

“SHARP AND LACERATING –
LIKE A BROKEN BOTTLE...”

THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE



TREAVOR MILLER

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CHAPTER ONE

It was a blue Monday. Grey light split the blinds. Traversed the wooden floor. Then it hit the bed. Cold and piercing and harsh. There was no gentleness left.

It swathed Valentine's half-naked body. Picked out stains on his shirt. Painted the pistol. Matt black.

There were few signs of the struggle.

Bitten fingers grasped the pillow. Saliva dribbled from his mouth.

Then Valentine woke up.

He felt cold. Muscular pain gripped his spine. There was the rumble of a tube train.

Valentine stood up. He rubbed his eyes. Things felt no different.

The classy studio still seemed elegant as a sushi restaurant. Black lacquer and sumi painting.

His boxer shorts were sticky. Yesterday's memories were vague.

He tried to think clearly. Notions were jumbled. Each pace stiffer than the last. He walked towards the window. Prised the louvre with his fingers. The City's machinery ticked over. People going to work. Cars jammed onto the bridge. Only the dock basin was silent.

He remembered the girl. Face down on the bed. Virginia was good at sex. He was confused. Their violent confrontation made no sense. Their plan would never seem real. But he had woken up alone. She was gone. And the game had begun.

A half-smoked cigarette poked from the ashtray. The filter was tarnished with lipstick. Red. He turned on the TV set. Picked up the dimp. He was dying for a smoke, craving for a whiff of sanity. The bookmatch flared. The tip was perfumed. He remembered how she tasted.

The newscaster's tie was purple. He was bald. "Good morning, Britain."

A cargo ship had sunk in the Channel. Containers were washing ashore. Toxic waste. Washing up on Brighton Beach. They were cordoning off the area, protecting the nudists. Greenpeace had been alerted. The first container had been full of biscuits.

Valentine tried to switch off. Another drug scandal from the Olympics. Everyone was doing it. Going for gold. Valentine crunched out the cigarette on a silver ashtray. Green flashed through his head. It was anger. It was envy. It was something else.

He bent down to slip on his shoes. There were no socks. He pulled on the left. Lurched for the right. A blister bulged from his right foot. Then he saw the gun.

Valentine slumped into a chair. He held his breath. Grinding reality began again. Unclean. Uncaring. Valentine had to stop the machine. That was all that was left.

The Luger grip chilled his palm. He wanted to piss.

He slid out the magazine. One bullet was missing. There was still enough.

The clock on the screen was ticking over. Later than he expected. It all had to be finished by 12.30. Valentine slapped the clip shut.

He put on his jacket. Stepped awkwardly into his trousers. The pistol bulged in his pocket. He checked the address. The yellow security pass. One final tarnished paper wrap. What if they caught him? Nobody would believe.

He shivered. Buttoned up his jacket. There was a tune in his head. 'High Noon'? No. It was the Shake n' Vac commercial. Powder fluttering from the carton. On the carpet. Useless. He turned off the set.

Valentine had enough for a cab. Six pound coins and some silver. He was not sure how far it would take him. There was never enough.

He padded to the door. One last look. This could have been everything. The time. The place. It was all wrong now. Meaningless.

There was no love. No hate. Only a sense of loss.

He tried to rewrite the end. But there was no other way. Valentine closed the door.

He walked across the grey courtyard. Down Jamaica Road towards London Bridge. Blue light painted the warehouses. He could have thrown a great party here.

Tooley Street was busy. The shopping Galleria looked like a greenhouse. Plants in the atrium were triffids, spitting poison at passers-by, gobbling up accountants like grey Twiglets. He shook his head.

Southwark Cathedral dripped birdshit.

He stepped onto the road, almost wanting to be run over. A dispatch rider jockeyed past. The taxi wheels wailed. Juddered. A foot slammed on the brake. The driver grimaced. Stopped. The bonnet was two feet from Valentine. He sidestepped, then climbed inside. "Paddington Station." There was no bravado in his voice. No boldness in his action. He was a frightened little man.

