

THE BLURRED MAN

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THE PEN PAL

I knew the American was going to mean trouble, the moment he walked through the door. He only made it on the third attempt. It was eleven o'clock in the morning but clearly he'd been drinking since breakfast – and breakfast had probably come out of a bottle too. The smell of whisky was so strong it made my eyes water. Drunk at eleven o'clock! I didn't like to think what it was doing to him, but if I'd been his liver I'd have been applying for a transplant.

He managed to find a seat and slumped into it. The funny thing was, he was quite smartly dressed: a suit and a tie that looked expensive. I got the feeling straight away that this was someone with money. He was wearing gold-rimmed glasses, and as far as I could tell we were talking real gold. He was about forty years old, with hair that was just turning grey and

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eyes that were just turning yellow. That must have been the whisky. He took out a cigarette and lit it. Blue smoke filled the room. This man would not have been a good advertisement for the National Health Service.

“My name is Carter,” he said at last. He spoke with an American accent. “Joe Carter. I just got in from Chicago. And I’ve got a problem.”

“I can see that,” I muttered.

He glanced at me with one eye. The other eye looked somewhere over my shoulder. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“I’m Nick Diamond.”

“I don’t need a smart-arse kid. I’m looking for a private detective.”

“That’s him over there,” I said, indicating the desk and my big brother, Tim.

“You want a coffee, Mr Carver?” Tim asked.

“It’s not Carver. It’s Carter. With a ‘t’,” the American growled.

“I’m out of tea. How about a hot chocolate?”

“I don’t want a hot anything!” Carter sucked on the cigarette. “I want help. I want to hire you. What do you charge?”

Tim stared. Although it was hard to believe, the American was offering him money. This was something that didn’t happen often. Tim hadn’t really made any money since he’d

worked as a policeman, and even then the police dogs had earned more than him. At least they'd bitten the right man. As a private detective, Tim had been a total calamity. I'd helped him solve one or two cases, but most of the time I was stuck at school. Right now it was the week of half-term – six weeks before Christmas, and once again it didn't look like our stockings were going to be full. Unless you're talking holes. Tim had just seven pence left in his bank account. We'd written a begging letter to our mum and dad in Australia but were still saving up for the stamp.

I coughed and Tim jerked upright in his chair, trying to look businesslike. "You need a private detective?" he said. "Fine. That's me. But it'll cost you fifty pounds a day, plus expenses."

"You take traveller's cheques?"

"That depends on the traveller."

"I don't have cash."

"Traveller's cheques are fine," I said.

Joe Carter pulled out a bundle of blue traveller's cheques, then fumbled for a pen. For a moment I was worried that he'd be too drunk to sign them. But somehow he managed to scribble his name five times on the dotted lines, and slid the cheques across. "All right," he said. "That's five hundred dollars."

"Five hundred dollars!" Tim squeaked. The last time he'd had that much money in

his hand he'd been playing Monopoly. "Five hundred dollars...?"

"About three hundred and fifty pounds," I told him.

Carter nodded. "Right. So now let me tell you where I'm coming from."

"I thought you were coming from Chicago," Tim said.

"I mean, let me tell you my problem. I got into England last Tuesday, a little less than a week ago. I'm staying in a hotel in the West End. The Ritz."

"You'd be crackers to stay anywhere else," Tim said.

"Yeah." Carter stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray. Except we didn't have an ashtray. The smell of burning wood rose from the surface of Tim's desk. "I'm a writer, Mr Diamond. You may have read some of my books."

That was unlikely – unless he wrote children's books. Tim had recently started *Just William* for the fourth time.

"I'm pretty well-known in the States," Carter continued. "*The Big Bullet. Death in the Afternoon. Rivers of Blood.* Those are some of my titles."

"Romances?" Tim asked.

"No. They're crime novels. I'm successful. I make a ton of money out of my writing – but, you know, I believe in sharing it around.

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I'm not married. I don't have kids. So I give it to charity. All sorts of charities. Mostly back home in the States, of course, but also in other parts of the world."

I wondered if he'd like to make a donation to the bankrupt brothers of dumb detectives, a little charity of my own. But I didn't say anything.

"Now, a couple of years back I heard of a charity operating here in England," he went on. "It was called Dream Time and I kind of liked the sound of it. Dream Time was there to help kids get more out of life. It bought computers and books and special equipment for schools. It also bought schools. It helped train kids who wanted to get into sport. Or who wanted to paint. Or who had never travelled." Carter glanced at me. "How old are you, son?" he asked.

"Fourteen," I said.

"I bet you make wishes sometimes."

"Yes. But unfortunately Tim is still here."

"Dream Time would help you. They make wishes come true." Carter reached into his pocket and took out a hip-flask. He unscrewed it and threw it back. It seemed to do him good. "A little Scotch," he explained.

"I thought you were American," Tim said.

"I gave Dream Time two million dollars of my money because I believed in them!" Carter exclaimed. "Most of all, I believed in the man

behind Dream Time. He was a saint. He was a lovely guy. His name was Lenny Smile.”

I noticed that Carter was talking about Smile in the past tense. I was beginning to see the way this conversation might be going.

