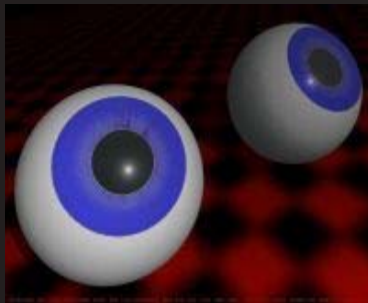




**Insanity
Never
Sleeps**



by

Anthony Hulse

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The shoddy garden shed was his cocoon, his escape from reality. His icy breath was evidence to the cruel wintry conditions, as he fingered his scrapbook. Another pair of eyes was removed from the magazine, the scissors skilfully manoeuvring their way through the glossy edition. He carefully pasted the eyes into his scrapbook and smiled a gleeful contented smile.

He picked up the photograph of his mother and his mood quickly changed, tears replacing the joy. The snapshot was held close to his quivering chest as he sobbed. He snapped off the top on his aspirin bottle and swallowed three tablets, his ever-worsening migraines invading his private world.

He overcame his grief and left his secret haven, his shrine to his beloved mother. The large padlock was snapped into place before he trundled along the long snow covered path, locking his rusty gate behind him.

As he exited the allotment, he whistled the tune, his tune.

“Knock, knock, knocking on heaven’s door.”

“Billy, where’ve you been or need I ask? You spend more time down that bloody allotment than you do at home. You’ll have to do your own tea; I’m meeting the lasses at seven.”

“You have a good time pet.”

“By the way, there’s a couple of letters for you on the table; frigging bills no doubt.”

Pat Woods was an attractive raven-haired woman. Even at the age of thirty-four she could still attract the attention of the young studs and usually did. Infidelity was her middle name. Her sexual appetite needed regular nourishment, something Billy could no longer fulfil.

Since the death of his father some six months ago and his mother shortly afterwards, Billy had lost all interest in sex. The Woods household had not been a happy house as debt after debt mounted up, which added to the tension. Billy’s migraines had started not long after the death of his parents.

Billy had a good job, the pay was generous but still they struggled. Pat would spend money on anything that took her eye, usually the latest fashions. It hadn’t always been like this. They had been married thirteen years after Pat had fallen pregnant with the twins; it had seemed like a good idea at the time.

They made a handsome couple, Billy standing at six-feet tall, his brown wavy hair and piercing blue eyes attracted much attention from the opposite sex, but as always, he resisted the temptation. The same could not be said of his unfaithful bride.

Pat wore the trousers in the Woods household and everyone knew it. As stocky and impressive a figure as he was, Billy was no match for Pat’s temper and her foul mouth. There was a time when she loved Billy and stayed loyal to him, but three months after they married she broke her vows. Billy was possibly the only person in Middlesbrough who knew nothing of her gallivanting.

He slumped in his armchair watching his wife applying her usual heavy black mascara, before powdering her cheeks. That was what had attracted Billy to her, the high cheekbones and that bushy raven hair. He inspected his wife, her low-cut red top and short leather skirt belonged to a woman from another era, but Pat being Pat, she could get away with wearing such clothes. She had kept her marvellous child-like figure after all these years.

“Where you going luv?”

“Out with the lasses, it’s Friday isn’t it?”

“You know there’s a union meeting tomorrow don’t you?”

“No, what’s that about then?”

“I dunno, they’ve called an emergency meeting.”

“Well let’s hope it’s nothing serious.”

She kissed the twins before departing, interrupting their game. Billy foraged in the fridge and opened a cold can of beer. He had no appetite for food as his head throbbed. Michael and Jimmy fought for possession of the keypad.

“Cut that out you two, I’m not in the mood for this.”

He stared at the unopened letters as his curiosity got the better of him. The red telephone bill was for one hundred and twelve pounds. If that wasn’t bad enough, the credit card bill was for three hundred and five pounds.

Billy held his head in his hands. How could she have spent so much? He swallowed another three aspirins along with a mouthful of beer.

“Dad, can we have a PC for Christmas? Bobby Dawson’s getting one.”

“Not now Jimmy, I’m going to lie down for an hour.”

He marched slowly up the staircase, holding his pounding head, unaware that he was slowly losing his mind.

