

THE HAUNTING OF HARRY LAUREL

A Supernatural Spoof

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SYNOPSIS

The atmosphere charged and began to crackle with static electricity as her eyes quickened with white-hot rage. The dead dog in the kitchen would have envied Anne her capability as she consciously drew back her lips in a bestial snarl and growled, “Even if I have to come back from the dead I’m going to kill you ...”

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The haunting starts with the innocuous smell of perfume and ends with Harry Laurel fighting for his life. Charged with the murders of Anne Bowden and her daughter, Jenny, Harry is forced to fight a war on two fronts. Despite overwhelming evidence, his denial of all charges is strenuous and consistent. But everyone knows he’s a habitual liar. Only his loyal wife believes in his innocence.

As Harry prepares for his trial, the haunting becomes more intense, and the outrageous acts perpetrated on him grow progressively nasty until he’s forced to confide in someone. His efforts to garner help in dispatching the ghost are constantly frustrated since everyone believes he’s attempting to cop a plea for insanity. But he knows that to confess the identity of the ghost would only confirm his guilt. And Harry’s misery is multiplied ten-fold by the reactive hilarity he causes to those who would otherwise have very little to smile about.

WARNING:

This novel is a black comedy and for adults only. It contains strong language, scenes of violence, and irreverent references, which may offend those of a delicate sensibility.

PROLOGUE

Buffeted by a fierce wind, Anne Bowden snatched the key from the lock and slammed the door shut against the driving sleet. A weary sigh escaped her lips as she stepped into the hall and switched on the light. Feeling miserable and apathetic, she wanted nothing more than to flop down in an easy chair and chill out with the TV and a glass of Chardonnay. She threw down the keys on the scuffed half-moon table, triggering a resonant clatter.

Shrugging off her coat, she paused and cocked her head. The sodden coat hung from her shoulder as she cast about for signs of Jenny. Something about the house wasn't right. It was only then she registered the unexpected frostiness in the air; the failure of the dog, Benny, to welcome her with his big heavy paws, thumping tail and dripping tongue.

Why wasn't Jenny playing that awful noise she called music? It was always the first thing to assault her ears on arriving home from work. She glanced towards the kitchen. It was shrouded in darkness, the door slightly ajar. There should have been the usual rattling of crockery as Jenny performed her daily chore of setting the table for their evening meal.

"Jenny," she called. "Jenny, why haven't you put the heating on? It's freezing." It should have been on a timer, but she hadn't yet been able to figure out how to set it. And, since she and Alec had separated, it was just one more thing to add to the growing list of DIY.

There was no welcoming answer. As she stepped further into the hall and towards the stairs, her coat slid to the carpet. "Jenny," she called again, hesitantly.

The total hush was unsettling, ominous. A singular feeling of dread crept up her spine, prompting goose bumps. Instinctively, her heartbeat quickened. Irrational fear suddenly coursed through her, fear that Jenny hadn't made it home from school. Every mother's nightmare reared up in her mind's eye, ugly scenarios setting logic aside.

Please, God, no.

But then, she saw her daughter's school bag lying at the bottom of the staircase, casually angled as if Jenny had hurriedly thrown it down. But instantly the moment

of relief met a fresh wave of fear as it coalesced with the continuing silence. Anne's basilisk gaze remained fixed for a while, and then, unnervingly, a slight sound that she couldn't quite grasp but knew didn't fit, attracted her eyes in a slow, lazy upward motion. The sight of a man standing on the landing at the top of the stairs, very still, very quiet, shot through her like a bolt of lightning. Her breath dragged, yet she displayed no outward sign of alarm, merely recognition.

His features were set in a strange solidified expression.

An apprehensive ripple of terror undulated beneath her calm exterior, making her heart skip several beats. All the tiny hairs on her body responsively stood on end. And then her heartbeat began to accelerate at breakneck speed, causing her chest to visibly thump.

Real time hung suspended as they shared a fixed exchange, their expressions almost identical in one of petrified shock. Finally, Anne shattered the moment by staring once more at Jenny's school bag. A frightened gasp escaped her lips as she returned a questioning look upon the intruder.

