

CORRUPTIVE INFLUENCE

LATE RETURN

Tony noticed him during a planning meeting at work, hanging around outside the meeting room but it was only when he woke up at 2am covered in sweat that he remembered who it was and it was then that the man crept out of the wardrobe silently. Tony sat up in fright and slowly whispered,

'Richard... Richard?'

The man said

'Very good, that's right.'

'Where... have you been?'

The strange tall man from the wardrobe, with bird like features, who was now sitting on the edge of the chest of drawers told Tony

'All that matters is that I'm back.'

'You did some awful fucking things, you fucking *shit-head!*'

'Fuck you' said the man.

Tony hadn't seen his imaginary friend since he was 12, following a blazing row about stealing sweets from a shop, stealing marker pens from the art class, stealing cigarettes, adult magazines from the newsagents where Tony had worked and setting fire to stuff, amongst other things. Richard had surprised Tony back then by arguing it was all just fine and that there was no way he would get caught.

The art teacher had searched his bag and hadn't seen the marker pens, and Richard had taken credit for this, telling Tony,

'It's ok man, these people are so fucking dumb'. '

Things escalated. There followed an incident where Tony had set fire to a school annex and the whole thing had burnt to the ground as well as causing a fireman a broken leg when the structure collapsed after the fire was brought under control. The police had been involved. A shopkeeper had sworn an alibi saying that Tony was in his shop at the time of the fire, and given an account of a boy with bird like features who he'd seen hanging around the annex. The alibi was a genuine mistake but Tony really didn't know what had happened and suspected Richard, who evidently was not real, of being involved somehow.

A few nervously answered questions from his parents, his teachers and the police about the episode had convinced Tony that Richard possibly didn't really have his best interests at heart. Tony told Richard to 'go fuck himself' and that had been that.

GIRLFRIEND

Tony had been seeing Francesca for about a year. Things levelled off pretty quickly following an initial honeymoon period, and Tony found himself feeling sort of trapped. There was much that he liked about Francesca, but she had a certain brand of self-centredness which he found bewildering and deeply unattractive. They wanted more or less the same things, but Tony wasn't certain that he wanted to stick around and find out if that was true or not. Tony was 35 and prone to self-doubt which left him unable to really do anything about the situation: a part of his psyche recognised his penchant for deception and self-sabotage, and she was pretty good in bed, so he stuck with it.

It's the second time that Tony has been round her place with Richard tagging along. Richard seems happy to sit and watch and barely says a thing but occasionally grimaces, scowls and frowns. Richard had said that she seemed nice, but that she really wasn't right for Tony; she was obsessed with many things that deep down Tony knew were pointless and vapid, and Richard had twisted the knife by describing her as a 'possible trophy wife, but for the second place trophy in a lack of personality contest, with extra points for blandness'.

Francesca has made dinner and she asks Tony about a holiday which they are supposed to be planning. Tony is chewing thoughtfully on a sausage, deliberating how much he can afford. Francesca mentions a cruise, and Richard rolls his eyes and snorts, muttering under his breath,

'Jesus Christ, really?'

Tony sort of scrunches his nose and says,

'I... never really wanted to go on cruises... stuck with the same people, and knowing our luck, a bunch of pensioners, or even worse, a bunch of wipe swapping suburbanites.'

Realising this sounds a little harsh, he adds,

'I mean, I want to go away, where it's just you and me.'

And he reaches across the table and squeezes her hand. She pulls her hand away.

'Do you ever take me, or my ideas, seriously?'

Instinctively Tony says

'Oh hey come on...'

Richard rolls his eyes again and covers his eyes with his hand, mock laughing. Tony looks up darkly at him. Richard stops mucking around.

'My counsellor was saying that...'

'My counsellor! My counsellor!' mimics Richard.

'...Not this again Fran...'

'My counsellor was saying that you're a bully and you're in denial and I'm a coward and I'm punishing myself for god-knows-what and then she also said that you're a coward and if I'm not going to be bullied anymore then I need to neutralise these situations...'

'...that counsellor is a moron, besides, you don't even tell him the truth!'

Francesca considers this for a minute and internally concedes that actually, Tony has a point. But this is no time to give ground. Richard says,

'If she mentions the fucking garden you should tell her you're through.'

