



# WHAT HAPPENED TO RHODRI

a horrifying short story by

## CRAIG JONES

What Happened to Rhodri  
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Cover Art by Terry Wright

Edited by Terry Wright

ISBN: 978-1-936991-02-0

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Rhodri sighed and looked around the drab apartment with its ratty carpet and peeling paint walls. If he had to spend one more month in this dump he would go insane. “I can’t believe you’re not more excited about this!”

He slid the realtor’s flyer across the kitchen table to his girlfriend. “After all this time, it’s finally on the market.”

“I-I don’t know, Rhodri—”

“It’s our dream house, babe.” He took Kelly’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “How many times have we driven past it and said it’s going to be our forever house, a wonderful place we come home to each other every day?”

Kelly turned the flyer so it faced her. The photograph of the house and the words describing it must have been a blur through her tear-moist eyes.

“The place where our kids are going to take their first steps,” he implored. “We can get married, do all the things we’ve planned.”

“I know.” Kelly squirmed like a nervous child in her chair, her voice a whisper. “But—”

“Then why aren’t you jumping for joy?”

“It’s just that—”

“We can afford the monthlies. I’ve checked. Okay, the down payment will take most our savings but—”

Her sob stopped him. He dropped to his knees next to her and wrapped both her hands in his. “We can do this.”

“We can’t.”

“We can, honestly, we have enough savings.”

“There are no savings, Rhodri,” she blurted out. “Well, not as much as we need.”

Rhodri shot to his feet. Confusion swam like hungry eels in his brain, making his head hurt. “What are you talking about? Every month we’ve made the deposits. Ten thousand dollars...”

“Ross got in trouble, he owed—”

“Your brother? You’ve given our money to your brother?”

“He needed it...life or death, he said.”

Rhodri turned and crossed the kitchen to the window while fumbling in his pockets for his Dad’s old Zippo lighter. He flipped it open, flicked it to flame, and then closed the lid. “How could you?”

“He said it was a loan,” Kelly said hoarsely. Tears streamed down her face. “But he won’t pay me back.”

Rhodri flipped the lighter lid open again.

*Kelly. Kelly. Kelly. What are we going to do now?*

Open, closed. Open, closed.

*Ross, you piece of shit! How could you rip off your own little sister?*

Open, closed. Open, closed.

Somewhat calmed by the repetitive motion of flicking the lighter, he took a deep breath and slid the antique back into the safety of his pocket. Ross had duped Kelly. Now it would be up to Rhodri to get the money back. It would be her boyfriend against her brother. No wonder Kelly was crying. He turned round and reached his arms out to her. “It’ll be okay.”

Kelly pushed the chair back and climbed to her feet. Unable to meet his gaze, she walked to him, head down, and let him take her in his arms. “We’ll save up some more.”

“I’m going to talk to him,” he said, kissing her forehead.

She stiffened in his embrace. “No! Please don’t!”

“I’ll get the money back.”

“You don’t want to make him mad.”

“He’s family.”

“He’s dangerous!” She pushed out of his arms, staring up at him with a look that begged

him not to go in harm's way.

"Then what? We write off ten grand and just go on living in this hovel?"

"This apartment is not a hovel, this is our *home*." Now it was her turn to walk away.

"Just let me talk to him. See if he'll pay back the money right away. What's the worst he can do? Say no?"

"Please, Rhodri. You don't know what he's like when he's angry."

"He's got our money, that's what I know."

The doorbell buzzed.

"Oh, and here he is now, probably just needs a few hundred bucks this time! You know, to feed his habit."

"Rhodri, don't say that!"

He pulled the lighter out again.

Open, closed. Open, closed.

*She always defends Ross. Even now...when she's his victim.*

The doorbell buzzed again: once, twice.

Kelly wiped her eyes and rushed to the door.

Rhodri flicked the lighter and shook his head. *If it's Ross at the door, I'll confront him here and now.*

"Hi, come on in," he heard Kelly say.

"You've been crying. Have I come at a bad time?"

Rhodri recognized the voice. Not Ross. "Yes you have, Craig," Rhodri called, stowing the lighter once more. "But now that you're here, maybe you can talk some sense into her."

Kelly came back into the kitchen followed by Rhodri's best friend.

"Bud, what's up?"

"Ask her?"

Craig gave her a look, his brows tweaked with concern. "Kell?"

She shrugged.

Rhodri said, "She's given our savings to her brother."

"Loaned!" Kelly insisted.

"Sorry, she's *loaned* ten grand to Ross. And now our dream house has come on the market. We're screwed."

“That house?” Craig picked up the realtor’s flyer from the table. “The one by the lake?”

“And we’ve got no down payment,” Rhodri said. “I’m going to see Ross, get the money back.”

“Whoa, bud! We’ve been best friends for a long time, right, so trust me when I say don’t mess with him. He’s a fucking nasty piece of work.” He stopped, drooped like he’d misspoken. “Sorry, Kell.”

“I can reason with him,” Rhodri said.

“You’ve got to listen to Kell and me. Leave him alone.”

“I’m not going to throw punches, I’m going to talk.” He snatched the flyer from Craig. “That’s all.”

“There’s no talkin’ to Ross, man.”

“He’s holding our dreams hostage, our future. What do you expect me to do?”

“Let it go.”

“Yes,” Kelly said. “It’s only money. We’ll save more.”

“It was just a loan, huh?” Rhodri stated matter-of-factly.

“I don’t want any trouble.”