He spread his hands in a gesture of uncertainty. Then, on a gulp of panicky breath, he offered a response to her unspoken question: "There's been an 'orrible fracas, I think. Nothin' to do with me. Honest. I didn't do it." Heavy with the local accent, his voice was low, gritty and nervous. Shrugging helplessly, he dropped his hands loosely but made no move to descend the stairs. He remained still, waiting, uncertain and reactively planning. His eyes darted about like a pair of rolling peas as if expecting a miraculous exit to appear before him at any moment.

For an infinitesimal moment her shoulders sagged. She knew. The complete quiet of the house and the intense look on his face seemed to answer all. She started up the stairs, slowly, deliberately and fearlessly with frenzy-filled adrenalin flowing through every fibre of her being.

Something very strange happened then. The atmosphere charged and began to crackle with static electricity as her eyes quickened with white-hot rage. The dead dog in the kitchen would have envied Anne her capability as she consciously drew back her lips in a bestial snarl and growled, "Even if I have to come back from the dead, I'm going to kill you ..."

CHAPTER ONE

Hands stuck in his trouser pockets against the cold, Harry turned the corner into Keyside Road and then pulled up short. To his utter dismay he saw that his near neighbours, Mr Clarkson and *Ten O'clock News*, were standing on the kerbside directly opposite his house. He quickly ducked back round out of sight. *Ten O'clock News*, a.k.a. Olive Beardmore, had been awarded her epithet many years ago owing to her habit of being the first one in the road to broadcast any local gossip. Since an unfortunate exchange during the summer of eighteen months ago, Harry always actively avoided the woman whose appearance was the epitome of the proverbial old battleaxe: squat, dumpy, with massive breasts and broad shoulders, a face like a pug dog and a razor-sharp tongue to match. Her head, covered in frizzy grey hair, would punctuate every spoken word with aggressive affirmations that would brook no challenge. Mr Clarkson, on the other hand, was a quietly spoken man in his early seventies, slight of figure, pleasant-looking craggy features and far too inoffensive to break free of Olive's grasp. Harry realized that the poor man would have no alternative but to listen and respond politely until she was ready to end the conversation and go back indoors.

Leaning up against the wall, Harry inwardly commiserated with him. He could just make out their voices as he cocked his head to listen. They appeared to be discussing the fight that had broken out the day before between two of the brothers at the Davidsons' house on the corner at the other end of the road. They were a family of eight given to warring on the entire neighbourhood, as well as themselves, and they were always the first to be suspected of any crime in the immediate neighbourhood, and rightly so. Harry was well aware that his name followed a close second on the list.

He wiggled his toes in an effort to keep them from going numb, feeling sure that a snowfall couldn't be far away. Given the icy temperatures, surely they wouldn't jabber on for much longer? Young as he was, it was putting an ache in his bones. Besides which, his sympathy for Clarkson didn't extend to allowing his balls to freeze off. His features gradually imploded with growing impatience.

He couldn't be sure, but he thought he'd just heard his own name mentioned. And if it was in the same breath as Davidson, he couldn't think why, seeing as how he, along with all the other residents in the entire area, never had anything to do with them – if they could help it.

Becoming irritated now, he stamped his feet and flapped his arms, more from exasperation at the stoicism of his neighbours to stand the cold than the severity of the weather itself. Finally, patience at an end, he decided to cross the road from the corner and rush along on the opposite side. It wasn't a long road; just a dozen houses in all, six either side. The corner where Harry was standing led off into Beacon Hill Road, the main thoroughfare into Stafford. At the other end, the road turned a slight bend into Wilmot Avenue, long and tree-lined with several uniformed poplars and chestnut, and two mountain ashes stuck on the end like an afterthought. There were no trees along the grass verge in Harry's road. But the hedges were high. Everyone appreciated privacy with the exception of Olive Beardmore whose hedge was clipped to precisely three-feet-six to afford her a good view of the frontage.

One of the street lights was out and Harry was thinking that if he was quick about it, he might just get past Olive without a lash of her tongue – the normal course of events if he happened to have the bad luck to be caught in her sights. Treading softly, he moved off quickly and crossed the road at an angle. On reaching the other side he avoided the cracked paving stones and walked on the grass verge, one eye on his chattering neighbours and the other on his intended path. If he unknowingly trod on a dog-turd and trailed it into the house he'd never hear the last of it.