The four sparsely dressed women welcomed the warmth of the Lion and Falcon lounge. Outside, the heavy smattering of snow promised a white Christmas, which was only two weeks away.

Numerous male eyes devoured the four middle-aged tipsy women as they made their way to the crowded bar. Pat squeezed her way to the front much to the annoyance of the other revellers.

“Two Tia Maria’s and two Black Russians please Romeo.”

“Excuse me, there’s a queue here,” complained a bespectacled thin man.

“Is there really Tarzan? Now piss off!”

Pat held her middle finger up at him as she applied ice to the drinks.

“Hey Pat, what would you do with them?” asked the redheaded Tina, lighting a cigarette.

“Fucking jailbait girl.”

“I’ll do time for them,” joined in Liz.

Pat scowled at Liz; she detested her, mainly because she lusted openly after Billy. Liz was good looking and pulled as often as Pat, which she resented. Liz and her husband Leo were known to be swingers. They had even approached her and Billy at a party once. Pat had been tempted but Billy would have none of it. Pat turned her eyes away from the leering Liz and looked towards the object of her attention.

A good-looking fair-haired lad was smiling at Pat. If you could rape someone with your eyes, then he ought to have been locked up. Pat sat on the stool and ensured her skirt rode even further up her thighs, revealing a glimpse of her stockings.

She ran her tongue provocatively over her moist red lips and pouted at her admirer.

“Bloody hell you’ve scored there lass,” commented the blonde-haired Sue jealously.

“I’m just popping to the loo, I’m short of rubbers, get the drinks in.”

Pat faced the cracked mirror and checked her make-up before turning to the condom machine.

“It’s your lucky night tonight girl,” she said to herself.

Liz looked towards Pat as she returned from the ladies room, a contented smirk adorning her pretty features.

“Looks like lover boy was teasing you Pat, they’ve pissed off.”

The raven-haired temptress looked to where the young Adonis had been sitting and shrugged her shoulders.

“The night is young girls, the night is young.”

The women scurried into the Red Lion to be greeted by a pot-bellied man belting out his rendition of “*My Delilah*.” This was definitely not *Tom Jones*.

“A Karaoke, how about it girls?” enthused Tina.

She added her name to the list and the women headed for the ladies room.

Liz adjusted her bosom as the others brushed their hair.

“God I feel horny tonight,” commented Pat.

“How’s Billy nowadays, still got droopy cock?”

“Yeah, been about six months now Tina.”

“Lucky cow! I wish our Frankie would get droopy cock, he won’t leave it in his trousers.”

“Well if you get tired of it girl, throw him my way would you? I’m on heat.”

“So we’ve noticed,” scowled Liz.

The ladies returned to the smoky atmosphere of the lounge and a bald-headed man holding the microphone beckoned them over.

“And now ladies and gentlemen, the act you’ve all been waiting for. It’s Tina and the girls with *Dancing Queen*. Let’s give them a rousing reception folks.”

All heads turned as Tommy Briggs entered the room. He was an intimidating figure at six-foot-four inches tall and had the build to match. His shaved head and goatee beard made him instantly recognisable, along with the broken nose he had acquired in his amateur boxing days. Tommy and his two brothers were legends in Teesside. They were into anything not legal, from drugs to dodgy security firms.

His companions were Marty Cox, a prematurely grey-haired pot-bellied figure and Ginger Joe Norton. Marty and Joe, like Billy, were steelworkers. They never usually frequented with Briggsy but had bumped into him in the St Joseph's social club. Briggsy had requested their presence on a pub-crawl, and who were they to argue with the fearsome giant?

"Shit, isn't that Billy's missus?" quizzed Marty looking towards Joe.

"Yeah, it sure is. I'd give her one, just look at those legs."

Briggsy watched with interest. "So that's Billy's missus eh?"

"Yeah, poor bastard's minding the kids while she's out flaunting herself," added Joe.

The four giggling women walked off the stage to a crescendo of applause and wolf-whistles. Briggsy strode towards the girls, the crowded floor parting for him as though it was the Red Sea.

"So you're Mrs Billy eh?"

Pat turned to face the giant, her eyes lighting up, as she looked him up and down.

