

A Morbid Habit

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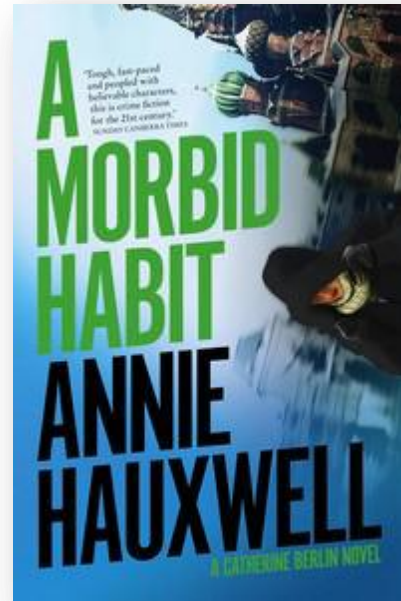
The hands were warm. Soft fingers, but flesh imbued with iron. Squeezing. The small hyoid bone cracked and the tongue, to which it was connected, lolled and protruded from the mouth.

Vertebrae fragmented: one, two, three. Finally the hands relaxed and the limp body slid from their embrace.

The crackle of cellophane was followed by greedy sucking and a fruity scent, which hung in the still air. The sweet wrapper lay where it had been dropped on snow that gleamed blue in the moonlight.

Blood turned to ice and sealed the nostrils.

'Let's go home,' came a whisper.



The victim

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Catherine Berlin sat alone gazing at a bank of monitors that captured a slice of a vast industrial estate in north-west London. Park Royal. Nothing moved except the occasional rat or fox, eyes jaundiced in the floodlights. The earth's frigid crust was cracked, seamed with frost.

Four days until Christmas.

It was the season to be jolly.

Berlin unscrewed the flask of tepid coffee to which she had added a drop of something stronger in a Yuletide gesture. A flicker at one end of the array caught her eye and she watched a white van cruise the perimeter fence, disappearing momentarily from one screen to appear on the next.

When it turned onto a slip road and backed up close to the roller door of warehouse 5B she took the clipboard off the hook to check the delivery and pick-up schedule at the warehouse. Nothing listed.

Berlin jiggled the joystick and brought the camera into sharper focus. A thickset man with a pudding-basin haircut and stubble jumped out of the van: white Ford Transit, long wheelbase, high roof, dirty. He strode to the roller door and raised it.

The van backed up and its rear doors opened. Another man got out. He was also stocky and unshaven, with thick, dark hair that appeared curiously flat on the monochrome screen. They could have been brothers.

The list must be wrong. The computer schedule would be more up to date. Keeping one eye on the screen, Berlin tapped the keyboard and woke up the machine.

With the rear doors of the van open she could see only the men's legs as they moved back and forth between the van and the warehouse. Then the van reversed right into the warehouse and the roller door came down.

The system was slow. The yellow Post-it note with the guest password scrawled on it was crumpled. It took Berlin a couple of tries before she managed to log on. The online schedule finally opened.

By this time the roller door had gone up again, the van had emerged and the brothers were leaning against it, lighting cigarettes. A mixture of dragon's breath and smoke hung over them: a cloud of nonchalance.

Berlin clicked through the complicated spreadsheet. Nothing in it about a pick-up or delivery at warehouse 5B.

She reached for the two-way radio but before she could pick it up the door of the control room swung open. Bright light spilled across the console.

She blinked.

A hulking shape filled the doorway. It stepped inside and as the door swung closed it resolved into the shape of a man in a heavy-duty weatherproof jacket. Like hers, it was emblazoned with a globe encircled by the words 'Hirst Corporation'. Hirst had the world sewn up. A badge clipped to the lapel of his jacket read 'Supervisor'.

'Where's Raj?' growled the supervisor.

'Sick,' said Berlin. 'I'm the relief.'

The supervisor didn't look relieved. He took a mobile from his pocket. 'No-one fucking told me,' he said.

Berlin glanced back at the monitor.

The supervisor followed her gaze. She indicated the radio.

'I was just going to call it in,' she said.

'Consider it done,' said the supervisor, dialling a number on his mobile. 'What the fuck's going on?' he demanded of whoever answered his call. He turned away from Berlin, listened for a moment, then turned back.

'Are you Catherine Berlin?' he asked.

She nodded.

The supervisor hung up and flicked on the two-way radio clipped to his pocket. 'Get rolling,' he said. 'Now.'

Berlin glanced at the monitor. The two men had dropped their cigarettes and were scrambling to get into the van.

'Listen, Catherine,' said the supervisor.

'Berlin will do,' said Berlin.

'Listen,' said the supervisor, 'whatever you think you might have just seen . . .'

'What I saw,' she corrected.

The supervisor regarded her for a moment. He shrugged.

