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Opening extract from

The Knife That Killed Me

Written by

Anthony McGowan

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CHAPTER 1

The knife that killed me was a special knife. Its blade was inscribed with magical runes from a lost language, and the metal glimmered with a thousand colours, iridescent as a peacock's tail or the slick of petrol on a puddle. It was made from a meteorite that had plunged to Earth after a journey of a hundred million miles. The heat of entry burned off its crust of brittle rock, leaving a core of iron infused with traces of iridium, titanium, platinum and gold. It was first forged into a blade in ancient Persia, where, set in a hilt of ivory and rhino horn, it passed from hand to hand, worshipped and feared for its power. From Persia it was looted by Alexander the Great, who plucked it from the fingers of King Darius as he lay dying. With Alexander it went to India, where it severed the tendons of the war elephants of Porus, leaving the beasts to vent their fury on the dry earth with thrashing tusks. With Alexander's death the blade was lost to history for three hundred years before it

emerged again, taken by Julius Caesar from the royal treasury of Cleopatra. For two centuries it was worn by Roman emperors, and this was the knife that the mad Caligula used to cut the child from his sister's womb. The blade went east again with Valerian, to subdue the barbarians. Five legions perished in the desert, pierced by Parthian arrows, and the emperor's last sight on this Earth was his own knife as it cut out his eyes. And for how long did he feel the cool intensity of its edge as he was flayed, and his skin made into a fleshy bag for horseshit, a gory trophy for the victor's temple? From Parthians it passed to Arabs, driven in their conquest by the fervour of faith. And then, at parley, the brave but covetous eye of Richard *Coeur de Lion* saw the glimmer in Saladin's belt, and that noble Saracen gave up the knife for the sake of peace. With Richard it arrived at last in England. Again a thing of secret worship, dark rites, unholy acts, it moved like a illness of the blood from generation to generation, exquisite but cursed. Until finally, after its journey of aeons, it came to me and found its home in my heart.

Yes, a special knife; a cruel knife; a subtle knife.

I wish.

Well, I've had a long time to think about it.

So, now, the truth.

The knife that killed me wasn't a special knife at all. It didn't have any runes on it. Its handle wasn't made of ivory and rhino horn, but cheap black plastic. It was a kitchen knife from Woolworths, and its blade wobbled like a loose tooth.

But it did the job.

CHAPTER 2

I'm in a grey place now. It could be worse, as hells go. I always thought that hell would burn you, but here I'm cold.

They've told me to write it all out. Why it happened. Why I did it. They said I had to write the truth. But then they said I had to use nice words, so half of this is a lie, because the real words weren't nice at all. You'll have to imagine those words, the ones that aren't nice. I'm sure you can manage that.

No computers here. Just paper and a pen and a big old dictionary, so I get the spelling right.

So I'm remembering. And you know how it is when you remember things. They get jumbled up, the old with the new, the now with the then. But sometimes I find the place and I'm there, utterly, completely, and the people are talking and moving and I'm with them again.

Like now.

I am in a field. The gypsy field, next to the school.

There are bodies around me. Bodies entwined. Arms move up and down. Bodies fall. Feet stamp.

When it began, there were shouts, screams, sounds that seemed to come out of the middle of guts and chests, not out of mouths at all. But now there are only the low grunts of hard effort and lower moans from the fallen. And I am among them, but not one of them – one of the fighters, I mean.

I have seen a face I know. Eyes wide with terror. A bigger face is above the face I know, animal hands holding it, the knuckles on the fingers white with the work of it. And the big face has bared its teeth, and the teeth move to the smaller face, the face I know, and the teeth rake down the face, frustrated, not getting purchase, slipping over the tight skin, the shaven head.

I did not know that it would come to this, to biting, to eating.

Are we truly beasts?

I am pushed to the ground, my knees leaving hollows in the wet earth. And I want to move. Either away or towards. To do something. But I have been burned to this spot, like one of the ashy bodies cooked to stillness in Pompeii. Only my eyes can move.

