

*Silent Nines*

**SILENT NINES**

*Colin Campbell*

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Bobby Z cursed under his breath as he entered the telephone box. The chipped red door swung shut behind him but couldn't keep the cold night air out, hardly surprising since there wasn't a single pane of glass in the six windows that made up the payphone door. There weren't any in the six windows to his left either but miraculously two had survived on his right. They were fighting a losing battle however and Bobby's breath plumed around him as he picked up the receiver.

It was bad enough that just about every phone box on the estate was smashed but this one was on the main road leading into town. If there was a posh side to Woodend council estate this was it even though most of the residents pretended their postcode said Apperley Bridge, a nearby and more respectable neighbourhood. A car drove past, blasting cold air into the kiosk. Bobby pulled his collar up and glanced across the green. It was late so there was nobody about, just the occasional motorist and two dogs sniffing each other. Bobby smiled at the joke his brother told him last week about Indians naming their kids after whatever they saw outside the tepee. "Two Dogs Shagging," wasn't going to be a solicitor when he grew up that was for sure.

Bobby put the phone down, thinking about his brother. Trevor should be out on licence next month and that was good because Bobby couldn't remember all the jokes he was told on visiting days. Better to have him home then he could tell them himself. *Man comes into't pub and sees a bloke sitting on a bar stool next to an Alsatian. Asks if his dog bites and the bloke says "No," so the man bends over to stroke the dog. Grrrr... The dog nearly bites his hand*

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*off.* “I thought you said your dog doesn’t bite,” he says. “It doesn’t. That’s not my dog.” Another dog joke. Bobby chuckled. Yes, it would be good to have Trevor back. Then he wouldn’t have to come to the phone box in the middle of the night.

A tuneful whistle drifted across the green and Bobby quickly picked up the receiver again, turning his back to the sound. If somebody wanted to use the telephone he wanted them to see it was busy and go away but more importantly he didn’t want them to see who was using it. The whistling stopped. Bobby had a brief conversation with the dead line.

“Yeh. Yeh. Sis is all right now.”

He didn’t know why he came up with that piece of chat because Bobby and Trevor Zajonc’s little sister was far from all right. The doctor gave Tracy medication but if she had another attack it would be hospital or bust. He glanced over his shoulder. The green was empty. Even the dogs had gone. It was time to get to work. Bobby reached down between his legs and pulled the Black and Decker from the canvas bag on the floor. He checked the battery was fully charged then positioned the drill bit below the cashbox and squeezed the trigger. Twists of metal spiralled to the ground as he drilled three holes then tapped the lock out. Jackpot. The cashbox poured money into the strategically placed bag as if he’d come up with three cherries.

A gust of wind blew through the broken windows as the last coins dribbled out then he heard the whistling again, only closer this time. The tune was mournful and he briefly thought about Tracy. Sad songs always made him think about his sister. He dropped the drill in the bag and zipped it up. Time to...

Before he could open the door someone grabbed him by the back of the neck and rammed his face into the receiver. Pain exploded through his head as his nose cracked, and blood splashed into his eyes. The ringing in his ears wasn’t the phone, it was tubular bells playing the same tune the stranger had been whistling. His eyes tilted inward and

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his knees buckled. Jackpot. Bobby Z hit the floor in a heap wondering why the police sirens were whistling the stranger's tune.

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“And you just happened to be passing, right?”

“That's right officer. I was going to call my brother.”

Bobby's head throbbed like a squashed bollock but he could still think on his feet.

The desk sergeant leaned on the counter and raised an eyebrow.

“So who gave you the shiner?”

“Tripped didn't I? Over the bag.”

“Oh yes. The bag. The one with the stolen money in it.”

“That's right. Fancy leaving it on the floor like that. Anyone could have tripped over it. I'm thinking of suing BT.”

“I doubt they left it there lad.”