Tony looks up and half grimaces half grins at Richard. Francesca has half started to cry, this being the primary tool when she's confused and overwhelmed with the actual reality of life. Richard says

'I mean it – if she does, you should quit man... you spent three fucking hours telling me about that shit the other day. She really isn't that great in bed, and yeah she's cute but so what... she's a fucking monumental headache.'

Francesca has pulled herself together a little and recalling the counsellor's words sort of stutters and says

'...This is just like the garden all over again!'

The word garden is pronounced over several syllables as the word is mangled by stifled sobs. Tony's shoulders sag and drop. Richard laughs openly, mimicking her again; 'the ga-ha-ar-har-harden...' and howls with laughter at how it sounds. Tony tries to focus on the situation but has lost his appetite and is not really interested in playing out these scenes tonight. Richard shrugs and says

'Come on man, just fucking kill it now, fuck it.'

Tony sort of winces and Richard continues to talk.

'I've been gone too long man, you got fucking weak,' and he jabs at the air with a pointed finger

'You're much too good for this girl, and you don't need this sort of headache – she needs to deal with her fucking shit and then get it together and she can't do that if you're around in any case, but who fucking cares man, big deal. Come on man, pull the plug, and let's go.'

Tony has been expecting this but is reluctant to do anything. He tells himself to be generous, convinces himself like always that she deserves one last chance. Richard says,

'Oh, the old 'one last chance' routine', how noble. You know she's going to mention the garden again in like two minutes, just fuck it, let's go while you still have a little dignity left.'

Tony stares down Richard for a moment and says,

'I thought we... you know... agreed not to mention that again? We were talking about a holiday a moment ago, about planning a holiday together.'

Francesca calms a little recalling this fact but then recalls the cruise and Tony's comments and it's all still so fresh and so sad and a tear rolls down her cheek

'Tony I just think you just don't listen,'

'Tell her it's because her ideas are fucking terrible.' laughs Richard

'Honey, you... we've been through this so many...' says Tony

'But isn't the garden the perfect example of...' mumbles Francesca

Richard laughs and points at his watch

'40 seconds! Not even a full two minutes!'

Tony shakes his head and looks at the ground. Drawing in a deep breath and picking up his keys and his phone from the table, he stands up and says

'Listen... I'm really sorry. I think we need to spend some time... you know... apart.'

And Francesca bursts into fresh floods of tears. And that's when her roommate Emily comes back home from her yoga class and cheerily shouts 'evening' and Tony looks up at her and Francesca is crying hard and this is compounded by a fresh tsunami of self-pity and Tony says

'We have to go... I have to go'

And Emily looks at him as if to say, what have you done now? but says nothing and Tony leaves.

BRICK

Tony is walking home from work a couple of days later, when Richard suddenly appears next to him from nowhere, his stride pattern following Tony's precisely. Richard says jokingly,

"We're in sync, man, can you see that?"

Tony, slightly surprised by Richard's arrival, immediately breaks his walking pattern to throw Richard out of sync and for one slight second Richard falls out of the pattern but almost indistinguishably falls back into the pattern and with a forgotten familiarity Tony realises there is no point in trying out manouvre him.

Richard pipes up cheerily,

'You never did throw that brick!'

Tony pretends he didn't hear anything.

'Remember, the brick experiment!'

Tony remembers everything in an instant, having not thought about this for ten, fifteen years. He immediately feels tremendously nervous and is filled with foreboding because he is aware of what is happening and aware that some horrific act is on the horizon and he gulps for a breath of fresh air, filled with nausea because of the dynamic which is established between him and Richard as a child: Richard would challenge him to do something, and the only way to get past any challenge was to *do that thing*. It always felt like there was someone else driving these negotiations to Tony, as if he was somehow 'in' on the challenge. Given that Richard is a figment of Tony's imagination, this is true. But Tony wasn't ever quite sure how real Richard really was.

As an imaginary friend, he'd never been very good – Richard was not really much good at anything apart from criticising – everything from Tony's hairstyle to his early interactions with girls had been heavily scrutinised by the thin boy with the birdlike features.

