

THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

by Alex Delve

Dusk was falling. Or, depending on your viewpoint, the night was rising. Henry Dalziel stood on the roof of his Greenwich apartment block. He could feel it coming. He could always feel it coming. He looked down at the streetlight-stained streets below, full of people crawling like ants.

They have no idea. They never have any idea.

A siren burst into life somewhere across the city. A distant howl, mostly echo, spectral.

They may know, but it still affects them. Still infects them.

The night continued to envelop London, slipping across the concrete and steel like oil. Henry could feel it on his skin; greasy, disgusting. He wondered if it would be his turn tonight, or if someone else would have to bear the burden. A cold wind, funnelled and corralled by the ancient twisting streets, whipped past, flapping his heavy black coat. Henry grasped it, trying to ignore the cold reaching in under the fabric. Holding it in place with one hand, he fastened the buttons with his other. The fourth one - somewhere just below his sternum - came away in his hand, trailing threads like entrails. Henry stared at it, as if trying to fill it with all of his infinite frustrations and then cast it to the ground. It tinkled as it landed, metal on concrete, and rolled away into the night, devoured.

Henry pulled his pocket watch from his breast pocket and checked the time. Dusk was

almost over, the night was almost here. A little tingle of hope fluttered in his chest, mingled with his breath.

He was almost free for the night. There would always be others, but he pushed that knowledge away. Almost far enough.

Then he felt it. That little tug on his soul. Subtle, at first, like it always was. Easy to miss. Not that Henry ever did. The tug that snagged on something intangible and ripped any hope from him,.

Henry sighed a steaming breath into the cold night air - night had fully risen now - and looked in the direction of the pull. A twisting of alleys and abandoned workshops. Out of the reach of the sodium-yellow streetlights.

Henry slipped his hand into the inside pocket of his long coat and felt the smooth curve of his knife. Pure ivory, from hilt to deadly blade. Familiar, like breathing. Then, removing his hand and leaving his knife waiting, he turned and descended the steps into the street.

Henry moved through the crowds. People seemed to be strewn across the pavement like litter. Their incessant, unintelligible voices bubbled over the rumble of traffic. Henry pulled the brim of his hat down and covered his nose and mouth with the crook of his arm. He had never gotten used to the stench of petrol fumes. He hoped he never would. Light spilled out of shop windows and illuminated the people around him in hard white light. None of them seemed to mind the smell, nor the racket. They had other things on their mind; a night of drinking, perhaps, maybe a fight. One or two of the people in the crowd would rob a number of the others before the Sun rose again and reclaimed the day.

It still affects them. Still infects them.

The pull within Henry was getting stronger now; He was getting closer. He passed a pub, one that had been there for as long as even he could remember, and the greasy smells of stale beer and body odour washed out, spiked with cheap, bitter cologne. He looked down at the dirty pavement. There was no glass here now, no scarlet stains of dried blood, but there would be when he returned.

There always was. The Dark made sure of that.

It wasn't long before the lights of the high street had died away and he found himself in the crumbling alleys of the old industrial estate. From the top of the Greenwich Tower, it had

looked like a smudge, and not much changed close up. The Victorian brickwork had faded to a dirty brownish-orange, and the air was tinged with what little streetlight struggled this far from the streets. Everything was dirty. The City of London, that concrete and glass fungus that had sprung up almost overnight was behind him now, far enough away that it was little more than a drone, an insect buzzing in his ear.

Quiet enough that he could hear violent syllables being muttered somewhere. A whispering, hissing voice. Pained. The shadows pressed in on him, leering from forgotten corners.

Henry touched the handle of his ivory knife again, for good luck. It was unearthly cold.

Henry was close. Very close. His breath misted in the chill air, and he felt an urge to hold it, an urge he fought. He would need all of his strength when he came across his prey. Henry moved forward, following the intangible pulling deep within him, each footstep an eon. His eyes flicked from shadow to shadow, looking for any movement, for a greater darkness within.

Henry's coat fell open and this time he let it trail behind him as he moved. He would very soon require swift access to his knife.

