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# **Alarums of Reality**

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**GRAINS OF SAND**



## CHAPTER ONE

*He can't quite make out the words, can't hear the sound of his own voice. His lips move, but there is no sound.*

*– You've always been here, the woman says.*

*She stands in a corridor filled with twilight. Her body is in shadows. Only her face is clearly visible. She wears a white, translucent mask. The mask moves, as if being a face, as if being alive.*

*– Take this ring, as a token of my love.*

And he wakes up in his own twilight bedroom, wondering what's real and what's not.

Colin rose from bed as he did every morning. He stretched his body, his muscles, soft and laden after a night's sleep, after days of inactivity. Looking at his watch, checking the time, registering he had sufficient time, as always. The alarm clock had probably sounded some time ago, even if he hadn't heard it. It had indeed brought him out of his slumber. He had always hated rising early in the morning.

Five steps to the bathroom, only five steps. Marion continued to sleep soundly. She had thrown off most of the blanket covering her body. Her nightgown had slipped a bit, exposing her large breasts. The sight instantly made his prick rise hard and painful. He splashed cold water in his face, looking at it in passing in the mirror. He removed his own night-suit, stepping into the shower. Water pushed against his body, surrounding it. He noted absent-mindedly that his cock still kept at it, half hardened, which he found quite unusual considering the previous night. Marion had been quite eager. They had both been after a few days absence.

She had visited her mother, left him alone.

There was breakfast, hardly noticeable. A few minutes later he couldn't actually recall what he had eaten. He tried to, as he stopped before the front door, shook his head and moved on.

He walked to the bus stop, the short distance from home. Autumn had come to the area just a few days earlier. Yellow leaves covered the streets, the sidewalks, floating in the air. He stopped a bit by the crossroads, as he always did, looking for the bus. If the bus emerged from the top of the slope he would have to run to the stop. He saw no bus. His eyes caught something in a heap of leaves close to the drain. He went there to pick it up. To his surprise he found a ring, a golden ring, somewhat dented, with a curious red glowing stone. Who could have dropped

it here? Whoever the owner might be couldn't have been wearing it on his or her finger, or he or she wouldn't have lost it. Luckily there hadn't been raining tonight, or it would certainly have been flushed down the drain. It could have been anyway, by the wind, along the heap of leaves, if he hadn't discovered it.

The bus had already stopped by the stop. He saw it leave it. And he, looking about found himself on the same spot by the crossroads. He started waving frantically, even though he knew, in his heart he did so in vain. Slackers had no chance with this bus company.

He couldn't claim his work to be easy; he couldn't claim it to be hard. But still he arrived home in the afternoon absolutely dead tired. Marion, too, did always look haggard, exhausted. She studied physics at the local university.

– If only it could be physics, but it's math, math, math all day long. I've got four years of math to look forward to.

This was her favorite subject each time work and school surfaced in the conversation. He couldn't very well complain about it. He had his favorite subjects himself.

He slipped the ring into his pocket, wondering why he had thought about what he thought about just now. It had been like a flash of revelation, not a tired memory.

The bus moved slowly through the city traffic. There was ongoing construction work going on somewhere ahead. They always did some construction work or road construction work somewhere. Bulldozers entered the neighborhood with their slow, inevitable pace and started bulldozing away some topsoil, some green spot. They had started working on the green spot by their home, a lawn where kids had played soccer in the afternoons last week. Nobody knew why, nobody cared. Construction work played an integral part in people's lives.

He would be late. Colin accepted it with a resigned shrug. Another reduction in his salary, another nick in the chief's book. There had been some of them lately.

A man spoke to a woman a few rows ahead, seemingly a mind reader:

– The bus is always late... or early. I swear to you, it's been impossible to keep track of time recently. Others have noticed it, too.

– So why haven't I, or anyone I know noticed it, except you? She said sarcastically.

The man fell silent. Everything fell silent. No one really spoke on the bus. One had to raise one's voice to be heard above the buzz...

But no one spoke.

They finally exited the cluster of suburbs and reached a bit of open land. On their right was a church. It had seen better days. The white paint had started to scale off several places. Even most of the white chalk on the brick wall wasn't white anyone.

