

## Blood Sugar

By Hamish Roberts

There is only a half hour left in Toby's day that vindicates his continuing to exist at all. It occurs on the 5.27 to New Garrington. He sits by the window and sips a coffee. He rubs out the headphones in his ears and the glass against his forehead, and disappears into the broads, Chopin scoring the sunrise as it smudges amber across the mist.

The train pulls in. His coffee buzz nosedives. He lumps himself from the station to his building, and already, the day ahead is tangling like wires in a bag. Another coffee will tip him too far back the other way. Its counterfeit energy will tremble down his biro as he fills out paperwork in his office. And throughout the day, as he obscures his exhaustion with more and more caffeine, he will dissect at least six corpses. He will collect samples from their blood, muscle tissue and vital organs, and form judgements about how they came to die.

He'll get home late. He and Rachel will lapse into silence in front of the television. He won't ask her to relive her day, nor she him; it's kinder not to. He'll stay watching far longer than she, until he's practically asleep. He can't risk his frazzled mind running the show in the dark of their bedroom.

This morning, Toby is locked out. He tries his card on the reader for the second time. Nothing. A few raindrops run down the stationary glass door. He wasn't even supposed to be in today.

There's a tired old ghost inside, looking straight at him— he flinches— but it's just his reflection in the glass, drawn into the foyer by the growing daylight. He tries his card again. Same answer. Something off to his left. Three suited up men in the adjacent car park, leant against an armoured van, puffing cigarettes behind opaque sunglasses.

A tap— it's Tim, the receptionist, in the foyer. He eyes Toby and unlocks the door.

“Sorry,” he says, “The entry system’s disabled. There’s a visual confirmation protocol in place.”

“Well.” Toby places a frame of index fingers and thumbs around his face. Tim beckons him inside.

“What’s going on?” Toby asks whilst they ascend the stairs.

“Don’t know, somebody brought in early this morning with an anonymity protection order,” Tim says. “A diplomat.”

“Really?”

“Think so.”

“Prognosis?”

“Suspected stroke. X-ray inconclusive. Shouldn’t take long.”

“Fucksake,” Toby hisses. He’s been getting these kind of cases for five months. Open and shut: suspected blood clots, strokes and heart attacks confirmed with just a few incisions into the body. It’s all management have trusted him with since last October, when he botched two sets of blood work in quick succession. He thought the call at 5am this morning must mean a return to his station, a case worthy of his seniority, requiring some extensive investigation. Why else drag him in so early? A post-mortem like this one takes two hours, tops. They could have just kept the body cool till the afternoon.

He heads up to the kitchen. There’s a girl sitting at the table, a junior pathologist he showed around the place a few months back.

“Hi,” he says. She glances at him. “You’re in early.” Her hands are wrapped around a cup, the liquid stained black by the teabag left floating in it, a carton of milk standing unopened by its side. “Nafisa, is it?”

“Yeah, hi,” she says. Young, female. And a Muslim, probably, Toby guesses. Arabic heritage, anyway. A twinge of somewhere else left in her accent. Probably moved here

as a child. I wish I was you, he thinks. I wish I could roll my eyes at the old white man hovering awkwardly in front of you.

“Not a morning person?” he asks. She shrugs. “Okay.” He sits down by the young woman, spoons out the bag, opens the milk and tops off her tea. “Who is?” He trails a finger down the schedule printout left on the table. “So, me and you, Nafisa, we’re—”

“Nafisa,” she says, correcting the emphasis.

“Oh, *Nafisa*,” he repeats apologetically. First fuck up, tick. “Sorry. So, you and I, we’re performing a post-mortem on a seventy-one-year-old male at...seven AM. Suspected stroke. Seen the case file?”

“Here.” She passes a document on a clipboard across the table.

“X-ray inconclusive,” Toby reads out loud. “Probably a...bullet in his brain.” He only hears this apparent attempt at a joke as it falls out his mouth. It bounces off Nafisa without making a mark. He watches one of his thumbs rub the other. “Right,” he says. “Have you eaten?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not hungry.”

“Well. I insist you eat something. Low blood sugar is a...proven error risk.” He gets up, opens a cupboard. That’s it, he thinks. Set the tone, direct vertically. There is no common ground for you to level to somebody like her. You aren’t paid to build rapports, anyway. You’re paid to cut open corpses.