“Neither do I,” he whispered, kissing Kelly on the forehead. “I love you, babe, and this is our dream. No one should take that away from us.”

She took the flyer from him and looked at the picture of the house. “I love you too.”

“I won’t be long.” Rhodri picked up his keys and headed for the door. “Craig, you’ll wait here with Kelly, right?”

“Don’t do anything stupid, man.”

“It was stupid to give him the money in the first place.” He stepped outside and slammed the door shut. Walking to the car, he dug out his faithful lighter.

Open, closed. Open, closed.

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Rhodri sat in his car looking up at the block of apartments, the lighter still in his hand.

*I can do this. I can sort this out.*

Open, closed. Open, closed.

Ross was not one to be told what to do by anybody, let alone his sister’s boyfriend. They

had never got on, but Rhodri had hoped it was just Ross being protective.

But it was more than that.

It was like the bully was always on the lookout for a fight, and playing the big brother gave him the chance to mark his turf.

And *big* was the key word.

With no time for a proper job, he spent far too long in the gym and grew arms bigger round than his own legs.

Rhodri flicked the lighter shut for a final time and got out of the car.

*Can I really do this, confront the bully and get our money back?*

The more he thought it through, the more likely end would be him going home with his tail tucked up between his legs.

*I have to do this. For me, for Kelly, for the life we're going to have in that house.*

The lift, of course, was out of order, and after trudging up eight flights of stairs, he was breathless by the time he knocked on Ross's door.

"What?" came a bellow from inside.

"Ross, it's Rhodri. I need to speak to you."

"Go away."

"It's about your sister."

The door flew open. Ross's scarred face came nose to nose with Rhodri. Alcohol breath tainted the air between them. "What about my sister? Where is she?"

"Can I come in?"

Ross stepped aside, but just a little. "What's your problem?"

Rhodri had to edge his way between Ross's bulk and the doorframe to get into the cluttered hallway, shoes and laundry and unbagged trash. Ross pointed, a cue for Rhodri to go into the kitchen. The bully followed him. Dishes were piled up in the sink, and half-eaten boxes of takeaway food were scattered across every surface.

"What's so important you gotta screw up my housecleaning day?"

"Right," Rhodri said, thinking this place had never been cleaned. The smell alone would make a rat flee.

"Spit it out, boy!"

"Umm, it's about the money Kelly loaned you. We need it back soon, and I was

wondering—”

“That was Kelly’s money,” Ross shouted. “Fuck knows what it’s got to do with you.”

Rhodri blinked. He suddenly didn’t know what to say to someone so intimidating. Overbearing. Even frightening. “A-actually, it was OUR money,” Rhodri barely managed to say, his throat was drying up so bad. “And we need it for a down payment on a house.”

“God, you think you’re so much better than me, don’t you?”

“Ah, no, what...?” With trembling fingers, Rhodri took his lighter out and fumbled to flip the lid open.

“Why can’t you keep renting like the rest of us?”

Open, closed. Open, closed.

Ross pointed at the lighter. “And what’s with that bullshit? Too fucking nervous to front it up with me, so you fiddle with your little toy.”

Rhodri’s dry throat seized. Ross had found a weakness. “I-it’s just a lighter.”

“You don’t smoke!”

“It was my dad’s.” Rhodri pocketed the lighter, hoping to appease the lunatic. “The point is—”

“The point is fuck off!” Ross pushed Rhodri in the chest, sending him backward and banging into the wall.

He kept his feet and ducked a wild haymaker. “It’s our money.”

Ross stepped in and threw another punch.

Rhodri managed to block it. He knew he had to run or take a hammering, but he had to get the money from the bullock who just kept coming at him.

*What’s he going to do, kill me?*

“I never liked you foolin’ round with my sis, anyway.”

Rhodri made a break for the hallway.

Ross snarled like a mad Doberman as he pursued him down the hall. “Always looking down your nose at me, thinking you’re better, you’re nothing more than—” He slipped on a stray rubbish bag and fell on his back, tailbone first. “Uhhh!”

Rhodri saw his chance and landed a kick square into Ross’s testicles. He writhed on the floor, clutching his groin and squealing like a pig.

“Where’s our money?” he shouted at cut-down-to-size Ross.

“Fuck you!” Ross moaned.

Rhodri heard the door open behind him, turned, saw a baseball bat coming head-on, and then nothing.

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Rhodri blinked. If he was awake and not still deep in a revitalising sleep then this was the darkest place he had ever been. He blinked again, freeing the eye gunk from his lids, confirming that he was awake.

“Definitely awake,” he muttered, his throat dry, his voice husky.

Lying flat on his back, he moved his eyes from left to right, up and down. Whatever kind of room he was in, there wasn’t a chink of light to be seen, not under a door or through a narrow crack between the curtains. Bracing his elbows on the cushy surface he’d been sleeping on, he pushed himself up toward a sitting position, but his forehead smashed against something hard, not six inches above his face, and his head plopped back down on...on a pillow?

“What?”

He tried again, colliding once more with whatever it was above him. His forehead gushed out something that ran into his left eye. He sagged back down and brought the fingertips of his left hand up to examine the damage. A gentle probe revealed a wet, sticky substance clinging to his skin.

*Great! I’m bleeding.*

Rhodri lifted both hands in front of his face and pawed upwards for whatever his forehead had struck. He felt a surface smooth as glass.

*...like a mirror?*

Silky billows framed the smooth edges.

“Shit!” His gravelly voice didn’t sound like his own. “What kind of joke is this, Ross?”

