

ONE IN DOCK

Conway awoke from a dreamless sleep, and felt that he was indeed dreaming. Two men were talking; or, rather, one man was talking more than enough for two. His voice was loud and resonant to a fault.

“I thank my angel,” he was saying, “that I’m here at all. When I was in Ward One, after the stroke, I didn’t know what I was doing. I couldn’t see straight or anything. I could’ve died. There’s a lot of it about in Ward One. But my angel took care of me. The angels take care of everyone. Bless them.” His voice broke with emotion. “The only problem now is—when do we get out of *here* . . . ?”

The speaker, who was sitting up bare-chested in the bed to Conway’s right, was neither young nor old. Considered in the abstract, his face was handsome enough, even boyish. But his skull was naked and pocked as a cannon ball, which gave this otherwise unremarkable face the look of an ascetic guru. The man to whom he spoke interminably was also sat up in the bed opposite. His face, thick-set with a slightly bulbous nose and a tightly-shut mouth, betrayed long-suffering; there was a rueful intelligence in his dark eyes.

Suddenly, he bowed his balding head as if in obeisance, and buried it in his left arm, which seemed to be causing him much pain. But it was the ritual strangeness of the scene that impressed Conway: it was unworldly, even oriental.

My murdere, thought Conway. The Chosen One. For Conway had returned to consciousness with the

sure and certain conviction that he was predestined to kill the young-old man with the bullet-bald head. It was a nauseating thought, but he was used to his mind playing tricks. DTs. If only he could have a drink

A nurse entered, bearing early morning tea. Conway would have preferred vodka, but accepted his cup quietly, his right hand shaking only slightly. Meanwhile, the man with the bald head just went on talking, all at the top of his voice.

“No, I mean it’s frightening. You find yourself here and you’ve no idea when you’ll get out—*if* you get out. They tell you nothing. You can’t believe a bloody word they say anyway. If anyone had told me, a year ago, Max, you’re going to have a stroke and do time in a place like this, I wouldn’t have believed them—never. Nurse! *Toilet! Nurse . . . !*”

“Wait on, Max,” said a nurse offhandedly, passing down the outer corridor. “We’re busy.”

“I know their *business*,” boomed Max. “Sitting in that office of theirs, *talking* about us for two whole hours. I ask you. Vic, what do I have for breakfast? Weetabix or Rice Krispies?”

Vic, in the bed opposite Max, spoke for the first time. His voice was steady and restrained.

“Weetabix,” he said, as if intoning a daily mantra.

“Oh yeh. And?”

“And toast and scrambled egg. And coffee.”

“Yeh, I remember. No porridge?”

“No porridge.”

“Right then. Nurse! Toilet! *Nurse . . . !*” His voice became stentorian.

Eventually a long-suffering nurse set up a commode for Max, and the curtains were drawn round his bed.

“Help me!” moaned Max *in extremis*. “Oh! Oh! Help me! Help me! Please, please help me . . . !”

Vic took this opportunity to be wheeled off to the gents, looking dignified and impassive.

Take me to the toilet, Nurse, Conway murmured to himself. For the black-bat night has flown . . . He was trying to ignore those initial waking impressions, but the fact remained that the scenario of himself as murderer and Max as murderee remained disconcertingly vivid. Intellectually this presented no difficulties: he had only to recall how, on his arrival in Ward 6 of Belknap General, a week before, he had looked on passively while a resident dramatist in his head invented an elaborate and farcical scenario for the other inhabitants of the Silverstone Bay. It revolved around the arrival of a wandering idiot from the outside corridor (there was no lack of wandering idiots in Belknap General) who proceeded to hijack a temporarily vacated bed while the owner was in the gents; and the gleefully-awaited comeuppance of said idiot once the lights were out. What Conway had observed was objective fact, down to the last detail; but his interpretation of the facts had been wrong: the “idiot”, and the rightful owner of bed 6, were one and the same person, a Mr Lawrence Hyde—a fact which became unavoidable after lights-on next morning. This had left Conway confused and embarrassed as he tried to explain to the others his immoderate and barely suppressed mirth of the previous night. In retrospect, however, there had been an element of truth in his mentally-improvised farce, for Mr Hyde had turned out to be something of a split personality: an amiable man of good will, a raconteur of Second World War stories, who was also a half-wit, totally ignorant of his alphabet—present him with a telephone directory, and he was lost. In the end he had

been sent, much dejected, into residential care. But Conway did not find much solace in all this.

