

Ask No Questions

R.D. Nixon

Charlie Bryant crawled clear of the car, dizzy and only vaguely aware that the little moans he heard were his own. The wet grass beneath his sweating hands was a relief, and he clutched handfuls of it as he pulled himself up the side of the ditch, ignoring the scratch of thistles and the tingling sting of nettles. Finally he scrambled onto the solid surface of the road, and only then could he bring himself to look back at the wreckage steaming in the ditch. The car was crumpled beyond recognition.

Charlie bent over, certain he was going to throw up, but in the end he only spat onto the tarmac. A thread of saliva swung from his lower lip, stretching, and for a moment he watched it in detached fascination, before blinking back to reality and sweeping it away. It was already cold, and the mild revulsion he felt went some way towards easing the shock as he wiped the back of his hand on his trousers. He straightened again, and eyed the car nervously; his phone was still plugged into the charger, but there was a rank smell of diesel drifting through the night air – one spark from the door handle could be all it took... he moved away up the road, his heart tripping uncomfortably, until the smell faded.

He held his watch up, angling it to catch the faint moonlight that struggled through racing clouds. Almost three a.m. He peered through the drizzle in both directions and swore under his breath; be lucky to see anyone out here at this time of the morning. He looked back at his car again, his mind skittering briefly over the contents, assuring himself that nothing incriminating remained in the wreckage. As further reassurance he patted the waistband of his trousers, and felt the familiar, comforting weight still there. Best get moving then.

Concussion might be a problem if someone picked him up; it wouldn't do to say the wrong thing to the wrong person. Hopefully it was only mild, but he couldn't even remember how the crash had happened. Some kind of animal in the road? Or another car that hadn't stopped? More like it, and whoever it was didn't even pull over to see if he was alright ... bastards. Charlie's confusion melted into righteous anger, altogether more palatable. He frowned, trying harder to remember, then shrugged; he was totally screwed up about the job. Who wouldn't be?

He had been walking for less than twenty minutes when he heard the engine coming up behind. A heavy, rattling diesel engine. Charlie turned and almost fell over his own feet when he saw the bus. It was closer than he had thought and he barely had time to wonder at its even being there before relief took over and he waved frantically for it to stop. It drew slightly past him before halting, and Charlie saw it was one of the old fashioned kind with an open entrance at the back and a wide step to swing himself aboard. Thankfully, he pulled himself up by the bar and stepped into the interior. It pulled away and continued its slow journey down the lane. Buses had improved their services since he'd last had to rely on them; they'd never have run a late bus between town and the outlying villages back then. Must be a works one.

Charlie looked around for a seat - something he would have expected to find easily at this time of night, but the bus was packed. No one turned to see who had flagged them down all the way out here; they remained, rigidly facing forwards. Nobody was talking. No-one was fiddling with their phone, checking Facebook or listening to music. He wasn't used to travelling on public transport anymore, but even he knew that on a bus everyone was plugged into something...

The silence felt heavy. Damp. Thick. Charlie suddenly wanted to get off - wanted it very badly indeed. He reached out a shaking hand, pressed the bell, and stepped back out towards the platform. A figure appeared in front of him, its face lost in the semi-darkness, blocking his way. He pushed forward, knowing deep down there was going to be no polite apology and an easy exit, but he pushed anyway.

The shadowy bulk remained firm, and a moment later Charlie felt a hand on his upper arm, gripping him tightly until he gasped in pain, his fingers splayed wide in reaction to the pinch on his nerves. The hand jerked him roughly around until he faced back into the bus, and shoved him into the narrow aisle between the double seats. He tried to glance sideways at the people nearest him, but a cold set of fingers settled on the back of his neck and jaw, making it impossible to turn.