The voice grew louder with every footstep, and Henry recognised the words. At least he thought they were words. He had heard them many times - too many - in his long life, and could form each one in his mind. Never on the tongue. They were harsh, guttural, not designed for humans to speak. He could recognise every grating syllable, but any semblance of meaning was beyond even him. It was barely speech. To Henry it sounded simply like hatred, like violence.

Then the alley fell silent.

A gust of wind funnelled by the close brick walls cried an almost human sound. Something like sorrow. It did not distract him. Instead he stood stock still, even his coat falling straight down. Henry strained his hearing into the silence. Listening.

Now he held his breath.

Something moved to Henry's right. He moved down and slightly away from it. He felt the air move beside it, parting to let something through, and he thrust his hands into this space. They found something. He grasped, twisted his torso and deflected the onrushing bulk up and over his head. He stood back up as it thudded wetly into the stone on his left. It began to chant again.

Henry looked at it. It was a man, still chanting, his mouth twisting in unnatural shapes. His irisless eyes didn't blink as he stood back up. Henry stared back, hand hovering near his knife. He wanted to draw it so badly that his fingers twitched in the cold night air, but he didn't. Not yet. The anticipation made his mouth water, and he spat.

Another noise joined the chant. This one too was, somehow, coming from this crazed man. A growl, something primal, poured from his throat like the sound of a wild animal. His eyes seemed to shine like starlight, but only for a moment. No sooner had they done so than they filled with black, like a lizard's.

The growl met the chant at the back of the man's throat and he roared like a beast. He leapt at Henry.

Henry's feet moved like a dancer's, swift and soundless over the worn stone pavement. He ducked the man's clumsy lunge and span around his bulk. Flicking one leg out to trip the man he turned on the heel of the other so that he was now directly behind the man. As he hit the floor Henry leapt up and landed, knees first, in the small of his back. Finally, the man's animal sounds were cut short as his lungs emptied of air. Henry heard him gasp but had no intention of stopping there. Instead he drove one knee further into the man's spine, then bent his head down so his mouth was level with his ear. With his left hand he grabbed the back of the man's hair and pulled his head back. His other hand flew to his knife. He slipped it out of his pocket and held the blade against the man's neck.

The man hissed.

A hatred fizzed in Henry, from the bottom of his gut to the end of his fingers. The fingers that held the blade against this man's jugular. They twitched, and a bead of blood marred the perfect white finish of the knife. Henry wanted to kill the man, no mercy, no chance.

A muscle twitched in his arm and he went for the kill. Only the man, or at least the Dark inside him, was expecting it. Twisting in such a way that Henry heard bones crack, the man pulled his throat away from the blade and flung out an arm. Henry's blade bit into the man's skin and blood poured blackly down the hilt, but it wasn't enough. In the slickness the knife slipped from Henry's grasp. The man flicked his ruined arm again and the knife span into the night, glowing like a far off star.

Henry cursed, grabbed the man by the hair on the back of his head and smashed it into

the cold stone ground. The man went limp, only for a moment, but long enough for Henry to regain his position on his back and lean down so his lips touched the man's ear.

He started to whisper.

Burn, burn foul beast, desire to enslave.

We hold the light to cast you out,

Our morning is your grave.

Burn, burn foul beast, our hearts are not for you.

The dominion of Sun and man,

Is inside each human too.

Henry's voice was the only sound, repeated the stanza over and over. Even the sound of the city fell away, as if the two men had slipped out of phase with the real world. As if they didn't exist.

Then, something else blended with Henry words.

It was the man. He was crying. It started as a whimper, laced with utter terror, but as the man began to breathe, great sobs racked him. Somewhat reluctantly, Henry eased his weight off the man, and stood up. He brushed himself down, tutting at the smears on his black clothing. He froze. Another sound. A gasp.

Henry looked up. There was a girl stood there, no older than sixteen. Her hair was pulled back over her head into a tight pony tail, which hung limply over the band of an oversized set of headphones that encircled her neck like a torc. She was shaking, her unblinking eyes moving from the sobbing man on the floor to Henry.

Henry stared back, utterly frozen. Then he turned and, for the first time in his life, fled into the night, pausing only to recover his knife from the darkness.