In spite of himself, he found himself thinking about the case of Denis Nilsen, the serial killer. Now *there* was a radical interpreter of the facts. Nilsen had had no idea of his motive for murder. The “facts” consisted of being alone in his flat with another man. But an interpretation had apparently been foisted upon him: *I am going to kill this man*. Reason? No reason at all. Fifteen times no reason

Conway was sweating, and felt the need to relieve himself. He hoisted himself out of bed and moved with difficulty—he had a drink-related circulatory problem in his swollen legs—in the direction of the gents, following Vic’s trail down the corridor of the Ulver Hospital, Ward 3, where he had been sent for rehabilitation.

He turned right, passing the sluice room where, as could easily be seen, they kept shelf upon shelf of papier-maché urine bottles, then right again, into a short descending passageway with a ribbed floor leading to the day room and the “bar” at the nearest end, where they served water and hot drinks. Conway remembered it all from his previous stay at the Ulver, which was just over a year ago. Brown crossbeams on a white ceiling; and, in the men’s quarters at the far end, the ancient upright piano, largely unused except (Conway remembered) by the chaplain from Belknap General. Every Thursday, as supper-time approached, John the Chaplain would arrive and sit down to play Songs from the Shows and Hits from 1925: “If You were the Only Girl in the World”, “Let the Rest of the World Go By”, etc. Conway was glad to find the piano silent: those songs, for a complex of reasons, made him want to weep, reminding him as they did of Lily, his mother.

No amount of redecoration could disguise the '30s look of the day room, which brought with it subliminal echoes of an even more previous existence as the local workhouse. As for the faded blue matt carpet, it looked as if not even redecoration had been attempted. Through long windows to the right, the Ulver revealed itself.

Conway stood in an open doorway in the wall, and looked out upon a small quadrangle of overgrown grass with a central broken sundial, over which a sunny blue morning sky shone through surrounding elms. On all sides of the quadrangle rose a square-towered garrison-like structure, its walls of grey granite pockmarked and pebbledashed with black stone. Most of its windows were blinded with wood, while those that were unblinded gave nothing away. Feeling quite at home, Conway retired to the gents, which were on the opposite side of the day room.

Sitting in the cubicle next to Vic, he felt relieved in more ways than one. While he was out of sight and—above all—sound of Max, he could dismiss that hypnotic mirage of murder and concentrate on immediacies. Gratified to observe the normality of his stool, he rehearsed his CV to himself. Name: Christopher Conway. Address: 45 Fearnville Drive, South Isley, Belknap. Occupation: alcoholic and ex branch-librarian. Age: 62. Married: No. Children: No.

“Nurse! Nurse!” In the next cubicle, Vic shouted—not with any of Max’s booming insistence, but with stoically persistent repetition. Conway opened the door of his cubicle and stepped out to wash his hands.

“Who is that?” asked Vic.

“Conway, Chris Conway—the new boy in your room. Can I help?”

Vic cleared his throat. “Will you tell Mavis I’m ready to come out? She was working behind the bar.

She swore blind she'd be there when I needed her. Now—"

"No problem. I'll find Mavis." Indeed, Conway had recognised Mavis from last year—she of the eagle eye and potentially basilisk stare—and she had recognised him. But when he left the gents, he found the bar empty. Instead, in the outer corridor, he met a sultry-looking blonde nurse with flushed features and rather puffy, sensual-looking eyes. Her name was Janis. She declared that she would look after Vic "in due time".

In Room 3, Conway's breakfast of porridge, toast, marmalade and coffee awaited him on the overhanging table at his bedside. He ate, then downed with some difficulty and an occasional attack of retching two thiamine tablets, one propranolol, one antibiotic, two librium and two vitamin Bs with a glass of water. A nurse brought a tub of hot water, and he bathed while she made his bed. Max was still being tended to behind drawn curtains, but eventually a wheelchair arrived and he was wheeled off to the day room, looking withdrawn and tragic. The nurse returned and rubbed Conway's back for him. Vic was wheeled in by Janis, to be given a complete tub-wash. Then he was wheeled out again, looking resigned.

Conway, using the mirror at the back of his old-fashioned wooden cupboard of a locker, trimmed his dapper but greying beard, behind which he could look respectably glum. Looking in the mirror, he noticed what was surely a CCTV camera scanning his bed from the opposite wall. It looked doubly strange amid the '30s décor of the room. Looking round, he saw a camera above each bed. Once more rehearsing his CV to himself, he dressed, using the second-hand clothes provided by the nurse. Remembering the fouled and foul-smelling clothes he had been wearing on arrival at Belknap General, he shuddered, and walked

circumspectly to the day room, using window ledges as handholds.

