

CATCH

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Vince Lavares was twenty-seven years old and expected to live forever. Nobody does of course but he at least expected to reach forty, the age of his father when he abandoned his family. Vince had been thirteen and doing well at school. The world was his oyster his mother used to say. She might well have been right but someone got to the pearl before him and from age thirteen onwards his oyster was empty.

He got out of the Citroen Xsara Picasso but didn't bother locking it even though he'd stolen the keys as well as the people carrier. It was parked round the corner from his mother's house beneath the overhanging trees of a neighbour's garden. He'd mounted the kerb to get close under but didn't bother about that either. The car was out of sight of the house; an important point because everyone knew the coppers only checked his front garden when they drove past. Imbeciles. He'd been running rings round them for years.

Darkness slowly sucked the life out of the day as he crossed the road, light rain wetting his hair. He reached over the six-foot wooden gate leading to the back door and released the catch then snicked it shut behind him. The cowbell hanging from the fence clanged like Daisy at milking time and he glanced along the lawn to the conifers at the end of the garden. Rolling fields faded into the night on the other side, his personal escape route to the old railway line whenever the coppers came. The cowbell stopped ringing, prompting Snowy to bark. For some reason the crossbred Alsatian never barked at the noise, only the silence that followed it but that didn't matter; the bell always alerted him to the old bill sneaking round the back. By the time they got the latch off he was over the hills and far away. Train-spotting where there were no trains on a railway line without any rails.

His mother was asleep in front of the television and even Snowy's barking couldn't wake her. She was dead to the world. As

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anaesthetised by two quarts of Bell's as Vince was anaesthetised by his daily score. Cannabis, heroin, crack-cocaine. He'd turned to them all during the fallout from his father's departure, a confused teenager who thought the sun shone out of his father's jacksie even on the cloudiest of days. There were plenty of cloudy days back in eighty-eight.

He went upstairs and dropped the keys on the bed. His bedroom faced the front of the house but it wasn't for sleeping in anymore. He'd scored more times in here than Beckham on speed. Every flat surface was piled high with used needles, empty wraps, and scorched tinfoil. A thousand burnt matches littered the duvet, burn marks showing up like dead black bullet holes in the fabric of his life. A hooker pipe lay in one of his trainers and a twisted leather strap hung from the headboard. Drops of blood dotted a payslip next to the door and a drift of bloodstained tissues littered the carpet. This room was hell in suburbia. Vince hated it.

He scored again anyway. He had to. What had begun as an escape from the guilt at his father's leaving became a buzz more powerful than anything he'd felt at getting good reports at school. Finally the monkey on his back bit deep and he had to score just to feel normal. Just to wake up and face another day. Dark voices sometimes whispered in his head, warning him of the dangers and the damage he was doing to his body but mainly threatening to tell his father. The thought of that had almost stopped him early on, but then...

Well, by then it was too late. Vince looked at the wreckage of his life and momentarily felt sorry for himself, but self-pity quickly turned to anger. Anger at his father for leaving them. Anger at the neighbours for being all the things his father wasn't. And anger at himself. Self-loathing oozed from his skin like withdrawal sweats but smelling infinitely worse. The cycle burned itself out as the heroin coursed through his veins and after a while he felt better.

Twenty minutes later he took Snowy for a walk.



It was full dark now. He followed his old escape route through the bushes and watched Snowy bound like a demented kangaroo along the uneven ground. The moon was full, painting the landscape a powdery blue and when he looked back the rooftops of the street were glistening mirrors to the stars. It had stopped raining but the

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grass dampened his shoes. Somewhere on the other side of the houses the stolen Citroen sat beneath a canopy of trees, yet another reason for the neighbours to hate him.

And they did hate him; he knew that. In his brief moments of lucidity he could understand why but then he remembered that he hated them even more. The street in which he was born had seen many changes. When he was a boy there had been an enormous field this side of the trees but the north end had been taken up by phase two of the Low Moor housing estate. They were nice, neat, pretty houses, but they couldn't match the majesty of those rolling hills.

The next street down was Railway Terrace, so named because the North Eastern line used to run through the cutting half a mile to the right. A young Vince Lavares had explored that line all the way to the Woodrow Tunnel where he had committed his first burglary aged ten. It hardly counted as a burglary, more a childhood adventure, breaking into the lineman's hut at the mouth of the tunnel. He had taken three railway spikes, a pair of pliers, and the nineteen eighty-five Pirelli calendar. He left the lineman's flask. After reading the plaque on the tunnel wall he couldn't leave the fella without his sustenance.

