

SLAM!

*Excerpt from Chapter 'Tom'*

Tom ambled along his small hallway to pick up the post. A few brown envelopes; bills and some junk mail. YOU ARE A WINNER! shouted one glossy brochure. Tom laughed, almost bringing up catarrh. Must stop smoking he thought. Fuck too late to stop now, especially after the news from the hospital. Winner? When had he last won anything? There was the bingo last month but £25 was hardly a fortune. It was handy, topped up his miserly pension. It was true what Gladys had said down at the local, old age is no place for cissies. Being poor is bad enough, but being old and poor is terrible. If only he had put something away when he was younger.

Bending down to pick up the post his back creaked. He was breaking down. Sixty-six; same age as when his dad went; the dust. His mam carried on living into her eighties. Tom had always thought that that's the way it would be with him and Joanie. He buried his wife before he did his mother. Women were supposed to outlive men. Joanie had got cancer six years ago. They didn't diagnose it till it had gone too far – fucking doctors thought Tom – still, at least it was all over quickly, and she had kept her mind intact. Fucking useless doctors - two women in his life, both dead because of useless doctors. Again Tom felt the rage rising, then he felt incredibly sad and alone. He missed Joanie – missed her so much. Live in the present he thought.

Count your blessings, Joanie used to say, at least we've got each other.

The kids had all moved far away. He understood their reasons; there's fuck all for them around here. Still they could write or phone. He'd left bringing up the kids to Joanie; three girls and Georgie. He didn't really understand kids. Anyway, he had to work, and there was all the Union meetings, and football... George his eldest wasn't interested in football. He's a designer in London now. Still isn't married.

Tom wasn't expecting to be alone. He thought he'd always have Joanie; now he kept regretting things. He wished he'd spent more time with the family, shown Joannie more affection. When you're on your own you think too much. What's the point in living if you're bloody miserable? He was glad he was getting out. What was it he said to Jim the other night? "I'm just waiting in the departure lounge, ready for the last flight". Jim had said he was a bad poet and a fool and bought some more drink replying that there's life in the old dogs yet and maybe a few new tricks. Tom had said every dog has their day, and his day was definitely over. Tom and Jim enjoyed their verbal thrust and parry.

Tom smiled. Then he looked up and caught his reflection in the hall mirror. His wrinkled leathery skin was a yellowy grey colour. He looked like Marley's ghost. An old ghost from the past thought Tom, that's what I've become. A forgotten past of real community, trade union roots, strikes and open doors. No fear of muggers and burglars. He didn't belong in this complicated, computerised, uncaring modern world.