

Bickering's End

by

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Bickering's End

Lying in the darkness, surrounded only by the cold gusts of wind which blew in from the sea, Martin listened. Bickering on Sea was almost beautiful again, with the moon full and bright, and its walls and roofs washed with luminosity. But the devastation was still clear, until he closed his eyes when he could imagine the sounds of people enjoying a day at the seaside. But now, the town was, as far as he knew, deserted and he had nowhere else to go. The acrid smell of old fires still laced on the salty breeze and Martin wanted to cry.

He reminded himself that silence was good. It meant no one was searching. Not that he'd seen anyone search the ruins of the town for at least a week. Not like in those first days, when the fresh rubble was alive with enthusiastic soldiers looking for survivors. Then, the skeletons of buildings had been illuminated instead by painfully bright lights, mounted on the bellies of helicopters. The beams had slid over broken walls and the husks of cars, casting shadows which moved, almost as if they were themselves alive.

The squads of soldiers had combed the former shops and houses, looking for the supposedly lucky ones and picking up valuables they found among the detritus of shattered buildings. It had seemed like the best choice, to crawl out from the rubble and throw themselves on the mercy of the troops. That's what they did. And the soldiers didn't shoot them, as they feared. Instead, they had simply smiled and apologised as they tied the hands of their new charges behind their backs. "It's just for security. Don't worry," they'd said, even as the plastic ties dug into Martin's wrist.

Martin and his little sister, Judy, who he'd surrendered with, were left with two more soldiers at the corner of the next street. Judy had been tearful and very scared. One of the guards, a woman with kind eyes and a big gun, smiled down at her. "Don't worry, kid. It'll be fine." The small kindness had seemed out of place, but it had also worked. Judy stopped crying and stood patiently next to her older brother, waiting for whatever might happen next.

That was the problem with lying in the dark, Martin thought now, wedged

against a wall, keeping watch, your memories came back. Even if you didn't want them, there was nothing you could do. He felt helpless. Trapped.

After a while, on that night two weeks ago, a military vehicle had driven slowly down the street, towards the corner where they waited under the eyes of the guards. Its line of halogen lamps lighting up the rubble on either side of the cleared road, picking out occasional splashes of colour from broken shop signs, tattered curtains, and other remnants of destruction. When the armoured car drew level, Martin saw a soldier peering out of the hatch on top, stationed behind a huge machine gun, carefully scanning the darkened ruins as if a hostile force might, against all the evidence, be ready to jump out and fight back.

A cloud of diesel fumes surrounded him as the vehicle growled past, followed by, straggling behind the vehicle, dozens of people, just like him and Judy. Shell shocked, dirty, hands clipped behind their backs... A somber, hopeless, silent procession. Most of the faces he saw were people he had seen around town, in better days. Martin's group were ushered into line behind the convoy and instructed to follow, accompanied by their guards. The silence of the march somehow managed to be louder than the growl of the engine and crunching of their feet on shards of concrete, brick and glass. It was eerie.

They trudged on, catching glimpses of side streets where more squads of soldiers were searching, house to house, property to property. Every so often, the night air was shattered by loud cracks, which echoed off of tumbledown walls and made Judy look quickly at her brother for reassurance. He tried to smile reassuringly, but felt unconvinced.

"That'll be more of 'em," said one of their guards cheerfully.

"Silence!" came the command from somewhere out in the surrounding darkness.

"Sorry, Sarge!" was his reply, although the look on his face said otherwise as he smirked at his colleague.

The subdued convoy emerged from the darkness of the town, into the floodlit expanse of Bickering's former Market Square. Gone were any of the brightly coloured stalls. Floodlights had been set up along the perimeter, causing the prisoners to blink as they came out of the gloom of the streets of the town, eyes watering, into brightness almost as dazzling as a summer's day. Everything was alive with activity, as uniformed people rushed from one place to another, sometimes accompanied by tired, dirty-looking civilians. At each

corner of the square was a scaffold tower, topped by spotlights, and, Martin assumed, guards. It reminded him of the pictures of refugee camps he'd seen on TV with his dad.

