

# DARK MAN WALKING

EXTRACT FROM A NOVEL

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## The First Morning

**04.15 a.m.** Leon awoke in darkness. He switched on the bedside radio, listened to the international news for a few minutes, and went back to sleep. A plane had crashed into a New York tower, but America was a long way from Lacuna. Outside his window, magpies rehearsed their morning calls in a low key and a cat strolled silently home.

**07.03 a.m.** The taxi driver watched as Tina Finch limped out of the main entrance of the City Hospital and approached his cab. She wore a coat, a headscarf, and another piece of cloth wrapped around the neck and across her lower face. The driver did consider such a thorough covering peculiar; the morning was not especially cold, but he thought the woman may have been hiding some sort of accident or surgical wound. People left hospitals in all sorts of states and some of them got into his taxi. The driver's view was confirmed when he saw that she carried a large paper carrier bag with a pharmacy docket stapled to it.

'Where to?'

'Lacuna, please, Federation Street.'

The driver started the meter, and—as someone who prided himself on being able to start a conversation—said, 'You look like you've got half the chemist shop there.'

Tina did not reply. The driver found a gap in the traffic and drove the cab to Lacuna without saying another word. He assumed that she could not speak English even though she had given directions a few seconds before.

As people do after a period away, Tina looked out of the car window for changes to familiar territory. The park was the same; the magpies and

galahs had moved but that was to be expected. The traffic lights still went through their familiar sequence from green to amber and then red.

It was while waiting for the lights to change that Tina noticed a yellow van parked on the verge. On the side of the vehicle in large black letters were the words: 'Nick Cob Fencing Contractor. We Sell Security.' A bald-headed man, holding a mobile phone in one hand and a tape rule in the other, leaned against his van and looked towards Lacuna. He noticed Tina watching him and gave a bow. *Funny fellow*, she thought. *Very formal in manner but dressed in a green and yellow tracksuit. Maybe he sleeps in the back of the van.*

The taxi driver briefly wondered if his passenger, with her face covered and carrying a large bag, could be a terrorist. He pushed the idea out of mind but was glad when they reached Lacuna.

**07.30 a.m.** Joyce stirred at the insistent pawing of the cat on her face. She arose with as much grace as her seventy years would allow, went into the kitchen, fed the feline, put on the kettle, and turned on the radio.

'Jimmy,' said Joyce as she heard the news, 'we are in for a spot of bother.'

Jimmy, her husband, had been in the city cemetery for five years and did not answer. The cat—who thought his name was Jimmy—continued munching from a bowl near the back door. In need of a better response, Joyce stepped into the garden in her dressing gown and loudly addressed the magpies and sparrows.

'War! Arabs!'

The shout by Joyce and the reply of the birds disrupted the mental state of a younger woman meditating in the next garden. Wendy blinked as the outside world invaded her consciousness. She quickly picked up a small heap of pebbles and arranged them into a protective circle in conformity with Wicca rites, perhaps to guard herself from Joyce's voice, perhaps from the scimitar of Islam.

**08.17 a.m.** A neighbour, on Joyce's side of the street, checked his watch against the car radio. John had already seen the two New York towers collapsing to rubble on television. He wondered if any Arabs were on the

payroll at work. John drove out of the driveway and onto the road. He hoped the traffic lights into the city would all be green.

**09.00 a.m.** Three blocks away from Joyce's house, the Reverend Duncan Donald stood in the kirk of the Lacuna Unreformed Presbyters. He had been preaching the apocalypse for decades; now it had happened, but he didn't have any parishioners to preach to.

Donald had become accustomed to an elderly congregation of about thirty, but last Sunday there had been only nine. The Reverend wondered if his stray flock would return in response to the bad news, but then remembered that some of them were dead. He prayed for the people of New York.

**09.13 a.m.** At the park end of Federation Street, in the Camille rooming house, the tenants were having their first bowl of cornflakes for the day. Some were eating the cereal in bed, but most had taken their bowls downstairs to the recreation room. They sat and watched the collapsing of the two towers on TV. One individual, Sam, stayed there all day as the television showed five minutes of mayhem in a continuous cycle.

### **The Placebo Kid**

Back in her flat, Tina placed the paper bag on the bathroom vanity shelf while trying to avoid looking in the mirror. She took out the jars and tubes and read the labels while putting them into the medicine cabinet: salicylic acid, propylene glycol, Celestone M, Oilatum, Dimithicream, and dicloxacillan tablets.

Tina walked down the hall past her ex-husband's copy of Bruegel's *Wedding Feast*. The picture reminded her that she had spent ten years with a phoney aesthete who had a medieval view of marriage. Taking part in the medical experiment, and its accompanying \$1500, had been a chance for a new start.

Tina had signed the informed consent form handed to her by the CareLab Corporation. The study was to last three months. It was to test an anti-rejection drug. The volunteers took the chemical once and were

then to make weekly visits to the lab for two months to give a little blood. A piece of cake!

A couple of weeks after taking the drug a few of the volunteers developed minor rashes or lowered white cell counts, but Tina was fine. It seemed that she had scored the lucky number in the double-blind test. Tina was enviously called the Placebo Kid by the other lab rats.

Then, after six weeks, Tina got a rash of rashes, and a load of lesions. This was big stuff: hands, legs, face, chest, every-bloody-where. Green grow the rashes, oh! Hard little lumps under the skin, like lentils, appeared along the edges of her hands. The CareLab doctor called it pompholyx, as though giving the ailment a name was a cure. Tina started feeling decidedly unwell. The doctor told her to call any time if it got worse. It got worse, but Doctor Pompholyx was not contactable.

Tina went to her GP who sent her immediately to the emergency department of the City Hospital. As she was wheeled off to a ward, Tina's mind was racing with questions. *Did I leave the fridge door open? Did I lock the back door? Did I leave the stove on? Where did I leave my notebook? What do you have to do to get a cigarette in this place?*

As it happened, Tina did not leave the fridge door open, the stove was off, the back door was locked, and the notebook was on the desk. But she did leave some vegetables on the kitchen table.

Tina went into the kitchen and looked at a bunch of spinach decaying on the chopping board. It seemed to sum up the present state of affairs. She lit a cigarette.

*(end of excerpt)*