His eyes fixed firmly on the meter. He wrestled the coins from his pocket. Played with the change. There had to be enough. Time seemed to be floating. Life had become the end of a cab ride.

Valentine was oblivious of the journey. He was in a large black goldfish bowl. London landmarks looked in at him. Along the Embankment. Grey battleships. Forgotten tarnished breezeblocks. Inns of Court like the set of *The Prisoner*.

The meter ticked over. Nearly four quid. Valentine slipped lower in the seat. He was losing concentration. He felt sick. The numbers were becoming a blur.

The cabbie glanced back in the mirror. He reassured himself. This fare was in no state to do a 'runner'. He turned into Euston Road.

Valentine tried to find the sun. It was behind thick cloud. His reflection bounced from the glass. He pushed the hair from his eyes. It plastered against his forehead. The flesh was lined. Eyes black and empty. A bump rattled the gun. He clasped his lapels shut. No-one must see.

They were on the Westway. The meter blinked six quid. Cars skimmed over the flyover.

"Here." Valentine's voice was shaky.

The driver looked incredulous. "Not on the dual carriageway, chief."

Six pounds twenty. "Here!" Valentine insisted. The driver veered

into Warwick Avenue. He pulled up at the lights, leant on the clutch.

Valentine fumbled with his change. There was not enough for a tip. He placed it all in the driver's hand. Shrugged his shoulders. Felt no shame.

He stumbled onto the pavement, slammed the door. The lights changed. Everyone moved on. The cab shot away. He was on his own again. The suit was small protection against the cold.

He approached the depot. Mottled by graffiti. All West London steamer gangs he had never heard of. One of the barn doors gaped open. The shadows mutated into black sodden faces. A taut stomach below a cropped top. She was from the plastic population.

The 'Friday Nite Funksters' had thrown parties here. A large red skull was plastered across a pillar. It looked angry.

A wooden sign lay under girders. 'FUNCTION THIS WAY'. Valentine stepped over it. He faltered on the large truck tyres. The round building was empty. It smelled of stale sex.

Two dead pigeons had been crushed. Smashed under the wheels. Fly and Niki?

The party had moved on. Valentine roamed through the carnage. Still.

He climbed the wall and dropped into the shunting yard. It had been laid to waste. Large mounds of hardcore flanked him. The developer's vans were empty. Gypsies were moving in. Mongrel dogs were running wild. He could hear a baby crying. Maybe just in his head.

The blister began to hurt. His reject loafers splayed. Mud spattered the bare ankles. A train hurtled by. It didn't seem real. Then it was gone.

He neared the arches. He would soon be in Paddington, surroundings he could comprehend. The mutating decay was frightening. The off-worldness shook his motives. There was always the gun.

Through the arches and up the concourse Valentine passed. Brickwork shook like an earthquake. It was not happening. The buildings were solid. He focused on the pavement. The sky blackened.

He stopped to look in a shop window. Its sign boasted designer porn. 'SNUFF MOVIES, ON REQUEST'. He felt sick. There was a picture

of a hand being crushed. Blood spurted out. He lit another filter. The nude men and women looked on. He coughed heartily.

He progressed up Paddington Street. Nobody knew him. He knew nobody. He cowered past two uniformed officers. As he got nearer to Praed Street the sinews tensed in his neck. He ached.

Valentine saw his destination in the distance. It stood out above the rest. The building was tall and transatlantic. Three shiny black towers. The windows were all black mirror-glass. Stillness surrounded it.

The towers bore down on him, each one bigger than the other. They encroached on his space. The more he tried to relax the more fear tore at him. He wanted the way out. This was the only way.

He progressed up the steps. He swung through the revolving door and paused in the foyer. He clutched at his palmed security pass. A guard approached him. He mumbled "Clearance A" and held up the yellow card. The guard was still. His glare remained fixed.

Valentine said it again. He had to get through. If he grew any tenser he would snap. The guard sidestepped. Valentine walked on.

He pressed the lift call and waited. It had been too easy. Something was wrong. The guard was probably raising the alarm. Any minute now, he would be surrounded. He wished the lift would hurry. Why was it taking so long? They may have turned it off. The door opened. He strode in and it shut behind him.