His dad...

Martin's mum, Lynn, had been bemoaning his dad's absence when the sirens had sounded all over Bickering. Who knew they existed? But they were similar to the ones that had been used during the Blitz in World War Two, so everyone took notice and sort of understood.

At the time, they had been sat together at the kitchen table. Judy was reading a book, while Martin and Lynn talked politics, and conjectured about the missing man of the house. He'd been to Branchester the day before, for a meeting of the Party, and hadn't returned home. Lynn had expected him home by the previous lunchtime. There hadn't even been an answer on his mobile.

By evening, Lynn had reported it to the Police, and the newly installed automated Desk Sergeant at Bickering Police Station had processed the information she gave before responded with the message; *"There is no need to worry, Mrs. Duller. If after 72 hours your husband has still not returned, please return to file a full report."* She'd been unable to get past the lobby to talk to a real person, and had returned home disappointed.

It was just one more of the many changes that the new government, The National Government for UK Unity, had introduced: AI policing. *"Freeing up 'human' officers for front line response,"* they said. Lynn had been very angry about that.

But, what about Luke? Her husband never stayed out all night, even after one of his meetings.

Lynn had been mid-sentence, explaining what she had planned for her husband's return, when he might regret coming home at all, when the sirens sounded. Martin had laughed, knowing that it would all be alright, because, despite their disagreements, his parents were like a pair of lovelorn teenagers most of the time. As the sound of wailing rose over the town, they stopped dead and looked at each other. "What on earth is that?" Lynn asked.

Suddenly and simultaneously, a text appeared on all of their phones.

"Reports in Bickering of terrorist activity. All residents take cover. Direct action

forthcoming. This is not a drill. You have until noon. NGUKU.”

Martin looked at his mum, then Judy. “What?”

Lynn flicked on the radio, which was usually tuned to Bickering FM.

“... is not a drill. Representatives of the National Government for UK Unity have denounced the town of Bickering on Sea as a ‘hotbed of rebellion’ and have resolved to take imminent, direct action. All loyal UK citizens are requested to take cover, according to guidelines, in cellars, under stairs, or under tables. Imminent action will be taken to quell the rebellion, for the good of the country and the freedom of her citizens. If you are in a position to spread the word, please do so. However, do not take unnecessary risks. Messages have been sent to all devices, via all possible outlets, in accordance with the National Strategy against Terrorism. This is a recorded message on behalf of the UK Defense force and the National Government for UK Unity. God save the Prime Minister and the King.”

There was a beep on the airwaves, as the message reset and began to play once again.

“The time is... 11:51... This is a recorded message, on behalf of the UK Defense Force and the National Government for UK Unity. Terrorist activity has been reported in Bickering on Sea. It is not the first such report, and the National Government for UK Unity are sending this message as a precursor to direct action. This is not a drill. Representatives of the National Government for UK Unity have denounced the town of Bickering on Sea...”

“The message is the same online”, Martin confirmed after he had looked. Lynn tried the TV. It was the same there too where a somber newsreader spoke the same words in a matter of fact voice.

Lynn was decisive. “You two, get down in the cellar. I’ll go next door and make sure Mrs. Finnes is safe.”

“But Mum,” Judy cried, “I’m reading. And I’m meeting Sophie later...”

“No arguing, Judy. Do as you’re told. Martin take care of your sister. I won’t be long. Oh, and take some water too. Hurry!”

That was the last time they saw their mum. They were still waiting for her return nine minutes later when the explosions thundered above ground and the house collapsed, burying them in the cellar. It took Martin and Judy almost twelve hours to dig their way out, and, when they emerged, they were greeted by devastated streets, rubble, spotlights, and the sounds of helicopters overhead. It had been too dark to search the rubble next door, where Mrs. Finnes had lived, or any of the houses in their street.