#

Henry stood at his window and watched the Sun rise. Warmth poured into his tiny bedsit, bringing with it a pride. After all, it was because of him that the Sun could rise at all. He placed his fingertips to the still cold glass, then rested his forehead against it, staring down at the scurrying people below, busying themselves with their - compared to Henry's - meaningless lives. Without meaning to, he found his gaze shifting to the spaces between the people, the grey slivers of concrete where his mind could roam a little freer. He wondered if the other members

of the Flame did the same thing, if they were surrounded by quite so many that owed their existence to men they knew nothing about. Henry sighed, leaving an oval of misted glass. Henry had been alone for so long they had started to seem like figments of his memory.

Something itched at the back of his mind.

The girl. Once he'd made good his escape he'd tried to forget her. He remembered his training, the voices of the Old Ones booming out amongst the flickering torch light. People didn't want to know the Flame existed. Didn't want to see them, remember them. Henry would be little more than the stain of a bad dream by now, completely gone by the morning.

So why could he not convince himself of this? Why, every time he closed his eyes, did he see her face, her eyes locked to hers? There was more there than just simple fear.

If he didn't know better, he would have said there was a flicker of understanding behind them.

Henry shook his head then, mumbling, grabbed his coat and headed for the streets.

The sounds of the city surrounded him. Cars growled and stalked like wild animals, their horns calling to each other in impatient tones. Voices fluttered around each other as they drifted up into the air like butterflies. A siren somewhere howled like a wounded animal. On the surface it was no different than the soundscape that blossomed at dusk. However, instead of grinding against each other, the sounds now seemed to fit correctly with each other. Instead of hard, harsh shouts, the voices instead ebbed and flowed with each other, a delicate call and response dance. Even the toneless sounds of the nearby construction seemed different, a rhythmic backdrop to this tableau of humanity.

Our morning is your grave.

Henry sweated. He pulled the neck of his long, heavy coat away from his neck in a vain attempt to allow some air to flow. It was too hot. Whilst it still wasn't yet Summer, the days were much warmer than the nights, and his heavy coat and layers of undershirt, shirt and waistcoat were too much. They weren't made to see sunlight. It had been a long while since Henry had felt it on his face. He wasn't quite sure whether he was enjoying it or not. It was too alien, too wrong. He wanted nothing than to scamper back to his tiny home and slide under the bedcovers. To wait for the night. His world.

But he couldn't. He had already tried. There was a restlessness within his he had never

felt before. A piece of grit, somewhere inside him, deeper than flesh.

He knew what it was, and so it didn't even really surprise when, after less than ten minutes of apparently aimless wandering, he found himself back in the alleys behind the workshops.

He was, however, surprised to find that he was not alone.

There was utter silence. Henry slipped his hand inside his pocket and felt for this knife. The ivory wasn't cold this time but it was there. Still sharp.

Whatever happens, he thought. The secret must remain intact. It's more important than her life, than any life.

He wondered if that compulsion was what had brought him back.

The quiet began to strain under the tension. There were little sounds here and there like cracks in glass. Soft, gravelly sounds of the girl shifting her feet. Quiet, tense breaths. Then, shattering the stillness, she spoke.

"You were gonna kill that man, weren't you?"

Her voice was high-pitching, quivering around the edges. The tone was brash, grating. Alien to Henry. There was, he thought, something of the workhouse about it. He didn't respond.

"Is that what you are? Some sort of murderer? You a serial killer or something?"

"If I am," ventured Henry, "Shouldn't you be running?"

The girl kissed her teeth, a sucking sound Henry had never heard before. His only analogue was the sliding of a knife from a body. "Please. There's scarier than you on the estate. Your knife barely even counts. You wouldn't dare."

Henry stepped out of the shadow, a flush of anger hot up the back of his neck. "This knife," he said, brandishing it, "Was handcrafted in the wastes of Lapland, honed during an eternal day by a master craftsman, the skill of whom may never be seen again. Please be under no illusions about what I might dare to do or not."

"Alright," said the girl, not stepping back. "Didn't realise you were one of them nutters. Looking to get a special on Crimewatch?"

"What?" Henry spluttered, barely able to get the words out. "Don't you know who I am? What I am?"

