

The 23rd Nail

By R. W. Mosses

I used my bit of wood to paddle the raft out from the bank, out into the wide water of the Clyde. The raft bobbed about, but with each of us on the corners and the guy in the middle it wasn't too bad. We could see in the distance that some of the city was safely above the water, but a lot of buildings by the river had been flooded. He pointed us down towards the Armadillo, it's shining ridges sticking out of the water like some mechanical sea monster, the waters reflecting in its metallic scales. Round the water's edge the rust was beginning to creep up the metal.

I first saw the guy the day before; he walked up to me out of nowhere. I was hanging around up top by the fireman statue. He smelt funny, wasn't even wearing a suit. Even though he couldn't look me in the eye, he asked me straight out if I wanted a job. I asked him how much it was paying. Two hundred quid each if you can find three more of you he said. I asked him if he wanted anything special, you get used to that kind of thing. He said it wasn't that kind of work.

I went down to the Street below the station and found May and Ikud arguing over the suit he said he'd killed. Ikud said it could be a sacrifice to the Crying Woman.

Sometimes Santa Diana is busy and can't protect us. The Crying Woman has a pact with the Devil and sometimes she comes and takes one of us kids, late at night while we're sleeping. That's when we find her black tears on the floor and hear her laughing. She only laughs when one of us dies.

They were both happy to help out and May said I should ask Petr. His English isn't so good but he was happy with the idea that we could eat burgers for a week, and all we had to do was keep an eye out.

We drifted past silent cranes, like giants paddling in the water. Lots of crap floated past us in the bloated river. Used johnnies and bog roll. Ikud said there might be a crocodile someone had flushed down the loo. We all told him he was talking shite.

We were all refugees and orphans of sorts. May said her parents had escaped persecution in Leng, but no-one had ever heard of it. Ikud said he was from Kurdistan and got here from Germany. Petr was from Romania. My parents were killed by a mudslide at the beginning of the flooding while we were here on holiday. I ran away from a foster home. I thought if I was to continue being raped and tortured I would be better off being paid for it.

We climbed into the warehouse through a window; the water was too high to get in the door. It smelt bad, worse than the bogs in the Station. There were millions of rats. I dunno what they were doing there, nothing left to eat, and nothing but water around the place. But we were used to handling 'em. Maybe that's why he needed us, take care of the

rats. We cleared a road up to the top floor, beating the rats with our sticks. It was a good laugh hearing them squeak in surprise. I noticed the guy was carrying a bag, it clinked when he moved and looked like it was made from dried up rat babies.

When we got to the top he told the other three to wait near the stairs and keep an eye out the window. They were to yell if anyone was coming. Like Santa Diana would be walking over the water to say Hi or something. He said I was to go with him. He had a special job for me and trusted that I'd do it right. I guess he must have been watching us carefully.

We went through to a room on the other side of the building. He took his clothes off and I thought it was a lot of hassle to go to for a shag. Then I noticed the marks on his body. I didn't know if they were tattoos or marker pen, but they were all over him. He explained to me what he wanted and showed me each spot, twenty-three of 'em he said, including the last one, which he said was the most important. He said he could do most of it himself but I needed to finish it off. Then he took the stuff out of the bag. It was a small hammer and several long thin spikes. I had no idea why he wanted to do it but I had my money I didn't care.

He started it himself. He placed the point of a spike on the dark circle on his left foot. He just pushed it into the skin until there was a dent then took the hammer and one, two, three, sent the spike right through. I didn't think the bone got in the way. He didn't seem to be in pain. It was like he was on dope or something. He did his legs and then his chest. He was sitting in a pool of his own blood, shivering. He dropped the hammer and the last few spikes and laid back, the points scraped along the concrete floor. He looked at

me and nodded slightly. Then I heard shouting out in the hall. May was saying something about a thing in the water like a huge elephant, but Ikud said it was a giant snake. I looked back at the guy. He said something with a smile on his face. I didn't know if he was happy to hear this or just high. He said it again, it sounded like coo-thoo-loo.

I waited, frozen. I thought I heard May screaming so I went to see what was happening, but they'd gone and I couldn't see anything weird out the window. I decided they were having a joke.

I went back to the guy. Somehow he'd managed to put the spikes in his left arm and hand. He looked over at me and said something in a funny language. I told him to fuck off. I wanted to run away but I couldn't. So I walked over like I was forced to and picked up one of the spikes. They were like two thin knife blades crossing one another with a flat bit across the top. I nearly cut myself just picking it up. I finished off the right arm and hand. Hot blood splashed onto my face. It tasted salty and metallic. There was only the last one left to do but I could hear this sound outside like a huge wave kept hitting the building. It went dark inside, water ran into the room from the roof and the smell of dead fish was everywhere. I prayed to Santa Diana to protect me, but I didn't know her secret name, so I knew she wouldn't come. I prayed anyway, maybe she was near and would help me. The guy was full of fuckin' spikes, bleeding out of every hole and out of his face on something. Then he started screaming at me, finish it, do it, now. Maybe whatever it was had worn off. His screaming echoed off the walls mixing with the scraping noise as he thrashed around on the floor. I wanted him to shut up; he was doing my head in and I started screaming back. Then I remembered the last nail. This'll shut you the fuck up I

thought. I went over to him, placed it on the top of his head, and whacked it with all my strength, took me four fucking goes just to get it past his skull. I just kept at it, bam, bam, slowly sinking it deeper into his head. I was screaming and along with the scraping and him wailing it all began to sound like a song. Then a wave of water crashed in through the window and I couldn't breathe.

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Next thing I know this other guy was pushing on my chest and I was sick.

He said he was polis. He took me to a boat and we went to the police station. He asked me what happened, how I got there. Eventually I told him hoping I'd get some food. He said there were hundreds of reports of a large elephant-like creature with a head like a squid. Most of the witnesses were mad and they didn't have room for them in the mental homes. I asked if he'd seen May and Ikud, he said he hadn't heard anything about them. I told him I forgot, that I'd remembered I was supposed to put the nail in the guy's forehead but there was no black mark there. The cop laughed in a weird way. He said I'd saved everyone. I know I fucked up.