“What can I tell you about Lenny?” Carter went on. “Like me, he never married. He didn’t have a big house or a fancy car or anything like that. In fact he lived in a small apartment in a part of London called Battersea. Dream Time had been his idea and he worked for it seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Lenny loved leap years because then he could work three hundred and sixty-six days a year. That was the sort of man he was. When I heard about him, I knew I had to support his work. So I gave him a quarter of a million dollars. And then another quarter. And so on...”

“So what’s the problem, Mr Starter?” Tim asked. “You want your money back?”

“Hell, no! Let me explain. I loved this guy Lenny. I felt like I’d known him all my life. But recently, I decided we ought to meet.”

“You’d never met him?”

“No. We were pen pals. We exchanged letters. Lots of letters – and e-mails. He used to write to me and I’d write back. That’s how I got to know him. But I was busy with my work. And he was busy with his. We never met. We never even spoke. And then, recently,

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I suddenly realized I needed a break. I'd been working so hard, I decided to come over to England and have a vacation."

"Wouldn't you have preferred a holiday?" Tim asked.

"I wrote to Lenny and told him I'd like to meet him. He was really pleased to hear from me. He said he wanted to show me all the work he'd been doing. All the children who'd benefited from the money I'd sent. I was really looking forward to the trip. He was going to meet me at Heathrow Airport."

"How would you know what he looked like if you'd never met?" I asked.

Carter blushed. "Well, I did sometimes wonder about that. So once I'd arranged to come I asked him to send me a photograph of himself."

He reached into his jacket and took out a photograph. He handed it to me.

The picture showed a man standing in front of a café in what could have been London or Paris. It was hard to be sure. I could see the words CAFÉ DEBUSSY written on the windows. But the man himself was harder to make out. Whoever had taken the photograph should have asked Dream Time for a new camera. It was completely out of focus. I could just make out a man in a black suit with a full-length coat. He was wearing gloves and a hat. But his face was a blur. He might have had dark hair.

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I think he was smiling. There was a cat sitting on the pavement between his legs, and the cat was easier to make out than he was.

“It’s not a very good picture,” I said.

“I know.” Carter took it back. “Lenny was a very shy person. He didn’t even sign his letters. That’s how shy he was. He told me that he didn’t like going out very much. You see, there’s something else you need to know about him. He was sick. He had this illness ... some kind of allergy.”

“Was Algy his doctor?” Tim asked.

“No, no. An allergy. It meant he reacted to things. Peanuts, for example. They made him swell up. And he hated publicity. There have been a couple of stories about him in the newspapers, but he wouldn’t give interviews and there were never any photographs. The Queen wanted to knight him, apparently, but sadly he was also allergic to queens. All that mattered to him was his work ... Dream Time ... helping kids. Anyway, meeting him was going to be the biggest moment of my life... I was as excited as a schoolboy.”

As excited as a schoolboy? Obviously Carter had never visited my school.

“Only when I got to Heathrow, Lenny wasn’t there. He wasn’t in London either. I never got to meet him. And you know why?”

I knew why. But I waited for Lenny to tell me.

“Lenny was buried the day before I arrived,” Carter said.

“Buried?” Tim exclaimed. “Why?”

“Because it was his funeral, Mr Diamond!” Carter lit another cigarette. “He was dead. And that’s why I’m here. I want you to find out what happened.”

“What did happen?” I asked.

“Well, like I told you, I arrived here at Heathrow last Tuesday. All I could think about was meeting Lenny Smile, shaking that man’s hand and telling him just how much he meant to me. When he didn’t show up, I didn’t even check into my hotel. I went straight to the offices of Dream Time. And that was when they told me...”

“Who told you?” I asked.

“A man called Hoover. Rodney Hoover...”

“That name sucks,” Tim said.

Carter ignored him. “He worked for Lenny, helping him run Dream Time. There’s another assistant there too, called Fiona Lee. She’s very posh. Upper-class, you know? They have an office just the other side of Battersea Bridge. It’s right over the café you saw in that photo. Anyway, it seems that just a few days after I e-mailed Lenny to tell him I was coming, he got killed in a horrible accident, crossing the road.”

“He fell down a manhole?” Tim asked.

“No, Mr Diamond. He got run over. Hoover

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and Lee actually saw it happen. If they hadn't been there, the police wouldn't even have known it was Lenny."

"Why is that?"

"Because he was run over by a steamroller." Carter shuddered. Tim shivered. Even the desk light flickered. I had to admit, it was a pretty horrible way to go. "He was flattened," the American went on. "They told me that the ambulance people had to fold him before they could get him onto a stretcher. He was buried last week. At Brompton Cemetery, near Fulham."

Brompton. That was where the master criminal known as the Falcon had been buried too. Tim and I had gone to the cemetery at the end of our first ever case*. We were lucky we weren't still there.

"This guy Rodney Hoover tells me he's winding down Dream Time," Carter went on. "He says it wouldn't be the same without Lenny, and he doesn't have the heart to go on without him. I had a long talk with him in his office and I have to tell you ... I didn't like it."

