



## Nepenthes

by Keris MacDonald

I knew the Howe Farm job was going to be rough even before the bottle hit the pavement behind us, but that moment brought it home. The noise was unidentifiable at first - certainly not the sound of breaking glass, more a sharp "crack" like a whiplash which echoed off the concrete cliffs around us. At the same time something struck the back of my calves and flattened the plastic fabric of the protective overalls. My first thought, not very quick either, was that somebody had shot at me with an air-rifle. I turned round to see a star-shape of white powder etched across the tarmac a few yards away, no fragments large enough to identify as glass.

"Shit," I said, more confused than anything. There were squeals of manic laughter from far above. Looking up I saw a row of heads leaning over the parapet on the top of Campbell House, eight floors up, shrieking with derision. One childish arm came into view waving something that flashed in the September sunlight.

"Get under cover," said Alan flatly, yanking the handle of the industrial cleaner away from me as he walked quickly toward the entrance to Campbell House. It was supposed to be a two-man job to carry the thing, but Alan is a big bloke. A lifetime cleaning and lifting for the City Council has put more muscle on him than you would guess from looking at his gut. I followed hurriedly.

Once we were safe under the concrete awning of the flat's main entrance I said, "Christ - that was a bottle. It could have killed me!" I wasn't that badly frightened, not even really surprised; that sort of thing had happened before now, but the adrenaline from the shock had got me strung up for the moment. I had been wary since we'd parked the van between the blocks - right out in the open, immobiliser on. all according to Regulations - and now it seemed that Howe Farm had issued its anticipated welcome.

"They weren't trying to hit you, Brian," Alan grunted, "just make you jump." He pushed open the door of Campbell House, once reinforced glass but now a patchwork of hardboard. so that I could wheel the cleaner in. "Anyway, von heard about Mahendra - on Six Shift? They were chucking used hypos at him last month."

Alan doesn't make a fuss about much. In the couple of years I've been working the same shift as him, I've never seen him lose his temper. Even in the pub after hours, he quietly gets up after eight pints and walks home without a word. I made up for his calmness by swearing for a minute, shaking my head, while he found the keys in his overalls pocket and looked over the work schedule on our clipboard. Under my breath of course. It's a disciplinary action if some concerned mother hears you using bad language in front of her innocent little darlings. Not, it is assumed, the same little kids as the ones on top of the roof dropping missiles on you. Fortunately the lobby was empty. It was not the sort of place I would have chosen to hang about in myself. The walls were smeared with indecipherable graffiti and time strip lights were trapped behind wire cages so thick that they hardly cast any illumination. There were no windows and only the draught through the front door kept the pungent biological smell of the dank floors at a breathable level.

"Report it when we get back to the depot," Alan said. He flashed the clipboard at me. "You know the layout here - same as last time."

"No. I missed the first shift. Flu for two weeks," I apologised. taking the papers from his hand. There was a list of instructions and a small map of the block layout.

Alan looked at mile, shrugged and said, "Well, hello and welcome to Howe Farm. Rats, roaches, junkies and all. I'm not going through Geoff's briefing again for you - it took nearly an hour. Let's get this block done and get out. It'll look no better by tomorrow, I'm telling you."

"Hmm," I said. The schedule was terse: we had to clear the public corridors, the stairs, the lift. Don't touch the graffiti. don't go into any of the flats, in case of trouble get the local police on the van radio.

"What did Geoff have to say?" I prompted.

Alan shook his head. "Any trouble and we get out right away, is what it comes down to, he said. 'Don't mess with the locals. You've heard the stories.'"