Around the perimeter of the old Market Square, huge, rectangular marquees glowed silver, the blood red symbol of the National Government for UK Unity emblazoned on their sides. There was the smell of cooking and Martin realised that he was starving. He looked around, searching for the source of the smell. He could even hear the sounds of children shouting in play above the hum of generators.

In the center of the square was another, more imposing, marquee with a quadruple line of people queueing in front. Martin and Judy were ordered to join at the back and stood there, brother and sister, hand in hand.

“What’s going on, Mart?” Judy asked in a fearful voice.

“I don’t know, Jude,” he replied. “Just stick with me and it’ll be alright, OK?”

“Where’s Mum?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is she dead?”

“I hope not. I’m sure she’s OK.”

“I’m hungry.”

“So am I.”

The line moved forward rapidly, while Martin and Judy shuffled along in uncomfortable silence, getting closer to the front. Meanwhile, other groups of townsfolk, their hands tied behind their backs, joined the growing line. Eventually, they were standing at the front, before the entrance to the huge tent, flanked by tall, fierce-looking guards, automatic weapons held loosely at an angle across their chests. Judy hid behind her brother when one of them glanced down at her.

After a few moments, a young man, not much older than Martin, emerged from the door and, seeing that Judy was holding onto Martin, beckoned both of them to enter; “Quickly now, follow me, please,” he said in a hassled voice.

They did as they were told, walking into the interior of the marquee. The atmosphere of calm efficiency was almost overwhelming, especially after the almost panicked feeling of the Market Square. The young man, who wore an olive uniform, led them to a table to one side of the entrance where he immediately took a pair of blue handled scissors and cut the ties from their hands, freeing numb wrists and aching elbows. “If you rub your wrists, they’ll feel better in no time. Now, we need to register you both, come on.”

They followed him to a table, hand in hand, where an officious looking woman in the same uniform looked up and flashed a glance at the young man, then at Martin. “Are you her father?” she demanded.

“No. Brother.”

“I can’t do them together,” she said to her younger colleague. “We’ll need the girl in the children’s section.”

Judy gripped onto Martin’s arm, limpet like. “I don’t want to leave you!” The woman sighed loudly, impatient with yet another problem in the middle of a busy night. She made a pre-emptory signal and a female guard walked forward and quickly grabbed Judy’s hand; “Come with me,” she ordered.

Judy snatched her hand back and hid behind Martin’s legs. She was stiff with panic and was about to scream as the woman approached again.

The uniformed young man held up a mollifying hand, stalling the female guard. She stopped as the man spoke to Martin; “It really will be quicker and easier for everyone if your sister simply goes with my colleague. I promise she won’t be hurt. It is only for processing.” His voice was not unkind and Martin nodded.

He knelt down and spoke to his sister, face to face, gently holding her hands and looking into her eyes. “It’ll be alright, Jude. I promise. Go with her and I’ll see you in a few minutes, ok?”

For a moment he thought she might refuse, but she rubbed the tears from her eyes and nodded courageously. The woman led her away, through a door to the left.

Martin stood again and looked back at the woman behind the desk who, as

if nothing at all had happened, asked sharply, “Name?”

“Martin Fuller,” he replied.

She tapped something into her tablet and waited for a moment. Then asked, “Woodhouse Road?”

“No, that’s my uncle. I live... used to live... on Branchester Road.” She looked at him sharply, then looked back down at the tablet.

“Age?”

“19.”

“Mother’s maiden name?”

“Crabbe.”

“Father’s name?”

“Luke.”

She nodded. Tapped her screen with a flourish and spoke to the young man who was still standing next to him; “Room G.”

The man saluted the instruction and said to his charge, “Please, follow me Mr. Fuller.”

They walked through a door to the right and into a corridor lined with identical doors, each with a different letter above them.

“What about my sister?” Martin asked.

“She’ll be fine, don’t worry. She’s young enough.”

“Can I see her? She’ll be frightened.”

The young officer ignored his question and opened the door with a ‘G’ above it. “In here, please.”

Martin walked through.