The sergeant stood back and dumped the canvas bag on the counter, breaking all the rules about cross contamination. It was open because the arresting officers had already been through it. Bobby thought his story was holding up pretty well considering it was only the second time he'd been arrested. Unlikely but possible and that was all he needed. The police had to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he'd been screwing the cashbox and he didn't think they could. The sergeant carefully pulled a square of plastic from the bag.

“I doubt they left your bus pass in it either.”

Bobby's heart sank. Roll on Trevor's release because he was much better at this than Bobby, although it was hard to make a case for that considering Trevor was serving

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six months for theft. Bobby's nose felt like it was going to close up any minute and he had a flash of inspiration.

"Look what these officers did? No need to be so rough. I'd have come quiet."

"You did come quiet. You were out cold. And don't try that one on me sunshine. You're the third lad this week duffed up in a smashed phone box. Not including two in the bus shelter last week."

Bobby had heard the rumours going around the estate but dismissed them as a bit of scaremongering. He doubted if there was a bus shelter on Woodend with a window left in and it was common knowledge that the phone boxes had been vandalised. Some lowlife had even ripped the receivers off, now what was the point of that? Didn't take the money just snapped the cable. The sergeant watched the comedy of expressions playing across Bobby's face.

"Heard about that then?"

"Something. Yeh."

"Forgive me if I'm less than sympathetic, but I'd like to know who's doing it. Any ideas?"

Bobby's only idea was getting out of the station as quickly as possible. His mind raced, trying to formulate a plan. Unfortunately it also played across his face so the sergeant cut him short.

"You're not getting off with this but I can give you bail if you come up with a name. Did you see anything?"

Bobby smiled and before he could engage brain his mouth opened.

"Two dogs shagging."

"Take him away."

Strong hands frogmarched him to the cells.

"No. No. I'll help. Honest."

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He didn't know how but he'd say anything to get out. Trevor was the career criminal in the family. Bobby didn't cope with isolation well. He was bang to rights for the theft so it was a case of damage limitation.

"I can find out."

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He might have overplayed the streetwise crim for the custody sergeant but if he couldn't find out who was responsible he knew someone who could. The trick was getting her to tell him. Trevor could have but Bobby didn't move in the same circles as his older brother. The woman was the font of all knowledge on Woodend estate but she was also mad as a sack of badgers. Maybe Bobby could play the sympathy card.

"You know. I'm the only one can look after my sis. She needs me."

"Den you better stop getting caught."

The crinkly old Negress was enveloped in so many rolls of fat that Bobby wasn't sure if it was a man or a woman. Nobody knew its name but going by the voice it was assumed to be female. That was near enough for Bobby but it didn't seem to be getting him anywhere. He sat amidst the stuffed animals and ceramic owls of the cluttered living room and waited. Dusty books lined the shelves. The great brown head swung towards him and focused its single eye.

"Yo heart aint in de thieving is it?"

"My brother's better at it."

"Not dat much better. He inside aint he?"

The Negress echoed his own thoughts and a chill ran down his spine. All the same, someone had to pay for Tracy's medicine and the social didn't cover it by a long way since the prescription charges went up.

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“Yo sister still need de tablets?”

This time the short hairs at the back of his neck bristled. Having his thoughts read twice was more frightening than doing time. He was beginning to think the stories about One-Eye were true. That there was more getting cooked in the kitchen than was needed for eating. He simply nodded.

“Den you need to be looking past dis world boy. Remember de girl run down on Edge End Road? She died ‘cause dey couldn’t call de ambulance. Phones were smashed. Look to her.”

Bobby remembered. The girl had just turned twelve, the same age as Tracy, when a speeder clipped her crossing the road. Neighbours tried all they could but no one had a telephone. They sent the fittest haring round the estate looking for a working payphone but they were all smashed. By the time an ambulance was called she was too far gone and died on the way to hospital. It was a tragic story but Bobby didn’t believe in hands from beyond the grave.

“You don’t believe it?”

Again the shiver down his spine.

“No matter. Dat is where you must start. Now go.”

