

THE CABIN



I

“The cabin isn’t real”, she said, flicking the ash of her cigarette from their second floor balcony and watching it plummet unexpectedly quickly onto the small courtyard below. “It’s all in your head”.

He sat on the other side of the glass, the balcony door open just far enough to let them hear each other whilst she smoked. Callum hated smoking. It killed his brother and his grandfather, and it had probably killed his father too for all he knew; although having no idea where the deserting bastard was these days, and not caring either, made it a safe bet that he would never know.

“That’s not what the website says” he replied flatly. He was tiring of her and her ways, the way she dismissed everything that wasn’t black and white.

He heard her mimic his words under her breath in a mocking tone, the tone a teenager uses when disrespecting the entire world is their only intent.

“I heard that” he said, trying to convey the fact that she was pissing him off without actually having to say it.

They continued on in silence for a while. Ramona smoked another cigarette and stared at the flats opposite. He continued tapping away, replying to the messages on the discussion board. Someone claimed to have killed their mother at the cabin. Someone else said they had raised 13 demons and slept with each one before bottling them all up inside the urn that held their father’s ashes, hoping all the while that they would torment the hell out of him. He smiled at the irony. “Do you think it’s actually possible to torment the hell out of someone? Isn’t Hell itself supposed to *be* torment?”

She continued staring at the flats opposite, sending her little ash-bombs down to the stone floor of the courtyard below. Either she hadn’t heard him, or she had and was choosing to ignore him. “Do you think if I fell from here I would actually die?”

He looked up at her. She was leaning over the balcony, her long goth hair hanging straight down, revealing the pale white of the back of her neck. He glanced down at the discussion board. “I don’t know” he said, exasperated. “Why don’t you try it?”

She pulled herself back from the edge. "Fuck you, Callum. Fuck. You". She ground out the cigarette stub on the balcony floor. "How much longer do we have to stay in this crummy flat anyway? It's been two months now, Two fucking months. It was a stop-gap you said. Somewhere to crash whilst we found a real place".

"Two months isn't much of a stop-gap, and we are still looking".

She opened the sliding door, stepped through and slammed it shut behind her with enough force to drive home her point.

"Jesus, Ramona!"

"Lucifer, Callum" she said, her face up close, staring into his eyes. "You will never find us a place because you are not *looking* for a place. *You* are looking for the fucking *cabin* and nothing else!" She snapped the laptop shut on his fingers, pressing down hard, "and that fucking cabin is in your head!". She slapped the side of his head making him wince under the pain. "You understand me? In your head!"

He pulled his fingers out and pushed her to one side, getting to his feet. "Don't you ever hit me again" he said, collecting the laptop from the chair and walking into the small bedroom.

"Or what?!" she screamed at him.

"Or I'll kill you"

II

Sunlight filled their kitchen space. The smell of coffee, cheap stuff out of a jar and made as strong as they could stand, was all they had in the cupboards for breakfast, save for the dark-grey mixture that Callum repeatedly slammed on the flour-covered worktop.

Ramona sat feet away, sipping her jet-black caffeine fix at the small dining table. The two places were set at each end but there was no real distance between the two. Everything touched everything in this tiny shit-hole.

"It's like the fucking potato famine all over again" she said.

He smiled. "Don't take the piss. If it wasn't for my Irish heritage I wouldn't know how to make soda bread". He slammed the slate-grey dough down again on the worktop, the reverberations being felt throughout the flat.

She turned the cigarette pack round in her hands. "How does a guy of Irish descent end up with the name Callum Polansk, for fuck's sake?"

He cupped the dough into an oval shape; to Ramona, it looked like the carcass of a dead rabbit. "Polish father" he said. "I thought I told you that?"

“You probably did” she said, looking down at the cigarette pack. She flipped open the lid and raised the packet to her face, sniffing the fresh tobacco. When she looked up he was hunched over the laptop again, frowning. “Someone got raped in the cabin last night” he said, reading a new post on the discussion board.

“That is sick. I want you to stop with this obsession, Callum, please. It has changed you, these last few months, and I don’t why you keep on with it”.

He scattered flour over the dough one more time, picking it up and pounding it, picking it up and pounding, then picking it up again and pounding, pounding, pounding it on to the work surface. He didn’t answer her but he worked swiftly, focused on the process, cupping the dough once again into the dead rabbit shape. When he was finished he stepped back to consider his work.

She took out a cigarette. “How long before it’s ready?” she sighed. “I need a cigarette”.

Without looking at her he reached behind him and drew a large knife from the wooden rack. “My mum used to tell me about her grandmother back in Ireland and all the old stories she would tell about the traditions. Did you know that when people made soda bread back then they thought the rise caused by the yeast was the Devil’s work?”

