

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
CROUCH END



CROUCH END

Stephen King

By the time the woman had finally gone, it was nearly two-thirty in the morning. Outside the Crouch End police station, Tottenham Lane was a small dead river. London was asleep ... but London never sleeps deeply, and its dreams are uneasy.

PC Vetter closed his notebook, which he'd almost filled as the American woman's strange, frenzied story poured out. He looked at the typewriter and the stack of blank forms on the shelf beside it. "This one'll look odd come morning light," he said.

PC Farnham was drinking a Coke. He didn't speak for a long time. "She was American, wasn't she?" he said finally, as if that might explain most or all of the story she had told.

"It'll go in the back file," Vetter agreed, and looked round for a cigarette. "But I wonder ..."

Farnham laughed. "You don't mean you believe any part of it? Go on, sir! Pull the other one!"

"Didn't say that, did I? No. But you're new here."

Farnham sat a little straighter. He was twenty-seven, and it was hardly his fault that he had been posted here from Muswell Hill to the north, or that Vetter, who was nearly twice his age, had spent his entire uneventful career in the quiet London backwater of Crouch End.

"Perhaps so, sir," he said, "but—with respect, mind—I still think I know a swatch of the old whole cloth when I see one... or hear one."

"Give us a fag, mate," Vetter said, looking amused. "There! What a good boy you are." He lit it with a wooden match from a bright red railway box, shook it out, and tossed the match stub into Farnham's ashtray. He peered at the lad through a haze of drifting smoke. His own days of laddie good looks were long gone; Vetter's face was deeply lined and his nose was a map of broken veins. He liked his

six of Harp a night, did PC Vetter. “You think Crouch End’s a very quiet place, then, do you?”

Farnham shrugged. In truth he thought Crouch End was a big suburban yawn—what his younger brother would have been pleased to call “a fucking Bore-a-Torium.”

“Yes,” Vetter said, “I see you do. And you’re right. Goes to sleep by eleven most nights, it does. But I’ve seen a lot of strange things in Crouch End. If you’re here half as long as I’ve been, you’ll see your share, too. There are more strange things happen right here in this quiet six or eight blocks than anywhere else in London—that’s saying a lot, I know, but I believe it. It scares me. So I have my lager, and then I’m not so scared. You look at Sergeant Gordon sometime, Farnham, and ask yourself why his hair is dead white at forty. Or I’d say take a look at Petty, but you can’t very well, can you? Petty committed suicide in the summer of 1976. Our hot summer. It was ...” Vetter seemed to consider his words. “It was quite bad that summer. Quite bad. There were a lot of us who were afraid they might break through.”

“Who might break through what?” Farnham asked. He felt a contemptuous smile turning up the corners of his mouth, knew it was far from politic, but was unable to stop it. In his way, Vetter was raving as badly as the American woman had. He had always been a bit queer. The booze, probably. Then he saw Vetter was smiling right back at him.

“You think I’m a dotty old prat, I suppose,” he said.

“Not at all, not at all,” Farnham protested, groaning inwardly.

“You’re a good boy,” Vetter said. “Won’t be riding a desk here in the station when you’re my age. Not if you stick on the force. Will you stick, d’you think? D’you fancy it?”

“Yes,” Farnham said. It was true; he did fancy it. He meant to stick even though Sheila wanted him off the police force and somewhere

she could count on him. The Ford assembly line, perhaps. The thought of joining the wankers at Ford curdled his stomach.

“I thought so,” Vetter said, crushing his smoke. “Gets in your blood, doesn’t it? You could go far, too, and it wouldn’t be boring old Crouch End you’d finish up in, either. Still, you don’t know everything. Crouch End is strange. You ought to have a peek in the back file sometime, Farnham. Oh, a lot of it’s the usual ... girls and boys run away from home to be hippies or punks or whatever it is they call themselves now ... husbands gone missing (and when you clap an eye to their wives you can most times understand why)... unsolved arsons ... purse-snatchings ... all of that. But in between, there’s enough stories to curdle your blood. And some to make you sick to your stomach.”

“True word?”

Vetter nodded. “Some of em very like the one that poor American girl just told us. She’ll not see her husband again—take my word for it.” He looked at Farnham and shrugged. “Believe me, believe me not. It’s all one, isn’t it? The file’s there. We call it the open file because it’s more polite than the back file or the kiss-my-arse file. Study it up, Farnham. Study it up.”

Farnham said nothing, but he actually did intend to “study it up.” The idea that there might be a whole series of stories such as the one the American woman had told ... that was disturbing.

“Sometimes,” Vetter said, stealing another of Farnham’s Silk Cuts, “I wonder about Dimensions.”

“Dimensions?”

“Yes, my good old son—dimensions. Science fiction writers are always on about Dimensions, aren’t they? Ever read science fiction, Farnham?”

“No,” Farnham said. He had decided this was some sort of elaborate leg-pull.

“What about Lovecraft? Ever read anything by him?”

“Never heard of him,” Farnham said. The last fiction he’d read for pleasure, in fact, had been a small Victorian Era pastiche called *Two Gentlemen in Silk Knickers*.

“Well, this fellow Lovecraft was always writing about Dimensions,” Vetter said, producing his box of railway matches. “Dimensions close to ours. Full of these immortal monsters that would drive a man mad at one look. Frightful rubbish, of course. Except, whenever one of these people straggles in, I wonder if all of it was rubbish. I think to myself then—when it’s quiet and late at night, like now—that our whole world, everything we think of as nice and normal and sane, might be like a big leather ball filled with air. Only in some places, the leather’s scuffed almost down to nothing. Places where the barriers are thinner. Do you get me?”

“Yes,” Farnham said, and thought: Maybe you ought to give me a kiss, Vetter—I always fancy a kiss when I’m getting my doodle pulled.

“And then I think, ‘Crouch End’s one of those thin places.’ Silly, but I do have those thoughts. Too imaginative, I expect; my mother always said so, anyway.”

“Did she indeed?”

“Yes. Do you know what else I think?”

“No, sir—not a clue.”

“Highgate’s mostly all right, that’s what I think—it’s just as thick as you’d want between us and the Dimensions in Muswell Hill and Highgate. But now you take Archway and Finsbury Park. They border on Crouch End, too. I’ve got friends in both places, and they

know of my interest in certain things that don't seem to be any way rational. Certain crazy stories which have been told, we'll say, by people with nothing to gain by making up crazy stories.

"Did it occur to you to wonder, Farnham, why the woman would have told us the things she did if they weren't true?"

