

A Night Out

Crime: Thriller

1500 Words

'A Night Out' - by Chris Matravers

Hours before, the dark night and thundering storm had masked the man from sight and sound as he killed and then made good his escape; fuelled from within by his burning hatred, bitter as the night that aided him.

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As the alarm sounded the wind, vicious even for that time of year, was hesitating as if reluctant to die away. Briefly, the temperature began to rise; warmer air met the falling rain – confused now whether to be sleet or hail. Then, as if coming to a decision, the wind returned, lifting and swirling the now freezing rain around the walls and the men with torches; drowning their voices made loud with fear, and the yelping of the dogs stung by hailstones. Throughout the county men were alerted to join forces against the storm of another kind they feared was let loose upon them and which they realised may already have been free for too long.

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Several miles away, and far from spent, the storm rages on; hail stones angling down a chimney sputter angrily on the dying embers of a fire as a man moves furtively across a darkened room. The small noises he makes are as nothing compared to the sound of the storm outside, but in the room above not even the storm intrudes on the dreams of the couple, snug in their duveted bed. A passer-by, head bowed, collar upturned, would have seen nothing amiss if he or she had glanced at the cottage whilst hurrying home on that dour November night. Passers-by, however, were few in that remote part of the Berkshire Downs.

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In the Duty Officer's room at Wantage police station the air is heavy with illicit cigarette smoke; a fug, starved of oxygen by the greedily burning gas fire. Duty Sergeant Johnson, his chair leant back and his feet propped up on the desk covered with paperwork, sips his tea drowsily as he reflects on his lot. Never an ambitious man he is content: no more pounding the beat for him, especially on a night like this, leave that to the youngsters. Only ten years to retirement, Station Sergeant was all he'd aspired to when he joined the service, or the 'force' as it had been in those days, and he'd made it. He'd never wanted to be in plainclothes: too much like hard work. He prefers the day-shift of course, it allows him more time with the wife, but nights like this are an easy number: even the crooks stayed safely in bed in this weather.

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In the cottage on the Downs, the man stumbles into a low, magazine bestrewn table; unseen in the fading fire-light, barking his shin on a chair as he does so. He can't turn on the lights for fear the glow would be seen from upstairs. Outside the storm lifts momentarily, the rain easing as the wind calms and the silence of the night closes in once more. Cursing softly, he fumbles for the vase as it threatens to crash to the floor. Upstairs the couple stir restlessly in their sleep, turn, but do not wake. The man pauses, listens, then as his heart slows to a more normal rate continues to edge his way across the room to the kitchen.

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The Sergeant's thoughts are interrupted by the hum of the printer and cocking a questioning eyebrow at the young constable writing reports he waits for the print-out to be brought to him. "All Points Alert for John Stanton" he reads, his skin turning cold. "Male, white, aged 32, six feet, fourteen stone, dark hair, brown eyes: Escaped Broadmoor Hospital at approximately 22.30 hours this evening after killing warder. Dangerous, repeat dangerous, believed to be riding a stolen motorcycle reg. NRD 472Y; Approach with extreme caution."

Little enough information but the sergeant's memory supplies the rest, memories best forgotten but recalled as if it were yesterday. "Stanton the knifeman" they had called him, a compulsive thief and a madman who killed if disturbed, slashing his victims horribly. Ten years ago, he'd been a village bobby. PC Johnson, then. The sergeant had seen Stanton's work and prayed never again. Four villagers, an entire family including two young girls just four and six years old, had died when they returned from an evening out to find their house being ransacked by Stanton. The sergeant had had the gruesome task of assisting the forensic team. The sights had sickened him for months, and the nightmares worsened and persisted long after Stanton was caught. The Sergeant had been present at the capture; Stanton had laughed. Now as he slumps in a chair under the puzzled gaze of the constable, the room spins as the Sergeant realises with horror that Stanton has been free for several hours.

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In the cottage, the man has found the kitchen. Closing the door quietly, conscious of the now still night, he feels for the switch: the fluorescent light flickers on. Upstairs, the couple sleep on.

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At the police station the constable picks up and re-reads a report they'd received earlier. 'Sarge, Sarge! That motorbike! A patrol found it an hour or so ago in a ditch at Great Shefford...' his voice tails off as the Sergeant, his expression turning grey, lurches for the radio. Great Shefford was the village Stanton had "visited" before. Stanton was back, 'Please God, No!' The Sergeant's mind reels.

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In the cottage, the harsh light from the kitchen hurts the man's eyes after the gloom of the living room. The kitchen is traditionally styled; matching storage jars, spice rack and a row of wooden handled knives hanging on the wall. Knives arranged in order of size. The man reaches for the end one, the largest. As he turns away his sleeve catches the next in line and the next, sweeping the rest of the knives from the rack. They fall clattering on the Formica work-top. Above, the couple wake.

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‘John Stanton, male, white...’ The Sergeant, his voice anxious almost frantic, reads from the printout alerting and directing their sole patrol car to the Great Shefford area; adding his own terse comments. What else to do? His mind worked slowly in the small hours of the morning, and was numbed further by fear. There had to be something, he couldn't face it again.

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In the cottage, the man hears the bed creak and the footsteps: first on the landing then coming down the stairs and into the living room. With a sigh he turns towards the door, knife in hand, expectant.

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Extra patrols are directed towards Great Shefford from neighbouring areas. The men know what to look for; signs of forced entry, lights on in the early hours of the morning, anything out of place. At the station the Sergeant waits for something he hopes will not be found.

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A sharp gust of window shakes the cottage; hailstones, clattering against the windows, warn that the storm is not yet over. The kitchen door opens. Two men look at each other, one windswept and bedraggled, tense, knife in hand, wary; the other confused, sleepy eyed; vulnerable in crumpled pyjamas.

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‘Sarge, we've had a report, a patrol saw a light on in Green Cottage, Wooley Lane on their last pass through the village, they are on their way back there now.’ The constable pauses, anxious, wanting reassurance but the Sergeant knows they are too late.

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The two men stare, hesitate, uncertain what to do and then – glancing at the knife in the others hand – the man in pyjamas laughs, relieved.

‘Christ, Paul, you scared me. I didn't recognise you standing there... waving that bread knife!’

The bedraggled man is embarrassed. ‘I'm sorry Mike, I tried not to disturb you so late, I hadn't realised my night out would go on so long ...’ he finishes lamely.

Mike runs a hand through his hair, rueful now, grumpy but not really angry with his old University friend. 'We thought you came back hours ago! Same old same old huh?' He said, grinning now. 'You always did need to eat after a night's drinking. C'mon then, I may as well have one too, make me a sandwich. How did it go then, your school reunion?' From upstairs his wife calls out to check that everything is ok. 'Its fine,' he calls back.

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Two miles but another world away in Wooley Lane, the returning rain and hail – made blue by the swirling lights – beats down on the roofs of the assembled police cars. They have found what the Sergeant feared, the storm was upon them once more. For them, all was far from fine.