His head swam. It was a mixture of fear and the kind of tiredness that comes from lack of money or peace of mind. Madness.

Valentine's chest tightened as the lift door slid open. He squared up and walked through the door with spiralling apprehensions. The corridors were imposing, all black shellac and pure marble. The pillars strained under basalt headpieces. Everywhere shone and stank of polish.

He looked around and swallowed. His throat dried. Cigarette, must have one. No. His head hurt. Thoughts jangled about in emptiness. Confident movement was difficult. Inches seemed like yards, yards like miles, miles from home.

They had him. Gobbled up and spat out, but nevertheless, they had him. A piece of meat. He followed the signposts.

The light strained his eyes. He tried to rehearse his speech, with no

memory. He tried to feel sad. He tried to cry. But nothing. Blankness. Passers-by ignored him.

He approached the door and stood still, looking at the shadow. His shadow. No Adonis. No wit. Only Valentine. He strained a smile. Looking into the woodgrain he lifted his head and knocked. Twice.

The door registered two dull thuds. Ebony. Expensive.

There was silence. Perhaps no-one was in. Good. Five seconds, ten seconds, fifteen seconds. A low authoritative voice rippled the calm. "Come".

Valentine paused, turned the handle and entered.

The office layout pushed him back. It was power. The kind of confident calm that puts whole nations through the mill. The black desk was at least fifteen feet across, lit only by an Italian cantilever table lamp. The wall behind the desk was glass. The London skyline shone beyond all this black magnificence.

Richard Domaine surveyed the situation. He was in control. Like a game of chess. He threw a knowing glance at Valentine.

Valentine was in no position to throw it back. His mind raced ahead. He could not go through with it. It would be easier to just walk away. No. There was no turning back. He closed the door behind him.

Valentine walked and sat down. The sumptuous black leather clung to him. He tried to relax. It was impossible. He was sitting in front of God. This was not the time for an act. It had to be real. There was nothing else it could be.

Domaine pushed over a gilt cigarette box to the corner of the table. He flicked the lid open. "Smoke?" Valentine shook his head. He was desperate for one but he didn't want to give a corner. Domaine pushed the box closer. "It's only a smoke." He smiled.

Casually Domaine reached over and took one white filter tip. He lit up and drew a long breath. Smoke cascaded from his lips. He stood up, walked to the window and surveyed the vista. There was something sexual about his relaxed way.

"All of this is mine." He knew exactly how it was. No illusion. He was not cold, just disinterested. Domaine knew everybody's price.

Valentine was getting sucked in. His only weapon, apart from the snug gun, was his tension, his illogical thought. Domaine's tranquility

almost engulfed him. He would have to make a move. Feverishly he took a cigarette. Lighting it with a book match from his top pocket, he slammed the gilt box shut.

Domaine did not recoil. He blew a smoke ring. “Don’t mind if I call you Valentine?”

Valentine winced as Domaine said his name. If he knew who he was, he knew why he was there. Then how could he be so relaxed? Count to ten then begin. Eight, nine, ten.

Valentine fumbled with his mock-croc wallet and withdrew a passport picture. He placed it on the desk. Domaine padded over and sat down. Lifting the photograph, he shook his head. “Pretty girl.” He looked closer. He rested his head on his interlocked fingers. “Not for sale, I presume.”

Valentine’s hands tensed. The more annoyed he got, the more he could take control.

Domaine asked if he liked women. Valentine said she was dead. Visions of her broken body jarred him. He tried to explain. The crushed limbs. The scarred face. The splayed frame, lifeless like a rag doll.

Domaine tried to align the picture to Valentine’s words. It did not fit. Her slightly oriental eyes shone out of the photograph. Valentine’s eyes burned. Domaine looked through both of them. “Where do I come in?”

Valentine played his ace. He reached into his pocket and took out the paper wrap. He opened it. Hands trembling, he shook the contents onto the black desk.

The green phosphorescent powder glinted under the light. The holy grail one last time. FX. The sweetener, the turkey at Christmas, the perk of all perks.

It was free. It was good, the best, like death.

Domaine knew. Valentine knew. The seller and the sold.