"Well..."

Vetter struck a match and looked at Farnham over it. "Pretty young woman, twenty-six, two kiddies back at her hotel, husband's a young lawyer doing well in Milwaukee or someplace. What's she to gain by coming in and spouting about the sort of things you only used to see in Hammer films?"

"I don't know," Farnham said stiffly. "But there may be an ex—"

"So I say to myself"—Vetter overrode him—"that if there are such things as 'thin spots,' this one would begin at Archway and Finsbury Park ... but the very thinnest part is here at Crouch End. And I say to myself, wouldn't it be a day if the last of the leather between us and what's on the inside of that ball just ... rubbed away? Wouldn't it be a day if even half of what that woman told us was true?"

Farnham was silent. He had decided that PC Vetter probably also believed in palmistry and phrenology and the Rosicrucians.

"Read the back file," Vetter said, getting up. There was a crackling sound as he put his hands in the small of his back and stretched. "I'm going out to get some fresh air."

He strolled out. Farnham looked after him with a mixture of amusement and resentment. Vetter was dotty, all right. He was also a bloody fag-mooch. Fags didn't come cheap in this brave new world of the welfare state. He picked up Vetter's notebook and began leafing through the girl's story again.

And, yes, he would go through the back file.

He would do it for laughs.

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The girl—or young woman, if you wanted to be politically correct (and all Americans did these days, it seemed)—had burst into the station at quarter past ten the previous evening, her hair in damp strings around her face, her eyes bulging. She was dragging her purse by the strap.

“Lonnie,” she said. “Please, you’ve got to find Lonnie.”

“Well, we’ll do our best, won’t we?” Vetter said. “But you’ve got to tell us who Lonnie is.”

“He’s dead,” the young woman said. “I know he is.” She began to cry. Then she began to laugh—to cackle, really. She dropped her purse in front of her. She was hysterical.

The station was fairly deserted at that hour on a weeknight. Sergeant Raymond was listening to a Pakistani woman tell, with almost unearthly calm, how her purse had been nicked on Hillfield Avenue by a job with a lot of football tattoos and a great coxcomb of blue hair. Vetter saw Farnham come in from the anteroom, where he had been taking down old posters (HAVE YOU ROOM IN YOUR HEART FOR AN UNWANTED CHILD?) and putting up new ones (SIX RULES FOR SAFE NIGHT-CYCLING).

Vetter waved Farnham forward and Sergeant Raymond, who had looked round at once when he heard the American woman’s semi-hysterical voice, back. Raymond, who liked breaking pickpockets’ fingers like breadsticks (“Aw, c’mon, mate,” he’d say if asked to justify this extra-legal proceeding, “fifty million wogs can’t be wrong”), was not the man for a hysterical woman.

“Lonnie!” she shrieked. “Oh, please, they’ve got Lonnie!”

The Pakistani woman turned toward the young American woman, studied her calmly for a moment, then turned back to Sergeant Raymond and continued to tell him how her purse had been snatched.

“Miss—” PC Farnham began.

“What’s going on out there?” she whispered. Her breath was coming in quick pants. Farnham noticed there was a slight scratch on her left cheek. She was a pretty little hen with nice bubs—small but pert—and a great cloud of auburn hair. Her clothes were moderately expensive. The heel had come off one of her shoes.

“What’s going on out there?” she repeated. “Monsters—”

The Pakistani woman looked over again ... and smiled. Her teeth were rotten. The smile was gone like a conjurer’s trick, and she took the Lost and Stolen Property form Raymond was holding out to her.

“Get the lady a cup of coffee and bring it down to Room Three,” Vetter said. “Could you do with a cup of coffee, mum?”

“Lonnie,” she whispered. “I know he’s dead.”

“Now, you just come along with old Ted Vetter and we’ll sort this out in a jiff,” he said, and helped her to her feet. She was still talking in a low moaning voice when he led her away with one arm snugged around her waist. She was rocking unsteadily because of the broken shoe.

Farnham got the coffee and brought it into Room Three, a plain white cubicle furnished with a scarred table, four chairs, and a water cooler in the corner. He put the coffee in front of her.

“Here, mum,” he said, “this’ll do you good. I’ve got some sugar if—”

“I can’t drink it,” she said. “I couldn’t—” And then she clutched the porcelain cup, someone’s long-forgotten souvenir of Blackpool, in

her hands as if for warmth. Her hands were shaking quite badly, and Farnham wanted to tell her to put it down before she slopped the coffee and scalded herself.

“I couldn’t,” she said again. Then she drank, still holding the cup two-handed, the way a child will hold his cup of broth. And when she looked at them, it was a child’s look—simple, exhausted, appealing ... and at bay, somehow. It was as if whatever had happened had somehow shocked her young; as if some invisible hand had swooped down from the sky and slapped the last twenty years out of her, leaving a child in grownup American clothes in this small white interrogation room in Crouch End.

“Lonnie,” she said. “The monsters,” she said. “Will you help me? Will you please help me? Maybe he isn’t dead. Maybe—

“I’m an American citizen!” she cried suddenly, and then, as if she had said something deeply shameful, she began to sob.

Vetter patted her shoulder. “There, mum. I think we can help find your Lonnie. Your husband, is he?”

Still sobbing, she nodded. “Danny and Norma are back at the hotel ... with the sitter ... they’ll be sleeping ... expecting him to kiss them when we come in ...”

“Now if you could just relax and tell us what happened—”

“And where it happened,” Farnham added. Vetter looked up at him swiftly, frowning.

“But that’s just it!” she cried. “I don’t know where it happened! I’m not even sure what happened, except that it was h-huh-horrible!”

Vetter had taken out his notebook. “What’s your name, mum?”

“Doris Freeman. My husband is Leonard Freeman. We’re staying at the Hotel Inter-Continental. We’re American citizens.” This time the

statement of nationality actually seemed to steady her a little. She sipped her coffee and put the mug down. Farnham saw that the palms of her hands were quite red. You'll feel that later, dearie, he thought.

Vetter was drudging it all down in his notebook. Now he looked momentarily at PC Farnham, just an unobtrusive flick of the eyes.

"Are you on holiday?" he asked.

"Yes ... two weeks here and one in Spain. We were supposed to have a week in Barcelona ... but this isn't helping find Lonnie! Why are you asking me these stupid questions?"

"Just trying to get the background, Mrs. Freeman," Farnham said. Without really thinking about it, both of them had adopted low, soothing voices. "Now you go ahead and tell us what happened. Tell it in your own words."

