Paraffin Winter

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December 1962

Chapter 1: The Eye of the Storm.

It began on Boxing Day. I'd just gone out to get the coal in when I felt something cold on my face. I looked up and there it was, a few papery flakes speckling down through the light that crept between the backroom curtains. Snow. That was all I needed. Snow was about as welcome as a hedgehog in a French letter factory, when you had to do my job. Snow got in the way, slowed everything down, buggered everything up. Bad things happened when it snowed.

But there, Christmas had been OK, as Christmases go. So I thought I'd try to make the best of it, for now. I filled the scuttle and lugged it inside, then took Jenny's sleepy hand, dragging her to the back door. I held her around the waist and pointed up into the sky:

"Look, it's snowing! Put Bing Crosby on that record player, it's a white Christmas .. sort of."

Jenny pulled the chalk blue cardigan I'd bought her for Christmas more tightly around her and shivered. There was about as much warmth in it as a string vest, but it was all I could afford. She sniffed back the beginnings of a cold:

"Great. That's all we need. I had to borrow three quid to pay for the last load of coal and that only half filled the bunker. Bloody fantastic."

I never quite got used to Jenny's accent, it always did something to me: urban Dorset, fast and clipped but with long, rounded vowels. I liked especially the way she said squirrel, it came out as 'Squerl'. That's what I called her sometimes: my little Squerl. I held her more tightly:

"We'll manage. At least the paraffin round should perk up. Old Cowdry's getting a new van and taking on another bloke. I'll be in charge, he says, so he'll have to up my wages. Those snow clouds might just have a silver lining. Besides, I don't suppose it'll last for long."

Jenny stared up into the sky, resting against me. She seemed so thin, like she was shrinking in the cold. A snowflake landed on the tip of her nose and melted there. She wiped it away:

"Now can we shut the door? I'm bloody freezing."

I pushed the door to, then kicked it tight shut, at the bottom where it stuck against the jamb:

"Come on, I'll make you a snowball. With a cherry. How's that for an end of Christmas treat, eh?"

She pulled the curtain across the door and we went back to the front room. She sat on the rag rug by the fire, shivering, knees tucked up under her chin, blotchy bare legs and the gingham dress she'd got from some readers' offer in the Daily Mirror. I mixed the snowball and topped it off with a cocktail cherry on a little plastic sword. I sat beside her, putting one arm around her shoulder and passing her the drink:

"There you go. Enjoy it, it's back to work tomorrow."

I kissed her neck. She pulled away:

"Get off. You stink of Double Diamond."

A spit of yellow smoke twisted out of a lump of coal and curled up the chimney. Jenny pushed a hand through her hair: she'd had an updo for Christmas, a home-made effort by Mrs Davies three doors along, but her hair was thin and didn't take lacquer well, so the updo had almost gone now, collapsed like a failed soufflé. She dabbled the cherry in her drink, then sucked on it, eventually pulling it off the plastic sword with her teeth and chewing it without much interest:

"Well that's Christmas over with, for what it's worth. I don't know why we bother with it, it's not

as if any of us believes in it or anything. It's just another excuse to make us buy a whole load of stuff we don't really want."

Twisting the glass around in her fingers, she watched the reflection of the flames there, then sighed:

"I suppose at least we didn't have to fork out for Christmas dinner, with Mum and Dad inviting us round. Goodness knows where Dad got that turkey though, I've seen more meat on a pigeon. And my little brother playing up like that … still, he'll be old enough to leave school at Easter, he'll follow Dad onto the railway I expect, and into the union. That'll sort him out a bit."

She drained the snowball and set the glass down on the hearth:

"I'm off to bed, I'm cleaning Alderman James's place in the morning, Mrs James is having people round for lunch, so I'd better be there sharpish. Then I'm on lates at the pottery, so I won't be back till gone ten. You'll have to get your own dinner. There's still a bit of that ham left, it needs finishing."

"I can't wait. Do you want a lift? I'm out that way tomorrow, I could take you in the van."

Standing, Jenny pulled down the dress and snorted:

"And end up stinking of bloody paraffin? No thanks. Besides, I have to be out early. I'll get the bus. That is if there are any. What with this bloody snow, I bet they'll be cancelled and I'll have to walk."

"No, it'll all be gone by morning."

