

## Broken Heating by Sebastian Dibb

Eleven fifty-four. Night had fully engulfed the sky now. It was winter and all the trees stood bare longing for summers past. Street lamps span a web of eerie shadows, their orange light strolling lazily through the damp winter mist. All around, cold air burrowed through your clothes nestling into your bones; numbing toes and making ears feel as if millions of tiny nails were relentlessly being hammered into them. A mournful wind moaned: trees whimpered their reply. The street glittered black and empty apart from one solitary figure leaning against his taxi.

Rich exhaled loudly, watching smoky plumes of breath disappear above him. He stamped his feet in a fleeting attempt to salvage some warmth. It was cold. But not just regular cold. This was the cold that stripped and exposed, brought soldiers to their knees and kept people indoors. Smiling back at him, the wind interrogated the marrow, bit the cheek, forcing Rich to blow into his gloveless hands. Occasionally, the grim blur of a car would roar past; their lights succumbing to the fog.

Reflecting off the greasy window screen, the outstretched arms of grinning Christmas lights shone into the darkness. Inside the cab the heating was broken, a pungent odour of sweat somehow stuck to the roof of your mouth; torn and withered seats gave way to mouldy foam spurting out like congealed blood. This sour scene was all the time watched over by the omnipresent gaze of dejected Marvel figurines standing miserably on the dashboard. As the spluttering engine drowned out a dull carol coming from the radio, something moved outside.

*'Silent night, holy night...'*

There it was again, more distinct this time. Immediately Rich bolted upright, mouth dry. The second hand on his watch began to slow as time itself seemed to grow hesitant. His sunken eyes, the dull colour of coffee stains, now pierced into the abyss as his feet became drowned in a cold sweat. He stepped forward to get another look.

*'All is calm, all is bright...'*

Flustered, hands quivering, he snapped open the car door, reached in and thumped the horn. A face emerged out of the mist; eyes wide with papery skin stretched tightly over the skull; blue lips pursed tightly together as if the air itself was toxic. The figure was shaking like one possessed by some unspeakable demon. As he scuttled into the musky streetlight, Rich was able to get a better look at the insect that gazed back at him.

It was Tim.

Tim was homeless. He had been since anyone could remember. At once Rich breathed easy, shoulders slumping back into their usual position, his drenched palms unfurled. It was only Tim. Trembling, the boy, for that's what he was, somehow seemed to stare right through Rich as the pear-shaped man slammed shut the car door in frustration.

"Bugger off!"

The boy stammered a reply. His dry lips parted, as if about to say something.

"I'm not giving you nothing, so don't ask!"

Rich's words were jagged against the freezing air. The grumpy driver now began to enjoy the moment as he gleefully booted a load of freezing sludge in Tim's direction. Solemnly, eyes pooling with salt in the half light, the small cockroach of a boy scurried off into hiding.

*'Sleep in heavenly p-eace...'*

Rich turned, quite pleased with his minor victory, then stretched out a frozen hand towards his car door. As he did so the face of a watching figure swam into view reflected in the driver's window. Just watching him. Like a shadow. It didn't seem to have come from anywhere; just appeared. Clearing his throat, Rich span round and asked the generic question all cabbies ask, "Where to?" The character edged towards the cab; its feet making no sound as they pressed upon the bitter concrete.

"St Martins, Windsor Road." Came the reply from deep within folds of dark wool concealing its face.

For the duration of the journey, Rich found himself hearing the strange fellow's words echo in his head over and over and over. Desperately he tried to locate the accent. The sounds were uttered in such a hushed tone that they seemed to melt the cold air around him.

*'Christ, the Savoir is b-orn...'*

Rich snapped off the radio channel stabbing at broken buttons trying hard to find another station to tune into.

*'Christ, the Savoir is born'* echoed back at him ricocheting around the cab.

'Bloody religious rubbish.' Rich mouthed. He snatched a glance in the rear-view mirror. No reply. At first, Rich could only imagine what the face of this figure looked like as it was shrouded in shadow, but after a while he realised that when the soft streetlights passed over the car, the backseat would be momentarily illuminated. So, during these spells, and they were brief, this balding middle-aged man with a pretty sizeable belly on him became the greatest spy in the world as he darted his eyes back and forth between the cracked rear-view mirror and the road ahead of him. Each glance more conspicuous than the last; yet each glance revealing nothing new.

