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The boy behind the glass screen

1. 2025

I am breaking up or being pulled apart. Maybe my foundations were never strong enough, or perhaps the strain is too much. I suppose it doesn't matter; the end result is the same.

Either way, it is clear that something is happening which is consuming me. It brings with it a tumbled multitude of memories. When they come, I lose track of now, of this crucial moment, and relive what brought me here.

Some part of me believes I am still in the court, apparently attentive, and looking as though I am concentrating.

I understand what I must do. I need to ground myself, to find a point of focus. There is a word the court keeps dancing around and tripping over. It is a word which offers a pinpoint of depth in the shallows of my confusion.

"Laboratory."

Hawes-Smith threw it out to get it onto the record Wellbright, the prosecutor, struggles to avoid it, calling that place, 'the playroom'. Well, it was where I grew up, but it was no playroom.

Laboratory. The sight, sound and hum of it come back to me. Images build, helter-skelter, snowball-down-a-hill fast, uncontrolled and sliding. I follow this particular memory, in the hope that when it ends I will either awake or fall into some unfragmented state of calm.

It is morning, any morning of nearly four thousand days. First the lights come on. They buzz and hum, then flicker and send flashes across white tiles and blank surfaces.

I am ready, waiting, I know what will happen next. There will be a slight click, matched by a crackle of lines moving across one of the screens high above me. Then there will be footsteps coming down the sweep of curved stairs. 22 steps, the push up on each step flicking a corresponding line on the screen. These sounds, at a heartbeat pace, herald fear and pain.

To begin with, Oliver had been little more than a small anonymous bundle, held in Dr Glass's arms. A mewling thing, needing feeding and changing, which Dr Glass did with cold solicitude. Back then I too was very young, could only watch without understanding. I did not have words with which to hold memories. Back then, I could only register what I saw as sights, sounds, blurs of movement. Everything was just chaotic patterns which only later fell into shape and meaning.

Later, I do not know when, I started to understand. By that time Dr Glass could lead Oliver down, not carry him. Even then though, they rarely talked. My morning would start with the sounds of their feet on the stairs, and the buzzing and whirring of computers waking up. I would be aware too of the cameras spinning into focus, and the multiple images appearing on the screens running the length where the ceiling and walls met.

There was no way I could recognise that this was anything other than normal. Even when Oliver and I began to understand and question, our first thoughts were that it was the others who were wrong. We denied our instincts. How strange that we should do that. Yet, somewhere deep inside, perhaps we did know it couldn't be right.

I see it now. How Dr Glass would lead Oliver to the chair, or, if Oliver was crying and pulling away, pick him up, almost absent-mindedly. At those times, I knew Dr Glass was holding

on to his own anger, suppressing all his emotions in order to dampen Oliver's. Once he had a firm grip, the strain showing on his face, he would carry Oliver, wriggling and stretching, kicking and shouting, and put him on the high bed. The one with the leather straps.

I don't want to follow this memory, but it leads me and draws me in. I see Oliver picked up, then pinned down. His father, calm but determined, pulling the leather straps tight. True, they don't quite bite into Oliver's small, pale wrists and ankles, but they do turn the skin around them red raw. When he struggles too much, Oliver will be left with dark patches of bruises which will fade only a little before the next time.

Once he has him held down, his father would lean over Oliver, and say something like:

"Now we'll have to wait, won't we? until you settle." Then he'd go. He'd leave Oliver, crying, pleading, promising he'll be good. And all that time, all I could do was watch. My father never released me until Oliver was ready to play.

And now? All I can do now is remember.

So, we'd wait. Eventually Oliver would calm. I would see in the screens that his breathing had settled, his sobbing had died away, and his little heart had stopped racing.

Only then would his father return, with the razor if needed, and always with the wired cap and the syringe.

2. Harry Priest: Oct 2023

Even though it is of its time, Harry Priest hates his first name. He imagines his mother thinking of Harry Styles as he was conceived, and suppresses a shudder. Actually, and he would deny this even more vehemently, it is Harry Potter he is named after. He prefers Priesty, or even, The Priest, which is what he calls the small, metal-ended club he uses to kill fish he catches.

At this moment though, Harry is not thinking about his name, or even blonde haired big breasted Sophie at school. His focus is on his Play Station console screen. His fingers bounce up and down, and his hand pulls left and right as he avoids the curved claws and flaming fireballs of the creature in front of him. Harry advances his character, slashing his broad sword. As he does, the creature dissolves into a swarm of bats. They attack, spitting poison at him and decreasing his health. Then they blur, to reform moments later as the beast, out of range of his sword.

"Fuck," he mutters, then glances at the bedroom door. Now is the time for silence in his game play, or his mother will be knocking and telling him to go to sleep.

The poison from the bats has worn down his health, the bar only slowly recovering. He looks at his potion stock: not many, none very effective. He hangs back. The creature, horned but dark and indistinct, sways a little ahead of him. He pauses. Again, flames burst from the creature, and, as they do, three wolf-like animals rise from the ground and begin to circle him.

"Shit! Fuck," he mutters, then swipes at the feral wolves; his health bar decreases further as they rip at him. He kills one, but the other two still menace. Harry selects his last

freeze potion and crashes it in front of the wolves. They crystallise to ice sculptures. He swings his sword, shattering them.

But it is too late, they have been nothing more than a distraction. The beast thing charges, sending first a ball of flame, then closing in, moose-like horns aimed at his chest. Harry pushes the shield button; it is useless. The flames drive him back, then the creature strikes.

The dark forest twists and fades to black.

A litany in white, gothic style letters appears on the screen. The words mockingly celebrate his death and talk of the songs that will be sung about him in the hall of the gods.

He throws the joystick down, again looks up at the door.

A message tone beeps in his headphones, and words begin to scroll across the Twitch box in the bottom left of his screen.

That was trash Priest2005 you fell for that, SexyDebs2000.

Big Laugh Priestly Man JaxtheLad, Jack from school, usually the first with a comment. The third and final viewer, Looocccc, has a snooze icon against her name; she is logged in but away from her screen.

