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## **crime in a fairy tale forest**

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There it is, illuminated and sparkling, a ladder of lights, propped against the sky, the steepest hill in London, and I'm plodding up after a long day and late night at work, letting the frazzle of meetings, deadlines, phone calls, emails, leak into the February dark, walking slowly, too tired to hurry, the tail lights of the last bus sinking over the distant crest ahead, when I come across a spoon, as if the sickle moon above me has tipped, just a fraction, and a dribble of light has trickled over the edge and fallen through space, through time, to arrive at the tip of my shoe. A silver tablespoon on the pavement . . .

As if a burglar, with crepe soled shoes and woolly Balaclava, going up the hill ahead of me, minding his business, had shifted his booty sack from one shoulder to the other and the spoon, finding a hole in the corner where a jagged object, perhaps a carriage clock, had rubbed at the hemp, slipped through, and just at that moment a police squad car, sirens blazing, hot on the trail of another burglar, swept by, tyres spraying droplets of oily rain water into the cobbled gutter. (In this part of the city there are still cobbles under the tarmac, surfacing here and there at the edges.) And the burglar almost broke into a run, his heart banging dangerously, almost leapt into a hedge, but restrained himself at the last second because this wasn't the first time the cops had missed him, and in that tyre-squealing, siren-blazing instant, the cops missed him again and he missed the sound of silver striking tarmac, a thin note on a cold night, easily missed in the buzz of the city, so

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he went on, up the hill, and didn't notice that his sack was lighter by one spoon - an engraved silver spoon with a hallmark of a dancing bear, the date stamped into the underside of the handle - 1868 - Russian silver, scratched and worn . . .

As if a traveller in a tattered rabbit fur hat and a greasy coat made of wolf skin had staggered through the hot, dusty streets of Constantinople, knocked on a wooden door studded with iron rivets and the butler, who worked for the British consul, opened it and asked him his business, but the traveller, burdened with state secrets, breathless and tear stained, brushed past him and ran through another door, into a party, where women in low cut evening gowns and masks twirled and glided on a polished floor in the arms of their escorts, while the band played, the chandeliers glittered, then the traveller trembled, lost his voice and fainted, recovering two days later to find himself tucked up in an attic, under a quilt embroidered with ducks, the contents of the little felt pouch he carried in his pocket exchanged for a bowl of chicken soup, cooling by his bedside, the promise of the bed for one more night, none of which he understood because all he could hear were distant gunshots, footsteps crunching over frozen snow, while downstairs, in the basement pantry, the butler who was fussy about his cutlery, and fed up with all the polishing, sat on a high stool in front of an open window tossing out the remains of a once treasured place setting - old fashioned, the butler considered, and clumsy - so out it went, through the window to lie on the pavement, lonely without its fellows, lost, like a solitary crumb in a fairy-tale forest . . .

As if an old woman with a bent back, wicker shopping trolley, flapping raincoat and transparent, pleated, plastic rain-hat, an old woman who took tea in the garden of the cafe at Kenwood House, in Hampstead, on a Monday afternoon when it was relatively quiet,

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in February, in the rain, who sat by the back wall, near the fig tree, and waited until no one was looking, or they'd all gone inside where it was altogether more cosy, less British, waited until she was alone. She didn't notice the waiter standing by the back door, smoking, staring bleakly into the curtain of rain. Then the old woman, who used to be a drug dealer in the nineteen-sixties, who did time in Holloway and was released early on health grounds, slipped the spoon into her pocket. No doubt, thought the waiter, (in Spanish) she will put that spoon into a drawer when she gets back home, along with a teaspoon from the Great Eastern Hotel at Liverpool Street, a desert spoon from the Victoria and Albert Museum, all her other spoons, but he didn't care; he shrugged his shoulders and thought of his girlfriend back in Madrid, wondering when he would see her again and if they would one day be married and have children and grow as old as the old woman who was walking with difficulty over the flagstones, dragging her shopping trolley down the rain sodden steps, slipping on the bottom one, the spoon falling out of her pocket, clinking, tip over tail, unnoticed by either of them, falling onto the pavement . . .

And I pick it up and put it in my pocket and run up the hill, into the night that has grown larger, where the moon is still tipping over, and there is an echo, a thin note flying into the bosom of a million cars, a million tapes, CD's, radios, DVD players, computer games, washing machines, a million people getting up to put on the kettle in the commercial break, or during the scary bit, or the sexy bit, or the boring bit, and my legs have grown longer, my muscles stronger, the dark stretching round me, expectant and alive . . .