On their left was an old castle. Nothing special about it, really. Just an old castle. Nobody had lived there for twenty years, after the owner had died. The way Colin had heard it he had been killed by a rowing band of drunks a stormy Saturday night. The city council and one of those societies working for the preservation of old castles had shared the expenses and kept its exterior somewhat shiny. Not many had ventured inside. The rumors of the place being haunted were very persistent.

They drove through a forest. Not a very big one. Just ten seconds or so, a glimpse of trees and they found themselves on the highway on the other side.

– Did I sleep? The woman in front asked the man in front.

– Sleep? He said.

– Yes, I got tired. She kissed him. – The life of the commuter is never easy. The queue seems to go on forever, doesn't it?

– There hasn't been a queue in these parts since they opened the new link-road, he sniffed.

– Oh, you old sourpuss, she declared, slapping him cheerfully on the cheek.

They hadn't completely completed the new link-road yet. There was still the question of the second lane. The bulldozers had started the completion work a few days ago. Green turned brown, turned gray. It turned black, completely black.

There was a girl speaking very loud. She had a very distinct voice and was easily heard. Everybody was treated to her long monologues every morning. Her friend didn't say much, except replying with one syllable or so now and then.

- I woke up this morning, the girl said, - and Sylvia had her period as usual, and she was in a very foul mood. I try to speak to her, but you really can't, you know. It's just one of those days, right?

Colin didn't really listen to the words, only to the phenomenon that was her voice. Everybody in the bus did, he wagered. The entertainment was really limited on buses.

Green turned brown, turned gray, turned black. Blue sky turned dark. There were no clouds. Suddenly the sky was filled with clouds.

Colin blinked and rubbed his temples. He hadn't slept much last night, but this was ridiculous.

He felt good really. The exhausting sex had reinvigorated him to a point of euphoria. At least he felt a few inches above his lowest ebb, something that hardly ever happened anymore.

The two of them sat facing each other on each side of the dinner table. Marion looked at him with a soft stare, a warm glow in her eyes. The candles lit her face, blushing her, burning him. Beyond the dinner table they saw nothing, heard nothing, sensed nothing. This was their time, their place. Nobody could reach them or disturb them here. Within these four (or five) walls they decided what would go or not.

And anything would go here.

The bus' journey through the rural and urban «landscape» was slow, exuberantly so. Colin yawned, a long, painful yawn threatening to break his jaw. The ride was slow, to the point of time crawling to a halt. He looked up again, out of the window. Had the bus moved, moved at all, since the last time? Its wheels had most certainly turned, but had it actually moved from its previous position?

He doubted it.

The day turned out to be one of those days, a day exactly alike the previous one, or the one before that.

They drove through a small piece of open landscape, before once again being immersed in the sprawl, the conurbation of modern human existence.

– You're off your guard, the girl said to the boy.

– No, you are.

– You, too.

– You, too.

On their left was a church. They had just painted it. The lawn had been cut. The city council kept it in top shape. Nobody would go on record for not supporting Religion.

On their right was an old castle. A spooky ghost house, if one ever existed. Windows had fallen out and a part of the roof was missing. Some society working for the preservation of old castles had been talking for years about funding a restoration, but talk was cheap. Nobody had given a fuck, since the owner, Marlon Caine had passed away 20 years ago.

The bus returned to the sprawl, the conurbation of modern human existence. The city rose around it, devouring it, immersing it between the cloud high buildings. The people shuddered in shadow. In the middle of the day the sun didn't reach them.

He registered at work 3 minutes past nine, three minutes late. Everybody looked at him as if at a leper. Everybody was closely watching everybody else here.

Michael Carnaby, the boss watched everybody from his office down the hall.

Colin's «office», like that of all the other lowly employees consisted of small cubicles, not really divided by walls, but by dividers on wheels, movable and flexible. Modern office space in a nutshell.

A desk, a chair, a computer screen, mouse and keyboard.

He and Sharon Wells, the dark-skinned woman next to him, greeted each other, exchanging looks before entering the cubicles. The video cameras caught that, of course.

The video cameras caught everything.

Not that they weren't allowed to say hello to their co-workers, but they had been late today. And when that happened «niceties» were at best frowned upon. And Colin felt a bit of the usual guilty pleasure. Perhaps he hadn't done anything wrong, but he sure felt like it. The all-seeing eye gave everybody a continuously guilty conscience.