Richard would then try to broker a deal with Tony, making ridiculous suggestions: 'if the next car is blue, then you have to do x in order for y to even stand a chance of happening'. Something in this strange and mangled logic convinced Tony that there was truth in this approach. Some of the time -roughly 50%, naturally - there seemed to be some correlation between the strange algorithms which Richard insisted had to be influenced externally. And even though Tony realises there is no real impact of external information on external events. He recalled the time he'd pointlessly broken seven big expensive mirrors in the school's new sports hall to prevent some slick kid from going out with the best looking girl in the class. Of course, it hadn't worked. But he still can't help but be a sucker for this kind of approach and strategy. Not knowing what to do, Tony is happier doing something than doing nothing.

'I'm not really interested.'

says Tony but Richard knows him too well and was already expecting this.

'This is why things never really worked out for you... you realise this don't you?' asks Richard.

Richard explains that life is there for the taking and that Tony should understand that by now, because there was that one time, when Tony was caught shoplifting but got away with it because the elderly woman manning the counter confused him with her own grandson, and this was all due to the fact that Tony had

already 'paid' for the shoplifting by successfully lying to his mum. His mum had banned him from visiting the abandoned mine because someone had been recently reported in the local news as breaking every single window as well as causing one of the shafts to flood. Tony was responsible. Richard explained the two events offset each other and it was all ok. Two wrongs making a right. Tony was less confident but he did get away with simply coolly lying to his mother.

Richard, arms swinging and happily watching girls walking in the opposite direction says

'Come on... the brick thing... aren't you going to do it?'

Tony is immediately recalling the previous time that he almost did this. His heart had raced although Richard had seemed ambivalent.

'...they have cameras now, CCTV cameras.'

'CCTV cameras' mimics Richard in a high pitch drawl, and he adds a manic high pitched laugh after it, insinuating some degree of fear or reluctance on Tony's behalf.

'I'm not doing it, get lost.' says Tony.

'It is essential that you carry it out, there is no way to 'un-commit' from this situation.'

'I'm still not doing it.'

'Come on... I'm here aren't I'

'I'm not about to throw... a fucking... brick through the window of a busy bus, to see what happens. It was a stupid thing to say back when I was 13, and Christ knows I was a stupid and susceptible kid.'

'How about only a half empty bus?' says Richard, and Tony knows he is not joking and the sudden improvement in odds of being able to successfully carry this plan out is not unnoticed by his sense of wanting to please or impress Richard, and the appeal of wanting to influence a set of events with another set of events is still present in him, even though he's much older now, and knows that the world does not work like this. Tony tried to compromise further,

'...What about, disused road traffic vehicles –like the steamroller machine which was at the building site at the top of my road today – I could totally destroy it.'

'You said bus,'

'Or maybe... a car showroom?' and he's childishly thinking of how to make it a bigger idea and seem bigger overall,

'The plate glass windows of a car showroom – any showroom you like. It would be pretty amazing.'

'you said bus.'

'the new, executive showrooms for those Ferrari's is not far from here,'

'you'd only fuck it up anyway, probably the rocks would bounce off the window and you'd end up explaining to some pissy junior cop about how the rock slipped out of your hand because it's a hot day and your hand was greasy, or some other bullshit completely fictional story.'

Tony pulls a face.

MOTHER

After the horror of the bus accident, the shocked passengers and the three injured cyclists Richard suggests a good place to cool down is at Tony's Mum's house. Tony's Mum is kind and old. She was a single mum much of the time Tony was growing up and worked hard to try to instil a degree of independence and character in Tony and his sister. Tony heads through the door and his mum says,

'Oh hello love... do you want a coffee? I just made some. Oh, you poor thing - I heard from Francesca's Mum about things. I just knew you'd ruin things somehow, she was too good for you.'

Tony says nothing. Richard comes in and just catches the end of the sentence.

'Not now, eh Mum' shrugs Tony awkwardly.

'I'd have told her to mind her own fucking business' says Richard.

STRIPPER

Tony has already had a couple of drinks with colleagues from work – someone retired and they were forced into going out for a leaving farewell by their manager. So when he leaves the bar, he's already got a taste for drinking and is feeling more confident. Walking past a bar in the moodier end of the city, Richard appears at one of the large windows facing onto the street, with a drink in his hand and mouths at Tony to come in. Tony hasn't seen him much since the bus incident and although it's been two days the memories of that action and the consequent 'accident' are still pretty fucking fresh to Tony.

