On the face of it, it was obviously a horrible murder and one with tragic collateral damage.

But there was more.

A middle aged widow was found slumped over her kitchen sink. She´d suffered a massive heart attack.

In fact she´d died of shock.

The estimated time of death was put at the early hours of that morning.

A morning that was to have been the happiest of her life.

She´d been due to be reunited with her son, whom she hadn´t clapped eyes on for more than 20 years.

Her only child, who´d disappeared at the age of 10 when she had turned up late to collect him from school. She´d dallied a bit longer than usual while visiting a friend.

A special friend. A very special friend. Her lover.

A child who, although he hadn´t seen his mother for most of his life, was known to be still alive.

Nobody knew the facts behind his disappearance, but it was obvious he´d been kidnapped, although no clues were ever found.

Every year, at different times, no pattern could be established, the grieving mother received photographs of her growing son.

He looked physically well, at least at the beginning. But as the years passed his face became ever more strained, his skin grey and his eyes dead and his smile well, there wasn´t one.

That was it, just photos. There was never a message or anything else. No demands. Nothing.

That´s what killed the father, the uncertainty, the not knowing.

His mother was made of sterner stuff.

Or was it guilt?

Every envelope bore a different postmark, some from different parts of the world.

No pattern.

Then, finally, on the day before she died, a photo had arrived with a message scribbled on the back:

‘Hallo mummy, I´m coming home.

I´ll see you in the morning.

Love Richard.’ XXX

The hand writing was that of a young child, of primary school age.

Whether he actually did see his mother cannot be determined.

His mother saw him.

That´s why she died.

He was hanging from the branch of a tree, directly outside her 4th floor kitchen window.

Friends and relatives and the local police were quick to pay tribute to a loving, dedicated and broken mother who´d always clung to the hope that she´d see her son before she died.

Well, she was right.

There was much speculation in the media as to the mental state of the person who could conceive and carry out such an abomination.

To me, it was obvious.

But why release her son now?

To me, that was also obvious.

A warning, for me.

This was a man who delighted in causing unspeakable suffering and then selling images of this suffering.

And he´s coming.

I know he´s coming.

I visualize him swooping into my life like some kind of avenging angel. Although what he´s got to avenge is beyond me.

I´ve moved into a new, ground floor flat, in the same neighbourhood I´ve always lived in.

And he knows.

I think he´s already lurking.

The other night, at least I can sleep again, albeit fitfully, I was awoken by a frantic whispering sound just outside my bedroom window.

I never used to be such a light sleeper. But living with the threat of death is not exactly conducive to a sound sleep.

I lay there listening, but the words were just not clear enough or loud enough to make out.

It happened again the night after.

This time the curtains on my window blew in, in time to the hissing sound, knocking a vase over and soaking my papers.

Now it`s only a matter of time.

I find I write better in the pub these days, especially my new local and especially late afternoon, when sometimes, like today, I´m the only customer. I sit there with my pint, my pad and my pen and it just gushes out.

I´ve actually finished my book on Yeats, it´s a mixture of fact and fiction and a good deal of embellishment. He doesn´t know I´ve finished it yet.

Now, no doubt inspired by Yeats, my mind is concocting a series of horrific short stories which, to be honest, read rather well.

The last time we spoke, I hung up on him after telling him, I wouldn´t bring the book out. He craves the superstar status he believes it would bring him and, no doubt, the affirmation of fellow psychopaths.

It puzzled me for a while, the fact that the prospect of being caught didn´t seem to trouble him in the least.

Then I realized.

Like others of his ilk, a part of him wants to be caught.

Then, suddenly, like at our first meeting, there he was, this time preceded by a plume of cigarette smoke falling slowly onto my half empty pint.

‘Don´t you know you´re not supposed to smoke in pubs?’ I asked him, my voice shaking.

‘I don´t think that applies to me.’ He answered languidly, coiling himself into the chair opposite mine.

He placed a battered, silver cigarette case and an old, red disposable lighter proprietorially on the table.

