

Ever wondered where you go when you're dead? Then watch this space. Cos I've been there. And here's something to blitz your mind.

I'm still there.

And I might not be coming back.

It's out of my control now. I can't make anything happen in this place. It's just me and Death. And you don't mess with him. He's the gobbo in charge.

But what's it like? I'll tell you, Bigeyes.

First up, no lights or heavenly voices. None of that

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stuff. What you get is memories. It's just like they say. They come flashing past. They're like pictures.

They're doing it now. Pictures of people, places, stuff you've done. Your life like a movie spinning through you. And that's where it hurts.

Cos I don't want to see mine.

Or most of it. Maybe bits. The times with Becky.

Now don't get confused, cos there's two Beckys, right? Sweet and sour. There's the one who died. That's sweet Becky. And there's the one who should have died. The sour one—the troll, the dreg.

The one who zipped me over and told me little Jaz was her daughter when she wasn't. I got lots of names for that troll. But we'll call her Bex, all right? So you don't get stumped in the head. Cos you get stumped easy, don't you, Bigeyes?

Becky and Bex, sweet and sour. Got it?

I've been seeing pictures of sweet Becky. Her beautiful face, those eyes. Her hair used to shine. Did I ever tell you that? And it had this kind of smell. Sort of fragrant.

Even the day she died she smelt like a flower. And looked like one.

I miss her, Bigeyes. She's the only picture I want to see in all these memories. But I got no choice about that. I got to deal with the rest of 'em too. And they're coming thick as rain. Death's one busy gobbo.

And here's something else.

They don't all make sense. It's weird, Bigeyes. All this stuff, all these pictures—they're kind of cloudy. I thought everything would be clear in Death's little snug.

But it's not clear at all. I'm seeing things I remember and yet I don't remember. Does that make sense? Like they're memories but they're not. Things I've done only I've forgotten.

Specially the early stuff.

That's the stuff that's really hard to see. I can see bits but lots of it's sort of shadowy, like it's almost a memory but not quite. Maybe that's a good thing. I've never liked remembering.

But at least it's not jumping about. It comes in the right order. Starts with Day One. And here's the first problem. Cos Day One's a shadow. Can't remember Day One, can't see it clear. But I can feel it. And that's the second problem.

Cos it was trouble. I'm telling you, it was trouble.

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That's right, Bigeyes. The bad stuff started on Day One.

Don't ask me how I know.

And the pictures keep coming. Age one, age two, age three and on they go. I don't like to watch 'em but they keep coming. They just won't stop. He's one mean gobbo, this Death.

Age seven.

I'm standing on the pedestrian crossing, stopping all the traffic, swearing at the drivers. Only now, when I see it flashing in front of me, it's not like I remember it. What's different is me.

I'm different.

Cos I'm not just a seven-year-old kid in this picture. I'm a kid who's lived for seven years. And that's not the same thing at all. Not when I've just watched those seven years again and seen what's in 'em, and who's in 'em, and what happened.

And there's shadows in there too, stuff I can't see, stuff I've blocked out and don't want to remember. Or maybe it's stuff that's blocked me out. Don't know. Doesn't make much difference.

It's bad anyway.

I'm seeing that kid on the pedestrian crossing like I'm watching someone I never knew before. Only there's no time to think about it. Cos there's more pictures coming.

Age eight, and then the change, the big change. If it was bad before, it's worse now. New places, new faces, new dangers. Big new dangers. Only I'm getting dangerous too. You better believe it. I'm getting dangerous too.

And I'm starting to like it.

Age nine, age ten. It changes again. I meet Becky, sweet Becky. Good pictures at last, only more dangers too, more faces. I can see most of 'em now. Not many shadows here. It's the stuff before seven that's cloudy. This later stuff's easy to see.

And I don't like it.

I almost prefer the shadows. They're bad news but at least I can't see what they are. These other pictures—I can't miss 'em. Each one's like the knife Trixi's brother stung in my head.

And they're coming too fast. I want to tell Death to slow down, only I don't dare. Like I say, you don't mess with this gobbo.

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Age ten. Yeah, I'm still seeing age ten. It's taking time to run through. That's cos so much happened in it. Too much. I'm starting to hurt, starting to want out. I'm starting to lose it. Only good thing is Becky.

Then I lose her too.

Age eleven. When it came to a head, when it all got too much. And then I'm gone.

Only I'm not. I've run away, left the old place far behind. I've moved to the city and I'm playing dead. I thought it was a good idea. But I should have known better. It was a dimpy idea. It worked for three years.

But they were always going to find me.

You can't play dead with these gobbos. The only dead for them is real dead. And you don't play it. Cos dead's not a game. Not with them.