“Want some?” said Domaine and sat back.



CHAPTER TWO

Valentine strained. He pushed his flight bag in the rack. The zips bulged. He could barely reach. Coach travel was cheap and nasty. He slumped into the seat.

For the first time in months, he was scared. Anonymity had been easy. People he hardly knew. The welcoming arms of the 'North'.

He lit a cigarette. It made no difference.

The bus station was tiled brown, bathed in electric light. The cafe sign was smothered in grease. An Albert Tatlock dished up barm cakes. Perhaps they sent you barmy.

Valentine had no friends. He had left all that behind four years ago. Four years from London. All that remained was his invented name. And the debts of course.

It had been like the Wall Street Crash. Many got ruined that night, the last night of the Underground. Courtney got busted. Maybe Fly, too. Valentine wasn't sure. He hadn't stopped to ask. Just ran.

He had never wanted to go back. Until now.

Valentine reached for his carrier bag and the two cans of Super Tennent's, the last vice he could afford.

"Is that seat free?" The woman wore glasses. Valentine stood up. She squeezed by. Passed him the crinkly carrier bag. They both sat down. "Always like a window seat."

Valentine nodded. He was slightly embarrassed. The beer cans and the woman. Coaches were not too intimate, everyone facing the same way. He put the cans on the floor.

The coach swung out of the terminus ten minutes late. Valentine had no appointment to be late for.

Things were changing, even here. King Street looked like an Olympic

Village. Dirty granite had been freshly sand-blasted. Showrooms full of radiophones. It was not a backwater anymore. Everyone was listening to Acid House. Doing fashion shows in Japan. It was definitely time to head South.

Valentine cracked open a can. The beer was too sweet. He never liked the medicine. Just its effect.

The book cover was half folded. Valentine could just make out the title. She was reading *On the Road*. It was appropriate. They were on a voyage of discovery. Boldly going where everyone else had gone before. Strange new worlds off Tottenham Court Road. Alien civilizations in Soho dives. Galaxies beyond the West One Nebula. Up Uranus.

What kind of traveller was this buxom woman? An outcast of the white slave trade? A lady of letters? Probably a student. Who else travelled by tacky coach?

She asked Valentine for a light. A Scottish accent. Gordon Jackson's daughter?

He lit his England's Glory. She inhaled. Then returned to her book.

Valentine supped more beer. He was bored. Nothing to read but the matchbox.

"Like the book?" he asked. The woman smiled. There was a long pause. She forced two antihistamines down her throat and placed the bottle in her pocket. "Just research."

Valentine didn't know what she was talking about. He didn't care. It was like pub talk. Chatting with the local loony. Smiling and nodding usually worked. At least it passed the time.

He offered a swig of beer. Strangely, she accepted. Valentine passed the can, bemused. Two big gulps. Definitely the local loony. Then it started. The preliminaries. Who was he? What did he do?

Valentine did not like questions, especially from strangers and wackos. This woman was both.

He wanted to tell her the truth. Say he had been a club promoter. One of the biggest in London. He had set up the *Underground*. Ran the most successful warehouse parties ever. But it was a long time back. Nobody remembered. Nobody believed him anymore. He was travelling by coach. Drinking in the afternoon. A has-been. It would

be easier to lie.

He answered obtusely. Said he had done lots of things.

She would not let go. It was like twenty questions. Was he a student of philosophy? An art student? Valentine was indignant. A student? She was the student, not him.

One last try. What was his name?

Valentine took the ticket counterfoil from his pocket. Held it in front of her face. She read the block capitals. Raised an eyebrow. "Valentine."

He had to be an actor with a name like that. Think of Valentine Dyall. Billy Ray Valentine. But he wasn't.

She considered herself a good judge of character. This man was unclassifiable, like a cheap wine. Maybe he was on the dole. Maybe he was lying. Perhaps even both.

She looked out of the window, watched the road. She announced that she was a journalist. Valentine said "Oh".

The arrogant bastard. Her profession normally provoked some interest. He looked too old to be a dole boy. Maybe twenty-five or thirty, it was hard to tell. The denim looked very worn, perfectly matched with the stubbly beard.

