



# A CROW AMONG THE STARLINGS

by John Dodds

**"An author to look out for; his ability as a writer of character-driven tales is without question"**

Chris Teague, *Whispers of Wickedness*

**A CROW AMONG THE STARLINGS**  
**by John Dodds**

<http://bonemachines.wordpress.com>

© John Dodds, 2009

## A CROW AMONG THE STARLINGS

by John Dodds

There had to be a flaw in the lens. No matter which print Saul examined, or from which angle he'd shot Martin Pearson's portrait, the result was the same. There was no reflection in his left eye. The last thing his victims might have seen in that eye, instead of the tiny image of their screaming faces, was a black hole.

In fifteen years as a photographer, Saul Meers knew how capricious light could be. How flirtatious, how seductive or perverse and unresponsive. So if it wasn't the lens, then the light was toying with him again.

One of the qualities that picture editors liked about Saul was how he always referred to himself as "a snapper." Not an artist. A few editors also treated him as a mere "snapper," – even though they recognised him as a superb photographer – in case they had to cough up a larger fee. But once in a rare while, a prestigious magazine would pick up his work. On this occasion it was Metropolitan magazine, which commissioned work that often ended up in a gallery or garnered awards. And when that commission was a series of portraits of psychopathic murderers, with a large cheque attached, Saul could hardly say no.

Lately good commissions had been few and far between. He had even been supplementing his income photographing weddings and children's parties. And resenting every moment of it.

Instead of trying to fix the flaw in the photograph, he chose to leave it the way it was. Let the editor decide for herself if the pictures were compelling enough for her exacting standards. If not, he would just have to re-shoot. And that would raise the stakes even higher. He still felt

bad, though, about the deal he'd made with Pearson. Before giving permission for his portrait to be taken, the killer wanted to see the forensics pictures of his last victim, a 23-year-old man named Rankin. And he wanted to choose one of them to keep. The Metropolitan provided Saul with funds to buy the loan of negatives from the forensics photographer. He made prints overnight and returned them before anyone could find out.

What Pearson was doing with the photograph he had selected Saul tried not to imagine. In the psychiatric evaluation unit where Pearson was presently housed he would be allowed certain privileges, though access to photographs like this was unlikely to be among them.

He clipped the prints to the drying line. With the darkroom door closed behind him, he went to the dining table, where an A3 size portfolio wallet lay open. The portfolio contained his pictures for the Metropolitan mounted on card in clear plastic wallets. Four serial killers, one a woman. All of them with one more thing in common besides murder; a blankness, a lack of emotional engagement. Yes, they were good talkers and even flirtatious with Saul, telling him they knew and admired his work. Saul had studied their case records for background. No good asking why they'd committed their atrocious crimes. Because in the end it came down to a single answer: because they could.

The phone rang. He picked up the receiver and gave his number.

"Will you use the one of me smiling? Mother always said I have a great smile." Saul recognised Pearson's papery dry voice.

"How did you get this number?" Anger popped in him like a flashbulb.

Pearson said, "Oh...you know...ways and means."

Saul took a deep breath. "Never mind. Yes, I probably will send that one. But they'll only use it if the editor likes it. It shows you in a different light."

"You mean it doesn't make me look like Charles Manson. You don't want to make an icon out of me."

He was about to answer "no," but then thought that maybe that was what he really did want. His personal iconography of killers, a series of portraits that would make his name.

“What is it you want, Mr Pearson?” Saul was unsure how to address him, and formality seemed the safest course.

“It’s okay, you can call me Martin.” There was a lengthy pause. “You know, I’ve been thinking about that. What I want. It’s a question that’s kind of preoccupied me since I was a kid. I wanted people to respect me, but they never did, ’least not when I was growing up. They do *now*, though, don’t they?”

Saul glanced at his watch: 8.30pm. Pauline should have been here an hour ago. They were supposed to have a meal together then go to the Stanley Kubrick retrospective at the FilmHouse. Through the bay window he watched the setting sun make a silhouette of Calton Hill. A flock of starlings with a huge crow in their midst took flight from the roof of the tenement building opposite.