The pictures keep coming. Lots of 'em now. Like the closer I get to when the knife plugged me, the better I see stuff. Maybe it's just cos it's more recent. Don't think so though. Death's not fussy how he gives you stuff. He just blams it in your face. And right now he's spinning more than I can keep up with.

There's the places in the city, places where I slapped it, living rough on the streets, before I found

my snugs. Duffs I hung around with in alleys, doorways, hovels, ruins, finding out where they went.

Then finding my own way.

The houses and flats and other places I snugged out in. I got pictures of all of 'em rushing through my head. And all the nebs I saw. The slugs I kept away from in the city, the gangs who caught up with me.

Like Trixi's lot.

And then Mary. Old white-haired Mary with her crazy dog. And here's another thing about Death, Bigeyes. He's not fair. You'd think now he's got me he'd tell me what happened in the bungalow that day.

Only no.

Like I say, he's one mean gobbo.

He shows me the house again, and the gobbos. I can see 'em forcing their way in. Paddy and his mate, and the fat man, the hairy grunt. I can see myself running away. I can hear the gunshots again.

Bang! Bang!

Two of 'em, loud in my brain. Only I still can't see what happened in the bungalow. Why won't Death show me that?

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Cos he's too hot with buzzing the next picture at me. Trixi's body lying on the floor. Paddy leering in the doorway. Sour Bex smashing the window, and me and her running away.

And I still don't know what happened to Mary. Cos everything's moving again. It's me and Bex and now little Jaz. I don't know she's Trixi's daughter. Bex's told me the kid's her own. Only Bex was lying.

And the pictures keep coming. Bex disappears, Jaz disappears. I find 'em again, only I find the girl gang too. And Riff. And Dig, the big guy, Trixi's brother, the guy with the knife.

And the gobbos are still after me. Paddy's gone but there are still five left. And I'm wounded now. Dig's knife's ripped up my forehead and I'm blacking out. And here's where everything turns dark.

What do I remember at the end?

A knife moving, cool as a breeze. A hot pain singing in my head. The trolls in the girl gang screaming. Riff standing back, Dig grinning. The whole crowd bundling me onto the bank, leaving me by the river. The stumble to the warehouse, the gobbos closing in.

A thought fluttering in my head. I'm fourteen and I'm going to die.

Darkness. Then gunshots.

Bang! Bang!

Two of 'em. Like the time at the bungalow. And then the voice.

It speaks my name. The name sweet Becky gave me long ago. Only the person speaking doesn't know that name. I know that cos I recognize the voice. It's the last thing I remember before this. And I'm freaking out, Bigeyes.

Cos the voice is speaking again now. I can hear it right this moment. Speaking my name like it did before.

'Blade,' it says.

And I'm feeling this shiver.

Cos the person speaking my name is dead too.

'Blade,' says the voice.

It's Mary. Old white-haired Mary with the crazy dog. But Mary's dead.

'You're dead,' I murmur.

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'As dead as you are,' comes the answer.

Silence, sort of. No more voices, just the buzz of my thoughts. Then another sound. Kind of a low rumble. Can't make it out.

'You're dead,' I say again.

She doesn't answer this time. But there's still this rumble. It's not loud, just a weird blur of a sound. Something's moving too. Maybe it's me.

It's not me. It's something else.

Only I'm moving with it.

The pictures have stopped. Just darkness now, and I'm starting to wonder about death. More darkness, more rumbling. Is this it? Am I going to lose it now? Maybe that wasn't death before. Maybe it was just the way in. And now the door's closed behind me, and there's no light inside.

Or maybe . . .

Another voice, some gobbo. He's murmuring something. No, he's not. He's shouting. Just sounds like he's murmuring cos he's a long way away. He's shouting something but I can't hear the words.

Or is it me that's far away? Cos I don't know where I am, Bigeyes. I'm blown away somewhere and

I'm scared. It's like I'm in a million pieces. They're all so tiny I can't see 'em. Or maybe there's no pieces at all. Maybe I'm nothing. Maybe I don't exist.

Then it happens. The jolt, the pain, the explosion. The blinding light in my head, the picture flooding my eyes. The inside of an ambulance, two medics leaning over me, black gobbos.

Mary.

Then darkness again and a rush of thoughts. And pain everywhere, digging into me.

'Ah!'

Someone's screaming.

'It's all right,' says a voice.

Another scream. Shit, it's me.

'It's all right,' says the voice again. 'We'll get you there.'

One of the gobbos talking. But now I can hear Mary again.

'Blade.' She speaking soft, right in my ear. 'You're going to be OK.'

I got questions banging my head now, pricking my brain worse than the wound itself. She's used that name again. And I never told her it. What's going on?

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I'm thinking back to when the knife got me. I can see the old hulk by the river. I can see Bex tied up. I can see the girl gang. I can see Tammy and Sash, and Xen and Kat. I can see dead Trixi's brother, the big guy, Dig. And Riff, his slimy mate.