Of course I had. The whole city knew about Howe Farm: the cluster of eight tower blocks wedged between the canal and Murton Moor council estate. Murton Moor is not itself on anyone's list of short cuts to take on a dark night, but even its inhabitants leave Howe Farm well alone. The Farm is a country all of its own; a community of the sort that the Councillors would rather not know about. Its population was moved there en masse from a genuine Victorian slum in the Sixties, and since that time it has shut down on itself, built walls of suspicion and resentment all around. The gleaming concrete tower blocks are grey and streaked with water-stains now. The windows on the bottom two floors are covered in chicken mesh to stop the bricks coining through - that is where the empty flats haven't simply been boarded up, and there are plenty of those. It was rumoured that some bright spark at City Hall had put a notice in the Big Issue offering council flats here to anyone who cared to register; but not a single homeless person had responded. Howe Farm actually has the distinction of being the only area in the city where the population is 100% White. It does not welcome outsiders. Anyone born in those flats, they say, is probably their own cousin across three generations.

And in City Services, where we have the dubious pleasure of holding the cleaning contract - and no, none of the time private companies did tender for it - there are other stories. Strange ones, some of them. There's a special clause in the contract document; every other site in the city is cleaned on a regular basis by a regular gang, but Howe Farm has its own rota. You clean it three times, then they move you onto another job. I'd missed my first fink, not that I had any regrets about that.

We went to find the service cupboard, which was at the back of the lobby, behind the lift shaft and under the stairs, accessed by a lit-

the passage wide enough for only one at a time. The hole reeked of urine and the ground was littered with condoms; I wondered how anyone could bear to stand in this place for long enough to drop her knickers.

"Little buggers have been at the door," Alan said in mild disgust, leaning aside to let me see. The door was six foot of featureless steel, in a corner so tight that it was impossible to rain. Nevertheless something had dented the solid metal at waist-height, near the keyhole. Not that we kept much of value in there any more; not even solvent-based cleaners these days, just mops and cloths and other bits and pieces. The pass-keys to the flat security grilles were hung there, though.

"Car-jack," I suggested, although the depression in the metal looked too large and diffuse for that.

"Write it down on the sheet," Alan replied.

We started with the lift. It was not a good omen. Rather to our surprise it opened straight away when I pushed the button. Then it became apparent that someone had decided to use the tiny, dimpled steel box as a toilet. More than once - or perhaps not alone - judging by the size of the pile of crap in the corner. We had both stopped making any comment about our finds by now; I just got the shovel out while Alan mixed up the disinfectant. With the door jammed open I scraped up the mess as best I could, working in the half-dark. I nearly missed the shit on the lift walls; one of the unknown crappers had had a go at drawing with the stuff. A stick-man with a four-foot erection, bollocks the size of an elephant's and hair sticking out like a halo or horns. Some handprints too. After the lift, anything else seemed more pleasant. Even working my way up the stairs armed with reinforced gloves, tongs and the secure box, picking up any discarded needles and rubbers. I get paid a bonus for this particular job. which is good money so long as you know what you're doing and you keep your eyes open. There was fresher air and a bit more light on the stairwells too; the walls were pierced by open slit windows, just wide enough to get an arm out of, not wide enough for anyone to shove a small child through. Believe me. if it were possible someone in this place would have done it.

It was the darkness that was the most oppressive part of the job. For all the slit windows - which reminded me of some medieval fortification more than a modern housing block - and the caged lights - half of which were faulty anyway and either out or flickering like strobes - the corridors along each floor were filled with gloom. Each of the doors to the individual flats was protected by a heavy iron grid with a separate lock, which added to the dungeon-like atmosphere. You could do something about the smell with disinfectant, but not the half-dark and the aura of menace. We worked close together, sweeping, scrubbing, bagging. moving from floor to floor. It was not that much more filthy than any other run-down estate block. I suppose. We work with dirt ever day, that's the point of a cleansing service. and you get to take it for granted very quickly. But the walls here oozed sheets of black damp and the wind passing through the slit windows made a thin, throbbing whistle that put me off, somehow, so I couldn't relax into the job. Alan said at one point. "Wish we had a bloody radio," but that's forbidden under Council regulations too, when working in a domestic area. We talked a bit, over the sound of the hoses, but it was a threadbare conversation with no energy to it. I don't remember what it was about, now.

