

The Prime Minister and the Stag

By Chris Soul

The Prime Minister crouches down by the dead stag. Headlights burn into its gazing, black eyes. Antlers are a silhouette, a wild tangled crown, against the wet tarmac.

It had happened in an instant. The driver had turned a dark corner. And the stag was there: majestic, huge in the road, a statue of nature caught in blinding light. The impact sent it bounding back into the darkness, while the Prime Minister jolted forward, his seatbelt choking. There was a black hole of silence, save for the slow swipe of the window wipers.

There is blood now on the road, seeping from the stag's mound of coarse brown fur. The thing stinks. It is musky like mothballs. Stinking of the earth. The Prime Minister holds a handkerchief to his mouth. As he crouches he is careful not to tarnish his suit against the wetness, the mud and the expanding pool of blood.

"What a shame," he says to his driver, who stands helplessly, shaken by his side. "What shall we do with it?"

"We cannot move it, sir," the driver replies.

"Very well. We must move on. Are you okay?"

"I am fine."

Later the Prime Minister returns to his country home. It is late and he is tired. His government is unpopular, the economy is still in decline and his wife is having a break with the parents up North. Only a small, glass of single malt whisky is a reprieve from a succession of hapless crisis. At least, finally, he gets to unloosen his tie and lie back on his leather Chesterton settee.

What is to be done? He wonders to himself. It is a question he regularly asks, although, these days, he cannot see the trees for the wood. If only he had been born a few decades earlier. If only he could be the great statesmen he had once envisaged; a man of the times, an unshakable pillar of British politics, root and branch honoured with the highest accolades.

Wearied now, he decides not to write in his journal. Instead he places his glass on the antique side table. He closes his eyes. Outside the rain is more forceful, lashing like pellets against the window pane. The grandfather clock ticks meditatively by. The lamplight dims. And soon the Prime Minister succumbs to sleep.

He sleeps restlessly. Knotting and squirming on the settee. A mound of creased shirt and trousers. Twitchy as a worm.

He is woken by a bang. At the window.

Presently, the lamplight is off and through the gloom, the Prime Minister only sees the tiny glint of raindrops on the glass, reflecting the dim paleness of the moon. What was it? Who is there?

Then, a wind races, howls around the house. The window rattles in its frame. He shivers and squints, sliding on the sofa.

Straining up onto his elbows, the Prime Minister gazes worriedly, pathetically. Was someone outside? Is this a security breach? It is the question of nightmares. Of assassinations, terrorist plots and madmen...

A huge shadow crosses the window. The Prime Minister reaches for his phone.

But then, he sees it. Across the garden. Standing in the drizzle. Like a black monster riding up in the twilight, there is the stag. Blood is still dripping from its dented, black-bloodied side. Its eyes

are unblinkingly dark. Two black-holes of incomprehensible wildness. Upon its large head, its crown of antlers is a chalice for the bright moon. A madness. A lunacy of feral, primordial power.

The Prime Minister is rigid on his elbows. He is now caught in the headlight. The stag is an impressive body of shadow and darkness, feeding on the nightmarish glare of the moon.

It saunters towards the window. It presses its face to the glass. Canines tapping. Eyes wide. Antlers threatening.

You left me by the road, it says. In a voice hoarse and deep. Frightening in its wild authority. *You left me on the tarmac. You left me to be struck again and again by more of your machines.*

The Prime Minister is in too much shock to reply. The stag just stares through the window, huge and furious.

What do you have to say for yourself? it asks.

The Prime Minister shakes his head. It is a dream. A dream. Go back to sleep.

He closes his eyes and lies back.

The window clatters. The stag remains at the window. Hot breath steams up the glass.

Do not ignore me. I will not go away.

In disbelief, the Prime Minister sits back on his elbows and watches the stag waiting at the window. It is too ridiculous to be real, he thinks. But he decides to deal with it, like any other farcical situation. As if dealing with a potential voter, intruding on his grounds.

"It was not my intention to cause you suffering," he replies, his voice croaky and dry.

Is that an apology? the stag inquires. *Are you saying sorry?*

"It was an accident," the Prime Minister affirms, composing himself. "My driver did not see you until it was too late."

Do you always blame things on others?

"Well... no. No, I don't."

Then say sorry.

"Look, what do you want with me?"

I want you to bury me in the woods. If you do, I will grant you one wish.

"Bury you? Now?"

Angrily, the stag snorts. Its breath steaming. Its face and piercing black eyes are shimmering. Black and ghostly.

It is still dark enough to go. He changes into his hiking clothes, his sturdy boots and tugs a flat cap over his receding hairline. He puts a shovel into the boot of the car. And leaves. Slowly he goes, up the gravel driveway, out of the gates and back onto the country road.

He considers the unreality of it. He is overtired, exhausted, possibly experiencing a mental breakdown. Other Prime Ministers have suffered such lapses, he thinks; sometimes going on regardless, showing themselves in public, grinning and defiant.

After a while, he reaches the spot in the road where the stag had been left. It is still there, although its hind legs are twisted, broken by the impact of other cars. Its eyes are now misty, glazed over by death. The smell of it is thick. The dirtiness and repugnancy of rotting bark. Decomposing mud. Blood, metallic, fetid.