Ramona was shaking her head. Not because she didn’t know the answer, but because she didn’t care. They used to have so much, but all they did these days was fight and when they weren’t fighting he was talking bollocks about traditions, superstitions and the fucking cabin. It was like an addiction to him. A perverse version of a Holy Grail quest. A cursed pot of gold at the end of a twisted rainbow.

He cut into the dough, deeply, straight through to the work surface. He spun it and cut it again, then again and again until he put the knife down and stared at the shape of the cross he had cut into the rabbit’s back. “So they used to cut a cross in the dough” he said triumphantly. “They called it ‘letting the Devil out’”.

But when he looked up, she wasn’t there.

There was only the small gap in the sliding door, and the faint smell of cigarette smoke.

III

“I’m leaving you”

She said it matter-of-factly, as if it had been over for months and she was only now just catching up on the paperwork.

He was sitting on the broken sofa, tapping distractedly on the laptop. He stopped mid-post and, hands frozen in position, raised his eyes. “Fuck. I didn’t see that coming”.

She started to cry. She didn't want to cry and she had sworn to herself seconds before she opened her mouth that the one thing she wouldn't do was... "Fuck you, Callum Polansk" she said, voice breaking under the tears. "I've tried. You can't ever say that I haven't tried"

He put the laptop to one side and got to his feet, but he stopped walking toward her when he saw her take a step back. "Ramona, I..."

She looked at him expectedly, but nothing else came. She wiped her eyes. "You see? You can't even say it, can you? You can't say 'Roma please don't go, we can sort this shit out'. She laughed. "Who am I kidding? You haven't called me Roma since..." she glanced at the laptop.

He followed her gaze. "Since I started looking for the cabin" he said.

"What is it, Callum? Why do you want to find it? *How* the fuck did you come across it in the first place?"

He shrugged. "You know what the internet is like".

"You know the Police will be looking for it, too, don't you? The shit that goes on there, whatever and wherever it is, can't continue. It's a very sick and dangerous place, Callum, and you need to stop. You need to stop now".

He stared at her. She filled her lungs, breathing deeply, putting the life back into her that had been seeping away for so many months. She swallowed, wiped her eyes again, regaining her composure. "Well," she said, slinging her handbag over her shoulder and picking up her two suitcases. "You've got my number".

IV

The bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling above him gave the flat a yellowish hue that he hadn't noticed in the days when Ramona had been around. He was swamped by the cabin now. He hardly ate, and when he did it was something immediate that would not detract from his time staring at the screen and watching the horrors evolving. The stream of grainy images uploaded to the site had become almost continuous since the poisonous word of the site had spread, and yet still no-one was prepared to speak of its location.

He had tried so many permutations of the same question. "How do I find the cabin/ where is the cabin/ why will no-one speak of the cabin location/ how do I get a body to the cabin/ etc etc... his ever desperate desire grew as the silence from what he had deemed the cabin cult continued. "Are you a secret society/ are you seeking something beyond life/ do you deal only in death or in the afterlife as well" ... and on and on with the questions being ignored and nothing but image after image and repulsive description after repulsive description being streamed through the website until

one day he couldn't take anymore and he had posted "WILL SOMEONE JUST KILL ME IN THE FUCKING CABIN! AT LEAST THEN I WOULD KNOW WHERE IT WAS!!"

And someone answered him.

V

The trail that led him to the meet was disconcertingly innocuous for something that had such horrific implications. The reply he received was from "A Friend" and it said simply "Lots of website hits from your log-in. You are an addict. Find me on Twitter..." and he was given a Twitter name to follow, which resulted in a swift follow-back, and then a direct message giving him an email address. He emailed the address as instructed, with his identity, and waited.

It was three days before he received a reply. A few lines of text gave him an address, which turned out to be a bar, and he was told to wait for "The Gatekeeper".

When the hooded man sat down on the bar-stool next to him he didn't have to worry about engaging in conversation. The man was unshaven, balding, with the grade of his haircut matching the length of his stubble. He smelled vaguely of petrol and curry. He wore jeans and a hooded-top which had deep crimson stains on the arms.

"I am The Gatekeeper. You will listen to what I have to say. Sometimes you enter the cabin knowingly. Sometimes you enter the cabin by accident. Sometimes you find yourself inside the cabin when you least expect it, and sometimes, no matter how hard you look, you cannot find it. Each case is different. Yours is different. For you, you must enter the cabin knowingly, and willingly. If that is what you want to do then all you have to do is follow me when I leave. Do you understand?"

Callum nodded, unable to resist a small smirk at the slightly ridiculous clandestine nature of it all. "I have a question, though" he said quickly, as the man was getting up to leave. "Where exactly is the cabin?"