But that's enough for me to see it coming.

The knife that will kill me.

It is in the hand of a boy.

The boy is blurred, but the knife is clear.

He has just taken it from the inside pocket of his blazer.

There is something strange about the way the world is moving. I can see an outline of his arm – I mean, a series of outlines – tracing the motion from his pocket. A ghost trail of outlines. And so there is no motion, just these images, each one still, each one closer to me.

He is coming to kill me.

Now would be a good time to run.

I cannot run.

I am too afraid to run.

But I don't want to die here in the gypsy field, my blood flowing into the wet earth.

I must stop this.

And there is a way.

It comes to me now.

Part of it but not all of it.

Maths. Mr McHale. A sunny afternoon, and no one listening. He tells us about Zeno's Paradox. The one with fast-running Apollo and the tortoise. If only I could remember it. But I'm not good at school. All I know about is war, battles, armies, learned from my dad, whose chief love is war.

But I have to remember, because the knife is coming. Each moment perfectly still, yet each one closer.

Motion

and

perfect

stillness.

How can that be?

Yes, I think. To reach me the knife must come half the way. That takes, say, two seconds. But first it must go half that distance. Which takes one second. And half *that* distance, which takes half a second. And half that distance, which takes a quarter of a second. And so it goes on. Each time halving the distance and halving the time: 2+1+½+¼+ +1/16. The sequence is infinite. It means he can never reach me. I am safe.

And so I can leave the me there, the me now, waiting for ever for the knife, while I go back to the beginning.

CHAPTER 3

I was sitting in front of Roth and two of his mates. Not really right to call them mates. Roth didn't have mates. He had kids who did what he said. They were sniggering and whispering and I knew something bad was going to happen. I just didn't realize it was going to be happening to me.

It was geography, and Mr Boyle was talking. He had a beard and wonky plastic glasses. Quite often he'd try to straighten them, but they just went from being wonky on one side to wonky on the other. The wonky glasses made him look mad, but he wasn't mad, just boring. He was wearing a brown jacket that looked like it was made out of the dead remains of many other jackets, and his trousers were too short and showed that the left sock was red and the right sock was blue.

Mr Boyle had been at the school for a long time and he didn't bother anyone.

I was looking out of the window. On that side of

the school you could see houses going on for ever. You couldn't see *my* house, but it was out there somewhere, in that red sea of brick. I imagined floating out over the roofs, looking down on the world below. I couldn't touch it, and it couldn't touch me. Perfect.

Then I felt something hit the back of my head. It didn't hurt. It wasn't like they were throwing rocks. Just a little tap. I thought it was probably rolled-up paper, most likely mixed with a gob of spit.

I felt a spasm of anger and embarrassment in my stomach. Once they started they didn't stop until they'd finished with you. My hair was quite long – long all over. More because I didn't like having it cut than for any other reason. When you have your hair cut, a person is looking at you and just you, and I don't like that.

And I didn't like having stuff thrown at my hair. But still, I had no choice but to ignore it. If you're in a gang, you don't have to ignore things like people throwing balls of wet paper at you. But when you're on your own, you do. You put up with that, and much worse than that. In fact if Roth's involved, then even being in a gang won't help you much.

I felt more hits. And heard more sniggering. I could feel that I was blushing. That might seem weird to you, but one of the main things about getting picked

on is it makes you ashamed. I felt a pressure building up inside me, made out of the shame mixed up with anger and fear. Some of the other kids in the class noticed what was happening. Some of them looked at me and then looked away, feeling bad, feeling pity. Some joined in with the sniggering, glad it wasn't them.

Mr Boyle was still talking, still fiddling with his crooked glasses. He was saying, '. . . and the Great Lakes of North America – that's Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, Lake Ontario, Lake Erie and Lake Superior – contain more fresh water than all the, *ah*, other lakes, all of them, in the world . . .' and his eyes seemed so far away they were actually looking at the Great Lakes. He certainly wasn't seeing what was happening right here in front of him.

