

Missing Time
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Elsa was the only one staring at the corpses. Two young black men, their skeletal bodies dumped on the slick expanse of mud by the retreating tide. They'd come thousands of kilometers crammed in the hold of some aging cargo ship, just to die on a dreary Essex mudflat.

Out in the estuary the refugee boats huddled together: an ancient ferry, two cargo ships-- all identifying markings blotted out with dark blue paint--and a host of smaller smacks, barges and rafts. A sleek naval patrol boat and two port security cruisers squatted between the estuarine refugee camp and the mainland.

The people out there meant little to Elsa. Famine, flooding, disease and civil war somehow weren't on her scale. Just things.

But the bodies--friends? brothers? strangers forced together by circumstance?--they were different. They got through to her.

It could so easily be her. Not out on the mud, of course, but dumped in an alley or a skip, lying unidentified in some hospital mortuary.

A big black-winged gull landed by one of the corpses, yellow beak stabbing at the rags, tugging.

She made herself turn, pushed herself away from the concrete flood barrier. The flow of people had eased a little. She'd spent the first ten years of her life in this town, yet now it all seemed so different: everywhere there were new tracts of housing and warehousing, while what remained of the old was decayed, falling apart. But it was more than just a physical transformation: so many people, so much hustle and aggression. The place felt different.

On the run for nearly a month, she had come here as a kind of homecoming, before she left for good.

She should have known there could be no such thing. Home is where your belly isn't always empty and you're not constantly looking over your shoulder. Where you don't have to sleep with a flick knife close at hand. Home was a foreign word to Elsa.

She pulled her parka tight against the bitter April sea breeze. At least the harbor wasn't iced up, as it would have been a few weeks earlier. She was too cold and tired to appreciate the irony that the same climatic upheaval causing famine and drought throughout the tropics was also responsible for the ice greeting the refugees who fled north. The North Atlantic Drift had failed around the time Elsa was born. She could still recall the port's first iceberg.

She stepped over the sprawling legs of the street people, wary of any sudden movement. She knew no one would raise a finger to help her if one of them decided to jump her for her coat and what money she carried. Some things never changed.

All the same, she caught herself surreptitiously eyeing the ragged street dwellers. She had spent many nights in the open in the last month, too cold to sleep, too tired to move, too scared to risk a hotel where she might be traced. This could easily be her future.

But not while she had her wits about her and a few dollars in her pocket. She

pushed through the heavily sprung doors of a pub and was hit by a barrage of smoke, voices, music, warmth. She'd been to the Salvation Army and the YCA hostels earlier, but they were stretched to the limit. "Go to one of the pubs in Church Street or King's Head Street if you've got the money," a matronly old buzzard had told her at the YCA. "They all charge the same."

Elsa pushed her way to the bar. "A pint of Adnams and a room for tonight," she said. "Dollars." The prices of the drinks were chalked on a board in at least a dozen different currencies over the bar.

The barman eyed her. "Three-forty," he said, slopping a straight glass of beer before her. "Seventy-five for the room."

She paid for the beer. "Fifty," she said, the price the old woman had told her. It seemed a lot of money but she knew she'd be paying more if she'd offered euros or pounds, or even deutschmarks. The only official currency was the euro, but it was a long-established fact that money was whatever people trusted and valued. A pocketful of gilders or schillings could be so much junk in the wrong town or the wrong month. Dollars and Swiss francs had been the only safe bets for the last two or three years.

The man seemed about to haggle, then shrugged. "Dollars up front," he said.

She handed over ten tatty notes, which the man examined closely before accepting. It's better than the street, she kept telling herself. It's worth it.

He gave her a card coded to let her into her room for tonight only. She tucked it into her street denim overalls and drank deeply from her beer. She hoped she would manage to sleep tonight, but it was hard to settle with a bomb sewn deep in your abdomen, a bomb you feared might be triggered by the slightest blip in your body chemistry.

Would a dream do it? Dream of Aaron and have the cleaners wiping bits of her off the walls for months to come?

Aaron was a professional bastard. She'd known that from the start, of course. With his brains and arrogant take-on-all-comers confidence he could really have been something. But what he was was a bastard.

Aaron was always on the make, trading favors, cutting deals, avoiding ties of obligation. In a world where most criminal activity was run on the corporate model, Aaron was that rarity: a successful freelance. He worked for any number of organizations, in any number of capacities, but somehow he had always remained a free agent. Riding his luck, playing faction against faction. One time he had told Elsa, "If I'd been Jesus they'd have pinned me to a double cross."

