

JOHN O'CARROLL

VIEW FROM A WINDOW

From where I am, cooped up on the top floor of this oblong apartment block, his clothes are what stand out. Even in the weird shadows of a city morning. Their clipped shape is silhouetted against the great plate glass window he has at the front of his workshop. Through the telescopic lens, his clothes remind me of these Georgian public buildings: austere, balanced and unfriendly. It's been proven that the higher up you live, the more likely you are to go mad. But people forgive all that because they're old. Funny how mustiness legitimises ruthlessness beneath a veneer of sentiment and nostalgia. Age makes things seem kinder than they really are, warm like the yellowing grasslands at the edge of town. I don't believe in heritage listing; I believe only in power.

From here, the sleeves are dun coloured. They are, as always, ironed crisp. Crisp, but without the excess requirements of starch. His face the same. Satisfied, yet no hint of warmth shines there. Not in the cheeks, nor the clipped moustache, nor even in the lines of the clean shaven chin. I'll not blow you a kiss, nor even raise this half empty glass in salute. That's all over big boy. You're a lot more than four floors away now.

Okay, it gives me pleasure to stand up here watching as he makes his way each morning to that grimy engineering workshop he calls his own, the one he swindled his way into. Look at him, as he turns off his car radio, heedless of whether the report is about child abuse or meat consumption, what a figure he cuts! He's now a member of the Chamber of Commerce, support small business and all that. Support small business my arse! The crisp fifty dollar bills and multicoloured cheques he carries each day to the rarefied air of the technobank bear only a trace of the odour of his personality. The whiff is unmistakable. But I don't mind that.

In fact, it amuses me to watch him (from Olympus) as he walks down to his office. You don't need these sights to see his military bearing; it's visible from a mile away. A military bearing, but no discipline. His two secretaries are terrified of him. One of them quivers like a dog when he touches her.

He likes that. It's like electricity to him. He showed me once; I can imagine it now. He took me to discos, to business lunches, even to an outback ranch. It was everywhere the same; it was sickening to watch. I was sick with the fear of those he crushed. Like the sickness of being dragged up a dark staircase to an upstairs room with just one window, where no one can hear, where no one can see. He's just like that German

tourist that armed himself with AK 47's and shot people after hunting them like dogs through the bush. His nose works anywhere: he tracks them with it, a great, cruel, jagged, angular thing. He could never have a family; a woman wouldn't stay with him long enough. In bars, in cars, I see people cringing as he corners them. Oh, you should see his eyes at close range, the terror they instil, a terrible grey-green devoid of all humanity.

And I will crush him in my hands until blood patches begin slowly to spread across his dun coloured uniform like clouds across a summer sky. And only then will I kiss his stiffening body for the very last time.

Just imagine, if tonight he were to go home and find his son in that uniform we wore. It'll be good, because, at night, with the lights on, I'll be able to see everything through the glass windows: they stop you seeing in during the day, but the tint doesn't work at night, and he's too mean to buy curtains. He wouldn't believe in them anyway.

And he'll catch him red-handed tonight — I had a son too by the way. I don't know what happened to him: my wife took him away after she found out about me. My son would be 14 now. Funny that. His is 14 too. And the uniform he'll wear has been in the wardrobe for years. I can still see it in the mirrors of my mind. It was so well ironed; how nice freshly ironed clothes smell! So long ago, so long ago, we went to the party as SS men, what an idiotic cliché. But it worked, it really did; they stared at us in horror.

Now the uniform smells of must. My guilt was in kneeling before it, in pushing him to his limit. But he had no limit. Nor I, I had no limit either. I knelt for him. Now that he's a member of the Small Business Association, he'll have to think about paying award wages to his two dogsbodies. He'd rather not pay them at all — the more money people get, he says, the less satisfied they are. That's probably why he gave me nothing. He thinks the unions will ruin the country. I think it's just another question of power.

It's funny he never threw it away — the uniform that is — now it just furnishes me with another symbol of my power over him. I'm looking forward to this. If my name's been in the White Mercantile, he'll find his in shit. I'm so excited that the ice cubes are rattling in my drink.

The TV was on when he walked in. Holmes a Court, no, he's the failure, it's Alan Bond I'm thinking of. They're replaying something from his past, an interview about Chile, and he's saying how good the law and order is there. Some idealistic interviewer with sun in his hair is trying to tell him about compassion. But that's just a word for weakness: like Orwell's emblem of the boot on the human face, people need to be controlled, they love it. And so do I.

My man knows this well. "Love is power," he says. He has everyone but me under his control. I followed him once to a place where he put it into practice. "I pay for my pleasure," was what he said to the guy on the door, as if that gave him the right. As I heard those five distinct words, I thought of his wife, Eileen, at home with the television, watching Alan Bond perhaps.

But, with his dogsbodies at home, at work, and at play, he always takes more than he pays for. Like he said to the girl as he looked down on her with his big hands, "I could kill you if I wanted." It made me laugh at the time. But afterwards, I couldn't help thinking about his eyes, how he looked at her as he said it. His eyes are mirrors of your terror; I can still see her fear in the glass.