According to the tarnished brass plate, three hundred and fifty workers had died carving the four-mile tunnel through the hillside, a figure he simply couldn't comprehend. He didn't even know three hundred and fifty people and certainly couldn't imagine that many dying so the railway could go through. It seemed such a noble sacrifice that he couldn't steal a flask that might belong to one of them. Vince loved playing along the railway but eventually the line was rerouted and the track taken up. All those workers had died in vain.

The Ciba Engineering factory across the road wasn't there when he was born, another change for the worse, and it left Woodrow Drive in shadow for three-quarters of the year, only breaking out in the summer when the sun was at its height. Vince had worked there for two years after leaving school but he was already sliding down the slippery slope towards drug dependency. It had been a good job too, prospects of advancement and a future that was not destined to be his.

The other change in Woodrow Drive was entirely of his own making, turning him into the social leper he was today. The crime rate soared after he left Ciba Engineering and Vince Lavares was responsible for ninety-five percent of it. He began by stealing

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pushbikes and garden furniture from his neighbours then progressed to burgling their garages and garden sheds. Finally he found rich pickings in the houses themselves and then there was no looking back.

The cars he stole didn't come from Woodrow Drive but they always ended up there. Abandoned along the dirt track to the fields or round the corner of the cul-de-sac. Stolen cars brought an influx of undesirables who visited to buy them. Mostly he would take cash but occasionally he exchanged them directly for heroin. The drug dealers called at all hours of the day and night, flooding the street with noise and stench. The tarmac became scarred with burnt rubber as they sped off and the tyre marks were a testament to just how much Vince contributed to the downfall of a once proud neighbourhood.

Snowy raced across the field, spun round and raced back, displaying boundless energy that Vince hadn't felt since he was thirteen. He looked at the drawn curtains of the corner house and felt a twinge of guilt. Old man Waddington had formed the neighbourhood watch scheme purely to combat the activities of Vince Lavares. His wife sat in the front window most days, paying more attention to the street than the soap operas she loved. The old man was constantly on the move, checking from the upstairs windows and out the back garden every half an hour. He'd come up with the term Neighbourhood Catch because they didn't simply want to watch the crime but catch the lowlifes responsible. Vince renamed it the Neighbourhood Witch because Mrs Waddington resembled a hook-nosed broom flyer. He reckoned she had a cauldron instead of a barbecue and she often visited during his drug-induced nightmares.

As he looked at the back window he suddenly felt a shiver run down his back. They were watching him. He was certain of it. Somehow they'd developed a kind of night vision that could look through the curtains even when they were closed. He glanced away, his eyes falling on the house two doors up. Mr Buchan had reported him for excessive noise one night when cold turkey was ravaging his body. It was one of Vince's few attempts to get clean on his own and he'd failed miserably. Noisily. When the police came round they found him sweating and screaming like a man being stuck with needles from a voodoo doll. Two days later he ripped the roof off Buchan's garage and stole a Black & Decker sander and a set of discs, not because he wanted them but to get his own back.

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Sparks lit the nerve ends at the back of his neck. Eyes were watching him from there as well. He scanned the houses along the street and sweat began to bead on his forehead despite the cold night air. They were all watching him. Neighbourhood watching him. They wanted to catch him up to no good. Catch him burgling their houses. But not just catch him. Tonight he was certain they intended to do more than that, they meant to stop him altogether.

The dark voices of paranoia whispered in his ears, something that happened more and more now the drugs were burning his brain. The neighbours were against him. The world was against him. And his father had been against him from the very beginning. No wonder he left the child who had no future, not realising that by leaving he was actually condemning him to no future.

It was dangerous to be out tonight. He called Snowy and jogged back to the bushes. His personal escape route quickly reversed itself, not there for escape from the house but into the house where the neighbours couldn't get him. When he closed the door he was crying and he didn't know why.



Sleep wouldn't come even though he waited until midnight before crashing on the couch. The bedroom was beyond sleeping in, unless you liked lying on a bed of nails, and although Vince's arms resembled a pincushion – his legs too if it came to that – trying to rest in that torture chamber was impossible.

Trying to rest anywhere tonight was beyond him.

Visions of his neighbours stalking him floated behind closed lids and only vanished when he opened his eyes. The trouble was that when he did open his eyes the reality of his situation was doubly bad. He was a twenty-seven year old drug addict with no future, no family – if you discounted an alcoholic mother who had abrogated responsibility years ago – and only the vaguest memory of the father he loved. That was the most painful part. He had forgotten the face of his father. The touch of his hand. The soothing tones of his voice at bedtime. The...