The terror began to build then, starting in his temples until his head seemed to swell with it - the pressure behind his eyes was frightening. Panic was close, very close... His heart hammered harder than ever, he could feel it in every pulse-point. For the first time in his life Charlie understood how fright could kill. He tried to force himself to think it through rationally. He'd somehow stepped into the middle of a hijack situation; everyone was scared to turn, to see their attackers in case that made them dangerous witnesses. It was best not to try to look anywhere but directly ahead.

Maybe he'd have a chance to get at the gun in his belt which, although had seemed close to hand a moment ago, now felt as unreachable as the wrecked car he had left behind.

But through these thoughts his head pounded with a deeper knowledge. This was no hijack; couldn't be solved by the timely intervention of some crack police squad even if one were to materialise out of the night. The grip on his neck eased, and Charlie realised he was at the front of the bus, and that there was a single empty seat. Shakily he slid into it, keeping his face fixed ahead as the other passengers did.

The seat was cold under him, the cracked red vinyl split to allow stuffing to escape, and he saw an old, carefully folded ticket tucked under the metal strip that ran down the length of the bus. Without knowing why, except that it was a relief to see something so ordinary amidst this strangeness, he picked it out and unfolded it, and his throat tightened with a new, colder fear.

Charles M. Bryant. Welcome Home!

He lurched upright, clutching the ticket with whitened fingers. Stumbling out into the aisle, he turned towards the exit, and froze as he saw the faces of his fellow passengers. Some were young, some were old, some men, some women. And all were very clearly dead. A scream started somewhere in Charlie's brain but got no further. The shape which had blocked his way, and which now stood at the back of the bus again, turned to face him fully, and Charlie felt himself grow light, his vision narrow, his muscles weaken. He tried to reach out, to grasp the back of his seat to stop himself from falling, but his fingers had no strength and, as he fell forwards into the aisle, the ticket fluttered from his hand and landed beside his slack face on the floor.

Charlie Bryant had taken up his current employment soon after the army had kicked him out. It was logical. He was due for a move anyway; even a dedicated regular like himself was well over the hill at thirty-two. And the past few years of specialist training in The Mob meant he was made for the job. It wasn't so much a career change, he rationalised, as a move to the private sector.

Charlie wasn't one to think too much, to ask too many questions. First his old dad and then the N.C.Os had knocked it into him ... 'You're not paid for arskin' fackin' questions, Bryant! Wotter yer not paid for?'

'Askin'-fackin'-questions, Corp!'

‘So switch off that light and build that fuckin’ AK back together. Left ’anded. You got thirty-eight seconds.’

Head down, he’d heard the pin pulled, and the knobbly grenade wobble across the floor of the bunker as the corporal’s boots clattered out, the harsh voice counting back as it faded,

‘Thirty seven ...’

Thanks to the legacy of Thatcher and her bollocks of a government, he’d soon found himself unemployed and broke. And there wasn’t much call in Civvy Street for his kind of training. This job he *could* do, and it was lucrative. What more did he need to know?

His best mate, Warren, had been a squaddie too. Same outfit. But ... well he didn’t like the wet stuff. He’d taken the golden handshake just about a year before Charlie had taken the boot up the arse.

‘So, what’d they get you for in the end?’ Warren had asked him as they leaned at the bar. He’d offered a cigarette – back in the days before the nanny state had banned smoking in pubs.

‘Fight.’ Charlie accepted the cigarette and lit up with a deep drag. ‘No biggie. But it happened at the wrong time, in the wrong place and I half-killed the wrong person.’ He shrugged. Warren raised a questioning eyebrow; Charlie exhaled in a sigh.

‘Soddin’ adjutant!’

Warren had just laughed. ‘Fuck’s sake!’

They hadn’t discussed Charlie’s dishonourable discharge any further but, after several more drinks, Warren had fixed him with a shrewd look and asked if he had any plans for the future.

‘Make some money. Have a laugh,’ he’d replied vaguely. ‘Why, got any ideas?’

‘Oh yes, my son. I have an idea - and you’ll make plenty of money. Can’t guarantee the fun though.’