He spread his legs out to the left and right, but not much, because his shoes collided with soft walls.

His heart started pounding. He was in some kind of box. Panic surged through his body. He stretched out his feet until they touched another barrier, and when he pushed against it, his body slid upwards a couple inches, until the top of his head collided with another invisible wall, confirming his horrifying suspicions.

His breathing rate suddenly multiplied. He drew in huge gasps of air, air that was probably in limited supply. His chest pumped up and down, and piston like, his hands clawed at the material surrounding him, ripping and tearing the fabric with fingernails that had grown long and jagged. He was desperate for some clue to an exit. There was one thing he knew for sure.

The bastards had buried him alive.

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Finally, he lay still in the darkness until his chest stopped jack-hammering and the trembling in his fingertips had ceased.

*If only I had some light to see...*

“My lighter!” he said and began patting himself down with his hands, hoping beyond hope that he’d be able to throw a little light on his situation.

It was only after he’d checked both inside jacket pockets that he realised he was wearing a shirt, tie and a suit coat.

*What the hell is Ross playing at? Why would he bother to change my clothes?*

And then he sighed, the sound of a slow sink into despair. *My lighter won’t be in these new clothes.*

He began his search over again, but this time violently. It was the work of a man afraid for his life. His fingers dove into places he had purged just seconds before.

The jacket pockets were empty, no wallet or mobile phone. He rammed his hands into his trouser pockets, and his right hand felt the lighter: metallic, cold to the touch, and perfectly smooth. He pulled it out, salvation in his grasp, or doom, he wasn’t sure which.

Holding his breath, he trusted his sense of touch to open the lighter and spin the flint. A spark shot out, so bright it startled him, and he dropped the lighter. The lightning-bright flare remained etched across his retinas.

“Shit!” He groped around in the space between his torso and his confines until he found the lighter. It had flicked shut. He opened it again, carefully rolling his finger along the flint wheel once more. This time the flame took and fully illuminated the small space he occupied.

He was surrounded by gaudy purple cloth. The tux he wore had a wilted red rose pinned to the lapel. Shiny shoes, toes pointed up, wingtips for sure.

All Rhodri could think about was how had Ross, the twisted bastard, come up with such

an elaborate coffin in which to bury him alive?

*Why hadn't he just wrapped me in plastic and buried me in a shallow grave, someplace deep in the woods?*

None of this made any sense.

Rhodri feared the lighter flame was consuming too much of the oxygen inside the casket, but he took a second longer to glance up at the smooth surface his forehead had struck earlier. He wished he hadn't. He wished he'd snuffed the flame.

Instinctively, he lashed out with his fist and smashed the face staring back at him, those round eyeballs, deep sockets, and sunken cheeks of a creature that had come straight up from the depths of hell. The face shattered. Shards of glass rained down. The lighter fell. The flame died.

And in the darkness, Rhodri screamed.

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The moment his scream was over, Rhodri regretted using up so much of his air supply in one go. He gathered the lighter from the remnants of the glass and stuffed it back inside his trouser pocket. He dug around in the broken debris until he found a shard large enough to grasp in his fist.

*I'm either going to die in here or die trying to get out.*

He forced himself to push the face he had seen out of his mind. He was scared enough without dwelling on that devilish image.

*He's already waiting to drag me through the gates of Hell.*

Steeling himself, he pointed the sharp end of the glass fragment upwards and began to jab at the wood above him. With each stab, the force he generated became stronger. During each second, he imagined more and more that it was Ross's body he was stabbing, blood spatter raining down instead of wood dust. Kelly would be sad, but Ross had to die...

*Kelly. Kelly. Kelly.*

He found another glass fragment, and now with both hands, he pummelled his coffin lid to splinters until lumps of wood started falling into his eyes. The hacking noise thudded around the tiny confines of his would-be tomb, but he heard the laughter of the woman he loved, his words as he proposed to her, her sweet voice as she talked of their future together.

*Kelly I'm coming home.*

His arms refused to give up; they would not fail him.

*We're going to have our forever house.*

The wood showering his face changed to soft, moist earth.

*We're going to raise a family in that house.*

He spat mud and increased the circumference of the hole he'd created, breaking boards with his bare hands and letting in a gush of mud.

*But first he was going to kill that bastard Ross.*

He scooted his body to the side and pushed the mud down towards his feet, freeing more space above him to squeeze into. As he worked and wriggled to create more room for himself, he refused to give in to the crushing confines of the mud. He battled to keep the word *suffocation* out of his mind, but it kept creeping back, sneaking in despite the lack of air, despite the fact that he was holding his breath longer than seemed humanly possible, for that was the strength of his hope, his will to live, his determination until finally, finally his right hand surged up through the surface and grasped only air.

He pulled and he tugged, grabbing at the mud and grass roots to haul his body toward freedom. Muddy spittle flew from his lips, and sticky brown snot spewed from his nostrils. His left foot caught in the coffin. He yanked it loose, heard his left knee *pop*, but he didn't feel any pain, so he assumed the injury couldn't have been too bad. Worming his way up, his head finally broke free of the earth. He looked up and saw a dark sky filled with rain.

"Ross," Rhodri shouted into the downpour. "You fucked up. I'm alive and I'm coming to kill you!"

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Rain fell from the night sky like it had never fallen before. Rhodri held his face upwards and let the glorious drops cleanse the filth from his skin. He opened his mouth and swallowed every splatter of water he could. The relief was intense and instantaneous.