"Clearly not. You know, apart from some nutter who jumps people in the backstreets,

holds a knife to their throat, whispers in their ear and then runs off into the night like a rapist or something."

"I, missy, am Henry Daziel. First Order Knight of the Glorious Flame and commended Defender of the Light Souls. I have guarded this world from the Dark for almost two centuries, and continue to hold firm."

The girl simply looked back, one trimmed eyebrow - complete with spiked piercing - raised.

"In other words, I am the only thing keeping you and everyone else around here alive," said Henry, wanting to leave no space for any doubt.

"Bollocks."

Henry wasn't sure what his response should be. He knew he should be walking away, returning to his little room and waiting for the Dark's next attack, but he couldn't. It wasn't just the affront this petulant youth had made towards his stature, but, deeper and stronger than that, it was the girl herself.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"You what?"

"I said, why are you here? Why were you here last night? This is hardly a thoroughfare, I can't imagine you being on your way to somewhere else. What were you doing here? And why have you returned today?"

For a moment, the girl didn't answer. Then, she said "Who are you to ask? I ain't gotta tell you nothing."

Silence fell between them again like a blanket. Absurdly, Henry noticed that the street around smelt of stale urine. Breathing through his mouth, he narrowed his eyes a little and stared at the girl. Directly into her gaze. She couldn't return it. Her eyes darted about, seemingly tracing the spaces between the pavement slabs beneath Henry's feet.

"You could feel it," said Henry.

Again, the girl didn't answer.

"You did. You don't know why, or what it means, but you could feel it. The Pull."

"I don't know what you mean mister. Now, I might just..." The girl turned to walk away but there was reluctance in her movements. A heavyness. She didn't want to leave.

"I know you felt it, because I can feel it too."

This time, the girl stopped completely. She was now facing completely away from Henry and he could see her mousey-brown ponytail hanging down over her shiny tracksuit.

"Do you know what it is?" she asked.

"I do."

She turned around slowly. She said nothing, but the questions were in her eyes.

Henry puffed out his cheeks and sighed. "It's a pretty long story. Fancy coming back to my flat? I'd rather not discuss it out here in the open."

"No fucking way. I might not be Einstein but I ain't that dumb."

Henry paused for a moment, weighing up his response. He looked into her eyes again and made a judgement of her character. "OK. Fair enough," he said, and then turned away and began to walk.

His footsteps sounded awfully loud and awfully lonely as he did so. The roar of the city crescendoed as he neared the mouth of the alley. His chest tightened. *Have I done the right thing?*

Then there was a presence behind him. Then next to him, falling into step.

"My name's T.Y.," said the girl.

"Henry. Pleased to meet you."

#

A number of now empty mugs sat on Henry's coffee table like terracotta soldiers emptied of their insides. In the centre sat an ashtray - left over from a previous occupant - with a still sealed pack of cigarettes in it. T.Y.'s cigarettes.

Henry leaned back in his chair, drained another tea, and added one more mug to the collection. "There's really nothing else I can call you?" he asked.

"It's my name."

"But it's just so...so..." The name T.Y. bounced around his head in all its absurdity.

"I can't believe that my name is what you think is important here," said T.Y. "After what you've told me, after what you've told me *I am*. And you're pissy about my name?"

"It is the greatest of honours," said Henry, feeling that no more justification was necessary.

T.Y. looked at him hard. "You were really going to kill him, weren't you? Before he knocked the knife away."

"Yes," replied Henry without a millisecond of consideration. "Of course I was. It's the safest way. He was infected, a risk to the world. If the Dark slips away from us, gets loose and blends in, there's no telling what carnage it could cause."

"But it comes back right? This Dark? Once you kill one person it just keeps on coming. Otherwise you wouldn't have been at it for...so long."

"Our job is never done. Every dusk is a reminder of that. We may have wounded it, pierced its bulk with glittering starlight, but it keeps coming back. Night keeps rising."

T.Y. didn't reply right away. Outside, the sounds of the day were starting to coalesce into the afternoon rush hour. A faint smell of the fried chicken shop downstairs wafted through an open window, thick and greasy. Shadows were stretching out across the worn carpet.

"He was sick," said T.Y. finally, in a voice Henry almost couldn't hear.