He heard the sound of the tapping of his fingers against the keyboard. He didn't really feel anything. The work was monotonous. There was no end to it. He kept tapping. It didn't really require any higher brain functions. He had thought he could dream only at night, while sleeping, but had evidently been wrong. Perhaps he was dreaming right now. He certainly was so close to sleeping as he could come without actually doing it.

Modern research suggested that parts of the brain turned itself off, well before people actually fell asleep. He could believe that.

Lunch-break already, after a thousand years. Lunch-break was part of the regulations. The firm abided by them, regulation by regulation. The first group of workers filed to the lunchroom. The other group would file in thirty minutes. Somebody had to work, at any given time, twenty-four hours a day. The machines kept going. Drechsler & Son had set its eye on the new, global economy. Colin, like all the employees worked night shifts once every third week. The twenty-four hours were divided in three working shifts, revolving continuously.

The lunchroom was big, big enough to fit almost the entire shift. Statistics said that twenty percent of the workers left the building during the break, either to smoke or eat or for other reasons and that assessment was about right.

There was a queue in front of the cafeteria desk. If lucky even those last in line would get a few minutes by the tables, not finding it necessary to wolf down the food too fast. The best workers sat closest to the boss, closest to the cafeteria, being the first in line when the klaxon horn sounded.

Colin wasn't among them.

He and Marion had agreed to work and study every second year, until they both had received a higher education, he in computer arts, she in physics. This was their second year. It would at least take them twelve more years to complete their self-inflicting task.

And that was just if nothing went wrong. Something always went wrong, but he had planned for that, in his planning, his calculations. If anything didn't go seriously wrong, they would arrive in twelve years, with a whopper salary as a result. Computer service, as he did now, was required practice anyway.

The klaxon horn sounded. Back to work. The walk back was uneventful. He hardly remembered it. A lot of E-Mails waited for him, accumulating during the break. It was always tough to catch up after a break.

He had to read, to study during his sleep year, too, of course, keeping his knowledge sharp and clear in his mind. It would have been a nightmare catching up otherwise. Time waited for no man.

Tapping again. He had kept this up for three months now, with just a little bit of unease. Even if nothing was said officially, there was a lot of talk about mouse and keyboard sickness, how it could disable you after a few, short years, turning you into a cripple. Both the keyboard and the mouse he used was the latest in ergonomic equipment, but one could never be absolutely certain, could one? Each new generation the last century had, after all, had their own, unique problems with the doing of monotone, repetitious work. It wasn't *fair*. Machines were supposed to make life easier.

Slowly, slowly he noticed the increasing smell of sweat under his arms, his bladder being filled, to the point of bursting. He rose and walked to the toilet. Toilet-visits were allowed. As long as they didn't turn out to be too frequent and too prolonged. The video cameras recorded everything, of course, including what went on inside the toilet. No one living today could truly imagine how it had been back then, before video cameras had been put up everywhere in public places. Colin, Marion, and their entire generation had lived with them since the cradle. He smiled a bit, shaking his head. Naturally he was unable to actually recall the hospital birth where he had been filmed the first time, but in a distant, intellectual way, he understood the point. One generation's nightmare was the next one's daily life.

Emptying the bladder felt like heaven. He had almost waited too long. The management expected rushed expediency of the workers. Another guilty pleasure. He could imagine how he looked, on the image of the monitor, with the beam of fluid erupting from his organ. If he had been an

adult twenty years ago he supposed he would have grinned a bit. Now it felt completely natural to share what had been considered private space with total strangers.

Well, some of it remained, he guessed. The toilets still had walls, and even a locked door. Some atavistic practices always remained. It was kind of funny, though, how anonymous strangers were allowed to see you, but not people physically close.

He wondered a bit about all this, if most other people wondered about it. They probably accepted it with a shrug, without really thinking about it much. He probably pondered it more than most.

Tonight was Friday night. Something he hardly dared think about too much during most of the week, but now, with it merely a few hours away, he allowed himself to dream.

Friday night was the end of the week. There was no work tomorrow. One could shake loose, get slam bam drunk and the occasional headache could be nursed at home, within the five walls. Monday had to be the worst day of the week. Everybody knew then that they would have to work for five days before the week's end.