"Why is it so hard to get a taxi in London?" she asked abruptly.

Farnham hardly knew what to say, but Vetter responded as if the question were utterly germane to the discussion.

"Hard to say, mum. Tourists, partly. Why? Did you have trouble getting someone who'd take you out here to Crouch End?"

"Yes," she said. "We left the hotel at three and came down to Hatchard's. Do you know it?"

"Yes, mum," Vetter said. "Lovely big bookshop, isn't it?"

"We had no trouble getting a cab from the Inter-Continental ... they were lined up outside. But when we came out of Hatchard's, there was nothing. Finally, when one did stop, the driver just laughed and shook his head when Lonnie said we wanted to go to Crouch End."

"Aye, they can be right barstards about the suburbs, beggin your pardon, mum," Farnham said.

“He even refused a pound tip,” Doris Freeman said, and a very American perplexity had crept into her tone. “We waited for almost half an hour before we got a driver who said he’d take us. It was five-thirty by then, maybe quarter of six. And that was when Lonnie discovered he’d lost the address ...”

She clutched the mug again.

“Who were you going to see?” Vetter asked.

“A colleague of my husband’s. A lawyer named John Squales. My husband hadn’t met him, but their two firms were—” She gestured vaguely.

“Affiliated?”

“Yes, I suppose. When Mr. Squales found out we were going to be in London on vacation, he invited us to his home for dinner. Lonnie had always written him at his office, of course, but he had Mr. Squales’s home address on a slip of paper. After we got in the cab, he discovered he’d lost it. And all he could remember was that it was in Crouch End.”

She looked at them solemnly.

“Crouch End—I think that’s an ugly name.”

Vetter said, “So what did you do then?”

She began to talk. By the time she’d finished, her first cup of coffee and most of another were gone, and PC Vetter had filled up several pages of his notebook with his blocky, sprawling script.

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Lonnie Freeman was a big man, and hunched forward in the roomy back seat of the black cab so he could talk to the driver, he looked to her amazingly as he had when she’d first seen him at a college basketball game in their senior year—sitting on the bench, his knees

somewhere up around his ears, his hands on their big wrists dangling between his legs. Only then he had been wearing basketball shorts and a towel slung around his neck, and now he was in a suit and tie. He had never gotten in many games, she remembered fondly, because he just wasn't that good. And he lost addresses.

The cabby listened indulgently to the tale of the lost address. He was an elderly man impeccably turned out in a gray summer-weight suit, the antithesis of the slouching New York cabdriver. Only the checked wool cap on the driver's head clashed, but it was an agreeable clash; it lent him a touch of rakish charm. Outside, the traffic flowed endlessly past on Haymarket; the theater nearby announced that *The Phantom of the Opera* was continuing its apparently endless run.

"Well, I tell you what, guv," the cabby said. "I'll take yer there to Crouch End, and we'll stop at a call box, and you check your governor's address, and off we go, right to the door."

"That's wonderful," Doris said, really meaning it. They had been in London six days now, and she could not recall ever having been in a place where the people were kinder or more civilized.

"Thanks," Lonnie said, and sat back. He put his arm around Doris and smiled. "See? No problem."

"No thanks to you," she mock-growled, and threw a light punch at his midsection.

"Right," the cabby said. "Heigh-ho for Crouch End."

It was late August, and a steady hot wind rattled the trash across the roads and whipped at the jackets and skirts of the men and women going home from work. The sun was settling, but when it shone between the buildings, Doris saw that it was beginning to take on the reddish cast of evening. The cabby hummed. She relaxed with Lonnie's arm around her—she had seen more of him in the last six

days than she had all year, it seemed, and she was very pleased to discover that she liked it. She had never been out of America before, either, and she had to keep reminding herself that she was in England, she was going to Barcelona, thousands should be so lucky.

Then the sun disappeared behind a wall of buildings, and she lost her sense of direction almost immediately. Cab rides in London did that to you, she had discovered. The city was a great sprawling warren of Roads and Mews and Hills and Closes (even Inns), and she couldn't understand how anyone could get around. When she had mentioned it to Lonnie the day before, he had replied that they got around very carefully... hadn't she noticed that all the cabbies kept the London Streetfinder tucked cozily away beneath the dash?

This was the longest cab ride they had taken. The fashionable section of town dropped behind them (in spite of that perverse going-around-in-circles feeling). They passed through an area of monolithic housing developments that could have been utterly deserted for all the signs of life they showed (no, she corrected herself to Vetter and Farnham in the small white room; she had seen one small boy sitting on the curb, striking matches), then an area of small, rather tatty-looking shops and fruit stalls, and then—no wonder driving in London was so disorienting to out-of-towners—they seemed to have driven smack into the fashionable section again.

“There was even a McDonald's,” she told Vetter and Farnham in a tone of voice usually reserved for references to the Sphinx and the Hanging Gardens.

“Was there?” Vetter replied, properly amazed and respectful—she had achieved a kind of total recall, and he wanted nothing to break the mood, at least until she had told them everything she could.

The fashionable section with the McDonald's as its centerpiece dropped away. They came briefly into the clear and now the sun was a solid orange ball sitting above the horizon, washing the streets with a strange light that made all the pedestrians look as if they were about to burst into flame.

“It was then that things began to change,” she said. Her voice had dropped a little. Her hands were trembling again.

Vetter leaned forward, intent. “Change? How? How did things change, Mrs. Freeman?”

They had passed a newsagent’s window, she said, and the signboard outside had read SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR.

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“Lonnie, look at that!”

“What?” He craned around, but the newsagent’s was already behind them.

“It said, ‘Sixty Lost in Underground Horror.’ Isn’t that what they call the subway? The Underground?”

“Yes—that or the tube. Was it a crash?”

“I don’t know.” She leaned forward. “Driver, do you know what that was about? Was there a subway crash?”

“A collision, mum? Not that I know of.”

“Do you have a radio?”

“Not in the cab, mum.”

“Lonnie?”

“Hmmm?”

But she could see that Lonnie had lost interest. He was going through his pockets again (and because he was wearing his three-piece suit, there were a lot of them to go through), having another hunt for the scrap of paper with John Squales’s address written on it.

The message chalked on the board played over and over in her mind, SIXTY KILLED IN TUBE CRASH, it should have read. But... SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR. It made her uneasy. It didn't say "killed," it said "lost," the way news reports in the old days had always referred to sailors who had been drowned at sea.