‘I have something very interesting to talk to you about, Writer.’

‘That sounds ominous.’

‘Don´t be so pessimistic.’

‘Excuse me. Smoking isn´t allowed in here.’ A gruff, confident bellow emanated from the bar.

Yeats looked slowly in the direction of the voice.

‘I´ve just been telling this gentleman, that doesn´t apply to me.’

I took a peep at Yeats´ face. He had adopted a wide-eyed, innocent expression.

‘Well on your bloody bike then!’ The publican shouted, opening the bar flap, with a slam. He was a tall and stocky character, middle aged with a puce face and a manner that did not brook disagreement.

I could see Yeats` expression changing, darkening like a storm front and his eyes narrowing.

‘Run along and get me a pint of your most expensive ale, my man. On the house.’ He breathed, huskily. ‘Oh. And another one for my friend here.’

The landlord held his ground for a second, opened his mouth, clearly thought better of it, went back behind the bar, grabbed a glass and proceeded to do as he was told.

‘Where were we?’ Yeats mumbled, half to himself, drifting off somewhere.

The pints of beer were placed reverentially in front of us, together with an ashtray. Yeats smiled at the rapidly retreating landlord.

‘Thank you, my man.’

We sat together in silence, an uneasy silence, while Yeats sipped his beer reflectively. His face, caught in the dust swirling motes of sunlight lancing through the pub windows, looked incongruously like that of a writer seeking inspiration.

‘I´ve been thinking, Writer. And it goes like this. Ready?’

‘Do I have a choice?’

‘Now, Writer, play the game.’

I sank back into my chair, took a fortifying swig and waited.

He put his cigarette out slowly, staring straight ahead, and retrieved a crumpled sheet of paper from a side pocket.

‘Now, when I begin, Writer, I do not want to be interrupted under any circumstances. Is that clear?’

He glanced at the bar and I followed and saw the landlord scuttle timidly away.

‘I´m waiting for an answer.’

‘Yes. It´s clear.’ I answered, begrudgingly.

He cleared his throat, theatrically and started speaking.

‘‘The figure emerged from the dank, dark subway onto the badly lit, rain swept streets of the capital. His city.

Yes, his work was done for now, but sometimes he felt the strain. So much to do and so little time to do it in.

He was a magnificent specimen. Tall and rangy like The Man with no Name.

Except he had a name. But was it his real one?

He lit a cigarette and blew a perfect smoke ring above his head. It lingered there like a halo and enhanced the fleeting pose he struck, one hand on his hip, the other holding the cigarette, coquettishly, a thin trail of smoke disappearing over his shoulder.

He´d modeled this aspect on the stick like symbol from the 60s TV series ‘The Saint’, and had had cards printed with this motif, which he left at the scene of his completed tasks.

He allowed himself a small smile, as he contemplated his next assignment.

And there was always another assignment. And there always would be.

That´s what drove him, and the need to supply answers to the questions that formed in his head.’’

I sat silent and still.

‘Well, what do you think?’ He snapped.

‘What´s it supposed to be?’

He squinted at me, forcing me to look away, pitifully.

‘What´s it supposed to be? It´s not supposed to be anything. It is the intro to our book. Which, incidentally, I have yet to read, and to which I will no doubt have to make further additions and corrections.’

‘Our book?’

‘Our book. The one you should have finished by now and are going to bring out to jubilant acclaim for writer and co-writer and subject.’

‘I´ve scrapped it.’ I blurted.

The only way to buy more time with Yeats was to tantalizingly dangle a distant completion date for the book in front of him. Of course now I had to find a place to hide my completed manuscript. I was getting worried constantly carrying it around. I even slept with it taped to my stomach.

‘You´re lying.’ His voice was shaking now, with barely suppressed rage.

‘To do it properly, I need to know about you, your past, why you do……….’

‘That´s the trouble with people, especially writers, your weakness. You always think there has to be logic or reason for what somebody does. You like to tie things up in a pretty bow. My past is irrelevant. I do what I do, because I do it.’