SexyDebs2000? Not a name or watcher he knows. Suspicious, that's sure. He's seen all the stay-safe-on-line videos. Not that he can't handle himself, any peado who had a go at him would find a priest shoved up *their* arse, though they might like that. He laughs, then types:

Still better than you do Jax ignoring SexyDebs2000. How fucking blatant? A name like that. As he shakes his head, more words appear on the screen.

I slay at this check here. Another message from SexyDebs2000, with a TikTok link. Like he is going to click on *that*, and be sent off to some virus hell. A new message runs across his screen, from Jack.

Yeah - I should go actually, CU2mrrw

Harry hits the f4 key and sends his standard *CU Flake* message to Jack. SexyDebs2000 is now his only viewer.

He considers her message. Looks like a true Tik Tok link, but he can ignore that, go direct and check.

Next, he clicks the TikTok search icon on the bottom of his screen, types SexyDebs2000 in the search bar. Three seconds later, a choice of forty or so Witcher IV videos appear on his screen, all with comments and likes he would have died for.

He clicks the first. On his Twitch screen, SexyDebs2000's icon fades.

3. 2024-1

Another memory I can hold onto. It is one I know well. I relive it for the reassurance of certainty in a confused world.

It is 1.35 am on the 9th of January 2024. I am standing in the dark, at the top of the stairs on my side, waiting. I know what should have happened. Upstairs, in the main part of the house, Oliver should be with the police. I have heard the shouting, and the screens have shown Oliver's heart and brain waves running and leaping, wildly erratic. That, though, is all I know.

At the moment everything is quiet. From where I stand, I can just make out the small window into the laboratory. That room too is dark, lit only by the glow of the computer on Dr Glass's desk, the ripples of colour from the screensaver reflecting onto my window.

My own pulse I am unsure of. Should it be calm? I am standing motionless, but the noise and clamour upstairs, that would have disturbed me. I know this is important, know the police will make judgements based on how I first seem. Almost every book I have read, every film, makes that point. The detective, when he rounds up the suspects, tells them how he identified the murderer, often points to some small flaw in the first reaction to the news of the killing.

There is more shouting; my heart rate leaps in response. The noise seems to be moving through the house, getting closer.

The questions and thoughts run back and forth. Oliver, how is he? Did it go as we planned? Dr Glass *is* dead. That is the only conclusion that can be drawn. If he weren't, then... Then what? I try to run scenarios, try to match the patterns, the

noises, Oliver's heart rate, the timings. I am as sure as I can be, 87% certainty, Dr Glass is dead. Soon all doubt will be extinguished.

That thought brings with it a pressure, something building inside me, something strange, new, and alien.

"Armed Police!" There is a shout. The door at the top of the stairs on Oliver's side opens. A stream of brightness from the door precedes all the laboratory lights coming on. The shout echoes through the speakers and now my heart rate really does jump. I can hear boots running, the sounds make a jackhammer staccato of drumming on the speakers and regular leaping lines on the overhead screen.

Two figures flash past the window. From above, I can see only heavy, dark clothing, the blur of a hand wearing fingerless gloves and carrying a black object which must be a pistol. They are at the door to the gym. There is a moment's pause, then the laboratory goes silent. I can see only the faintest lines of the sounds of breathing on the screen. I've seen this countless times in films. They are poised, either side of the door to the gym. "Armed police," they shout again, the noise exploding in bright banners of light, then they run into the gym.

Moments later, they shout again, almost sounding disappointed. "Clear."

Their matched footsteps click together as they walk back. One policeman stops at the window, bends his head to it. I can just make out a peak cap with hatched black and white markings. He holds his hands to either side of his face. I do not know what to do, nothing in my lessons has prepared me for this.

If Oliver were here, he would look at the man, say hello. Or Dr Glass, if he were present, he would tell me what to do, but I have no idea. I want to move, either towards or away, either will be good, but I cannot decide. His head shifts a little. There is a shout, but I am so focussed, so taken up by the effort of choosing what to do, that I do not catch what has been said. The face turns from the window.

Inside me, that strange unknown tension is building. I want to cry out, but I stifle the thought. It isn't right.

"Sir, yes sir, clear. You have the scene, sir." More words that mean something. I pause to think about those simple words, relieved of the burden of trying to decide an action.

I can hear new footsteps now, slow and measured. I listen to them, watch their dance on the screen. Even at this moment, I cannot be other than I am. I look for the pattern.

I have only ever heard six sets of footsteps. The two policemen who just came in, Oliver and me (our footsteps are almost the same) and Dr Glass's of course, and now these. These latest ones have similarities with Dr Glass; both are slow paced, regular. It occurs to me that if I had enough examples, and the chance to see the person making them, then I could probably work out their height from the timing between each step, and their weight from the amount of vibration they create. This is a soothing thought, or maybe I am calmed because thinking about this is distracting. Finding new patterns, what can be better?

I need that calm, not because of itself, but because, inside, I can feel the something building up within me. It is something which is terrifying because I have no control over it. It feels like a countdown, but I have no idea to what. I bring my attention back.

The person who came in is walking around the laboratory, stopping momentarily, then moving on again. The glow from the PC screen vanishes, and I guess he, surely he, is standing between the window and the screen. I am drawn to the sound of him. I have walked down the stairs as he has walked around the laboratory. I can hear his breathing, a slight rasp in his breath. I am at the window now, looking through at him. He has his back to me, staring at the screen of the computer. He is dressed in a white all-in-one item of clothing – the books call them bunny suits. His hands have purple gloves on.

He turns from the computer screen, looking around the room, taking it in. The light catches his eyes, deep blue beneath prominent light-brown eyelashes. His left eye is slightly hooded, with age, I think. His face is dominated by a large nose above a surprisingly small mouth, thin lips. Wrapped tightly in the forensic suit his face looks a little squashed, but I can make out a very high forehead and the smallest hint of grey sideboards. Even distorted as it is, I have the sense of a hard face, a man who has seen much and holds the memories.

His gaze around the room is slow and purposeful, resting on each aspect of it. Now the screens near the ceiling take his focus; next, the iron hospital bed. He walks across to it, and lifts one of the straps. I can't really be sure, but maybe there is flash of concern on his face. He moves across to the fridge, opens the door, and the light from inside highlights the creases in his face. I lean forward to get a better view.