UNDERGROUND HORROR.

She didn't like it. It made her think of graveyards, sewers, and flabby-pale, noisome things swarming suddenly out of the tubes themselves, wrapping their arms (tentacles, maybe) around the hapless commuters on the platforms, dragging them away to darkness... .

They turned right. Standing on the corner beside their parked motorcycles were three boys in leathers. They looked up at the cab and for a moment—the setting sun was almost full in her face from this angle—it seemed that the bikers did not have human heads at all. For that one moment she was nastily sure that the sleek heads of rats sat atop those black leather jackets, rats with black eyes staring at the cab. Then the light shifted just a tiny bit and she saw of course she had been mistaken; there were only three young men smoking cigarettes in front of the British version of the American candy store.

"Here we go," Lonnie said, giving up the search and pointing out the window. They were passing a sign which read "Crouch Hill Road." Elderly brick houses like sleepy dowagers had closed in, seeming to look down at the cab from their blank windows. A few kids passed back and forth, riding bikes or trikes. Two others were trying to ride a skateboard with no notable success. Fathers home from work sat together, smoking and talking and watching the children. It all looked reassuringly normal.

The cab drew up in front of a dismal-looking restaurant with a small spotted sign in the window reading FULLY LICENSED and a much larger one in the center which informed that within one could purchase curries to take away. On the inner ledge there slept a gigantic gray cat. Beside the restaurant was a call box.

“Here you are, guv,” the cabdriver said. “You find your friend’s address and I’ll track him down.”

“Fair enough,” Lonnie said, and got out.

Doris sat in the cab for a moment and then also emerged, deciding she felt like stretching her legs. The hot wind was still blowing. It whipped her skirt around her knees and then plastered an old ice-cream wrapper to her shin. She removed it with a grimace of disgust. When she looked up, she was staring directly through the plate-glass window at the big gray tom. It stared back at her, one-eyed and inscrutable. Half of its face had been all but clawed away in some long-ago battle. What remained was a twisted pinkish mass of scar tissue, one milky cataract, and a few tufts of fur.

It miaowed at her silently through the glass.

Feeling a surge of disgust, she went to the call box and peered in through one of the dirty panes. Lonnie made a circle at her with his thumb and forefinger and winked. Then he pushed ten-pence into the slot and talked with someone. He laughed—soundlessly through the glass. Like the cat. She looked over for it, but now the window was empty. In the dimness beyond she could see chairs up on tables and an old man pushing a broom. When she looked back, she saw that Lonnie was jotting something down. He put his pen away, held the paper in his hand—she could see an address was jotted on it—said one or two other things, then hung up and came out.

He wagged the address at her in triumph. “Okay, that’s th—” His eyes went past her shoulder and he frowned. “Where’s the stupid cab gone?”

She turned around. The taxi had vanished. Where it had stood there was only curbing and a few papers blowing lazily up the gutter. Across the street, two kids were clutching at each other and giggling. Doris noticed that one of them had a deformed hand—it looked more like a claw. She’d thought the National Health was supposed to take

care of things like that. The children looked across the street, saw her observing them, and fell into each other's arms, giggling again.

"I don't know," Doris said. She felt disoriented and a little stupid. The heat, the constant wind that seemed to blow with no gusts or drops, the almost painted quality of the light ...

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"What time was it then?" Farnham asked suddenly.

"I don't know," Doris Freeman said, startled out of her recital. "Six, I suppose. Maybe twenty past."

"I see, go on," Farnham said, knowing perfectly well that in August sunset would not have begun—even by the loosest standards—until well past seven.

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"Well, what did he do?" Lonnie asked, still looking around. It was almost as if he expected his irritation to cause the cab to pop back into view. "Just pick up and leave?"

"Maybe when you put your hand up," Doris said, raising her own hand and making the thumb-and-forefinger circle Lonnie had made in the call box, "maybe when you did that he thought you were waving him on."

"I'd have to wave a long time to send him on with two-fifty on the meter," Lonnie grunted, and walked over to the curb. On the other side of Crouch Hill Road, the two small children were still giggling. "Hey!" Lonnie called. "You kids!"

"You an American, sir?" the boy with the claw-hand called back.

"Yes," Lonnie said, smiling. "Did you see the cab over here? Did you see where it went?"

The two children seemed to consider the question. The boy's companion was a girl of about five with untidy brown braids sticking off in opposite directions. She stepped forward to the opposite curb, formed her hands into a megaphone, and still smiling—she screamed it through her megaphoned hands and her smile—she cried at them: “Bugger off, Joe!”

Lonnie's mouth dropped open.

“Sir! Sir! Sir!” the boy screeched, saluting wildly with his deformed hand. Then the two of them took to their heels and fled around the corner and out of sight, leaving only their laughter to echo back.

Lonnie looked at Doris, dumbstruck.

“I guess some of the kids in Crouch End aren't too crazy about Americans,” he said lamely.

She looked around nervously. The street now appeared deserted.

He slipped an arm around her. “Well, honey, looks like we hike.”

“I'm not sure I want to. Those two kids might've gone to get their big brothers.” She laughed to show it was a joke, but there was a shrill quality to the sound. The evening had taken on a surreal quality she didn't much like. She wished they had stayed at the hotel.

“Not much else we can do,” he said. “The street's not exactly overflowing with taxis, is it?”

“Lonnie, why would the cabdriver leave us here like that? He seemed so nice.”

“Don't have the slightest idea. But John gave me good directions. He lives in a street called Brass End, which is a very minor dead-end street, and he said it wasn't in the Streetfinder.” As he talked he was moving her away from the call box, from the restaurant that sold curries to take away, from the now-empty curb. They were walking

up Crouch Hill Road again. “We take a right onto Hillfield Avenue, left halfway down, then our first right ... or was it left? Anyway, onto Petrie Street. Second left is Brass End.”

“And you remember all that?”

“I’m a star witness,” he said bravely, and she just had to laugh. Lonnie had a way of making things seem better.

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There was a map of the Crouch End area on the wall of the police station lobby, one considerably more detailed than the one in the London Streetfinder. Farnham approached it and studied it with his hands stuffed into his pockets. The station seemed very quiet now. Vetter was still outside—clearing some of the witchmoss from his brains, one hoped—and Raymond had long since finished with the woman who’d had her purse nicked.