There was a table, upon which stood a computer and camera, like the one he’d seen on the day he’d applied for his new UK identity card. Behind the table sat another man in an olive green uniform. He was much older and had a number of medal tabs on his chest. The young man beside Martin saluted the older officer, spun on his heel and walked out.

“Sit down,” the older man commanded Martin, who did as he was told,

noticing that two guards had appeared behind him, on either side of the door.

“Look into the camera. We need to scan your face.”

Martin did so. There was a flash, as lasers scanned his face, after which the man looked intently at his screen, reading what he saw. “You are Martin John Fuller. Born on the 5th September 2001?” he asked.

“Yes. I told the lady out there. What’s going on?” Martin replied.

“Your address is 38 Branchester Road. A house registered in the name of Luke and Lynn Fuller.”

“Yes. Although it’s not there now. What’s going on... Sir?”

“Why are you not in Exeter, Mr. Fuller?” the older officer asked. “That’s where you’re studying, isn’t it? It is currently term-time, is it not?”

“Yes, but I came home to visit.”

“Why did you need to visit, Mr. Fuller?”

“The Doctor signed me off for a week.”

“Ah, yes. I see.” He looked at Martin and smiled, although it didn’t reach his eyes. “It can take some time for the files to update and unify. It says here that you have been diagnosed with depression. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you have depression, Mr. Fuller?”

“I don’t know. Stress I guess.”

“I see. So, why did you want to come back to Bickering on Sea? If you only felt a little down, if you know what I mean?”

“I wanted to see my family, that’s all. Can I see my sister now, please? She’ll be scared. Our mum’s disappeared, you see.”

“Everyone is in the same boat, Mr. Fuller. Please just answer my questions. I don’t see why one needs to return home, when one has depression, Mr. Fuller. Is it not the case that you came home to meet with your father?”

“I saw my father, yes. But I came to see my family. Where is my sister?”

The officer folded his hands and looked impassively across the desk. “Please, stop asking questions, Mr. Fuller. The sooner you answer my

questions, the sooner we can resolve the issues we have here. Tell me, Mr Fuller. Are you a member of any societies at University?"

"What does that have to do with it?" Martin asked vehemently. "The place has been bombed and my dad wasn't even home. I want to see my sister!" A heavy hand fell on his shoulder as one of the guards stepped forward.

"Please remain calm, Mr. Fuller. Or we will have you restrained, and you will certainly not be allowed to see your sister. Now, I ask again... Are you a member of any societies at University?"

He struggled for calm. "Yes. Several."

"Are you a member of..." he turned to read the screen, "...The UK Unity Society"

"No."

"Why not, might I ask? It is, after all, your campus chapter for the UK Unity Party."

"I never felt the need to join. It's all marching and shouting."

He was ignored, "The need? Surely all true Britons see the need to live in a truly united kingdom?"

"Yes, but..."

"No buts, Mr. Fuller. The best way to be united in Britain is to be united in action and belief... Tell me, Mr Fuller, are you aware that your father is a member of the Liberal Democrat Party?"

"Yes. He's been a member for years."

"Are you a member of the Liberal Democrat Party, Mr. Fuller?"

"No."

"But you were a member of their youth movement, were you not?"

"When I was a child, I was. But I stopped that a long time ago."

"It is, however, still an illegal party with terrorist leanings, Mr. Fuller. Surely membership of such a group is not something one simply walks away from?"

"I didn't know it was illegal," Martin commented.

"Since last Tuesday, Mr. Fuller. By an Act of the Prime Minister's

Office.” Before Martin could answer, the man continued, “Are you also aware, Mr. Fuller, that your father was arrested in Branchester? It was two days ago and he was at an illegal meeting of the Liberal Democrat Party?”

Martin was shocked, “I didn’t know that, no.”

“That your father was at an illegal meeting, or that he’d been arrested.”

“That he’d been arrested. And that the meeting had been illegal. Mum reported him missing to the police. They didn’t tell her anything.”

“Tell me Mr. Fuller. Are you proud to be a citizen of the UK?”