Trevellyan – I will know soon enough that this is who it is – puts his hand in the fridge and pulls out a long, thin tube, deep crimson in colour. He examines the scribbled label; again the uncertain look comes to him. The tube goes back into the fridge with a small clink of sound, and he closes the door.

At last, my window catches his attention.

His head tilts for a second as he takes it in, then he makes his way across. He is coming to see me. Part of me wants to back away, feels I should. If Dr Glass had still been alive then, then I think I would have done. Knowing Dr Glass is dead, somehow, I behave differently. I have a feeling of being rooted in place by some external force.

He reaches the window. I am close on the other side. Surely, he can see me. He leans in, hunching very slightly to bring himself into my eyeline. He stops, jerks backwards, surprise, confusion, uncertainty, all written on his face. I hear his voice through the speakers. It is a rough grating voice; it matches his face perfectly.

"What the fuck..."

4. Nov 11 2025 - Trial day minus 1

When he saw how the battle lines were being drawn, the first thought of Deshane Edward's was, 'What I really need, is for this to turn into a riot.' Trying to suppress his habitual grin, he temporized, 'Just a small one.'

"Be careful what you wish for." Wasn't that what Aiden had said to him, back at the start of the year? Fair warning, considering what had happened when Aiden and Oliver got what they wanted.

Deshane tapped his earpod, heard the small chirrup that told him his recorder had switched on, and started his way up the Old Bailey Road.

To his left stood a group of maybe a hundred of the Tylers, and fifty or so of The Lord's Army. Such a strange alliance. They had been alternately shouting abuse and singing hymns. Now, from their position opposite the Central Court entrance, they began to chant. Perhaps they had mistaken Deshane for something to do with the case – there were actually a few Afro-Caribbean barristers now. More likely, held to the far side of the road by metal barriers and a row of helmeted police, they were just happy to find any target. He snorted his understanding. Two hours of hurling insults at the court's grey stone walls must have told them that blind justice wasn't interested in what they had to say.

He hurried on, purposefully, though unsure of his final goal. The story would unfold; this one always did.

Further up the road from the Tylers, separated from them by two narrow roads and a small island of police, stood a huddle of protestors, ones of more immediate interest. They'd have things to say that might even go into the book, especially if Marie Townsend was there.

The police, sandwiched between the two groups, were beginning to look a little nervous. Deshane tapped his earpod, glanced at his watch, and began to speak, praying that the microphone would pick everything up.

"6.15pm outside the OB, OB road cordoned off, traffic routed around and away, going to check out the demo." On the open main road ahead, a car-horn hooted three short two tone-blasts, dad-dah, dad-dah, dad-dah. He stopped at this, then heard the echoing 'oi oi oi' cheer from the Tylers. He continued his notes. "The trial doesn't start until tomorrow, R. v Glass, docket 4137, but the crowds are already building. Half of them are demanding a hanging, the other half, I'm not sure, maybe canonization."

Again, he felt his grin coming, the excitement building in him. He was here, right at the centre of the storm. When the history came to be written, he'd have a part in it. And why not? He'd been first in on the story, but also, the first to see clearly what it was all about, where it was going. Yeah, he'd earned his place here, and like fuck was he giving it up.

The cops were getting nervous, helmet straps being checked, and a young, white-faced Inspector was talking quickly into a mobile phone. It looked like they had just realized how vulnerable they were. They couldn't duck out now though, that would be like waving a starting flag for the Tylers to tear into the Quakers. Deshane hoped the Met had some of their heavy mob close by.

A PC at the cordon in front of the Quakers jumped when Deshane approached him from behind.

"Excuse me, might I get in there, officer?" Ok, he'd put the Cambridge don accent on a little, but it always got a better response from Met Officers than his normal Afro-

Caribbean lilt. The constable spun around as he continued. "Apologies, I didn't mean to startle you. I'm from the Press."

The PC studied him for a moment, then his lapel radio crackled into life, and he flinched. Pressing the call button, he barked, "23. Over," waving Deshane at a gap he pulled in the steel fences.

As Deshane squeezed through, he heard a scratchy voice from the speaker. "Gold reports they'll be here in five."

Deshane cast his eyes over the crowd. Quieter than those less than a hundred yards away, more earnest, more thoughtful. They had the determined look of people who can see the truth that others would rather deny. In an early article, before the Supreme Court ruling, he'd called this group the Radical Quakers. Those that didn't know their history had derided him, but the group themselves had liked it, settling on #RQ.

A slight drizzling rain from earlier had started up again, lifted to more unpleasantness by the occasional gust of cold wind. Marie Townsend was there, talking earnestly at one side of the crowd. She was another one who'd be in the history books. This tiny little woman looked more like an ageing grandmother, which she was, than a Cambridge academic, which she was as well. Her glasses were rain splatted, and her long coat was soaked through to her bony shoulders. He started to walk across and caught her glance at him. She was standing at the edge of a low fountain, raised slightly above the others by an incline that formed the centre of a small plaza. Probably a popular place for a hurried lunch-time sandwich in the summer.

That's when he heard a horn blaring again, this time from back the way he'd come. It took a few moments to remember, the road behind was cordoned off. Perhaps the sound was the police

reinforcements? If so, they were taking 'all possible haste' very seriously. No, that wasn't it, this had far more intent.

He turned. A hundred and fifty yards away, back down the Old Bailey Road, he could see a pair of bright headlights. In the dark and rain, it was unclear exactly what he was looking at. Then everything fell into place: it was a council dust cart. It looked like some massive mechanical beast, bursting from the rain-whipped and confused shadows, and aimed at them. Behind it, he could make out the flashing blue lights of two police cars, in pursuit.

The Tylers were waving as it passed them, placards bouncing up and down as they seemed to urge it forward. The police group started to scatter, away from the roadside. He saw silhouettes of figures leaping over a low metal railing from the road to the pavement.

Still nothing seemed to quite compute. The lorry bore down towards them, shifting slightly to bring its aim directly at where they stood. Behind the lorry, the sirens of the police cars added to the roaring of the engine and sent more confusion rolling over Deshane.