'Look, Berlin,' he said. 'This is just a couple of casuals, like you, knocking off surplus stock to flog down the market. Storemen who'll be out of work after the Christmas rush. Their kids want the latest bloody computer games in their stockings but the bank still expects the mortgage to be paid. Understand?'

Berlin knew all about zero-hours contracts. You had to be available and on call at all hours, without any guarantee of work. When you did work, the pay was strictly by the hour. By the minute. No holiday or sick pay. No other benefits.

The supervisor took a few steps across the tiny room and loomed over her; he had the face and gait of a heavyweight boxer.

She glanced back at the screens. The van was already disappearing off the last one.

The supervisor gripped the arm of her chair and turned it away from the console. An odd smell of hot tar hung around him, and something else: the rancid scent of a threat. He reached into his pocket.

Berlin stood up.

The supervisor laid fifty quid on the console.

'Have a bit of compassion,' he said.

Berlin walked along the Grand Union Canal towpath. The canal was an historic legacy that ran through the twelve-hundred-acre site. The landscape was a patchwork of abandoned Victorian engineering works and sterile modern units.

Strings of lights sparkled against the black sky, marking the outline of lorries arriving from Eastern Europe. The turbulence as they thundered past rattled her.

The whole place was ringed with mountains of unstable rubble. Cranes swayed in the wind. It was difficult to tell if construction or demolition was in progress.

Berlin made her way to the night-bus stop. The people mover that had dropped her off at the start of her shift wouldn't be back to collect her, or the Hirst guards from all the other sites, until dawn. She had knocked off early.

A noise behind her made her jump. She tightened her grip on the bag slung across her body and picked up her pace, ignoring the finger of pain that ran up her calf. Her torn Achilles tendon had healed short and left her with a slight limp. It was the least of her problems.

She patted the laptop in her bag. After the fourth burglary she took her computer everywhere. The insurance premiums in her postcode were off the chart.

The bus was approaching. There was only one every hour. She started to run, but lost her footing in a puddle of toxic run-off that had formed black ice. She staggered on and ran onto the road in front of the bus. It screeched to a halt. The doors wheezed open.

'Got a death wish?' shouted the driver.

Berlin made her way slowly up the worn stone steps that led to her flat and thought about the supervisor's fifty quid and compassion. The milk of human kindness didn't run freely in her veins – it had some competition there – but she tried not to judge.

It was five in the morning and the occupants of the flats were still sound asleep.

Bar one.

When Berlin reached her landing the door opposite hers opened. Insomnia was a curse she shared with her neighbour Bella, a former dancer in her eighties who fitted the description of a 'theatrical type'.

At any time of the day or night Bella was to be found in full make-up. A willowy beauty when high-kicking at the Windmill Theatre during the war, she remained an imposing sight, even when encased in a woolly hat, fingerless gloves and two tracksuits. Her vanity was legendary. So was her drinking.

Bella had been absent for long periods over the years 'convalescing', which meant drying out. The cure didn't always take, but after decades of practice Bella had reached an accommodation with her tippie in which they were now on good terms, rather than locked in a doomed passion.

Bella took the carton of milk Berlin had picked up from the twenty-four-hour shop and offered a dazzling smile in return.

'I'll fix you up later,' said Bella.

Berlin nodded. How many times had she heard that?

Bella peered at her. 'Rough night?' she enquired.

'It had its moments,' said Berlin, as she worked her way through the three locks that now secured her front door.

'Come in for a hot toddy,' said Bella. 'A Scotch is what the doctor ordered.'

Bella's doctor invariably prescribed strong spirits.

'Thanks, but not this morning, Bella,' said Berlin. 'I'm knackered.'

Bella waved cheerio and retreated.

Berlin's Christmas decorations rustled in the draught as she closed the door. The streamers and paper bells were a riot of colour in defiance of contemporary minimalism.

The small flat, a studio in modern parlance, was freezing. She turned on the central heating and went straight to the bathroom. The cabinet held something that would deliver a little more than whisky.

Addicted to heroin since the eighties, Berlin was now on a program that provided her with a month's supply of an opioid replacement, buprenorphine. Before the regime change she'd been on the old Home Office register, which meant her doctor could give her a pure daily maintenance dose of the real thing.

But the register had long been archived, and with it people like Berlin – remnants of a discredited past. At the age of fifty-seven she sometimes felt that she was a living embodiment of the history of drug policy.

It was this, a sense that she was dependent on the whims of a capricious state, that fired her recent determination to shatter the confines of addiction. That, and her encounter with the vicious nature of those controlling the illegal trade.

When it came to drugs, the only thing that never changed was the street. She was grateful she wasn't out there.

She slipped the bupe under her tongue and lay down on the sofa. It would take a few minutes to dissolve and then be absorbed straight into her bloodstream.

The taste was bitter.

Just before the miserable dawn broke over Park Royal the supervisor made his way back to the control room. He cursed when he saw the fifty quid still lying on the console. It was just his luck.