There weren't many people around. Normally the faintest sniff of a Council uniform is enough to bring people out in queues with their complaints, usually that the grass hasn't been cut this week or that Housing hasn't been round to see about the plumbing, but in this place - where God knows they had a right to complain about the conditions, and if I'd had to live here I'd never have bloody stopped - there were no heads poking out from behind doors, no bored old ladies desperate for someone to witter onto. At the end of the third floor corridor there were two women standing talking, but they retreated into one of the flats when they saw us coining and the safety grille grated shut behind them. I only got a glimpse of their faces - both were painfully thin with jutting cheekbones and shadowed eyes under their scraped-back hair. They reminded me of old photos of concentration-camp inmates.

On the fourth floor a door actually opened and a man hurried out past us. He was carrying a case and wearing overalls with the BT logo on them. Alan nodded at him, grunting a greeting, but got no reply. When the man had gone Alan snorted, "That's a mistake he won't make again."

"What?" I said.

"He was new around here." Alan explained. "Most of the services in the city won't send men out to Howe Farm. Too many of them get mugged. Anyway, no-one here pays their bills, do they."

He kept his voice down, I noticed, when he said that. I didn't reply; I had seen the telephone engineer's face as he passed. It had been ashy white and slick with sweat.

It was on the seventh floor, right at the end of the corridor, that we encountered the new smell. Not particularly strong, but distinctive enough if you know what it means. I motioned for Alan to switch off the cleaner and come forward. We sniffed around in the end of the corridor like couple of dogs at a butcher's. It was a dead end with only two doors to choose from and not even the omnipresent aroma of urine to mask the new scent.

"Oh no," sighed Alan, pulling a face.

"Probably that one," I said at last, gesturing at one of the doors. The security grille was in place. After ringing the doorbell failed to produce a response I reached between the bars to knock on the wood, but with similar lack of effect. We waited grimly a few minutes, wishing rather than hoping that there would be an answer. At length I turned to the other door and rang on the bell.

This time, after a short pause, the inner door swung open and a woman looked out through the grille. She was the right side of middle age, but sagging and only half-dressed. The areas of flesh visible looked neither alluring nor washed.

"What d'you want?" she said with undisguised hostility.

"Council cleaning services, love," Alan said. "Can we just ask, is there anyone occupying the flat opposite at the moment?"

"Yes," she snapped. "An old woman. Mrs Wilkes, or Wilkins, I think it is. Look, I called the Housing Office last week about those kids. On the landing all night, they are - shouting and screaming and wailing. Months of it, I've put up with. Keeps me awake all night. What are you going to do about it?"

There were a few children in the flat behind her doing just that by the sounds of things. I listened while Alan tried to steer the conversation back to the subject at hand.

"Your neighbour," he finished determinedly; "have you seen her about recently?"

"No. Not for a few weeks. What's wrong?"

"Does she keep animals of any kind?"

"Cats - dozens of the things. They keep getting out and messing on the landing. Stinks of cat-piss, the corridor does in summer. You should get rid of them, they're a health-hazard. And," she added vehemently, "there's a dead rat about here somewhere. Can't you smell it? It's in the pipes I bet." She glared up at the silver-wrapped ducts that snaked along the ceiling above us. We followed her gaze dutifully then met each other's eyes. Alan nodded slightly at me.

"We'll deal with it," he told the woman. "Thanks for your help, love."

She waited a moment for further information, but Alan outstared her and neither of us moved until eventually, reluctantly, she withdrew into her flat and shut the door.

"I'll call the police," Alan said with resignation. He stumped off down the corridor. I withdrew from the door and lit a cigarette, staring out of one of the slit windows. We're not supposed to smoke on duty either, but I disliked the smell in that enclosed space too much. Cat-piss would have been welcome.