But if Harry thought he was going to sneak past under cover of darkness he was wrong. *Ten O'clock News* spotted him with her eagle eye as he went through the front gate, the click of the latch sounding loud in the quiet. He cursed; convinced she must have heard it.

"There he goes, the shiftless, good-for-nothing layabout," he heard her say. Without a word of response or even a look in her direction, he shut the gate and hurried up the path.

He started whistling tunelessly as he turned the corner of the house, heading for the back door. On reaching it, he grabbed the handle and started to turn it, his foot poised on the step. Abruptly he jerked to a halt, his whistling fizzling out on a

nondescript note. His limbs hung suspended in a gawky pose. Only his nostrils twitched. About to enter he attempted to shrug off this weird incursion, but then, almost immediately, he stood frozen to the spot once more, his head to one side, ears pricked and eyes roving nervously. His breath made little curly wisps as it traversed in and out of his open mouth. Pressing his lips together, he breathed in deeply through his nose, the nostrils expanding and contracting like an old pair of bellows. Inexplicably, he could swear he'd just caught a whiff of perfume in the air. But it seemed to have gone now and all that remained was a smell of damp night air. Shaking his head, he dismissed it as nothing more than one of his frequent fancies and pushed open the door.

Pat had just covered his dinner and was putting it in the oven to keep warm. The microwave was broken, something else to add to all their other vicissitudes. Taking the plate to the table, she said, "Where've you been till now?" D'you know what time it is?"

Harry mumbled an appropriate response, "Out on a job."

Noticing that he was wearing his *special* heavy but roomy coat, she said, "Working late, aren't you? Well, what kept you?"

"*Ten O'clock News* and Mr Clarkson, gabbing on about that Davidsons' brawl." There was no need to explain further. Pat was all too aware of his daily efforts to avoid Olive and her insults.

She poured two cups of tea. "Did you get much?" her voice rising on a note of expectation.

Reaching in his trouser pocket, he pulled out a wad of notes and chucked it on the table by the side of the teapot. Then he went over to the kitchen sink to wash his hands.

"Hurry up, your dinner's gettin' cold." She experienced a fleeting moment of guilt, but her eyes were on the money and she was already calculating which of the outstanding bills it would pay off. Exactly where and from whom he'd stolen it, she would never ask.

As he stood rinsing his hands under the tap, Harry watched Pat's reflection in the kitchen window. She was laboriously putting an exact number of chips on her bread and as the melted butter ran down her fingers she quickly licked the greasy stream

away. Taking a bite out of her chip butty, she worked the morsel round to the side of her mouth and half turned her head to look at Harry. Dipping the corner of her sandwich in HP Brown Sauce, she took another bite and chewed on it animatedly. She flicked a strand of bleached blonde hair behind her ear, then her eyes narrowed as she pinned them on the back of Harry's head.

After vigorously wiping his hands, Harry paused to take in a shuddering breath before turning to face her. "If anyone asks, I got in before four-thirty. OK? Don't forget!" He threw her a meaningful nod.

There followed a short spat along a well-travelled path. Pat was worried about red-letter demands and Harry's opposition to gainful employment. Their social benefits had been stopped due to his refusal to join a course for the long term unemployed. And the threat of redundancy was hanging over her, doubling her anxiety. He could get a *proper* job if he wanted to, she was always telling him, and then they could start a family. But he was dead set against this, too.

Harry was easy to manipulate in most instances, but on these two subjects he was pugnaciously obstinate. Their financial woes couldn't have come at a worse time. First she had tried wheedling, cajoling, and then gently arguing and, finally, screaming her needs at him. It was all a waste of breath. Now, she was riding on the back of deceit, having stopped taking the contraceptive pill weeks ago.

Slapping his thigh impatiently, a habitual gesture of his, Harry said, "I don't want any squallin' kid messin' things up. Everythin's just fine as it is. And don't you worry none about money. I've got a few ideas on how to get that rollin'."

Enraged, Pat sprang to her feet. "Well pour your own bloody tea," she yelled. And she defiantly turned her back on him, the anger fizzing like a firecracker about to go off.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered. "And I could do with somethin' a bit sharper than tea."