He makes them some porridge. Nafisa eats her bowl in silence, her gaze drifting along the porcelain walls. “Filled it all in?” he asks, holding up the case file. She nods. “See you in there.” He takes the document and a flask full of coffee down to his office.

There’s a lot of paperwork with this one. A complex non-disclosure agreement, a hundred clauses to be signed, dated and initialled. He traces over each sentence in turn without absorbing a single word. It’s Rachel’s medical bills that stop him turning down any shifts, that put him here on a Saturday morning. They’d have more quality time

left together if he just stopped paying for the treatment and let her body run its natural course.

He scrubs up and meets Nafisa in the operating theatre at 730 AM. It's a ten-foot-wide hexagonal room, with a viewing platform and several large square lockers. A flood lamp and a table laden with sterilised surgical instruments are set up for them in the centre.

“Ready?”

Nafisa nods. He moves a trolley beneath a locker and, with a twist of its handle, pulls out of the wall, amidst a hiss of frozen air, a seven-foot long metal plate with a corpse resting on top of it. The trolley creaks. It's a big one. He and Nafisa guide it beneath the flood lamp.

A sulphurous wisp escapes the near-frozen mound. It's the large belly, stacked high above the trolley, close to the heat of the lamp. Toby thumbs a dial, drawing back the bulb. The light spreads, their pupils narrow; the corpse's skin glares then gradates along the contours of an old man's pinched face. A pear-shaped chin, a small mouth clamped shut. “It's...” Toby looks up at Nafisa. She nods curtly. Her surgical knife raised and ready. “Did you know?” She shakes her head. He looks back down. Rolls of wrinkled fat sag off rigor-mortised muscles. It's the President. Or what's left of him.

Toby has never properly digested the existence of this man. Every time he saw him on his newsfeed, speaking on behalf of the country, he had to reinsert the sheer fact of him into the world all over again. It was like being reminded that vampires or ghosts are an empirically verified phenomenon. And look, now, at the flesh and bone of this contrived fiction. This 100-kg dead weight clickbait. Gravity has pulled the blood inside, reducing the fake tan to a milky amber.

Toby skims through the case notes. *Death sudden, in home, wife present. Loss of motor functions in face minutes before death. Likely stroke.* This is no probation case.

His findings will be presented to some federal body or another, surely. This will be on record. At the top of his CV.

“Shall we proceed?” says Nafisa. He looks up. Her knife remains poised. Her gaze on the top of the torso where she thinks she’ll begin her incision. Toby lingers on the strip of skin between her hair cap and her mask...should she be the one doing this? What if it gets out? The way conspiracies are whipped up these days, her mere involvement might stain their findings with doubt. And can she actually be adequately dispassionate? He couldn’t, if he were her.

A dark shape slides into the viewing gallery. It’s one of the suits from outside, cropped hair and sunglasses, a cup of coffee in his hands and a conspicuous protrusion through the left hem of his jacket.

“Right,” says Toby. *Of course*, they were being observed. Somebody would have been watching the camera feed from the start. He looks right at Nafisa and says, very quietly and very slowly, “We cannot afford to fuck this up. Even a tiny bit.”

Nafisa nods minutely and stays still, awaiting instruction. “Put that down, Nafisa,” Toby says, more audibly. “We are going to need to get into the brain.”

They cut away the skin and sinew along the middle and around the back of the head, then drill through the bone and remove half a cap of skull, skin and implanted hair. He takes out the brain in its entirety and ties up the larger blood vessels, then cuts it into eight segments on a separate operating table. Each part in turn is placed under a microscope and examined. The X-ray didn’t miss a thing. No sign of rupture or blood deprivation.

“Not a stroke,” he says to Nafisa. “Can you fix him back up and take some blood samples. I’m going to write this up.” He heads up to the kitchen, spoons heaps of coffee into an espresso maker, and starts scribbling.

*No bleeding or signs of deprivation in the brain. Unknown neurological condition or some form of toxicity only remaining hypotheses with clear explanatory power re loss of motor function in face.*

Toby thinks for a while, then heads downstairs to pick up new scrubs, the coffee forgotten on the stove. Low voices drift up the stairway as he descends, then come to an abrupt halt as he reaches the theatre doors. He walks in: the suit's left the viewing gallery. He's next to Nafisa, facing her. Her arms are folded.