He sure got a shock when he saw that son of his standing there in that uniform. You should have seen his face. He must have thought of me then. What surprised me though was not the anger itself, but the violence, the sheer force of it. He smashed his son across the face with an open hand; blood flowed. He fell heavily against the mirror he'd been admiring himself in, you know, those full length ones in the middle panel of the wardrobe. Fifties triptych. I smiled to myself. He hit him so hard. It's like . . .

Let's see. Dogs. They learn the degree of your anger by the tone of voice, by the power of the token blow. But if you strike far harder than that, far harder than could ever be needed, then there is genuine surprise and pain for the dog, and a strange kind of pleasure for you, a pleasure that brings you to the verge of the other state. But then the guilt. For you and for the dog.

He can't go on doing things like that for free. Not to the dog, not to the boy, not even to me. It all comes back in the end. that is something he doesn't seem to know. Actually, I've learned that he's quite stupid. It's not that he isn't a good business man; he is. He knows how to crush people. How to put a hand on a secretary's breast and look her straight in the eye so that she is the one who stutters. That's how he makes deals.

In cities, we have lost the urge to kill, the urge to look as you twist the knife. We are cowards who are terrified by the spectre of death, by the iron gaze of darkness, by the iron fist of power. Killing, a job, is performed half-heartedly.

I was weak, I was a coward too. But that is only normal. It is easier to read about it than to do it yourself; it is easier to buy it prepackaged than to have to kill it yourself. You have to pass into the other state. But how could you understand? I've been through it all before. Look. We don't eat real eggs or chickens anymore. Even the meat is in plastic slices. The stink of horse shit is still too much for me. I feel like spewing up my plastic guts when I smell it. Where was I?

Stupid. He wanted Joh for PM, it makes me laugh. He thinks AIDS patients should be put in jail. Confining them to this oblong apartment block would be better. I'd fuck 'em all! No, no I wouldn't, the death mask scares me still. He's married too, did I tell you that? He doesn't need to beat her, poor Eileen. After she married, I kissed her and held her until she trembled. I looked into her dog-brown eyes. Boy. Even I felt like hitting her. Even then.

He was a Protestant; he never needed confession. He kept it inside. Me, I went each week to unlock my heart, to pour my pain into the darkness, to see the darkness reflected in the tabernacle box. I think I succeeded in weighing the priest down with my guilt. I dwelt on it, the way current affairs journalists dwell on social sicknesses, and in so doing bring guilt to us all. It was like kicking him. And in the end, he needed it more than I did, he waited for me and longed for me. So I gave it up, slowly and painfully, extracting the last drop of blood from his bloodless lips. Now I save it up; I'm gathering in intensity like a tropical cyclone.

His son cried for shame. He could smell the gas that came from him, that strange mixture of engineering grease and bank airconditioning. I remember that smell too. In a dark space with only one light source, the smell of red terror. There is no kindness in me now, or in him. And he just watched as his son blubbered away in front of him. I remember crying like that too. The welts were kisses, but the eyes were mirrors.

I reached out my schoolboy hand to touch the ugly face. My fingers trembled; they were like tracers from heaven. Arching across the sky. But he just hit me over and over, until I was warm on all the surfaces of my body. Even now, as I rock myself from side to side, I can feel the redeeming glow.

And when he had relieved his guilt, he let me kneel as he unzipped. I kissed and kissed until liquid fire poured into my guts. And then with an animal cry, he would push me away, in disgust I think. I still don't know if it touched him.

But his son could not kneel that way. He has to keep it all inside, feeling perhaps like Tristan handing away his bride. No magic potion to release him, no, he would never feel the white searing heat of his father's cock bursting inside him; he doesn't believe in KY jelly you see, he just thrusts those white angelic cheeks apart; oh, it makes me cry inside, how I long, how I long! Just watching him walk makes me ache. But to yield to this rising lump in my Levis would be to let power flow back to him. I must not do that. I must not.

He hates poofs. That's how stupid he is. Even as he arranges the great sadistic belt buckle on his belt, I could kill him. I yearn for the day when I will shiver with a cold rage. I'll kill him, but not from here. From

here, he's just a target, a clay pigeon. No, I'll employ psychology. Ah, I yearn for the day. I'll put my mascara on — I'll do it now, just for fun. Where's my mirror? Ah, there it is. No other make-up. Just enough to let him see. A refill. Some ice. I might wear a collar too, a small one that could be mistaken for something else, by those who don't know. And I might ask that dogsbody of his to make an appointment for me with him. I just want to see his face.

I just want to smell that smell again. My fear. The grease and sterility. Yes, I want to smell the gas, I want to see his eyes, steely grey, you know, they'll look like mine used to, a bit like a kangaroo caught in the spotlight. I want to see that face lose its colour. And, oh!, his hand will rise up. It is coming down, down on me.

Blinding pain and shame. I seem to be on the floor. He is not even a witness to my suffering. The ice has made a pool and my lump is lost. I stagger unsteadily to the window to see if anything is left. I look down, but it is no good.

I am crying by the window, holding myself, backwards and forwards. It's dark outside and I see only my reflection, my poor reflection, in the glass. It's all I see, and all I hear is the television dwelling on the sordid details of the latest South American coup, of the latest takeover bid by a newspaper baron. And all I know is that I yearn for the fear again, the slow retreat up the stairs to the upstairs room, knowing there's no escape.