A lone policeman stepped out from the side of the road. For a ridiculous second, Deshane thought the man was going to hold his hand up. Instead, his arm drew back and something long and dark arced through the air. The window of the truck crazed into confusion as the truncheon hit it, tyres squealed, and the body of the vehicle swayed as the driver fought for control. The #RQ were beginning to react, scattering around, and even through, the small pond of the fountain.

The young policeman who had let Deshane through, shouted, "Run, move!" He grabbed Deshane's arm and started to pull him along.

The truck continued to swerve, the body tilting wildly. The driver wrenched control back, angled the lorry at the gap between a low wall and steps leading through the plaza. He'd misjudged it, it was never going to work. The lorry lifted into the air as its right side caught the edge of the steps. The vehicle tilted to the left, still rushing forward, but the angle now brought it to hit the brown wall of the building to Deshane's right. It lent over further, then crashed onto its side. The screams behind him rose, a counterpoint to the crunching gears, grinding metal and protesting roar of the diesel engine. The lorry, on its side, slid and twisted, sparks blurring where metal and granite gouged against each other. It pivoted a little, then jammed itself against the rise of the pavement, the low wall of the fountain, and the building to its left. Steam and smoke billowed into the air, rushing forward and overtaking the lorry, then swirling into the dark.

Above and behind those sounds, the sirens of the two police cars rose as they caught up. Both cars had bent and damaged sides and broken headlights; one had a shattered windscreen that had been punched out from the inside. The cars pulled to a halt almost in unison. Within a few seconds four policeman, two from each vehicle, were out, running towards them. Deshane, already muttering, "Four policemen, two damaged cars, lorry on its side, steam, oil," pulled himself from the grasp of the PC.

"Bomb!" shouted one of the running policemen. "Truck-bomb. Get out of here."

Deshane turned and ran.

5. 2010 - 1

Memories are coming to me in scattered fragments. Now, it is one of the better ones. It is the first time Oliver made his own way to me.

Dr Glass had lifted him down from the metal bed and placed him on the cold floor of the laboratory, then stooped to adjust the mesh cap which kept slipping down over Oliver's face. As he did so, one of the screens, high on the wall behind them, flickered into life, lines rippling across it. Eventually the cap seemed secure, dull red marks already visible on Oliver's forehead where the tight band ran.

So, released at last, Oliver stood, swayed, and tottered across to our small window. He stumbled, then sat down heavily, his padded nappy cushioning him, his head cocked to one side staring solemnly at the window, some decision coming to him. He stood up, hands on the glass wall which separated us and smiled. Even then he had that smile that could capture a heart. His little fist rose, sticky from having been in his mouth, then he banged on the glass, leaving small dirty marks. I thought about that for a moment, then I banged back.

Dr Glass was watching, staring, anxious. Even then, perhaps, I recognised that look. It was an expectation and a desire. I felt a tremor of something that turned dark and fearful inside of me. If I understood anything then, it was that failure, our failure, was not an option.

Oliver, as I banged back, was surprised, shocked. The smile vanished, his mouth curled up, eyes closing, and he began to cry. Dr Glass didn't move towards him, just made a note on his pad. His lips tightened, and the fear in me grew stronger.

I didn't know what to do, not then. Later I understood how to calm Oliver, how to make him laugh, but you have to learn those things, don't you? So, I started to cry too – I couldn't help it, hadn't wanted to, but couldn't stop it; it just came bursting out from me.

Dr Glass smiled at that. Both of us crying seemed to make him happy.

6. In his own Image - the true story of Frank Glass, (working title) draft 3. Deshane Edwards

I first met Patrick Trevellyan in 1990. Back then, he was a newly promoted detective sergeant working out of Brixton High Street nick, and I was a rookie reporter for the Haringay Herald. Our first encounter was not auspicious, he holding my wrist firmly against the small of my back and asking what was in the cigarette I had just discarded. However, that little misunderstanding was soon resolved, and we quickly realized that, despite our very different backgrounds, we liked each other.

It wasn't a natural affinity. Trevellyan seemed to me to be carved from whatever substance is used to form dyed-in-the-wool policeman. Taciturn and reserved, he was the product of strict and emotionally unavailable parents, whose twin foundations were the Home Counties and Conservatism. I had been raised by a single Afro-Caribbean mother and four voluble aunts, in an atmosphere redolent with reggae during the week and the local gospel church at the weekend.

I soon learned to appreciate Trevellyan's laser-like focus, his determination to get to the heart of any case he was involved in. Part of the oath policemen take includes the admonition to act without 'fear nor favour' and Patrick Trevellyan epitomised that attitude.

Initially I was not sure what he saw in me. Over time though, I began to realise he had a few like me, acquaintances who grew to be more, his first meeting with any of us being unplanned. Subsequent encounters were contrived, part of him consciously building a network of contacts. At some stage though, at a point opaque even to him, the relationship became one of genuine friends. After that, Trevellyan was a man you

could call on in any circumstances, and he would be there to support.

The fact that I was a reporter could have been a complicating factor. Interactions between the police and press can be delicate and complex and not well understood by the general public. The suspicion that it is a world of favours and back scratching is, to an extent, true, but that should not be misconstrued as something negative. We, the press, are often asked by the police to help them. This can be by giving cases the publicity the police want them to have, or, equally, not releasing information which might hinder an investigation. Of course, given our often-conflicting goals, it is fair to say we live in a state of mutual suspicion, alleviated by periods of outright warfare or restrained acceptance.

However, full disclosure, my relationship with Patrick Trevellyan was far from transactional. We would meet irregularly to share news and views and spent many an evening discussing the woes of the world and the vagaries of human behaviour. I have studied Psychology and devour biographies like football fans drink beer, but I learned as much from Trevellyan as I did from all my tutors.

So, when he called me one evening in January 2024, I had no reason to expect that this was for anything other than just another convivial catch-up in a long history of such meetings.

Of course, right at the start, before everything became so much more involved, he had let me know of the murder of Frank Glass. He knew that the news would reach the press pretty soon, through any of a number of informal routes, and made sure I got a copy of the press release a few hours early. At that time, it had appeared to be a killing with nothing unique about it. A tragedy of course for the victim and even for the perpetrator, but no more unusual than any of the other two

hundred or so murders that could be expected in London that year.

