him. They didn't know whether or not they should dislike the man, pity him, laugh or cry. Help him, or fear and hate this eerie creature of a human being.

– ... remember... an old song, he hummed. – «Feel the glow, the glow we all must feel»... and it scares the shit out of me.

No one was able to tell how many glasses, beer, wine and liquor he had been drinking. They knew it was a lot, bordering on the improbable, and that it returned the same way it had come a few minutes after he had drunk it. He hadn't eaten any food, not the tiniest piece.

He was pale. Everybody had pale skin these days, caused by lack of sunrays, but he was *pale*. He looked so bad that they found it remarkable that he was able to stand. There wasn't anything wrong with his strength, though, only his coordination.

Everything about him was wrong... or different, in a way they were nowhere close to explaining, far less put into words.

Some remained in their chairs, silent and brooding, while others used the occasion to let go. They felt the special mood and responded accordingly.

This place had always been something special, at least since Shelby had taken over. But tonight the stranger spiced it all further. *The Stranger...* not only in the sense that none of them had met him before, but an understanding of the word going way beyond that.

A pack of youths danced to the beat. Supple young limbs threw themselves into the laughter and play. They didn't just use the dance floor, but also the space between the tables. Everywhere between the floor and the ceiling. The rain kept pouring outside and the water formed a river in the streets. A river turning into a sea. Inside the Green Rose the water constantly vaporizing from the floor didn't put any damper on the mood, the exuberant mood.

They smilingly surrounded the lone man's table. Usually they would leave such a downtrodden man in peace, but they had so much fun now that they were ready to take on hopeless causes. A girl reached for him with two open palms. He jumped up and pushed her, pushed her hard away. So hard that the others just about managed to catch her before she hit the bar. Shelby was there in an instant and grabbed the raised arm.

– Hey, man, pull yourself together.

The stumbling drunk stood there, momentarily frozen. Then he struck the open, offered hand. He backed off from Shelby, backed towards the entrance with a snarl. The entrance door opened and closed with a loud crack. He had vanished in an instant, as if he had never been there at all.

– Good riddance, Claudette sniffed indignant.

Shelby held his tongue. His face had taken on a distant quality not totally unlike that of the stranger. He had his entire attention directed at the door. And beyond... at the wet, dark streets outside. At the needles of rain stabbing everybody stupid enough to expose themselves to them. He felt them, as if he personally felt them hit his body.

They all heard the rain. They could no longer avoid hearing it.

– The dam must have broken, a man said fearfully. – This can't be just rain. It just can't.

The rain poured down. Tonight was one, continuous shower. People finding themselves outside looked at each other, in loss of words. The dirty, lukewarm water bathed them. The dirt covered everything, most noticeably the flickering round, orange traffic lights. This was certainly not a night where the ground dried. Instead there was no ground anymore, only the vast sea-like river drowning the city.

The man stumbling out of the Green Rose, pressed a hand at his mouth and was soaking wet after just a few steps, as the ruthless forces of nature

assaulted him. Perhaps he registered this deep within himself, but nothing suggested that he did, and he continued his blind walk. The thoughts racing through his mind hardly reached any rational level. They were merely random pieces in a puzzle without meaning.

He was freezing, freezing violently in the heat of the night. Nightmarish images chased away any heat he might have felt. Where had he been today? He couldn't tell. What had he done? Where did he just come from? Where he had lived all nights before this remained unknown. Did he know... who he was? He knew he couldn't even start to reply to that question. He knew he ran from something. From what he couldn't say. A white glowing ice-cold rage, both known and unknown rose from his depths, making him straighten and remove his hand from his mouth.

The pain came first. Then the violent, all-consuming nausea. He was forced to crouch so much that his hair almost touched the ground. He wondered about how he was able to stay on his feet, didn't wonder about anything anymore, merely took steps one by one, until he reached a dark alley. A large, endless gap swallowing him whole.

A beast swallowed him whole and raw, but it wasn't that beast that was growing. He was, until he had grown so large that he *became* the monster. Everything turned black and he saw existence with absolute clarity. He felt like he ran through the pitch black hole. It happened so slow, so slow. A wall, he had to find a wall, something to lean on. He had to stop, breathe out, breathe in. It was so hard to breathe. Vomit flowed from his mouth like a geyser. Another round of vomit. He couldn't understand how there could be more left down there, all the times he had emptied himself. The hollow room in his stomach hurt so much that he felt there was nothing but bowels left down there, and now everything returned topside with a vengeance. He crouched, but didn't fall. The body felt powerless and powerful at the same time. The ears listened and they didn't listen. Did he hear steps? The ears that listened heard steps. A pack of monsters slipped up around him, surrounded him. He had been aware that they were hunting him, but the paralyzing indifference dominated his being.

– Look at this SICK bastard.

They blinded him with flashlights, a sun in his face. He didn't really see anything but shadows, shadows with horns and claws.

– One will hardly encounter anything more sickening, another confirmed. – I've never done so.

– By damn. And such trash is supposed to belong to the human race.

He was grabbed hard around his arms and pulled up. The first strike hit deep within the sore, empty stomach. Many fists followed that first. They threw him through the air. His head hit a brick wall. He hit the ground

hard. They began kicking him. Everything hurt, in a distant, horrible way. He registered no surprise in himself because of what happened with him. Only the pain was real, was true.

They lifted him up by the hair and held him up by it. Experts like them knew well how much people could take before they stopped feeling the pain. Except they were wrong. There wasn't one pain, but one, with many different points, dull edges beating endlessly within. They didn't understand shit, Satan's pigs... roasted pigs, he, he. He had feared for a while now, that he was on the verge of insanity. He remembered that, registered it dully, like he registered everything else. He had stopped caring.

– Hold him.

A knee struck his crotch. Another in a long row.

– Damn, the guy must be a blood donor. He's hardly bleeding.

– Everything is diluted. He's drowning in alcohol.

He heard the grin more than he saw it.

– The red color is virtually gone.

The laughter was hard and rough. Someone would perhaps call it ruthless and terrifying, but not he who knew well what was truly ruthless and terrifying. They didn't. Not yet.

– Let's put an end to this wreck.

– No! A sharp commando voice. – Let him serve as a warning, a harsh lesson.

Experts, no doubt. They didn't break a single bone in his body, even during the final, prolonged beating. The white light grew, until the black glow was the only thing he «saw». He saw nothing. Nothing but horns and pointed tails. Everything turned to shadows once more. Steps grew distant. He knew they were, even though he heard nothing.

The last of them released him, let go of his hair. He fell far, and landed on the hard ground a thousand meters below. His head hit the tarmac. He felt it like he landed on a field of soft feathers. The wreck of a human being remained where it had landed, unmovable.