Withering under her fiery expression, he was persuaded to relent a little. He crept up behind her and flung his arms around her slim body. Towering over her five-foot-two frame, he leaned over and planted a noisy kiss on the back of her neck. "Don't be bitchy, hon, I've had a lousy day of it without you startin' in on me. Let's just chill out, babe, everythin's cool. We've years yet."

In return for this unexpected show of affection, Pat tightened her lips and rewarded him with stony silence, jerking her head away angrily. Acid poured from her expression.

He opened his mouth to say something, but all thoughts but one suddenly fled his mind and he visibly stiffened. Then Harry bent his head and sniffed at her wrist, all the while looking straight through her with a worried frown. He mumbled something about it not being the same one and marched off into the living room, leaving Pat to puzzle over his odd remark.

CHAPTER TWO

Harry was all decked out in his best suit, standing in front of the mirror and admiring himself: six-foot-two, baby-blue eyes, lustrous, black spiked hair and just enough chunky muscle on him to pass the beanpole look. He found his reflection so pleasing that he was half inclined to kiss it. He turned his head slightly to yell, “ ’urry up or it’ll be time to come back home again before we’re even out the door.”

Pat checked the contents of her bag and picked up her coat. “Comin’.” As she came down the stairs, she took out her perfume spray and squirted some behind her ears and a generous amount down her low cleavage. She walked over to the front door and waited patiently while Harry went through his obsessive ritual of checking the doors and windows, after which he set the burglar alarm. Pocketing his keys, he took her arm and pulled her onto the small porch, slamming the door behind them. Then they started off down the path.

She pulled up short. “Oh, I’ve forgotten me gloves.”

“Tough!”

She shrugged disconsolately and caught up with him. As she fell into step beside him she started to ask where they were going but the words caught in her mouth when he suddenly jerked her to a standstill. She watched as Harry sniffed the air, turning his head first one way then another. Then he murmured something about perfume once more and started off again. As they walked down the road he lifted her hand, not once but several times, sniffing her wrist and shaking his head in puzzlement.

“What’re you sniffin’ at? You sound like a bloodhound.” When he didn’t reply she added, “Are you gettin’ a cold, or what?”

Harry just shook his head. For some reason he wasn’t feeling quite so cocky now.

*

The quarrel had started over something Pat thought quite petty: sniffing. All night he’d been snatching at her wrists to catch a whiff of her fragrance. But when he’d started going the rounds with several other females close to their table, her temper had snapped. Unable to stand it a moment longer, she’d left him in the pub after lambasting him with a torrent of abuse worthy of Olive Beardmore.

Harry had quickly caught up with her. But just as he was about to explain his behaviour, the immediate atmosphere suddenly filled with that dreaded aroma yet again. Stupidly, he asked if she could smell it too. And she, believing that Harry was mocking her, snorted contemptuously and gave him another black look before marching on in silence.

Trying desperately to ignore the powerful fragrance enveloping him, Harry followed closely, tongue-tied for several minutes as he fought to bring reason to this strange phenomenon. But once the scent evaporated as quickly as it had formed, he gathered his wits, returned his attention to the earlier pedantic ranting of his wife, and told her quite plainly what he thought about the little scene she had enacted back at the pub.

Having turned the corner into Keyside Road, they were still arguing fiercely with raised voices certain to bring a twitch to Olive Beardmore's net curtains.

"You're not layin' out rules and regulations for me, and that's that," he told her flatly.

They continued to swap moronic threats until Harry inserted the key in the lock. He rushed to switch off the alarm and threw over his shoulder, "That bloody tongue of yours could propel a boat." Turning round to face her, he inclined his head and pulled down on his earlobe. "Give this one a rest and try the other, will you!"

Pat knew that he'd never raise his hand to her. With a derisive jerk of her head, she kicked off her shoes and ran upstairs.