He rested from his digging, but for only moment, then wriggling his shoulders, he freed his other arm from the mud. Planting his palms flat on the ground on either side of his body, he pushed with all his might. His legs kicked like a swimmer trying to propel his body out of quicksand. When his hips finally plopped free, Rhodri let himself collapse on his back into a puddle.

*If it hadn't been raining, my escape wouldn't have been possible.*

He shoved the thought away. It *had* been raining, and that was enough. With his good leg, he pushed himself away from the hole and lay face down for several minutes, sucking in deep, cleansing breaths and savouring his sweet victory over death.

*My sweet victory over Ross.*

Rhodri's mind became awash with thoughts of how he was going to deal with Kelly's brother.

*He'll probably shit in his pants when he sees me again.*

That thought gave him good reason to laugh out loud. He crawled up to his knees and looked around, saw a graveyard crammed with headstones and memorials. He looked back to the hole. A flat cracked stone stood nearby.

*Here lies Rhodri, Taken Too Soon.*

Having battled so hard to ensure he had air in his lungs, Rhodri now lost all control, and his breath leaked out of his body.

*All of this for money.*

He fought to regain some composure.

*Ross thinks I'm a dead man.* Rhodri released a rattling laugh. *But he's the dead man now!*

Rhodri struggled to his feet, his muscles tight, his joints creaking.

*I'm going to get our money back.*

He took a staggering step away from his grave.

*Kelly and I will have our forever house.*

He wobbled towards the back of the cemetery, away from the main road and was able to ease through a gap in the fencing and onto a service road. His left leg was far more damaged than he had first realised. It hindered him to the point that he had to drag it along the wet and slippery ground.

"He's the dead man now," Rhodri growled, reinforcing his reason for suffering this inhuman gait.

There were no streetlights, but he kept close to the trees running along the roadside. He ambled on to the main road, ducking low as he spotted the bright lights of a service station not far away. He'd been here before. Ross's apartment block was a few kilometres away.

*I can't make it that far, not with this bad leg.*

He'd need to thumb a ride. He strode forward and then stopped again, glancing over his mud encrusted suit and shoes, his filthy hands with fingernails torn and broken from digging. *Not looking like this I can't.*

He was bound to attract unwanted attention from passers-by or cops on patrol.

In need of a freshen-up and some wheels, he glanced back toward the service station and began to limp in that direction.

The rain kept coming down.

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Rhodri waited in the shadows of the service station's back fence until a car pulled up for petrol. He wasn't keen on the idea of stealing, but desperate times called for desperate measures. A teenager got out of the car, pumped gas, and went inside to pay.

It was now or never.

Rhodri stumbled across the tarmac to the car and opened the driver's door.

*Shit! No keys!*

He spotted a mobile phone lying on the passenger seat and snatched it up. The next best thing would be to phone someone for a ride to Ross's place.

The door to the restroom was outside the building, so Rhodri ducked in, pushed the door shut behind him, and locked it. The single stall was empty. He opened the flip phone and began to dial Kelly...but stopped.

*She didn't want me to confront Ross the first time; she's not going to let me do it again.* He could hear her saying, "You're lucky to be alive, Rhodri, don't push your luck."

He thought of their future together and how none of that would happen if she knew of his plan to get the money and kill Ross, who would be a splinter under Rhodri's fingernail forever if he didn't get rid of him.

*If she doesn't know what I'm doing, she can't stop me.*

He pressed the red button, cancelling the line of numbers to Kelly's phone.

*Who can I trust? Of course, Craig.*

He dialled again, pressed the green call button, and placed the phone to his ear.

"Hello." The voice sounded sleepy.

"Craig, it's me," Rhodri whispered.

“You’ll have to speak up. Who is this?”

“It’s Rhodri,” he grated out.

“Look, whoever this is...”

“It’s Rhodri, damn it.” He turned towards the sink. “It’s Rhodri.”

“This isn’t funny,” Craig said. “Rhodri was murdered. We buried him two months ago.”

Rhodri felt his guts tighten, then twist, then tighten some more, like someone had looped a tourniquet around his belly. His stomach knotted up and made him double over, and his chest felt crushed like he was neck-deep in graveyard mud again. His gnarly fingers started shaking so bad he lost his grip on the phone. It tumbled from his fingers, almost in slow motion, and shattered on the floor.

*Two months ago...I couldn’t possibly have survived that long if I was buried alive...*

In spite of his stomach cramps, he straightened and looked up from the pieces of broken cell phone to the mirror above the sink.

He gasped at the sight of his mottled flesh, a dent in his head just above his right temple where his skull had been bashed in, and his lips were peeled back from his teeth.

His tortured mind flashed back to the face that had met him in mirror of the coffin. His stomach contracted again when the truth hit him.

It wasn’t Hell looking in on him.

*It was me looking like Hell!*

What was left of Rhodri’s heart lurched.

*I wasn’t buried alive. I was buried dead.*

He looked back into the mirror.

*And I’m still dead!*

Reality crashed against Rhodri like a tsunami against the shore. All he could think of was Kelly, his only true love.

*Kelly. Kelly. Kelly.*

He would never hold her again, never touch her with these cold, damaged claws. He brought his fingers to his ravaged face and sobbed his heartbreak into his bony palms. He would never kiss Kelly’s lips again. He would never carry her through the door of their forever house, and he would never...could never...

*Never see anyone I love ever again.*

He felt his knees weaken and let the wall behind him support his weight.