‘No problem. I’ll make the money now, have the fun later. Talk to me.’

But he hadn’t needed the fun, not after the money started to roll in. He’d abandoned all thoughts of socialising, of having a normal family life, he lived for the job now; it suited him perfectly - except for the first time.

Two days after their conversation, Warren had delivered an envelope containing a name, address, description and a down-payment. Fanning the money in his hand, Charlie grinned, scarcely able to believe this was only half his profit.

Later that night he'd thought he would never smile again. It had gone badly. Nerves. He'd missed with his first shot and aimed just as badly with the second, although he had at least hit the target somewhere. He stood over the screaming man, his mind spinning, his stomach churning with disgust; disgust at himself and what he had done, but also at the sight of the writhing, stinking person at his feet. The middle-aged man had soiled himself as Charlie had pulled the trigger and, since the bullet had punctured his groin, massive amounts of blood had mingled with the faeces, and even the third and fourth bullets had failed to silence his screams. Now there was more blood from a huge, ripped wound in his side and one in his chest, and Charlie had stepped forward to end it, not trusting his own shaking aim any longer.

He stood over the man, who stared back up at him in agony and terror, his eyes pleading for help, for some explanation. But how could Charlie explain what he had not been told? He had been contracted to kill this man, that's all he knew, and he had screwed it up. Oh, man, had he ever screwed it up...

Charlie pressed the gun to his victim's head and forced himself not to close his eyes as he squeezed the trigger once more. Finally, blessedly, the man was silent. With a last look at the carnage he had created, Charlie left the house, gagging, and unscrewed the now almost pointless silencer from his gun and dropped it into the nearest wheelie bin. With trembling fingers he pulled off his gloves, and stuffed them deep into the pockets of his coat, before getting into his car two streets away and fumbling for the ignition key.

It had been three days before he was able to contact Warren McKinley for the remainder of his payment. He dreaded retribution, but McKinley waved away the apology.

'Forget it; it was your first time. Call it your apprenticeship. You did it, that's what matters, and you didn't get caught. The scent's been well and truly directed elsewhere. Wanna know where?'

Charlie hesitated. 'Nah.' But he had to know something else now, especially after the mess he had made. 'I was wondering though... what did he do?' His brain provided a replay of the shattered man begging for an explanation, and he bit down on his own lip to silence the phantom voice.

‘Didn’t *do* anything,’ Warren said blandly. ‘He was the main shareowner in a company that our client wanted to take over. Now he’s out of the picture, our client can proceed.’

‘That’s all? He was just... shit. Forget I even asked.’

‘Yeah,’ Warren advised. ‘Better that way. Now, you want me to get you more work or what?’

For three months Charlie had refused, but gradually his mind began to chip away at the layers of sick loathing he had built up, and the memory of the smell and the screams faded. He contacted Warren.

After that it got better. The next hit was a retired teacher who’d been giving his pupils after-school lessons they could well have done without. One such pupil had finally had enough after a young adulthood plagued by nightmares, and paid Warren to help him win his revenge. Warren had told him all this over a few pints, but Charlie was only half listening as he poked a finger into the corner of a sealed envelope and finger-counted the twenties stuffed inside.

For twenty years he received his orders and his envelopes. During that time Charlie was responsible for the deaths of eighty people. He never took a partner, he never said ‘no’ to a contract. And he never asked again. He’d abandoned all pretence of interest in who the victims were, and how they’d managed to fall foul of Warren McKinley.

On October 16th this year, Charlie had taken his last contract. A month ago he had been given the details for a young man, pleasant-looking, no movie star, but didn’t look like a tosser either. Charlie had always been a good shot but tonight there had been too much distance between him and the mark, and the shot had hit the bloke in the abdomen instead of the chest. Charlie had to shoot him again. It had been the first time since the beginning that the hit hadn’t gone to plan, and as usual he didn’t know anything about this victim, but it had shaken him just the same. Even from that distance he had seen the shock and pain in the young man’s face, and as the man – Jarvis, his name had been Jarvis, he remembered – had folded to his knees, something had whispered in Charlie’s head that this was the end. He met Warren one last time.