The man paused slightly, as if he were momentarily unsure of whether what he was about to say was allowed. Then, with the conviction of a person who had suddenly made up his mind on a point of insane importance, he replied: "You are already in it".

VI

The first pain Callum was aware of when he regained consciousness was the one in his stomach. It was just under the breastbone, as if he had been hit so hard that he had been winded and the pain had remained long after the breath had come back. After that first sensation everything else seemed to hit simultaneously and made him squirm in panic, fighting his restraints whilst he tried to work

out what had happened to him. He could taste blood in his mouth. He had a headache beyond anything else he had ever experienced. His hearing was dulled; sounds of people around him fought for priority amongst the constant thumping beat of his own heart. He was cold; and the immediate realisation that he was also naked made him cry. It was only then, as he felt the discomfort of the salty tears running back up his nose that he understood he was upside down. The world, as he saw it, was upside down. White tiled walls, a concrete floor. *A disused toilet... Oh fuck, I'm in a disused toilet..*

His head had been restrained with what felt like rope. He felt its tight, harsh abrasiveness as he tried to turn his head to one side, and then the other. Despite its resistance he could make out his naked arms, and when he followed them down to his fingers he saw his wrists lashed with the same, taut blue nylon rope to the wooden struts of the... *oh fuck, no... please*

He stared straight ahead, looking for a point far away where he could focus... regain himself... think. It was then that he saw it. A mirror. A full length mirror on the wall opposite. He was tied to a full size wooden cross, placed upside down against the wall. Blood ran in small red lines from his ankles and wrists where he had been tied. He closed his eyes. He was upside down, that was why he saw himself the right way up. It was him that was upside down, not the world around him.

Then he felt something cold and wet, a cloth, pulled down over his nose and mouth and water pounded onto his face. He tried to close his mouth but couldn't. He tried to hold his breath but his chest contracted in pain and forced him to inhale and then he started retching and coughing and the cloth was taken away.

He spewed cold water across the floor and cried out in pain. "PLEASE! WHO ARE YOU! WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO ME!"

A man crouched down beside him. Jacob recognised him as the man from the bar.

"We have to make sure you're not law enforcement, don't we?"

Then another voice came. "Why do you think you're naked, you dumb fuck? Do we look stupid? We know what a fucking wire looks like. We know what a fucking tracker 'round you ankle or in your fucking shoe looks like, you dumb fuck".

There was laughing from the others in the room. "Yeah! You dumb fuck!" shouted someone else.

The Gatekeeper raised a hand to quiet them down. He tilted his head to one side to look at Callum, considering him.

"Please..." said Callum, "I am not the Police. I am nothing to do with anyone. I just.."

The Gatekeeper nodded. "You are just a prick who liked the idea of being involved in violence. You like the fantasy of it. You like the idea of it, but as you are experiencing, the reality of it is something else".

He sat down against the wall, looking down sideways at Callum. "I looked at all your posts. All the questions on the cabin discussion board. Tell me, Callum: Why so many questions?"

Jacob fought the shivering that engulfed his body, tightening his muscles. Trying to sound like he was calm. Tough. Someone to be allowed in to the circle. "I don't know what to say. I got a fascination with blood, I guess".

The Gatekeeper nodded. "I will tell you the truth about the cabin, Callum. I will tell you because I do not think you understand the true horror of it. You see, I used to be like you, a long time ago. I used to be curious. I used to sit motionless through one horror film after another wondering what it would take to make me feel. Everything always had a cabin in it. I remember that. Always a fucking cabin in the woods, where no-one ever goes, or if they do go – they die. How many fucking cabins can one generation take, Jacob? How many fucking cabins have to be built before people learn to stay away from the fucking cabin?"

Some of the others laughed, but The Gatekeeper waved them down. He reached into his jacket and took out a pack of cigarettes offering one to Jacob.

Callum closed his eyes. *Ramona*. "I don't smoke" he said, weakly.

The Gatekeeper snorted. A dismissive, ironic snort. "Huh. Imagine that. All that fixation with loss of life and yet you don't smoke". He lit the cigarette. "Are you some sort of Geek, Callum?"

Callum didn't answer him. He closed his eyes, fighting all the while the urge to cry.

"The cabin isn't real", said The Gatekeeper, flicking the ash of his cigarette onto the stone floor. "It's all in your head".

Callum felt himself tense.

"I expect you are in love", said the man. "Most geeks are". He drew heavily on the cigarette. "Who are you in love with, Callum? Hmm? Who is it you want to impress?"

"I... don't", Callum swallowed hard. "I don't have anyone" he said.

