

a foggy night in london town

by Cameron Balloons

"It was a drak and stromy night, and all about the wintry city" – I sighed, and hurled the freshly-typed manuscript into the bin. This had gone far enough.

"Roberta Scratchit!" I yelled, stamping through to the unheated, uncarpeted hallway we optimistically called our reception-area, where I discovered the aforementioned Ms Scratchit crouched low over the office toaster, hindquarters aglow, "I've had enough. You're a lovely woman, you make a damn fine cup of coffee, you use the colour-photocopier like it was an extension of your own body, and if it ever came to wrestling naked for money in a Bangkok bawdy-house, I'd back you all the way – but when it comes to typing up dictation, you're about as much use as a dyslexic baboon in oven-mitts."

"It's not my fault", she moaned, as beneath her the toaster pinged and two well-singed

pop-tarts popped tartily buttockwards, "you *know* I can't hear as well as I used to. It's an industrial injury. By rights, I should sue."

"Getting the dictaphone muddled with your walkman does *not* constitute an industrial injury. I also object to everybody on the 59 bus now knowing exactly what I think of Steven Wells, given you left it lying on the floor while you ran screaming to the driver – some of them might even be his friends, he must have some somewhere, and the top-deck of a bus in south London between 9am and 5pm is more likely a place than most. But you're missing my point: I'm fed up, you hear? – fed up with my words constantly ending up garbled or even – on one memorably expensive occasion, for which I'm still paying off the monumental mason in monthly instalments, as I'm sure I don't need to remind you – marbled. We can't go on like this – how are people going to be touched, moved, shaken and stirred by my life-story if even *I'm* never sure what I'm saying, or whether or not I'm coming or glowing. Ah, you see what I mean??? Imagine if that had happened at a signing-session in Borders. No, I know it's nearly Christmas, but I'm afraid enough is enough. I'm kicking you out onto

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the streets. I'm sure you'll survive, a great big sturdy lardy-limbed woman like you."

She rose in silence, gathered her things, and walked to the door. And then she turned her head, pointed a bony finger – one of her requests when she'd first started working for me had been to ask if she could personalise her desk with favourite items from her late father's extensive collection of second-hand body-parts, her father having mysteriously gone missing one evening on the way back from the newsagents, it seemed – and said, in a voice that would've chilled a freshly prepared roast-beef platter in seconds without losing any of the taste or goodness: "I will have my revenge."

Like holl you woll, I muttered.



Chapter One

It was a dark and stormy night, and all about the wintry city the wind was doing its worst. And then, feeling pretty pleased and smug with itself, in the way only a really high-profile, A-list celebrity-status just-out-of-rehab style wind can – and this was a wind which had been puffed up and fluffed out of all proportion by all the top BBC forecasters – it was doing its second and third-worst too, just because it could. It was, to be blunt, rather full of itself.

It was also rather full of rain. In the street outside our office, the muck-splattered headlamps of homebound cars peered blearily through the murk like the eyes of giant sad cats, fidgety for fireside pouffes, while the oil-slicked tarmac glistened blue and green, as if recently re-paved with a freezerful of freshly caught trout. Newspapers flapped and fluttered, gusting up past the just-shuttered shopfronts and fluttering rapidly gutterwards before swooping suddenly earthwards again like Chinese fighting kites whose razor-flecked

strings have just caught round the necks of runaway toddlers. And under creaking streetlamps, disconsolate huddles of men and beasts shook hands or hoofs and hurried home, each muttering to the other in damp and thwarted tones that this really wasn't a fit night for either of them, and that they'd try again in the New Year.

"A merry Christmas, sir!" called a passing urchin, his duffel-coat toggled tight, his rotund face glowing ruddily.

"And what right have you to be so merry?" I spat, double-locking the office-door behind me and stepping out gingerly into the maelstrom.

"And what right have you to be so dismal?" he spat back gaily. "You're your own boss, you run an epoch-defining record-label with a nifty sideline in disagreeable literature, you must be raking it in. Don't be so morose!"

"Morose? Morose??? But what else can I be, when I live in such a world of fools? For what's Christmas but a time for shops to stack their tackily tinselled racks with Blur compilations instead of Cody albums, for NME to double its price and pad out its pages with the puerile pontifications and pitiful

nonsensities of witless nonentities instead of Fosca reviews, and for small one-man businesses to balance their books and prove beyond all unreasonable doubt that everyone really does prefer The Field Mice to any of the new stuff?"

"Well, I'm sure *I've* always thought of Christmas-time as a good time – a kind, forgiving, charitable and pleasant time, when men, women and journalists open their shut-up hearts freely and think of others as if all were truly fellow passengers to the grave. Speaking of which, do you still need your Travelcard? Being a fully unpaid-up member of the Napster Generation, I don't see why I should pay for using public transport when someone else will do it for me. I'll swap you a Belle & Sebastian badge?"