He sat up on the couch, the living room dark except for the glow of the television. His mother sat slouched in her chair, a corpse in all but name. Snowy raised an eyebrow and began flapping his tail to show he was awake. The dog sensed this wasn't the time and closed his eyes again.

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Something thumped on the wall next door. Not so much thumped as throbbed. Repeated. It had the gentle cadence of a ceremonial drum. He half expected to see Britt Ekland cavorting naked against the wall in an attempt to draw him out. Then his eyes sharpened. Draw him out? That's exactly what they wanted to do. He felt eyes watching him through the wall and knew that the Neighbourhood Catch was goading him on.

But he wouldn't be tempted. No. He would stay put tonight.

The pulse of the wall subsided and the room was quiet again. Had he heard it at all? Snowy certainly hadn't, otherwise he would be barking now that the silence had returned. The dog kept its head down but glanced up through nervous eyes. Sad eyes. Vince dismissed the noises as yet another symptom of his growing paranoia. Or could you recognise your own unhingedness?

The room closed in, becoming less of a living room and more a dying room. His mother was dying in front of the television. His father had been dying to leave. And Vince was a dead man walking more surely than a prisoner walking the green mile. Sometimes the prospect of death didn't seem that bad and there were days when he actually welcomed it. On those days, his blackest days, he thought it might be the best thing all round. His mother could go into respite and the neighbours could go to hell. When the police paid their infrequent visits the prospect of spending time in a cell seemed even worse than death.

A bolt of pain jarred his body. He had been misreading the signs. The walls weren't closing in, they were changing. His head spun, his eyes going in and out of focus. A pulse ticked gently at his temples. The room was so small now it might as well be a cell, and in many respects this house had been a prison to him ever since his father left. He needed to break out, not hide inside these walls. The whispering sounded inside his head again. It wasn't the Neighbourhood Catch but his father. Pleading for forgiveness. Not after he'd left, but before.

Then he heard the car and understood what the voices were really saying. It wasn't the neighbours warning him off, and it wasn't his father seeking absolution, it was his survival instinct telling him the police were coming. His eyes strobed with blue flashing light and he knew it was true. In one swift movement he was up and at the kitchen door, the escape route beckoning across the garden. Snowy looked confused but laid still, not even a flap of the tail to warn him.

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Outside and into the night. Darkness followed him, seeping out of his pores like black sweat. His mind was full of it. He was about to make a bolt for the bushes when he saw movement in the shadows. He froze. Had the police finally realised their mistake and posted a guard in the field? No. He recognised the figure stepping out of the trees. It was the Neighbourhood Catch co-ordinator.

The patrol car stopped round the corner, its blue light reflecting off the gable end. He heard it stop and guessed it was next to the Citroen. Good. While they were busy with the stolen car he would barge passed old man Waddington to the railway cutting. Return to the place where he felt most comfortable.

He had barely taken a step when he saw something else in the bushes. Not just the bushes but the neighbouring gardens and the fields beyond. There was Mr Buchan, and the milkman who lived opposite. The accountant from up the street, and the mechanic from the end of the cul-de-sac. Everyone from the Neighbourhood Catch was there, either standing in his garden or crowding round the outside. His escape route was blocked. He thought he glimpsed a familiar figure but didn't wait to find out. The cowbell rang as he flung the gate open and darted along the side of the house into the road. Someone shouted for him to stop but it was too late.

Vince Lavares ran in front of the Citroen as his drug dealer stole it back. The car hit him just above the knees and flipped him over the roof. When he crashed to floor he was no more than a bag of broken bones bleeding from the ears. The tyres squealed leaving a trail of rubber as the car sped off. Foam dripped from the alarm box on the house opposite and he realised that had been burgled as well, the blue light on the box flashing intermittently.

When the neighbours came out it wasn't from the garden but from their own houses, awakened by the noise. Mrs Waddington brought a blanket to keep him warm but he was too cold for that.

Vince Lavares expected to live forever. Nobody does of course, but he at least expected to reach forty, the age of his father when he abandoned his family. His father. The face of his father. It came back to him now, every line and crease and twist of hair, and he realised that he hadn't forgotten it at all, just mislaid it. The last thing he saw was his father pushing through the crowd, and whether that was true or not, Vince believed it was. That was all he needed.