"Well, you must be Tommy Briggs are you? How's it hanging big boy? I've heard so much about you."

"You three, piss off!" he barked at the girls.

It was not a request but an order.

"What's your name love?"

"Pat."

"Well Pat, I've a proposition to put to you."

Pat smiled, Tommy Briggs was not handsome with his broken nose and battle scarred features but he was large, and that's how she liked her men.

"Your Billy owes me thirty quid from last week. His deadline has passed. Tell him when I see him I'm going to break his fucking arm. That's after I take the money back of course."

"He owes you thirty sovs? He's said nothing to me. What's this proposition you were about to make?"

"You come outside with me and give us a blow job."

"Piss off! What type of girl do you think I am?"

"Judging by your clothes, a slut."

"Cheeky bastard. You'll get your money back don't worry. And don't you touch our Billy."

"It's too late for that," snarled Briggsy as he wandered back to his friends.

"What did he want Pat?" asked Sue.

"You don't want to know luv; you don't want to know."

Three Black Russians later, Pat escorted Briggsy to the rear of the Red Lion. The snow had ceased but the bitter cold wind still bit at their faces. Briggsy put his coat on the ground as Pat knelt before him. To the music of "*John Lennon's Imagine*," Billy's debt was paid in full.

Billy felt coldness in his loins as he stirred from a deep slumber. He felt a hand inside his shorts.

“Pat, what’re you doing, I’m trying to sleep?”

“What do you think I’m doing lover? Come on Billy; get hard, just for me.”

“I’m not in the mood Pat. Leave me alone.”

“Come on baby, I’m hot for it,” she said as she stroked him.

Her breath reeked of alcohol as she mounted him, still stroking at his lifeless penis. He pushed her off and turned his back.

“You ungrateful limp-dicked bastard, if only you knew what I’d done for you tonight.”

“Done for me, what do you mean?”

“I’ve paid your debt to Briggsy that’s what.”

“Debt, what debt?”

“The thirty sovs you owed him.”

“Do you honestly think I’d lend money off him? I’ll ask him for your money back Pat, he’s conned you.”

“I can’t take it back Billy.”

“Of course you can Pat. I’ll see him in the club tomorrow.”

The loud snoring drowned out his last sentence.

Progress was slow in Billy’s battered Ford Escort as the snow-laden roads hindered the steelworkers. They arrived at the Conference Hall at ten-fifty-five, the strong wintry gale numbing their bare faces as they exited the car.

“Fuck, it’s cold enough to freeze the bollocks off a polar bear,” said Ginger Joe.

Marty rubbed his large hands and stamped his feet.

“What’s going on?” asked Billy. “Why all the Press?”

A Pakistani colleague caught up with them.

“I didn’t expect this Mo.”

“Haven’t you seen the news this morning Billy?”

“News? No.”

“There are rumours they’re shutting the steelworks down.”

“You’re joking, please Mo, tell me you’re joking?”

“See for yourself Billy.”

Just over an hour later Billy sat on the steps, his head in his hands.

“Come on Billy, I think we all need a drink.”

“How can they do this Marty? Fifteen years I’ve been there.”

“Nothing’s definite yet; besides, they’re talking about April. Don’t let it spoil your Christmas.”

“We’re off to the Crown Billy, are you up for it or what?” asked Ginger Joe.

“What about my car?”

“Leave it here. You can collect it tomorrow; besides, nobody’s going to nick that rust bucket now are they?”

The three of them headed towards the pub, Billy troubled greatly by the possible news of the closure of the steelworks.

“You two walk on; I’ll have to visit the hole in the wall. I’m short of dosh.”

“Well don’t be too long Billy, Briggsy’s meeting us for a drink,” said Marty.

“Briggsy! He’s coming? He’s a fucking psycho, why’d you invite him?”

“He sort of invited himself Billy. We couldn’t turn him down now could we?”

Billy fumbled with his credit card; his hands numbed by the freezing conditions. He inserted the card into the machine and hesitated before withdrawing twenty pounds, adding to the large overdraft he had already amassed.