He was more than well built. Fat.

Valentine ignored her roving glare. He grinned. It was his turn to play. He checked her rucksack. He looked at her shoes. They were DMs, probably from *Red or Dead* in Camden. She was wearing a Bomb the Bass T-shirt with a yellow smiley face. Valentine said she was a music journalist, either living or working in Camden, and her name was Anna. Then he finished the last of his can.

The woman looked sideways, puzzled, annoyed. How did he know? This knowledge seemed a violation, intrusive. She tried to convince herself they must have met before.

Valentine opened his second can. A well-bitten finger pointed at the rucksack. The woman looked down. Her luggage label had her name and address typewritten. A few backstage passes were plastered on the pocket.

Anna acknowledged his observation. Victory fired his ego. Another vice he had not forgotten. He started to tell her who he was, hoping to

make 'running' sound like a quest. He said he had been travelling, trying to find himself.

It was not like that. He had been avoiding debts, retribution. Little spirituality was involved. Sure he had been wacko, but not from a troubled soul. Valentine had been a speed-freak. Coke as well, when he could afford it. Of course, he would not admit such transgressions to a stranger. Speed was unfashionable now.

Valentine drank more beer. He had once been a journalist. A writer. That sounded better. He squirmed a little, feeling like a compulsive liar. Anna was becoming more interested, animated. Writing would be common ground.

Neither really knew about writing. Valentine had had two articles published. Two in four years. He had applied for an editorial job, subbing short stories for a soft porn mag. He'd failed the interview.

For the rest of the time, he had signed on. Worked cash in hand. Shit jobs. DJ at tenth-rate clubs. MC at cabaret pubs. Bartender. Signwriter. Landscape gardener. Anything and nothing. He had hung out at student bars where the beer was cheap, the company gullible. Valentine had lived on past glories for years. Young guys were impressed. Girls fresh from home, blagged by stories about cocaine and kisses from popstars. Every reminiscence had become so convoluted. Valentine didn't want that anymore. No more running.

The conversation came to a halt. The air was full of bullshit.

"Where are you coming from?" Anna's words came slow. Valentine pursed his lips and tried not to laugh. It was one of those phrases, like 'go for it'. Modern. Incisive. Meaningless.

Valentine really wanted to make sense. He raised himself in the seat. Poised demonstratively, he said he moved ideas. Once he had sold dreams, entertainment in its purest form. Dreams could be real. Reality was only an adult dream.

Anna shook her head. "Bullshit."

Valentine shrugged it off. It was hard to be serious, especially here.

She was losing interest in him. He was ceasing to be different.

Anna said she needed 'the loo'. He got up. She pushed into the aisle.

Valentine felt a bit merrier. He had not told her anything. Not about himself. It was usually better this way. He pushed the empties under

the seat. He was not sorry to see her go.

A head popped up and rested on the head restraint. The small girl was staring at Valentine. Her Afro hair was in braids. Valentine smiled, ran his hands through his hair. His slightly receding hair made him self-conscious, uneasy. The little girl pointed at him. It was alright. He liked children. "It's all standing up." Valentine saw his reflection in the window.

The stubble was black. A heavy growth. Eyes were heavily ringed. Anna was right. He looked too old to be a dole boy. Still only twenty-four. Valentine was always looking at his reflection. Perhaps because the ageing processes were working overtime. More likely because of his unshakable vanity.

He pushed his wavy hair flat and turned to talk to the child. But she had disappeared. Back watching with mother.

The bus was in midflight. They had been travelling for an hour, maybe more. There was no way of telling. Valentine had no watch.

He glanced at the road signs. Tried to gauge the distance. Each Little Chef made London feel closer.

Thoughts of reprisals filled his head. Miki, the girlfriend he had run out on. Courtney, his stitched-up partner. All the favours that people would have forgotten. What if nobody remembered? What if they all snubbed him?

In '84 the Metropolitan Police busted most of the Warehouse crews. Valentine insisted they should carry on. It was a fatal mistake. Everyone sank the last of their time and money. That amount of gear was a dealing offence. Valentine could have warned them. Should have warned them. There was no time. So he ran. Into the station. Onto the train. Back where he came from.

