

"Denton's Death"

by Martin Amis

SUDDENLY DENTON REALIZED that there would be three of them, that they would come after dark, that their leader would have his own key, and that they would be calm and deliberate, confident that they had all the time they needed to do what had to be done. He knew that they would be courtly, deferential, urbane - whatever state he happened to be in when they arrived - and that he would be allowed to make himself comfortable; perhaps he would even be offered a last cigarette. He never seriously doubted that he would warm to and admire all three at once, and wish only that he could have been their friend. He knew that they used a machine. As if prompted by some special hindsight, Denton thought often and poignantly about the moment when the leader would consent to take his hand as the machine began to work. He knew that they were out there already, seeing people, making telephone calls; and he knew that they must be very expensive.

At first, he took a lively, even rather self-important interest in the question of who had hired the men and their machine. Who would bother to do this to him? There was his brother, a huge exhausted man whom Denton had never liked or disliked or felt close to or threatened by in any way: they had quarreled recently over the allotment of their dead mothers goods, and Denton had in fact managed to secure a few worthless extras at his brothers expense; but this was just one more reason why his brother could never afford to do this to him. There was a man at the office whose life Denton had probably ruined: having bullied his friend into assisting him with a routine office theft, Denton told all to his superiors, claiming that he had used duplicity merely to test his colleague (Denton's firm not only dismissed the man — they also, to Denton's mild alarm, successfully prosecuted him for fraud); but someone whose life you could ruin so easily wouldn't have the determination to do this to him. And there were a few women still out on the edges of his life, women he had mistreated as thoroughly as he dared, all of whom had seemed to revel in his frustrations, thrill to his regrets, laugh at his losses: he had heard that one of them was about to marry somebody very rich, or at any rate somebody sufficiently rich to hire the three men; but she had never cared about him enough to want to do this to him.

Within a few days, however, the question of who had hired them abruptly ceased to concern Denton. He could muster no strong views on the subject; it was all done now, anyway. Denton moved slowly through the two rooms of his half-converted flatlet, becalmed, listless, his mind as vacant as the dust-filmed windowpanes and the shrilly pictureless walls. Nothing bored him anymore. All day he wandered silently through the flat, not paying for it (no payment seemed to be seriously expected), not going to his office more than once or twice a week and then not at all (and no one there seemed to mind; they were tactful and remote like understanding relatives), and not thinking about who had hired the three men and their machine. He had a little money, enough for milk and certain elementary foods. Denton had been an anorexic in his youth because he hated the idea of becoming old and big. Now his stomach had rediscovered that ripe, sentimental tenseness, and he usually vomited briskly after taking solids.

He sat all day in his empty living room, thinking about his childhood. It seemed to him that all his life he had been tumbling away from his happiness as a young boy, tumbling away to the insecurity and disappointment of his later years, when gradually, as if through some smug consensus, people stopped liking him and he stopped liking them. Whatever happened to me? thought Denton. Sometimes he would get a repeated image of himself at the age of six or seven, running for the school bus, a satchel clutched to his side, his face fresh and unanxious — and suddenly Denton would lean forward and sob huskily into his hands, and stand up after a while, and make tea perhaps, and gaze out at the complicated goings-on in the square, feeling drunk and wise. Denton thanked whoever had hired the three men to do this to him; never before had he felt so alive.

Later still, his mind gave itself up entirely to the coming of the men and their machine, and his childhood vanished along with all the other bits of his life. Facelessly, Denton "rationalized" his

kitchen supplies, importing a variety of dried milk and wide-spectrum baby foods, so that, if necessary, he should never have to leave the flat again. With the unsmiling dourness of an adolescent Denton decided to stop washing his clothes and to stop washing his body. Every morning subtracted clearness from the windowpanes; he left the dry, belching heaters on day and night; his two rooms became soupy and affectless, like derelict conservatories in summer thunder. Once, on an impulse, Denton jerked open the stiff living-room window. The outdoors tingled hatefully, as if the air were full of steel. He shut the window and returned to his chair by the fire, where he sat with no expression on his face until it was time to go to bed.