Saul said, “Yes...Martin...I suppose they do.”

“Saul...you don’t mind if I call you that, do you?” The voice was quieter, a lover’s whisper.

Saul was anxious not to antagonise him. Even although he was incarcerated for life there was a quality about him that suggested he could cause harm at arm’s length. Saul’s grandfather had been a student of the Quaballah, and his stories of the pan dimensional realms frightened him as a child, and no matter how rational, how urbane he was as an adult he could never quite scoff at mysticism the way many of his non-Jewish friends did. The idea that, simply by wishing someone ill you could hurt them, remained in his subconscious.

“No,” he said. “That’s fine. Everybody calls me that.”

“Well, then...Saul...I have another favour to ask. As you know, I am fond of photographs, and your skill impresses me. I managed to obtain back issues of magazines and papers in which your work has appeared. You manage to capture just the right moment, the telling expression. I don’t know, it’s...well, you’re gifted, there’s no doubt about it.”

Saul was not immune to flattery, even the flattery of a homicidal psychopath.

Before he could answer, Pearson went on, “The thing is, I need you to get another picture for me. Several, preferably.”

“You know I can’t—”

“Oh, but I think you can, Saul.” The voice instructed as much as cajoled. “You see, my last victim was never found. And you have a chance to find him, and let the police know where he is.”

Saul was certain Pearson would hear the hammering of his heart down the phone line.

“But first, I need you to photograph him. The way I left him. From every angle.”

“I don’t believe you, Pearson. Why don’t you tell me what you really want.” Saul sensed Pearson was trying to frighten him, and he wanted to call his bluff.

Pearson said, in what sounded like genuine surprise, “Oh? How odd. Why would I lie about something like that?” A long pause and then he added, “Well, why don’t you sleep on it first?” and hung up.

When Pauline arrived an hour later he was hugely relieved. The phone call had unnerved him.

She was still wearing her business suit, which told the whole story. The accountancy firm exploiting her again. Pauline was too ambitious to leave them, and justified the long hours as a necessary step on the ladder to the top.

“I tried to ring you,” she said, kissing him quickly and going over to the kitchen cabinet to pour them both a stiff whisky.

“It was...an editor. Wants some celeb shots at the Festival.” He was annoyed with himself for lying to her. If he was honest, though, it wasn’t to protect Pauline from the sinister phone call but because he hadn’t made up his mind about what he was going to do about it.

“Hey, that’s great. You might be able to sell them around.” Pauline’s smile changed her whole persona: the stern, somewhat serious facade she presented to clients was part of her, too, but Saul preferred the side of her he got. Hair down, so to speak. She added, “Listen, do you mind if we don’t go out tonight...”

He grinned and moved towards her, but she pushed him back with a playful shove on the shoulder. “Sorry, mate, not that either. I’m knackered. A quiet drink in front of the telly, yeah?”

He must have looked crestfallen, because she added, “Well, okay,

maybe later. But I'll need some serious persuasion first.”

What the Metropolitan thought of his photographs was difficult to say. When Saul handed over the hardback envelope, the editor's assistant simply said, “Great, thanks”. And that was it. A fortnight passed before he heard anything more. A cheque arrived with a compliments slip and an unrecognisable signature. In spite of receiving his largest fee ever, he was disappointed at the lack of comment.

“If money was all that mattered to me, I'd be doing something else.” Saul wasn't sure if Pauline were asleep or not.

