

Clatty Pat's Needle

By R. W. Mosses

The boy ran past the metal gates as fast as his tired legs would take him. Rusted open, the gates were a boundary marker rather than a barrier. He could smell the river, the dank earth and dog shit. His breath pounded out of him like a steam train.

The steep hillside rose up before him. Ribbons of tarmac criss-crossed and confused. The boy's feet slipped on the grass, wet with dew. The sound of booted feet, pounding the pavement behind him, urged him onwards. He could see it in the gloom ahead, towering above him. He could find sanctuary there, he'd been told.

The boy struggled up the last rise, only a few more feet to go. Someone shouted at him. Terse and commanding. An order he didn't understand. He slipped again. The grass once more failed to support him. Even the ground of this cursed country was conspiring against him.

He picked himself up. He was nearly there.

There was a loud bang. He was shoved forward. He slipped. A hot pain in his back.

Weakly, he lifted his head. He couldn't seem to get up. He was sure he could see her feet. He tried to reach out to her, offering his token.

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The Needle stood 24 meters tall, two of which belonged to the granite plinth on which it rested. The hieroglyphs carved into the surface, the language of a long dead race, caught the morning sun as it rose over Kelvingrove Park. McEwan and Jarita Jandhyala made their way up towards the Needle, past the fountain.

"What are we doing here?" JJ asked irritably, a slight trace of the sub-continent hidden in her Glasgow accent. McEwan had dragged her out of the office before she had even had her coffee.

"They brought the Needle here in 1880 from Alexandria," McEwan said, seemingly ignoring her. "A gift that had taken nearly a hundred years to be delivered. Originally, James Bruce, who discovered the source of the Blue Nile, wanted to bring it back as a reward in 1780. Took a while to persuade the Egyptians to part with it. Then they had to build a special boat for it, a huge railway to bring it here from the Clyde, and finally a massive crane that picked it up and turned it on its axis."

"How do you know all that?" JJ asked,

"Did a project on it at school," McEwan replied, grinning.

"You still didn't answer my question," insisted JJ.

"A few years ago, the Egyptian Government wanted their Needle back. When they realised how expensive it would be to return the Needle intact the Scottish Executive made a deal. The land at the base of the Needle is Egyptian sovereignty. As you can see," McEwan gestured towards the tent that had been set up round the base of the Needle, "there has been an incident. The Egyptian Government has hired the Claymore Consultancy to investigate, and since we work for the Consultancy, we're here to do just that."

McEwan nodded to the SOC processor guarding the crime scene, she recognised him and let them pass. He lifted the flap of the tent and followed JJ in. The body of a boy, maybe fourteen, lay face down, a few feet from the granite plinth. In the back of his oversized, third-hand, olive-green parka jacket was a large hole rimmed with gore, crusting over in the morning air.

McEwan was fairly certain he didn't need a pathologist to tell him the boy had been shot.

JJ stared at the body, fascinated and trapped like a bunny in the oncoming truck's headlamps. "Jesus," she swore.

McEwan quickly paced out the distance from the body to the base of the Needle. He had found what he needed to know. Taking JJ with him, he turned to leave the tent when he noticed clutched in the hand of the boy, arm stretching futilely towards the Needle, a red origami rose.

On the way out he got the SOC processor to put the rose into an evidence bag.

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McEwan and JJ walked across the park to Gibson Street. The moments in the morning air a pleasant diversion from their investigation.

"I think it's down here," said McEwan, as they crossed the road and walked down the steps into the play area near Kelvingrove Underground station. A few metres away, set into a bricked in arch, under the Gibson Street Bridge that spanned the River Kelvin, was a steel door. A padlock should have secured it shut, however, it stood slightly ajar.

"Ready?" McEwan asked.

"I guess so," JJ confirmed, pulling her coat around her. "I just don't see the need for this."

McEwan yanked open the door. The hinges squealed in protest. Flakes of rust fell onto the ground. The archway was the end of an open tunnel several metres high. Lit only by the light that sneaked in from the door, the tunnel seemed ominous.