“Fuck it,” he mumbled to himself, “in for a penny.” He struggled to walk through the icy conditions; his hands buried in the pockets of his leather jacket, his collar pulled up over his ears. He whistled a tune as he ambled along. His tune. “*Knock, knock, knocking on heaven’s door.*”

Briggsy and Marty were playing pool as Billy entered the shoddy pub, like two Titans in battle. Briggsy nodded at Billy and he acknowledged with a wave. The pub was over populated for an afternoon, most of the steelworkers had decided to stay out for a drink.

“Here Billy, it’s a bit flat now but it all goes down the same way,” said Ginger.

Billy put the glass to his mouth and finished the beer in one gulp.

“Bloody hell Billy, that didn’t even touch the sides?”

“Ginger, today I’m going to get arseholed. Fuck to what Pat says, and fuck British Steel.”

“I’ll second that Billy.”

Three hours later and the pub was really bustling. The four of them were in good voice as the landlord approached.

“Come on lads, keep it down will you? I have other customers to think of you know.”

“Fuck off baldy!” yelled Briggsy.

Marty tried to defuse the situation as he approached the angry landlord.

“Look, we’ve had some bad news today. It looks as if we’ve lost our jobs. We don’t want any trouble.”

“Well just as long as you keep the noise down. Anymore trouble and I’m phoning the law.”

“Do you fucking know who I am?” screamed Briggsy.

“I don’t care if you’re Mike bloody Tyson, keep it down or you’re out.”

“He’s Tommy Briggs,” slurred Ginger.

The landlord looked at the huge figure sneering back at him. After much deliberation he relented.

“Mum, it’s Tina!”

Pat scrambled down the staircase, a pink towel wrapped around her.

“Yeah Tina, I was in the shower.”

“Have you seen the news?”

“No, I can’t get near the frigging telly with the kids.”

“They’re on about shutting the steelworks Pat.”

“Shit, you’re kidding me.”

“No, it’s true Pat.”

“Oh my God, they can’t. We owe a fortune in debt.”

“He’ll get redundancy money Pat.”

“How much?”

“I dunno. Enough to cover your debts I imagine.”

“Eleven grand, that’s what we owe and that’s without the mortgage.”

“Shit.”

“Billy’s good with his hands though, he’ll get another job.”

“He’d have to be wouldn’t he? Good with his hands I mean,” laughed Tina.

“Cheeky cow! He can’t help it; he’s having a lot of problems. First his parents, then his migraines and now this. No wonder he can’t rise to the occasion.”

“Are you going out tonight Pat?”

“Too right I am girl. I’m waiting for that shitbag to come in. He went to the union meeting this morning and he isn’t home yet.”

“Probably gone for a drink with his mates Pat, you can’t blame him.”

“Where’s he got the frigging money from? I hope he hasn’t used that credit card.”

“See you at seven then eh Pat?”

“Seven it is Tina.”

The bouncers on the door of the Golden Eagle watched the approach of the rowdy group. One of them put his arm out to bar their way.

“Sorry lads, you’re pissed. You won’t be getting in here tonight.”

Briggsy pushed his way to the front of his companions.

“I don’t think I heard you properly. Did you say we wouldn’t be getting in here?”

“Sorry Tommy, I didn’t realise it was you.” The bouncer opened the door and beckoned them inside.

Billy counted his money and realised he didn’t have enough for his round.

“Don’t worry Billy, I’ll sub you if you’re short,” offered Marty.

Billy watched Briggsy push his way to the front of the bar; protests were withdrawn when the harassed revellers saw who was doing the pushing.

“No, it’s okay Marty; I’ve just remembered something.”

Briggsy returned from the bar carrying four pint glasses in his giant hands and placed them on their table. He sat between Joe and Marty and smiled at Billy.

“Something troubling you Billy boy?”

“Well now that you mention it yeah, there is.”

“Well spit it out,” he insisted as he removed four white tablets from his pocket.

“Last night Pat my wife, she said that you conned her out of thirty pounds.”

“She said that?”

“Yeah, in so many words.”

Briggsy laughed loudly. “Billy, here have some speed. This’ll keep you awake. It might also help you to get it up.”

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“Relax Billy boy, it’ll pass.”

Billy stood over Briggsy as Joe and Marty tried to restrain him.

“Sit down, you’re pissed Billy,” demanded Briggsy.