At night, exultant and wounding dreams thrilled and tormented him. He wept on scarlet beaches, the waves climbing in front of him until they hid the sun. He saw cities crumble, mountains slide away, continents crack. He steered a dying world out into the friendly heat of space. He held planets in his hands. Denton staggered down terminal arcades, watched by familiar, hooded figures in dark doorways. Little flying girls with jagged predatory teeth swung through the air toward him at impossible, meandering speed. He came across his younger self in distress and brought him food but an eagle stole it. Often Denton awoke stretched diagonally across the bed, his cheeks wet with exhausted tears.

When would they come? What would their machine be like? Denton thought about the arrival of the three men with the gentle hopelessness of a long-separated lover: the knock at his door, the peaceful and reassuring smiles, the bed, the request for a cigarette, the offer of the leader's hand, the machine. Denton imagined the moment as a painless mood swing, a simple transference from one state to another, like waking up or going to sleep or suddenly realizing something. Above all he relished the thought of that soothing handclasp as the machine started to work, a ladder rung, a final handhold as life poured away and death began.

What would his death be like? Denton's mind saw emblem books, bestiaries. Nothing and a purple hum. Deceit. An abandoned playground. Hurtful dreams. Failure. The feeling that people want to get rid of you. The process of dying repeated forever, "What will my death be like?" he thought - and knew at once, with abrupt certainty, that it would be just like his life: different in form, perhaps, but nothing new, the same balance of bearables, the same.

Late that night Denton opened his eyes and they were there. Two of them stood in the backlit doorway of his bedroom, their postures heavy with the task they had come to do. Behind them, next door, he could hear the third man preparing the machine; shadows filled the yellow ceiling. Denton sat up quickly, half-attempting to straighten his hair and clothes. "Is it you?" he asked.

"Yes," said the leader, "we're here again." He looked round the room. And aren't you a dirty boy."

"Oh don't tell me that," said Denton, "— not now." He felt an onrush of shame and self-pity, saw himself as they saw him, an old tramp in a dirty room, afraid to die. Denton lapsed into tears as they moved forward - it seemed the only way left to express his defenselessness. "Nearly there," one of them called fruitily through the door. Then all three were upon him. They hauled him from his bed and pushed him into the living room. They began to strap him with leather belts to an upright chair, handling him throughout like army doctors with a patient they knew to be difficult. It was all very fast. "A cigarette - please," said Denton. "We haven't got all night, you know," the leader whispered. "You do know that."

The machine was ready. It was a black box with a red light and two chromium switches; it made a faraway rumble; from the near side came a glistening, flesh-colored tube, ending in what looked like a small pink gas mask or a boxers mouthpiece. "Open wide," said the leader. Denton struggled weakly. They held his nose. "Tomorrow it'll be a thing of the past," said the leader, "finished...in just...a couple of minutes." He parted Denton's clenched lips with his fingers. The soft mouthpiece slithered in over his front teeth-it seemed alive, searching out its own grip with knowing fleshy surfaces. A plunging, nauseous, inside-out suction began to gather within his chest, as if each corpuscle were being marshaled for abrupt and concerted movement. The hand! Denton stiffened. With hopeless anger he fought for the leader's attention, tumescing his eyes and squeezing thin final noises up from deep in his throat. As the pressure massed hugely inside his chest, he bent and flexed his wrists, straining hard against the leather bands. Something was tickling his heart with thick strong fingers. He was grappling with unconsciousness in dark water. He was dying alone. "All right," one of them said as his body slackened, "he's ready." Denton opened his eyes for the last time. The leader was staring closely at his face. Denton had no strength; he frowned sadly. The leader understood almost at once, smiling like the father of a nervous child. "Oh yes," he said.

"About now Denton always likes a hand." Denton heard the second switch click and he felt a long rope being tugged out through his mouth.

The leader held his hand firmly as life poured away, and Denton's death began.

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