But I'm moving on already. I can see little Jaz in the cabin, screaming cos she's terrified of me. And then the knife, splitting the air, splitting my head. Blood filling my eyes. Like it's doing now.

'Blood! Blood!'

'Easy, boy.'

The man's voice again. Calm-sounding gobbo. Only what can he do? I thought I was dead. I almost was. I almost am. They won't get me out of this. I'm drifting off. They won't get me back. No way.

Another jolt, another explosion, another blinding pain.

Tight round my chest. I'm screaming, sitting up, eyes open. I'm peering at faces and they're peering back. I can see the front of the ambulance, the gobbo driving, some woman next to him, turning round. I can see the medics close, edging me back down.

And Mary.

And now more faces. Only they're not here in the ambulance. I know it. They're not real. I'm seeing Becky from the past, beautiful sweet Becky. And little Jaz. And then Bex.

'Not you, troll!' I scream.

'I'm here,' she answers.

'Not you!'

'Blade—'

It's not Bex talking. It's Mary.

And I'm slumped back again, pain still pounding. It's getting worse. I'm moaning now. Can't drift off and I want to. I want to blast out somewhere else. Don't care where. Long as it's somewhere well dead.

I can feel hands touching me. Hate that, hate hands. And they're bringing the pictures back.

'Ah!'

'We're losing him.' One of the gobbos, talking fast. 'Quick!'

More hands. Something clammed over my mouth. It's going dark again. Sound of a siren growing loud.

Growing soft.

More darkness. Voices talking all at once, but they're low now. Can't even make out the words. Just

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know they're talking about me. Why's the pain still there if I'm drifting off?

Cos I am drifting off.

And it's good. It's a stinger. Like when I fold up in a blanket in some snug, and I know the owners aren't coming back, and it's my house, my little place, for another few hours, and I can rest, and forget, and not be me.

Not be Blade.

So why's the pain still there? It's meant to go when you die. You lose your body, you lose your pain. But I've lost my body and I still got the pain. And it's getting worse.

Now the noises are coming back. The voices, and they're not talking low. They're yelling. And the siren. That's yelling too. Everything's yelling. Even I'm yelling. That's right. I'm yelling and yelling and yelling. Cos suddenly I know what I really want.

I want life, Bigeyes. I want it back.

And I want it now.

Black silence. That's right. Black. It's got a colour.

And everything's changed again. I'm somewhere else. Only I don't know where. All I know is it's black. And it's quiet. And I'm awake in my head. You better believe it. I'm wide awake.

I'm watching cute, listening cute.

The black silence goes on falling. No voices, no sirens, no engines. No breathing even. I listen for my own. Can't hear it. But I can feel my chest moving. And the flicker of my eyes as they search the darkness.

Nothing.

Just black silence.

And me, thinking.

I'm lying down somewhere. I've worked that out. Don't know where. In a hospital maybe. They must have been taking me somewhere in that ambulance. Got to be a hospital. Only it doesn't feel like one.

The memories have come back again. Only they're different now. Or they look different. They were rushing past me before. But maybe that's cos I was dying. Now they're just floating in my head. I can't even see 'em really. There's too much darkness. I can just feel 'em moving like clouds.

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And I'm starting to wonder again if I'm dead after all.

'Blade,' says a voice.

I tense up. It's Mary speaking. And she's close.

I feel something, a hand. It's touching my arm. Don't like it. Try to move my arm, flick the thing off. It's no good. Can't shift a muscle. But the hand goes away. And the voice comes back.

'You've been badly hurt,' she says. 'A knife slash across your forehead and very deep. The doctor says it cut your temporal artery. They've fixed that but you lost a lot of blood. Your clothes were so drenched they've had to destroy them. But at least you're alive.'

'Where am I?'

'In a hospital.'

'Who else is in the ward?'

'Just you and me.'

'No other patients?'

'No, you've got it all to yourself.'

'It's dark.'

'You've got a bandage over your eyes.'

More silence. I'm glad of that cos my brain's working again. Not fast, not yet. But it's working. And I

know it's bad. I'm alive, OK. I'm in a hospital. But I can't move. So I'm still dead dung.

There's too many nebs want me grilled, Bigeyes. And don't tell me Mary's the only one who knows I'm here. What about Lenny and the grunt and the others? They got to be somewhere close.

I got to find out what happened. And I got to do it quick before I get rubbed out.

'You called me Blade,' I say.

My voice sounds like someone else's.

No answer. But I know Mary's still there. I can feel her close by. So why's she not answering? I hear a movement. Someone's joined her. I don't like this. Reach up, try and get rid of the bandage.

