

# FERAL COMPANIONS

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# RATTUS

Simon Maginn

## *One*

“**N**ew people over the road,” I say, and Triin comes over to look. We see a large white van blocking the street. A scrawny, scratchy-looking woman is struggling with a box which is clearly too heavy for her: she is trying to shift the weight onto her raised knee, but the whole effort looks about to collapse. A man appears at her back, effortlessly relieves her of the box and shoulders his way through the front door. His face is like a fist, his fists are like boots, his boots would hurt you.

“Looks like a nightclub bouncer,” Triin says, and I say “Hm, funny but I never thought of bouncers as having houses. Do you think he stands outside at night not letting himself in?”

He does indeed look like a bouncer. Not only has he the man-mountain profile, the shaved head, the monumental neck, the broken nose, but also the uniform: shiny zip-up jacket (black), trousers that look as if they come out of a catalogue and have a high polyester content (black), tie (black), great big boots (black) and white shirt, every seam straining to contain him. He looks as if he were about to attend a funeral, perhaps of a minor gangland figure, a dry-eyed bleached-blond matriarch on his arm as he manhandles the photographers out of her way.

He reappears at the door and, sidling past the increasingly helpless woman, who is now scrabbling about with some plastic

bags, hoists a vast TV onto his shoulder and shoves his way back in. Later I see them sitting in the cab of the hire van, she is looking straight ahead, her hair scraped back into a pony tail. She looks as if she is speaking out of the corner of her mouth, not looking at him. I can't see his face. She is smoking, her movements are short and somehow bitter.

Our street is of mixed character. Although the area as a whole has 'come up' enormously over the five years or so I have lived here, there are still standouts from the coffee-shop/estate agent/art gallery uniformity. The pubs on the corners, no matter how frequently remodelled and renamed, remain occupied by ghosts, seemingly, of less prosperous decades, solitary men of no clear age sitting lonely all day over their pints and gazing out at the go-getters and wealth-creators striding past. They look as indifferent as zoo animals, fathoms deep. There are a lot of what Triin (she originates, murkily, in Estonia) calls 'mentals': drunks, addicts, homeless, the usual. It is, technically, part of Hove, but you would wait a long time to see a blue-rinse or a Pekingese. Our street is short but surprisingly busy, especially at night, when people roam up and down it breaking off the wing mirrors from the BMWs and smashing bottles and going "Oi Mitch, *Mitch* ya cunt!" Triin has found syringes in next door's stair well, which she has shown me triumphantly, as if this somehow vindicated her in everything she'd ever said. There is an extraordinary amount of shouting at night. Many of the houses have been done up in line with TV makeover show orthodoxy and are rented out as flats to shadowy, harrassed-looking individuals who move on in six months time.

Mostly, people look worried.

The struggling woman has gone inside; I can see her now at an upstairs sash window which she is trying, vainly, to open. He stands behind her, his enormous arms wrapping her up, and they both gaze out roughly in the direction of where I am standing at my window watching them. I notice the texture of her skin, pock-marked, tightly stretched. He muzzles her ear. They, of course,

have no curtains yet.

“Aaaaah, look,” says Triin. “He is just like a great big teddy bear.”

“You think?”

“Nice company for you. While I’m away,” she says, and I try to take it as a joke, but we both know things can go wrong for me when she’s not here. It’s happened before. She’ll be gone for at least three months this time. I’m trying not to think about it.

In a street like ours you inevitably get to see bits and pieces of your neighbours’ lives, particularly when they haven’t got their curtains up yet (actually louvred blinds are more the thing round here). So it doesn’t at all mean that I have them under any kind of organised surveillance if I say that I saw a few other things later that night, culminating in him, stripped now to the waist, with the scrawny woman kneeling in front of him. I could see the reflectivity of the window changing as the pressure against it fluctuated.

‘Teddy bear’ was not the expression that suggested itself to me.

# THE INVISIBLE ARCHITECT OF PSYCHOPATHY

Gary Fry

*One*

“**H**e’s such a nice boy,” said Mum’s friend in the sitting room, and she sounded surprised.

Kyle had just come downstairs and was loitering in the hallway. Having showered for innumerable frantic minutes, he was about to leave for a lecture at university. He’d dressed in a clean shirt – despite her ‘problem’, Mum never let him down with the washing – and he’d been wondering whether he should go into town later to buy something new to wear when he’d overheard this comment. He liked learning new things about himself. The psychology degree had taught him that this was how everyone developed an identity.

“I know. I’m very...lucky,” Mum replied, but to Kyle’s profound disappointment she added nothing more than a rattle of metal. Of course: her injection was due. More recently the diabetes had grown worse, and since Dad was rarely home (despite collecting the drugs from the pharmacist with whom he frequently socialised), Kyle had often been asked to help with the needle.

He didn’t relish that today: touching her flesh felt weird somehow; he was nineteen and had a girlfriend, Belinda... In fact he guessed this was why the comment from the visitor had disturbed him. What he planned to do to Belinda this afternoon wasn’t ‘nice’ at all. It actually made him very nervous.

Pitched into confusion and animated by unruly thoughts, he tiptoed back up the steps, the better to marshal himself before

being exposed to the world at large. Yes, he'd go shopping after his lecture and in preparation for the final rehearsal this week at the local playhouse. Charlie, who was playing the sexy siren Liz in the amateur production of *Billy Liar*, would be there. Kyle needed to look his best if he wanted to bait such a potentially fine catch.

He paced into his parents' bedroom, sighing at the utter disorder that surrounded him. Much of this was Dad's detritus, of course. Kyle must have inherited his Mum's tidiness gene, since his own room was spotless, and so was he, always. At any rate, by standing on the plush mattress (nothing but the best for the Rawson family!) he was able to access the suitcase on top of the wardrobe.

Kyle wasn't sure whether his Dad knew that an occasional handful of notes often went missing from his stash of everyday funds, but there was plenty. The odd twenty pounds here, thirty there, wouldn't be missed. In the event, however, Kyle took forty. Perhaps he'd summon enough courage to ask Charlie out for a date *tonight*. He'd take her somewhere special – somewhere maybe her own parents from the posh detached on the other side of the town had visited.

However, Kyle knew he had a worrying task to complete before that was possible. Belinda. Chubby little girl. He'd begun seeing her before he'd known anything about himself. Such was life. He was indeed a nice boy, but he must let down his fellow student, and he wondered how he might do so without compromising his burgeoning, desirable identity.

He dropped to the carpet and suddenly caught sight of himself in the bedside mirror.

*You're a good lad*, he said, though perhaps only in his mind, since the lips of his reflection didn't move. *You're nice. All of you.*

Then he folded away the notes in his wallet, which bore his student ID card, presumably to remind him who he was.