‘Your past has a bearing on your future and…….’

‘Past, present, future, I´m a work in progress, Writer. A glorious work in progress.’ He gazed dreamily into nowhere.

‘Believe me, Yeats. I´m a perfectionist. I want this to be my defining work, a book people will talk about in the future. My life`s work.

He actually smiled at me. It even looked genuine.

‘Not bad, Writer. Almost convincing.’

Then he drained his glass, collected his cigarettes and lighter and stood up.

‘I´ll be seeing you soon, Writer.’

‘Not if I see you first.’

‘You won´t.’

I could smell the cigarette smoke even before I reached my flat door.

His cigarette smoke. Think what you like. I know his cigarette smoke.

His exhalation contains something of him.

I had, by now, taken the reluctant action of severing contact with all friends and acquaintances. I couldn´t take the chance of anymore of them falling victim to Yeats.

On my pillow, lay a crumpled sheet of plain white paper with a set of instructions. I was to follow the instructions implicitly, any deviation, however small, would result in instant and final reprisal.

Once memorized, I was to destroy the instructions. He knew I would.

There was a set of directions to a body of water, quite far from here. Once there I was to view, and only view, the image. I could view it for as long as I wanted. But no, absolutely no, photographs were to be taken and no, absolutely no, recording devices of any nature were to be used. And finally, no, absolutely no, attempts at communication were to be made.

And, I was not to TOUCH IT!

Finally, he added, that it was best to visit the location in daylight and, to best take advantage of the current beautiful weather we were enjoying, I was to take a snack for myself and a cool bag with a couple of beers.

I actually spewed up all over my bed, my innards burning as beer and scraps of food were voided.

If it´s possible, barely contained frustration and almost uncontrollable fear also erupted from my quaking body.

Of course, I didn´t know what I was going to see, but, whatever it was, it would bear Yeats` unique signature.

I left early, sleep was even more difficult to summon than usual.

I followed the instructions to the letter, which involved taking trains and buses, then walking back in the direction I had come until I reached a telephone box, crossing the road, then down a lane, walking around in circles three times, looking for a certain type of tree and on and on and on.

Or something like that.

Then I had to look around until I spotted it, the image. Which may take a few minutes as it was moved regularly to ensure it was not unnecessarily exposed to too much direct sunlight.

Which I did, after about five minutes.

It was a truly idyllic spot, looking out onto an endless expanse of calm, blue, shining water.

In his list of instructions, he´d further urged that, before viewing the image, I should take the trouble to fully appreciate the view and surroundings.

I stood there breathing in the cool air, looking at the lake, trying to relax.

Well, I tried.

He stressed, it was important that I really take all this in, realize how privileged I was. Learn not to take anything for granted, especially the simple things in life.

I was dreading this and I began to feel like some kind of accomplice, because I knew that whatever I saw, I was not going to contact the police or I would, more than likely, end up the same way.

Just in front of an impenetrable looking forest, was a fairy tale like glade, containing a copse of fir trees nestling in thick, luxuriant, deep green grass.

It was propped up against a tree, the middle tree at the front of the copse, as if somebody had left it there for a few minutes and had gone off to run an errand.

It was a box.

The lush grass was still damp from the dew. Staring through a canopy of interlaced branches, I could see a perfectly cloudless, light blue sky. It was a truly beautiful spot, off the beaten track, but silent, strangely silent. Not a bird in the sky. Nothing. Total peace.

A dirty, old, bashed about box.

Its surface was gouged and scratched and the original paint, which looked like light green, was almost worn away.

It was about six feet long and at the top it had a window in it. A grimy, window, about 4 inches square.

I began shaking and breathing rapidly.

I dropped to my knees and crawled to the box.

I stood up beside it. I could see inside the window and, as expected, I saw a face.

A man´s face.

He was alive.

He blinked.

Although the window was dirty, I could see that his skin had a spotty, grey pallor to it, starved of light. He looked at me.