Farnham put his finger on the spot where the cabby had most likely let them off (if anything about the woman’s story was to be believed, that was). The route to their friend’s house looked pretty straightforward. Crouch Hill Road to Hillfield Avenue, then a left onto Vickers Lane followed by a left onto Petrie Street. Brass End, which stuck off from Petrie Street like somebody’s afterthought, was no more than six or eight houses long. About a mile, all told. Even Americans should have been able to walk that far without getting lost.

“Raymond!” he called. “You still here?”

Sergeant Raymond came in. He had changed into streets and was putting on a light poplin windcheater. “Only just, my beardless darling.”

“Cut it,” Farnham said, smiling all the same. Raymond frightened him a little. One look at the spooky sod was enough to tell you he was standing a little too close to the fence that ran between the yard of

the good guys and that of the villains. There was a twisted white line of scar running like a fat string from the left corner of his mouth almost all the way to his Adam's apple. He claimed a pickpocket had once nearly cut his throat with a jagged bit of bottle. Claimed that's why he broke their fingers. Farnham thought that was the shit. He thought Raymond broke their fingers because he liked the sound they made, especially when they popped at the knuckles.

"Got a fag?" Raymond asked.

Farnham sighed and gave him one. As he lit it he asked, "Is there a curry shop on Crouch Hill Road?"

"Not to my knowledge, my dearest darling," Raymond said.

"That's what I thought."

"Got a problem, dear?"

"No," Farnham said, a little too sharply, remembering Doris Freeman's clotted hair and staring eyes.

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Near the top of Crouch Hill Road, Doris and Lonnie Freeman turned onto Hillfield Avenue, which was lined with imposing and gracious-looking homes—nothing but shells, she thought, probably cut up with surgical precision into apartments and bed-sitters inside.

"So far so good," Lonnie said.

"Yes, it's—" she began, and that was when the low moaning arose.

They both stopped. The moaning was coming almost directly from their right, where a high hedge ran around a small yard. Lonnie started toward the sound, and she grasped his arm. "Lonnie, no!"

"What do you mean, no?" he asked. "Someone's hurt."

She stepped after him nervously. The hedge was high but thin. He was able to brush it aside and reveal a small square of lawn outlined with flowers. The lawn was very green. In the center of it was a black, smoking patch—or at least that was her first impression. When she peered around Lonnie’s shoulder again—his shoulder was too high for her to peer over it—she saw it was a hole, vaguely man-shaped. The tendrils of smoke were emanating from it.

SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR, she thought abruptly.

The moaning was coming from the hole, and Lonnie began to force himself through the hedge toward it.

“Lonnie,” she said, “please, don’t.”

“Someone’s hurt,” he repeated, and pushed himself the rest of the way through with a bristly tearing sound. She saw him going toward the hole, and then the hedge snapped back, leaving her nothing but a vague impression of his shape as he moved forward. She tried to push through after him and was scratched by the short, stiff branches of the hedge for her trouble. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse.

“Lonnie!” she called, suddenly very afraid. “Lonnie, come back!”

“Just a minute, hon!”

The house looked at her impassively over the top of the hedge.

The moaning sounds continued, but now they sounded lower—guttural, somehow gleeful. Couldn’t Lonnie hear that?

“Hey, is somebody down there?” she heard Lonnie ask. “Is there—oh! Hey! Jesus!” And suddenly Lonnie screamed. She had never heard him scream before, and her legs seemed to turn to waterbags at the sound. She looked wildly for a break in the hedge, a path, and couldn’t see one anywhere. Images swirled before her eyes—the

bikers who had looked like rats for a moment, the cat with the pink chewed face, the boy with the claw-hand.

Lonnie! she tried to scream, but no words came out.

Now there were sounds of a struggle. The moaning had stopped. But there were wet, sloshing sounds from the other side of the hedge. Then, suddenly, Lonnie came flying back through the stiff dusty-green bristles as if he had been given a tremendous push. The left arm of his suit-coat was torn, and it was splattered with runnels of black stuff that seemed to be smoking, as the pit in the lawn had been smoking.

“Doris, run!”

“Lonnie, what—”

“Run!” His face pale as cheese.

Doris looked around wildly for a cop. For anyone. But Hillfield Avenue might have been a part of some great deserted city for all the life or movement she saw. Then she glanced back at the hedge and saw something else was moving behind there, something that was more than black; it seemed ebony, the antithesis of light.

And it was sloshing.

A moment later, the short, stiff branches of the hedge began to rustle. She stared, hypnotized. She might have stood there forever (so she told Vetter and Farnham) if Lonnie hadn't grabbed her arm roughly and shrieked at her—yes, Lonnie, who never even raised his voice at the kids, had shrieked—she might have been standing there yet. Standing there, or ...

But they ran.

Where? Farnham had asked, but she didn't know. Lonnie was totally undone, in a hysteria of panic and revulsion—that was all she really

knew. He clamped his fingers over her wrist like a handcuff and they ran from the house looming over the hedge, and from the smoking hole in the lawn. She knew those things for sure; all the rest was only a chain of vague impressions.

At first it had been hard to run, and then it got easier because they were going downhill. They turned, then turned again. Gray houses with high stoops and drawn green shades seemed to stare at them like blind pensioners. She remembered Lonnie pulling off his jacket, which had been splattered with that black goo, and throwing it away. At last they came to a wider street.

“Stop,” she panted. “Stop, I can’t keep up!” Her free hand was pressed to her side, where a red-hot spike seemed to have been planted.

And he did stop. They had come out of the residential area and were standing at the corner of Crouch Lane and Norris Road. A sign on the far side of Norris Road proclaimed that they were but one mile from Slaughter Town.

Town? Vetter suggested.

No, Doris Freeman said. Slaughter Town, with an “e.”

*

Raymond crushed out the cigarette he had cadged from Farnham. “I’m off,” he announced, and then looked more closely at Farnham. “My poppet should take better care of himself. He’s got big dark circles under his eyes. Any hair on your palms to go with it, my pet?” He laughed uproariously.

“Ever hear of a Crouch Lane?” Farnham asked.

“Crouch Hill Road, you mean.”

“No, I mean Crouch Lane.”

“Never heard of it.”

“What about Norris Road?”

“There’s the one cuts off from the high street in Basingstoke—”

“No, here.”

“No—not here, poppet.”

For some reason he couldn’t understand—the woman was obviously buzzed—Farnham persisted. “What about Slaughter Town?”

“Town, you said? Not Town?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Never heard of it, but if I do, I believe I’ll steer clear.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because in the old Druid lingo, a touen or townen was a place of ritual sacrifice—where they abstracted your liver and lights, in other words.” And zipping up his windcheater, Raymond glided out.