McEwan sighed. "What little CCTV footage we have, shows that an armed Police team entered here. They are next seen emerging from a similar access opening near Argyle Street following the boy. I'm curious to see what sort of criminal enterprise would be working in the abandoned railway tunnels beneath Kelvingrove Park."

"I didn't even know there were any," said JJ.

"More to this town than meets the eye," replied McEwan. He stepped over the threshold and into the tunnel, switching on his torch.

The brick-lined tunnel smelt of rust and damp. McEwan tried to avoid sneezing, but his nose itched. The darkness yielded to their torches and after a short descent the tunnel widened further.

At first, McEwan thought his eyes were playing tricks, as he could see lights dancing around. As they got closer, he could see that alcoves had been built into the walls of the ancient brick tunnel. Each alcove had been turned into a miniature shrine. Each had a red origami rose and a small candle flickering in the gloom, the light fragile and precious. Occasionally, other offerings had been made; food, cigarettes, plastic toys.

The eerie sense of intruding into the sacred brought the hairs up on the back of McEwan's neck. "What do you make of this?" he said to JJ.

"I dunno, seems a bit weird to me," JJ said. "Think whoever made these sacrifices white people to their gods?"

"It does seem like some kind of temple. I'm sure it would take more than the odd sacrifice for the Police to go in armed, though."

They continued down the tunnel. This far from the entrance it was quite warm. Ahead, their beams showed a small town made from cardboard boxes. Somewhere near the centre was the orange flicker of a fire.

McEwan walked over quietly, his leather shoes creaking on the brick floor. He hoped his torch hadn't given him away and switched it off. By the light of the fire, he

navigated his way through the maze of cardboard rooms, supported by scavenged wood, decorated with posters from bus shelters and paintings that would not look out of place on a caveman's wall.

"Hello?" McEwan said softly, just at the rim of the fire.

Wide, frightened eyes stared back, paralysed in terror. Then there was a flurry of movement as they tried to escape. McEwan thought he glimpsed a small gang of kids.

"It's okay," McEwan said gently. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"How do we know that?" asked a boy's voice, in heavily accented English.

McEwan thought Russian might be his first language.

"He's no like the others," said a girl sounding like a local.

"Tell me about the others," said McEwan.

"They come at night, mostly. They have guns. We run. Sometimes they catch one of us, take 'em away. We never see 'em again," the girl said.

McEwan was able to find her eyes reflecting the flames, staring out over the top of a small shelter. "Were they here last night?" he asked.

"Yes," several voices chorused.

"Did a boy go missing last night?"

"Yes," said the boy. "He is my brother, Temir. Have you seen him?"

"I'm sorry," said McEwan. "He was shot dead."

The boy wailed, uttering a cry in a language McEwan didn't understand.

"Where did he die?" asked the girl.

"At the Needle," McEwan replied.

The girl nodded, it made sense to her. As if understanding McEwan's ignorance she explained it to him. "The men are agents of the Crying Woman. They hunt for her. The Needle is a safe place, if you can get there, and she lets you stay."

"Who's the Crying Woman?" McEwan asked.

"She works with the Devil," the girl replied. "She wants to kill us all, but she also needs us. She sends the men to take us one by one."

McEwan was surprised; these kids seemed to have turned their misfortune into myth already. Suddenly the shrines and offerings made some kind of sense. "I know who killed your brother," he said to the wailing boy. "I'm just trying to find out why."

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The interview room was designed for greatest psychological discomfort. It was confined and hot. The walls were painted red. Sensors recorded data, from voice tremors to skin temperature. McEwan often felt the designers had overlooked the discomfort of the interviewer, and how much of their performance could be recorded for later scrutiny. JJ was monitoring the readouts and observing from behind the two-way mirror.

Police Sergeant Keith Mallory sat sullenly on the stiff plastic chair. His jeans and t-shirt were both blue and worn. His lawyer, provided by the police force, sat next to him in her stiff suit, Nordic blonde hair swept back from her head.