The Prime Minister holds his nose a moment. He prepares himself. With gloves on, he grabs at the stag's hooves and tugs. The thing is so heavy and instead of moving it, he only hears the crack and crunch of its metatarsus and tibia. Its bones are deteriorating, given itself up to the inevitability of the road.

The Prime Minister stops and thinks. Stupidly, he pushes against the stag's stomach, where the blood is congealing. The end of an intestine worms its way out. The smell is overpowering. And the stag does not move. Its body merely shudders. Its almighty head and antlers nod and sway.

The Prime Minister stands there, helpless by the roadside.

I want you to bury me in the woods, the stag had said. *If you do, I will grant you a wish.* He already knows what he would wish for.

Soon, headlights appear down the roadway. It is a 4x4 vehicle. There is no point in hiding. But, regardless, the Prime Minister covers his face a little with his flat cap.

The 4x4 stops and an elderly man steps out. He is grey and solemn. He says nothing, but looks at the stag and at the Prime Minister, who stands awkwardly, slightly smiling.

"There's no point trying to get that off the road," the man says. "Better just inform the police."

"I can't," the Prime Minister says. "I can't just leave the creature here...."

The man stares at the Prime Minister, until realization dawns.

"My goodness, you're the PM!" The man is aghast and his expression changes. He doesn't know what to say. What can he say?

"Yes, yes... I am," the Prime Minister confirms, reluctantly. What would the press say? "Can you help me move it?"

The man is silent a moment, but then nods. "Of course," he says. "I can use the 4x4."

It takes a while and dawn swiftly approaches. Sunlight rises, yawning through the trees by the roadside. Leaves glitter with damp. Like a black river, the tarmac shimmers. And slowly the stag is dragged, antlers scraping, legs twisting and buckling. The 4X4 revs its engine, wheels struggling against the mud on the bank by the roadside.

Then, the stag rolls down. A tangle of legs, blood, fur and antlers. There is a trail of blood and intestines from the road. There is nothing to do about it.

"Thank you," the Prime Minister says. Still disbelieving, the man nods and drives off with a story to tell.

The Prime Minister stays. He gets the shovel from the boot of his car and starts digging a hole in the mud by a tree. With every cut of the soil with his blade, the Prime Minister feels relief spread over him. He can't remember the last time he has done such manual work. His back aches, his hands are stiff on the handle, yet he feels satisfied. The stench of the mud is enlivening. The stag watches on.

The problem now is get to the stag in its fresh grave. But on the slope of the bank it is easier. With several hard pushes, the stag turns over, crunching and cracking, into the hole in the ground. One black misty eye gazes upward.

You will get your wish. Don't you worry.

The Prime Minister shovels a pile of wet mud onto the stag. He keeps going, smothering the face of the stag, covering its great antlers in blackness. As morning warms his face, he is close to burying the whole stinking animal. Perspiration runs down his back. Manual labour is hard. Finally he pats the ground. The deed is done. The stag is buried. Surely forgiveness is as clear as the sun.

"I'm sorry," the Prime Minister says.

I can grant you your one wish now, the stag's deep voice echoes. The voice is sad and growing more distant.

Through the trees, far away, the Prime Minister can see the stag's ghostly, grey form, swimming in the morning light. Like a statue at Westminster. Forever remembered.

"I wish to be the most powerful Prime Minister this country has ever seen," he says, smiling triumphantly at the ghost.

Very well, the stag says. I will grant you your wish. But it comes with a warning. Even the King of the Woods will fall.

The wish is granted. Within weeks there is a surge of popularity for the Prime Minister. The economy is improving, his policies are met with acclaim and even his wife stands more assuredly by his side. In the House of Commons, he stands tall and is victorious in debate. The opposition are in awe of his dominance. Swiftly he becomes known for his towering presence, his wide-eyed stares and viscous flash of teeth if anyone should challenge him. He is respected. His peers and his public are in awe. He is the wild one of politics.

Then, a few years later, he falls. Striding out of parliament, the sun glowing in front of him, the Prime Minister is distracted by an unusual sight. On the lawn of Parliament Square there is a ghostly shape. The stag.

I warned you, it says. You had better watch out.

The Prime Minister stops. He squints at the stag. Is it possible? After all these years he had forgotten. That night. That moment of insanity. Thankfully there never had been anything in the papers about him dragging a stag off the road with a stranger. Thank God.

Watch out, the stag says. Its antlers are enormous in the bright sunlight. I did warn you. There is a price for wishing to be powerful, like me.

Still the Prime Minister is frozen. His peers and aides are confused. Why has the Prime Minister stopped? This is not like him.

Finally, it happens in an instant. Which was just as well.

A car, later discovered to be driven by a madman, carries off the road and smashes into the Prime Minister. It is senseless and unfathomable in its suddenness. The Prime Minister is thrown back, colliding hard against the road. His head smashes.

What is to be done? The Prime Minister thinks, hazily, stupidly. His body is smeared across the tarmac like a bloodied worm.

I told you, the stag says, his deep voice rising above the commotion.

The Heavens open. Rain. Blood. Guts. Power.

There is a natural order to this world, Prime Minister. It is done. You are now forgiven.