She had her arm curled across his chest as he lay in bed watching shadows from a bonfire on the Calton Hill writhe across the ceiling. She mumbled an answer. He couldn't make it out, and before he could ask her to say it again he realised she had fallen asleep. For the last few nights he'd been suffering from insomnia. Usually this happened from being stressed by a job or being unable to switch off the creativity cogs as they ground against each other to no apparent purpose. Lately it was the phone calls and emails. Martin Pearson either had access to the internet or he was routing his messages through a partner. Working with a partner seemed more likely, unless the psyche units were more liberal than he supposed. The email address was: 124678@hushmail.com. Encrypted. No way of tracing the originator. It said: *He must be dead by now. Too bad. You might have saved him.*

Pearson was messing with his mind. There was no way he could have left his last victim alive and kept him alive for the months after the arrest and trial. Unless, again, he had an accomplice. The idea chilled him, and he was almost overwhelmed with a sense of guilt for not informing the police immediately after Pearson's first phone call.

Next day the guilt was endorsed by a second email: *I taped my phone call to you, incidentally. The police might want to know about it.*

Once Pauline had gone to work, he put a call through to the psychiatric unit. He wanted to know, as background to the photo shoot, if Pearson was allowed special privileges. The duty officer, an educated sounding man with a hint of Gorbals Glasgow in his voice, said, “Aye, I'm sure he's got plenty. More than us that's looking after him I bet.” Saul took this to mean access to a phone. The numbers would be registered of

course, but the content of the calls not necessarily recorded. He requested a meeting with the prisoner.

Saul worked hard, long hours, well into the night. He saw Pauline less and less these days. Their relationship was beginning to feel the strain.

“Am I just a convenience for you, Saul? Sex when it suits you?”

This wasn't like her. A sharper tone had been entering their conversations lately, mild recriminations occasionally, as now, escalating into accusations.

“I have to work, Pauline,” he said. And he added his feeble rider, “Freelancing isn't a nine to five job. Plus it doesn't offer a pension scheme.”

Taking this last to be a comment about her own job with its decent salary, perks and pension, Pauline spat, “I knock my pan out for every penny, mate. Which you always seem to bloody forget. You and your fucking artistic ego.”

After that they didn't see each other for nearly a fortnight. Saul tried to apologise.

“Don't,” she said. “I hate that. When you mean something, just say it. Let me decide how to handle it.”

The private visiting room was small, with white tiles and a single barred window. Pearson wasn't chained, but a guard observed both of them from a wooden chair in the corner nearest the locked metal door.

“They're transferring me to a high security prison next month, did you hear?” Pearson, close-cropped balding head gleaming in the stark light, watched for a reaction. Saul was in equal measure drawn to, and disgusted by, Martin Pearson. His smile appeared generous and honest, yet both of them knew there was nothing but calculation behind it.

“Yes, they told me.”

“I mean, my fellow inmates might kill me if I murdered kids. But that's not my thing. Still, they're not likely to be too keen on me. It's not the



outcome I hoped for, I must admit.”

“Look, can we just get on with this?”

Pearson stopped smiling. “It’s all business with you, Saul, isn’t it?” He made a clicking sound with the tip of his tongue. Then he coughed into his hand and reached for the pack of cigarettes Saul had brought for him. Instead of taking the whole pack, he withdrew three and handed the pack back.

“I’m trying to give up,” he said. Then he signalled to the guard that the interview was over.

Once Saul was back in his Audi, he poked a finger into the opened pack and withdrew a tiny foil envelope, still moist with the saliva from Pearson’s cheek pouch. Unfolded, it proved to contain a notelet with an address on it. And a date: 2nd December, 8pm.

He realised his hands were trembling. He had to smoke one of the cigarettes before the trembling stopped.

Ice-edged wind sliced through his wool jacket as he pushed into the gap. Behind the construction company’s plywood hoarding the sandstone walls of the old hospital looked damp in the wash of moonlight. Saul remembered how the old Victorian building had looked in daylight, how he had once visited his grandmother on her deathbed here. He smelled again the sharp tang of disinfectant intermingled with his mother’s perfume. Huge artist’s renderings of the hospital under development at another site papered the hoarding, but no matter what an architectural masterpiece the new hospital would be, people would still die there, like his grandmother did here in the old building when he was ten years old.