Martin was confused. “Why? Why ask me that?...”

The blow to his head was like being hit with an encyclopedia. Martin shot off his chair and crashed to the floor in a heap. One of the guards then grabbed his hair and pressed his face painfully onto the dirty floor. Dazed, all Martin could feel was the pain of his ringing right ear and the cold grittiness of the floor. His captor’s dirt covered boots filled his vision and he couldn’t move.

“Tell me, Mr. Fuller,” the man behind the desk continued in the same dispassionate voice, “are you a proud citizen of the UK? Or are you one of those who would seek to dilute us?”

Martin didn’t know what to say, so said nothing. The guard who loomed over him looked at the man behind the desk, before aiming a deliberate kick at Martin’s stomach. The wind was knocked out of him and his ribs exploded in pain. The two guards then grabbed Martin roughly under the arms and dumped him back on his chair, almost causing it to topple over. The officer simply impassively looked on.

“Mr. Fuller,” he said after a moment, “I think you have been poisoned by your father’s fabrications and the liberal propaganda of his party. But, I ask myself, is it too late for a man as young as you? Are you a lost cause?”

“I haven’t...” Another blow to the side of his head sent Martin flying again.

“It is interruptions like that which persuade me that it is, indeed, too late for you, Mr. Fuller. A more patient, less intransigent, man might be ripe for reeducation. But, for some, the new path set for our glorious nation is simply far beyond their comprehension. Such men and women become grit in the machine, causing problems with their foolhardy ideology. Disrupting to the smooth running of the machine of truth and purity of purpose.”

Martin was pinned down on the floor again and couldn't answer. "The new government," the man continued, "doesn't want to see people suffer during this time of transition, Mr. Fuller. The National Government for UK Unity would much prefer those people under its care to be won over. People like you, Mr. Fuller, who have been fed lies and mistruths about the subordination of the people of Britain to the interests of lesser nations and peoples. The National Government for UK Unity wants all of her citizens to find purpose and a place in the new order. To live by the truth. To pursue purity."

Martin noticed that there was spittle in the corners of the officer's mouth, and the man was leaning forward, as if overwhelmed by the passion within. "Let me tell you, Mr. Fuller, purity will come. Some might be unwilling to embrace it, but it will come. Either by fire, as in Bickering, or by education. The question we must answer, Mr. Fuller, is whether, having survived the fire, you are ready for education? Are you to follow your father to purity, Mr. Fuller?"

Martin was once again shoved back onto his chair. He could feel blood dripping from his nose and his side hurt, but he found the strength to look at the man in front of him. The officer seemed to be almost lighthearted, tapping his chin as if in dramatic deliberation as if the young man before him wasn't bleeding and bruised from mistreatment. "Tell me, Mr. Fuller, what should I do? The decision is mine, after all. Are you malleable to change, or not?"

"Can I see my sister?" Martin asked, half flinching at the expected blow, which didn't arrive.

The officer, stood up suddenly, clapping his hands in an act of decision. "No, Mr. Fuller, you may not see your sister. I think it's time she was given a fresh start, without the lies and half-truths of her childhood. I think she deserves a bright future, don't you? You, on the other hand, are a more challenging question."

Lying next to the wall, in the deserted, ruined streets of Bickering on Sea, Martin still felt the pain of his broken ribs and the emptiness of the loss of his sister. He had no idea where she had been taken. After the interrogation, the guards had tied his hands behind his back and dragged him through a door behind the officer's desk. From there, they had frog-marched him down a dim corridor, to a steel door through which they passed. Past two more guards, armed with assault rifles, and away from the noise of the Market Square, by means of a fenced in, covered passageway. Martin had tried to ask where they were going,

but was simply growled at threateningly.

Eventually, they had pushed him into the back of a police van, the kind used for transporting prisoners, where he had been ordered to sit with a half dozen or so older men and women who carried bruises of their own. The door had been slammed shut behind him and, over the next hour or so, more and more people had been pushed in to join them in the heavy silence. So many, in fact, that there was hardly any room left.