“Kelly would still love me!” he told his repulsive reflection in the mirror, the Rhodri who was now emaciated, waxy looking, like the blood had been sucked from his flesh. He moved his jaw up and down robotically, the sinewy muscles visible in places where the skin of his cheeks had become translucent or decomposed.

He dragged his lighter out of his pocket. Despite the rotten state of his fingers, his old habit still soothed him, made him focus on the problem at hand.

Open, closed. Open, closed.

*Ross did this to me. To us. Well, I’m going to do worse to him!*

Open, closed. Open, closed.

*I’m going to torture him to death.*

Open, closed. Open, closed.

*And no one is going to stop me.*

Hammering on the door dragged Rhodri’s attention away from the lighter.

“Hurry up in there, butthead, I need a dump.” More pounding.

Rhodri tried to ignore the noise, hoping the guy would go away.

“I know you’re in there,” the voice shouted. “I saw you go in. Now come on, open the door.”

This whacko was going to draw too much attention to the restroom. Rhodri stowed his lighter and unlocked the door, turning quickly back to face the sink with his head down, hoping his face wouldn’t be seen.

“About time, asshole,” muttered the teenager as he crashed into the toilet stall, slamming the door after himself and clicking the latch.

Rhodri tried to block out the splashes and the groans of what could have been relief, pleasure or pain. He gripped the sides of the sink with both hands and kept his head down, hoping that the boy would not bother washing his hands afterwards. The flush finally gurgled down. He tensed when the stall latch clicked and footsteps crossed the tiled floor behind him towards the exit.

“Uh?” the teenager muttered before he reached the door. “This is my phone!”

*Shit! He’s the kid who owns the car outside...*

“So!” the kid shouted at Rhodri, still hunkered over the sink, wishing he’d just go away.

“That’s why you wouldn’t let me in. Cos you robbed my car? Hey, I’m talking to you, fuckhead.”

He grabbed Rhodri’s left shoulder and spun him around. Now faced with the remains of what had once been a living breathing human, he was lucky he’d already dumped the contents of his bowels. “What the fuck are you?” he screamed.

“Shut up!” ordered Rhodri and shoved the punk backwards.

His foot slipped on a shattered part of his phone, and his skull slammed against the bare block wall behind him.

It sounded like a raw egg had cracked open. He slid to the floor, leaving a skid-mark of blood down the wall to where he slumped into a sitting position on the floor. His head tilted to one side, and his eyes stayed open in a blank stare.

“Oh, rubbish,” said Rhodri.

And then the smell hit him. It was indescribably delicious. Perfect in its elegance. It was every single one of Heston Blumenthal’s culinary creations stirred together and offered to Rhodri in one delectable smear.

He rushed to the wall and let his tongue lap the fresh blood into his mouth. He licked his way down until he reached the back of the boy’s cranium, where he dug his fingers between the cracked bones and sucked out the rich, grey mass within.

Being dead wasn’t so bad, after all.

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By the time Rhodri had finished feeding, the bathroom looked like a slaughterhouse. He wanted to wash up but had been forced to step away from the sink and the mirror when he’d caught sight of himself with all that red, gelatinous goo slopped all over what was left of his face.

*It would be a waste of time to try to make myself look more presentable.*

He had to face the facts. He was a dead person walking around in a mud encrusted suit. It was only a matter of time before someone noticed him. Hoofing it round town like this was not an option. That car outside was. He bent down and dug through the kid’s jeans pockets and felt a moment of satisfaction when he plucked out a set of keys.

*You’ve just made yourself even more useful, you little shit.*

Rhodri knew he had to flee the scene before someone found the leftovers of the kid on

the floor.

Found the leftovers and called the cops.

Because the cops would hunt him down like some kind of mad dog.

He wasn't mad.

He was murdered.

*Murdered...damn it.*

That would have made anybody mad.

Rhodri opened the bathroom door and stole a glance up and down the service station forecourt. The car still sat next to the petrol pump. There was no one else around, and even the road seemed exceptionally quiet. The rain continued to fall.

Rhodri felt invigorated after his meal, even as he tried to block the memory of what he had done to the kid.

*I ate his brain.*

He had never tasted anything so satisfying, so good yet so wrong. And now he wanted more.

With renewed confidence, he crossed the forecourt to the car and got in the driver's seat.

There was one brain he was going to enjoy freeing from its cranial cell. One brain he was going to eat so slowly that its owner would have to watch him take the first gushy mouthful.

Rhodri jammed the key in the ignition and caught a morbid glimpse of himself as he checked the rear view mirror.

*That's if I don't scare him to death first.*

He turned the key and noticed a shard sticking out from his index finger. He dug at the splinter until it came free and beheld a fragment of the boy's skull. With a shudder, he let it fall to the car floor and examined his injured hand.

No blood. No pain.

*That's right.*

He grinned so wide his right cheek split open, the decaying meat tearing like fresh-sliced bologna.

*No pain means I can't be hurt. And if Ross can't hurt me, he can't stop me.*

With renewed purpose, Rhodri slammed the car into gear and peeled off. He planned to drive straight to Ross's high-rise apartment building...

*...Who is going to stop me?*

Something resembling a laugh escaped his decomposing throat.

*No one!*

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The rain had stopped falling. Rhodri's legs stiffened up even more, and he had to make a concerted effort to work the gas and brake pedals. The car lurched and swerved down the road, but he was able to keep the wheels between the gutters.

*The white lines keep moving from side to side!*

He concentrated even harder, not wanting to draw any attention to his driving.

Not wanting to draw the cops.

A traffic light up ahead turned red.