As Pearson had promised, the sash window to the kitchen slid up without obstruction: the rotting wood meant the wheel lock would have just pulled away when the killer entered the first time. On the steel worktop against the window there were dark stains, which he hoped were not blood. The metal boomed as his boots hit it and he slid to the floor. He swung the torchlight across the greasy cookers, freezers and worktops.

Sweeping the beam about the kitchen he glimpsed the masklike face of a man. He stumbled back in horror, even as he realised it was his only his

reflection in a darkened glass door panel. He turned away. Then he dumped his camera bag on to the central worktop, glancing uneasily upwards at the metal frame with hooks from which once would have dangled pots and pans and chef's utensils. The frame bounced the dim light back at him. He fumbled with lenses and flashgun and checked his supply of film rolls. The latter he stuffed in his shirt pockets. He draped the Pentax with its heavy telephoto lens across his chest and headed for the stairwell. He'd managed to obtain ground plans of the hospital from the Royal National Incorporation of Architects and had tried to memorise the route to Ward 27. It was two flights up. The stairwell enclosed the dead lift shaft. As he ascended the stairs every so often he shone the torch over the tiled walls and the grille that enclosed the lift shaft.

Saul had never been afraid of the dark. Even as a child. What scared him was losing people. People he loved. Death was not so much the horror of decay for him, but the horror of the great absence and loneliness it brought the living.

Ward 27 was three doors down from the central stair, on the right. The number had significance for Pearson: it was the age of the man he said he had murdered. In his final email he explained to Saul how he had bound the man to the bed frame without its mattress and started cutting him with a scalpel. A scalpel because they were in the hospital where the victim worked as a nurse. Pearson always chose his weapon for appropriateness and irony. He had left the man alive, with a supply of food and water, and one arm free to reach for it. The chains on his other arm and ankles made it impossible for him to break free. Ward 27 was to the rear of the hospital, so no matter how much Pearson's prey screamed, no one would have heard him.

"I wanted to find out what would happen," Pearson explained in his email. "Having heard that an animal will chew its leg off to escape a trap, I wondered if a man were capable of the same."

Saul felt the slickness of perspiration on his palm as he laid it against the cold door to the ward.

He pushed it open.

It was some time before he could begin to understand what he saw when he entered the room.

Had someone from the upper floors of the tenements, which backed the hospital grounds, been looking hard, they might have seen after a time an intermittent flash from one of the hospital's upper windows, as if sheet lightning were trapped inside the building and trying to escape.

When he was done Saul returned quickly to his flat, where he found Pauline waiting for him.

"Where have you been? I've been frantic." She pushed her hair back whenever she was angry. And as she spoke she hooked hair behind her ears and slid her hands across the top of her scalp as if to flatten her curls.

Tenderly, Saul held her wrists to stop her. "I...had to take some night shots. For an article about the city after dark."

She scowled at him. "That's a lie, isn't it? I can always tell. If it's another woman you better tell me now, or I'm out that door."

He saw that she meant it but feared involving her. He sat down on the couch and wondered how he could help her understand.

"I could be in a bit of trouble, Pauline. I did something bloody stupid and now I'm paying for it."

Strangely, she appeared to relax then. Being in trouble was something she could at least understand, and maybe even be able to help with. Pauline was pragmatic in that respect. She waited for him to speak, but by way of reply he went to the darkroom and emerged with a photograph of the serial killer Martin Pearson.

"He wants photographs of his victims. And he wants me to be the dealer."

She recognised the face, which had been plastered across all the papers only months previously. She looked more closely at the print, at the dead space that was Pearson's non-reflecting left eye. Pauline may not have understood why that eye was fascinating but she seemed to pull away from it reluctantly.

"Tell the police, Saul," she said.

"I can't," he said. And then told her why.

They went to bed after some unfruitful debate. They didn't make love, but fell asleep holding hands.