Bobby backed out of the room trying not to bump into anything that might bite him and breathed a sigh of relief once he reached the front garden. He felt he’d drawn a blank so it was back to the drawing board, and that meant night obs on the only payphone still working. Raven Terrace.

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As he stood in the bushes behind the phone box he couldn’t help thinking about the old woman’s assertion that little Lisa Pollaro, for that was the dead girl’s name, was

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somehow responsible for the spate of vigilante attacks on local vandals. Trying to banish the thought was made more difficult because a full moon shone out of the clear night sky. He'd read enough "Famous Monsters Of Filmland" magazines to know just what that meant. The collection of magazines belonged to his father, before he debussed from the Zajonc family, making sharp reading to an impressionable ten-year-old, and even now the sight of the full moon conjured up black and white images of werewolves and vampires.

To take his mind of them he tried to remember the tuneful whistle that preceded his fall from grace. More importantly he tried to remember if the whistle could have come from a child but that was difficult since he couldn't whistle himself. The mechanics of whistling were a mystery to him so assessing how high or low a girl would sound was impossible. Giving up on that train of thought he tried to remember the tune itself. It had a haunting quality to it, a sadness that went beyond a mere collection of notes, but he imagined that had more to do with the pace of delivery rather than the melody. He pursed his lips and puffed air out in an attempt to replay the music in his head. What came out sounded like badly played panpipes, a tuneless mishmash of highs and lows.

Wednesday night slid into Thursday morning, midnight passing without incident, a fact that cheered him no end since midnight and full moons seemed to go together, and he was contemplating calling it a night when footsteps sounded down the street. He backed further into the bushes and waited, wondering if he should be in the telephone box itself since that's what the vigilante was protecting. The footsteps didn't sound like a girls so that was a relief but they slowed as they approached the kiosk, and that worried him. The night was quiet, no suggestion of a whistle anywhere.

Hurried whispers and a drunken giggle sharpened his focus. At least two of them he thought and risked a quick glance through the bushes. A shadowy figure opened the

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kiosk door then let it go again. The whispers again, only Bobby couldn't see who he was talking to. The figure lurched to one side then straightened with an effort, holding a finger to its lips. Sshhh... There was no second figure. The man was talking to himself. Shushing himself. A whiff of stale beer drifted across the pavement and everything became clear. The man was drunk as a lord. He looked around with a mischievous grin then picked up a stone.

Bobby felt torn. Should he stop the damage or leave things be. It obviously wasn't the vigilante but this was the last working payphone on the estate, a situation he was partly responsible for. Guilt coloured his thoughts, the old woman's tale reminding him of what tragic events could ensue. He wished Trevor were here, he'd know what to do. But would he? His elder brother was doing time because he obviously didn't know what to do when it came to stealing, why should he be any better at dealing with tricky situations?

The man's arm came back, cocked and ready to fire, and Bobby was about to dart from his hiding place when a tuneful whistle echoed in the silence. Bobby froze but the man didn't seem to notice. He launched the stone at the kiosk, shattering the quiet. It sounded loud enough to wake the dead, a thought that had Bobby cowering in the bushes. His chance to intervene had gone and the drunk was about to go as well when he let out a strangled cry. There was the sound of a struggle and more breaking glass. Bobby daredn't look, covering his eyes as if that would protect him from the forces of darkness.

The struggle was brief. Bobby looked out from his hiding place and saw the drunk lying curled on the floor inside the phone box. Two windows were broken and there were cuts to his face. A second figure was walking away from the kiosk, its whistle fading as it grew more distant. Bobby leaned forward to get a better look, trying to gauge size and age, then he stumbled through the bushes onto the pavement.

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The whistling stopped. The figure turned slowly and Bobby tried to hide his face. He didn't want the death mask to stare into his eyes in case it cursed him or something. He'd read about such things in his father's magazines. Boris Karloff used to do it all the time. *Please God. Don't let it be the girl. Not Lisa Pollaro.* Despite his fear he couldn't help peering through the folds of his coat. Newspaper headlines played across his mind.

