



WAKE UP IN MOLOCH Joel Lane

It started with the machine in the garden. Though I suppose it had been going on for a while before that, and perhaps a long time.

If you live around here, you take certain things for granted. Birmingham grew out of the Industrial Revolution, so in a sense it owes its life to the machine. It was inevitable that sooner or later, we'd have to give something back.

In the autumn of 2001, an unusual death was reported to us. A man in his fifties had died while mowing the lawn in his back garden. His widow, who contacted us, was convinced it had something to do with a bizarre machine in the garden next door. Of course, we assumed this to be the familiar mechanism of displaced grief: blaming the loss on some mysterious external agency makes it easier to accept, at least to begin with. The neighbour's machine appeared to be some kind of inert urban sculpture: a dark mound of pistons, cogs and levers with no energy source and no imaginable purpose. He said it was there to

frighten off potential burglars.

We were expecting the post-mortem to indicate a natural death. When the coroner told us the cause of death was exposure to poison gas — of a kind not used since the First World War — we were round there within minutes to confiscate the machine. But it had gone. The owner said he'd taken it to the rubbish dump at Tyseley. Only the threat of a murder charge made him go there with us and point it out among the rusting cars and mouldering sofas.

The HSE officer took charge of the machine, and established that it contained various chemicals which, over a period of time, would drip together and generate occasional bursts of toxic gas. I spoke to a guy there called Spencer who described the machine as 'a mechanical compost-heap that, left to its own devices, could be relied on to kill everything in the garden'. At this point, I recalled that the garden it had been placed in was essentially a dirt yard: any grass and flowers had been removed, and the only tree was dead.

The owner of the machine, a Mr Ford, claimed he'd not tampered with it in any way since purchasing it. He'd bought it from a scrap yard in Warley that had advertised in the *Evening Mail*. It sold chunks of rubbish as 'unusual garden sculptures'. When we asked him for the scrap yard's details, he admitted that they'd actually sold the machine to him as a 'rat and fox killer'. He'd bought it purely for its appearance, not realising that it didn't need fuel to operate.

The scrap yard proved impossible to trace; in recent months the area had been levelled prior to redevelopment, and there was no record of any salvage company. According to the site record, the land was leased by a religious organisation called the Union of Body and Spirit. We arrested Ford on a charge of manslaughter. Over the next few

months, as we worked with the HSE to put a case together, we were in some danger of getting lost in legal and scientific technicalities. But I was asked to liaise with the family of the dead man, take full statements from them and keep them up to date. That helped me to remember what this meant. That, and the look of nausea on Spencer's face when he'd told me about the machine.

The CPS held onto the case files for six months before grudgingly approving the prosecution. The trial was more than a year after the death. It lasted five days. Spencer and I sat through the whole tedious process. The prosecutor ignored most of the scientific evidence we'd spent months assembling, and reduced the case to a handful of sound bites about Ford's lack of regard for his neighbours. The defence argued that the machine had given every appearance of being safe — the very point we'd worked so hard to disprove, though the prosecutor didn't seem to care — and devoted an entire day to questioning character witnesses: Ford's wife, his grown-up son, his colleagues in the TV repair shop he ran, the friend who'd been best man at his wedding in 1963. By the end of the day, it was clear that Ford was such a great bloke I wondered why he hadn't been given the freedom of the city.

The not guilty verdict surprised no-one, except Spencer. Like many specialists, he couldn't see the spin for the facts. 'Why are Birmingham people so utterly blasé about machines?' he said helplessly. 'We let drivers who kill children off the hook because these big cars are hard to steer on wet roads. We let engineers who run generators inside closed buildings off the hook because carbon monoxide has no smell. There are so many machines around us that we don't know how to be afraid of them.' I thanked him for all the work he'd done; then I went to speak to the dead man's family on the steps

outside the courtroom. They were subdued, just going through the motions, as if nothing they saw was real.

A few months before the trial, there was another peculiar death. A teenage couple went into a Bordesley Green industrial estate late at night to find somewhere quiet. Their date never reached its conclusion. As they walked together, hand in hand, past the chain-link fence of a warehouse that stocked alarm systems, the girl stopped and turned her head towards the boy. When he leaned down to kiss her, he saw that one side of her face was covered with blood. He caught her before she fell, but she was already dead.

The A&E department at Heartlands Hospital found several small fragments of twisted metal in the left side of the girl's head and neck. We were notified and sent in the city's bomb squad, who established that the shrapnel had been fired from behind the warehouse fence by a crude security device. I saw a photograph of the machine: it was something like a black shrub, with cameras instead of flowers. The company that owned the warehouse claimed to know nothing about any such weapon. The site's caretaker had apparently done a runner overnight; the only personal items he'd left in his office were a cracked mug and a wall poster showing the workings of a generator: a steel core wrapped in copper wire.

As we searched the site for fingerprints that might help us to trace the caretaker, a distant roar filtered through the plasterboard walls. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the match at St Andrew's had just ended. We marked off the crime scene and called it a day. Outside the estate, thousands of jubilant fans were keeping right on to the end of the road. An Asian shopkeeper was dragging in his advertisement

boards before anyone could walk into them. He smiled at me. ‘Have the Blues won again?’