A tapping sound woke him. It took him a second or two to adjust to the grey light of dawn and another second to realise what woke him; a crow was sitting on the window ledge, tapping the glass experimentally with its beak. It tilted its head from side to side as though puzzled. Not a very smart crow, then, Saul thought. Maybe a rural crow come to the city for the first time. For an instant its eye watched him, cold and impassive as a camera lens. When he threw back the duvet, the bird took flight. The room was cold, and he shivered, reminding himself to adjust the central heating to its winter setting.

Pauline's long hair snared around her head like damp fishing net. He wanted to brush it clear of her face but hesitated when he saw how soundly she slept.

After a shower and coffee, he crept into the darkroom like a thief. Once inside Pauline wouldn't enter unless invited, and if she wanted to see the photographs she would need to wait for him to decide if he could show them. Once the negs were developed he loaded them into the enlarger. The negative images, even enlarged on the plate made no more sense now than when he'd shot them, nor would they be likely to make sense after they were developed. The black ragged shape that would be pale white in the final print might have been a map of an unknown country. But he knew what it was. It was a swathe of human skin, bits of fat and muscle tissue still adhering to it, and pieces of bone, which were unmistakably vertebrae.

Pearson had skinned his victim like a cat, careless of removing other tissue as well. Clothes pegs pinned the flesh to the bedsprings, bloody tissue uppermost, in a mocking simulacrum of a human torso.

As a child Martin remembered his parents taking him around Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, and the boxed, dried and pinned butterflies and exotic beetles were brought to mind by the expanse of pale skin, which had once wrapped a man. Pearson, like any collector, would have a catalogued filing system of his kills; he would know who, when, where, what was done and what results he got.

Every angle. That's what Pearson's instructions were, and Saul obeyed them to the letter. But Pearson had lied about what Saul would find. Who could say this victim was tortured and killed in Ward 27, or whether it happened elsewhere and the skin brought there for a specific purpose.

While working, Saul was always emotionally detached, whether it was behind the lens photographing his subjects or developing prints. His focus was on perfection, rarely achieved but always striven for: the perfect moment for the shutter to click, when the light was right, framing and subject just so; using only the best tools for printing, the most expensive chemicals and paper, a darkroom many a professional photographer would envy. But it was never enough to satisfy him. Perfection was always just out of reach, and that made him angry and frustrated.

He wanted to photograph something that no one had ever done before. And photograph it well. And Martin Pearson was giving him the opportunity to do just that. Well, if that was what Pearson expected of him, so be it. Saul was part of a game that Pearson had set in motion and, if there was a prize to be won, then Saul needed to do more than accept he was part of that game. He must also try to master the rules.

Pearson's first move had been blackmail. His second was offering bait. So far Saul had neither defended nor attacked but he was starting to understand, like a chess player, that he must be willing to make a sacrifice in order to stand a chance of winning.

He made a call to the psychiatric unit, only to be told that Pearson was mid-transfer to a prison just outside Stirling; he would need to wait a week or so before he could apply for visiting privileges.

Saul was annoyed with himself for forgetting the date. He packed up the prints and decided to return to bed. Maybe Pauline could go in to work a bit later today, he thought. But when he got back to the bedroom, she'd gone. She would have shouted goodbye but so intent must he have been on his work that he hadn't heard.

He switched on the computer to check his emails; there was another one from Pearson.

The message said, "I killed the others. You see why I need a good photographer."

And there was an attachment, which Saul saw was an image file, identifiable by the .jpeg suffix. He clicked to open it and an image gradually revealed itself, occupying half the screen space. It was dark, with a greenish hue, clearly taken with a digital camera without proper lighting or image resolution. The terrified face of a man came into view.

The face was severely bruised and cut, with one eyelid cut away to expose the white bulb of an eyeball. The blood-splattered shirt was indistinct at first, until Saul realised that what looked like shadows on the shoulders were actually epaulettes, and upon closer inspection the insignia on the shirt pocket was unmistakably that of HM Prison Service.

“Oh, Christ!” Saul murmured. “Jesus Christ.”