Mallory was in his late thirties, grizzled. McEwan thought he had sharp, cruel features. His eyes were cold and blank, like a shark. Perhaps his years of military service had deadened him?

"You shot a boy," McEwan stated. "Did you know that?"

Mallory kept focussed on the table. "No," Mallory said.

"You followed Temir from Kelvin Hall to Kelvingrove Park without noticing he was a child?" probed McEwan.

"It was dark," Mallory said, still looking at the tabletop. "He looked older."

"Why did you follow him for so long before engaging him?" asked McEwan.

"Orders where to raid a base of criminal activity, see what we could flush out. When it was clear he wasn't going anywhere in particular, we closed in."

Criminal activity meant organised crime, which was equivalent to terrorism these days, hence the police operation.

"Hunt in the old tunnels often?" McEwan inquired.

"First time I'd ever been down there."

"Did you not notice the other kids?" pushed McEwan.

"I didn't see anyone else down there."

"When you confronted Temir, you still failed to notice he was a child?"

McEwan persisted.

"Like I said, it was dark," Mallory maintained.

"According to your file, you used to specialise in night missions. If what you say is true, you'll need to retire anyway, now your eyesight has gone."

"Listen, you fuckin' pencil pusher. I was doing my fuckin' job," shouted Mallory. "We went to break up a criminal gang and I followed the book, to the letter. He had fair warning to stop after he ran."

"Mr Mallory," warned the lawyer.

"I'm only doing my job," McEwan responded, trying to sound amused. "I'm having a little difficulty getting access to the radio logs. Until I do, I only have your word for it. Surprisingly, most of the CCTV cameras were not working either."

Mallory glared at McEwan, before staring at the table once more.

"He's telling the truth," said JJ, when McEwan met her in the observation room.

McEwan nodded his agreement. "I think we have a death squad on our hands," he said.

"A death squad?" asked JJ, disbelieving.

"The police are doing what they are told, removing a security threat. Fortunately for us, Mallory is an honest man and this death wasn't covered up. But the same teams have been ordered down there regularly for months. I just need to figure out why."

"What are we going to do?" asked JJ.

"I'm going to have a chat with the Chief Constable."

"Shouldn't we get the Boss to deal with it?" asked JJ, feebly. She knew McEwan's facial expressions well enough to know that his mind was made up.

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Lesley Wilson, the Chief Constable, was most certainly not amused. McEwan had expected a fat, jowly hog, but Wilson was a scrawny, rodent-like woman. He was more surprised to find the street kids were right. Wilson's weasel eyes tried to probe deeper into McEwan and JJ.

"What makes you think I'm going to accept such an accusation?" Wilson said in a thin nasal voice.

"It isn't so much an accusation," said McEwan, "as a matter of record. You signed the orders for the operations to break up criminal activity in the abandoned railway tunnels. I don't expect we'll ever know how many street kids disappeared in those raids. The thing that really puzzles me is why you're attacking kids?"

Wilson regarded McEwan with open contempt. The police force had still not recovered from their CID work being outsourced to agencies. "They're little more than vermin," she sneered. "What does it matter? You have no evidence."

"Murder is still murder, Ms Wilson. Did your daughter run away? In some weird, sick way, is this some kind of revenge?" McEwan asked rhetorically.

"Get out of here," Wilson yelled, rising out of her chair.

McEwan remained, placid. "There are a few good men out there, still," he said. "I'm just glad that despite what PS Mallory did in the line of duty, he did do things by the book. You're both lucky, if that's the right word, that Temir fell into Egyptian territory after he was shot. My report to the Egyptian Government will show that there is no diplomatic incident for you to worry about."

"I told you to get out of my office," Wilson said with seething menace.

"Yes, ma'am," said McEwan, placing the evidence bag containing the red origami rose carefully onto Wilson's desk. "I know I can't prove it, yet. I'll find a way. Or maybe, just maybe, one night the Crying Woman will come for you too. And you better hope you can find your way to the Needle in time."

End