

THE KILLING GAME

They say that you always know when you meet the 'one'.

You've seen it in countless films and read about it in books. There's usually some combination of the mouth going dry, sweat breaking out, the heart thumping like a drum/thunder/the wings of a captured bird etc.

I'd always thought it was nonsense.

That was before he walked into the shop. Before the sweating, the dry mouth and – since you ask – a heartbeat that felt like a racing engine about to tear itself out of my chest.

Before I clapped eyes on the one I was meant to kill.

It all started as a bit of a laugh. There was Jez, Darro and me. We'd been round at Jez's house all afternoon with nothing to do; no money for a film; no money for the shops; just a long boring afternoon to get through. Jez had some card game of his kid brother's in his pocket. Don't know why, but that's what set us off.

"Seen this stupid game?" he asked, tossing the cards carelessly onto the table in front of us.

Darro and I looked at the scatter of cards. They were sort of see-through with bits of faces printed on them.

"It's like a police identikit or something," Jez said looking at our puzzled expressions. "You lay them on top of each other and build a face. It's rubbish really. Hey look at this one."

And it was kid's stuff but we couldn't help leaning forward to look at the silly face he'd made up.

"Looks like old Jericho who sits in the park getting out of his head on cider," Darro said.

"No it doesn't, not a bit like him. It looks like Shrek."

That was Jez who was a stickler for detail.

"I bet you couldn't make those cards look like anyone normal," I said, trying to keep the peace. Darro can get a bit edgy if he's in the mood.

"Tell you what," Jez said. "Let's write stuff down. Y'know. Colour of hair, colour of eyes, shape of nose and stuff."

"And then what?" Darro asked.

"Well, we put them in piles."

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, and then we all take a card from each pile and we’ll have the description of someone. See.”

“Yeah, but what’s the point?” I asked. I wondered if Jez was going to get us drawing next. We could pretend to be artists and turn out ‘wanted’ pictures like the ones on ‘Crime Watch’ that never look like anyone human.

We were all quiet for a bit, thinking it was a stupid idea, but reluctant to let it go.

“Tell you what,” Darro said not making eye contact but staring hard at a poster of a surfer. I don’t think Jez had ever made it to the seaside so I couldn’t imagine why he’d put it on the wall.

“Wipe out,” I muttered involuntarily.

“Wha’?”

“We could kill them.”

Darro finished his interrupted sentence.

Jez and I both gasped. But I got this little excited feeling somewhere down in the pit of my stomach. It made me want to giggle like a silly little kid so I pressed my lips together tightly and tried to look serious.

“You’re joking man,” Jez said.

“Yeah, course I am,” Darro agreed grinning and a bit of me felt disappointed.

“Anyway,” he said, “we’d never meet anyone that looked like the description.”

“Yeah,” Jez said and I could tell from the way he said it he was relieved.

We were quiet again for a bit and then I said,

“Well, we could give it a go, couldn’t we? Just for a laugh. Just to see what sort of person we came up with.”

Darro smiled. It transformed his face. He scared me.

“Come on then,” Jez said, suddenly up for the game. “I’ll go and get a sheet of card from our kid’s room, he’s usually making something. You two better start thinking about what we need for the faces and,” he paused for dramatic effect, “how they’re going to be done in.”

Again I felt the tingling but now it was running up and down my spine.

Then, what a laugh, we sat round like three big kids at a playgroup writing out these stupid little cards. We sorted them into sets and shuffled them. Jez is brilliant at doing that thing with two piles of cards and riffling them together. Then he laid them in straight rows on the table.

“Right, choose your man,” Darro said.

I know it sounds pathetic but we had decided against women. Made us feel uneasy. It’s not that we’re sexist or anything, but somehow we didn’t fancy it.

We each laid the cards out in front of us, shielding them with our hands so that the others wouldn’t see straight off.

“Look at that man,” Jez said laughing. “How many blond haired, black men with blue eyes am I going to find down town?”

Darro and I sniggered.

“I dunno, but I’m sure there’s a player in the Premier League who looks a bit like that,” I said.

I could see Jez’s relief turning to anxiety again.

“Yeah,” he said quickly, “but he’s not likely to be living anywhere round here?”

“You never know,” Darro said, joining in the game.

“How you going to kill him then?” I asked keeping the pressure up.

“With a beer bottle. Who thought of that stupid thing?”

“What you going to do, drink him to death?”

Darro burst out laughing and treated us to a view of his gold crowns.

I looked down at the cards lined up neatly in front of me. Red hair; glasses; brown eyes; fat; short; to be killed with a baseball bat. I felt let down. I didn't think I knew anyone who looked like that but I did have a baseball bat. At least my dad did. He kept it under the counter of our shop because he said you could never be too careful and it was no use catching the buggers on CCTV after they'd run off with the till.

Darro's 'person' could have been anyone and that bothered me because he could claim anyone was his victim and that seemed like cheating. Then I got to thinking that there were three people walking about out there who didn't know what was coming to them. It made me feel good. The power of life and death. Yeah right! But then it was just a game. I mean we weren't really going to do anything, were we?

That was a couple of weeks ago. Not a lot's happened since then. I haven't seen much of Jez or Darro, we're all busy with our own stuff. But I keep an eye on the local press, just in case. I mean I know I won't really be reading about a murder, but the excitement is that I might and I'll know who's done it because I've got descriptions of all the victims!

It's been a quiet afternoon and I'm stocking up the cigarettes behind the counter "not too many son, don't put temptation in their way" when in he walks. My knees buckle, I hold on to the edge of the counter for support. It's all there; the ginger hair; the thick glasses magnifying the brown eyes, making them look huge. And he is fat, his stomach strains against his t-shirt and he's definitely on the short side.

"How you doing mate?" he asks smiling, his lips as pink and as wet as a baby's in his full moon face.

For a couple of seconds I can't say anything. I just stand like an idiot wondering why I never thought of Terrence Smith when I first turned over the cards. He lives at the end of our street but I haven't seen much of him since we all left school a couple of years ago. Anyway he was never in our gang. He was hopeless at sport; he was hopeless at most things. Even the first level of computer games defeated him. And then I suddenly remember the time when I got all the little kids to call him Mr Blobby and his mother came round and threatened my dad. Even now, it makes me cringe to think of her standing in our shop mouthing off about me in front of everyone. So I left Terrence alone then, or Piggy, as I called him when his mother wasn't around. I think it's safe to say, by anybody's reckoning, he owes me.

"Yeah, I'm all right," I say after I get over the first shock of seeing him.

He wanders off to look at the magazines. Not tall enough to see the top shelf stuff I think smugly. I watch him bend down awkwardly over his stomach to look at some kid's comics on the bottom shelf. I stretch my hand out under the counter and let it run up and down the smooth surface of the baseball bat. And here it is the heartbeat that feels like a racing engine about to tear itself out of my chest. And there's this laughter that keeps bubbling and fizzing inside me. But I have to keep cool. I've got to work this thing out properly. Getting caught isn't part of the plan. But at least I know my victim now. Game on!