"This is a closed theatre," says Toby.

The man turns. "I've been sterilised," he says. He removes his glasses. Cold grey eyes focalise a taut, empty face. "I'm a federal agent. What can you tell us? We need to get out a statement as soon as possible."

"We haven't been able to determine the cause of death as of yet," Toby replies. "We've only ruled out the suspected stroke and exploring other possible causes will take some time. Maybe hours, maybe days, possibly longer than that, depending on what chem-work is required. I'm afraid any non-essential persons increase the risk of contamination. If you can make your way back to the viewing gallery." He watches the agent leave, then catches Nafisa's eye. *That's how it's done*, he says with a small cock of his eyebrow. "Right. We are going to look for signs of toxins in the body. Where should we look first?"

"Okay," she says. She glances at the agent as he re-enters the viewing gallery. "You think he's been poisoned?"

"I didn't say that. I asked where we might look for tell-tale signs of toxicity."

"The liver."

"Correct!" Toby reaches over and pats her on the shoulder. She dips away from him. Her face is sweating, he notices. He picks a disinfectant towel from a box on the

wall and wipes it across her forehead. “Sorry,” he says, throwing it in the bin, “You’re perspiring. Can’t be too careful.”

She takes a shallow breath and then says, evenly, “That’s alright. Should I make an incision on the abdomen?”

Toby nods. She cuts and prises apart the skin then sagging layers of fat and muscle beneath. Toby pins back the walls of flesh, leaving a chasm between them, the digestive system exposed. He gently pushes the other organs to the side whilst Nafisa adjusts the flood light so it falls on the liver.

“That doesn’t look right. Take a sample.”

The left lobe is redder and bigger than it should be and bulging out to the right. Nafisa cuts out a small cube of liver and places it on a petri dish under a microscope. Toby puts on a new pair of rubber gloves and places his eye on the ocular. It’s out of focus. He thumbs the dial.

“I can’t breathe,” says Nafisa.

“One second.” He’s almost there. The brown red surface of the liver starts to draw into focus. It looks inflamed.

The sound of a convulsing throat squirms into Toby’s ears. He lifts his head and catches sight of a grey mass arcing up from Nafisa’s lurching mouth and down between the walls of flesh pinned to either side of corpse beneath her. The gloop splashes on impact, then rides in a wave from one end to the other of the man’s innards. It channels between organs and settles in crevices.

The next three seconds will stay with Toby for the rest of his life. He will return to them again and again, as one clicks a mouse again and again on a frozen screen. The ramifications of Nafisa’s half-digested porridge swimming inside the President are too large to process and so no thought breaks up these three seconds before the agent

comes bursting through the door. Toby watches Nafisa. Calmly lifting her eyes to meet his. Is that a smile?

The agent bursts through the doors, shouting nonsense code into his watch. “What the hell happened?”

“Don’t come in here!” Toby shouts back, flapping his hands at the agent. “You aren’t allowed in here!” More agents follow. Nafisa wipes her mouth with her mask. He aims a trembling finger at her, as agents grab her arms and lock them behind her back. She doesn’t resist. She’s pulled out the room. Toby is held there for a time, then taken to an office for questioning. They watch the CCTV. They send him home. They give him a week off, paid. As for what they do with Nafisa, or who the *they* in question are exactly (Police? Federal Officers?) Toby hears and knows nothing, nor does anybody else he speaks to.

He watches the cause of death announced on TV. Acute food poisoning. A chef from a golf resort is charged with manslaughter. *Never, impossible, how would you determine that? None of the chem work would be admissible.* He shouts all this at the TV. He arranges a meeting with a journalist and then cancels it. He gets back on the 5.27 to New Garrington. Back on the sofa with Rachel in the evening. He turns to her and opens his mouth and...stops. Why burden her with something he hardly believes himself? She drifts back towards the television.

He drifts back to Nafisa. The manner in which she met his eyes. It was an admission. Of something. He should be able to use it, somehow, to pull all this down. The wife, the job, the daily grind, the rinse and repeat. Somehow. He should be able to push it all down like the walls of a television set.