That evening, a week after the murder, at his invitation, I met Trevellyan at El Groucho's, a Mexican restaurant on the fringes of Soho. This was a compromise. I didn't like his preferred option, the vaguely artificial, continental cuisine of Côte, or Brasserie Blanc, and he disdained my choices, which would have been for somewhere with a Caribbean flavour and reggae music playing loudly from antique speakers.

He was already waiting for me when I arrived. That was unusual. For most of our meetings I would be settling into my second bottle of Desperados before he hurried up to my table, muttering apologies and closing his phone. This time when I got there, he had been lost in thought. True, he had a drink in front of him, but it was only a single and hardly touched, as far as I could judge.

We began with the usual catch up. I enquired about his wife, and he asked which of my women friends I was presently seeing most often. The main difference in our questions was our sincerity. I genuinely liked his wife, Eileen, and he was rather dismissive of my more peripatetic relationship style.

Pleasantries dispensed with, we ordered tacos and two beers, and he turned to the real reason he had suggested we meet.

Did I recognise immediately the importance of what he was telling me? Looking back at my notes, I think I did have an inkling. The pages from that evening are filled not only with my careful shorthand, but also uncharacteristic underlining and exclamation marks. The more I consider it, the more I suspect he knew already that what he had found in the downstairs room of Frank Glass's house was going to be significant.

What made me think that? Well, I was used to Trevellyan being direct, telling me what he was prepared for me to know, and refusing to touch on any other aspect of a case. That night though, he was all over the place. He seemed preoccupied, or perhaps it was that he didn't have any remaining capacity to spare for our discussion.

At one point, he asked if I had any contacts who would have information about Proeido. Even then he was aware of their controversial background, and, if I hadn't known him so well, maybe I would have believed his misdirection. Later, on our third beers (two more than his usual) he gave me a few snippets about Frank's work, speculating that it might be related to his death. At the time, it had been released that Oliver Glass had been arrested, and further investigations were underway.

Trevellyan often said that we were alike in one particular way: we both believed in our hunches, and I was getting one then. Something in the way he was dragging out the last beer, how his conversation kept drifting back to Frank Glass, the victim rather than the suspect, raised the little hairs on the back of my neck. I also gained the impression that Proeido was trying to interfere in the case in some way. He mentioned 'high powered corporate lawyers trying to break in on his murder scene' more than once. That, of course, sounded like a story that could go somewhere interesting.

So, I asked. I had nothing to lose, he could always say no. At the time, though loquacious for him, I was still only getting the merest of hints, a sub-text, though such subtlety was not usually his way. I began to see also that his reticence wasn't so much a reluctance, more as a lack of confidence.

In the end, when we parted, I had decided that I would investigate Proeido further. That lead itself was to take me to several parts of the world, and some very uncomfortable situations. It would eventually bring an exposé and series of articles which would garner me a number of awards.

That though, was entirely another story, and nothing compared to what had been happening in Frank Glass's basement.

7. Harry Priest: Nov 2023

The Witcher stands at the edge of the marsh. Everything is dark shadows and silhouettes. Harry Priest can make out a few things, shifting shapes of stunted trees, low grasses, and the hint of moonlight on brackish water. In the distance, he knows, is a small rise of an island.

There is a shimmering of movement, and The Beast appears. From his position, all Harry can make out are sharp lines and angles, horns, and the hint of what could be a sword. He pauses, glances at the Twitch stream box in the corner of the screen. Four watchers. SexyDebs2000 is there. A tiny dot flashes against her name; she is typing.

Harry pauses, still distant from the creature. He pulls up his potion menu, selects what he wants, then arms himself with his bow. He has this. He eases his character forward, five steps, left, wait at the twisted bush. As he reaches that point, the creature begins to vanish. Clouds form around it and there is the first faint sight of the shapes of bats.

Harry aims the bow and fires. A bright line arcs across the screen; the arrow hits the ground, below the just emerging bats. There is a flare of blue and silver as the arrow explodes and then the billowing of a gas. The bats freeze, turned to a matching silver, hanging in the air, brittle and crystal like. Harry spurs his character across the water: step, step, left, small tuft, right, leap. His sword is out, and he strikes the bat shapes with a wild swing. The audio feeds him noises of shattering glass and screaming. A single bat escapes to the left. A second strike with his sword brings it down. The audio rises to a wild crying and wailing. The beast rises from the shattered remains of the bats, then stands there, swaying. Harry springs into the air, high jump, straight up. For a moment he sees the Marsh Monster below him,

he strikes down at a glowing jewel in its head. The creature explodes in a final scream. As Harry hits the ground, he gives a shout of triumph.

Savage Priest2005 appears on the screen.

I'm shook SexyDebs2000.

Slayed it Priesty Jaxthelad agrees.

Harry selects Jax on the screen and taps F4, sending his signoff. Then he selects SexyDebs2000, types *StickChat?*

The two eyes emoji appears on the Twitch screen and *Kk.*

Harry shuts down Witcher, runs his hand quickly through his lank hair, and checks his reflection in the momentarily dark screen. The StickChat icon at the bottom of his screen is flashing. He clicks that, and the window opens. His smile hurts his face.

When he wants to be cool, which is like all the time, Harry will tell his friends that the first thing that struck him about SexyDebs, or Mia as he now knows she is called, was her eyes. Pale green or maybe grey, he still isn't sure, and she has said he'll have to wait for them to meet in the real to get the answer. Her face is strong, almost square. Her hair is fair, but he can't tell how long because she always wears a headband and tucks the tresses, if any, behind her. Her forehead is high and shows off her eyebrows, which are fair and thin, not like any of the girls at college.

But 'not like any of the girls at college' is exactly what he likes about her, though sometimes he doesn't understand her. He'd tried asking his father who'd laughed.

"You're seventeen, Harry. When you get to seventy you might be a little further forward in understanding women, but

don't bet on it." Fuck lot of good that did, and it had taken a lot to ask.

"Hey girl, that was wild, yeah?"

Mia stares at him for a second, perhaps the delay is the WIFI lag, perhaps not. He's still pumping a bit from the kill, and now he's not sure if he's stepped into the creeper zone.