It wasn't long before Harry followed her. As he strolled into the bedroom, he saw that she was already ensconced beneath the thick duvet, lying on the edge of the bed, facing away from his side and with an illusory big 'no' written on the back of her head. He shrugged absently, feeling an unusual indifference to her enmity. He started to undress, thinking he had other things on his mind more important than a goodnight cuddle. He neatly folded his trousers, placed them on a coat hanger under his suit jacket, and then carefully positioned it in the wardrobe, allowing a little space between the other hangers to avoid crushing. Where his clothes were concerned, Harry was an orderly man and particular about keeping them clean and pressed.

Dropping his boxer shorts on the carpet, he grabbed his pyjama bottoms from the end of the bed. One more glance at Pat's huddled figure had him reaching for the

jacket, figuring he was in for a chilly night. He wouldn't normally go to bed in his socks but he couldn't seem to get his feet warm.

The last thing he did before climbing into bed was to sidle up to the window, which faced the front, and look out. He must have stood there for at least a minute before the chill in the air broke his concentration and prompted him to the dubious warmth of the bed. He jumped in with deliberate heavy bounces and thumped the pillow several times before finally lying down and drawing the duvet over his head.

Heavy, angry breathing now surrounded the connubial bed. Then:

“Harry.”

“What!”

“I'm cold.” Pat turned over and stuck her feet between his legs.

He was feeling a touch more than cold himself. In fact, from the moment he'd ceased moving, he suddenly imagined that an icy tendril of something unspeakable was gradually creeping over his entire body. He had a feeling of being completely encompassed in a vortex of freezing pressure, squeezing and pressing in on him, choking him, even. It was almost as if his body were becoming trapped in a solid block of ice. And Harry was frightened.

“Ooh, you're as warm as toast,” Pat murmured, snuggling up to him.

Her words didn't register. Feeling close to desperation now, he flung an arm round her and pulled her into a tight embrace. Pat found she couldn't breathe properly and started to push him away when she realized he was trembling. As the spasms gripped him, he involuntarily relinquished his hold.

“What's the matter, Harry?”

“C-c-cold.”

Cold? But he wasn't cold at all. Hadn't she just commented on the warmth of his skin? Waves of heat were radiating from his body. She laid a hand on his shoulder. “But you can't be cold ... Harry, you're burnin'.”

The tremors that had been tearing through his body suddenly ceased, and then he lay rigid.

“Harry?”

He sucked in air, greedily, and then let out a deep, tremulous sigh.

“HARRY?”

“Er, I’m all right, now... Jeez, it felt like I’d been shoved in a freezer.”

What on earth was he talking about? This was strange behaviour for Harry. “But you’re not cold. You’re hot – and I mean hot ... I know, p’raps you’re comin’ down with the flu. Yes, of course, that’s it. You always feel a little shivery, even with a fever ... And you’ve been sniffin’ all night!”

Harry turned his back on her and settled into an uneasy quiet.

“Give us a goodnight kiss, Harry.”

The idea of making love was the furthest thing from Harry’s mind but he promptly turned over, since it was unthinkable he could ever turn down the chance of a nightcap. But, some ten minutes later, it became clear this had been a gross mistake on his part. He was lying flat on his back, staring wide-eyed through the dimness at the ceiling, and feeling utterly miserable as he listened to Pat’s patronizing and sympathetic reassurances on his failure to elicit an erection. He put an end to it with a forthright, “Goodnight.”

CHAPTER THREE

The clock had ticked only another twenty minutes into the night, and Harry was having trouble dropping off. Usually he fell asleep straight away. Tonight, he couldn't stop tossing and turning. His thoughts were fragmented and his eyes kept opening and shutting involuntarily. He groaned several times, each groan deeper than the one before.

In the first instance his twitching had acted on Pat like a mild irritant and she'd tried to disregard it, hoping he would soon settle. Now, she was becoming increasingly niggled at his endless fidgeting. Each time she was about to nod off, Harry would twitch or turn over with a big heavy grunt. Unable to stand it a moment longer, she drew herself up and leaning back on her elbows said, "For chrissakes, Harry, stop squirmin'. It's like sleepin' with a wrigglin' worm. What's wrong with you? I thought you said you were tired." She switched on the bedside lamp with an angry flick, almost knocking it over.

"I am."

"Well go to sleep, then. You're keepin' me awake and you know I'm like a dead dog the next mornin' if I don't get a decent night's kip. I have to get up for work, you know, unlike *some* I could mention. Take a pill, or somethin', but go to sleep!"