Cuffing his optimistic young face playfully with the back of a handy brick, I continued on my way up the high-street towards the tube-station. Here I bought a Kit-Kat and a copy of *Time Out*, and passed an agreeable couple of hours declaiming deftly memorised excerpts from the *Lonely Hearts* and *Once Seen* columns to some of the more vulnerable-looking commuters on the Circle Line, falling to my knees imploringly before them – somewhat in the style of the young Marlon Brando in *Streetcar Named Desire* – then running out sobbing when the train next stopped. When this amusement finally palled, I returned to ground level, ate a melancholy meal in the Burger King at King's Cross, and caught the bus back to Vauxhall.

By now the wind had swaggered off home to put its feet up, and silently into its place had slipped a thick damp fog, flopping across the lit-up city like a dank and mouldy blanket dropping onto a pile of shiny-eyed new-born pups in an exposed hill-top barn. Crossing Lambeth Bridge, the bus slowed to a nervous crawl. Somewhere below us the Thames slunk seawards, cold and invisible. And stretching away to left and right, the lights along Albert Embankment were mere fuzzy haloes, like a line of urinating saints in an unlit bathroom espied from outside through a high frosted window, or the lights at the wrong end of a smoky snug at the hazy close of a very good evening indeed. Two stops further on I rang the bell, got off, and crossed over into the China Walk Estate. "Christmas," I muttered to a rather flustered-looking reindeer galloping full pelt along Lambeth Road in the direction of the Elephant and Castle, casting anxious glances skywards as it went, "who needs it, eh?"

By the time I'd reached my front-door, the fog had thickened to such an unwholesome soupiness that I was hard-pushed to see two feet in front of my face; indeed, it was only as I was already fumbling for my keys that I finally registered their clumpily booted presence, one hanging either side of the white-enamelled number and knocker – well, I *say* "hanging", but that's really not quite the word, for while the scuffed and battered toe-caps pointed upwards at the porch, the legs to which they were most assuredly attached dropped like drainpipes towards the step. The whole ensemble was, in short, upside-down.

But, curious though this was, even more curious was the fact that, in substance, both boots and legs appeared... somewhat less than substantial. Indeed, as my eyes travelled the length of the apparition's inverted form, I could see at every point quite clearly the painted wood of the door behind – not to mention the letter-box, bell-push, knob and – oh dear God! I reeled back in horror, for my gaze, reaching a point some twelve inches above the step, had at last fallen upon the chin-topped face of this dreadful phantom, superimposed rather neatly upon the catflap – a pale, ghostly, other-wordly face, slightly unshaven – although that could just have been the draughtproofing – that filled me at once with an ill-concocted cocktail of dread, bewilderment and vertigo. "Good Lord," I exclaimed, unable to help myself, "it's Alan McGee! And he's clearly back on the drugs." But, before I could gather my thoughts, or get him to autograph the battered 7" copy of Biff Bang Pow!'s *Love's Going Out Of Fashion* I carry with me at all times, the image began to fade, and suddenly the cat-flap was just a cat-flap again.

Shaking like a hungry OAP who's just run out of 50p's for the meter, I stabbed my key clumsily into the lock, staggered awkwardly into the darkened passageway beyond, and then stumbled upwardly to the door of my second-floor flat. Once safely inside, with the door slammed shut behind me, I slipped the chain into its slot, and double-locked the mortice. And then, not caring to sample any more of this particular night's delights, I retired to bed.

My sleep, however, was fitful. That weird, wan face, flapping to and fro at my feet, kept floating past the uncurtained windows of my dreams. What could it mean? Was it some kind of message and, if so, how was I to understand its import? Somewhere out across the fog-fingered rooftops and chimneypots a clock began to strike, twelve eerily muffled chimes. Midnight. Christmas Day. Stricken with a sudden morbid fear of I knew not what, I lay trembling in the darkness, duvet pulled up to my chin, listening to the steady tick, tick, tick of the trainee teacher in the flat downstairs doing some late-night marking.

And then, from somewhere further off, I heard another sound – a sound of such

desolating awfulness that my blood seemed instantly to freeze in my veins – a dreadful, distorted, unearthly wailing and screeching, as if all the evil spirits in the world had just got together to form an informal post-rock ensemble and then started improvising in our cellar. But – even worse than that – it was getting louder. Or perhaps – and here I sensed my neck-hair bristle like a Persian kitten held up to a TV screen – it was simply getting nearer.

As if by way of confirmation, I now heard, beneath the appalling din, the dull thump of what I was sure were footsteps, clumping ponderously upwards on the bare wood of the stairs. And yet... if so, then what strange, lop-sided steps they were! – first one light, then one heavy – almost as if the creature that was – dear God! – even now lurching slowly across the landing towards my bedroom door – possessed some awful deformity of the foot or leg causing it to limp, or even – and here I found myself starting to doubt my own sanity, and a strange chill chased across my skin, as if a bag of frozen peas had just broken open under the duvet – as if it was having to stop after each staggering step and lug a guitar-amp along after it.