I nearly jumped out of my skin.

He didn´t look shocked.

We just looked at each other. It´s difficult to be sure, but I feel I saw something in his eyes.

A flicker of something.

It wasn´t fear. It wasn´t hope.

No, it was just a blink.

There was nothing else for him but abject resignation.

Then again, I´m sure he was beyond even that.

I just fell to the ground, like I´d been deflated. I cried, great heaving sobs. I thought my chest was going to explode.

I think, I must be on the verge of some sort of breakdown.

I´m drinking too much. Not eating enough. Not sleeping properly. I´m a bag of nerves. I´m in a constant state, that I can only describe as petrification. And my guilt ridden conscience has just assumed another load of blame.

He rang that night. My eyes had just closed and I was sinking into a much needed state of unconsciousness.

‘What do you think, Writer?’

My eyes and my body felt so numbingly heavy like I´d been working non- stop down a mine for days. Even my mind felt shattered.

‘I think I fucking hate you Yeats. I absolutely despise you. I wouldn´t piss on you if you were on fire.’ I said it slowly and without emotion.

‘Writer, Writer. What´s come over you?’

‘What are you doing to that man? How long has he been in that box? How much longer does he have to stay in it?’

‘One question at a time. Nothing. Years. Don´t know.’

‘Why do you do these things? You´re not human.’

‘Among other things, I feel it´s important to observe the trials and tribulations of my fellow man. You can learn so much.’

‘You´re so fucking twisted…..’

‘Now just a minute. I move that box around regularly. He prefers to watch the sunset, he doesn´t like the sunrise. I feed him, give him water, exercise him, sort of. What more can I do?’

‘Let him out. That´s what you can do.’

‘Too late for that . He wouldn´t survive. It´s like those wild life programmes. You know when they try to reintroduce some creature into the wild? Doesn´t work. Anyway, he´s a commission.’

‘A what?’

‘Yes. I´m branching out.’  
  
‘I don´t believe anybody could be as sick as you.’

‘You´d be surprised.’

‘Leave me in peace.’

‘If I told you who´d commissioned me, a top drawer writer, you´d go green with envy. I wouldn´t be surprised if he´s a hero of yours. You do have literary heroes, don´t you, Writer?’

‘What the hell do you want?’

‘Let me finish. He´s one of those much garlanded literary lions they´re so proud of in America and, well, he was looking for something for his new work.’

‘I don´t want to hear anymore.’

‘Listen. How else do you think the descriptions in some books are so vivid? Anyway, he wants to observe a scenario, and then incorporate it in his next opus.’

He was relating this like a museum guide to a group of art lovers.

‘I knew you were responsible for the hanging man.’

‘The penny has dropped. There is a similarity between the two. I´m glad you picked up on that.’

‘I haven´t picked up on anything.’

‘Where do you think the hanging man had been all the time?’

My fear, disgust and incomprehension had assumed physical properties. I felt as though something was slowly crawling over my entire body. My skin was tingling and a horrible sensation was spreading out from the pit of my stomach.

‘No. That´s just too mind numbingly horrific to take in.’

‘Do you think they noticed how perfectly his body was framed in the kitchen window, just like in a painting? I bet they didn´t. I quite liked him, actually.’ He reminisced, as though discussing his first serious romantic partner.

‘I want you out of my life.’

‘But you´re good for me, Writer. You´ve given my creative side a much needed boost.’

‘Creative side? You´re just destruction personified. Nobody could make you up. You´re sick.’ I was screaming, it even began to feel cathartic, therapeutic.

I could hear him lighting a cigarette. I could sense his enjoyment as he puffed happily.

‘Writer. You haven´t studied my images. They´re not random you know. They´re planned. Take those spinning heads for example. Remember them, from our first meeting?’

It was indescribable listening to him, his cool and calm speech, as though he really was discussing some abstract piece of art.

‘Now those heads, each one was suspended on a different length of rope and at a certain distance from each other….’