"Sorry?"

"You said yourself. He was infected. Sick. He weren't the danger, the thing in his head was. The night. Which you can't kill, can you?." T.Y. drew breath but didn't wait for Henry to answer. "So, the man's death got you nothing. It ain't much more than murder."

"Murder!?" Henry spat the word. "Murder!? Have you listened to nothing I've said. About the threat that presses against a membrane a photon wide? About this sacred gift that marks us as one of the Blessed and bestows upon us the honour and duty to defend ourselves. What is one man's death in the face of all that?"

"If life means so little to you, what are you protecting?" replied T.Y.

Henry didn't reply. He considered getting up for another cup of tea but his anger had frozen him solid. This girl - this ridiculous child - was taking the most sacred of duties and treating it as an option. And, no less, suggesting it might not even be the right one. As if she knew better than the power that protected them all, kept them safe from the Dark.

The Dark!

Panic bubbled in Henry as he realised how low the light had fallen.

I should be on the roof. Waiting. Watching. This girl!

He looked over at T.Y. She was looking back at him. There was no levity in her face, no

challenge or disobedience. The colour had drained from her cheeks, her skin grey. She barely blinked.

"You can feel that too, can't you?" she asked.

Henry nodded. Slowly, as if in disbelief. He felt lost. This wasn't how it went. He was never surprised. He found himself clenching his fists so hard that his nails dug little half-moons into his palms.

"Does that mean the night has got someone else?" asked T.Y.

Henry turned on the spot, looking for his coat. "It does," he said. "And it also means that it is time for you to return home."

"Bollocks it does. I ain't going to sit at home feeling like this. I'm meant to be out there, fighting back like you do." T.Y. paused, then, "Well, not exactly like you, but I want to fight it."

Henry found his coat and slipped it on. He was deep in thought. His mind was spooling, looking for the fallacy in her words. There was none. She had the Gift, she was meant to fight. He just didn't want to be the one who did so. She'd already thrown him off to the extent he was already sweating, scrabbling to catch up with events. If he couldn't regain his focus when the Dark took its host, he dreaded to think what might happen.

The coat settled heavy on his shoulders, and he reaching into the inside pocket to check his knife. It was there, already growing cold. He exhaled, long and slow.

"OK," he said finally. "Let's go."

#

This time, The Pull led them to a graffiti stained squatter's den about fifteen minutes' jog away. A foul smell thickened the air as they climbed the steps to the darkened first floor. Henry fought back a cough, desperate to clear his lungs of the stench. It made the building humid, close. Sweet rot permeated the walls. Even in the gloom, he could see patches of rising damp underneath the scrawled lettering on the walls.

The top step creaked as Henry and T.Y. stepped onto it. At the far end of the landing, the red fire-flies of lit joints danced barely two feet from the floor, their owners too stoned to stand. The acrid smell of marijuana mixed with the body odour and rot, and burned Henry's throat. He fanned the air in front of his face, to no avail.

T.Y. tugged the elbow of his coat and he nearly jumped back down the stairs. Battling to ignore his thudding heart he turned to her, and she pointed towards what looked like the faint outline of a door. He checked the Pull within him and nodded. They moved off together silently.

Barely three steps later, they heard the familiar chanting.

A man's voice twisted around itself in ways that should be impossible. Henry felt T.Y. stiffen in the darkness beside him and he took her hand until she relaxed - just a little, but enough. His hand felt strange once he let go - the touch of another person alien to him. He checked his knife again, just to be sure.

The chill from the hilt bit at his skin. They were close now.

They reached the open door. The threshold. The two of them flattened themselves against the the outer wall, Henry closest to the room. He looked back at T.Y. The light was scant, but there was just enough to make out her features. There was fear there - she wasn't good enough to hide the huge amount that must have been flowing in her veins - but there was also something else. Something that it took Henry a moment longer to recognise.

Determination.

It was written in her face - in her wide staring eyes and the clench of her jaw. She was terrified - not only for her life but for the world she knew - but she was going to fight. Because it was her duty. Henry remembered feeling like that.

He touched her shoulder to get her attention, then signalled silently in the air.