People have no idea how common this is. OAPs living alone in unsupervised accommodation, surviving on Cup-a-Soups. hardly any visitors, barely capable of tackling the stairs and too scared to use the lift - who's to notice when they stop moving around one day? Not their neighbours. Not their bloody families. It's left to chance and someone's sense of smell. Then the Council has to break in and clean it out and fumigate so they can rent the place to someone else. It doesn't get into the papers unless someone really screws up - like that time last year a London crew reopened a house to find the previous tenant was still inside, six months dead. He was old and deaf, you see, and hadn't heard them boarding it up.

I've done a few dead-resident clean-ups in my time and it's without doubt the worst job in this line of work. The smell clings to your skin and hair and clothes for days, no matter how much you wash. Anyhow, since Compulsory Competitive Tendering was introduced these special jobs have gone out to a private contractor - it's one lot of overtime I don't miss. I stood and smoked and waited for Alan to return. From the window I couldn't see the car-park or the escort van with the council coat of arms on it; the corridor on this floor faced the other side of Campbell House. I had a good view down onto an area of bare, compacted earth that was presumably a designated play area. There were three children down there, all too young for secondary school by the looks of them. They had a ginger cat tied by its neck to a piece of rope and were fighting over who got to swing it above their heads. When one dropped it I was surprised to see the cat's legs thrash around as the animal tried to escape.

"Hoy! Stop that, you little bastards!" I shouted out of the window. Waste of time. They whirled round, spotted my face high above them and gave me the finger contemptuously before running off, the cat jerking and tumbling on the ground behind them. I wondered if my children would have grown up like those ones if they had been brought up in a place like Howe Farm.

The lighting in the corridor gave brief, frantic buzz and died. As soon as I turned away from the window I was unable to see a thing. I stood and waited for my eyes to adjust. My skin unaccountably crawling. I could hear the ululating whistle of the wind among the concrete - much stronger up here on the seventh floor - and far away a faint murmur of unintelligible voices; a television set, I presumed. Suddenly I was aware of how vulnerable I was, alone in this dank cement hive. I wished Alan would turn up, embarrassing though it was to admit. People would think twice about tackling two of us at once. I thought with discomfort about who might be creeping down the murky tunnel toward me and what they might be armed with.

We were supposed to have a torch with us. I felt around with my foot until I located the cleaner, then groped for time rack where the torch was officially located. The job schedule was clipped there but no torch. Instead I discovered a glob of something cold and sticky on the plastic, from which I snatched my hand with distaste. With my clean hand I rubbed at my beard - it's a habit I have when I'm getting wound-up.

It seemed like an hour that I stood there with my back to the window, lit another fag, not needing to see because the action was so familiar, but the flare of the match burnt a green glow on my retinas, which I instantly regretted. My eyesight didn't get much better after that. I could make out the dim glow of the emergency lamp at the head of the stairs and the white streaks that marked the positions of the windows but seemed to admit no actual illumination. The piping noise of the wind grew a little louder and lifted an octave or so. Something made a dry scratching noise overhead. Maybe the old bag from next door had been right about rats in the piping; it was a good job I didn't mind rats. Preferable to some of the other inhabitants of this building, I was willing to bet. Then came a soft musical sound like the note of a gong. I strained my ears, staring down at the red glow of the cigarette-end cupped in my left hand. The sound was repeated and became a regular rhythmic chime, building on itself and growing louder by the second. There were words mixed in with it now.

"Brian - what's up with the lights?" Alan's voice exploded from the stairwell. I tried to swallow but smoke had dried out my throat. "God knows. Fuses. I'll get on to Housing when we get back," I croaked. The chiming noise had been the sound of feet on the stairs, hands grabbing the rail. There was someone with Alan I could see as they approached down the length of the corridor; a torch was flicked on, bright yellow. Presumably they hadn't wanted to use the lift given its recent condition.

"I found a policeman walking through the car-park," he grunted, sounding out of breath. Alan is not built to climb seven storeys of stairs. "Saves us waiting, doesn't it?" The constable moved into the ray of light from the window and nodded at me.

"Which flat is it then?" he asked. His voice sounded a bit unsteady to me. He was young, clean-shaven and pale.