Not wanting to be stopped.

He carefully transferred his right foot from the gas to brake.

*Because I have work to do.*

The car slowed.

*I am going to be working all night.*

The car stopped.

*I am going to make Ross beg me to kill him.*

Another car pulled up alongside Rhodri. He kept his focus on the road in front.

"Hey, buddy!"

Rhodri ignored the man's voice and a woman's high pitched laughter.

"It ain't fucking Halloween, man."

As the light changed to green, Rhodri turned his head toward the woman and winked, then sped off from the light, leaving the other car behind. The woman wasn't laughing now. She was screaming.

Finally, Rhodri pulled up outside Ross's high-rise.

*High-rise for a low-level scumbag.*

He struggled to climb out of the car, his legs were that stiff, and began his shuffle towards the entrance. Not looking where he was walking, he accidentally stepped on a storm drain at the curb. His left foot got snagged in between the grates. He tugged and pulled to free

himself.

*I don't have time for this.*

He wrenched the bones harder, and his leg came loose, leaving the mud encrusted shoe and his foot in the grate. At least it didn't hurt. He continued onwards, dragging the bloody stump behind him.

Stopping outside Ross's door, Rhodri looked back down the corridor. He had left a streak of blood and gore along the tile floor, like the trail of some hell-bound slug.

*If anyone out steps a door...*

He snapped his teeth together, the clack echoing off the badly painted walls, and regrouped his thought process.

*If anyone steps out a door...*

His thoughts were getting jumbled, like his mind was failing in the onslaught of decay.

*I'm dying all over again.*

He knew his body was a wreck, but fearing his mind would slip away troubled him more.

*More than being seen.*

But no one had seen him. He felt fortunate to have dragged himself free from his grave under cover of darkness, and that he could make it all the way to Ross's in the middle of the night.

Rhodri sniggered.

*Of course it was the night of the middle.*

He grinned wickedly.

*The middle of the night. That's when all the ghouls come out to flay...ah...play.*

His grin became a snarl.

He knocked on the door, hard enough to wake the dead. The first few raps had not raised any reaction from inside, so he increased the force until he finally heard a muttered response from within.

"Who's there?"

Footsteps approached the door. Rhodri stuck his finger over the peephole and prepared to meet his murderer. He pictured Ross's eye pressed to the peephole, unable to see who had disturbed his sleep.

"Who's there, damn it?"

Rhodri hammered on the door again. "Your worst nightmare, fool."

He knew that would get Ross's goat. Nobody called him a fool and lived to tell about it.

A security chain rattled.

"We'll see who's a fool."

The door flew open.

It seemed, for a second, that time stood still. Ross's face turned from rage to shock. Even the red rims around his eyes turned white.

"Me remember?" Rhodri asked, his head tilted to one side. "I mean, remember me?"

Ross gasped and brought his hand up to his face, pinching his nose shut.

"I hell like stink...like hell, don't I."

Ross backed up a step. Rhodri took advantage of the shock and awe and threw himself at Ross. They tumbled to the floor, and Rhodri pummelled his nemesis with punch after bony punch, his fists like pistons revving at high RPM.

*It's like I'm digging out of my grave again.*

"You me murdered, you bitch of a son...ah...murdered me, son of a bitch!"

Digging, digging, digging.

"And now I'm back to you murder...to murder you."

Ross couldn't speak, his hands were slapped over his face in self-defence.

"But first I want money our!"

Rhodri was sure he heard Ross mumble something about it being his sister's money.

The punches sounded like wet, sloppy slaps, and soon Ross's face and chest were smeared with a layer of viscous tissue. Rhodri paused the beat-down. "Are you going to where the money is tell me...where it is, you murderous, unemployable shit little?"

Ross's wide eyes were suddenly riveted to something behind Rhodri. "Yeah! You're fucking dead now!"

"Huh?" Rhodri turned and saw a baseball bat coming at him head on.

The force of the blow knocked him over, but he immediately sat up. "If you think a bat's going to stop me this time..." His voice froze in his throat when he saw who had struck him.

"Craig?" he croaked.

His best friend stood in the doorway, the baseball bat cocked and ready to swing again.

"Don't just stare at him," Ross yelled. "Fucking take his head off."

But Craig was unable to react. The bat fell from his hands and clattered on the floor with all the other trash.

Rhodri was so dumbstruck, his mind raced back to the last time he'd been here, the last thing he'd seen before he awoke in the coffin.

*A baseball bat.*

He couldn't believe what he was seeing and battled the thoughts that barged into his brain. Now he knew how Caesar felt when Brutus stabbed him in the back.

*It was Craig who hit me that night!*

The world went out of focus.

Craig stood motionless, his eyes almost as wide as his mouth.

Rage filled Rhodri.

*My best friend killed me!*

A deep growl resonated from his chest. With shaking hands, he pushed himself up onto his one good foot. "You fuckin' traitor!" He sprang toward Craig, but Ross's giant arm clotheslined Rhodri's throat and started dragging him backwards towards the kitchen. His stump left a gory streak down the middle of the worn and filthy carpet.

"Get some rope, get some rope," Ross shouted, finally breaking Craig's fugue.

Ross slammed Rhodri onto one of the kitchen chairs but maintained his vice-like grip. "Hurry the fuck up."

Craig reappeared with a coil of motor-oil-stained tow rope. His mouth was still agape.

"Wrap it around his chest," Ross ordered. "We're sending this fucker to the bottom of the lake."