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I've got a touch of bellyache," he lied.

"Well for chrissakes, either have a good fart or take yourself off to the bathroom, 'cause, quite frankly, you're gettin' on my nerves."

"Quite frankly," he mimicked, "I couldn't care less." But he threw back the bedcovers, leapt out of bed and pulled on his slippers. Then he stormed out of the bedroom on a wave of frustration.

Pat was just about to extinguish the light when something occurred to her and, curling her lip, she leaned over his side of the bed to check on her suspicion. It was just as she'd thought. Sitting bolt upright in the bed, she folded her arms and fixed her face with a tight-lipped, sardonic expression. And then she waited, her head wagging from side to side.

It wasn't long before the sound of the burglar alarm tore through the night. She cocked her head to one side, listening for the inevitable thuds of Harry's footsteps on the stairs as he made a speedy return trip, the like of which an Olympic runner would have been impressed with.

He crashed through the doorway, gasping and spluttering. "Forgot the alarm." Then, snatching up the keys from the floor by the side of the bed, he spun on his heel and made a mad dash out again.

"It's a good job," she shouted after him, "that we're not hooked up to the police station, or they'd confiscate that bloody alarm the amount of times you set it off." Pursing her lips, she shook her head vigorously. Even given the facility, she knew Harry wouldn't have taken advantage of it, since there was a charge for accidental callouts, now.

The screaming sound of the siren ended abruptly and Pat, plumping up her pillow, muttered a few expletives and then snuggled down once more.

Downstairs, Harry stood leaning with his hand on the side of the alarm box, fighting to get his breath back and vowing to quit smoking. As his noisy wheezing began to subside, it occurred to him that a coded alarm might save time on these occasions and he wondered how much a new, modern one would cost.

Clutching his chest as if it would put his lungs to right, he set off for the kitchen. This had been his original destination when he'd inadvertently set off the alarm, since the internal doors were wired, too.

*

He was on his third cigarette and second mug of extra sweet Ovaltine and sitting in his favourite chair in the living room, doing nothing but staring off into space. Despite the late hour, he was almost of a mind to switch on the TV and scroll through the SKY menu to see if there was anything worth watching. But he soon discarded the idea, knowing Pat would fly into a new rage if any further noise disturbed her.

Just for the sake of action he decided to take a peek outside. After balancing his half smoked cigarette on the ashtray, he crept over to the window – though he wasn't aware he was creeping. Pulling aside the curtain, he pushed his face up against the windowpane. It was a little wet with condensation, and his nose left a smear as he

pulled back. After clearing a round patch with the palm of his hand, he thrust his face forward again. He glanced up and down the road, barely aware of the white blur in all directions. Through the swirling snow his eyes fastened on the house over the road, directly opposite his own.

The lights were burning in some of the rooms.

Well, that's not right. No, that's not right at all.

In the time since they'd returned home, it had been snowing steadily. For the first time, he took in the thick blanket of snow covering everything with not a blemish to mar the startling beauty. It'd be a different story tomorrow, he thought, when the traffic and chimney smoke'd had a chance to make their mark.

His eyes were drawn once more to the house opposite. In particular, he was looking at the front right window on the ground floor. He could just make out the vague shapes of furniture behind the thin, almost transparent floral curtains. His eyes strayed to the left of the room. He let go of the curtain with a violent start.

Now that can't be right.

Someone had just switched on the hall light.

Taking up the edge of the curtain, he pulled it aside just enough to allow him a slit of a view. The light stayed on, the quiet of the night seeming somehow menacing now.

On a quivering sigh, Harry dropped the curtain and traipsed back to the chair. As he stubbed out his cigarette, he groaned again at his inability to sleep. He picked up the cigarette packet. But it suddenly slipped from his fingers to drop to the floor with a soft plop.

Where before, there had been only the usual smell of stale tobacco circulating, now there was an overpowering fragrance of perfume. *That* perfume. It clung to his nostrils, saturating his nasal passages and drenching the immediate space around him. It was like an invasive warning. As if something or someone were laying down the first rule in a set of bizarre engagements. It felt personal, too. And, on the instant he'd caught the first whiff of the provocative odour, he was suddenly beset by a fresh onslaught of trembling spasms, similar to those he'd experienced earlier. Jumping up, he fled the room and clambered up the stairs like a vibrating jelly, slipping and sliding erratically.