We went up to the door and Alan used the pass-key to unlock the security grille, folding it back to expose the wooden door. We didn't have the key to that, of course, so for form's sake we knocked again and called out for Mrs Wilkes before the constable put his foot to the lock. It yielded on the second attempt.

With the door open the smell sprawled out in a wave. I didn't have any doubts about what we would find in the flat now. The policeman put his hand up to his face and stepped back quickly.

"What's your name, constable?" I asked, looking at him in the light that spilled from the doorway

"Edwards." I was right, his voice was shaking.

"You done one of these before?"

He shook his head, but pulled himself straight and was the first over the threshold. Rather him than me. I thought with a shrug, and followed.

There was more light inside the flat, but it was diffuse and brown. The whole place was brown; a dingy tobacco-stain coloured wall-

paper, piles of yellowing newspaper tied with string nearly blocking the hall, dust-clotted camel underfoot that gritted and crunched with every step. I looked down and saw that the floor was alive with black-beetles. Cockroaches, quicker and more wary, were disappearing under every low surface. Constable Edwards had stopped in the hall and was looking around, fingering his radio. "Mrs Wilkes?" he called.

There was no human reply; a low buzzing filled the air of the flat and deadened the sound of his voice. I stepped sideways into the tiny kitchen and motioned Alan in with me.

"Where did you find that one?" I asked in a low voice. "He's only a bloody Special Constable, Alan - you can see he doesn't know his arse from his elbow. Why didn't you call the station?"

Alan shook his head. "Look, he was there when I got outside. All he has to do is confirm there's a body then call the station himself." He looked up at the kitchen window and added 'Oh Christ, let's get this over with now.'

The light was weak and unsteady because the glass was covered with flies in constant torpid motion. We backed out into the hall, not wanting to disturb them more than necessary. I glanced around the kitchen as we left; no cats in sight but four or five plastic food bowls were scattered over the benches, their contents pale and heaving.

Constable Edwards, with more guts than I'd given him credit for, was checking the sitting room. I saw a threadbare settee and more neat piles of magazines over his shoulder as he came out, slinking his head.

"No-one in there," he said. "A lot of flies."

"Nothing in the loo." Alan added. We all looked at the last door, the one at the end of the passage. It was slightly ajar and no light showed around it. The bedroom, presumably. Reluctantly we approached it in single file. Alan was closest, probably to the relief of our Special Constable, and pushed it open with his foot. The room inside was in total darkness and there was hardly any light leaking into the passage from the crawling windows in the rest of the house. Alan put his hand on the wall and felt around for a light switch.

"Christ!" he yelled and leapt back, then went brick red. "Sodding roaches." he mumbled. I grinned rather sickly at him; insect life didn't usually bother either of us - he was getting jumpy.

"The electricity's off," Edwards said. "I tried the switches in the other rooms." He lifted his torch and squeezed past Alan into the bedroom. I gave him another mental brownie point. We all looked down the ray of torchlight.

We saw... nothing. It can't have been a very big bedroom, we were right in the corner of the block, but if it had been as big as a ball-room and painted Dulux matt black we wouldn't have seen less. There was a thick, smoky look to the air, which seemed to soak the light up. I can't put it any other way. Flies spiralled into the torch-beam, flashing, but that was all we could make out. The constable grunted, then shone the light on the wall to either side to test the strength of the beam. We saw faded rose-patterned paper and a cockroach nearly as long as my thumb, but when he moved the torch again it did not reach any of the other corners. We couldn't see the far side of the room. We couldn't see any furniture.

"How big is that room?" I asked softly.

"My batteries must be on the blink." Constable Edwards said. He did not sound terribly certain. He shone the light down at his feet, showing us bare lino - brown, naturally, and greasy-looking - and the ubiquitous beetles. The smell from the room was very bad, worse than elsewhere in the house; we didn't doubt that the occupier was in the room, we just didn't understand why we couldn't see her.