Like all successful relationships, Elsa and Aaron's had been based on mutual use. Aaron used her as a confessor, an emotional anchor, a gofer and a regular, safe screw. Elsa used his money and his prestige. She knew Aaron would never hesitate to dump her if it suited his purposes, but while she had him she was off the street, making a little of a life that had been nothing before she'd picked him up at a lapdancing joint in Nottingham.

He'd been mixed up on the fringes of something big for a month or more before she'd gone on the run. Unusually for him, he wouldn't let her in on any of the specifics at first. Important-sounding phrases: Someone coming up from the

Smoke, Playing with the big boys.

Lying on top of him, curtain of black ringlets isolating them, face to face. "Information's the new currency," he told her. "Forget your Swiss francs. I'm an information banker, just waiting to trade."

"Trade?" she prompted.

His thin walrus moustache twitched as he smiled. "Alwyn Thomas," he said.

Thomas had been Industry spokesman for the Democratic Labour party until he was killed by a suicide bomber the previous autumn. "So?"

"There have been others, too," said Aaron. "Less public. I know about them. And knowledge is money."

Poor Aaron, out of his depth. It turned out that he wasn't the only one trading information: someone had told his London contact that Aaron was looking to double cross.

Aaron often went away without warning. Elsa had learnt not to worry when this happened: he was brighter than most, luckier than almost anyone. He might be on a job, he might be lying low, he might be living it up with some bimbo dazzled by his charm and cash. Probably a cocktail of all three.

He'd been gone for a day and a half when Elsa realised she was missing some time. She was getting ready for bed and her head was pounding, her mouth sandy-dry, her gut hard and aching. She'd had a few drinks and sniffs at lunchtime, but that didn't explain how she felt now. She'd gone to the Trocadero with Lizzy and some of the girls from Megan's. Catching up, realizing how much she had left behind her in the last year or so.

But the afternoon and evening were blank.

She had a shower, soothing away some of the roughness. When she was dry she went through to the bedroom, slid between Aaron's black silk sheets.

As ever, she smelled him on the bedding. It was almost as if he was there beside her, all around her. She felt her pulse accelerating, grew warm, felt the ache in her belly transforming itself, moving downwards. She was hot now, feverish, heart beating so hard it might easily burst out of her rib cage.

She dragged herself across the bed, rolled onto the floor. Crawled across the carpet until, finally, the madness started to subside.

She spent the next four nights on the sofa, fearing the fever that had nearly swamped her that night.

She was at Megan's when Aaron returned, a chance event that saved both of their lives. She hadn't been back to the club for over a year, but seeing Lizzy and the girls--and maybe her taste of madness--had sent her after some form of reassurance, the security of the past.

She was on her third Bloody Mary when Aaron walked in: new Emporio suit, big smile, staring appreciatively at Lauren and Spatz on the revolving stage.

She never knew how she would react when he returned after an absence: sometimes self-righteous, sometimes pathetically grateful, sometimes horny as hell. This morning she felt very little at all: he was back and he was in one piece. Nothing had changed.

He saw her and was clearly surprised that she was here.

As he approached her she felt it starting to happen again: the racing heart, the heat, the ache. She stood awkwardly, staggering. He stepped forward and instantly she threw herself away from him, ran between the tables and out into the sleet and wind of the city streets.

That was the last time she'd seen him. At first she couldn't explain it: all she knew was the madness, the physical certainty that something awful was about to happen.

She turned up at Lizzy's flat late that night, cold and wet and frightened. Slowly, hesitantly, she explained about the madness, about the irrational, yet intense, terror. "You're scared of commitment," Lizzy said knowledgeably. "You don't want to love a man you don't trust."

But by now Elsa knew it was more than that. That afternoon she'd taken a roll of dollars from the flat and bought an x-ray at a back-street clinic.

She pulled her clothes open, made Lizzy examine the new scar on her abdomen: about four centimetres long and so fine it was barely noticeable. "I've had it checked," she said. "The scan showed a device, a bomb. The doctor won't cut it out, though. Says he's never come across anything like it before and it's bound to be booby-trapped. He'd have thrown me out of the clinic if he dared touch me."