In the day room, everyone was waiting. According to the clock on the wall at the far end of the room, it was ten o'clock. Immediately beneath the clock was the stout oaken door which was the main entrance to, and exit from, Ward 3 (Rehabilitation): it had a black iron ring for a handle, and an iron grille at the top. Beyond it lay mysterious kitchens and corridors leading to offices; Conway could remember them from his arrival the previous night. To the right of the door sat Max. He was wearing old black trousers, grey socks, galoshes and a white T-shirt. He was letting people in and out of Ward 3, using a nonchalant gesture of his right hand and arm. Without Max, none might pass out of, or into, Ward 3. Conway stood at the bar, looking at him down the distance of the day room.

The foremost and larger portion of the room was inhabited by ladies and, to the left, a large wall-TV. Most of the ladies were old, but in very varying degrees of dilapidation. Few of them took any notice of the TV, though it was already chattering away to itself.

"I told *you* to stay away from here," said Mavis, who was preparing tea and coffee behind the bar. She started to give him the Look, known to stop the most troublesome man in his tracks. Conway pretended to fend it off with his left arm.

"No use, Mave. Things were hotting up again. Things were getting too much. I couldn't resist the lure of this place. I needed some peace and quiet."

"Don't give me that," said Mavis, but he knew he had got past her defences. Her face softened like butter, and so did her Maryport vowels.

"They said they would transfer my *Telegraph* order from Belknap General to here," he said, his politeness verging on the ingratiating.

“Well, you know where to find it, then. Always got to be intellectual, haven’t we?” But her voice had ceased its scathing; it had adopted its tone of matronly forbearing and condescension, and her face had a warm and kindly look, as if she were thinking: *Bless him*.

Conway turned automatically and reached for the daily pile of papers, which lay on an adjacent desk near the wall-telephone and the draughty window. “Not *really* intellectual.” Feeling his smile to be too greasy, he wiped it off and picked up the *Telegraph*. He could hardly tell her the truth: that his life had been extraordinary to such a degree, so extra-mundane, that he clung to the most ordinary newspaper in the world, using it as ballast. Looking at the headline—ASSASSINS TARGET FELDMAN—he noticed that the *Sun*, which lay on top of the pile, was marked out for a Mr Max Cornwell. May as well make friends with my murdere . . . There, he’d said it. Saying it, he’d thought it. Thinking it, he felt surrounded by an evil sense of unreality, which made the scene in the day room look far too vivid, far too laden with predetermined doom. Forcing one leg after the other, he somehow moved down the room towards the one dark door of exit and entrance. As he moved nearer, Max effortlessly extended his fully-operational right hand and arm to admit through the door a dumpy woman in the pale yellow uniform of an underling. She had a large, sleepy face, puffy half-closed eyes and thick, sensual lips. She pulled a trolley full of bed-linen.

“Morning, Marie,” said Max; and everyone knew Marie had arrived.

“Morning,” said Marie sulkily, sleepily, moving somnambulistically on. Max let go of the iron ring, and the door swung shut with a definitive thud. Having performed his office, Max leant back easily in

his armchair, a confident dignity in his face and bearing.

“Morning paper, sir?” Bowing slightly, Conway put on his best smile, acting a part as he handed the *Sun* to Max. Max extended his right arm once more, with a lordly unconsciousness.

“Oh, thanks mate. Thanks”

“Conway. Chris Conway. I arrived yesterday, in time for a late supper. Hope I didn’t wake you up.”

“Oh? No, no. You’re a real mate, Chris, bringing me my paper like that. A real mate.” Max’s voice misted over with facile emotion as he flattened out the paper on his lap with his right hand. His left arm hung limp at his side.

“Not at all.” Conway seated himself in the other side of Max’s corner, between Max and Vic. His back was painful with an alcoholic arthritis; his legs looked and felt gouty, so he took his time. Then he gratefully opened the *Telegraph*.

“Hello, Chris,” said Vic civilly, before returning to his *Mirror*. Behind him and Conway, a long window with blue curtains extended to the doorway leading out into the overgrown quadrangle with the broken sundial. The door was now shut, but bright warm sunlight shone through the window.