But Friday was bad, too. A poor ass had worked the entire week and all the seconds felt like hours. Time dilated to eternity. He took another look at his watch.

#### **04.32.30**

He waited, and waited. He waited a long time, before looking again. He looked hard, thinking hard, but nothing seemed to work.

#### **04.32.30**

– What's the time? He asked Sharon.

– Four thirty-two thirty, she said, and he swore he could spot black lines under the eyes on her brown skin.

Every watch was synchronized every morning. Another bold move from the management implemented two months ago in an effort to improve efficiency.

– Four thirty-two thirty, he mumbled. – Remember. *Remember.*

– What did you say? Sharon asked in a tired voice.

– Nothing, he replied. – Nothing important.

E-mails kept pouring in. Most of it was Spam, of course, of little value to the receiver. But within all the crap there could be gold, pure gold, and everybody had to sift through it all, just in case. There had been a case last month that had been broadcasted all over the wire services, about a guy who had skipped a lot of Spam... and missed a million dollar opportunity. Colin kept tapping.

He looked at the watch one more time, one final time.

## 04.34.12

Colin kept tapping.

The tapping grew louder, as if he somehow was able to hear everyone in the room tapping. The sound of one person tapping wasn't very impressive, but when one heard an entire office do it, it turned out to be quite impressive indeed.

He turned deaf after a while, as if there was no sound at all. The construction work outside their home had also been bad the last two or three nights, but had then seemed to subside into the background, into nothing. He couldn't remember actually hearing the klaxon horn at precisely five o'clock, what he supposed had been five o'clock precisely. But for all he knew it could just as well have been **05.05.54**... or even closer to **05.30.00**.

One just couldn't tell.

He found himself on the bus, on his way home, reading «Colors in the Night», a very colorful magazine. The bus took forever to move in the afternoon rush hour. In a rare show of creativity the company operating this particular route had started selling newspapers not long ago. Very few read the papers, but «Colors in the Night» was quite popular. But today it hardly mattered which paper or magazine one looked at, or opened or read. They all had the same screaming headline:

### CHLOE WEBSTER MURDERED

And in «Colors in the Night» Colin read:

«Chloe Webster is dead. Our esteemed investigative reporter died while pursuing leads on a story to be written for our magazine».

There was a picture of her, of an anonymous looking woman in her twenties. She had *something*. Colin could easily see that. Even on a bland black and white photo he saw the fire in her eyes...

But essentially, this described just another dead individual, another lowlife murder, nothing extraordinary at all.

Colin almost missed his stop. The door closed behind him the moment he put his feet on the ground. The irritated driver had threatened with closing the door in his face, «if such shite ever happened again». The bulldozer still went at it, and would continue doing so for at least a couple for hours more... before finally calling it a day. Its sound would eventually fade to a tiny buzz. Everything did. He had lived close to a

construction site once. The first few nights it had been quite impossible to get even a moment's sleep, but after a few nights he had slept like a baby. The bulldozer reminded Colin of the bus driver, even though he couldn't say exactly why. The house suddenly appeared, right there in front of him. Marion greeted him in the door and everything was great again. The outside world faded like the fucking nightmare it was.

She had made sandwiches. He smelled them, even from outside, and inside, in the hall, the scent of them was very distinctive in his nostrils. He smelled Marion, too, of course, like he did the entire day at work. But now it overwhelmed his senses, overloaded them, like a wall of fresh flowers a rainy day.

- How was your day?

He looked sharply at her. She always asked him that, and it did irritate him occasionally, but her smile always washed away any grumpy feeling he might have.

The kitchen, cold and small. The living room warm and open, light colored walls, soft carpet on the floor.

Dark, now, candles being the only lights in the room, two hours gone like magic.

The party started at eight sharp. Very few people arrived late, even fashionably late. The Friday parties at Dexter's had grown quite popular.

– This is our place, Marion greeted the guests. – Everything goes here.

She had dressed up in an outrageous outfit. The virtually transparent black cloth had ornaments of devils and crosses and pentacles and god knows what. Everybody new to the Dexter's stared. She enjoyed that. The others just shook their head. Her firm, heavy breasts pushed at the cloth, the dress that seemed more like a part of her body than anything distinct from it. That, and the way she moved made more people than Colin horny and dizzy.