I put my hand to the back of my head. I knew instantly that something was wrong, wronger even than I thought. There were lumps. Stuck in my hair. Sticky lumps. Paper-and-spit balls wouldn't have stayed in my hair like that. And the tackiness went onto my fingers, but the stuff wouldn't come out of my hair. I smelled my fingers. There was a sickly smell, half sour spit, half mint, and I realized it was chewing gum. They'd thrown little bits of chewing gum in my hair.

I turned round.

Roth in the middle. On one side there was a kid called Miller and on the other a kid called Bates. Roth's face was completely blank. You had to be frightened of Roth. It was almost funny how much he looked like a Stone Age man – I mean, like a cartoon of one. You half expected to see him wearing animal furs and carrying a big wooden club, maybe dragging a mammoth behind him. His jaw stuck out and his head sloped back and his arms seemed to reach right down to the ground.

He looked thick, but he wasn't thick. He knew where you were weak, and would use it to hurt you.

Like my hair.

He only had two expressions. There was his wolfish, laughing face, which he used when he was hitting someone, or there was his completely blank look, unblinking, emotionless.

That was the look you got when he was about to hit you.

He was blank now, and his black eyes stared straight into mine. It was like being stabbed.

But it wasn't Roth who'd been throwing bits of stinking chewing gum into my hair.

Nor was it Miller. I felt a bit sorry for Miller. There weren't many black kids at our school, because black

kids are usually Prods, and this was a Catholic school, and his way of fitting in was to suck up to the hardest kid in the year. I'd probably have done the same, if I'd had a choice. I don't think he had any natural evil in him, but there was nothing he wouldn't do if Roth gave him the nod. Miller was smiling, a sort of cringing smile, nodding his head up and down, and when I looked at him, he looked away out of the window for a second, and then at Roth, and then out of the window again, still smiling.

It was Bates who was doing most of the sniggering. Bates really *was* thick. His fringe went straight across his forehead, which made him look sort of mental. When he smiled, thick lines of spittle criss-crossed his lips. His nails were bitten down to ragged stumps, oozing blood. It made you wince to look at his nails, almost as if you could feel him gnawing and biting at them. He still had a piece of rolled-up chewing gum in his fingers.

The anger burned and bubbled inside me like lava in a volcano. My jaws were clamped together, and I could feel my lips tight across my teeth. Bates stopped sniggering. He tried to do a version of the hard Roth stare. But he couldn't stop his lips from curling into that spit-thick grin. I wanted to hit him. Really wanted to hit him. And I hated him enough, in that moment,

not to care what happened to me afterwards. Getting my head kicked in mattered to me less, just then, than having chewing gum in my hair.

But there was something else, something stronger than the rage. The embarrassment. I was still embarrassed – worse, humiliated – about being the one who was picked out. I knew the whole class was aware of this. Aware of the fact that I was the weak one they'd found. It turned my muscles to jelly. I had nothing to hit him with.

'Will you give over.'

That was it. That was all I said.

Bates looked at me in mock seriousness for a second, as if I'd made a reasonable suggestion that he was considering.

'Paul Varderman, will you turn round, please.'

It was Mr Boyle, who'd finally noticed something. The back of my head.

I turned round, thinking that now it would stop. That was stupid. Less than a minute passed, and then another piece of stinking gum landed in my hair.

That did it. The shame and rage all came together in a hot rush to my face. I stood up quickly, so quickly that the chair fell back with a clatter to the floor. Now everyone was watching, not just me thinking they were. Mr Boyle's mouth was open, stopped

somewhere in the middle of the Great Lakes.

I spun round to face Bates again.

'Filthy dog,' I spat out. I wanted to hit him, but I was still weak, still burning with the humiliation.

'Varderman, sit . . .'