She snicked back the curtain an inch or two and peered out:

"You reckon? It's snowing like old boots out there now. It'll still be there by new year, knowing our luck."

She padded across the carpet square to the hallway door:

"You did remember the hot water bottle didn't you?"

I frowned and bit my lip:

"Bugger … no, I forgot."

Jenny raised her eyebrows exaggeratedly, shook her head and sighed:

"Why oh why are you so bloody useless? It'll be freezing up there. Well I'm going to be dressed up in woolly socks and a winceyette nightdress when you come up, so you can forget about any end-of-Christmas hanky-panky. It's your own fault. And remember to bank up the fire, if you can manage that much, or there won't be any hot water by morning."

She didn't mean it, about me being useless. She was in a mood, that's all: she hated Christmas. I listened to the tread of her feet on the stairs as she went up to bed, then looked outside again. Creamy-white snowflakes swirled around the gaslights like ash from a furnace. A good inch had settled already, the footprints of a dog leading to the lamp post, then away, a yellow melted stain at the bottom. I wondered if Jenny would be right, about it snowing until New Year. It did look as though it had set in for the season. I opened another beer to mark the end of Christmas and had a whisky or two. Then I went to bed.

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When I woke up, it was still snowing. And I wasn't feeling too clever. But there, it was Christmas, you had to get into the spirit of it, and it was over now.

By the time I got up, Jenny was already out. She'd left me a note:

Fire's gone out. Hot water all gone. Beef paste sandwich and cheese in lunchbox in larder. Get your own breakfast. Back late.

I made toast under the grill, scraped slivers of hard butter on and smeared it with marmalade, then took it upstairs to chew on while I shaved in cold water, knocking back a couple of aspirin while watching the snow pile up around the edges of the frosted glass window. I dressed as warm as I could, long johns and three pairs of socks in my Wellingtons, two pullovers under the donkey jacket, a scarf wrapped around my face. I pulled on a pair of woollen fingerless gloves – the paraffin had already rotted a hole through them, even though I'd bought them only a month before. Normally I went to work on the push bike, but there was no point in that today. I breathed in my last lungful of warm air, opened the front door and stepped out to face the icy wastes of Gas Street.

Outside, the snow had covered any tyre tracks in the road, which had merged completely with the pavement, just a hint of a downward curve where the two joined. Nobody much around here could afford a car. The smell of the gasworks filled the street, although I was so used to it by now I hardly noticed. Steam rose from around the coal ovens as the gasometers filled, their huge round shapes overwhelming the rows of terraced houses and snow-filled skyline, like fat, giant mushrooms that rose up overnight. This part of Poole was dominated by the gasworks, and the quay where the coal boats unloaded. And the pottery. The council part-owned the gasworks, which explained why the entire town still had gas lighting, long after it had disappeared everywhere else. The gas lighting was quaint but dim: like the local officials who'd decided to keep it.

I set off along the road, hands shoved deep into my pockets, breathing steamily through the scarf. Snow still fell thickly from a heavy, dark sky, battleship grey, blotting out everything more than a few yards distant, a real snowstorm. My feet sank into it with a soft, collapsing firmness, like walking on egg boxes. I could almost have got a childish thrill from that, if it hadn't been for the thought of how my feet were going to feel by the end of the day. A milk float turned the corner, its snow chains clattering along the cold-hardened tarmac. It stopped and the milkman jumped down, cheerily whistling.

" Cold enough for you then?" he called out as I passed by. Why did people say that? I nodded but said nothing. He took a pencil from behind his ear and wrote in a notebook. I plodded on.

By the time I reached Cowdry's yard, he'd already hitched the tanker trailer to the back of the Bedford. He wasn't best pleased. That was supposed to be my job. Now the old boy was puffed out; he was about as agile as a dead dog. He wiped grease from his hands on a rag, looking up at me as I came in, melting snow glistening on the top of his bald head:

"Where the hell have you been? You should be out on the road by now."

Cowdry wasn't the kind of man I'd ever have chosen to spend time with. When it came to repulsive, he could have given a sack of rotten offal a run for its money. I pulled the scarf down from my mouth:

"You know, I can't make it out. There's this white stuff falling out of the sky. Seems to get in the way …"

Cowdry stood up stiffly:

"Yeah, I'd noticed. Now, get a move on, we've got a delivery at lunchtime and I want this tank back here so I can get it topped up."