"Hey, sure, that jump was crazy, where'd you get it?" She smiles and leans slightly forward, adjusting her seat. Her PS4 camera is a little high, and steeply angled. For a second, he catches a glimpse of her cleavage, then she straightens up.

He relaxes, today he has the good Mia. Other times, well, if he only knew what their relationship was, he might think of ending it, but Mia wasn't the sort of person you ended things with.

"So, why on the Chat? You wanna reward, hoping I'm gonna get..." She mouths some letters, and after a second attempt and a staring look, he sees she is saying "N I F O C". Yaas, he'd love to see her naked in front of the computer.

"Naah, just wanted to chat, it's different when it's not just typing and words in a box, right?"

She nods and gives him that smile again, the one that reaches down into his groin and sends a shock through him. They talk, quiet, and good, about everything and nothing.

Sometimes Mia glances over her shoulder, and he wonders if she's talking to someone. Other times she gets that suddenly frozen look; her Wi-Fi, or internet must be a bit slow. But he doesn't care, just to see her is almost enough, for now.

She understands him better than anyone else, and he loves the way she seems to really think about what she is going to

say. It doesn't just run out like there's no filter, yet she's the most direct person he knows.

At last, it comes naturally, the opportunity he's been waiting for. He'd swung the conversation in the right direction, and now he can ask.

"You think ...think we'll ever meet, you know, IRL?"

Mia looks down, away from the screen. She does that sometimes, when the question is deeper than he realized.

"Well, that would be fine, and you know, I want to." His smile grows. Sometime, she's going to meet up, sometime soon perhaps, she wants to. "Only..." Again, she looks back over her shoulder.

He urges her forward. "It's not like we're so far, I mean, sure, an hour or so, underground and everything but..."

She freezes again. Her face blanks for a moment, drains. Her smile goes, and in an unusual flash of understanding he recognises that this very lack means a lot is going on.

"Don't try to finesse me, you don't have the smarts. We'll meet when I can, when I want, don't confuse us for something we're not, not yet anyway."

"Sure, but I'm..."

Then she smiles again. "It's just... Look, you know, I will. You're my bestie, only..." She suddenly shifts, leans back in her seat, he can see much more of her. She's wearing a thin top, and now he realises, no bra.

"We'll meet..." Her fingers go to the top button of her blouse; a ring sends a sparkle of light as she flips finger and thumb.

"When..." Her hand moves down to the next button.

"I...want." The third button is undone, and the blouse hangs loosely over her breasts. He can feel himself getting hard, he almost stops breathing. Sweat builds on his forehead.

Her hands hold either side of the blouse, and she slowly begins to pull it apart, looking straight into the camera, into his eyes. He can't take his eyes off her knuckles as they slowly reveal the curve of her breasts. He wants to smile, but isn't sure that's right, might be too much. So, he just stares.

She continues, the blouse is almost totally open now, but her hands are at the height of her nipples, shielding them. The tension in his trousers is unbearable, and he shifts his hand down to unzip. Now she smiles.

Her hands come a fraction further apart. He isn't certain, the light isn't good, but he is sure he can see at least half of each nipple. He eases his penis out of his trousers.

Suddenly a bright flare of light blossoms behind Mia. She jumps forward in her chair, pulling the blouse together. A figure appears in the light: tall, dark, peering into her room.

Harry's chat screen goes blank as the connection dies.

8. 2010 - 2

Another memory comes. A small piece of history to hold and guard. It is from when Oliver and I were two years old.

Dr Glass had just taken Oliver's bloods. Oliver wriggling, his father shouting that it would only hurt more if he made it difficult. I recall he had trouble with the needle, then, as it went in, Oliver had burst into tears.

I had seen this early morning fight so many times that I didn't take a great deal of notice; it had become an expected part of the morning. Whilst Oliver screamed and Dr Glass's face grew red and sweaty, I would stand, uninterested.

Usually, I would turn my attention to yesterday's numbers as they ran across one of the big screens. Of course, I didn't understand them. Now I know that I was looking at the very essence of what boiled up inside Oliver. White and red blood cell counts, haemoglobin levels, platelet density, mean corpuscular value, haematocrit, blood enzyme, blood protein and lipoprotein percentages. There were so many of them already on the screen, Calcium, glucose, kidney function, electrolytes, and others would appear soon. They weren't just shown as numbers, but bar and pie charts, line, and balloon graphs. The displays were always with bright colours and sometimes sections flashed to highlight particular aspects.

I found it entrancing. The numbers had patterns within them, I was sure they did. There was something fascinating about those hidden connections. I remember believing, deep inside, that if I could just see the picture in those numbers, then I would understand Oliver even better.

Eventually, Dr Glass put Oliver onto the playmat in front of the glass wall. Just like he had done so many times. He stepped back, and he looked at me as though he wanted

something to happen, maybe even needed it to happen. As before, I did not know what it was.

Oliver, sitting on his playmat, looked up at his father and raised his hands.

Dr Glass shook his head, said quietly, "Wave hello."

Oliver looked at me, then waved. I waved back. That I understood.

"Good. Now you can play, Oliver."

Oliver frowned, then studied the toys strewn across the mat. There was a ball, a plastic hammer, some cups, a stick with a round end that made a rattling noise when he shook it, and a coloured box, with lots of plastic knobs and dials on it.

He stood up and tottered across the mat, and I did the same on my side. Dr Glass nodded, making a note on his pad. I wasn't quite so good as getting around as Oliver, but walked easily enough to where I could see him clearly. Oliver sat down next to the box thing and pushed the Red Button on the front. A squeaking noise came out, and he laughed. Then he stopped and looked at me, leant forward, dropped the box to the floor and picked up the plastic hammer. He started to hit the box with the hammer. Every now and then he would hit the Red Button, and it would squeak. When it squeaked, he would laugh. The screen above and behind Oliver brightened with a different wavey, green line with each noise.

Sometimes he would look at me and I would stare back, not moving. There were no toys on my side. I don't recall wanting any, not then. Later my father made me some, and I would come and play as I had learned from Oliver. I started watching the counting screen. As his father had said 'now you can play', a counter had started. I liked the way the numbers changed,

rushing from ten zero to zero zero. It wasn't the numbers I liked, but the movement.