At some point, Martin gave up his seat for a tired looking woman he knew from the pier. In fact, the van was full of people he recognised vaguely from a lifetime living in Bickering on Sea. It was hard to believe it was now a smoking ruin.

One of the new arrivals had immediately thrown themselves against the closed doors, screaming to be released. After only a few seconds, their shouted request had been answered when the doors were yanked open, causing the angry man to spill out onto the concrete. The doors slammed closed behind him and everyone heard the muffled swearing and shouts of the guards outside. Then there was a loud crack, like a firework, and an oppressive silence. No one dared speak, but all of them understood what had just happened.

There were several more late arrivals, and Martin recognised one of them very well. The old man had a black eye and blood seeping from his mouth. “Mr. Taylor?” Martin whispered, frightened of being noticed by the guards.

The dull eyed man turned towards him and instantly his face lit up with recognition. “Mr. Fuller, is that you?” he replied. “I hear you’re doing well at University. Not so well now though, eh?”

“What’s going on, sir?”

“Did I teach you nothing worthwhile in History, young Martin? At the very least, watch the news. The UK Unity Party have seized power in old Blighty and this is the result. An army of fanatics and fascists. It seems that Bickering, among other towns I am sure, has been made an example of.

“They will brook no dissent, Martin. And our town was a dissenting place, as far as they were concerned, full of vermin and impurity. Anyone who opposes them must either hide, or face the consequences. We, it seems, sadly, are facing the consequences.”

“Shut up, you old fool,” said one of the other prisoners in the van.

“Why should I, Ian?” Mr. Taylor responded, some vehemence in his whisper. “It’s not going to get much worse, is it? My father was in Burma. My uncle was in France. I know how it goes.” He turned back to Martin. “I rather think we are about to be shipped to some camp or other. Stay close to me, Martin. We will prevail, I hope, but it will be hard.”

Martin could feel the relief flood his whole body. At least he wasn’t alone.

The van engine roared to life and the van juddered as it drove off into the night, causing those who were standing to stagger. They might have fallen over, except there wasn’t the space. Mr. Taylor closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the movement of the van; “It seems we’re heading out on the Castle Road. To Branchester, I imagine.”

“How do you know?” Martin asked.

“I’ve lived here for far too long to miss the signs, Martin. We’re headed straight uphill, past the castle.”

Unexpectedly, the van juddered to a stop and the back door opened, revealing a squad of armed soldiers and a serious looking officer. Martin could see they were in the car park of Bickering Castle, under flood lights again. Apart from the soldiers, it was deserted. The large group of men and women spilled out of the van and were ushered into an untidy rabble before being accompanied into the castle grounds.

The atmosphere felt heavy to Martin, as they made their way across the grass, towards the towers. He looked down as he walked, hands still pinned behind him. On the ground were scattered items, small and insignificant, but out of place in what had always been an immaculately kept tourist attraction. A pair of broken glasses, a tatty baseball cap... even a leather wallet. But he couldn’t stop to pick them up, although he wanted to.

“Stand still!” the officer commanded in a loud voice. The soil where the group came to a ragged halt seemed slightly wet under foot. “Line up... straight now!” Over the shuffling of feet, Martin could hear the swoosh of the sea and the distant hum of generators and helicopters in Bickering on Sea. Despite a slightly metallic smell, the air was cold and fresh, and the towers of the ruined castle were stark black silhouettes in the light of the moon, clawing for the stars and clouds.

The prisoners stood, facing the towers, their guards behind them.

Then, right behind him, a voice screamed, making him jerk in surprise,

“STAND STILL!!” Martin was standing still, but the voice was clearly directed at him. He was about to answer that he was standing still when a heavy blow thudded onto the back of his head and his legs gave way beneath him. He collapsed to the floor, dazed and confused, only to find that his attacker leaning over him screaming, “I SAID, STAND STILL YOU PIECE OF SPUTUM!”