Of course, the money ran out. He thought he could never go back.

But here he was.

Sunlight was breaking through the cloud, bright and blinding. It strained his eyes. He put on his pilot glasses, gilt-edged Ray-Bans. They were bent, but the only expensive souvenir left.

His rakish pose was short-lived. The stewardess told him to draw the curtains. He took off his glasses, pulled the orange fabric. The speakers crackled. Something about the TV screen distracting other

drivers. The sound was distorted. He peered at the fourteen-inch monitor.

Anna tapped his shoulder. He slid his knees across. She edged past, then sat down. She had been a long time. Probably talking to someone else.

A filled barm cake sat in her palm, encased in clingfilm. Valentine had no money for 'luxuries'. It was ham salad, at least something pink and curly. "Cordon Bleu?"

She snorted. Just looked at him. Anna began to unpeel the film. Then the film began.

A roll of drums. A horny fanfare. It was Wrekka, a F production. An ad agency had bought a film company. The content of their pictures was irrelevant. Each feature-length commercial starred Ranee Hubbly; an American footballer turned porn star turned serious actor. He was working-class and right-wing, a winning formula for the late-80s. The story began to unfold.

In the first five minutes Wrekka killed thirty Vietcong. Blood poured like rain. Disembowelled corpses on bayonets. The violence was bizarre. So were the product placements. This company made films to sell consumer disposables. Wrekka dressed in Lacoste, drove a Ferrari and smoked forty Marlboro a day. Every street punk guzzled Coca Cola. The Vietnamese general took the Pepsi challenge, then Wrekka blew his head off. The small child in the seat ahead squealed, not with fear but delight. Justice had been done.

By the end, Charlie Wrekkowski had used a million dollars worth of consumer product. Difficult on an army pension. Sex and violence were incidental. What mattered was shifting units. 'Underline selling' affected everyone. Valentine thought he would sell his soul for the Ferrari. Who wouldn't? He lit a cigarette.

Anna had fallen asleep, curled up, hands still clutching the book. It was safe to open the curtain now. Valentine dragged the drape. Yellow light washed the seats, painted her face. She was not bad looking. Needed a decent haircut.

Valentine was bored again. He clawed at his teeth. Looked up and down the aisle. Watched the fields passing.

Then he was asleep. Valentine had strange dreams. Running. Always

running. Getting nowhere. Always further to run.

When Valentine woke up he was sweating. The seat was very uncomfortable. The stewardess was offering 'fresh' sandwiches, curly and stale. He shook his head. Besides, he could not spare the cash.

Valentine lit another cigarette. He smoked habitually, especially when travelling. Usually out of boredom. He watched the smoke curl. They had travelled a fair distance.

Passing cars seemed more executively styled. Londoners on the coach started speaking cockney.

A familiar voice boomed from the speakers. The stewardess had switched on the sound of the city, 'Mainline' London Radio. A smoochie soul sound for redundant soul boys. Barry Whitman broadcasting live. "You know it makes sense." Barry had been fired by the network. Too many tales in The Sun. But the ILR primates loved it. Barry's benefits grew larger, the programmes more salacious. Ratings soared.

"This one's for all you ladies still in bed. Here I come." Marvin Gaye eased in with 'Sexual Healing'. Valentine's libido was frustrated. The song triggered memories. It was embarrassing. Anna was awake now. She was facing Valentine, smiling. He was going to grin, show his pearly whites. It was a bad idea. He had not cleaned his teeth yet. Valentine buttoned up his jacket.

Anna's pose was threatening. She would not look away. There was uneasy silence. She leaned nearer. Valentine had become interesting again. "I know who you are."

His palms went clammy. There was a vague chance. Her voice drifted into a whisper. "Your real name's not Valentine." He nodded his head. Tried to speak.

She had seen him in '84 at the Hammersmith Odeon. A Kid Creole gig. He was the percussion player for Sonido D 'Espresso. They had been the support band.