Farnham looked after him uneasily. He made that last up, he told himself. What a hard copper like Sid Raymond knows about the Druids you could carve on the head of a pin and still have room for the Lord’s Prayer.

Right. And even if he had picked up a piece of information like that, it didn’t change the fact that the woman was ...

*

“Must be going crazy,” Lonnie said, and laughed shakily.

Doris had looked at her watch earlier and saw that somehow it had gotten to be quarter of eight. The light had changed; from a clear

orange it had gone to a thick, murky red that glared off the windows of the shops in Norris Road and seemed to face a church steeple across the way in clotted blood. The sun was an oblate sphere on the horizon.

“What happened back there?” Doris asked. “What was it, Lonnie?”

“Lost my jacket, too. Hell of a note.”

“You didn’t lose it, you took it off. It was covered with—”

“Don’t be a fool!” he snapped at her. But his eyes were not snappish; they were soft, shocked, wandering. “I lost it, that’s all.”

“Lonnie, what happened when you went through the hedge?”

“Nothing. Let’s not talk about it. Where are we?”

“Lonnie—”

“I can’t remember,” he said more softly. “It’s all a blank. We were there ... we heard a sound ... then I was running. That’s all I can remember.” And then he added in a frighteningly childish voice: “Why would I throw my jacket away? I liked that one. It matched the pants.” He threw back his head, gave voice to a frightening loonlike laugh, and Doris suddenly realized that whatever he had seen beyond the hedge had at least partially unhinged him. She was not sure the same wouldn’t have happened to her ... if she had seen. It didn’t matter. They had to get out of here. Get back to the hotel where the kids were.

“Let’s get a cab. I want to go home.”

“But John—” he began.

“Never mind John!” she cried. “It’s wrong, everything here is wrong, and I want to get a cab and go home!”

“Yes, all right. Okay.” Lonnie passed a shaking hand across his forehead. “I’m with you. The only problem is, there aren’t any.”

There was, in fact, no traffic at all on Norris Road, which was wide and cobbled. Directly down the center of it ran a set of old tram tracks. On the other side, in front of a flower shop, an ancient three-wheeled D-car was parked. Farther down on their own side, a Yamaha motorbike stood aslant on its kickstand. That was all. They could hear cats, but the sound was faraway, diffuse.

“Maybe the street’s closed for repairs,” Lonnie muttered, and then had done a strange thing ... strange, at least, for him, who was ordinarily so easy and self-assured. He looked back over his shoulder as if afraid they had been followed.

“We’ll walk,” she said.

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Away from Crouch End. We can get a taxi if we get away from here.” She was suddenly positive of that, if of nothing else.

“All right.” Now he seemed perfectly willing to entrust the leadership of the whole matter to her.

They began walking along Norris Road toward the setting sun. The faraway hum of the traffic remained constant, not seeming to diminish, not seeming to grow any, either. It was like the constant push of the wind. The desertion was beginning to nibble at her nerves. She felt they were being watched, tried to dismiss the feeling, and found that she couldn’t. The sound of their footfalls

(SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR)

echoed back to them. The business at the hedge played on her mind more and more, and finally she had to ask again.

“Lonnie, what was it?”

He answered simply: “I don’t remember. And I don’t want to.”

They passed a market that was closed—a pile of coconuts like shrunken heads seen back-to were piled against the window. They passed a launderette where white machines had been pulled from the washed-out pink plasterboard walls like square teeth from dying gums. They passed a soap-streaked show window with an old SHOP TO LEASE sign in the front. Something moved behind the soap streaks, and Doris saw, peering out at her, the pink and tufted battle-scarred face of a cat. The same gray tom.

She consulted her interior workings and tickings and discovered that she was in a state of slowly building terror. She felt as if her intestines had begun to crawl sluggishly around and around within her belly. Her mouth had a sharp unpleasant taste, almost as if she had dosed with a strong mouthwash. The cobbles of Norris Road bled fresh blood in the sunset.

They were approaching an underpass. And it was dark under there. I can’t, her mind informed her matter-of-factly. I can’t go under there, anything might be under there, don’t ask me because I can’t.

Another part of her mind asked if she could bear for them to retrace their steps, past the empty shop with the travelling cat in it (how had it gotten from the restaurant to here? best not to ask, or even wonder about it too deeply), past the weirdly oral shambles of the launderette, past The Market of the Shrunken Heads. She didn’t think she could.

They had drawn closer to the underpass now. A strangely painted six-car train—it was bone-white—lunged over it with startling suddenness, a crazy steel bride rushing to meet her groom. The wheels kicked up bright spinners of sparks. They both leaped back involuntarily, but it was Lonnie who cried out. She looked at him and saw that in the last hour he had turned into someone she had never seen before, had never even suspected. His hair appeared somehow grayer, and while she told herself firmly—as firmly as she could—that it was just a trick of the light, it was the look of his hair

that decided her. Lonnie was in no shape to go back. Therefore, the underpass.

“Come on,” she said, and took his hand. She took it brusquely so he would not feel her own trembling. “Soonest begun, soonest done.” She walked forward and he followed docilely.

They were almost out—it was a very short underpass, she thought with ridiculous relief—when the hand grasped her upper arm.

She didn't scream. Her lungs seemed to have collapsed like small crumpled paper sacks. Her mind wanted to leave her body behind and just ... fly. Lonnie's hand parted from her own. He seemed unaware. He walked out on the other side—she saw him for just one moment silhouetted, tall and lanky, against the bloody, furious colors of the sunset, and then he was gone.

The hand grasping her upper arm was hairy, like an ape's hand. It turned her remorselessly toward a heavy slumped shape leaning against the sooty concrete wall. It hung there in the double shadow of two concrete supporting pillars, and the shape was all she could make out... the shape, and two luminous green eyes.

“Give us a fag, love,” a husky cockney voice said, and she smelled raw meat and deep-fat-fried chips and something sweet and awful, like the residue at the bottom of garbage cans.

Those green eyes were cat's eyes. And suddenly she became horribly sure that if the slumped shape stepped out of the shadows, she would see the milky cataract of eye, the pink ridges of scar tissue, the tufts of gray hair.

She tore free, backed up, and felt something skid through the air near her. A hand? Claws? A spitting, hissing sound—

Another train charged overhead. The roar was huge, brain-rattling. Soot sifted down like black snow. She fled in a blind panic, for the second time that evening not knowing where ... or for how long.