“You look nervous, Chris,” said Max with friendly concern. “No need to feel nervous here. You’re among friends.”

“Thanks,” said Conway. But his smile wobbled and disappeared; he could not look steadily at Max. Concentrating on the *Telegraph*, he told himself that hospital was surely the only place where you could read the daily paper exhaustively and without compunction. A whole unreal world extended indefinitely before him; a world as stylised, and as organised round a central chaos, as the Ulver Hospital

itself. And both worlds were strangely comforting in their compartmentalised self-definition.

And yet, in both worlds, death loomed ever larger. In Hospital-World, even Conway felt that the drink was leading him to dusty death (that devastating blackout in the corridors of Belknap General, turning the hospital into an interstellar space station; those interminable mortuary DTs, complete with slabs and moaning, fidgety corpses—the dead having nightmares); while in Mediaville the global threat of the New Assassins grew to deadly effect. The Assassins saw themselves as reincarnated 11th-century heretics, and had been, in fact, anathematised by Osama Bin Laden for their rejection of Mecca. Daily they wormed themselves into the necrosis of the West in order to deal the deathblow to the ghost of Christendom, secure in the knowledge that a raging, dissociated Godhead was on their side

Max coughed. “Excuse me, Chris,” he said. “I think I’ve left my glasses in our bedroom and, well, I can’t help seeing you can walk. They’ll be in a black case, either on the windowsill or on top of my locker. Could you have a look and, if you see them, bring them back here?”

“Of course.” Conway slowly hauled himself to his feet.

“You’re a real mate. You’re doing me a real good turn. There aren’t many people will do you a good turn these days. Thank you. Thank you very much.” Max’s voice began to get shaky.

“It’s nothing.”

“Are you sure you can make it? Don’t put yourself out for me.”

“No problem.” Turning to Max, Conway nearly fell over. Righting himself against the arms of his chair, he regained his feet.

“Be careful,” said Vic.

“Yes, you be careful,” said Max. “We don’t want you hurting yourself.”

“I’m OK.” Using his rusty inner gyroscope, Conway righted himself. Resolutely planting one foot before the other, he gathered impetus as he went down the middle of the day room. Afraid lest he gather too much impetus, he stopped in front of an empty armchair and held on to it.

“I see he’s got *you* well in hand,” said a low voice to his right.

The speaker was a leprechaun with big ears, a white pointed sea captain’s beard, a baggy grey polo-necked sweater and a soft southern accent. Smiling wryly, slyly twinkling, he revealed an apparently full set of teeth which only occasionally betrayed their true status by dropping in full consort. He had been wheeled in shortly after Conway, and had been transferred to an armchair facing the long window. So far he had spoken mainly to himself, murmuring a soft and incomprehensible verbal jazz into his beard. Afterwards he had been joined, in the armchair to his left, by an old woman who was unique in thus invading the men’s quarters, and who was his wife. On the face of it she was a wizened, bent old woman, her features as black and blue as her bandaged legs, which were like pipe-cleaners. But she fixed Conway with a very lively glare.

“I want Horlicks,” she bawled shrilly but precisely into her husband’s capacious but apparently deaf right ear.

“And so you shall, my lovely one, my sweet, my true love—so you shall,” crooned Irish Willie, making love to her with his eyes. His eyes, liquid and brown as beer, shone with a deeply-relished appreciation of life’s endless ironies. “Just wait a little longer, and it will come to you.” He turned his gaze, which had at

some point become fixed in gentle amusement, upon Conway. “And what do you think of the Voice of Them All? That’s what I call him—the Voice of Them All.” He let his blue, sly eyes sidle in the direction of Max, who was opening the door to someone.

“He’s OK,” said Conway, smiling. The idea of being a real mate was rather appealing to him: it had been a long while since anyone had thus considered him, and he slipped into the part easily.

The Irishman gently raised his eyebrows and smiled. His full set of teeth, slightly askew in his mouth, made his smile wolfish.

“You think he’s OK? Well, you’ll learn. You’ll learn.”