"You don't think it's a nice office?" Tim asked.

"I think something strange is going on."

Tim blinked. "What exactly do you think is strange?"

Carter almost choked on his cigarette. "Goddammit!" he yelled. "You don't think

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there's anything unusual in a guy getting run over by a steamroller? It happens in the middle of the night and just a few days before he's due to have a meeting with someone who's given him two million dollars! And the next thing you hear, the charity he'd set up is suddenly shutting down! You don't think that's all a little strange?"

"It's certainly strange that it happened in the middle of the night," Tim agreed. "Why wasn't he in bed?"

"I don't know why he wasn't in bed – but I'll tell you this: I think he was murdered. A man doesn't walk in front of a steamroller. But maybe he's pushed. Maybe this has got something to do with money ... my money. Maybe somebody didn't want us to meet! I know that if I was writing this as a novel, that's the way it would turn out. Anyway, there are plenty of private detectives in London. If you're not interested, I can find someone who is. So are you going to look into this for me or not?"

Tim glanced at the traveller's cheques. He scooped them up. "Don't worry, Mr Carpark," he said. "I'll find the truth. The only question is – where do I find you?"

"I'm still at the Ritz," Carter said. "Ask for Room 8."

"I'll ask for you," Tim said. "But if you're out, I suppose the room-mate will have to do."

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We changed the traveller's cheques into cash and blew some of it on the first decent meal we'd had in a week. Tim was in a good mood. He even let me have a pudding.

"I can't believe it!" he exclaimed, as the waitress served us two ice-cream sundaes. The service in the restaurant was so slow that they were more like Mondays by the time they arrived. "Three hundred and fifty pounds! That's more money than I've earned in a month."

"It's more money than you've earned in a year," I reminded him.

"And all because some crazy American thinks his pen pal was murdered."

"How do you know he wasn't?"

"Intuition." Tim tapped the side of his nose. "I can't explain it to you, kid. I've just got a feeling."

"You've also got ice-cream on your nose," I said.

After lunch we took the bus over to Fulham. I don't know why Tim decided to start in Brompton Cemetery. Maybe he wanted to visit it for old times' sake. It had been more than a year since we'd last been there, but the place hadn't changed. And why should it have? I doubted any of the residents had complained. None of them would have had the energy to redecorate. The gravestones were as weird as ever, some of them like Victorian

telephone boxes, others like miniature castles with doors fastened by rusting chains and padlocks. You'd have needed a skeleton key to open them. The place was divided into separate areas: some old, some more modern. There must have been thousands of people there but of course none of them offered to show us the way to Smile's grave. We had to find it on our own.

It took us about an hour. It was on the edge of the cemetery, overshadowed by the football stadium next door. We might never have found it except that the grave had been recently dug. That was one clue. And there were fresh flowers. That was another. Smile had been given a lot of flowers. In fact, if he hadn't been dead he could have opened a florist's. I read the gravestone:

LENNY SMILE

APRIL 31st 1955 – NOVEMBER 11th 2001
A WONDERFUL MAN, CALLED TO REST.

We stood in silence for a moment. It seemed too bad that someone who had done so much for children all over the world hadn't even made it to fifty. I glanced at the biggest bunch of flowers on the grave. There was a card attached. It was signed in green ink, *With love, from Rodney Hoover and Fiona Lee.*

There was a movement on the other side

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of the cemetery. I had thought we were alone when we arrived, but now I realized that there was a man, watching us. He was a long way away, standing behind one of the taller gravestones, but even at that distance I thought there was something familiar about him, and I found myself shivering without quite knowing why. He was wearing a full-length coat with gloves and a hat. I couldn't make out his face. From this distance, it was just a blur. And that was when I realized. I knew exactly where I'd seen him before. I started forward, running towards him. At that moment he turned round and hurried off, moving away from me.

"Nick!" Tim called out.

I ignored him and ran through the cemetery. There was a gravestone in the way and I jumped over it. Maybe that wasn't a respectful thing to do but I wasn't feeling exactly religious. I reached the main path and sprinted forward. I didn't know if Tim was following me or not. I didn't care.

The northern gates of the cemetery opened onto Old Brompton Road. I burst out and stood there, catching my breath. It came as a shock, coming from the land of the dead into that of the living, with buses and cabs roaring past. An old woman, wrapped in three cardigans, was selling flowers right next to the gate. Business can't have been good. Half the flowers were as dead as the people they were

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meant for. I went over to her.

“Excuse me...” I said. “Did someone just come out through this gate?”

The old woman shook her head. “No, dear. I didn’t see anyone.”

“Are you sure? A man in a long coat. He was wearing a hat...”

“People don’t come out of the cemetery,” the old woman said. “When they get there, they stay there.”

A moment later, Tim proved her wrong by appearing at the gate. “What is it, Nick?” he asked.

I looked up and down the pavement. There was nobody in sight. Had I imagined it? No. I was certain. The man I had seen in Joe Carter’s photograph had been in the cemetery less than a minute ago. Once I’d spotted him, he had run away.

But that was impossible, wasn’t it?

If it was Lenny Smile that I had just seen, then who was buried in the grave?