What brought her back to herself was the realization that Lonnie was gone. She had half collapsed against a dirty brick wall, breathing in great tearing gasps. She was still in Morris Road (at least she believed herself to be, she told the two constables; the wide way was still cobbled, and the tram tracks still ran directly down the center), but the deserted, decaying shops had given way to deserted, decaying warehouses. DAW-GLISH & SONS read the soot-begrimed signboard on one. A second had the name ALHAZRED emblazoned in ancient green across the faded brickwork. Below the name was a series of Arabic pothooks and dashes.

“Lonnie!” she called. There was no echo, no carrying in spite of the silence (no, not complete silence, she told them; there was still the sound of traffic, and it might have been closer, but not much). The word that stood for her husband seemed to drop from her mouth and fall like a stone at her feet. The blood of sunset had been replaced by the cool gray ashes of twilight. For the first time it occurred to her that night might fall upon her here in Crouch End—if she was still indeed in Crouch End—and that thought brought fresh terror.

She told Vetter and Farnham that there had been no reflection, no logical train of thought, on her part during the unknown length of time between their arrival at the call box and the final horror. She had simply reacted, like a frightened animal. And now she was alone. She wanted Lonnie, she was aware of that much but little else. Certainly it did not occur to her to wonder why this area, which must surely lie within five miles of Cambridge Circus, should be utterly deserted.

Doris Freeman set off walking, calling for her husband. Her voice did not echo, but her footfalls seemed to. The shadows began to fill Norris Road. Overhead, the sky was now purple. It might have been some distorting effect of the twilight, or her own exhaustion, but the warehouses seemed to lean hungrily over the road. The windows, caked with the dirt of decades—of centuries, perhaps—seemed to be staring at her. And the names on the signboards became progressively stranger, even lunatic, at the very least,

unpronounceable. The vowels were in the wrong places, and consonants had been strung together in a way that would make it impossible for any human tongue to get around them. CTHULHU KRYON read one, with more of those Arabic pothooks beneath it. YOGSOGGOTH read another. R'YELEH said yet another. There was one that she remembered particularly: NRTESN NYARLAHOTEP.

*

“How could you remember such gibberish?” Farnham asked her.

Doris Freeman shook her head, slowly and tiredly. “I don’t know. I really don’t. It’s like a nightmare you want to forget as soon as you wake up, but it won’t fade away like most dreams do; it just stays and stays and stays.”

*

Norris Road seemed to stretch on into infinity, cobbled, split by tram tracks. And although she continued to walk—she wouldn’t have believed she could run, although later, she said, she did—she no longer called for Lonnie. She was in the grip of a terrible, bone-rattling fear, a fear so great she would not have believed a human being could endure it without going mad or dropping dead. It was impossible for her to articulate her fear except in one way, and even this, she said, only began to bridge the gulf which had opened within her mind and heart. She said it was as if she were no longer on earth but on a different planet, a place so alien that the human mind could not even begin to comprehend it. The angles seemed different, she said. The colors seemed different. The ... but it was hopeless.

She could only walk under a gnarled-plum sky between the eldritch bulking buildings, and hope that it would end.

As it did.

She became aware of two figures standing on the sidewalk ahead of her—the children she and Lonnie had seen earlier. The boy was using his claw-hand to stroke the little girl's ratty braids.

"It's the American woman," the boy said.

"She's lost," said the girl.

"Lost her husband."

"Lost her way."

"Found the darker way."

"The road that leads into the funnel."

"Lost her hope."

"Found the Whistler from the Stars—"

"—Eater of Dimensions—"

"—the Blind Piper—"

Faster and faster their words came, a breathless litany, a flashing loom. Her head spun with them. The buildings leaned. The stars were out, but they were not her stars, the ones she had wished on as a girl or courted under as a young woman, these were crazed stars in lunatic constellations, and her hands went to her ears and her hands did not shut out the sounds and finally she screamed at them:

"Where's my husband? Where's Lonnie? What have you done to him?"

There was silence. And then the girl said: "He's gone beneath."

The boy: "Gone to the Goat with a Thousand Young."

The girl smiled—a malicious smile full of evil innocence. “He couldn’t well not go, could he? The mark was on him. You’ll go, too.”

“Lonnie! What have you done with—”

The boy raised his hand and chanted in a high fluting language that she could not understand—but the sound of the words drove Doris Freeman nearly mad with fear.

“The street began to move then,” she told Vetter and Farnham. “The cobbles began to undulate like a carpet. They rose and fell, rose and fell. The tram tracks came loose and flew into the air—I remember that, I remember the starlight shining on them—and then the cobbles themselves began to come loose, one by one at first, and then in bunches. They just flew off into the darkness. There was a tearing sound when they came loose. A grinding, tearing sound ... the way an earthquake must sound. And—something started to come through—”

“What?” Vetter asked. He was hunched forward, his eyes boring into her. “What did you see? What was it?”

“Tentacles,” she said, slowly and haltingly. “I think it was tentacles. But they were as thick as old banyan trees, as if each of them was made up of a thousand smaller ones ... and there were pink things like suckers... except sometimes they looked like faces ... one of them looked like Lonnie’s face ... and all of them were in agony. Below them, in the darkness under the street—in the darkness beneath—there was something else. Something like eyes ...”

At that point she had broken down, unable to go on for some time, and as it turned out, there was really no more to tell. The next thing she remembered with any clarity was cowering in the doorway of a closed newsagent’s shop. She might be there yet, she had told them, except that she had seen cars passing back and forth just up ahead, and the reassuring glow of arc-sodium streetlights. Two people had passed in front of her, and Doris had cringed farther back into the shadows, afraid of the two evil children. But these were not

children, she saw; they were a teenage boy and girl walking hand in hand. The boy was saying something about the new Martin Scorsese film.

She'd come out onto the sidewalk warily, ready to dart back into the convenient bolthole of the newsagent's doorway at a moment's notice, but there was no need. Fifty yards up was a moderately busy intersection, with cars and lorries standing at a stop-and-go light. Across the way was a jeweler's shop with a large lighted clock in the show window. A steel accordion grille had been drawn across, but she could still make out the time. It was five minutes of ten.

She had walked up to the intersection then, and despite the streetlights and the comforting rumble of traffic, she had kept shooting terrified glances back over her shoulder. She ached all over. She was limping on one broken heel. She had pulled muscles in her belly and both legs—her right leg was particularly bad, as if she had strained something in it.