Pearson must have worked so quickly. His guards might have been at the end of their shift and perhaps the prison wasn't expecting them back that day. But what about the driver? He must surely have been in radio contact with his office. Martin Pearson had been prepared, that much was clear. The idea of there being an accomplice seemed more feasible than ever, and a chillier prospect than Martin working on his own. And, hadn't he already made Saul his accomplice in providing post mortem photographs of one victim, as well as the flayed hide of another? What else was he capable of?

In spite of what was happening, Saul found himself weighing options the way he had done as a war photographer. One the one hand, telephoning might mean Pearson would be caught. On the other, it meant implicating himself. He reasoned that the guard and the van driver would be dead by now in any case. Saving their lives wasn't remotely feasible. And if the police were to find Pearson's emails on his computer, which they could probably do even if he erased the files, he was likely be imprisoned for aiding and abetting murder.

His heart was thudding and his chest felt tight. More than once he glanced over at his camera bag. A thought kept coming to him, like thinking about sex at a funeral. The thought was this: maybe I can photograph Pearson with one of his victims.

An image of Pauline's face came to his mind, too. Her smile was at war with his cold-blooded determination to achieve something no one had ever done before. And there was also the opportunity of selling the photographs for a lot of money. Fame and fortune.

No. No, that's impossible. Completely bloody insane, Saul.

That Pauline loved him he never doubted. For his part he had always believed that he loved her in return. And yet it was as if he were always seeking something indefinable. Once he had asked himself a question:

could he really love anyone completely, or was love just a mirror of his selfish needs?

Pauline told him once, “You’re too hard on yourself, Saul. Such high standards all the time. I never said I wanted Mr Perfect.” And she added, smiling, “Besides which, Mr Perfect doesn’t exist. Apologies to your ego.”

In some respects being with Pauline was what he wanted more than anything. The best part of him felt that, at any rate.

And yet there was the continual sense of dissatisfaction. With his life. With his work. A voice inside that cried out for something more. Incoherently and irrationally.

He thought, too, of all the editors who had rejected his work, how little he was paid for the work that was accepted, and how little recognition he got.

For over an hour he alternately paced the room and threw himself on the couch and tried to unravel his tangled thoughts. But all along he knew what he wanted. If he were honest, the mental reasoning was simply a way of trying to justify himself.

It was as though he watched himself from outside his own body as he reached for the camera bag, stocked up with film and lenses, pulled the bag across his shoulder and walked to the door. He was completely alert, in a state of nervous anxiety, but nevertheless he kept walking, and even jogged down the stairs. He knew where Pearson was. There was only one place en route to the prison where Pearson would be able to perpetrate his atrocities without being seen.

It was only once he had got into the car, turned on the ignition and floored the accelerator that he started to wonder what exactly he was doing. A man was being tortured and murdered. And he, Saul Meers, was planning to photograph the act.

As he crossed the river onto the bypass the motorway lights on their gigantic poles swept past in a pulsing rhythm. After a time his eyes began to sting from the strobing lights. He tried to piece the puzzle together. The Ward 27 business still mystified him; Pearson couldn’t have staged it for Saul: he wasn’t to know he would be going to prison and he didn’t know Saul then. It must have just been one of Pearson’s grotesque rituals. And he had built a story around it to draw Saul in.

Perhaps to make himself feel as powerful as he did during the act of killing, even though he was behind bars.

He switched on the radio. A retro rock station, playing Tom Petty, then Neil Young. And then the news. Pearson's escape had made the headlines. Saul heard the words "vehicle and occupants still missing" before switching off. He started building an alibi for himself: how Pearson had lured him to the scene by threatening to kill the man if he brought the police; how he had made him bring his camera. It sounded feeble. If this was going to work he'd need help to make it plausible. He needed a Martin Pearson game plan.

His mind raced. Thoughts tumbled over one another like clumsy acrobats, creating a stew of generalised anxiety and determination.

On the way to the high security prison there were a few disused buildings and factory premises. Only one would provide an appropriate stage set. Saul estimated it would take forty minutes to drive there.