Tony guesses that Richard knows that he's ignoring him, and tries to walk away but Richard rushes out to catch him, telling him he has to come in, because two girls he's befriended are toying with the idea of kissing each other for free drinks. Tony is mildly intrigued so he goes along. The second he walks in he realises he's made a mistake as it's basically a strip club. Richard immediately starts trying to talk Tony into getting a private dance with a girl who's basically a better looking version of Francesca. Tony heads to the bar and gets a beer and a shot as he warms to the idea of a private dance.

They head together to a room at the back of the club, a seedy looking softly lit but still dark room and the stripper, who says her name is Natalia, begins to dance provocatively. Richard is unimpressed. He's put on a pair of sunglasses and Tony has to admit to himself that although it looks dumb, given it's so dark, it does look kind of cool, and he's filled with a rush of admiration. Richard is commenting on how lame the dancer is and points out some strange stains in the room on the 'booth' style seating in there, and the stripper is barely really trying to pretend she's hot and getting off on this. Richard says,

'Her breasts aren't great are they?'

The dancer strips off and Richard won't stop complaining about her tattoos, her choreography and her 'lazy approach to something which could be enjoyable'.

After the routine is over, Tony feels a little deflated, but she had looked pretty good to him, and he'd put some leftover mental images of Francesca together with the stripper's gyrations and it was ok.

'What a rip off... fuck, she should pay *you* for that' says Richard and adds,

'They're going to expect at least £75 for that.'

The stripper whispers in Tony's ear,

'Ok, £75 big boy.'

From behind sunglasses Richard shakes his head, mouths the word 'no' and makes a mangled whimpering sound. Tony says,

'I'll give you £30, that was a bit... uh... lacklustre.'

'Leck-looster?' says the stripper, with a thick accent.

'it just wasn't really... very good.'

The stripper looks at him,

'I see you almost jacking off, hmm, is no fucking good yeah?'

Richard peers over his sunglasses and howls with derision, almost shouting

'Jesus! Who does this girl think she fucking is?'

Tony clears his throat and says

'I'll give you £30.'

And the girl moves towards a small switch on the wall and within seconds a tall man; he's not that big, but he is tall, appears and moves immediately towards Tony.

'...a fuckin' ...problem here have we?' he grunts.

'She's... just, not a very good dancer, or at least, she didn't really dance very well just now, and I said I'd give her £30.'

'Look mate, just hand over the money or a credit card or whatever, I can't be fucking bothered to even deal with you.'

'I have my rights!' says Tony. Richard starts laughing and says

'Why don't you tell him you'll check this with the Citizens Advice Bureau?' and laughs more viciously.

Tony weighs up the situation and simply stands up, gives the tall man £30 and starts to leave.

'It really wasn't a great dance, I'm not trying to be funny.'

The tall man looks at the girl who repeats that he looked ready to jack off and that's all she's really interested in and the tall man weighs up the situation and Tony begins to reach the door and the tall man shifts just one step and hits Tony on the side of his head pretty hard. Tony's reeling and Richard takes off his sunglasses but the tall man was not completely unimpressed nor surprised that someone else complained about Natalia – she *has* got a bad attitude and an unprofessional approach and Tony's knees are a little flexible for a second or two and the tall man simply yells,

'Fuck it, we'll take the £30 you cheeky cunt; don't ever come back.'

And Tony rushes out and out of the bar into the street, and Richard isn't far behind him and is laughing and after a minute or so Tony is laughing too, exhilarated with, and somehow validated by this episode.

TOWER

Richard says he knows another bar, at the top of a tower and why don't they go there for a drink and a look at the evening sky. Tony is a little drunk and happily goes along with this plan. Tony gets a drink and heads out to the terrace and sure enough three corners of the city are laid out before them. Richard has his sunglasses back on even though it's basically night time. There's a light breeze. Fairly innocuously Richard starts talking about how someone walked the entire length of the barrier on the terrace edge. The terrace is at least 20 stories high, it's an incredibly long way down to the busy main road below. Tony is impressed with the way Richard describes the cinematic images of this scene. Richard starts talking about the strip club and about how lame the dance was, the way her mouth had turned down at the corners and the way her underwear was at least a size too small for her and had left marks on her body,

'That's not hot' said Richard 'that's the *opposite* of hot.'