Even while his ears were ringing, the same voice muttered much more quietly and close to his ear, “Whatever you do, stay still.” Martin almost doubted he’d heard it at all.

The officer shouted the order, “Fire!”, and there was an explosion of cracking gunfire as the guards shot their charges in their backs and heads. Martin was still lying prone on the ground, when the earth next to his head spewed soil from the impact of a bullet. It just missing him. Remembering the voice, he lay there, as still as he could, terrified. Shots echoed from the ruined walls and bodies slumped to the ground around him, thudding like meat falling from a hook. He heard the sound of someone nearby running, only for a shot to be followed by the sound of another body collapsing. There was a groan, followed by another shot, and then silence.

As the echoes of gunfire faded, the only sound was the seaward wind and the generators. It was broken by a soldier’s cough and a kerchunk sound, as a magazine was removed from a gun. Martin lay still, his whole being crying out for him to run and hide. His bladder was full. He felt sick.

“Clean up squad! Get here now, before the next lot arrive. Come on!!!” yelled the officer. Then Martin heard the soldiers and their officer walk away, back towards the car park.

Martin was too terrified to open his eyes. He could hear the sound of running feet coming from the shadows around the towers. He peeked through squinting eyelids, and saw a large group of ragged looking men and women racing to gather the corpses, one between two, and carry, or drag, them back in the direction from which they had come.

Martin himself was lifted from the floor, people at either end of him, carrying him by his feet and arms. He thought he might give away that he was alive, but managed to stay limp, as if dead. He knew that if he made a break for it now he would be found out immediately and shot.

Through slitted eyes, he saw that both dead eyed men carrying him were wearing grey overalls and hats. They were carrying him towards what

had been the picnic field, past the ruined main wall which overlooked the old caravan park. As they emerged from the castle grounds through a gap in the wall, the full force of the sea breeze hit them. One of the men stumbled, and he dropped Martin's legs, swore and picked up his burden again. His grip on Martin's ankles was painful and almost causing the young man to cry out, but he managed to swallow his exclamation and remain limp.

They carried him down the path and over a short expanse to the picnic field. Where there had once been lush grass where children threw balls and frisbees, there was now a huge pit. When they reached the edge, they tossed what they thought was his corpse into the pit and turned away.

Martin landed heavily on the uneven surface of other bodies, the wind knocked out of his lungs and the smell replaced it when he gulped another breath. It took every ounce of his determination not to scramble desperately away. He was overwhelmed by the stench of faeces and piss, and the oddly yielding surface of the mass grave.

Another body landed half across his legs, and Martin felt himself being buried under the corpses of other dead men and women, the same ones he had been crowded next to in the van. He made sure to surreptitiously use the opportunity to keep a space free so he could breathe.

After several minutes, bodies stopped raining down and Martin listened carefully. He didn't want to move too soon, alerting people to the fact that he was still alive. He heard a voice shout, "Get ready you lot! Next lot on the way!" There was the sound of running and shuffling feet, as the zombie-like work team ran back to the castle walls and Martin was left alone in the pit of corpses.

He knew that this was his one chance, and so he crawled out from under a corpse he didn't recognise and tried to work out which way to scramble. His senses screamed, expecting a cry and shot at any moment, but none came. He made his way to what he thought was the furthest point from the castle, and scrambled up the sloping wall of the newly excavated mass-grave. Looking back briefly, he saw lots of bodies, simply dumped in the ground, lying at odd angles, some looking sightlessly at the sky. The smell of death and evacuated bowels made him want to wretch, but he swallowed his vomit right back down.

Martin could see a pair of guards on the other side of the pit. They were looking back towards the castle. They were standing next to a pair of JCBs,

whose lights flooded the far side of the pit in light, leaving the area where Martin was in darkness. This was his chance. He crawled away from the pit, ducked under the wooden fence and into the long grass which swayed in the sea breeze on the hillside, which in turn dropped away towards a track. The track separated the caravan park from the castle grounds, and, Martin knew, led down to the cove at the base of the cliffs. All he had to do, for now, was stay out of sight.
