

**Monday**

**T H D Russell**

Monday morning and already he's lost.

On a whim he took a different turn, headed down a narrow street that looked to be pointing workwards, thinking: *this'll get me there quicker*. That was half an hour ago. After ten minutes of semi-uncertainty, of considered lefts, pondered rights, of narrow, clouded strips of sky, confused by homogeneous concrete, bland shop-fronts, unfamiliar street names, Tom decided to cut his losses, to accept he had been mistaken. He turned back hoping retracing his steps would be a snap. Now, amused incredulity at dull uniformity has become mild concern – it's been a while since any car trundled by, minutes since sighting another pedestrian, since seeing a shop, since knowing where he is.

Things have just turned spooky. The street he now walks is lined with identical banks of impossibly long, prison-high walls, which are cut by regularly spaced, perfectly perpendicular roads. Each door he passes wears the same grey-white, the featureless expanses of concrete wall are unpainted, the small windows square, the lowest of them some ten feet above the pavement, each reflecting the pale grey opposite. There are no signs of life, no graffiti, no speckled bird-shit, no dark lumps of dog-shit. On top of that, each of the buildings he passes, though residential, feels empty, un-lived-in, every adjoining street he glances down leads invariably through the same unimaginative topography, leads but to new iterations of where he is now. Where is he now?

*I am the only living thing*, he suddenly realises. The thought stops him dead. How on earth did he get himself here?

“This is silly,” says Tom out loud, the sounds of his words the only sounds, now that his feet have stilled. He stays for a moment where he is, holding his breath, listening out for life, but hears nothing at all, not even a pigeon. There is no wind.

“No one at the office is going to believe this,” he says cheerfully, refusing to be bowed by his odd predicament, choosing to believe the way back is out there somewhere. He resumes his walk to the first rumble of his stomach.

As he walks, only two things change. The first is the time as told by Tom's wrist watch (which continues to tick long after he dies), the second is his state of being. As his hunger grows, so recedes his hopeful buoyancy, his ability to resist the patient pressure of the unchanging terrain. Consequently, the second time he stops, it is in reaction to the first flutter of panic.

He has been unable to orient himself to landmarks like trees or unusual buildings – for reasons I hope not lost on the reader – having followed instead a pattern of random lefts, rights, as well as long stretches of straight ahead, having paid attention to neither street name nor house number. Needs must, reasons Tom, fighting to keep alive the guttering flame of his optimism, determined to change his tactic to a more winning, more systematic way. Sadly, his improved attention to the details of his surroundings rewards him instantly

with a shock: Each door he studies sports a small, dulled brass “1”, tucked away in its top left corner, each street sign he finds announces a street of the name ‘Leafy Lane’. Tom Mann could never have imagined blandness so terrifying.

In a swift, instinct driven transition, his popped fear sets his legs pumping. He runs from door to door, from street to street, shouting out an angry denial at each repeated affront to his senses, to his certain knowledge of how things should be. Everything is impossible except him, everything cannot be this way, except for him. *He* is the only thing that makes sense. He must be dreaming.

Of course ... he must be dreaming! He comes to a stop at once, false relief bringing a dry laugh to his dry mouth. Looking to the clouded strip of sky above him, Tom wonders what the quickest way to wake up might be. The more obvious ideas quickly make their presence felt. He pinches the back of his hand, but that does nothing except hurt. He slaps his face, also only painful. He then closes his eyes in an attempt to relax, to lull his body to a slumbering state, but sleep while upright, even an approximation of it, proves beyond him. However, if sleep was the door to this nightmare – it must have been! – then it must likewise be the door back home. He lowers himself to the paving stones, to prepare himself for the return journey, to get as comfortable as he can, knowing comfort is the tonic sleep needs for its revival.

Reader, you will have guessed already, I am certain, that Tom’s attempt proves futile. A cruel tension-discomfort cocktail rouses him with no thought for his fragile hope, swirls him to his feet in a renewed flurry of fear, then dumps him back on that monochrome street, lost, alone, mercilessly solid, horribly real, truly afraid. Now he is desperate, but his stuttering desperation furnishes him with no new idea. There is only walking, only searching the empty streets – no door yields to his attempts to break in.

So it goes on. He walks, then stops, tries an unwilling door, then carries on, only to stop again a little while later, still confused, still afraid. Only two things change. The first is the time as told by his watch, the second is his state of being. As his strength leaves him, as all liquid in his system runs dry, as his energies deplete to zero, so his fear disappears. He becomes a walking thing, pacing criss-crossed streets that seem to circle the globe, that form a perfect concrete grid as thorough as the sky.

Neither night nor Tom ever falls. Trapped in an unchanging, endlessly cloudy day, walking without rest or respite, what is left of nature takes its toll. His skin peels, his blood dries up, his flesh falls from him in crumbling pieces, which themselves, left alone on square paving stones, slowly decompose. Neither do his clothes survive the insistent ravages of the air; in the end he is a naked, white skeleton, thousands of miles from home, thousands of mile from anywhere, walking and walking and walking.