Richard says Tony still got ripped off even though he only paid £30. Tony says,

'It was a successful negotiation.'

'And you let him punch you! You fucking coward, you were going to smack him but then you didn't! I saw that look... that fucking pathetic look flicker across your pudgy face you useless fuck.'

Tony is slightly aghast and is again struck by some premonition of what scenes are about to be played out. He looks at the barrier and it looks fairly wide, and pretty steady.

Tony weighs up what he's had to drink and judges it probably about *just right* – the amount he's drunk is enough to make him able to undertake this without being overwhelmed with nerves and not too drunk to cause him to easily lose balance. Richard realises that drunk people think like this regardless but is interested to see where this will go and doesn't feel the need to really interject further. Tony puts his jacket next to his drink and heads to the edge of the wall.

VOLUME CONTROL

Tony is alone, looking out of the window after a long day at work; it's peaceful and Richard has been away for several days. Tony has enjoyed the reprieve. Richard had been angry and 'disappointed' because although Tony had walked almost half the distance on the ledge, two of the bar staff had rushed out and begged him to get down because someone two weeks ago had died by falling off. One of the bar staff, a young looking man had commented how this was his first job and he was only his second shift, and both times someone had tried to walk round the fucking ledge and the last guy was dead and they'd all been to the funeral and he'd started crying quite heavily. Richard was unmoved and had muttered 'minus 1' to Tony as Tony had climbed down.

Some dopey American sitcom is playing quietly in the background. Tony's reflecting on how a particular meeting went well that day at work – he'd directed the meeting with a new-found firmness and maturity and it played out exactly as he'd hoped.

He's pleased that Richard has disappeared again, and is determined that this time things are going to be different – he'd basically walked round the ledge and Tony was hoping that maybe things are straightened out with Richard and he's filled with an optimistic sense of resolution.

Tony is suddenly aware that the tv show is blaring at full blast, the noise of the orchestral backing has swelled and the bland dialogue is very loud and he turns to see a familiar bird like figure at the table where the computer is, and his hand is on the volume control and even though he's wearing sunglasses he's obviously looking at Tony and is smirking. Tony rushes over and turns it down and a rush of dejection washes over him at the sight and he can't think of anything to say.

'That dumb kid ruined everything didn't he' says Richard 'Still, fuck it.'

Richard clicks away at the computer, killing the sitcom and firing up a page called 'Candid Shooting', which offers advice about taking pictures of women without them realising it. Richard looks up towards Tony and says,

'Pretty cool, huh? And you have that nice camera!'

Tony flits his eyes over the screen and sort of scrunches up his face but is aware that his heart has begun racing at a familiar speed and the idea is not unappealing if a little extreme and evidently criminal. Richard says,

'Let's start now, let's see what you can shoot!'

Tony sighs.

'I don't know... I mean, how long is this going to go on for? It's always the fucking same with you! I could have easily ended up in a young offenders institute for setting fire to the school annex, or pretty much all the other crazy shit you cook up in that fucking warped brain of yours. You've been back like three weeks and you're fucking everything up'

Richard says thoughtfully,

'...but for some reason you brought me back'

Tony sighs again, deeper.

'I always felt... I had to really *try* to invent you, like you weren't a real imaginary friend, you were an imaginary imaginary friend... I was never able to suspend my disbelief.'

'It doesn't really make any difference does it?'

'I suppose not.' says Tony.

They leave the flat and Tony has his camera phone out and ready. For a while they follow a couple of young women who are wearing fairly tight outfits and he just gets used to taking photos silently. The young women stop at various shops and Tony and Richard follow them in really casually and Tony's still taking the occasional photo and it turns out he's pretty good at gauging when to shoot and when not to and at looking innocent. Richard's saying,

'You could sell these if you keep following them!'

The young women take a coffee break and a couple of people seem to be a bit nervously looking at Tony, which makes Tony paranoid. Richard says,

'They're morons, ignore them.'

Completely coincidentally a shopping centre security guard waddles over to a nearby pillar and Tony thinks he'd better get out of there. Richard, hands on hips, shakes his head woefully.