Valentine sat back. He could continue being what she wanted him to be. She started calling him 'Val'. That was always a good sign. He called her Anna. Perhaps she had a penchant for musicians.

Valentine was along for the ride. He played blag for blag's sake. In a club, on the street, on a coach. It was all the same. The thrill of

deception. Adventures in your head. It was self-expression. It was Valentine's drug. Addictive. Destructive, like all the best drugs.

Anna said she liked jazz. Valentine said he liked jazz, played jazz, lived jazz. It was bullshit, but musicians can say that kind of thing. He had seen 'The Man with the Golden Arm'.

The bus spiralled off the motorway. Past Scatchwood. Round the flyover. There they were. Going into London. Brent Cross was the usual suburban wasteland. Mr 'Mud' Club lived in a house behind the shopping mall. Scally had thrown parties in Golders Green. Soul allnighters were held above The Alexandra down Finchley Road. He saw the car breaker's yard where they had dragged in their first sound system. The crusher was inert. It was a long time ago. The yard was derelict again.

Valentine hunched his shoulders. There was a traffic jam in Camden. Drivers were honking horns. Fists turning purple. Drumming fingers. The motor hummed, waiting to pull away. Anna pointed at the Lock Tavern. Her flat was down the side, at the bottom of Harmood Street. It was a council flat, acquired from an old boyfriend. Maybe she was fishing. "Have you got a new boyfriend?"

Anna shrugged her shoulders. Not today.

It surprised him. She had everything else.

She asked where he was staying. Valentine thought up an answer. There was his old friend on Charlotte Street. It was fashionable. Very hollow.

Anna said she had a spare room. It was empty.

Valentine wanted to accept but he was too proud. Accepting would make him a nobody. He tried to forget the offer. It felt better. Human contacts spread disease.

"Thank you." He smiled. Anna smiled. It was an awkward moment. Both had reacted foolishly.

Traffic jostled on rush hour Euston Road. Anna took out a black filofax. It bulged with papers. She asked Valentine for a pen. He didn't have one, not even a bic. She struggled with her pockets and produced an anodised Mont Blanc.

The Telecom Tower hung from the skyline. Valentine looked up. Just like the commercials. The tower was power. Money. Valentine had

neither. There was no turning back. He could win it all back. There was nothing left to lose. Except his sanity.

The paper tore from the binder. Anna had written her phone number on a single green sheet. She handed it over. Then there was silence. Valentine was not sure what to say.

“Call me,” Anna insisted. They could go for a drink or something. Something? He took out his mock-croc fax, and tucked the paper inside. Anna raised an eyebrow. There was no need to worry. The skin was fake.

The bus juddered to rest in the Metropole car park, facing Russell Square. The stewardess bid the punters a safe journey. “Thank you for travelling with Skyliner.”

The grip strained on Anna’s rucksack. She pulled it free. Valentine stood up. She was three inches taller than him. They moved down the aisle. Anna was rushing. She was late for something. Down the steps onto the street. The stewardess smiled. They made a ‘nice’ couple.

The hold was half empty. Valentine had his bag in his hand, travelling light. He followed Anna by the bus. The driver panted pulling out the luggage. He was having trouble. The overstuffed Louis Vuitton was jammed. One last tug. It grazed free. It was Anna’s bag. She hoisted it onto her shoulder. Valentine was about to walk away. “No goodbye?” she said.

Goodbye was forever. Valentine did not like forever. She stepped towards him. Valentine said “See ya.” Then she kissed him on the cheek.

She felt warm. He tried to smile, shrug it off. His movements were self-conscious. He was screaming inside his head. Why was human touch so unnerving?

Besides, she was kissing some percussion player. Not Valentine.

Anna walked off toward the tube station and waved. Valentine watched her DMs disappear round the corner. He could always call her up. Maybe.

Other travelers hustled away. The sun was shining. Valentine was just another face in the crowd. No bells were ringing. There was nobody there to meet him. He put on his dark glasses, slung the bag on his shoulder.

One deep breath. It was London air alright.
His heels clicked. "There's no place like home."
Only one fiver in his pocket. He needed a drink.
Valentine walked down Woburn Place.

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