On gaining the bedroom he launched himself at the bed yelling for Pat to wake up. Alarmed at what was happening, he even pinched her arm to provoke an immediate response.

“Ouch!” she cried, bolting upright. “You spiteful pig. Whatever d’you think you’re playin’ at?” vigorously rubbing the stinging patch of skin.

Forcibly dragging her from the bed, Harry struggled to speak between the erratic jerks of his body. “C-come on. I-I ... C-come on.”

Halfway through the door, she angrily jerked her arm away from his painful grasp. “What’s goin’ on? Have you lost your marbles?”

He took hold of her once again, pulling roughly. “A s-smell. C-come on.”

“Smell?” she screamed. “Gas? Is it gas, Harry?” She was running with him now. “Bloody hell, Harry, we’re not insured. Please God, let us get out before it blows up.”

Both had difficulty keeping their balance as their feet became entangled and they almost fell headlong down the stairs. Only the banister saved them. On reaching the bottom, Pat naturally headed for the nearest exit, the front door, but was astounded to find herself being lugged into the living room and she began to protest stridently.

Harry, deaf to her yelling, pulled up short in the doorway. And then, he just stood there, staring wild-eyed whilst his body juddered on a mass of violent vibrations, as if he were standing on a set of jigger-picks all operating on a different pulse.

“S-s-m-mell.” His voice wobbled fit to match the rhythm of the jigger-picks.

Pat stared at him blankly, at a loss to understand why he’d dragged her into the living room if an explosion was imminent. He repeated the warning. And so, nostrils twitching, she sniffed the air. “Harry, I can’t smell any gas.”

His trembling fit appeared to be subsiding, and after a few deep, shaky breaths, he whispered, “Perfume. I can smell perfume. It’s stinkin’ the room out.” His eyes shot around the room, wildly darting from one space to another. “Can’t you smell it?”

“PERFUME? That again! You’ve dragged me out of bed in the middle of the night ’cause you can smell perfume? I don’t believe this.” And for a moment, Pat wondered if she were dreaming.

Harry swiped his forehead with his pyjama sleeve. “I think it’s goin’ now.”

“I can’t smell a damn thing – except the stink off your armholes. You must be goin’ round the bend or somethin’. I’d lay off the beer, if I was you.” She turned to go. “And you can clear that mess up as well,” she shouted, pointing at the heap of fag-ends strewn across the carpet from an upturned ashtray.

Catching hold of her again, he protested, “But I tell you I could smell it. It were overpowering. All around me.”

“So what? Is that any reason to go berserk? Even if it were true, what’s to be frightened of in a bit of perfume?” she snapped. And with some effect, for once, as she saw his pale features crumble into a hangdog expression. As his head dropped, she wagged her finger at him, remonstrating, “Really, Harry, have you any idea what this looks like? If it was anyone else, they’d have you certified.” Moving to the door, she threw over her shoulder, “I’m goin’ back to bed. Are you comin’ or not?” Reaching the door, she halted and glared at him.

Harry, still looking sheepish, avoided the angry look in her eyes and nodded, mumbling, “I’ll be up in a minute.”

“Well don’t leave it too long,” she said, a note of sympathy creeping into her voice as she took in the uncharacteristic slump of his shoulders.

He watched her retreating back and listened to the suck, suck of her bare feet on the imitation marble tiles across the hall floor. They became muffled as she reached the carpeted stairs.

There was a new kind of weakness in his limbs, totally unlike anything he’d ever experienced before. Shock. That was the only way to describe it. But what had triggered this inexplicable intrusion into his mundane existence?

The click of the bedroom door closing broke his trance-like state and, noticing the debris beneath his gaze, he bent down to pick up the fag-ends scattered over the carpet. A sense of embarrassment washed over him and he made up his mind to forget all about this nonsense.

After picking up the stubs he used his feet to grind the heap of ash into the carpet, sneaking a guilty look upwards, and then sat down heavily to light a fresh cigarette. Whilst he nervously puffed on it, his eyes kept up a roving dance around the room, at odds with his decision to put it all behind him.