The colliery had closed years ago. All part of the general decline of the industry in this area. Although the wheel hoist which had taken the miners below the earth had been dismantled, the county still had a pit bing as its major landmark: a mountain of earth and shale and coal dust which many men had died of emphysema creating. The cages that had taken them deep underground must have been like prison cells. Saul remembered the video and the crosshatched grillwork that he now knew was a miner's elevator cage.

A damp breeze banged the corrugated iron-clad warehouse building. Massed clouds overhead threatened rain while a band of lilac light across the horizon provided just enough visibility once the car headlamps were off. He crunched his way across gravel. Distant moans from the building might have been the wind through openings in the structure, or something else. Then there came a horrifying scream. It seemed endless.

Saul wanted to turn and run then, but fought the instinct. He trembled, even as he stepped forward to the door that hung off its hinges, and entered the building.

This is another war zone, he told himself. Just another war zone. And Saul knew how to survive one. First, you needed to lock down



emotional responses. To be dispassionate. It was survival instinct in its purest form. Not fight or flight. Something else. It had enabled him to stand his ground and photograph all manner of atrocities. Neither hails of bullets nor random explosions, nor eviscerated soldiers prevented him doing his job.

It was colder inside than out. At the far end of the warehouse shapes moved, a halogen lamp casting a fretwork of writhing shadows. There was just enough light where Saul stood to make the frost on the inside of the corrugated walls sparkle.

“Pearson?” he called, but it came out croaky. He coughed and called louder, “Pearson...I came...like you said.” And, for the benefit of the guard, just in case he made it out alive, “No police, you said, and you’d let him go.”

All he got by way of response was a deep chuckle. Game players like Pearson would be inclined to participate in falsehoods. If they moved the game along.

When he reached the cage, he had to avert his face for a moment. The guard’s arms had already been removed and only bloody meat and the stumps of his shoulders remained. There were tourniquets on the stumps to slow the flow of blood so he would not die too swiftly. He was tied to a chair by his waist with what looked like electrical cable.

Pearson was the epitome of calm. He smiled gently, politely. Both men were inside the cage that had obviously been thrown in here along with disused mining equipment such as drill bits shovels, pick axes, helmets and the like.

Saul focussed his attention on Pearson and Pearson alone as he unshouldered his camera bag and put it on the ground between his feet. He squatted down to open it, keeping his eyes on Pearson the whole time, continuing to do so even as he fixed the lenses, checked shutters on the two cameras he’d brought. Like a highly trained infantryman who could fieldstrip his rifle in pitch blackness under heavy fire, Saul could take apart and re-assemble his cameras and load film with his eyes shut. Or while he was watching his subject while deciding the best way to shoot it.

He risked a glance at the prison guard. The man was unconscious, his head forward as though ashamed of his ruined face.

“Why are you doing this?”

Pearson used a yellow duster to wipe the blade of the tenon saw he was holding, polishing off the blood. He replied, “Why are you?”

There were more tools on the ground before him. He must have stolen them, maybe from a garage. A thought struck Saul then. He realised there was something different about Pearson, and the difference was that he was wearing the uniform of a prison guard. The uniform of the guard he had killed.

Without being asked, Saul started to shoot the scene. He shot through the mesh of the tilted cage, and stepped inside with Pearson and his victim and took close-ups of Pearson with his torture implements, of his victim’s face, of his dismembered arms which had been laid on the ground in front of him, the hands curled in on themselves tightly like the claws of a trussed turkey.

Pearson said with a giggle, “The long arms of the law.”

Then the guard came to and started shrieking, and begging for his life. The camera flash startled him. The realisation that someone else was there seemed to enliven him more, as though the presence of another could afford some hope.

“Jesus, please...don’t let him kill me.”

The man was clearly deranged with terror. But Saul had switched off. In real war zones he had seen much worse than this. He told himself this man was already dead, and let the idea take hold.