All electrical lights had been turned off. Only candles lit the dark place. Colin could hardly see more than shadows around him. Faces, brighter than the dark-clothed bodies, seemed to float in and out of sight in the darkness, drifting as balloons in the breeze. He danced with Ethel Wharton, sort of. At least she pushed her body at his, and he remembered getting a large and painful hard-on, before pulling himself backwards, floating away from the fire-red face. He leaned against the wall, drying sweat from his forehead. And as he did so, he heard voices speak in the shadows, the soft darkness surrounding him, comments coming from nowhere, making no sense. He couldn't be certain there was anybody there at all. He heard the voices, but they could just as well be tape recorders.

– Mathematics is truly the linchpin of the Universe, she said, Marion said, with her arms around Carl.

There were several candles on the table, illuminating the immediate surroundings. Colin and Marion sat on the couch with their arms around each other. Then suddenly, he was out in the hall, where candles were rare and everything seemed like a long, black tunnel, and he could just about make out other human shapes in the darkness.

Colin and Marion sat in the sofa with their arms around each other. Ethel was talking. Her voice soft and full, her eyes twinkling in the firelight of the candles.

– Poe was right, she said. – All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

The sound of the words reverberated inside him. A strange echo in the room (the room had no echo).

– But that poem was nothing like the existential interpretation it has been given, Carl protested. – It was about his one-way love to a woman. His short time with her seemed like a dream. A silly love poem, that's all.

– Are you sure? Ethel crouched in the seat beside him, grinning wildly.

– It's about reality, another one said. – He wanted it to be solid, something he could grasp, at least for one moment in time. The moments were slipping away from him, at least all the good moments. He wanted, in his despair to save one, at least one from the roar of the eternal storm, one grain of sand from all those slipping through our fingers.

Colin sensed gooseflesh on his arm, huge as grains of sand. He looked at Marion, but she was busy conversing with Carl on her other side. He turned back to Ethel. She was snuggling with a man he didn't know. A big, powerful built man, which face he couldn't see, hidden behind Ethel's fire-colored curls.

– Ah, it's such a quiet place you got here, a girl sighed. – At least at night. It's like the world outside doesn't exist.

– Unfortunately it's just during the nights, Marion said. – The construction work down the road is certainly loud enough.

– There seems to be ongoing construction work everywhere these days, Sharon from work said, shaking her head. – I mean, there is *always* some construction work going on. Buildings and roads, and everything need to be constantly refurbished and upgraded, but lately the process of entropy seems to have gone into overdrive.

– Old Marlon Caine's haunt has certainly fallen into disrepair.

– Well, the historical society has kept it somewhat in shape.

– With a missing roof? You must be kidding. Out of shape, you mean?

Colin didn't really participate or even listen in on the conversation. Conversation and general details had never interested him much. He stood out there in the hall, surrounded by mirrors and shadows, blinking.

– Sleepy? He saw the silhouette of the firehair by the entrance table, a shimmering figure in the night.

– It's been a hard week, he nodded.

She held up an object, something twinkling in her hand.

– You found my ring, she exclaimed happily.

– It's yours? He sounded like an adolescent kid and knew it.

– Of course it's mine, you silly boy, it's always been mine.

A clock stroke midnight somewhere. Colin looked at his watch. He lifted a hand, a huge smile transforming his face.

He sat in the sofa with Marion by his side. Glasses were being filled. Bubbling fluid decorated the table and the furniture. He rose with his glass raised, before a gathering of candles, illuminating his flushed face.

– Marion and I, he began, interrupted by a loud cheer, looking down at her equally flushed face. – Marion and I have now been married for a year...

– A year filled with love and understanding, comradeship and challenges, he said, reaching out a hand.

She took it, rising with her own glass in the other hand, kissing him hotly on the lips, his sore lips.

Ethel lifted her own glass, standing in the shadows at the other side of the table.

– Good cheers to Colin and Marion, she cried, signaling with her free hand to the assembled party.

– GOOD CHEERS TO COLIN AND MARION, everybody cried, – MAY THEY LIVE LONG AND PROSPER

And they all drank. And the bubbles stirred his stomach in new and exciting ways the wine earlier during the evening hadn't been able to.