The only thing he could smell now was the curling smoke of his cigarette. Deciding Pat must be right, and he'd had a drop too much, he took one last drag on his fag, and then viciously stubbed it out, cupping the ashtray in his hand so as not to upset it again.

Shivering in the night air, he cast a rueful glance at the cold, empty fireplace, as if it were to blame, somehow, for the goose bumps rising on his forearms.

He couldn't reason why but felt unable to resist the urge to check on Anne Bowden's house again. Now it was lit up like Blackpool Illuminations. Allowing the curtain to fall back, he turned round slowly with a stupefied look plastered to his features.

"Pat's right, I'm goin' bonkers."

Across the road, at an upstairs window, the curtains were now wide open whereas before he could have sworn they were closed. And, to top it all, the light was blinking on and off like a neon sign.

He closed his eyes and backed away. He didn't look again. Feet dragging, he trudged out and plodded up the stairs. He was almost at the top when he remembered he'd left the lights on and, more importantly, hadn't reset the burglar alarm.

"Shit!"

Grumbling all the way, he came back down the stairs and then tracked round the ground floor, extinguishing the lights as he went.

Just as he was about to turn the key in the alarm, that fragrant aroma rattled the hairs in his nostrils. Turning sharply, he growled, "Piss off." Then he turned the key in the box so fiercely, it bent slightly and almost got stuck in the mechanism, forcing him to yank it from side to side in order to get it out. But his warlike grimace turned into a blanched stare when a sudden nervous hiccup hit his bowels. He wasn't so far gone as to put it *all* down to a pint too many!

Harry climbed in beside Pat, the icy chill of his body inevitably disturbing her yet again. As it connected with her warm skin, the light snoring ceased abruptly on a loud snort. Her eyes shot open.

"Pat," he whispered. "I can smell it again."

"Drop dead!"

*

He was in a house, one he didn't seem to recognize, and he was dragging something along a narrow hall. Then he was by the front door and seemed to be checking off a list of sorts. After switching off the light he went out and pulled the door shut turning almost immediately to peer in through the glass pane at the top of it. Something was sticking out of a doorway, protruding into the hall.

Whatever it was, it moved, and the movement whipped up a spine-tingling scream of terror from his open mouth, causing the hair on his head to shoot up on a hot pulse of electrifying panic.

He flew down the road, banging into walls, hedges, lampposts and parked cars, before skidding to a halt at an overflowing skip. The stench emanating from it pierced his nostrils like an exploding aerosol can and he gagged. Holding his nose, he set off at a run again, and then all at once found himself leaning up against his own back door, breathing heavily.

He was just thinking that he must oil the lock, as he turned the handle with its responsive creak, when all such thoughts died on the first whiff of that telltale perfume. As it gradually encircled him, wrapping him in the cumulus fog of its heady but choking nub, he heard an eerie whisper coming from behind.

"Har-r-yyy."

Harry, immobilized, turned his head as if it had been decapitated and were on an icing-cake stand, the action incredibly smooth and slow. His terrified eyes tried to focus on what was hovering directly behind him: an indistinct figure, which was floating about a foot off the ground, its arms rearing up as if readying itself to pounce on him.

It was almost seductive as it weaved about him provocatively in a strange sort of dance, and all the while, oozing that cloying substance, which burned his nostrils and turned his stomach.

Closer, now, and he could see black patches of what appeared to be skin emerging within a blurry mass of gathered cells, pulsing and periodically emitting sparkling daggers of light, sometimes blue. A distorted countenance suddenly came into view. At first, it seemed to be smiling. Then, without warning, it changed abruptly and he found himself looking into a face, the faintly familiar beauty of

which was entirely obscured as, with lips drawn back in an animal snarl, it shot forward.

Harry's head jerked back reactively as it came within inches of his dripping red-tipped nose. The mouth was emitting guttural sounds so low that he could only just detect them. Then it threw back its head and laughed before drawing close once more. It reached out its hands and growled, "I'm going to kill you Harry Laurel."

*

Harry woke up with a scream on his lips that a woman would have been proud of.