

Car Park Death

So me and Maz, we're up at the hospital. Vinny's been in there a week, like, on his own, and I mean, we're his mates, yeah? Need your mates when you're laid up, don't yer? And it's raining hard, and we get in there, and some granny with a pink sash sends us down this dark corridor that goes on for miles, and it's cold – yeah! cold, in a hospital! – and I'm thinking we'll never get there. Then there's a few lights, and we see this nurse, like. All in black and white she is, and I mean her pasty face and tight-black hair too.

'Ye-es?' she says, looking down her nose, and it's long enough, I tell yer.

So I say, 'We're looking for Vinny. Vinny Ward. Hey, that's good, innit – Vinny's in a Ward!'

She says nothing. Again with the stare, though.

'We're his mates,' explains Maz.

'Vinny Ward,' I tell her. 'Best twocker in town – famous, he is.'

Eyebrow goes up. 'Twocker?' says the ice queen.

Maz is nudging me, but I go on. 'Yeah. He nicks cars. He's dead good.'

'Dead good?' she says. She smells of soap and scrubbing. 'He was nearly just *dead*.'

Silence.

'Er, can we see him, then?' says Maz. Good at keeping focus, Maz is.

'This way,' she says. 'Ten minutes only.' Off she stomps, and me and Maz are after her.

'I heard he'll walk all right,' I say to her back, 'when he's better?'

She stops at a door and pulls a face. 'He is a very lucky young man,' she says. 'He has another chance.' Then she's off, with her nose back in the air. Just like that.

Maz shrugs, and opens the door. The lights are low, and there's not much in there: just one of them beds made of scaffolding and wheels, and a drip stand with no drip, and one chair, and some naff picture that's crooked. And there's Vinny, propped up on about ninety pillows with his eyes closed. Big blue bruise on his head, cuts on his nose, and a tent over his legs.

'All right Vinny?' says Maz. Vinny keeps his eyes shut.

'Hey, d'you bring the grapes?' I says to Maz.

'I thought you was bringing 'em,' he says.

I give him a shove. 'We got to have grapes, stupid.' I'm keeping my voice low, see. Not to wake Vinny. 'You go visiting hospital, you take grapes. Everyone knows that.'

'Well I never got none,' says Maz, shoving me back.

'Oh will you shut up about the effing grapes!' says Vinny, all of a sudden. You remember Vinny – he's the one on the bed.

'Hey, all right Vinny!' we say.

'We come to visit yer,' Maz points out.

'But we got no grapes,' I say.

Vinny pulls a face, and we can't tell if he's trying to smile or if his leg hurts. 'So what's up?' he says.

'Same as usual,' I says. Maz got another Alfa last week – wasn't much good though, left it at Tesco's. I got into a Bimmer but I couldn't get the bleeder started. Tinno got himself locked in a

Mini – ’

‘Yeah, that was a laugh,’ says Maz.

‘ – and Mo did a couple of Audis and a Focus. He’s good, is Mo.’

‘Not as good as you, though,’ says Maz, who’s spotted that Vinny’s not saying much. ‘Not as good as the Master.’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘*Re*-spect, mate.’ And we’re both bowing, trying to get a grin.

Still nothing from pillows man.

Maz shrugs again. ‘Where did you dig up that nurse, mate?’ he says. ‘Like out of one of them old horror films.’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘Black and white. Ha, ha.’

Still nothing.

‘Look,’ I say, serious-like. ‘Sorry about Mario. Getting you down, is it?’

I look at Vinny. He’s in a bad way, he’s got his eyes tight shut and his mouth all squashed together. There’s a bit of old newspaper in his fist, and he’s crumpling it. And then – you won’t believe this – he starts crying. Quiet, like – but the lips are giving it the wobbles, and he’s whimpering, and there’s tears all down his cheeks.

Maz starts to say, are you all right mate, but Vinny interrupts: ‘Shut up!’ he shouts. ‘Bloody shut up, will yer?’

Then he covers his face with his hands, and sobs. We don’t know where to put ourselves. Maz swallows, and I feel hot on the neck. I catch Maz’s eye and nod at the door.

‘Best leave you to it, mate,’ says Maz, and we’re sidling out when Vinny yells, ‘No!’

We stop.

‘I gotta tell you,’ he says, gasping a bit. ‘Got to.’ Pause. ‘Me and Mario,’ he says in a cheese-grater voice, eyes still tight shut, ‘we was in Taylor Street – the multi-storey by the station.’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘Bad place.’

‘Tuesday night,’ Vinny goes on, between his teeth. ‘Nothing worth nicking. We did it cos we was bored. Just cos we was *bored!*’ He cries again, and I look at Maz, and Maz looks at me. But we’re not going anywhere.