There was dance, and there was a lot of Champagne. And in the shadow he slept, and dreamed about the old castle on Marple Road. It was big. So big that the stairs went on and on upwards and downwards, into the sky, down below the Earth. He relived the old television programs with Marlon Caine, heard the man's insane mad shriek of a laughter echo in the tower of the castle, in its deepest depths.

He awoke on the couch the next morning with a splitting headache and in good spirits. Only a slight sweat revealed the existence of his intense dreams. Marion slept snoring by his side. He rose quickly, looking around, looking into the bedroom. The bed showed signs of having been used, but there was no one there now. All the guests had left, fortunately.

The house had fallen silent. The construction work down the road sounded muted and insignificant. He awoke in bed, with Marion snoring by his side. It was a quiet morning. No sounds, unfamiliar or not, disturbed the peace. He rose quietly without waking her, without even making her stir. He had long practice. She would like fresh bread for breakfast. She loved fresh bread for breakfast. He looked at the watch and then took a look out of the window, at the setting sun. Hmm, late afternoon already. He grinned.

There were still ten, fifteen minutes until the bus arrived. He took his time dressing, savoring every sense of cloth touching the skin. Outside, as he closed the door behind him, he breathed in the sharp air, the scent of spring. The lawn was green, but it had been green all winter. The trees were naked. They hadn't started growing leaves yet.

There was a crossroads close to the house. From there he was able to easily see the bus appearing from around the corner. There was no bus to be seen.

He stopped there, spotting something twinkling on the tarmac. He recognized it immediately as Ethel's ring. She had somehow managed to lose it once again.

*Take this, as a token of my love.*

He picked it up. When bending he experienced only the slightest sense of vertigo, but still regretting not starting early on the breakfast. Food was important after such wild nights as yesterday night. Everything started spinning, but he managed to rise to full height quite easily, and the dizziness faded fast enough. The bus... He realized with a start that it had passed him somehow, without him being aware of it. At that very moment he saw it slow down to a halt down the road, by the stop sign. He started walking faster, quickly breaking into a run. The queue, dreadfully short on Saturday afternoon disappeared into the bus. He reached the front door, just as it was about to close. By sheer luck he had exact change and put it into the greedy slot machine in front of the driver. The driver looked at him with more than a hint of suspicion and wrath. Why Colin couldn't say, and he didn't really care.

The driver stepped on the gas pedal, moving the bus out of the lane long before Colin and most of the other passengers, too, had found a seat. A man stumbled and almost fell, before managing to pull himself into a seat, using the next minutes drying sweat from his forehead. Colin sat in the front of the bus, where there were just old ladies, glaring suspiciously at him.

People, still tired after another hard week at work stared blindly ahead. Some stared out of the window, seeing nothing. There was a blandness in

their eyes making him turn shitty all over. He looked in the mirror at home to scout for the same signs in his own eyes. He did so often.

The relatively short trip to the shopping mall was as uneventful as ever. Nothing ever happened around here. Nothing in public. The driver kept staring at Colin as he disembarked the bus. One moment it looked like the man would rise from his seat, and give chase, but he remained. And Colin left, hurrying into the many comforts of the shopping mall.

Flowers, there were flowers everywhere. The entire mall stank of flowers and antiseptic junk. He saw Ethel by the big palm tree by the escalator. She waved and he waved back.

The walls... He frowned. The walls here changed color. Or... perhaps not color... but consistency.

Wind ruffled his hair. The walls... breathed on him.

He shook his head, in wonder, over all the bullshit thoughts rattling him lately.

The two of them embraced. Ethel kissed him on the cheek and he kissed her back. They went arm in arm up the escalator to the upper floor. The upper floor was dedicated to restaurants and cafés, the smell of coffee and spices almost overpowering him. She walked by his side, smiling brightly to his face. He caught himself at smiling back, wondering if this was the girl from his dreams.

He heard water flow from a tap somewhere. He couldn't tell from where. There was no restroom nearby. But he could hear the water, hear its flow, like a river in his mind. He kept shaking his head. Ethel didn't notice. There was a flow, a release, and the river became a waterfall. He pushed his hands at his ears, but it did him no good. The sound just kept flowing, and it hurt. And when it finally subsided it was still there, like an echo in his mind.