He held out the keys to the van. I took them:

"You'll be lucky. And there's no way this old banger will start on the motor, I'll have to bloody swing it."

Cowdry shook his head and turned away, walking back to the office:

"Not my problem. I stuck a heater under the sump last night, it should be fine. Mind you don't flatten the battery. You can do Hamworthy today, there's too many hills over towards Canford Cliffs. And watch your mouth, the misses is around."

He walked back along the snow-trodden path a few steps, then paused and turned:

"Oh, I saw that bird of yours earlier, on her way into the pottery. She's not half bad that one, you should look after her. She looked frozen."

He looked up into the sky:

"Mind you, if we have a winter of this you'll be able to buy her a fur coat, if you keep your nose clean and manage to stay on the wagon. You pull your weight and I'll look after you, you understand? Good. Now, get that van out."

The old Bedford started on the fourth turn, coughing noisily into life after I'd shoved down the accelerator pedal with a brick, but not before it had backfired and almost broken my thumb. I slid open the door, shoved the starting handle into the back of the van and climbed in, clipping a clothes peg around the choke to keep it part open. At the first try, the wheels just spun as I let the clutch out. I tried again, more carefully, and found a bit of grip. The van began to move, pulling cautiously out onto the road. It was all very well Cowdry telling me to get a move on, but there were no trailer brakes and I didn't relish the idea of turning the damn thing over and spilling two hundred and fifty gallons of Aladdin Pink all along Poole High Street. So I proceeded with caution, as the coppers say, gingerly feeling my way out onto the slippery highways and off into the wilderness of the Hamworthy estates.

It didn't take long before I realised that business was going to be brisk. Word had got around the estate that Burford, the local coal merchant, wasn't going to get his lorries out today. Too dangerous, apparently. Pity someone didn't tell Cowdry that. A five-ton coal lorry would have been a cinch compared to that damned Bedford with a trailer. But what with it having been Christmas, and cold, a lot of people had used up all their coal. So they wanted paraffin. More than that, they were desperate for it. And because I was having to go so slowly, they were dashing out in front of the van with any old thing to fill: petrol cans, old creosote tins, paint pots – one woman even brought out a big old cast-iron kettle. Every time I stopped, a queue formed. My hands were numb from the freezing metal of the tanker tap and measuring jugs, so I couldn't work quickly. Still, by midday I'd virtually drained the tank and the round was hardly started. I didn't know what Cowdry would make of that: I'd sold a day's paraffin in a couple of hours, but I'd let down his regulars on the coldest day of the year. Whatever I'd done, he'd find fault, I knew that.

I'd about drained the tank when a kid approached. He was a cheeky little sod, I knew him quite well, although I didn't know his name. In spite of the cold he still wore short trousers with grey woollen socks pulled up to his knees, the exposed skin between red and chapped. Dribbles of snot trickled from both nostrils and crusted on his top lip; he sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve, a silvery trail from cuff to elbow.

"Hey mister .. there's somethin' funny over 'ere. Come 'n' look."

I hesitated, expecting a snowball ambush from a gang of estate kids if I followed. But he ran on ahead, turning to beckon me:

"Come on … it's important …"

He ran up the path to the front porch of Mrs. Bental's house. She was one of my regulars, but I knew she was spending Christmas with her daughter in Weymouth and wasn't back yet. I followed the boy up the path, his footsteps fresh in the snow. He stood in the open porchway and pointed at something on a shelf. At first, I thought it was one of those giant gobstoppers you got in sweetshops. But as I got closer, I could see it was something even less expected. The boy wiped his nose along his sleeve again and looked up at me:

"Is it from a pig or something? I've seen them at school. Teacher's brought them in to cut up."

I looked more closely. It looked back: an eye. Not a glass eye or a plastic one from a joke shop. A real eye. And this was no pig's eye. Pigs don't have green eyes. I leaned down and held the boy's shoulders:

"Look kid, I could do without this right now, but I'm going to have to get the coppers out. Where's the nearest phone box?"

" Over there."

I could see it, the red bright against a white world. I turned back to the boy:

"You stay here and keep an … just stay here."

I fumbled in the leather satchel I carried around my shoulder and found half a crown. I gave it to him:

"Now stay. Promise?"