Tony wanders off and gets on a bus and sits on the lower deck where the chairs face each other. Opposite is an overweight middle aged woman chatting on her mobile phone, a coffee in the other hand, with three bags of shopping. She's wearing a tight top that is not very flattering, and a short skirt which is sort of hitching its way up her thighs as the bus jerkily moves slowly down the busy traffic jammed street.

CANDID

Tony asks Richard where the fuck he disappeared to when the woman started yelling at him, and threw her phone at him in front of everyone on the bus which was stuck in heavy traffic and she'd threatened to call the police and the bus driver had got involved and another female passenger had turned out to be a lawyer. Richard grinned.

'This was your operation! What exactly did you want me to do? Besides, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that taking indecent unauthorised pictures of middle-aged women is always a bad idea.'

Tony looked darkly at him and flushed with humiliation. Richard says,

'Cheer up, you got a few good photos, didn't you?' and he laughs mockingly.

Richard says

'Let's go and get drunk.'

And right now that's the best idea Tony has.

SECRETS

Richard has become a real drag to be around. He's been nagging incessantly, turning up early and leaving late and Tony's started to take the anti-anxiety medication that Richard encouraged him to steal from a co-worker who left her bag open. It's reasonably strong and coupled with the heavy drinking and the constantly corrupting influence of his childhood imaginary friend, Tony is nervous. He's taken to watching pornography every available second, the concession he cut with Richard is that he watches it with the sound right down.

Tony's barely functioning at work because Richard keeps insisting on longer and longer sessions at the gym, and longer and later lunches to see how far he can push it. Richard's begun suggesting that Tony works too hard and Tony's begun leaving work earlier and earlier. He's begun abusing his corporate credit card. A while ago Richard had him tell his direct manager to go fuck himself, but Tony's boss, who never had the sharpest mind, figured it was a joke and had laughed and then carried on telling a story about his children's sports day.

Tony's home after a short day at work, but with the overall sense that it has been a long day. His nerves are frazzled from looking out for his managers from work, he's pretty much terrified of what Richard is going to suggest next. And the way he just won't leave him alone, these days, he's just always there. Richard appears from behind the curtains and wanders over to Tony.

'You look tired – maybe you're working too hard!' and he laughs manically from behind his sunglasses.

Tony took a couple of the antidepressants as he'd reached home and the reaction begins to settle in and soothe the fraying edges. Recently Richard has taken to threatening Tony. They started with minor threats, in the gym for example, being told to re-do a bunch of exercises as they weren't executed properly, or at work, being forced to decline more and more meetings on the grounds that powerful people don't just accept every meeting. A couple of co-workers noticed a minor change in character but nothing really noticeable, though Tony had started to turn up later for work. Richard's also taken to re-telling stories from Tony's life back to him.

It emerged that Richard was actually pretty much always there in the background and offered brutally realistic appraisals of pretty much every incident, episode, encounter. He would keep Tony awake til 3, 4am with these stories which always ended up with Tony being mocked and ridiculed.

Richard was also aware of a number of secrets, a couple of which Tony deemed to be the kind of secrets which you never tell anyone because they were just *not cool*, and Richard's been threatening to spill the beans, convincing Tony that he could tell anyone all of this any time he liked. While no one can see him it should not be taken to mean that Richard cannot exert control over what Richard refers to as 'the natural desire for truths to surface'. Richard is clear that there's no room for negotiation, it's not something which is up for discussion.

DOCKS

'Every good story ends at the docks.' says Richard sarcastically.

Tony yawns and says,

'Fuck you.'

Richard is talking about how long people can hold their breath for and Tony begins to wrap his foot sort of into some rope and there's an anchor attached to one end of the rope and Tony without taking his eyes off Richard ties the rope around his ankle and Richard looks slightly panicky for a second and Tony looks at him and waves and Richard looks a bit surprised and Tony lurches forward and grabs hold of Richard and Richard struggles like crazy and tries to kick and punch Tony and even though Richard is taller Tony is more focused and determined and Richard stumbles off balance and next thing the two of them and the rope and the anchor all fall splashing and crashing into the white water and then it's calm again and a couple of minutes later two sets of bubbles rush up and appear on the surface.