They sat down in a coffee bar. He tried not to glance too hard at all the strange people around him, the people suddenly filling the place, but he found it increasingly difficult. He wondered where they had all come from. He wondered a lot.

– So, how has your day been so far? Ethel asked brightly, staring openly at him with those deep, burning eyes of hers.

– Well, it started fairly *late*, so I haven't managed to do much yet, not even having breakfast.

– Neither have I, she said.

– Marion was still asleep when I left, so I thought I would surprise her with breakfast... on the bed.

– Nothing wrong with having breakfast twice one morning, Ethel said huskily.

And she smiled ever so sweetly to him, and he couldn't help returning the smile. He had always found her...refreshing.

She was a big woman, taller than most men he had met. The blond hair had a touch of red, of sunset, her skin a similar touch of brown, her lips more Slavic than not. She was a strange creature, and he liked her.

They ate. And it was as if all the other people in the room weren't there. He was aware of them, but they were more like window dressing, like unmoving mannequins. They didn't give away any sound, didn't move or disturb the conversation in any way.

– I must say one thing about you guys, she said excitedly. – You know how to throw a party.

– Thank you, he replied, not really hearing the sound of his own voice.

– From the declaration of «Do what thou wilt» to the deep philosophical discussions. You don't experience that in many parties these days.

– One doesn't, does one? He nodded briefly, before once more being caught in her deep eyes, before another thought struck him. – Who was it that explained Poe?

– I thought I did, she grinned. You won't seriously claim that Carl did, will you?

– No. no, after you, after you both. There was someone...

– I can't recall anybody else. Carl got insulted and left, and that was it. She shrugged.

– It was a pretty wild night, after all.

She bent slightly forward, taking his hands in hers, her eyes shining like black stars.

– I love wild...

He pulled back a little. She did, too, smiling in regret.

– I forgot something, he said, shaking his head again. – I can't believe I forgot.

He stuck his hand in the pocket, pulling up its content. Her eyes widened.

– You lost your ring again.

She looked at him with a sobering smile. She took the ring, looking closer at it.

– It's very beautiful, but it's not mine.

She returned it to him with a regretful smile.

– But you...

He hesitated, suddenly wondering if it had truly been her that night at the party. Oh, she had been there, all right, but he realized with a start that he had never seen the face of the girl claiming ownership of the ring.

– You found the ring somewhere? She asked curiously. – You actually found it?

– Just outside the house. One of the guests must have lost it.

– I didn't see it on anyone. She shook her head. – And I can't imagine it actually belonging to anybody present last night. I mean we're a loose bunch, but not that loose. And not that rich...

She inspected it from afar, as he kept holding it up.

– What *is* that stone? She wondered incredulously.

She smiled to him again, and once more he drowned in that smile.

– I *do* wish it was mine, she sighed.

They kissed each other goodbye, and parted. She waved and he waved back, more than a bit relieved.

The man behind the desk spoke a lot, as usual. He was one of those people who had been given a machinegun mouth as a gift at birth, and he never failed to take advantage of that fact.

– I saw her, you know.

– Who did you see? Colin asked, not really interested.

– Chloe Webster, the salesman said, almost proudly. – The very night she was killed.

– I would gather a lot of people saw her...

– Not that night, no. No one else saw, according to the police officers questioning me. Except for the killer, that is.

Suddenly the guy looked anxious, as if he had revealed something or had said too much, or he, unbelievably enough was afraid Colin would suspect him.

– She was killed far away from there, he said hastily. – Several hours later.

Colin just looked at him. Motormouth coughed and died. No more gas.

Colin Dexter looked at the driver on the bus on his way back. He made a point of looking at him. It wasn't the same guy, he was fairly certain of that fact, but he saw that... flash in the eyes of the guy causing him to not be hundred percent sure. There, there it was again. He drew breath, suddenly feeling a strong urge to breathe, a need for air.

– Are they *ever* gonna complete that crossroads work, a guy two seats behind him said to his companion. – I feel like they have kept at it for years.

– Try centuries, the other guy replied, shaking his head.

A lot of people were evidently shaking their heads these days.