At the intersection she saw that somehow she had come around to Hillfield Avenue and Tottenham Road. Under a streetlamp a woman of about sixty with her graying hair escaping from the rag it was done up in was talking to a man of about the same age. They both looked at Doris as if she were some sort of dreadful apparition.

"Police," Doris Freeman croaked. "Where's the police station? I'm an American citizen ... I've lost my husband ... I need the police."

"What's happened, then, lovey?" the woman asked, not unkindly. "You look like you've been through the wringer, you do."

"Car accident?" her companion asked.

"No. Not ... not ... Please, is there a police station near here?"

"Right up Tottenham Road," the man said. He took a package of Players from his pocket. "Like a cig? You look like you c'd use one."

“Thank you,” she said, and took the cigarette although she had quit nearly four years ago. The elderly man had to follow the jittering tip of it with his lighted match to get it going for her.

He glanced at the woman with her hair bound up in the rag. “I’ll just take a little stroll up with her, Evvie. Make sure she gets there all right.”

“I’ll come along as well, then, won’t I?” Evvie said, and put an arm around Doris’s shoulders. “Now what is it, lovey? Did someone try to mug you?”

“No,” Doris said. “It ... I ... I ... the street ... there was a cat with only one eye ... the street opened up ... I saw it... and they said something about a Blind Piper ... I’ve got to find Lonnie!”

She was aware that she was speaking incoherencies, but she seemed helpless to be any clearer. And at any rate, she told Vetter and Farnham, she hadn’t been all that incoherent, because the man and woman had drawn away from her, as if, when Evvie asked what the matter was, Doris had told her it was bubonic plague.

The man said something then—“Happened again,” Doris thought it was.

The woman pointed. “Station’s right up there. Globes hanging in front. You’ll see it.” Moving very quickly, the two of them began to walk away. The woman glanced back over her shoulder once; Doris Freeman saw her wide, gleaming eyes. Doris took two steps after them, for what reason she did not know. “Don’t ye come near!” Evvie called shrilly, and forked the sign of the evil eye at her. She simultaneously cringed against the man, who put an arm about her. “Don’t you come near, if you’ve been to Crouch End Town!”

And with that, the two of them had disappeared into the night.

*

Now PC Farnham stood leaning in the doorway between the common room and the main filing room—although the back files Vetter had spoken of were certainly not kept here. Farnham had made himself a fresh cup of tea and was smoking the last cigarette in his pack—the woman had also helped herself to several.

She'd gone back to her hotel, in the company of the nurse Vetter had called—the nurse would be staying with her tonight, and would make a judgement in the morning as to whether the woman would need to go in hospital. The children would make that difficult, Farnham supposed, and the woman's being an American almost guaranteed a first-class cock-up. He wondered what she was going to tell the kiddies when they woke up tomorrow, assuming she was capable of telling them anything. Would she gather them round and tell them that the big bad monster of Crouch End Town

(Townen)

had eaten up Daddy like an ogre in a fairy-story?

Farnham grimaced and put down his teacup. It wasn't his problem. For good or for ill, Mrs. Freeman had become sandwiched between the British constabulary and the American Embassy in the great waltz of governments. It was none of his affair; he was only a PC who wanted to forget the whole thing. And he intended to let Vetter write the report. Vetter could afford to put his name to such a bouquet of lunacy; he was an old man, used up. He would still be a PC on the night shift when he got his gold watch, his pension, and his council flat. Farnham, on the other hand, had ambitions of making sergeant soon, and that meant he had to watch every little posey.

And speaking of Vetter, where was he? He'd been taking the night air for quite awhile now.

Farnham crossed the common room and went out. He stood between the two lighted globes and stared across Tottenham Road. Vetter was nowhere in sight. It was past 3:00 A.M., and silence lay

thick and even, like a shroud. What was that line from Wordsworth? "All that great heart lying still," or something like.

He went down the steps and stood on the sidewalk, feeling a trickle of unease now. It was silly, of course, and he was angry with himself for allowing the woman's mad story to gain even this much of a foothold in his head. Perhaps he deserved to be afraid of a hard copper like Sid Raymond.

Farnham walked slowly up to the corner, thinking he would meet Vetter coming back from his night stroll. But he would go no farther, if the station was left empty even for a few moments, there would be hell to pay if it was discovered. He reached the corner and looked around. It was funny, but all the arc-sodiums seemed to have gone out up here. The entire street looked different without them. Would it have to be reported, he wondered? And where was Vetter?

He would walk just a little farther, he decided, and see what was what. But not far. It simply wouldn't do to leave the station unattended for long.

Just a little way.

*

Vetter came in less than five minutes after Farnham had left. Farnham had gone in the opposite direction, and if Vetter had come along a minute earlier, he would have seen the young constable standing indecisively at the corner for a moment before turning it and disappearing forever.

"Farnham?"

No answer but the buzz of the clock on the wall.

"Farnham?" he called again, and then wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand.

*

Lonnie Freeman was never found. Eventually his wife (who had begun to gray around the temples) flew back to America with her children. They went on Concorde. A month later she attempted suicide. She spent ninety days in a rest home and came out much improved. Sometimes when she cannot sleep—this occurs most frequently on nights when the sun goes down in a ball of red and orange—she creeps into her closet, knee-walks under the hanging dresses all the way to the back, and there she writes Beware the Goat with a Thousand Young over and over with a soft pencil. It seems to ease her somehow to do this.

PC Robert Farnham left a wife and two-year-old twin girls. Sheila Farnham wrote a series of angry letters to her MP, insisting that something was going on, something was being covered up, that her Bob had been enticed into taking some dangerous sort of undercover assignment. He would have done anything to make sergeant, Mrs. Farnham repeatedly told the MP. Eventually that worthy stopped answering her letters, and at about the same time Doris Freeman was coming out of the rest home, her hair almost entirely white now, Mrs. Farnham moved back to Essex, where her parents lived. Eventually she married a man in a safer line of work—Frank Hobbs is a bumper inspector on the Ford assembly line. It had been necessary to get a divorce from her Bob on grounds of desertion, but that was easily managed.

Vetter took early retirement about four months after Doris Freeman had stumbled into the station in Tottenham Lane. He did indeed move into council housing, a two-above-the-shops in Frimley. Six months later he was found dead of a heart attack, a can of Harp Lager in his hand.

And in Crouch End, which is really a quiet suburb of London, strange things still happen from time to time, and people have been known to lose their way. Some of them lose it forever.