When the sweating doctor had told her what she was carrying, she had thought back to Aaron's boast that he knew about the suicide bomber who had killed the Industry spokesman, Alwyn Thomas. The assassination had been live on TV, the pictures repeated over and over. A man, later revealed to be a junior party official, had pushed through the crowd at a press conference. He was carrying a sheet of paper, an apparently important message. He had approached the seated politician, reached out to touch his shoulder and then, in sickening slo-mo, his body had erupted: flesh ballooning outwards, shirt ripping, blood spraying and then, at the heart of the explosion, a sudden ball of flame. Thomas, the assassin and three others had died in the blast. Forensic reports had later confirmed that the device had been carried inside the assailant's body, although no one could--or would--say how it had been triggered.

Elsa knew. Somewhere deep inside she knew. She remembered the pictures. Moments before, as the official had approached, he had seemed flushed, excited. It had been assumed that this was because he had known he was about to kill Thomas--the inflamed passion of the suicide assassin.

Elsa knew how the man had felt, as his body had recognized Thomas's. She knew the fever, the visceral thrill of recognition on a cellular level. The ache in her abdomen.

Lizzy was staring at her, taking it all in. "You have to get out of here," she said at last. "You can't trust anyone around here: that doc'll have split on you already. You got to go."

She meant immediately. Seconds later, Elsa was alone in the street. All she had were the clothes she wore and the roll of Aaron's money in her pocket.

She woke in the early hours in a room barely large enough for the bed, dresser and basin. Gulls cried outside, and she remembered the two dead refugees.

She'd survived another night, at least. She supposed she should be grateful.

In her time on the run she had done what she could to confirm her conclusions. Thomas had been under investigation by the Fraud Squad for several weeks before his assassination. Something to do with the Skids gang which ran most of London's East End. Aaron had been working for the Skids.

There were a couple of other cases officially linked to the Thomas assassination, both tied up with organized crime in the south-east. Both had been suicide bombers, the killers having some passing connection with the victim which had ensured access. Newsgroups on the Net mentioned another half dozen or so killings, and were full of speculations. Suicide bombers were traditionally from the Middle East, so inevitably rumors centred on some extremist religious involvement. But money was the western religion, Elsa knew.

She felt intimately linked with the so-called suicide bombers. Had they known what they were doing? Or had they, like Elsa, experienced some missing time in the days before their end?

She went out into King's Head Street, which was slick with ice. She would go to the ferry terminus today, get a ticket for the Hook or wherever the fuck the first ship out of here was heading. Her first priority was to get as far away as possible from Aaron and all the shady double-dealing that had led to this. And her second was to find someone who could cut the bomb out of her belly.

Aaron was waiting at the terminus.

The sterile concourse was in stark, antiseptic contrast to the chaos outside. No begging, haranguing street people, no rumbling buses and whining, programmed convoys of citicars, no smells of sewage, biodiesel and decay. The concourse was spotless, with its geometrically arranged seating, its wall-sized screens running adverts for the shipping line that owned the port. Shops--an Oddbins, a John Menzies, a Virgin, a Murasaki Joe's--occupied the space by the check-in desks. The only thing the concourse shared with the streets outside was the press of the crowd, although here the masses were kept pliable by the wash of Muzak and the cloying scent-mosaic of the nozak. Here, middle income families waited patiently to be summoned to their ferries for their annual holidays while others, clearly distinguishable by their cluttered belongings and fugitive looks, were leaving for good; heading, no doubt, for some other part of the EU where work might be more freely available.

All these families, so eager to get away, while a kilometer out in the estuary the refugees waited, waited, desperate to break in.

Elsa headed for a travel desk to buy her ticket. There was a ferry due out this morning, going to Hamburg. Before her mother had died she had taught Elsa some German. Erbe, she had said--it was Elsa's heritage.

Aaron was sitting at a table in a concourse coffee shop. She drew back sharply. He hadn't seen her; he would, though, if she moved to get on a ferry. Just the sight of him sent her pulse racing, brought a flush to her face. She wondered how close she would have to be to him before it happened.

How had he traced her? As she turned sharply away before he could see her she cursed her own naivety. All the ports to choose from, so why had she come

here? She had been trying to avoid the refugee problem--she had thought that was restricted to the south coast. And there was the homecoming thing: one last look at her childhood town before leaving for good. Was she so transparent?

Outside, she found a covered bench with a view out over the docks. In years past tourists would have come here to watch the shipping. Now it smelt of piss and was clearly used by the street people for shelter.

She sank her head into her shoulders, savoring the warmth of her coat.

She would never have expected Aaron to be so patient. It was late in the afternoon when he finally emerged from the terminus. He paused to survey the crowd, then went across to a citicar, slid a card through its reader and climbed in.