Constable Edwards shouldered his responsibility, said, "Wait here," and stepped into the room. We watched him walk away, his silhouette outlined by the moving beam of the torch. I kept expecting him to walk into a piece of furniture and stop, but his figure began to fade into the darkness. Alarm stabbed at me and I called, "Hey, stop!"

His voice drifted back from his dwindling figure; "There's nothing in here. It's a huge room, though. Nothing on the floor. No furniture." The words were attenuated, as if spiralling up from a deep hole. "I've never seen a council flat like this before!"

At this point the last dim glow of his torch faded out. Alan and I both shouted, "Stop! Come back!" into the darkness. When we paused there was a moment's silence, then the thin sound of Constable Edward's voice calling, "The floor sags around here. It's very slippery. It looks like there might be some sort of subsidence. Maybe the floor's collapsed - "

There was a thump, a brief, horrible scream and then absolute silence.

Alan and I stared at each other. I'm sure neither of us really believed what was happening. If it had been a normal, rational sort of crisis I expect that we would have responded sensibly according to Health & Safety guidelines, but at that point I felt I was in some sort of nightmare. Alan said, "We call Geoff." but I shook my head and said: "He's fallen down some hole. Get the hose."

"The hose?"

"Tie it round me. You can anchor me." Part of my bravado was shock, but part was shame too, that we'd let the bloody Special step into the dark like that just because he had to prove he was not frightened by the situation.

We fetched the water hose from the corridor and I flicked on Alan's Zippo for a second - it was the best source of light we had - while he strapped the canvas under my arms. I walked off into the stinking room while Alan played out the reel behind me. I was trying not to think how impossible the situation was, how I could explain it to the police or Geoff or the wife when I got back.

Beetles crunched and skidded under my feet. He had been right about that - the floor was slippery as an ice rink, as if someone had poured cooking oil all over the lino. It was still lino, I noted, kneeling to play the Zippo light down on it. Brown with a pattern of darker squares. Insects scuttled and buzzed everywhere. The stench of rotted meat was thick enough to chew. I dragged my lifeline into the dark, refusing to look back even when Alan called - after only 10 paces or so - 'I can't see you any more!'

"I'm OK!" I yelled, still walking. I started to call for Constable Edwards. How the hell was I going to find him in the dark if he didn't guide me?

I stopped calling when the floor began to slope under my feet. I crouched again with the small flame. The lino glistened wetly. I saw that the pattern on the flooring was stretched into narrow diamonds, front to back. I went forward cautiously, expecting to see at any moment a hole in the floor, broken masonry, gleaming pipes. Don't think I wasn't careful. But the floor wasn't sagging as Edwards had said - it was curving downwards, the gradient changing so imperceptibly that it was impossible to tell the moment when I passed the threshold of stability. The floor was arcing down into darkness, smoothly as the curve at the start of a roller-coaster drop.

Or a throat.

My feet skidded from under me, the plastic cleats cutting the grease without friction. I hit the floor and started to slide down into that void boots first - Christ did I scream, till the hose snatched me up short and knocked the breath from me. The lighter went flying and I could hear it bouncing down the slope before and below me. I rolled onto my face, scrabbling desperately for traction with hands and knees, finding none, clutching at beetles. A fly shot down my open mouth - while I was choking the knot in the hose under my arms began to slip. I grabbed the taut canvas with flailing hands and then, only then, but thank God for Alan being at the other end, nineteen stone of muscle and gristle and Council bloody-mindedness, he began to haul me back up the slope. He pulled me into the light like a baby attached to an umbilical cord. I nearly fell at his feet. His face. I recall, was green.

To be honest I don't remember leaving Campbell House. We must, I suppose, have dumped the stuff and walked out, but I don't remember a thing until the moment I was sat on the tarmac with my back to the side of the van with Geoff standing over me shouting "You stupid bloody bastards! Didn't you listen to a word I told you?" That must have been quite a long time later, because a contract manager is never actually on site when you need one. Anyway. I wasn't listening to him then, either. I was thinking about the water hose. It's 200 metres long that one, but I'd walked out the whole length. down to the bare spool.