‘I’m out.’

Warren hadn’t seemed surprised, he’d simply nodded and handed Charlie a fat envelope. ‘Yeah, I know.’ He caught Charlie’s surprised look, and laughed quietly. ‘I’ve been watching you, watching the questions start to build up again. It’s time to get out. This’ll be the last.’

Charlie nodded slowly. He pocketed the envelope he knew would contain the balance of payment for the Jarvis job and details of his last assignment, and reached out his right hand to shake Warren's for the last time. 'Don't contact me again.'

'Understood. You'll find full payment for your final job in there too.' He patted Charlie's jacket where the envelope bulged. 'You've been good at this, Charlie, you know that. I pulled the work but I could never have pulled the trigger the way you could. Don't worry, I won't contact you. But you've got my card.' The laugh was flat, emotionless, but Charlie saw something like regret in his old friend's eyes, and he stood quickly. Feelings he could do without - at least for now. He had left those behind twenty years ago, and now he had one more job before he could allow them back into his life. After that, who knew? Maybe he could begin some kind of normal existence, whatever that was.

Back home he opened the envelope, extracted a thick wad of banknotes, then shook out the other contents. A black and white photograph fell out, along with a piece of paper noting the name, address and known movements of the target. He picked up the photograph and felt his scalp tighten. His heart slithered in his chest, and he dropped the picture back on the table.

Warren's face smiled back up at him.

This was no candid shot taken by a secret camera - this was posed and deliberate. Along with the name, details and address was a card with a printed message.

'Don't ask.'

Charlie didn't.

Ten forty-five p.m. Charlie Bryant sat in his car, screwing the fresh silencer into place and trying to conquer the rising horror that threatened to push reason aside. He was about to kill his best friend - not in a rush of passion or the heat of the moment, but in cold blood. It had to be a sickness. It *had* to be. Warren was dying and he wanted to end it before the pain got too bad. What better way to cheat dismal fate than to get the one man who never said "no," to whack you instead? The one guy he could trust.

He had almost called to refuse the job, but his memory was tugged back to the gentle regret in Warren's eyes as they sat together on the park bench for the last time.

'*You've got my card.*' Oh yeah, Charlie had his card alright ... and his photo and itinerary for good measure.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, checked his weapon, and tucked it away into his waistband. He didn't know who to hate more, himself or Warren. How could the bastard do this to *him*, his best friend?

'Fuck it.' What was the point? It would be like hating the gun he held, the trigger he squeezed; just a waste of emotion, and emotions didn't come cheap these days.

He glanced at his watch and climbed out of the car, squinting at the sky. A bit of drizzle blew around in the stiff breeze; wouldn't be many people out and about tonight. His legs shaking more than ever before, he walked the usual two streets, this time to Warren's home, and slipped into the large front garden and around to the back of the house.

There was movement in one of the upstairs rooms, and after a while the kitchen light came on. Charlie ducked down out of sight, his heart pounding, then relaxed. What was the point in hiding? Warren knew he was coming. His wife and daughter were both out, according to the itinerary, so it had to be the man himself who had come into the kitchen. Charlie stepped boldly up to the back door and let himself in.

Warren turned, and the pleased surprise on his face made Charlie hesitate for the briefest moment, before professionalism took over and he brought his gun out, aiming it at Warren's head. *For christ's sake be quick...*

Movement in the corner of the room distracted him and the shot went wild, smashing into a cupboard in a splintering thump. He turned to see a woman in her dressing gown, a hot lemon drink in her hand, a tissue pressed to her nose as she stood, paralysed at the sight of the gunman in her home. *No time to think, get the job done...*

The next shot was more audible than the dull 'whump' of the first, and Warren had moved. The bullet took him in the left shoulder and he screamed as he went down. Charlie's vision swam; the memory of his first kill came drove all other thoughts from his head; the shrieks, the blood, the smell - God, the smell ...