The Gatekeeper raised his eyebrows. He placed the cigarette in his mouth in order to free both hands and took out Jacob's mobile phone. He turned it on, scrolled the numbers. "Don't have many fucking friends, do you, Callum?" he said disparagingly. "Proper geek. Oh, hang on. Who's this?". He sounded out the name as if it was deeply foreign and unfamiliar to him. "Ra-mo-na".

He looked down at Callum for a reaction. There was a long silence before the man said, "The cabin is not a real place. That's why I said it doesn't exist and that it's all in your head. Actually, it's not only in your head, Callum, it's in my head too. It's in his head", he gestured toward someone Callum could not see, "and his, and his, and his. It's in everyone's head, Callum. The website you have been on isn't a collection of violence from a single place. It's the collection of violence from every fucking place. Everyone who has got it in them is out there doing it. The cabin is everywhere, Callum. You walk down the road, and the fucker coming toward you has probably got his head in the cabin even though he's on your street walking one foot in front of the other. The person you sit next to on the bus. Their head is probably in the fucking cabin, too. You won't find the cabin, Callum, because it doesn't exist, and yet it does because it is everywhere".

He drew on his cigarette, flicking the ash over Jacob. "Call her" he said, his voice dropping a tone. He typed in the numbers. "Call her".

He held the phone out in front of him, on speaker.

"Hello". It was Ramona's voice. She said the word as if it was the only thing she could think of to say. It wasn't a greeting. It was just the sound of a human being acknowledging another one, the way they have to when there have been difficult times between them and difficult things have been left unsaid, waiting for the time when they can be exhumed from where they were buried and given a proper funeral.

"Ramona"

"What do you want, Callum. I don't want to hang up on you but you had better give me a good reason to keep listening".

"Ramona, I..." He tried to take a deep breath but his chest kicked back and wouldn't let him. All he could think of to say was "Ramona, I found the cabin. You were right. It doesn't exist".

"I really hope you haven't found it" she said coldly.

"It's... it's a long story".

The Gatekeeper cut her off, and turned off the phone completely. "Smash it up" he said, tossing it over to one of the men outside of Callum's view.

He looked down at him. "Well, time's up". Getting to his feet, motioning as he did so to some non-descript face to turn on the technology, he and two others picked up their baseball bats and beat Callum to death for the cameras.

VII

Police have today announced the successful shut down of the website known as The Cabin, and the seizure of servers, computers and other hardware thought to be used in connection with the site. It is hoped that closure of the website, which formed a centrepiece for the internet activity known as "splicing" (posting videos of violent crimes against the person) will lead to several arrests. The officer in charge of the operation confirmed that the computer-forensic team will be able to trace all those who have viewed the site from its inception and arrests will be made "without exception"

VIII

The uniformed officers sat in rows, filling the church, taking up all seating space and, like a blue wave with nowhere to go, crashing against the back wall where the officers stood three-deep. The officer at the altar removed his hat, placed it respectfully on the coffin, and turned to face the mass.

“We are here to show our respects for Callum Polansk, a friend and colleague killed in the line of duty. For operational reasons, some of those colleagues who should be here today cannot be, so I speak for all of them when I say that undercover plain-clothes activity is often both the pinnacle of an officer’s career, and sometimes, the one thing that destroys it”.

He stared straight at Ramona in the front row when he said “Undercover operations mean that the officers involved have to live a lie. That does not mean that the people they care for when they are living their undercover lives mean any the less to them than they would otherwise do were they able to tell them the truth”.

He turned to the coffin. “The death of Callum Polansk brings to an end an operation that has been ongoing for many months. His spirit, and the contribution he has made to society in tackling the violent undercurrent that blights it, will live on for far longer. Officer Polansk, we salute you. Good night, and God Bless”.

He took a step backwards and bowed his head. The Lord’s Prayer, spoken in the low respectful tone that only sorrowful mourners can produce, lifted gently into the air, echoing through the stone walls.

As he made his way back to his seat, he paused briefly by Ramona, touching her on the shoulder.

“Why didn’t he tell me” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“He was only going to do a two month stint. It wasn’t supposed to end like this”.

She looked over at the coffin. “He never actually said he loved me, but I loved him”.

The officer straightened up, holding his professionalism, holding his composure. “If they hadn’t have turned on his phone for his last call then we would never have found him or seized the equipment. Whatever you think, you were a special person to him. He chose to phone you, and that little piece of GPS window was all we needed. You saved him”.

She lowered her eyes. “He was always rejecting me” she said, starting to cry again.

“Rejecting you?” said the officer, incredulous. He took the white handkerchief from his uniform pocket and passed it to her. “No, Ramona. He was protecting you”.