Conway smiled and continued down the length of the day room, past the bar, and into the outer corridor. His trip to Room 1, where he retrieved the glasses case from the top of Max’s locker, was, to a quite childish degree, a good one: he liked being Mr Nice Guy for a change. But when he returned and saw Max waiting for him like a bald goblin beneath the white clock, beside the dark door, at the far end of the day room, things went badly wrong again. He felt he was acting out the scenario of a film, a film in which he was destined to kill Max. The sunlight from the long window made the scene oppressively bright, while the walls, decorated from floor to ceiling with rose-bedecked wallpaper, seemed to close in on him like the burning walls of a condemned cell. He felt that he had seen it all before, and had to remind himself that he had indeed seen it all before, in April of the previous year. But surely he had not seen Max before; he was, surely, unprecedented. As Conway watched, motionless by the bar, Max was looking at him expectantly from his armchair. Then he turned towards Vic and announced to the room:

“Here he is.”

Forcing himself into action, Conway set his feet in motion. Smiling, he held up the glasses case.

“He’s got them—good old Chris.”

As if heading for a final showdown, Conway somehow walked down the centre of the day room, still smiling. You might smile, and smile, and be a villain. You’re evil, Conway—*evil*. A voice, echoing from his schooldays. Always the solitude. And the evil. Smile, villain.

Max was floridly profuse in his thanks; Conway was relieved to sit down and hide behind the *Telegraph*. It really looked as if Denis Nilsen were going to be released. For good behaviour

Eventually it became impossible to ignore the disturbance. Conway lowered his paper and looked at Max.

Max had discarded his *Sun* and his glasses. His good right hand, reaching across his lap, scrabbled on the table to his left, where paper and glasses lay in disorder. His eyes were unfocussed, chaotic.

“Chris, help me,” he said. His voice was also unfocussed and wavering. “Put—put my glasses on the windowsill where I can find them. Here—” and he reached tremulously for the *Sun*. “Read this. Go on. Read it.” His voice became increasingly distraught and irritable.

“But” Conway displayed his *Telegraph* expressively.

“Read it,” Max implored. “Read it for me. Please.”

“But I’m . . . OK, OK. Read it aloud, you mean?”

“No, no. Just *read* it. I can’t. Read it. For myself. Please read it for me. Read it!”

“Take it easy,” said Vic.

Conway felt inwardly exasperated, and even wondered if Max were making a fool of him; but he

was somehow aware that, in any case, it would be inadvisable to gainsay someone like Max. Accordingly, he placed his *Telegraph* on the tubular table to his left, next to Vic, who was still reading his *Mirror*. Then he took the *Sun* from Max's shaking hand, and dutifully opened it up. Either the page three girl would be no good, or she would entice him to masturbation. With mixed feelings, he found that she was no good.

Max relaxed visibly, leaning his head back in his armchair and closing his eyes as if in deep meditation.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you very much."

Conway, who had never read a paper in vicarious mode before, felt awkward at first, but eventually found a piece of succulent gossip and concentrated on that. For the rest, he was glad when Mavis brought coffee and biscuits round at a quarter to eleven, which gave him an opportunity to discard the *Sun* and replace it with the *Telegraph*. By this time Max was eagerly glean- ing the latest football results from Vic and Irish Willie, and did not notice Conway's surreptitious move.

"Arrigo is rubbish," boomed Max. "But he's good rubbish. He knows just how to put on a show."

"*Show*," growled Irish Willie from the depths of his *Daily Mail*. "You don't get the devil else but show these days."

Mavis brought Conway his coffee. "How nice to see someone who reads something at a higher level than the *Sun* and the *Star*."

"They're all the same," said Conway, eager not to appear toffee-nosed. "In the *Star* you get Jordan. In the *Telegraph* you get what are called the Fashion Pages."

"That's right," said Irish Willie, genially. "A higher class of tart."

"You button your lip," said Mavis sharply. "Do you want tea or coffee?"

“I want Horlicks,” shrilled Mrs Willie.

How nice, thought Conway, returning to the *Telegraph*, to lose oneself in an unreal but highly-organised world in which Mr Prime Minister and Mr President—it was hard to tell them apart—rise early each morning, have their porridge, toast, marmalade and coffee, and then go to the gents for a fairly regular bowel movement, before getting down to the real business of putting the world to rights over coffee and biscuits, making phone calls to President Arrigo and the rest of the boys, and comparing notes with their entourage. All very regular and comforting, barring the occasional accident; until, tired but happy, they have supper and go to bed without a hint of drink on their breath.

But the coverage of Nilsen’s increasingly probable release from prison still brought a chill to Conway’s heart, closely followed by a cold sweat, as Max’s voice boomed on like a foghorn presaging shipwreck and death among rocks like blackly-shining teeth in the viewless sea, sharp teeth, rending teeth, grinding teeth, the one sure reality.

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