He smelled it again now, and the nausea threatened to choke him. His hand shook. 'Lie still! *Still*, dammit...'

But Warren was scrambling feebly backwards, his face a mask of pain, terror and bewilderment.

'Charlie... what's... Christ, man! *What ...?*'

Charlie's voice was a sob. 'Don't. Fucking. Ask!' One more bullet, and the questions were over.

Susan McKinley was dragging in sharp, shallow breaths, the tissue still pressed against her face, her eyes wide and blank as she stared past Charlie, unable to move in her terror. Never before in his career had Charlie taken a life he wasn't contracted for, but he had no choice now. He swivelled his gun towards the stricken woman and shot her. Once. A small, dark red hole appeared in the centre of her forehead as she fell to the floor, and Charlie had a moment to wonder bitterly why he had been unable to do as well for Warren, before another shape appeared in the back doorway. He saw with the low tingle of alarm that this time he was the one with a weapon sighted on him.

Warren's daughter, a cool twenty-three year old, stared at him over the barrel of her father's hunting rifle. It looked incongruously large in her slender hands, but Charlie had no doubt she would use it, and use it well.

'Well well,' she said slowly. 'I seem to have stumbled on a terrible murder scene. I might have to defend myself.'

Charlie stared back at her, confusion fighting with an unaccustomed sensation; fear. 'Caroline, you're supposed to be out with—'

'My mother?' Her gaze fell on the woman who lay by the other door. 'Yes, that could put the mockers on things a bit.'

'What are...?' Realisation set in and his voice dropped to a whisper. 'Oh, my God. It was you.'

'Well what did you think? That he was suffering from terminal cancer, like in some crappy detective programme? Come on, Charlie. How long have I known you? I credited you with a little sense.' With trembling fingers, she held up a brown envelope identical to the one that had contained Charlie's final instructions.

'This is the contract you were supposed to have. Turns out it was your old Corporal. Probably no real reason other than Dad not liking to be shouted at. Anyway, I swapped them before he left to meet you.'

'But why?' Charlie felt his own hands shaking, almost uncontrollably, but he held the gun as firmly as he could, nevertheless feeling it slip slightly in his sweaty palm.

'Ask no questions, Charlie. Not important. The thing that you should be worrying about now is what I tell the police? We do have a choice here.' It had the feel of a prepared speech, but the chill in her voice transmitted itself to Charlie's heart and he couldn't find any mocking words to break the spell and retrieve his dignity. She stepped around the body of her mother, carefully avoiding the spreading pool of blood under the mat of dark hair on the floor. The gun she held wavered but didn't drop.

‘Do I say that I disturbed you, and you ran away? That I didn't see you? Or that I found you here standing over the bodies of my parents and I shot you in self defence?’

Charlie couldn't answer her; his mind was still struggling with the knowledge that this girl had arranged the murder of her own father and her mother.

She smiled suddenly, but her long hazel eyes were still icy. ‘So which is it to be?’

Dear god she was serious, she was giving him a choice. He cleared his throat, thinking fast.

‘What’s in it for you if you let me go? Why not just shoot me anyway since you’ve done all this groundwork?’

She shrugged. ‘Letting you go means less questions from the police. If I have to shoot you it’ll all become ... more complicated.’ She sighed. ‘We could always shoot each other, but you don’t want that any more than I do.’

‘Your father was my best friend. You made me kill him.’ Charlie heard the self-pitying tone in his own voice and wondered at it; what right did he have to feel sorry for himself?

For the first time, Caroline’s composure broke. ‘And *he* made you kill my fiancé!’ Bright tears sprang to her eyes and she knuckled them away furiously.

Charlie stepped back, caught off guard. ‘What?’