He looked at the coin, big in the palm of his hand:

"Blimey, that's five bob I've made now. Right mister, you go off and call the coppers. I'll stay here."

I trudged off to call the police, thinking: why me? I should have guessed these things don't happen by chance, eyeballs don't simply turn up, not even once in most people's lives. But we'd just had Christmas so I thought I'd give fate the benefit of the doubt for now. When I got back, the boy had gone. I thought about going too. I didn't particularly want to talk to the police. Still, I thought I'd better wait or it would look suspicious. So wait I did, stamping my feet and rubbing my hands in a hopeless attempt to keep warm.

It was almost half an hour before they turned up, in a black Wolseley. A uniformed copper climbed out of the driver's door, and a detective from the passenger seat. He wore a long trench coat, his hands buried in the pockets, shoving the door shut with his elbow. He approached me, the uniform following. When I saw who it was, I wished I had done a runner. But it was too late now. Out there in the snow and cold, he was about as welcome a sight as the grim reaper with a hangover. And this wasn't how I'd have wanted to bump into him. Plodding across the buried garden, he made a grunting half-laugh:

"Well, well, well, if it isn't my old friend Ronnie Delaney. I wondered how long it would be before our paths crossed. Was it you who got me out here in the cold?"

I nodded:

"Detective Sergeant Parker. I'd heard you'd followed me down here. I was touched. I didn't know you cared."

He sniffed, looking up into the sky as if giving thanks:

"It's Detective Inspector now, if you don't mind. So, where is it then?"

I nodded towards the porch:

"There, on the shelf."

Stepping into the porch, he peered at the eye:

"I see. Is it human?"

"You tell me. You're the detective."

He straightened and looked at me suspiciously, down a longish nose that had been broken more than once, it had cricks in it like a starting handle. And one of those cricks had been down to me. Nosey Parker, I knew him of old. He cleared his throat noisily:

"Right, best get onto the forensic boys I suppose."

He blinked out into the snow that still continued to fall onto the path:

"Not much chance of footprints. They aren't going to have much to go on."

He glanced across at the uniform who took out a notebook and pencil. Nosey returned his gaze to me, narrowing his eyes suspiciously:

" So, Ronnie, what are you up to these days? A bit of eye plucking?"

I shook my head vigorously:

"Oh come on, you can't think …"

He waved his hand, brushing this aside:

"I'm not paid to think Ronnie, I just gather evidence. But it doesn't look like your kind of crime, I'll grant you that. And you'd be doing what now .. delivering paraffin eh? Nice. I hope that old banger's legal …"

"It's not mine. I'm working for Mr Cowdry, it's his van. It's all legit."

He nodded thoughtfully:

"Glad to hear it Ronnie, glad to hear it. So, where are you living these days?"

"Gas Street."

He cupped his ear with his hand:

"Beg pardon? Not quite enough, unless you want me knocking in all your neighbours' doors."

I sighed:

"Thirty-two."

He went back to nodding, like one of those dogs people put in the back windows of cars:

"Nice. Lovely part of town I always think, the gas works. Well Ronnie, you'd better get on with your round or old Cowdry will have something to say, I bet. I might need to talk to you more about this though. Funny how things happen isn't it, this eyeball bringing us back together. Just like old times. Don't leave town, as they say."

Nosey walked back to the Wolseley, the uniform following, scurrying ahead at the last moment to open the car door for his boss. I drove back to Cowdry's yard. I'd run out of paraffin anyway, but it was half past one now and the tanker delivery would have been and gone. Cowdry would be furious.

I got home early that day, cold and miserable. The tanker hadn't showed up, because of the snow, and the paraffin left in the stock tanks had been sold by the time I got back, to people turning up at the yard. I'd kicked my heels for a while around Cowdry's office while he grumbled about the money he was losing, then went home. As I was paid by the hour, I'd had a stinking day. And still the snow kept falling. By now, all traffic had stopped and the roads were completely blocked, turned into frozen white playgrounds for the snowball-throwing kids who messed about, sliding down slopes in Tizer crates or rolling huge balls of snow down steeper streets to thud into abandoned cars at the bottom. Any adults who were daft enough to be out in this weather were an easy target: by the time I reached Gas Street, I was hoarse with shouting pointless threats and my ears were numbed by too many direct hits. I closed the front door thankfully behind me, brushing the snow from my coat onto the doormat and unwinding the sodden scarf from around my face.