“Pat says you took thirty pounds off her.”

Briggsy pulled Billy’s head towards him and sneered at him.

“She never paid cash Billy.”

“I didn’t borrow any money from you.”

“And I didn’t take any from her.” He put his tongue in his cheek and brought his clenched hand back and forth to his mouth, working his tongue in rhythm with his hand.

Billy lashed out and caught the big man on the cheek. Briggsy was up in a flash and punched Billy on the head knocking him to the ground. He picked him up and head butted him, the crack of Billy’s nose clearly audible above the loud music. Briggsy held Billy’s head in his hands and constantly pounded it on the table amid the protests of Ginger Joe and Marty, who with the aid of the bouncers tried to restrain the giant.

A pool of blood covered the beer-drenched table as Briggsy released his grip and let Billy slump to the floor.

“Call an ambulance!” screamed Marty. “Someone call a fucking ambulance!”

“Phone call for Pat Woods,” was the cry.

“Get us a lager Tina, I won’t be long.”

St Joseph’s social club was a catholic establishment but was mostly frequented by Protestants such as Billy and Pat. It was conveniently located on a main road between a private housing estate and a tough council estate. It was in serious need of refurbishment but was very popular among both classes.

Willow Grange, the private estate was inhabited by seventy five per cent of the people who had grown up on the tough council estate. Billy and Pat were two such people. A weekend in the St Joseph’s club rarely passed without incident, usually something relating to crime.

“Hello who is it?”

“Marty. It’s Billy, he’s in hospital. He was involved in a fight.”

“Oh the daft bugger; who was he fighting with?”

“Briggsy. Don’t worry Pat, he’ll be okay. We managed to pull him off before he did any serious damage.”

“Briggsy! Oh shit. He doesn’t know about the other night does he?”

“I’m afraid so Pat. Listen, I’ll have a word with Briggsy. I’ll tell him to say it was a wind up.”

“But I’ve already told Billy I paid his debt off.”

“Just deny everything Pat.”

“How bad is Billy?”

“I think his nose is broken, he’ll be kept in overnight.”

“Thanks Marty, I’ll be seeing you.”

Pat returned to her table and swallowed a mouthful of lager.

“Who was it Pat?” asked Sue, shouting to be heard over the group who were playing an awful rendition of *Angels*.

“I’ll tell you later.”

Pat’s eyes were focused on the lead singer in his tight leather trousers. Christine Norton, the wife of Ginger Joe smirked at Pat.

“Heard the news today Pat? What’s Billy going to do?”

Pat hated Christine, her neighbour who thought she was above everyone else. Pat was inwardly jealous of her possessions, her new Volvo, her new caravan, her conservatory. The fact that Christine’s father was wealthy irked Pat.

“Aren’t you forgetting something Miss smart arse? Your Joe works at the steelworks.”

“Yes but he can work at one of my father’s garages can’t he?”

Pat felt a hand on her shoulder and whiffed the aftershave as a voice whispered in her ear. “Do you want to dance?”

Pat stared into the dark eyes of the young Adonis from the evening before. She said nothing, she just smiled and rose to her feet and followed her tall admirer to the dance floor.

“Isn’t that him from the other night Sue?” asked an excited Liz.

“Isn’t that who?” interrupted her husband Leo.

“Never you mind.”

“What do you girl’s get up to when you go out?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know luv, wouldn’t you like to know?”

Bob and Joan Clarke, Pat’s elderly neighbours eyed her up in disgust as she smooched with the stranger. Pat grinded her hips against her partner, feeling the ever growing bulge as they danced in rhythm, ignorant of the prying eyes.

“Are you following me?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“How did you know where to find me?”

“I’ve seen you around.”

“Do you know, I’m old enough to be your mother?”

“I like older women.”

“How old are you exactly?”

“Twenty-one. And you?”

“Never you mind, it’s rude to ask a lady her age... What’s your name?”

“Paul.”

“Well Paul, I’m Pat.”

“I know.”

He nuzzled her neck and she gave the middle finger to her elderly neighbours who shook their heads in disgust.

“Well honey; meet me outside in five minutes.”

“Where’re you going Pat?”

“To make a phone call. I want to make sure the twins are in bed now don’t I?”

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