

Chapter 7: *'Every time I see you something happens to me, like a chain reaction between you and me'*
Pet Shop Boys (Tennant, N & Lowe, C 1988)

Whilst Nichols, Quillam and Deepak were preparing to explore the cemetery, the dusk was arriving to end the day in the sleepy countryside village around it. Yet, the evening and night were going to be far from quiet and inactive. Just outside of the centre with its green, defunct pub, small arcade of tired shops, post office and convenience store, perhaps three miles, was a cluster of cottages, outhouses, and even, still a few, redundant, outside toilets. The gardens were immaculate, the allotments well sown with vegetables.

The tapping at the rear door elicited quizzical whispers, sudden turning on of lamps, including the porch. Roger released the chain to open the door, gone were the days of leaving it off, much to his anger. *Things had changed for the worse*, he thought. Grammy Essy, resplendent in her nightgown and housecoat, her slippers covered in earth, hair awry, enquired if it was a bit too late for a cup of tea and a chat? Roger was overjoyed to invite her in, as well as Milly, once Grammy Essy said her grandkids, Jamie and Freddy, were with her, too. The boys were invited in, 'come in, *don't be silly!*', Milly admonished. They all settled down to a lovely tea and chat, but Grammy Essy and the boys didn't touch the tea nor biscuits. Roger and Milly were not perturbed though, they were more than happy to proffer a wrist or neck, watching with proud smiles as three golden-eyed parasites sucked out their lifeblood. The night saw all seven cottages visited by Grammy Essy, Jamie and Freddy, gorging on their inhabitants until they were full as gross bugs. Come morning, curtains or blinds in all seven would stay firmly closed against the return of the sun.

In the mortuary of the country hospital, the attendant and duty physician were puzzled by the absence of Grammy Essy's body. If they had not lingered, discussing the need to call in the local constabulary, then they would not have been there for her escape from the dawn. Later, three of the six cold drawers were occupied instead of one. *'It was a slow night,'* the nurses agreed, so the physician had gone to bed (*'rude!'*), that dork of a mortuary attendant had likely gone home, and they were looking forward to their own beds, anyway. The day staff took over, noting that the village seemed quieter, as they looked after the few occupants with varied maladies. The village was dying, but they did not realise. How could they? During the following night the physician and the dork attendant would open their senses. And their veins.

So it was in an encircling of death around the village centre, out to around ten miles, in hamlets or single, lonely, abodes. Tapping at doors in the dark, hesitation followed by warm welcomes and invitations to cross thresholds, don't worry about the hour. And then those golden eyes, growing so large, almost eclipsing the room, the cold feel of fingers and hands, tugging of clothing, slight pain ignored, and then fading, fading, fading into the obsidian dark. More would not be greeting the new day, not picking up papers, nor popping down for groceries, or chewing over the latest gossip or national news with a friend or neighbour. More this morning, more the next. The populace thinning, the gaps in networks growing, increased online chatter, possibly a 'flu bug? Should go and see my GP, just in case.

The surgery was overburdened with calls and visits, the lethargy, needing to wear dark glasses outside, thirst and paleness of the skin and inside the lower eyelid. 'Wanting to sleep so much, *doctor*, can you pep me up?' many would ask. In the break before house calls GPs discussed this, *'infectious anaemia'* they seem to be witnessing spread. 'CMV, perhaps, or something in the water?' or, 'Maybe give Public Health a quick call?', and so on. Except they would also succumb in darkened homes they called upon, or later that night. So no calls to Public Health or the nearest police, no more discussions with fellow GPs.

The village was close to death. Sadly, no one would yet cast a tear, news travels slowly in these parts. And the dead are not interested in Facebook, TikTok, or Whatsapp. Face recognition does not work on phones when you cast no reflection. And for those left in dwindling numbers, perhaps stay in today, keep the doors and windows shut. Tell your family and friends all is fine, except there's a bug going 'round.