

Sequela

By Rob McInroy

Highly Commended 2018

Mally Vogel stared at the blue-black sky unfolding above him, moving image of eternity. His mouth was dry and rank. He had a pain in his left shoulder and the rest of his body was sore. He tried to move but couldn't. Smell of earth in his nostrils. Dampness. Cold. A dark wall rose above him on either side, earth, grass, roots. *Am I in my grave?* he thought. *Is it over?* As he lay there the last of the night stars disappeared one by one, darkness resolving into day. There were birds. Clouds gathering, rain threatening. Mally Vogel stared upwards, tried to move, tried to think.

He knew if he didn't get out of here soon he would die. His difficulty was he had no idea where he was.

Or how he'd got there.

He was accustomed to a chasm of confusion in the mornings, that void where memory should be, the despair that accompanied the return of consciousness. But this was different. Normally, he would wake in the house, the drunkard's homing instinct ensuring safe passage. Even when he didn't make it home he would wake up in MacRosty park, or James Square, or a doorway. Not in a hole in the ground.

What happened yesterday? What had he done? He stared upwards and tried to focus his mind. An image came to him. Sitting in his Jaguar. Nobody on the streets. There was rain. Another disappointment bore down on him. He was driving on the Muthill straights, night as dark as death. The speedometer hit the ton. As he climbed towards the bends at the Drummond Castle estate he kept the Jag pointed straight ahead. This was how he'd imagined it dozens of times, the one hundred miles per hour impact freeing him from all future responsibility.

It didn't happen. He steered round the bend, coward to the last. So what happened next? Had he crashed? Had incompetence realised what he wasn't brave enough to achieve by himself? He listened and couldn't hear traffic and didn't think he was near a road. He tried to lift his hand but couldn't feel it. There was a pain in his face as though his skin was burning. He wanted to touch it, soothe it. He lay motionless instead.

Your name is Mally Vogel. You're a a loser. If you really are dying no-one will care. Your wife will cheer and your kids will shrug their shoulders. Your friends won't be surprised. He had it coming, they'll say. Only a matter of time.

Something bad happened. He knew it but couldn't locate it. It was always this way. He'd wake with a gnawing guilt in his stomach and no way of identifying what had caused it, shame exacerbated by ignorance. *Narrow down the possibilities, Mally. It'll involve Angela. It always does.* He heard something rustling in the undergrowth that was somehow above him.

"Go away," he tried to say, but he could barely hear himself. "Please."

A long face appeared above him, red and whiskery, dark eyes staring impassively at the improbable sight beneath. It was beautiful, so confident and sleek. The fox studied him in silence for some moments before it turned and disappeared and Mally felt a desolation worse than anything he had ever experienced. It was darker than any of the darkest moments of this darkest year that had started on Hogmanay in intensive care in Perth Royal Infirmary having his jaw reassembled. It was to end, it seemed, here, now, in June, in dissolution, in ruin.

"Mally Vogel's an intelligent boy but he leads himself astray." "Mally has an addictive personality which will surely get him into trouble." "Mally Vogel's teeth are black, he looks like shite and smells like cack." Mally Vogel, butt of everyone's jokes, the boy least likely, the man least able.

A loser dying in a ditch.

“You’ve gone too far this time, Mally.”

Don’t I always?

There was an argument with Angela. He’d told her he was going to commit suicide. “Run the Jag into a wall. There’ll be nothing left of me. That’s best.”

Attention seeking bastard. Every time he did it he told himself it would be the last. It never was.

“I’m calling the police.”

Angela and the kids were staying with Angela’s sister in Commissioner Street. Isobel. Sanctimonious bitch. It was her poisoning Angela’s mind, turning her against him. It was her fault. Whenever Angela looked at him now there was hatred in her eyes. And pity. Alice and Graeme, eight and seven, no longer wanted to see their daddy. They were scared of him. He said things that were cruel or nasty or didn’t make sense. He staggered about the house. He smelled. He wasn’t funny like he used to be, didn’t play with them, didn’t make up bedtime stories. And the more distant his family grew the more Mally took refuge in whisky and the cycle cycled downwards and down. This was hell.

“Call them. I’ll resist arrest. They can beat me up. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“You’ve wrecked my sister’s house, you bastard.”

Rain started to fall and he opened his mouth and let the drops refresh his parched tongue and throat. A belt of pain around his temples was tightening. There was a pigeon sitting in a nearby tree, cooing constantly. *Crazy... we’re all going crazy... we’re all going...* Mally tried to ignore it but the harder he tried the more insistent it grew. It was as though the noise was in his head, as though the pigeon was inside him, haunting him, taunting. It would be there always. The rain grew heavier. It was sharp and hard, not like June rain at all. Mally’s already cold body grew colder. He started to cry.

He hadn't resisted arrest, had he? Otherwise, how could he have gone out in the car afterwards? Two policemen called, one old, the other younger. The memory began to unfold, moment by moment. Seated on his settee, trying to focus on them, trying to understand what they were saying. Following them into the police car, into the station, into the interview room. "Mally Vogel, I am formally charging you with criminal damage..."

Mally moaned. His clothes were soaked. Rain was running down his face in rivulets, the tickling sensation driving him mad. There was a pain in his chest like his heart was being repeatedly punched. Was it a heart attack? Was this how it would end? *Please, please.*

Afterwards, they drove him home. *That was kind.* "You need to sort yourself out, sir. There's a Perth branch of Alcoholics Anonymous. I would recommend..."

He drank another half bottle of whisky after they left. Or was it a whole bottle? Jesus Christ, no wonder he was in this state. Even for Mally that was a heavy session. It had been about three in the morning when he took the Jag out. Later maybe.

He went over it again. "I am formally charging you with criminal damage." What criminal damage? "You've wrecked my sister's house, you bastard." Mally closed his eyes, forced himself to think. He was round the back of her sister's house. Up a ladder. In the bathroom window. He got stuck, his upper body through the window but without the leverage to pull his legs up. There was a dog barking, the sound of footsteps approaching and then receding. He gripped the edge of the sink and pulled himself through. The weight of his whole body rested on the sink and it gave way and Mally tumbled headfirst into the bathroom and landed on top of it. There was a hissing sound and he could feel his clothes getting wet and he turned round to see what was causing it. The sink had been pulled from the wall and the pipe was ruptured. Water was pulsing out of it in a torrent. He put his hand against it and water sprayed all over his face. He swore and pulled his hand away.

"Fuck."

He jumped downstairs and opened the front door and looked out. The street was empty and he ran. Didn't even close the door. Now, working through the memory of it, he couldn't fathom what he was doing there anyway. Why was he breaking into his sister-in-law's house? That made no sense.

Nothing about you makes sense, Vogel. You're a moron. You've flooded her house, you cretin. You deserve this. Rain was sheeting down and he could feel the water rising around him. *You're going to drown. Just desserts.* He stared at the greyness above him and closed his eyes but still saw light bearing down on him like a curse. He felt both inside and outside the world, as though, simultaneously, he was hurtling towards the end and the end was speeding towards him.

"What on earth?"

Mally could feel something splashing about at his feet. He looked down to see a spaniel nosing around at his boots. He groaned.

"What are you doing in there?" A terrified face stared down at him, an old woman in a sodden headscarf. She stared at him with incomprehension. He stared back. "Wait there, I'll get help. Kit, come on, boy."

Mally shook his head. Please no, he thought. Please don't get help. Leave me here. He still had no notion of where he was but he was reconciled to it. He was calm. The pain in his head had eased and the pain in his chest was growing but otherwise he was completely numb.

It was the most relaxed he had felt in months.