



CHASER

Damien G Walter

For four years I didn't eat. Not like you eat when you really want feeding. I nibbled at things. I took crumbs left on plates. I sipped surreptitiously from other men's cups. Then when I was so thin that I could have slipped between the bars, they let me out.

Screws like to see thin men leaving their institutions, it reaffirms their faith in the system to see you have no appetite left. I stood blinking in my first unfiltered light in four years. I was bony-limbed and sunken-cheeked with a concave belly but I could only remember what it was like to be hungry.

They call me Chaser due to my taste for spirits. I could line up ten little glasses along a bar, empty them one by one and always want another. I could never have enough. I wouldn't stagger either, friend. Not that I wasn't drunk. They say a drunk is a man trying to look sober. The trick is not to try. Never any point denying the truth. Somebody told me that once, if not in so many words.

You will always recognise the big jobs when they come along. The little ones, you feel good you didn't get caught. The middling ones, you're happy for the easy money. The big ones are all about reputation. Once they're done you buzz on knowing on that every face that matters is going to wonder how it was done. You leave behind just enough so they guess at it being you but not enough to prove anything. You feel your name hanging on the lips of your competitors, whispered with grudging awe by the very men who are paid to catch you.

That morning I felt better than a million bucks, better than the two million that was stacked in bearer bonds in the case beneath the bed. It felt like coming home, like a dream made real, like everything you ever wanted given to you on a plate. It was pure.

I was at the centre of a silent world. Outside the cars didn't rumble, the crowds didn't roar. The streets sat serene and unmoving as London took a minute's silence in awe of its criminal son. Out of respect the hotel suite's white curtains chose not to rustle in the breeze. Even my hangover kept quiet. I turned, warm in a world of crisp white sheets. My arm stretched out to touch her and found the space where she should have been empty, her warmth gone. When they kicked in the door and slapped on the cuffs, my world had already imploded.

I don't remember the streets having this many windows. Four years and now everything is made of glass, so that you can see the building right down to the bones. Window upon window of stuff.

Watches and jewelry and rings, little piles of books on three for two, huge stacks of toilet cleaner now at rock bottom, the cheapest ever computer, music-music-music, everything must go, go-go-go,

sale ends soon, 50% off designer suites and part exchange. Electricals bought and sold, wi-fi hi-fi units ready in a week, buy now pay later, 0% interest until it's too late to back out, buy it now before we go bust, desperate for your next fix then we've got the answer, cheap shit you don't need direct to your door, another sham promotion to draw you suckers in, give us the cash now or we'll fuck you later. Sell sell sell. Buy buy buy. Shit shit shit. I look at it all and I look at the people and I can't understand how they want it all. I can't understand how they want anything.

I stop outside a fast food place selling burgers and spicy spuds. Through the window I can see the customers chewing down their food. In the window I see me, a pale reflection of who I should be; in clothes three sizes too big, stretched and sagging in all the places where the muscles used to go. Beyond want is need and as I need food I go into the place. I order a lump of grease battered chicken. The girl behind the counter looks so sad, a lost vacant thing without dreams, hope or desire, I just want her to die. I see my look returned in her eyes. I will never be lower than this.

I was in love with her face, but I wanted her ass and her legs. Especially her legs. I'm reminded of this as I sit letting the shitty chicken get cold, out on a bench on the street. A young thing walks past wearing a shirt that ends just short of decent, slim legs that trail into high heels so she is tottering along and I could knock her over with a laugh. She knows I'm looking because as she walks past she looks back and flashes me a look of contempt like I could never have her and ensuring the fact that I will want her forever.

She used to do that. Did it once big time. A flash of leg — come on Chaser. An inch of cleavage — we could be together. One less item of

clothing — I'm yours, if you can afford me. So one big job was all it was then we could be together in our world of silence and white sheets, exchanging a warm embrace. I reach out an arm and she's gone, and the doors kicked in and as they're slipping the cuffs on one fucker whispers her name in my ear, so that I'll not have to speculate.

The girl's gone without looking back again, just another set of legs on just another street. I'm left thinking of legs, and a face and two million in bearer bonds that might be enough to take you to the ends of the earth but won't get you close to escaping from me.

There's grease running down my chin. I hadn't noticed when I started eating the chicken. I'm swallowing great chunks of flesh, gibbets of fat falling from my chewing, hungry mouth.

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