*The lake? The lake by the house? Our forever house. Forever taken away. By Ross.*

Only when the chair and Rhodri were as one did Ross release him and test the final knot Craig had tied, giving it a muscular tug. "That'll hold him."

Rhodri sat in silence, engulfed in anger and frustration at having been so severely shocked by Craig's betrayal that he'd forgotten about Ross behind him.

*Now look at the fine fix I'm in.*

The turnabout was almost funny. Just because he couldn't feel pain didn't mean he was invincible. *Rhodri the Invincible.* Made him grin.

"Fuck, man," Craig said, his discomfort with seeing his best friend back from the dead

quite obvious. “What the fuck is he grinning at?”

They both turned to face Rhodri.

He bared his teeth at them. “Now I’ve got to both you kill...kill you both.”

“Fucking ignore him,” Ross barked. “Who else knows about this?”

“No one. When he... when he phoned me, I thought we’d been rumbled. I didn’t think he’d come back for real. But just to be on the safe side, if he was coming after you for revenge, I got over here as fast as I could.”

Ross slapped Rhodri across the face. A soft layer of cheek clung to his hand. He wiped the sludge onto his jeans.

“Well he has come back,” Ross growled out. “Maybe for revenge, but I know what he wants more. You want your money back, don’t you, Rhodri?” Ross laughed and picked up a thick envelope from the table. He pulled out a slab of bills and smacked Rhodri on the top of his head with it. “Well here it is, but you’re not getting none of it.” Ross leaned into Rhodri’s face. “How does it feel to be so close to it, yet so far?”

“Why?” Rhodri hissed.

Ross threw the cash back onto the table where it fanned out like a deck of cards.

“You see, the way it works is we buy the gear up front, cut it and sell it for a profit. You, useless shit that you are...sorry...were, gave us our seed money. He’s the salesman.” Ross indicated Craig. “And I’m the muscle of the company.”

“And Kelly?” Rhodri whispered.

“S-she’s fine,” Craig stammered. “She’s not involved.”

“Tell him fucking nothing!” Ross spewed. “He’s dead. At least this time we won’t have to make it look like a mugging.”

Craig turned his back on Rhodri. “The money was too good to pass up, old buddy. I’m sorry you got hurt in the process.”

“You think sorry you are now.” Rhodri snarled. “I’ll kill first Ross, and then you I will next kill.”

“You’re in no position to make threats, Rhodri.” Ross turned to Craig. “You can get your uncle’s boat, right?”

“I-I can’t do this again,” Craig said with a breaking voice.

“You fucking will do it.”

“Don’t Craig worry, old buddy,” Rhodri slurred. “You’re going soon to be dead. You won’t need no stinkin’ boat.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Ross shouted, grabbed the back of Rhodri’s chair, and dragged it into the hallway. “Craig! Open that door.”

Craig did as he was told, and Ross jammed the chair and its tethered occupant into an already crammed closet.

“I’m going to kill you both,” Rhodri said. “You stop me can’t...stop me.”

Ross laughed. “I don’t think so. Once I get hold of an axe, I’m going to hack you up in pieces. I’ll dump your legs in the river, your body in the lake, and bury your head in the woods. Try killing me then, you fucking shit.”

He slammed the door shut, leaving Rhodri, once again, alone in complete darkness.

\*\*\*

Rhodri sat in the dark and focussed on the voices in the hallway as they faded in and out.

*I’m dying all over again.*

He’d worried about his longevity when his words began to come out in the wrong order. Now his hearing was beginning to fail him, too.

*Kelly. Kelly. Kelly.*

He willed himself not to think of how Ross might have treated her since she’d been widowed, how much more money he’d leeches off her.

The conversation beyond the closet door came back with the volume of an argument.

“Do you know where to get an axe?” Ross was shouting.

“No!”

“So you’re fuckin’ staying here!”

“Can’t we both go?”

“You’re going to wait for me, and if anything happens, you’re going to crush his skull with the bat.”

“But—”

“Stop fuckin’ whining!”

Rhodri heard a bang that he assumed was Ross shoving Craig into the wall.

“We end this tonight. For good. Whatever happens, zombie Rhodri is history.”

Craig started laughing like a maniac.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Zombie Rhodri! Zhodri!” Craig’s second guffaw was cut off with a sharp slap.

“Wise ass! Just watch that door.”

And then the front door slammed. Rhodri was again left in silence. He couldn’t see a way out. Now he wasn’t going to get his revenge. His stress levels were rising. Times were getting harder.

*Kelly. Kelly. Kelly.*

He wiggled in the chair. Although his hands were free, the rope bound his elbows tightly to his ribs and the chair back. He tried pushing with his legs, but he was packed in so tightly with Ross’s junk that he failed to gain any leverage. His body sagged; his chin fell to his chest. He was finished.

*Kelly. Kelly. Kelly.*

Her name became the crutch he hoped would carry him through this darkness until an opportunity to fight back presented itself.

*If I ever get an opportunity to fight back!*

In his anxiety, the fingers of his left hand began to work instinctively, the thumb flicking over his index finger, as if he were flicking...

*My lighter!*

\*\*\*

Rhodri fought to work his left hand into his left pocket. He no longer felt fear or anxiety. He believed that his dead body was giving out on him, but more than that, he now had hope that before he expired for a final time, he would have the chance to get his revenge.

*I’ve earned that much.*

With the tips of his rotting fingers, he managed to extract his lighter from the pocket. He flicked the flame to life, burning a halo into his retinas. The temptation was to hold the flame to the rope until it caught fire and burnt through, but he knew that out in the hallway Craig was watching the door. Any smoke snaking its way through any gaps in the doorframe would surely bring the baseball bat calling.