### **YOUNG GIRL KILLED BY HIT AND RUN DRIVER.**

He remembered grainy photographs of the road and the flowers tied to the lamppost where she'd died. Faces. Neighbourhood quotes. A photograph of Lisa Pollaro, her pale blue eyes twinkling on some long forgotten holiday. The head began to turn. A small head, half covered by a hood pulled almost to the eyes. Even by the light of the nearest streetlamp Bobby could see that the eyes were pale. They weren't twinkling now though. And they seemed older. That surprised him. He imagined that if you came back to haunt people you'd stay the same age as when you died. There was no mistaking the resemblance though. The eyes of a Pollaro.

Then the eyes recognised Bobby. Of course they would wouldn't they? It was only two days ago they'd watched him drill the cashbox out of a phone box just like this one. Vandalised it. Ruined it. Made it unusable for making emergency calls like the one that killed...

Bobby closed his mind and waited for the inevitable even though he had no idea what the inevitable was. Eternal damnation? Turned into a pillar of salt? Hung, drawn, and quartered? The moon was bright, squeezing through his closed eyelids and forcing him to turn away. Unfortunately that meant turning towards the apparition down the street. He risked a glance into the pale blue eyes. Yes, they were the same as the photograph, but not the one he'd been thinking of.

The middle-aged man nodded and began to whistle again, looking for a second exactly like the photograph of the grieving father. Andre Pollaro had the eyes of his

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daughter but they hadn't twinkled in many a year. They were satisfied with the night's work however and had no wish to prolong the encounter. He turned away and strode into the shadows between streetlamps then disappeared.

Bobby stood on shaky legs, all thoughts of "Famous Monsters Of Filmland" knocked into a cocked hat. So much for hands from beyond the grave. He allowed himself a smile that stayed on his lips all the way home, until he saw that his sister's bedroom light looked odd.

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"Tracy?"

The chill that ran down his spine now had nothing to do with the supernatural and everything to do with reality. His sister had had falls before but never during the night and never when she was alone. Either Bobby or Trevor had always been there for her, elder brothers looking after their baby sister. With Trevor in prison that left Bobby and he was already regretting listening to the old woman. The cockeyed bedroom lamp could only mean one thing.

"Tracy. I'm back. Everything okay?"

No reply. The house was quiet. He stared at the light shining under her bedroom door but was afraid to go in. Shadows danced in the beam but there was no sound. Whatever was moving in there it wasn't Tracy. He took a deep breath and opened the door. The twelve-year-old lay half out of bed, her head pressed at an angle against the floor. The mobile that had hung above her cot as a baby dangled from the lampshade, throwing flickering shadows across the carpet. A shocking trickle of blood showed at her mouth.

"Oh Jesus. No."

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He swept her up in his arms and laid her on the bed. She was cold but still breathing. Her eyelids fluttered but didn't open. It was another seizure but worse than any she'd had before. The doctor had warned him this might happen and he cursed himself for going out. His mind raced. The tablets. He dashed into the kitchen and collected the prescription drugs his thievery had paid for and a glass of water. Kneeling beside the bed he tried to open her mouth, whispering gently, but her jaw was clamped shut, the spasm so complete that it would take a crowbar to open it. He set the glass on the bedside cabinet and stroked her brow.

“Come on sis. Loosen up. Take your tablets.”

All the coaxing in the world wasn't going to work. Panic set in. He wished Trevor were here. He wished he'd never gone out screwing telephone boxes the other night. And he wished his father hadn't abandoned them. He yearned for the simpler days when all he had to worry about was sneaking the “Famous Monsters Of Filmland” magazines into the garden shed for a sly read but yearning wouldn't cut it. The only thing they needed right now was an ambulance. And the only place to call one was the telephone box on Raven Terrace.

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Bobby Z cursed under his breath as he entered the telephone box. The chipped red door swung shut behind him but couldn't keep the cold night air at bay, hardly surprising since three of the six windows that made up the door were smashed. Moonlight glinted off the broken glass on the pavement and Bobby's breath plumed around him as he picked up the receiver. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked, perhaps one of the dogs he'd seen on the green two days ago. Otherwise the night was silent as the grave, a recurring thought that chilled his blood.