Any kind of comfort briefly grasped from the closing door soon disappeared. The house was

almost as cold as the outside, there'd been no fire all day. I went into the kitchen. The remains of the Boxing Day meal were still piled on the draining board: oily bits of gristle dried onto plates, a pan of yellowed sprouts hardly touched, and bits of torn crepe paper from the crackers, along with their useless plastic toys. The dripping bowl had somehow been knocked over, its semi-solid contents slithered out onto the draining board, greasily grey-yellow and speckled by burnt bits from last Sunday's roast, like something coughed up by a tubercular elephant. I went into the front room to light the fire, wishing I'd mended the immersion heater, it would take hours for the water to heat up in the back boiler.

The day after Christmas, everything seemed to look sad on the best years, the chains of gummed paper loops trailing dismally between the corners of the room, the cards propped drunkenly amongst mantelshelf ornaments, the tree dropping its needles into the space where the presents had been, little torn corners of wrapping paper twitching on the lino in the draught from under the door. I lit the fire, then brought the paraffin stove into the room and lit that too, the familiar gloop-gloop-gloop sound as the paraffin ran through into the burner. This did start to throw out a bit of heat, and the room began to warm. I got myself a ham and pickle sandwich, and a bottle of beer, and sat between the fire and stove to thaw out, waiting for the television programmes to start. I picked up the newspaper: 'Soviet Workers Enjoy Bumper Christmas as Production Soars'. I always bought the *Mirror* when it was my turn to get a paper, it was Jenny who bought the *Daily Worker*. I didn't like it, full of gloomy stuff about strikes and articles on how great it was in Russia, which I never believed. They had weather like this all the time, and worse. Not that I read my own paper very thoroughly, either. Jenny was the reader in the family, she'd go through them from cover to cover. About the only thing I read was car magazines. I opened December's *Small Car* and began to read the review of the Lotus Elite. But I couldn't help thinking about that eyeball. It could have been chance, it could have just happened to be me that was passing when that kid found it. But I doubted it. The more I thought about it, the more I got a queasy feeling about it all. I thought I'd left all that behind me. I had another beer to settle my stomach, and tried to concentrate on the review. I'd read it at least twice before, over Christmas. After another beer, the magazine began to droop as the troubles of the day took their toll.

I was awoken later that evening by Jenny kicking over the empty bottles by the side of my armchair:

"Oh, you've let the fire die down again! And do you have to bring that stinky old stove in here? And what are all these empties doing? How long have you been home? "

I tried to wake myself up, wiping away a dribble of spit that had run down from the corner of my mouth. I told her about my day; but not about the eyeball. She gave a half-sympathetic shrug, kneeling down in front of the fire, dropping on a few chunks of coal with the tongs and opening the regulator:

"The snow's easing off a bit now. Half the shift didn't turn up. Mind you, it was the girls who came in. We don't get bloody paid as much as the men either. They're always moaning about that, I try to get them to join the union, but they can't be bothered, all they do is moan. Good job I didn't have far to go."

Examining her feet thoughtfully, Jenny picked at a broken toenail:

"Oh, and Mrs. James wants to see you, she said. She wants to show you something."

" Does she? I don't even know the woman, I've only met her the once, when I picked you up from that big posh house of theirs. She looked at me a bit funny, I remember."

Jenny shrugged again, attempting to rub some life back into her feet:

"I didn't ask. I said I'd send you round. She probably wants more paraffin or something, she was going on about her orchids dying. Whatever it is, you ought to be able to touch her for a bob or two, they're rolling in it, them two. Now, I need to get something warm inside me … no, don't even think about it … do you fancy a bit of bubble and squeak? We've still got some sprouts left. And did you do the washing up?"

"There wasn't any hot water and … I sort of fell asleep .."

Jenny snorted in contempt, huddling closer to the fire:

"I bet you did, helped by half a dozen bottles of Double Diamond. Well I'm not bloody doing it … you get out there and it clear up. And put the kettle on while you're at it, I'm gasping for a cuppa …"

I pulled myself up out of the armchair. The room swayed as I stood, but I tried not to show it,

fixing my sights on the kitchen door as I made to get on with the job in hand.