The class were laughing now, enjoying it. This was great. Some drama, some spectacle. Much better than the Great Lakes and all that boring water. Bates laughed like an ape. Miller laughed. Even Roth seemed to smile.

'. . . down, I said sit . . .'

I couldn't stand having the eyes of the class on me, their laughter in my ears.

'. . . down.'

But Mr Boyle had lost control. The laughter of the class became insane, mixed with mad shouts. Other kids had stood up. Other chairs were thrown across the floor. Mr Boyle looked around frantically, not knowing what to do. And then his eyes came back to me, the cause of it all. And he came wading towards me, barging aside kids and desks.

'Right, have it your way,' he was shouting. 'Get straight to . . .'

And the next thing I knew I was flying, looking down on the scene. It took me a moment to realize what was happening. Mr Boyle was shouting in my

ear. He'd picked me up. He was stronger than he looked. I don't know what he was shouting – it was just noise. And then, instead of carrying me, he was dragging me. And jumbled up with the meaningless noise I heard the dreaded words, 'Mr Mordred's office.' Mr Boyle threw me out into the corridor, and I staggered a few steps. I looked back. Mr Boyle's face was red. He wasn't wearing his glasses. They must have fallen off. He looked naked without them.

'Wait outside Mr Mordred's office,' he yelled at me. 'And you tell him exactly why I sent you.'



Is he closer? I can see his face now. It is not a good face. The white skin is pasted straight onto the bones, with no flesh to soften the line. The face looks like it was baked hard in a furnace. Tight, hard, inhuman. Except for the gash, the red and pink wound, caused by the mouth of another boy. And who is to say what I would do if my face had been chewed like that, torn open by the teeth of my enemies? But I must concentrate, must prove that Zeno is right, that Apollo can never catch the tortoise. Stay there, knife boy, stay there.

CHAPTER 4

I didn't go straight to Mordred's office. First I went to the toilets. I couldn't see the balls of chewing gum, but I felt for them with my fingers, and tried to tease them out. *Filthy dog. I'd said filthy dog. It was so stupid. I should have said something better.* The foul stuff had become so tangled up in my hair that pulling at it just seemed to make things worse. *Why had I said filthy dog?* So I went to the art block, found an empty room and took some scissors from a desk. *Something better. I should have said something funny, something that made him feel small.* Then I went back to the toilet and hacked at the hair wherever it was smeared with the gum. It took ten minutes, and at the end the sink was full of knotted clumps of hair. *Or hit him. Right in the face. Made him eat his teeth.* Then I washed my hands in water as hot as I could stand it, rubbing in the grimy soap, trying to get the rank stench of spit and mint off my fingers. *Filthy dog.* I didn't have time to take the scissors back to the art room, so I slipped

them in my pocket. *But it was me who looked stupid.* Godgodgodgodgodgod.

I thought about going home. But if I went home after being sent to Mordred's office, I'd be in bad trouble. That was a definite exclusion. Almost funny. You play truant and they punish you by kicking you out of school. But that wouldn't be the real punishment. The real punishment would be what my dad would do to me.

But it might all still be OK. What I'd done wasn't that bad. I couldn't tell Mordred or Boyle about Bates and the chewing gum, because that would be squealing, but even so, all I'd done was stand up in class and shout, 'Filthy dog.' I wish I hadn't said *filthy dog*. I wish I'd said something better or nothing at all.

So I went to Mordred's office, running back through the empty corridors. I could see into the classrooms through the little square windows. There were threads of wire running through the middle of the glass so you couldn't smash it. Some of the classrooms were full of the brainy kids, the ones who did their work, and I liked the look of the orderly rows and the way the kids listened and the way the teachers taught them things and didn't just try to stop them from fighting.

When I started school, I just got put into a class with the thick kids, and so I was one. Or at least no one ever told me I wasn't. I think things would have been different if they'd just said, *Here, go in this class*, and it was a good class. Because I wanted to learn things, not just about war. But once you're in a place you just can't get to another place.