‘Last month. Daniel Jarvis. You shot him twice. Ring any bells? But then why would it? You don’t care enough to find out. If you did you’d have maybe refused the contract. But you never ask do you? So I knew you wouldn't this time.’ Her voice faltered, and now she just sounded tired. ‘Get out, Bryant. Next time I see you there won’t be a choice.’

Charlie turned and stumbled from the kitchen, half expecting to feel a bullet slam into his back, but it would hardly look like self-defence if Caroline shot him now.

The two streets to safety felt like two miles, but finally he jerked open his car door and slid behind the wheel, fighting to control his racing heart. Warren and Susan McKinley, both dead...

He lowered his head onto his hands as they gripped the steering wheel, and breathed deeply as he fought the urge to weep for this and all the other times he’d done exactly the same thing. What right had he to cry now, for those faceless people? For their families? None. He gunned the engine and drove away into the night, heading south back to London and home.

Charlie began to stir. His face, pressed against the floor of the bus, was numb with the cold and as he opened his eyes he saw the ticket lying face up beside him. At once the fear and disbelief returned and he closed his eyes tightly against reality. A moment later he felt a hand close on his shoulder, digging long, thin fingers into the muscle there. He bit back a shriek of pain and terror, struggling to his knees to alleviate the sharp agony.

From where he knelt he saw the cold, dead faces staring at him and as his mind, tired of pretense, cast aside all other possibilities for this madness, he began to recognise them. There - that was the old schoolteacher who had been playing after school, there was Daniel Jarvis, the side of his head curiously flattened ... but really, not so curious, was it? The second bullet from Charlie's gun had torn away half his face. The owner of the bony fingers squatted beside him, and Charlie moaned as he saw again the face of Warren McKinley.

'Hello, Charlie. Just tell me. Did I look sick to you? Did I?'

'I ... thought ... I didn't know ...'

'You didn't *ask*,' Warren hissed.

'You told me not to! Christ, you said it often enough!'

'No, Charlie! I agreed with your rank cowardice! I never held back any information, but all you cared about, was that what you didn't know couldn't hurt *you*!' Warren's voice rose to a scream, spittle spraying from tight, white lips and beading on Charlie's face.

'It was Caroline!' Charlie reached up to wipe away the moisture from his cheek, and found his hand gripped and bent backwards at the wrist, further and further until the bones in his fingers and forearm started to burn.

Warren's voice was calm again. 'No, it wasn't. She was no more the killer than I'd been all those years. You were the triggerman. You were the guy who worked in the wet. Now, come with me, *friend*, I'm going to find some answers for you.'

He gave one more twist, and Charlie heard the bone snap; the pain was instant and huge. He almost greyed out, but was brought back to reality by Warren gripping his cheek and twisting until he was certain the ghost was going to tear him apart where he knelt. Even the pain of his broken wrist was almost eclipsed by this new and unlikely agony. He was pulled to his feet by the skin of his own face, and pushed forwards until he was standing in front of the nearest passenger.

‘Simon Bignall,’ Warren told him conversationally, and switched his grip so he was holding Charlie tightly by the back of his neck, as he had before. ‘Simon, did you have something to tell Mr Bryant?’

‘You killed me three years ago,’ Bignall said, his voice calm. ‘Never said what the reason was. You took out my eye.’ Suddenly on his feet, he shot out his thumb and jammed it deep into Charlie's left eye socket. Charlie's knees gave out and he stumbled, clapping his uninjured hand to his eye, feeling blood seeping through his fingers.

He heard himself sobbing, but Warren paid no attention, and dragged him on to the next seat on the bus, where Daniel Jarvis was sitting, his head bowed, his hands clasped across his waist. Without warning Jarvis sat bolt upright and, with one terrifyingly swift movement, drove his blood-soaked fist into Charlie's stomach. His expression contorted with disgust at the mewling sound Charlie made as he staggered back.