Sitting silently behind him, the figure and the darkness were one, only its emerald eyes stared fixedly ahead. Yellow fog rubbed its back against the taxi windows, licking its tongue into the corners of the night. Rich shuddered and yanked his collar up to combat the cold.

Windsor Road crawled into view. St Martin's, shadowy and immense, towered over the silhouettes of forgotten gravestones. Twisting and beckoning, the contorted branches of trees formed a sodden canopy which oozed fat black drops of melted snow over each plot. In the distance, rain tumbled down the thin windows of St Martin's Church, like tears. The icy river to the right flowed thick and constant like a vein feeding the dank earth; it snaked and hissed through the damp causing Rich to shiver as he parked up. "That's just eleven quid." He stammered glancing up into the mirror.

The emptiness of the backseat grinned wildly back at him.

Stunned and cursing, Rich staggered out of the car's relative safety, releasing himself from the seatbelt's choking grip. "Bastard," he muttered. Hours ago, the sky had been painted with hues of red and sapphire; but now all light was extinguished. Beneath a black, soulless sky, the stocky, middle-aged man desperately waded across the graveyard. Wheezing, Rich paused for breath, as his eyes tore over the landscape. The phantom stood statue-like metres away hunched between the graves staring at the ground. Ignoring the cold and dark Rich pressed on. "You owe me eleven pounds!" To the right the river hissed louder, its incessant pulse propelling life into the gloomy horizon. "Eleven quid!" Rich screamed.

The figure turned its head ever so slightly then pointed to the ground. Rich stopped still in his tracks. The sound of middle aged panting was all that separated them. Rich's eyes nervously flitted towards the outstretched finger dread pricking his neck.

“What is it? Have you dropped something?” Still the figure pointed downwards; silent, immovable. As if drawn to the spot, Rich stepped closer bending down towards black grass. His legs gave way, trousers instantly soaked through. Frantically, he began to tear at the harsh stone with his nails, crimson blood tore down his fingers and softly kissed the snow beneath as his harsh and wrinkled eyes flooded with all the misery of a wasted life.

RICHARD BERNAEL.

The taxi driver, Mr Richard Bernael aged 44, Clapham born and bred crumpled against the ground. The river swelled and the trees above moaned in agreement. Only able to shake his head in disbelief Rich continued to cry, whimpering at first then sobbing, heaving as if his whole life depended upon it. He clung to the stone, shoulders convulsing, willing the damning words to disappear.

“Sir...are you alright?”

The voice came from a boy. A boy so pale that if it weren't for his rough coat Rich surely wouldn't have been able to have seen him against the fresh snow. As he slowly turned, he noticed that the brown waves of fog had passed, the aimless crooked smile that hung in the air, the spirit that had caused him so much anguish; all of it: gone. Suddenly, Rich remembered himself. His eyes fizzed over the headstone, searching for his name but it too had evaporated without a trace. Beams of amber sunlight smiled through the descending snow, and as Rich raised his head heavenwards, the – now slightly confused little boy could have sworn he saw the man's lips mouth the words, 'thank you.' Out of nowhere, the sweet tunes of winter birds brought light to the trees joining forces with the cabbie's splendid laugh. It was to be the father of a long line of brilliant laughs.

“Would you like a lift, Tim?”

“Me?” returned the child.

Grinning at the tiny boy– which was something they both later agreed that he needed to work on - Rich took off his heavy coat and draped it over the child's shoulders as, together, they wandered through the falling snow towards the cab. Twisting the key in the ignition, Rich noticed the boy gently poke at the heating dial. He was just about to tell him that it was broken, but as he opened his mouth he was interrupted by the dull hum of warmth which began to flood the car for the first time in years. Perplexed, Rich himself then poked at some of the buttons and, low and behold he had the pleasure of *Silent Night* gracing his ears again. Laughing quietly to himself, he glanced at the young boy smiling and singing along to the hymn as together they trundled into the break of a new day.

*'Holy Infant so tender and mild...'*