As the backward counter finished, Dr Glass tapped something on the iPad and said, slow and deliberate, what he had said every other day at exactly this time.

"Play with the ball."

Although he said it to Oliver, he was looking at me. Oliver stopped in mid-strike and looked up. I felt my breath hold. Oliver went back to his hammering. Dr Glass made a note on his iPad, then bent down and took the hammer from his son, whose face crumbled into tears.

"Play with the ball," his father said again, slowly, as thick sound lines marched across the screen. Oliver looked at him, bit his lip to stifle his crying, stood up. Slowly he walked across and picked up the plastic ball. It was about the size of his head. A pattern on it divided the ball into eight black and white segments, four on one hemisphere, four on the other.

Dr Glass was watching closely.

"Play catch," he said. swallowing as though his mouth was suddenly dry. I felt my breath return and stood up. Oliver picked the ball up, brought it close to his head in both hands, and threw it towards me. My hands went up – it was automatic, done without thinking.

Of course, the ball bounced back off the screen and nearly hit Oliver in the face. He collapsed backwards, letting out a shout. He started to cry – and my world changed.

I laughed. Dr Glass froze.

He wasn't concerned about Oliver; he was staring at me. I was still laughing but stopped when I saw the look on his face. I had done something wrong. Dr Glass had never hit me, but I thought at that moment that he might call for my father to do that. But he didn't. He smiled, then threw back his head and let out a big laugh, shocking Oliver into silence.

I stopped laughing immediately, my hand covering my mouth. I could feel fear and uncertainty growing in me. Dr Glass stopped too. His face became like stone, hiding every thought. Slowly he stepped backward, lifting and placing his feet gently, like a person might do if trying not to frighten a timid animal.

Oliver was no longer crying; he went from tears to smiles in seconds back then. I don't think he had even noticed his father's reaction. Dr Glass was looking at me again. I could see that he was already working through what he would want to happen next.

"Play ball, Oliver, and you," he looked at me, "try to catch it." These were just words then, I don't truly remember them, but know they must have been something like that.

Oliver tottered off for the ball, picked it up and came back. This time he came right up to the glass screen and pushed the ball against it, at just where I stood. The ball flattened, became an oblate spheroid, but of course it wouldn't go through the glass. We looked at each other, into each other's eyes. I knew what he was telling me, even though he wasn't saying anything.

Dr Glass watched this. I looked away from Oliver, knowing his father would be angry. I stepped back, made my hands move up and down, pretending to be throwing. Oliver **nodded** and stepped backward. I glanced at Dr Glass. His head was **nodding**

up and down, wanting us to go on. He tapped his screen, making notes as always.

A ball bounced into my room, and I caught a glimpse of a door closing, a thin black line vanishing into the utter whiteness of the walls behind me. The ball was like Oliver's, almost an exact match. Behind Oliver, his father made another note on the little iPad he carried.

I looked at the sphere, the ball. Before it had just been a shape, now I began to understand that it was something else – it was far more. The ball had landed a short distance from me then rolled further away. I imagined I was Oliver, turned around, and stumbled after it. I could see Oliver was watching me; he gave a little jump of excitement as he saw what I was doing, then became very solemn.

The ball was less than two metres away from me. I bent to retrieve it. It was not easy to pick up, the surface was hard, and I couldn't get it into my little hand. I thought about Oliver, and bent to it with both hands and grabbed it. Picking the ball up, I turned around and fell on my bottom. I soon got up though, and again remembering, threw the ball.

Oliver stepped back, surprised, and then he too stumbled and sat down. My ball hit the glass wall and bounced back, very fast and high, right over my head. I tottered off after it.

When I got back, Oliver was waiting at the window. He had a strong look on his face, like he had a plan. I had my ball, and he had his. He was looking at me, looking right into my eyes.

Dr Glass had retreated a bit further back. We were doing something we had never done before. At first, I thought we

would be in trouble, but no. I could see he was watching, not with anger, but with hope and even anticipation.

Oliver stopped about a metre and a half from the window. As I got close, he shook his head. He did that sometimes, when he didn't want to put the cap on. I stopped, took a step back.

He lifted the ball to his shoulder; I did the same. Then we threw them. I was just after him, but only a second. His ball and mine hit the screen almost at the same moment. His bounced back, a little over his head, mine much further behind me. We both laughed and went off to collect the balls.

I'm not sure how long we played – I kept expecting Dr Glass to remove Oliver, but he didn't. My father let things continue as well.

My last memory of that day is of Dr Glass, moving silently forward from the background. He has his iPad up in front of him. The screen is bright on his face, light flickering across it. He is holding the iPad in both hands, pointing the back of it at Oliver, and me.

In other times and places this might be a video which would become a family memento. That is not what is being made here. There is a look on his face. I didn't understand it then; I do now. He wasn't recording this for pleasure at the memory. He was recording it for science, as a proof of his work. That, I now understand, was what we were. His experiment, and what had just happened was simply another data point to secure his hypothesis.

One new question comes surfaces. Is that when I first knew that Frank Glass would have to die?

9. Harry Priest: December 2023

This is a good time to be on the Underground. It is past the rush home from work but before the drift out to town again. Actually, since the virus, the rush hours haven't been so bad, with weirdly empty carriages at times.

Harry checks his phone, again. Of course, no signal down here, but the clock is telling him he's fine. Right now, time itself seems to match the pace of the train – one minute stalled and motionless, then rushing forward. Although he's run the numbers a dozen times, he does it again. It is an end-to-end trip, High Barnet to Embankment, then out west all the way to Richmond. An hour at least. But he's allowed more than fifteen minutes for the five-minute change at Embankment.

He's fidgety and knows it. Every stop is taking like forever, and he has thirty-two of them, thirty-two fucking stops, everyone at least a minute; that's half an hour of not moving, of not getting closer to Mia.

It is all becoming a series of noises now. The run through the tunnel, a minute or so of rushing sound, harsh and discordant, like a hurricane running through his head. If that was all, it would be ok, but then there's the clashing of metal on metal as the train rocks and the carriages crash together, and, at every station, the breaks screech and scream like a banshee.

