

Paradise House

by Christopher Peter

The clock stuttered, faltered; and then stumbled on. Its guttural ticks marked out John's bleak days, and sometimes he wished it would just stop.

He sat in the armchair, gazing sightlessly out of the tenth floor window, Emily in the next room. Finally he stirred, then gingerly pulled himself upright, wincing at the needling pains arcing through his legs and up his back. Bloody hell, he was so *tired*.

At least he now knew what he wanted to do. He'd known since yesterday, the day Bradley Tyler pissed through his letterbox.

In the dim hallway the pungent ammoniac stench assaulted him, prickling his eyes and stinging the back of his throat. He knew he could never forget it – how he'd stood in numb incomprehension, transfixed by the pale pink member poking through the letterbox, hearing the thick steaming liquid splatter onto the doormat, splashing onto the carpet and up the walls. Shamelessly violating his home. Emily's home.

Last night he'd dreamt he'd dashed forward, kitchen knife in hand, and castrated the little bastard. Then he'd woken up and remembered that he'd done nothing; and knew then, in the pre-dawn dark, that he never would.

He shrugged on his coat and took his walking stick, holding his breath to stop himself gagging as he wrenched open the door. Outside the flat the urine lingered faintly in his nostrils, even on the windswept walkways high above the city.

He hobbled up to the stairwell where he'd first encountered Bradley Tyler. Had to be two or three years ago now. Bradley couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen years old, a spotty little runt in a baggy tracksuit. He'd squinted cheekily at John, made some joke. John had laughed, and wondered what this little kid was doing out on his own at that hour. Where were his parents? John might have asked him that once. He seemed to remember a blank look in return.

At some point, something had changed. It might have been that time on the way to the shops, when Bradley had kicked away John's walking stick while his mates bayed with laughter. John said, I'll speak to your dad, but he was drowned out by the scornful jeers.

The balance of power had shifted. The man became the child.

John had called the police once, the day one of Bradley's gang had grabbed John's shopping bag, scattering his groceries down the steps, broken eggs bleeding into the grime. An hour later a policewoman who looked barely older than those kids was in John's kitchen, scribbling down notes, stifling yawns. Did John have any family? Not local, no. She gave him some leaflets. Meanwhile Bradley and his gang were long gone, melted into a hundred hiding places.

The next day John had found *Grass* scrawled on his front door in lumpy brown excrement; dog or human, he couldn't tell.

He shuffled up the steps, wheezing. Not long now.

Yesterday, they'd crowded around him outside his flat. Once inside, he found his wallet gone. He'd have phoned the police again, but then Bradley had pissed through his letterbox and a thing like that tends to make you forget whatever it was you'd been about to do.

Just as he'd got to the top of the stairwell, and stood struggling for breath, he heard quick steps below, and recognised them immediately. The girl.

Bradley's assorted hangers-on were mostly boys, but a few girls drifted in and out of his orbit, most of them scrawny little specimens who strutted and shrieked in desperation. Sometimes they appeared with swelling abdomens, then disappeared, never to be seen again.

Jez was quieter than the other girls, and her abdomen had remained unswollen so far. She might have been quite pretty if her face had let her. She tended to hang at the back, smirking, as if quietly egging the others on. That was worse, somehow. Always there to witness his humiliation in silent approval.

Now she was following him. Which meant the others couldn't be far behind. No, just leave me, thought John, just a few more minutes. That's all I need.

That walkway faced west. The place where he and Emily had stood, his arm around her as they soaked up their first sunset at Paradise House. Their backs to the stained concrete monstrosity, their eyes turned to the blue distant hills. The hills where they had walked at weekends, striding across the turf, the wind lifting them to the sky.

'John?'

Emily?

She stepped forward and of course it was Jez. He tried to see if the others were behind her. Maybe that would be OK. It might do them good to see what he was about to do.

Facing back to the city and the hills, he placed his hands on the cold metal rail. He wondered if he'd be able to swing his leg over.

'Mr Jones?'

Jez was holding out something – small, square and black. She slouched forward and pressed it into his hand. 'It's all there. Didn't nick nothing. Honest.'

John stared dumbly at the wallet, then at her, then all around. Ears straining for a snigger from the shadows.

Jez stepped back and studied the ground. 'Look inside. It's all there.'

'Thank you,' he managed at last. Then: 'Why?'

She shrugged. 'Wasn't fair. You're – old and that. I'm ... sorry.'

'Does Bradley know?'

She shook her head. 'Don't take no notice of him. He's a dick.'

'Well there's something we both agree on.'

Jez looked him in the eye for the first time, and grinned suddenly. 'Yeah. Seeya.' Then she was gone.

John turned back to the hills, but they looked further away now. Far below he could see the rest of Tyler's gang inching along like ants in a gutter. Bradley was the smallest ant of all.

Back inside the flat, the clock stuttered, faltered; and then stumbled on. Emily was in the next room, and that was all right for now.