Instead he’d forced himself to only keep the heat on the fibres for a few seconds at a

time. It didn't take long before the rope frayed and the individual strands peeled away from each other until the frazzle became weak enough to break by flexing his arms. After that, it was only a matter of seconds before he completely freed his arms and slid the lighter safely away.

*And now I just have to be patient.*

Craig didn't make a sound the whole time Ross was gone. That made Rhodri feel better.

*I hope your terrified heart bursts, you back stabbing bastard.*

The front door creaked open, and Rhodri steeled himself for the battle to come.

"Did you get the axe?" Craig's voice sounded whiney and pathetic.

"Has Rhodri moved?"

"Not a peep, did you get one?"

"Does it look like I got one? No, I fucking didn't get one. We'll have to cut him up with a bread knife!"

"I can't do that. He was my best friend."

"I'm your best friend now. You'll hold him down while I do the slicing. Now come on, let's drag him back to the kitchen."

*Kelly. Kelly. Kelly.*

Knowing he had nothing but the element of surprise on his side, Rhodri sucked a slow, deep breath in over his decaying lips.

Footsteps approached. Rhodri waited until the door handle began to turn then slowly stood up. As the door opened, he raised his hands above his head and screamed with everything he had.

"Here's *Rhodri!*"

Ross and Craig froze, a twin look of complete and utter terror etched across their faces. Rhodri leaped forward and wrapped one hand around the back of each of their heads and smashed their foreheads together.

"Out lights...out!" He snarled as Ross and Craig collapsed unconscious at his feet.

The blood that seeped from their injuries made Rhodri's stomach roil with yearning. A waterfall of saliva began to churn its way between his teeth. He dropped to his knees and turned Ross over so his ugly face looked up at the ceiling. Rhodri slapped that face, once, twice until the eyelids flickered open.

Ross let out a painful, woozy moan.

“I was going to kill you, told you I,” sneered Rhodri. “This is for stealing our dreams, for taking me...my Kelly away, our house, our future, you no good bastard thieving.”

Ross’s pupils dilated with fear as Rhodri opened his mouth and leaned backwards.

*I’m hungry.*

He threw his head forward, his teeth snapping shut over Ross’s left eye. As he chewed the eyeball from its socket, he felt the giant man’s body shudder underneath him. Ross’s cries for help were muffled by the blood that gurgled down his face and into his mouth. His hands flapped uselessly, fish-out-of-water-like, at his side.

*Revenge tastes so good.*

Rhodri gnashed at the bone of the eye socket and then rammed his curled tongue into the gore, finding renewed strength in his feeding that he had never known, slurping and sucking at the grey-matter goo.

When he finished his meal, Rhodri felt a warm glow of contentment fill his chest, not only from the nourishment he’d received, but also from the knowledge, that when he took his first bite of Ross’s brain, the bastard was still alive.

\*\*\*

In the shadowy bedroom of his apartment, his hovel, his home that he now missed so badly, Rhodri stood over Kelly’s sleeping body. He wanted so much to touch her one last time, to tell her that he was now going to rest peacefully, that he had avenged his murder.

But he knew he could not do any of those things. He could only listen to her breathing for a few more seconds, fearful that if she awoke now, she would be scared to death.

He silently placed the stack of bills he’d taken from Ross’s apartment onto her bedside table. He’d started to count it, but his failing brain lost its focus when it reached twenty thousand. Including interest.

*Kelly. Kelly. Kelly. How I miss you so.*

On top of the money he placed the realtor’s flyer he’d found still lying on the kitchen table.

*She never stopped dreaming of our forever house.*

As he stagger-stepped out through the bedroom doorway, he looked over his shoulder at her for the final time.

*I love you, Kelly.*

He left her sleeping there, the tears he shed nothing more than a gelatinous mass that set like glue upon his disfigured face, a face that she would never have to bear the agony of seeing.

*One last thing to do.*

\*\*\*

Burrowing back down into his grave was much tougher than escaping. Rhodri was glad he'd fed before such exertions. Although the lid had a ragged hole in it, he'd managed to drag more than enough mud over it to seal it forever.

He reached into his pocket once more and pulled out his lighter.

Open, closed. Open, closed.

He thumbed the flame to life and waved its flicker over Craig's wide open eyes. His so-called best friend lying next to him had just regained consciousness since the head-bashing. It would take him a second to realise the predicament he was in.

Rhodri closed the lighter and let it fall from his grasp, and as he drifted off into forever sleep, Craig's screams sang him a goodnight lullaby.

*Kelly. Kelly. Kel...*

## About the Author



Originally from South Wales, I have held a wide range of jobs from tennis player to gym manager to health service worker. I turned 40 in October, am married to Claire, and we have an insane ginger cat called Wookie. I went to school with Catherine Zeta-Jones, have played tennis with Jamie Redknapp, and coached Great Britain's first ever World Number One tennis player.

I have always loved horror stories, having grown up with Jason Voorhees and his slasher friends, and I love writing them even more. The thought of taking normal people and putting them in terrifying situations gives me a fantastic buzz. I hope to convey that buzz to my readers in every story I write.



Gem, the novel (TWB Press, 2012)

A vampire novel by Craig Jones

<https://www.twbpress.com/gemthenovel.html>



A Man's Guide to Getting it Wrong (Comedy)

<https://www.twbpress.com/amansguide.html>



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