And then I reached the part of the school with the staff room and the offices. It goes like this. You turn right at the end of the corridor, then the staff room is on your left, and the office is opposite, on the right. Ahead there are some double doors. You go through there and you get to Mr Mordred's room and, beyond that, the headmaster's office.

I didn't know anyone who'd ever been in the headmaster's office. The headmaster was called Mr O'Tool. We don't often see Mr O'Tool. Sometimes he walks around the school, taking a sort of black cloud of doom with him. He usually says something at the weekly assembly, but even when he's reading out the sports results and we've won at rounders or football, he'll sound like he's reading the casualty lists from the battle of the Somme. Everyone thought that Mr Mordred was after his job, and Mr O'Tool looked like he thought there was nothing he could do about it.

There were two comfy chairs outside Mr O'Tool's office, but only a row of hard chairs outside Mordred's door. Two boys and a girl were already sitting there. The girl looked like she'd been crying, and there were leaves and bits of twig in the back of her hair. I didn't know her name, but I'd seen her around. I thought she might have been caught, you know, in the bushes. But not with either of the ones sitting here. They were little Year Eight scruffs, spiky-haired, cheeky, but frightened. They'd probably gone too far in some prank, and now they were staring vacantly into space, the way you do when you're waiting to be punished.

I felt a bit calmer now I'd got that filth out of my hair, and the rage and the disgust and the humiliation of the whole thing had eased up, the way a toothache sometimes goes away after a while. But, as I waited, other feelings floated to the surface. The unfairness of everything, of me being here, while Roth and his lot got away with it. And the fear of what Mordred was going to do. And what if I did get permanently excluded? Dad would kill me for definite. Except you can only die once, and that pleasure would wait for me at Temple Moor High School. Because the only place that would take you if you got expelled from the our school was Temple Moor, and Temple Moor kids hated us because of the war that had been going

on for years. And any of our kids who washed up at the Temple would get massacred. Every day.

The bell went for the end of the lesson. It meant break was beginning, which meant that Mordred would be here to tear our heads off.

I heard a clomping sound coming down the corridor. For a second I thought it was Mordred, but then I remembered that Mordred had little feet and took little steps and made a tippy-tap sound when he walked. I looked up and saw Mr Boyle. His glasses were even more skewed than usual. I thought he'd come to tell Mordred all about how bad I'd been. But he sort of loomed over me, breathing heavily, and then he took me by the shoulder and stood me up and pushed me in front of him back down the corridor.

'Let's have a talk,' he said. 'In my room.'

Back in the classroom he sat me down in front of him. Close up, his face, even in the place where his beard was supposed to be, seemed to have more skin than hair. He smelled a bit cheesy. Not terrible – you wouldn't say he stank – but just not very fresh. I didn't know if he was married, but I doubted it. He had the look of someone who lived alone and didn't have anyone to tell them that they looked stupid or didn't smell too fresh.

'So, what was that all about?' he said. I was

surprised by his tone – he sounded sad rather than angry.

'What, sir?'

'You know what I'm talking about, so don't play the idiot. Look, Paul, you're not the kind of kid who usually starts fights. And you're not stupid – I know you're not.'

So there was a first time for everything.

'I'm not brainy, sir.'

'How do you know? As far as I can see you've never really tried.'

I didn't know what to say then, so I just looked down.

'I've noticed you, Paul,' continued Mr Boyle, 'just sitting there. I don't know how much you take in, but . . . what's happened to your hair?'

'Nothing, sir. I don't know, sir.'

'Is it mixed up with why you were shouting in class?'

'Don't know, sir.'

'Don't know much, do you, Paul?'

'I told you I wasn't brainy, sir.'

Then I looked at Mr Boyle, thinking he might be smiling. But he wasn't. He still looked quite sad.

'Can you play chess, Paul?' he said finally.

'Don't know, sir.'