‘The blues always win,’ I said. It had been a long day. It was going to be a long night. And at the end of it all, I knew, there would be no result. Even if we tracked down the caretaker, what local jury would care about some teenager who shouldn’t have been there? It didn’t matter that the estate itself had no gates. They hadn’t broken into anything. They were just looking for a place to make love. If Jason Voorhees lived around here, they wouldn’t make films about him: they’d just give him a job in security.

Just after the trial of the neighbour, I took a weekend off to unwind. But as usual when things get to me, I didn’t go anywhere. Alison went to visit her mother in Redditch on Sunday morning, and I spent the day wandering around near home and feeling brittle. Everywhere I went, newspaper boards kept me up to date on the local car industry: Jaguar announcing closures at Coventry, Rover in crisis talks with the unions at Longbridge.

In the afternoon I drove across the city to Grove Park, where my brother and I had played football as a child. The pond was still there, the cedar tree, the ornamental garden. And in the distance, blurred by mist, a line of poplar trees flanking the road. Driving here, I’d seen a display of wreaths at the crossroads outside the park gates. It was a cold day, but kids were chasing around like there was no tomorrow.

The familiarity of the park hurt me. I wanted it all to be different. Not because my childhood had been particularly bad, but because everything else had changed and this island of memory felt abnormal. I walked around the pond, letting its stink of rotting vegetation dissolve

the last thirty years. Nothing was visible under the cloudy surface. On the far side was a patchwork of rhododendron and other shrubs. And beyond that, an area of grass with some black tree I didn't recognise.

As I walked towards it, I realised it was made of metal. It had tiny red fruits like cherries, the lowest some four feet off the ground. The leaves were arranged in whorls, like crooked black wings. A kid on a bicycle rode past and stopped under the tree. He looked about seven years old. As he reached up to pick one of the berries, I tried to shout, 'Don't'. No sound came out. With a single tug, he pulled the fruit off the branch. It blew up in his hand.

By the time I reached the boy, he was unconscious. Red scraps of his hand were stuck to the metal tree like wet blossom. I carried him a few yards away from the metal tree, then took off my sweater and tied it around his arm to slow the bleeding. What was left of his right hand kept shaking, as if he'd had an electric shock. I pulled out my mobile and phoned for an ambulance. As I did so, a blur of movement beyond the shrubbery caught my eye. A small man in grey overalls, running away. The park keeper. If I went after him, the boy would be left alone. The ambulance service forwarded me to the police, and I described the running man. By the time the ambulance arrived, the boy was dead.

At least we caught the park keeper. He was at home, packing a suitcase, when two officers knocked at his door. When they finally broke in, he was just sitting there on the carpet, with the full suitcase beside him. He was rewiring a plug. When they searched him at the station, they found a small enamel badge in his shirt pocket. It showed a coil of wire wrapped around a steel rod. Underneath were the words: **THE UNION OF BODY & SPIRIT.**

The factory was in Netherton, part of the unique patchwork of urban villages and gravel meadows that make up the Black Country. The park keeper had told us where to find it. The threat of a life sentence had opened his mouth. He'd called it the temple. In the sodium haze of pre-dawn its windows glowed red from its dull brick walls. DC Avery and I had driven up from Birmingham to check the place out; three squad cars would arrive in an hour to take whatever action was needed.

We used wire-cutters to clear a gap in the coils of razor-wire above the spiked railings at the back of the factory. Inside the fence, I climbed the rusty fire-escape while Avery kept a lookout. There were no windows at ground level, but the rosette-shaped glass panes some twenty feet above the gravel yard looked down on the factory floor. I wiped some of the grime off the thick glass and peered through, wondering if there was a night shift. There was.

The light inside was murky, and I couldn't see very well. Some kind of machine occupied most of the floor. It looked rather like a giant steam engine turned inside-out, with pistons and wheels and chains moving at the surface. Its black chassis was ribbed and pitted like a fossil, and gleaming with oil. I couldn't see what the machine was doing. There were dozens of workers around it, holding onto its various surfaces and protrusions. They were all naked.

Despite the evidence of movement, I couldn't hear any sound from inside the window. Various components moved repeatedly back and forth or round and round. The workers held onto parts of the machine and brought themselves into contact with it. Some of them were female. Hands, faces, breasts, stomachs, cocks, feet. Whatever part of themselves seemed to need comfort. The machine stroked them, oiled them, tore them. Their blood ran down their bodies and the sides of the

machine, onto the dull floor. I closed my eyes.

‘Are they in there?’ Avery said when I climbed down from the fire-escape. I nodded. ‘What they doing?’

‘Worshipping.’ The morning air tasted of rain and petrol and broken stone. I pulled out my mobile and dialled the station to ask for more back-up.

By the time the shops were opening across the road, we’d arrested everyone in the factory. But in the end, no-one but the park keeper went to prison. We couldn’t prove that the Union of Body and Spirit had made the killing machines, and what I’d seen through the window was people inflicting injuries on themselves. We were able to put the factory out of business, but I dare say the worshippers found another temple. If you grow up around here, you take certain things for granted.

When I got home that night, I couldn’t talk to Alison or even hold her. I drank some whisky but it didn’t calm me down. There was a sound in my head, like a chant I couldn’t quite hear. Its rhythm eventually lulled me into an uneasy sleep. Then I woke up in the dark, the red glow of a blast furnace trapped behind my eyes, and I could finally hear it. A name being chanted over and over, until it was the only thing in my head. *Moloch*.

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