'Stop that.' Another voice, a woman, brisk, cheery. Got to be a nurse. 'I'll take off the bandage if you want me to. Just don't pick at it. And you're not to move your other arm at all. There's a needle in it with the drip attached.'

I don't answer. I'm just glad my arm's moving again. I thought for a moment I couldn't shift it.

'Now then,' says the woman.

Another touch on my arm, firmer than Mary. I feel

my hand placed on the bed. Then a faint light round my eyes. But not much. Even with the bandage off, it feels dark.

'Can you see us?' says Mary.

Just about. Nurse leaning over me, Mary sitting by the bed. They look like ghosts. Maybe I do too.

'Can you take off the drip?' I murmur.

Nurse shakes her head.

'We'll keep it there a bit longer. It's not essential now you're out of the high-risk zone, but we'll leave it in for the moment just to be on the safe side. So don't fiddle with it, OK?'

'How long have I been here?'

They look at each other, like they don't know which one's meant to answer. Nurse draws up a chair next to Mary. I don't want this. I want Mary on her own. I got to know what happened. And how much time I got before they come for me.

Mary answers.

'They rushed you in yesterday. Operated on you straightaway and gave you a blood transfusion. You've been unconscious most of the time since.'

It's hard keeping my eyes on 'em. The lids keep

falling down. I'm aching all over now, specially my forehead. I almost want the nurse to put the bandage back. But I can't let her. There's too much to do.

I got to think.

Yesterday, Bigeyes. I've been here since yesterday. I remember the ambulance, sort of, but not the operation. Or anything since. That's bad, I'm telling you. What's been going on while I've been lying here blacko? Who else has looked in on me apart from Mary?

And who's waiting outside for when I come out?

I got to get out of here. And I can't just blast out. First I'm not strong. Second I got to play stealth anyway. Got to sneak out. Trouble is, how weak's my body? I can move my arms and head. But what about the rest of me?

I haven't even tried standing up.

'You need to rest,' says the nurse.

'I want to talk.' I nod towards Mary. 'To her.'

'In the morning. When you've slept a bit more.'

'I want to talk to her.'

I feel my eyes close. I try to keep 'em open but it's no good. They close on their own. I hear my voice still speaking.

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'I want her to talk to her.'

Then Mary's voice.

'I'll talk to him for a bit. Since he wants to. If that's OK.'

'He's falling asleep,' says the nurse.

'No, I'm not,' I say.

'I'll stay with him anyway,' says Mary. 'If that's OK. Just for a few minutes.'

Sound of a chair moving. I hope it's the nurse going, not Mary. I don't open my eyes. I just wait. Hand on my arm again. Feels like it did before. It's Mary's hand. I can tell. Still don't like it but I'm glad it's there. I'm glad she's there.

I keep my eyes closed.

'Mary?'

'Yes, sweetheart?'

'Is it night-time?'

'Pretty much. Well, late evening anyway.'

'Feels dark.'

'It's certainly dark outside. Cold too, even for November.'

The hand on my arm moves, strokes the skin. I give a flick and the hand goes away.

'You don't like being touched,' she says.

I don't answer. Not sure it was a question anyway.

I'm thinking faster now. I'm tired all over but I'm not going to sleep, whatever the nurse thinks. I'm too scared for that. I got to know stuff. I got to find out what to do. And I got to find out soon or I'm cooked.

'What happened at the bungalow?' I say.

She talks quiet but not just for me. She's got secrets of her own. I remember that from the bungalow. She was keeping lots back then. I like her voice, always did. Soft, Irish. Still don't trust it though. She called me sweetheart just now but she's also called me Blade. I keep my eyes closed and listen.

'They killed Buffy,' she says. 'Those men. She was barking at them and snarling and snapping her teeth. I tried to hold her back. I knew they'd kill her if she went for them.'

'And she did.'

'Yes. I couldn't stop her. She wasn't my dog, you know. She was a stray. I picked her up on the road a

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few days before I met you. Or maybe she picked me up. Not sure which. We just hit it off. Suited each other, I guess. I don't think she realized how grateful I was to have a rottweiler for a friend.'

'Which one of 'em killed her?'

'The fat man.'

That must have been the gunshots, Bigeyes.

'He just pulled out a knife,' says Mary, 'and let her jump onto it.'

Shit, it wasn't the gunshots.

'I keep seeing that man's face,' she says.

So do I, Bigeyes. I'm seeing it right now. I had that grunt in front of me when I was lying outside the warehouse. I could have pissed his life away. I had a knife, just like him, and he was square on, easy plug. Could have split him with one throw.

But he's still alive. And I'm stuck here.

And I still don't know about the gunshots.

Mary's talking again.

'That's what did it. Buffy getting killed.'

She falls quiet for a moment, then goes on.

'So I pulled out my gun—'

'You what!'