Vinny gives a big groan. ‘There was this little red Peugeot. No-one about, nothing inside, just a big blanket on the back seat. Just a bloody blanket!’ He opens his eyes, and he’s panting.

We’re still saying nothing. This is serious – Vinny’s never had Conscience before.

‘I smashed the window, grabbed the blanket,’ he says. He grunts, and he’s shaking his head like a wasp’s after him.

‘Go on, mate,’ I say.

‘The bloody thing – ’ he has to stop, cos his voice is shaking ‘ – it just started up! We never touched it – and it was revving, revving hard. So loud! Me and Mario backed off – I looked round, thought it must be some git with a remote. Couldn’t see no-one.’ He shakes his head again. ‘The place was filling up with smoke, and it stank. And then – and then it reversed out, fast. It got Mario, I had to jump out of the way. I was getting up, wanted to help him, but the thing came back! It ran over him again – I couldn’t stop it . . .’ And he’s sobbing like someone off *Eastenders*.

‘You’re sure, like?’ I ask. ‘No-one was driving?’

‘I TOLD ya!’ he shouts, punching the bed. ‘It was an effing ghost car! I ran up the slope, round the corner – he came after me. Tried to get behind the pillar, but he pinned me, rammed me flat against it. Don’t remember no more . . .’ He falls back on pillow mountain. ‘I woke up, this

family found me. I was bleedin', the little girl was crying, I tried to get up – they said the ambulance was coming. No sign of the Peugeot. Took me here, then the pigs turned up. Asked me questions. They said there *had* to be someone driving that car – they reckon I imagined it, I was pissed or something. They're never gonna believe me. No sympathy, them pigs . . .'

He goes quiet for a minute. Then he's got his eyes on us, and his voice is like, hard: 'You two – don't never go nickin' no more cars. Never,' he says, 'or you're dead men'. Then he opens his hand and pushes a little ball of newspaper down the bed.

Maz picks it up and smoothes it out. It's from a couple of years ago. 'Car Park Death,' says the headline, 'Victim's Dying Oath'. We read on. 'Here,' I say, 'it says Taylor Street multi-storey!' I look up at Vinny, but he's shut his eyes again.

Maz is reading, muttering. 'Alf Collins, his name was. Eighty-two. Found a couple of lads breaking into his car. Gave him a heart attack.'

'What does he want to go and have a heart attack for?' I say. 'It's only a car. Just a bit of fun.'

'Listen to this,' says Maz, reading on. '“He was so angry,” said his tearful widow. “His last words were, I'll get them, Lily. You wait and see. I'll get them.”’

We're out in the corridor – still long, still dark, still cold, but no sign of the monochrome nurse.

'You'd never've thought it, would yer?' I say. 'Vinny. Cracking up.'

Maz shakes his head. 'Poor bleeder. That'll be the shock. Seeing Mario killed.'

'And he nearly died himself. D'you know, I reckon that nurse gave him the newspaper cutting. Deliberate, like. To teach him a lesson, or something.'

'Yeah. It's gone straight to Vinny's head. I mean, it's like –'

'It's like he thinks the old boy's ghost was the one that ran him over, and killed Mario.'

Maz laughs. 'Stupid.'

'Yeah. Stupid,' I say. 'Bloody long corridor this, innit?'

So we're shuffling through the revolving doors – like a wally, Maz has got in the same time as me – and there's lots of people around. Outside there's about a hundred patients in plaster casts and wheelchairs, all smoking. There's even one with his drip stand. Anyhow, we muscle through, and there's the roadway. Then this old geezer pulls up in red Peugeot.

Me and Maz are staring at him, and then he winds the window down. He's got pale, watery eyes. And then he points at us, and like, beckons! I'm telling yer, I'm nearly having me own heart attack, and Maz looks like he's a plaster cast himself. It's Alf the ghost, and he's come for us!

'Excuse me, boys.' This old biddy's pushing past us, voice like a parrot, and before we know what's happening she's getting into the car with Alf the ghost. And kissing him. Urgh.

'Hey,' I say to Maz, 'that bloke could've been Alf the ghost, couldn't he? Right kinda car, old git, looks half dead already?'

'Yeah,' says Maz, laughing a bit too much. 'Yeah. Woulda spooked Vinny, eh?'

'Yeah,' I say, and I'm thinking, there must be lots of old duffers out there, driving red Peugeots around. By this time he's done an eighteen-point turn, and he's off, with the parrot in the passenger seat.

But as he drives past, I could swear he's winking at me.