Hurrying, Elsa did the same. She hated using her card, thinking, as the door clicked open, of all the messages flashing from hire company to bank to consumer preference monitoring agencies to godknowswhere, saying Here is Elsa: she's spent two euros and rising for a citicar.

She swung the wheel violently and the little electric car, moderating her excesses, pulled out and tagged neatly onto the end of a bumper-to-bumper convoy.

How could she hope to follow Aaron like this? Ahead, at a junction, she saw a car peel away from its group and join another. Was that him? She couldn't be sure. She had best stay in her convoy. She clung to the wheel, blindly following at a sedate twenty.

Heading out of town, she studied a Trafficcontrol map projected onto the windscreen. Aware that she wasn't local, it had highlighted the hotels and other features of interest. She didn't know this fringe of the town; it had all sprung up in the last fifteen years.

The convoy she was following split at the next junction, a dozen citicars peeling off to enter a plastic-domed leisure complex. The Trafficcontrol said there were three hotels here. She took the plunge, peeled away.

Aaron climbed out ahead and Elsa cowered in her slowing citicar, suddenly aware that she would be trapped if he saw her now.

He turned away, headed off through an avenue of lemon trees. Elsa realised she was shaking.

She climbed out. The air was still in here, the spring sunshine filtered through the plastic dome. She smelt flowers, heard gurgling water, bird song, the gentle hum of voices. More manipulation of the senses: piped scents and sounds for the sensually challenged.

She removed her coat and followed Aaron through the sparse, monied crowds and the tastefully landscaped grounds. Shortly, he disappeared through the ever-rotating doors of a Mr Motel.

Immediately, Elsa turned and left. She knew where he was staying, she knew where to avoid.

Back in town, she booked into an old-fashioned dockside hotel. Having already

used her card for the car, she used it again, deciding it added little to the precariousness of her situation. She would save what remained of the cash for when she really needed it.

From the security of her room she called the Mr Motel, asked for Aaron.

Moments later, his face appeared onscreen. Guarded, wondering who it was that was calling him with their own video channel blanked out.

"Aaron?"

He recognised her voice and relaxed.

She thumbed the button, let him see her.

"El," he said. "I came after you. I couldn't let you just go like that."

"I had to," she said. "I was being used to set you up. I . . . I had to go."

"I know," he said. "Lincoln told me you knew."

"Knew?"

"About the Skids, El. Poking your nose where it didn't belong. You stirred up a hornets' nest, babe. Lincoln told me the Skids are out to get you, so here I am: your guardian angel."

Poor Aaron. Out of his depth. The Skids had known him far better than she had. She had him down as an emotionless bastard but they had known: they'd known he would rush after her like some dumb knight in armour if they told him she was in danger. "You've got it wrong," she told him. "They didn't need to send anyone after me--all they had to do was send you."

He didn't understand. She explained--about the missing time, her night madness, her suspicions . . . about the device shown up on her x-ray and her research into the other suicide assassinations.

He stared into the middle distance, tugging absently at his moustache. "I knew all about the hits," he said. "That's why the Skids want me out of the picture. But"

His brain was racing. Elsa waited.

"I'd heard rumors," he continued, "but I didn't really believe them. What you've got, El, is not just a bomb--it's a bomb with a detonator that samples the air in your lungs, tasting it all the time. Just waiting for a particular scent signature. And when you breathe in a lungful of Aaron, its ker-boom time!"

He smiled. He didn't seem at all put out by this development.

"What are you thinking?" asked Elsa. She could see the dollar signs in his eyes, flashing like twin neons.

"You're valuable, babe. Don't you see? What you're carrying is worth a fortune. That's why Lincoln fed me the information that you were here. Two birds with one blast."

She thought about it. Whatever it was they'd put in her belly--the bomb, the detonator-- was revolutionary. The potential was frightening. The Skids had

probably lost interest in Aaron: it was Elsa who was in possession of their secret. It was Elsa they wanted dead now.

"I know some people," Aaron was saying. Aaron always knew people. "A syndicate, based in Jakarta. We could retire on this, babe. Just leave it to me: I'll get you out safely, fly you to Jakarta, book you into a clinic. We sell what the Skids have put in you and we're rich for life. Just sit tight, El. I'll set it all up." He smiled, added, "And listen: just stay clear of the Mr Motel, okay?"

She lay on her bed for a long time, listening to the gulls crying outside.

Why should she trust Aaron? All he was after was the money. He wanted what she was carrying, that was all.