But, alas, the time for such whimsical conjecture had long-since gone, for the steps had not ceased at my door, but passed straight through, and now before me stood a hideous and contorted figure, shaggy and unspeakable, and without thinking I found myself crying out "I know you! I know you! You're... hang on, don't tell me, it'll come to me in a minute... you're... you're Kevin Shields!"

And he was. I felt the chilling influence of his cold dead eyes. I saw his lips move, but could make out not a single intelligible word above the relentlessly tuneless racket. It was almost as if his voice was simply another instrument, rather than a means of communicating useful information. "This is no good," I yelled, clutching my pillows to my ears, "you're just wasting everybody's time. It's just noise. Anyone could do it given enough studio-time and effects pedals. It's not big, and it's not clever, it's just a bloody row. Send me someone I can talk to, you bloody shoegazing hippy." But on hearing my words he simply shook his guitar with even greater pointlessness, making such a dismal and appalling noise that I was forced to pull the duvet high up over my head, for fear I would giggle. And when I looked again, he had gone, and in his place stood the figure of McGee, now thankfully the right way up.

"Thank God," I said, "now perhaps we'll get some sense. First, though, Alan, tell me this – why have you got all those Primal Scream records tied to your foot?"

"I wear the chain I forged in life," he said (you can do the accent yourself), "I made it link by link and yard by yard. You see – my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of running a critically-acclaimed, hugely successful, multi-million pound multi-national multi-media empire. I lived a life of untold riches, untamed sex, untempered happiness and untampered-with drugs but – by God, man, have you ever actually *listened* to any of these things? I mean, *Higher Than The Sun* was pretty good, and everyone likes

Velocity Girl because it fills up the odd minute-and-a-half left at the end when you're making a compilation tape, but the rest... Jesus!"

"Even the ones with gratuitous rock'n'roll apostrophes like *Movin' On Up* and *Struttin'*? I'm afraid it never actually occurred to me to listen to any of them. I just used to read about them in the papers."

"Especially those. And ever since then – the release of *Give Out But Don't Give Up*, to be precise – I've been paying the price. But I'm here now to warn you that you have a chance of avoiding my fate. So listen carefully, because I'll say this only once, and then I may self-destruct – it wouldn't be the first time. Tonight you will be haunted by three spirits. Without their visits, you cannot hope to shun the path I tread. Expect the first spirit when the bell tolls one. And the second when the bell tolls two. And the third at twenty past four."

"Twenty past four?"

"No, at three. I was just checking you were still paying attention. Now, before I depart, I have something to show you. Come."

He began walking slowly backwards across the floor towards the window, beckoning me

with a deeply unambiguous finger as he went; and at every step he took the curtains parted and the window raised itself a little, so that by the time he had crossed the room, both were open wide. He motioned me to approach and, as I did, I gradually became aware of a weird cacophony of confused noises in the air outside – incoherent sounds of lamentation and regret, and wailings inexpressibly sorrowful and self-accusatory. I gripped the sill with shaking hands, and looked out. And – oh! – what a sight it was that confronted my poor bewildered eyes! For the cold damp air was filled with phantoms, all wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and all of them moaning as they went. And, like McGee, each and every one wore around its ankle, like the tail of a kite, a chain of CDs, LPs, cassettes and minidiscs.

"My God," I whispered, "is that Tony Wilson over there, up by the chimney?"

"Indeed. And see, over yonder in the jumper and beard – Richard Branson."

"The Lord have mercy. And who are those two – Tweedledum and Tweedledee – floating past the drainpipe just below?"

"That's Mr Warner. And his brother."

"And down there, wafting about in the gutter – are those the people who run the Jeepster, Setanta and Duophonic labels?"

"No, I think those are bin-bags. Sorry, I knocked the dustbins over on my way in."

"And – "

But now my companion held up his hand to silence me. And then, letting out a piteous howl of utter desolation and despair, he rose up and floated out of the window into the bleak, dark night, his pitiful moaning soon quite indistinguishable from the others' doleful, dreadful dirge, rather in the way that most of the later Creation releases were quite indistinguishable from the doleful, dreadful Teenage Fanclub.

I hauled the window shut and drew the curtains. Then I looked at the clock by my bed. Midnight. *Still* midnight??? How strange. And a whole hour until the first spirit was due. I toyed with nipping out to the all-night Texaco garage on Kennington Road for a Kit-Kat, then thought better of it, and went back to bed. Christmases had never been like this when I was a child...

Chapter 2 will be posted on the Shinkansen website at www.shink.dircon.co.uk/carrot.htm, sometime round the end of April...