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The phone. He raised the handset to his ear and prepared to dial three nines. In a control room somewhere across town the operator would be poised for the next emergency call, ready to direct the message to Police, Fire, or Ambulance. She would weed out the false calls with good intent, the malicious calls, and the ones where the caller hung up before speaking, the silent nines, but as Bobby prepared to dial he knew the operator wouldn't be getting any of those. The line was dead. No dialling tone. His very own silent nines.

He tapped the cradle for a line, hoping the operator would somehow hear the clicking down the wire like his Uncle Joe had once told him they could. As a child, after his father had left, Uncle Joe used to take him out to play football on the green. Young Bobby had leant against the restraining cable that supported the telegraph pole until Uncle Joe warned him that the noise he made would transmit along the wires and disrupt whatever phone calls were being made. It was a good joke and Bobby had lived with it ever since. Happier times. Now he wished it were true, that he could communicate in Morse code by simply tapping the cradle.

“Come on. Come on. Please.”

His breath came in short bursts, his heart racing.

“For pity's sake. Come on.”

No matter how hard he tapped the line was still dead. He saw the stone that the drunk had thrown lying on the floor amidst a scattering of broken glass then noticed the dent in the metal casing of the payphone. Frustration overcame him. Tracy lay in bed dying and there wasn't anything he could do about it. If the ambulance didn't take her away then the hearse would. Tears formed in his eyes. He'd never felt so useless. What had the money achieved in the end? Nothing. He might as well have kept his record clean and let her die in peace instead of prolonging the agony. Anger boiled inside him. His

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fist clamped around the receiver and he began to hammer at the dent in the casing. He made so much noise that he couldn't hear the whistling behind him.

All the shadow could see as it approached the phone box was another vandal destroying another telephone. All Bobby Zajonc could see was the futility of life. He raged on, oblivious to the danger behind him. It wasn't until he ran out of steam that the tune played in his head and at first he thought he was hearing things, a trace memory from the last time he'd been in a telephone box. Tears stained his cheeks. His knuckles, gripped white around the receiver, ached. And the tune grew louder. His chin sagged onto his chest and he massaged his temples with the handset.

The hand on his shoulder made him jump. The tuneful whistle struck fear in his heart. After all that he had tried to do for his sister he was going to get another beating and be left for the police. A glimmer of hope sparked in the dark. If the police were quick he could tell them to get an ambulance. Yes, that was it. He lifted his chin, wanting to get the beating over with so he could help Tracy, expecting to see the soulful eyes of the grieving father. What he saw instead froze him to the spot.

The eyes were twinkling as they had in the photograph but the newspaper hadn't captured the simple beauty that was Lisa Pollaro. She was short and frail and painfully white but she was beautiful. Her grip was like steel however; a strength that could thrust a grown man against the wall and break his nose; a strength that could hogtie a drunk and leave him for the police; a strength that transcended her size. Her father watched from the shadows, whistling her favourite tune. Lisa balled her fist, gripping the front of Bobby's jacket, then she noticed something in his eyes. Something of the tragedy that was playing out around him. The whistling stopped. The barking stopped. The world stopped turning and hung on a thread of silence so complete that Bobby thought he would never hear anything again.

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Then the dialling tone sounded in his ear. He was so shocked that he couldn't do anything for a moment then he was dialling with fingers he couldn't feel. Nine. Nine. Nine. The operator came on immediately.

“Hello. What service do you require? Fire, police, or ambulance?”

It only took a few minutes to call for help then he hung up and sagged against the door. The dog started barking again. The world continued to turn. But the whistling had gone. He turned around but the street was empty. The moon bathed the pavement in milky white patches of light and shade but there was no sign of the girl or her father. It didn't matter. The ambulance was coming and he had to get back to Tracy. Without another thought he crossed Raven Terrace and broke into a jog, his breath streaming out behind him.