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## The Catalogue of Death

by Stuart Carruthers

I've been about too long, people are getting tired of me, it's time I went for a walk.

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On countless occasions I've walked past this particular shop on the high street and not even bothered looking in the window. It's got a very bland appearance and if I'm honest it's not very welcoming. Considering how expensive the service they provide I'd have expected more. Then yesterday for whatever reason I found myself standing in the reception area.

The lady was very nice. She couldn't stop talking. I couldn't concentrate. The walls were adorned with pointless pictures and after what seemed like an age I found myself sitting on a leather couch with a cup of lukewarm tea.

"So Mr Carter how can we help you?"

For something that was going to cost a small fortune, she could have got my name right.

"Casey."

"Sorry."

"My name's Casey, not Carter."

"Yes it is, so how can we help you?"

The following thirty minutes was painful. I tried to explain my situation, but for some reason Judith Brownfield just couldn't understand. After finally listening to what I was saying and realising that no immediate family had suddenly passed away, she leaned back in her chair and exhaled heavily.

"I need a cigarette," she noted, "this isn't our usual request."

She placed a very colourful catalogue on the table in front of me, before heading out the back for her much needed cigarette.

"You'll find everything you need in there... tea..."

"Sorry?"

"Milk and sugar."

\*

I prefer it when the house is empty. I can actually hear myself think.

Over the years I've developed a routine to avoid the kitchen table on early mornings and late evenings. Its chaos. No one actually listens to what the other person is saying. Across the table buttered knives, slops of dark brown tea and spoken words are exchanged relentlessly. I used to sit at the end of the table in silence. No one noticed me. Mouths full off steaming hot vegetables and chunks of half cooked red meat spat out words from the day's experiences. Tales that meant nothing to me. Then one day I just decided, I've been about too long, people are getting tired of me.

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The Red Lion, on the corner of Dukes Street and the parkway is my home from home. Its interior hasn't changed from the first day I walked in. Exposed brick walls, stained glass and a wooden floor that's stood the test of time. In the far corner the Snug. Business is done here. When the factory owners threatened closure, it was here they planned their revenge. Men and women. Generations from the surrounding streets have walked in through the doors. Its where I finally made up my mind.

Pat Foyle, whom I've know since school was the first to hear. Over drunken pints I opened my soul like never before. Since that dark day in June I've thought about nothing else. Pat doesn't tolerate fools easily. Harsh words came my way. Words that made me really think about the choice I'd made. I remember walking home that afternoon. As soon as I opened the back door I could hear the argument. Passing through the downstairs rooms unnoticed I walked into the hallway. Hanging my grey overcoat on its wooden peg I'd already made up my mind. That evening over dinner father never said a word. No one noticed.

As the volume increased I sat at the top of the table and looked on as my family grew old without me. I realised that I've been about too long and these people, my people, are tired of me.

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“So Mr Casey, have you seen our brochure?”

“Im not booking a holiday you know.”

“Sorry?”

“Never mind...what's the basic cost?”

“If you turn to page seven, you'll see we offer a range of offers to suit all your requirements.”

“Your tea?”

“I'll need your measurements Mr Casey.”

“Did you put sugar in this?”

“Two.”

“With our without my shoes on?”

“Sorry Mr Casey?”

“Do you want me to take them off?”

“Pardon?”

“My shoes, Jesus wept.”

As I left the shop that afternoon I realised Mrs Castle was the first woman to see me in my underpants since Margaret on the day of her sister's wedding. After the initial embarrassment I paid my deposit and left the most bland shop on the high street, smiling.

June 28<sup>th</sup> is fast approaching.