‘Think that hurts, do you?’ Jarvis followed him and sank his clawed fingers into Charlie's mouth and cheek, pulling it viciously to the side. The heat of blood flooded down Charlie's jaw, and Charlie could do no more than whimper at the enormity of the pain.

‘I fell in love with his daughter,’ Jarvis said. ‘That was my crime. I wasn't good enough for her. Or for that bitch ...’ Jarvis jerked a thumb in the direction of a middle-aged woman in a night-gown. She had a small, red eye in the centre of her forehead.

‘Hello, Charlie dear,’ Sue McKinley said, and, smiling, tipped the hot lemon drink from her hand onto his face, where the citrus burned like sulphuric acid into the raw wounds.

The ragged flaps of flesh which had once been Charlie's cheeks stretched obscenely apart as he moved the visible jawbones. Words were difficult to form, but his remaining eye pleaded mutely as he gestured at Warren.

Jarvis understood it. ‘Yeah, but you're the one who pulled the trigger. Your bastard partner believed he had a reason, at least. But he couldn't kill. Left up to him, I'd just be a nasty thought, but still walking around.’ He swung out his arms to take in the entire busload of dead. ‘We *all* would. But you ... *you* don't ask questions ... not even when you're looking your man in the eyes.’

It began in earnest then. Charlie stumbled away from Jarvis only to find himself surrounded. One by one the passengers exacted their revenge, biting, scratching, clawing and all the while shrieking their manic accusations. The noise was deafening, mind-twisting, the agony deeper and more savage than he could ever have imagined pain could be. He could feel shredded skin hanging off what remained of his face, his teeth were loose and spraying blood as he screamed wordlessly; his tongue lay useless and uncontrollable, every movement of his head sending it sliding into the sides of his blood-filled mouth. The lid had been torn from his single eye denying him any chance of shutting out the horror around him, but, dear God, there had to be a way out of this torment...

A flare went off in his consciousness; there was one hope left. He dragged the gun from the waistband of his trousers, and, turning it on himself with a wild-eyed scream of triumph, he jammed the barrel under his chin and pulled the trigger.

He felt it all. Felt the heavy, dull impact, and the blood spilling down his face, felt the horrifying sensation of the bullet mashing his brain and splintering his skull, blowing the back of his head away ... but there was no blessed release, just more intense agony, and the dark, screeching laughter as his tormentors closed in tighter. Then, at the rear of the bus, the open platform gaped like a black maw and his reeling mind saw his sole means of oblivion.

He ran the gauntlet of eighty ripping, slashing souls. He groped past the last few rows of seats, feeling his fingernails peel back as he snatched at the metal rails to claw himself forward. Talons raked like scalpels down the backs of his legs, the flesh there parting with sickening ease, and as the blood gushed under his feet he slithered in the stickiness. He gave short grunts of effort and desperation, but moving forwards in the leopard crawl he had perfected in the army he slithered on, flat on his belly until a sabre of pain sliced his body in two. Light-headed and puking, he turned and recognised the pale, chubby man, who spat Charlie's own mangled testicles into his face. It was his first kill. The messy kill. The kill he had shot in the balls.

The blood from Charlie's ruined face flooded his remaining eye and turned the nightmare crimson. But the black hole of escape from this hellish bus was inches away now... just inches... He gathered the last ounce of strength in his shattered body, forced himself forward over the fiery coalpit that was his groin, and launched himself into the blackness.

He hit the edge of a ditch and rolled down, sobbing with fierce, triumphant elation at the feel of fresh, cool air on his burning face. The wet grass beneath his sweating hands was a relief, and he clutched handfuls of it as he pulled himself up the side of the ditch, ignoring the scratch of thistles and the tingling sting of nettles. Finally he scrambled onto the solid surface of the road, and only then could he bring himself to look back at the wreckage steaming in the ditch. The car was crumpled beyond recognition.

Charlie bent over, certain he was going to throw up, but in the end he only spat onto the tarmac....

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