For the next hour Saul took carefully-framed photographs of the slow butchery of a human being. He saw the meticulous, almost loving way, Pearson cut away the guard’s clothes, made horizontal slices with a knife across his chest until the skin looked like a Venetian blind. He cut off the man’s ears, and then his feet until he was no more than a tailor’s dummy or a discarded child’s doll that had been ripped to shreds.

Saul continued to take photographs.

Pearson did something to the guard’s vocal cords so his screams became frantic whispers. Fortunately for the guard he was comatose long before Pearson finished.

Pearson sighed with discontent, “I just don’t have the right materials,

Saul. Not like you, eh?" He indicated the cameras with a nod of his head.

Saul dared not speak. He felt omniscient behind the camera. The unforgiving eye of the lens took in everything with neither rebuke nor praise. The camera, after all, was only doing its job.

"You know why I'm doing this, Saul? Really? For the same reason as you. We're not part of the crowd. You know what it feels like, don't you? You walk among them in the street, in their hundreds, flocks of them, darting around aimlessly. Day after day.

"No purpose, you see? Of course you do. When we observe them in a mass like that, we know their lives have no purpose. And, if you don't mind a photographic analogy, no...focus. I can give them that focus. It's as though their lives have been leading to this one moment. A sharpness, a clarity comes to them. It's as if they realise finally what their lives have all been about. It's quite a beautiful thing, really."

Pearson finished then. He pushed his hand into the flayed ribcage and simply squeezed the exposed heart until it stopped. Why it hadn't stopped long before now was a miracle.

"I use drugs," Pearson explained. "I have a contact who supplies me with stuff, stops the shock killing people too soon if I use replacement fluids, too." He took from his jacket pocket a syringe with clear liquid in it and waggled it by way of illustration.

Saul sat on the ground suddenly, as though his legs could no longer support him. He felt the frozen mesh of the metal cage against his back.

He looked at the cameras in his lap without really seeing them.

"How can I?" he said.

"How can you what?" Pearson crouched down in front of him, the right eye which had no reflection in Saul's photograph, reflected something now: Saul's inverted face.

"How can I develop this film? I can't. I can't show it to anyone."

Pauline. How could he go back to her now? He was so confused. He was finding it so hard to concentrate. A dark shape loomed over him. A scent of engine oil and rusty machinery infiltrated his consciousness and he looked up.

Pearson was expressionless, but his voice soothing, calm as he spoke. “You have nothing to lose, Saul. After this, you need to begin again. You do see that, don’t you?”

Yes, he saw, quite plainly, and finally. Life as he had known it was over; this one act had closed a door on him. Even if he went back to Pauline now, to his old life, this wouldn’t go away. He had watched, and photographed, a human being disassembled like a used car for spare parts.

“You’re going to be fine, Saul,” the voice went on. “After all, you passed the test. The Ward 27 test. That was when I knew I could trust you; the way I knew I could trust the friend who set it up for me.” Pearson put a hand on Saul’s head as though baptising him. “Sure, the film is worth a lot of money. I have connections. But that’s not the point, is it?”

Saul was tired. Pearson’s tone was so reassuring, and he could see now just how...ordinary...his life had been up until now. The banality of struggling to pay his bills, to keep the proverbial wolf from the door. And it was not that Pauline hadn’t meant a great deal to him; she had, but he found it so hard to love her the way she seemed to want. He wondered if he had ever really loved anyone. No, Martin Pearson was right, it wasn’t the money.

But he was still uncertain. At the back of his mind something told him his life was over. But he was also being born into a new one, and his voice was a child’s as he said to Pearson, “What am I going to do, Martin? What now?”

And gently, ever so gently, Pearson crouched down, pushed hands under Saul’s arms, laced them together around his back and slowly pulled him upright. Saul was too dazed to be aware of how tenderly Martin treated him. He couldn’t fix on anything. But Martin continued to whisper softly in his ear, a mother to a child, “Everything’s going to be alright, Saul. Don’t worry. You’re with me now.”

And as they walked slowly together out of the shed and into the cool night, huddled like lovers, Martin folded his right arm like a huge black wing covetously around Saul’s shoulders.

END