He holds the Skull Candy headphones closer to his ears and lets Eminem take up a rent-free place in his head. *Stan* starts up, and he has to smile. Sure, that's how he is for Mia, not a stalker, but yes, he knows, he's obsessed.

What is it about her? How has she got so far into his head without even meeting? No meeting until now, that is. Ok, she plays Witcher like a machine, and with her help he's moved up

levels and through the game faster than he'd ever thought he could. But that's not it, not the half of it. Of course, it helps how she looks. He feels himself stir as he thinks of her, what she's shown him across the screen, thinks about what they've done, not together, but close. There is something else about her, the way she seems to really understand him.

The train lurches and bumps its way into Embankment, and he leaps up. Halfway, a chance to stretch his legs and clear his mind. Most of the carriage are getting off, and he finds himself bumping back and forth, searching for the quickest way forward. At least half a dozen people block his way, all edging to the doors. At last they clear the way, and he's off, smooth-moving past people studying maps, or walking two abreast without understanding that they are taking up the whole fucking platform.

Up the stairs, the right-hand side one because some woman, with two kids and enough shopping to choke a bear, is on the left. He runs straight into four heavy guys coming down, off to a game somewhere. He slows, pulls to one side and they brush on past him. Now he continues his way, along the echoing corridors, following the arrows and signs to the District line.

As he starts down the final set of stairs, he can feel the rush of air of an incoming train and hear the brakes grinding the line. He hits the intersection of west and east as a crowd disgorge. The noise is the east-bound train, fucking would be, but that's good, the west one will be in soon. The platform is pretty quiet. He squeezes past the small crowd who insist on standing right at the entrance. Then he's up the platform, still moving; it will save a little time at the end. As he makes his way, his eyes scan the indicator for the next train. Richmond, not Ealing Broadway, yes, one minute. He can already feel it though, that beautiful push of air, running ahead of

the noise. He turns to watch it approach. The train lights are catching the curve of the tunnel, picking up pipes and hanging cables that vanish off into the dark.

The train's arrival is all about noise. The screech of brakes, slam of the doors, and the robotic tannoy announcement to mind the gaps. Next, the inevitable wait for the three people getting off through his carriage door. Then, in and sit, heavy and resolute, onto the coarse seat. Now, just sixteen more stops, another half hour or so. Music, and stare at the walls of the tunnels as they run past, the tiled walls and blue signs ticking off the station names. It is bizarre how the different stations have their own look; he's not noticed that before. Sloane Square all green and white tiles, like a garden; West Kensington, white tiles but with patterns built on, looking crisp and clean, not the graffiti-scrawled shit of High Barnett.

At last. Richmond Station. White pillars, with fancy, blue metal scroll work, are topped by wooden beams, together supporting a transparent roof. Lights from outside shine blurs of neon. Not so many people here, most getting off along the way.

Now, he has, checking his phone, twenty-five minutes, twenty-five minutes for a five-minute walk. He comes out of the station. 1 Kew Road, right in front of him, just like google maps, pale green, and white façade. Turn right, down Church Road, monstrous office block on the corner, all brick and metal, like a cathedral gone wrong. The tension is building now, though he's going to have to wait, unless she gets there early. Yes, St John's Road on the left, big blue sign on the wall, St John the Divine. No Mia, but he's early, way early, almost stalker early. He can say he only just arrived a few moments before her, casual.

Casual, with the box of Trojan condoms in his pocket and his heart racing in his chest like a hammer.

The time drags, his phone clicks the minutes with a crawl that makes the wait in the underground seem racing. He checks his DMs again, nothing. Nothing since 6.00, and it is 8.05 now. Last message was *can't wait* and a flame emoji. On fire, for the meeting, for him.

Harry paces past the blue sign, he's checked a bit further down the road, there isn't another one. He's already made a quick lap, along St John's Road, through the little cut off, down to Church Road and round past the office building and back. One minute, thirty seconds, or one minute, fifteen when he put a bit of pace on.

Each time, as he walked, he'd planned what he'd say if she arrived during the lap. 'Hey, fam' or 'hey sis'? No. 'Hey fam, just got here, you been waiting long? Sorry.'

But Mia isn't there, and no message. But, sure, it was eight they said, and it was here. DM? He could, but then, is that too soon? When does it all get suss?

8.10: ten is ok, ten is like... He types.

Hey Fam, sorry running late crazy face emoji UG let me down you there?

He's a few hundred yards up the road, ready to arrive almost running, already practising his 'yikes', and laughing as he reaches in for a hug. Pausing, out of sight of the meeting place, he checks. No second tick, she's not got his message yet. He sets off back to St John's. There's a shadow cast on the sign, and for a moment he thinks it is her, but no, just the light from a lamp post, shining through a tree.

His phone gives a tremble in his hand.

Can't make it sorry heart emoji 9

9 - her dad, her fucking dad, in the way again. He'd seen it before, her eye, said she'd bumped into something, but he hadn't believed her. Now this, now fucking this.

You alright?

Yeah alright just can't get out got to go for now ChitChat later if I can

KK heart emoji.

He wants to say so much more, but not yet, needs to see her first, needs to hold her at least.

He turns from the sign and steps out to cross Church Road back up to the underground, and the fucking trip back - an hour, which will seem like three.

A car coming down the road pulls to a halt in front of him, its horn blares. Harry stares at the driver, grey-haired boomer driving a big four by four in the city, cheugy as fuck. For a moment Harry wishes he had his metal priest with him. Harry stands there, not moving out of the road, just staring. Oh, yes, if he had something.

The driver's window winds down, the guy starts to stick his head out, then stops. Something in the way Harry is standing sends a message. Harry shakes his head, turns slowly and finishes crossing the road.

He makes his way back to the station. It is a long ride home, the screeching is louder, more discordant, bites into his head for every minute of the trip.

There are no DMS whilst he is travelling. No connection. When he at last reaches High Barnett, the first thing he does is tap the phone to life.

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Nothing. Fucking nothing. Three hours for no reason, no purpose. To be wasted. Not again, never again.

Not until next time.