But he'd come after her, he'd wanted to save her life, even after she'd run out on him. She would never have suspected him of an act like that.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't decide what to do. She'd never trusted Aaron in their year and a bit together, so why start now? Just because the bastard maybe loved her?

She went downstairs.

The lobby wasn't as crowded as before: two families, reading magazines and playing gamedecks, a couple having aperitifs before going on into the dining room.

There was a woman at the desk--booking a room, Elsa supposed. She wouldn't have paid her any attention--tall, angular, cropped hair, nothing unusual--but . . . there was something odd, something compelling.

Elsa swallowed, making herself stay calm. Casually, she walked past, brushing against the woman, hurrying away.

There was no mistaking it: the racing heart, the burning heat. The woman reeked of Aaron. Elsa thought back to the phone call: was there something in Aaron's behaviour, his sideways glances? Had he been alone in that motel room or had this woman been with him?

And what was she doing here?

Elsa hurried out through the swing doors. Cold air hit her like a hammer blow. Had she been imagining it? She eyed the people all about: how many carried something deadly inside them --a virus, a budding tumour, some 21st Century toxin? Every one of them a potential, walking bomb.

Voices behind her . . . the woman, staring out through the glass.

Elsa knew why she was there, why she had come to the hotel. Protecting Aaron's retirement.

She cut across the flow of the crowd, leaving a trail of cursing, raised voices.

She came to a concrete barricade: the flood barrier. She clambered over it. There were fewer people here, she could run faster.

The woman wasn't alone: two men were running alongside her. The three were pacing her, Elsa suddenly realised. When she tired and dropped, unable to fight, they would still be there, ready to pounce. Maybe they were frightened of her. Of what she carried.

Over to the left, a citicar was keeping pace too, driving on manual so it wouldn't get tagged onto a regimented convoy.

It was Aaron, she realised. He had to be there, had to see what was happening.

With a sudden leap she was up on the floodwall, then down onto the pavement. Progress was harder here, impeded by the crowd. But she knew this road: there was a junction up ahead.

She watched Aaron's face cloud as he lost control of the citicar and it slowed to wait for a slot in the traffic.

"Aaron!" she cried. He looked up. "I'm coming to get you, Aaron, you two-faced bastard!"

He went pale, he wrenched at the door of his stationary citicar as she sprinted towards him, her arms spread wide to embrace him.

She'd never seen him run before. For once in his cheap, shabby life, he had no style. His legs pumped madly, arms swinging out of synch. The man had no rhythm.

She was catching him easily, aware of the confusion behind her. Aaron's little snatch squad were clearly torn between stopping her and getting the hell out before she caught up with their boss.

Aaron looked back, stumbled against the flood barrier.

She wondered how many of them she'd take out in the blast.

He raised his arms to defend himself, wrapping them pathetically around his head.

She ran straight past him, up onto the barrier and over to the Promenade. He wasn't worth it. She reached the edge, threw herself off.

The water was cold and her body reacted instantly, and started to swim.

Egbe gave her a plastic bowl of UN rice. She reached out from under the blanket, smiled in gratitude. Some of the people here clearly hated her but some--like Egbe, with his mad smile and his stumbling English--had accepted her, another fugitive among so many. It was Egbe and his sister, Latoya, who had hauled her out of the brine, wrapped her in their blankets until the chill in her bones had subsided. Egbe and Latoya who had initiated her in the ritual queuing for UN handouts as they bided their time in the estuary.

"We going," he said now. "Moving on out. Try someplace else."

Looking back, it had been her only option although, at the time, all she had wanted was to get away, leave it all behind. She would never have evaded Aaron again, they would have been prepared. And what about this mysterious Lincoln and his gang? Aaron had been right: she was valuable. She had to get away.

Her bowl was empty in seconds. "Where to?" she asked.

Egbe shrugged. Some other port--they were all the same. He didn't care: as long as the UN rations were delivered and there was some land visible to offer a shred of hope, he would be content. It was better than what he had left behind.

Elsa, too, was content for now, safe in this wandering city of the coastal waters. Maybe one day she would turn herself in to the UN aid force, see what they could do. Either that or resume her journey. Get free of here somehow and head into Europe. Switzerland, perhaps: that economic island within the sprawl of the EU. The Red Cross was based there: maybe they would know what to do with what she carried within.

She raised her blanket, let Egbe creep in beside her. "I'm valuable," she muttered, remembering Aaron's words.

He put a hand on the flat of her belly. "Sure," he said. "We all valuable, baby."