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Henry dashed around the corner, moving as quickly as he could into the room. He heard the machine gun sound of T.Y.'s feet on the floor just behind. He lunged forward, into the space from where he had heard the chanting. He roared as he did so, a battle cry.

It cut short. Henry stopped moving and T.Y. ran straight into the back of him. There was no-one there. The room was empty.

Then he heard T.Y. whimper, and then a voice from behind her. A thousand voices, stretched and twisted around each other into some repulsive parody of speech.

"I was expecting you," the man said. The Dark's new host had sallow skin and sunken

eyes, the emaciated body of an addict. He was naked from the waist up, his trousers torn and his feet bare. In the silver moonlight, he looked like a skeleton, eyes hidden in deep pools of shadow.

There was a movement, something unseen, and a shriek. By the time Henry could see what was going on, the Dark had its arms around T.Y. She struggled, but a strength that did not come from the addict's atrophied muscles held her still. One more flick of the man's wrist and a needle appeared, held to T.Y.'s throat. A tiny shadow marred her skin where the point pressed against it.

Henry reached into his pocket and pulled out his knife. It glowed softly, pure white. He held it towards the Dark. It - or at least the body it had taken - winced slightly, and pulled T.Y. even tighter. A glinting diamond ran down the girl's face - moonlight reflected in a tear. Henry looked into her eyes. That same mixture of fear and refusal to be beaten was there.

He looked the Dark in the eyes. There was nothing there, only hatred, only death.

Henry's mind began to spin in ways it hadn't before, looking for answers to questions it had never asked. The Dark knew that he was thinking of something and began to push the needle through T.Y.'s skin.

No time.

Henry held the knife in front of him, one hand on the hilt, one at the far end of the blade. He nodded at T.Y. and fought back the bile at the back of his throat.

Then he broke it.

The knife snapped cleanly in two as though it was little more than firewood. In the flash of brilliant white that followed, Henry saw shadows of every person he'd killed with it. Every wrong decision he'd made flowed out like a waterfall rising to the heavens.

For a moment, the Dark didn't know what to do. It had seen that knife countless times, through countless eyes, and it knew it to be as precious to Henry as his own soul. The sight of him breaking it in two utterly confused it. And gave Henry the opportunity he hoped it would.

He darted forward, spinning as he moved, and pushed his body into the tiny space that had opened up between the Dark and T.Y. Henry grabbed the addict's arm that held the filthy needle, pushing it up and away. The skin felt so thin he expected it to tear. He made enough space to push T.Y. away from the Dark. To safety.

The addict's other arm came round, grabbing Henry by the throat. His breath began to burn. He struggled but the Dark had regained its composure and it was furious. It roared through the addict's mouth, a sound like raging wind, and grasped harder and harder, trying to pull Henry's windpipe from his body.

Pain burned from Henry's jaw to his chest. Black and scarlet closed in at the edge of his vision. The world was little more than shadow.

The Dark would be the last thing he was going to see.

A crash. The grip on this throat loosened and he stumbled forward. The world began to resolve, albeit in monochrome. He knew someone was shouting at him, a voice he recognised. He couldn't understand the words.

"T.Y.?" he croaked. The words were agony.

"I said fucking now!"

Henry turned behind him and saw the addict sprawled on the floor beneath a shattered chair. He was beginning to move and a couple of the wooden shards fell off him.

Henry dived down and began to whisper.

Burn, burn foul beast, desire to enslave.

We hold the light to cast you out,

Our morning is your grave.

Burn, burn foul beast, our hearts are not for you.

The dominion of Sun and man,

Is inside each human too.

It seemed an eternity until the addict stopped struggling, and started to breathe slowly and calmly. Henry stood up. The man was asleep.

"I doubt he'll even remember," he said, as if that might not be a good thing.

T.Y. just shrugged. She was stood in the middle of the room, holding a piece of his knife in each hand.

"It's broken," she said.

"Yes. I noticed," replied Henry.

"But...but how you gonna fight it?"

Henry stepped forward, took the knife halves from T.Y. and dropped them to the floor.

They sounded dull, like bones. Spent and powerless. Then Henry took T.Y.'s hands in his own and looked into her eyes.

"I'm sure we'll think of something."