‘I´ve had enough of this…’  
  
‘This is just the beginning. We can do things together, Writer. Books, films. I was even thinking, when our book comes out, it´s bound to be a huge success, they´re going to want to film it. But who could play me? It´s a pity Clint Eastwood is so old, otherwise he would have been perfect. I can´t think of any other actor who could exude that certain malevolence that I possess. What do you think?’

This was surreal. It was like some kind of script meeting.

‘Well?’

‘Please get the fuck out of my life.’ I slammed the phone down. I really only had one option. Not one I believed in, but my only hope, however slender.

I went to the police. I didn´t ring them. I went to them. To say they were a tad skeptical at first, would be an understatement.

They knew me already, from that silly misunderstanding between me and my neighbours at my previous flat.

‘You know, you´re not the first crackpot writer who´s come here thinking he can solve a murder.’ That was the closing salvo from the first detective, after I´d spent, I don´t know how long telling them the unlikely sounding story of Yeats.

But his partner, who had said next to nothing during my interview and who had been studying me closely the whole time, gave me a thoughtful look.

‘You look like shit.’ He said finally. ‘And you´re a nervous wreck. I´m not saying I believe you. But I´m not saying I don´t.’

‘We`ll look into it.’ They allowed.

‘Just one more thing,’ I said. Detective One sighed with exasperation.

‘Sometimes you keep something back from the general public and the media, something you discover at a crime scene. Something that only the killer could know about. Or an informed member of the public.’  
  
‘Like you?’ Said One.

‘Like me.’

‘What have you got?’ Two asked, less abruptly.

I told them about Yeats` cards, with the symbolic, stick figure.

They exchanged glances.

‘As I said we`ll look into it. You`ll be hearing from us.’ One said, too quickly. That convinced me I was right.

‘OK?’ One ended the interview.

‘Don´t leave it too long.’ I pleaded.

‘What´s that supposed to mean?’ Asked Two.

‘I´m not being melodramatic. But I really don´t know how much time I´ve got.’

‘We´ll be in touch.’ One said dismissively.

They were.

Quicker than I thought.

Within an hour, we went to where I´d seen the box. Needless to say, there was no trace. They snooped around, but there was nothing. Nevertheless, I think even One believed me. They asked me to come in again, for more questioning.

‘There´s no record of this Yeats character, nothing. Not a trace. We´ve checked everywhere and everything.’ Two informed me.

‘That doesn´t surprise me.’ I said. ‘No offence. But that´s how he´s always one step ahead of the law.’

‘We haven´t given up yet. Don´t go planning any long journeys.’

‘There´s nowhere far enough.’

Back in my flat, I felt that I´d taken the most positive step I´d taken in an age. But I also knew that Yeats would know what I´d done.

If he comes. No, when he comes, let him come. I can´t live like this anymore.

But I won´t give up without a fight.

The next day I went back to the box site. I´d found a place a bit deeper in the forest and buried my manuscript. It was the last place Yeats would think of looking.

That night, I drank till I passed out.

Although, alcohol only keeps you under for so long.

I was awoken by the whispering again. More intense and hurried.

In a half stupor, I grabbed a claw hammer, I´d started keeping under my bed, and went into the garden, it was pouring with rain, adding to the threatening atmosphere.

I looked at the dense shadows, waiting for a movement, then I´d let him have it. Right in his face, claw first.

Then I heard him whispering, behind me.

I spun around, with surprising speed, there was, of course, nobody there. I looked down at the rain water, whispering and gurgling down the drain.

I laughed aloud, looking up into the torrential downpour, delighting in its refreshing feel on my face, and went back to my flat.

But I walked straight into a cloud of cigarette smoke.

His smoke.

I spun around again, he wasn´t there.

In my flat I closed the windows and checked on the doors.

I grabbed another bottle and fell onto my bed.

Onto my manuscript.

I pulled it out from under me. One of his new cards had been attached to it. There was an untidily written message on the back:

‘Writer, our book should be titled, Unfinished Business.’