– You see, that's exactly what I am talking about, the first guy continued. – They have kept it going for so long, now, that I don't know what I will do if they finally stop. Perhaps I have grown so used to it that

I will never be able to sleep in peace and quiet again. I fear I will go crazy, and that they will lock me up somewhere.

– What *are* you talking about? His buddy said.

– Am I talking? I wasn't aware that I was talking.

And then, a few minutes later:

– It's these bus drives. They're driving me nuts. I swear the bus is changing routes several times a week. I *swear*.

For some reason Colin looked at his watch.

## 07.02

It said.

He figured he had wasted at least 90 minutes with Edith. If he hadn't he and Marion would already have been half through the breakfast, and they would have started on the long, eventful, joyful evening.

The sun had set. A red glare darkened the horizon. Everywhere else was cast into the big shadow. The front lights of the bus hardly seemed sufficient for the task of brightening the road ahead. The construction workers had taken the weekend off. The road looked like it hadn't been worked on at all. An argument had broken out in the back of the bus, quickly ending in a wild exchange of blows and curses. Then silence. With luck they had knocked each other unconscious and wouldn't awake for quite a while.

Colin left the bus. It stopped at the stop for once. Colin left the bus. He walked the short stretch to the driveway.

There were a lot of cars ahead... in his driveway?

A lot of police cars.

It even covered the turn ahead.

He spotted a lot of spectators outside the yellow ribbons, the ones that said:

### CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

He reached the gate to the driveway. The entire path to the house was lit by blinking red and blue lights.

– What is going on here? He cried out to the two guards.

– Police business, sir, one said politely, – move along please.

– I MUST get in there.

– I'm afraid that's not possible, sir... And then, after a short hesitation. – Who are you?

– My name is Colin Dexter. I live here. What has happened here?

The two exchanged glances, and then stepped aside.

– Please, come with us, sir.

Two other uniformed cops took their place, as they were escorting Colin to the house. He looked around as if he couldn't believe what he saw. Red

and blue lights turned everywhere, turned round and round in an insane dance.

– Why are you here? He insisted. – What has happened? Is it something in the neighborhood? Are you in all the houses?

But he saw that they weren't. He saw curious neighbors everywhere outside the police line, the red and blue yellow ribbons, and a terrible sense of apprehension cursed through him.

– Just come inside with us, sir.

A man, obviously the man in charge waited inside the door. His face was drawn. Colin recognized the face immediately. Not the man, but the face, of one who had seen too much, too many times.

– I am Lieutenant Elliott Lasko. The man extended his hand. – I'm in charge of the investigation.

Colin took the hand reflexively, suddenly finding it very difficult to breathe.

– The investigation? He exhaled in pain.

Lasko changed expression, evidently making a decision.

– Hell, there is never any easy way to say this... It's your wife, sir. I'm afraid she has been murdered.

– Are you insane? Colin protested weakly. – Are you sure? You don't know my wife, do you? Can't it just be someone that looks like her?

– I'm afraid there is little doubt, sir. She has been identified, positively identified by several neighbors. Will you come with me, please?

– Positively identified? Colin wondered dumbfounded. He wondered about that phrase, wondered a lot.

He was led further into the house, further into the Inferno, through the kitchen, into the living room.

And there, on the carpet he saw what made all blood, all blood leave his body. There was nothing but frozen ice left.

The body of Marion Dexter, of a strange, horribly alien Marion Dexter lay there on the carpet, in a pool of blood. He looked at the knife sticking out of her chest, her lovely bosom, her lovely body frozen there on its spot. It wasn't Marion at all, but some look-alike pretender.

He looked around the living room. Everything was in place. Everything was neat and compartmentalized, as it usually was. Everything was in place... except for the body on the carpet.

– I was... out, he said slowly, – buying breakfast. Marion loves fresh bread for breakfast

He turned to the Detective.

– Who did this? He cried out. – Do you have him, have him in custody?

– We don't know yet, sir, Lasko said, gritting his teeth, – but we will.

Colin Dexter sat down, right there on the spot. Coincidentally there was a chair right behind him. He crouched on it, doing his best to hide as much of his face as he possibly could with his small palms, his shaking hands. He wanted to scream, but couldn't. Colin Dexter had lost his voice.