



CHECKPOINT

Place: Border, heading north from Dublin to Belfast, between Irish-Catholic Republic of Ireland in the South and Irish-Protestant British-ruled Northern Ireland

Time: Present

Characters: Tony, a motorbike courier
British soldier

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THE CHECKPOINT

Yony powers his messenger bike out of the corner on the narrow Newry Road. The biting mountain chill nips through his gloved fingers and leather trousers. Directly before him stands a border post. Cars. Checkpoint. Wheels inch ahead slowly over a long line of speed-ramps. Stop. Start. Two lanes shut down to one between the walls of corrugated iron sheets and squat British Army bunkers. He brake-slams his bike, squealing to a halt that attracts attention he hardly fucking wants. His face burns beneath the soldiers' intense scrutiny as he pulls to a stop alongside the line of humming cars. The warm exhaust of his hot engine is a rising comfort. The throb of his idling machine vibrates his packet between his thighs. The ramp of traffic headed north towards Belfast starts and stops and starts forward again. The drivers are as bored with the drill as the soldiers. Tony impatiently over-throttles on the next-to-last ramp. His boots and gloves struggle. The Honda four-hundred-four lurches to a stop. The front wheel hits against the last ramp. He bounces down hard on his saddle, crushing his nuts against the petrol tank.

A waiting soldier, chewing, spits. He judges Tony's performance and recovery as a bit of attitude. The soldier's booted feet kick out to a no-shit stance. His camouflaged crotch, padded with armour, peeps out from beneath his rifle. He stands confidently, directly in front of the bike.

"Ye've noo brakes! 'Ave ye?"

The soldier's accent is thick Northern English. The SA80's stock nestles familiar in the crook of his right arm. His big trigger finger limns the cold barrel. His left hand is part of

the barrel's moulded grip.

His stood-back squad grins. Tony's nerves prove they're doing their job. The soldiers are no older than bike couriers themselves, but they are trained, poised, posed, pacing.

To the beat in his head of the Horslips' "Dearg Doom," Tony's hazel eyes glimmer inside his black helmet. He thinks himself the Red Destroyer descending from the hills of ancient Ireland.

He stares at the British soldier, always the same ambivalence, wondering how he should feel about this invader.

Always the same revenge fantasies.

Tony strips the square-jawed soldier mentally like an action-figure boys play dolls with. His uniform lies scattered across a floor, a bunk, a room with no windows. The handsome young soldier stands, flesh naked, tumescent, powerless, captured, and desirable before Tony's lust and rage and rape.

Rampant images tumble through Tony's mind fusing into his groin. A kicked, splintered, front door crashes through the pre-dawn quiet. Six years before, when he was thirteen, warm, eager, alone, hard with dreams against the sheet, waking to a start under the snug duvet, boots stomp up the stairs, the jangle of buckles and straps, click of armoury, goggled, masked, crackling miked voices commanding, strong, rifle-hardened hands, gun barrels tossing his bed-cover aside, revealing succulent, twinkling rump, the laugh, breath heavy with tobacco, cold press of gunmetal, goosebumps, his nakedness, rough scratch of combat fatigues, shivering skin, boots on the duvet, they do nothing, everything hangs suspended, the very nothing they do threatens everything, they never fail to excite, disappoint, they leave. It's a hard memory.

Inspecting the bike. Inspecting the messenger.

Hard in the leathers. His face flushed red with lust, not shame, on his visor-shadowed cheeks.

"The state o' yer bike," the British soldier grimaces. "Ave ye noo respect for your machine, mon?" The soldier circles Tony, giving the street-banger bike a closer inspection. He frowns at the courier-punk tangle of bungee straps holding the pedals up, saddle and headlight in place.

Tony fancies some headbutting. He looks directly at the soldier whose legs remain spread wide across the front wheel blocking the way. *Stupid*, he thinks, *or trusting?* He guns

the four-cylinder up to a roar and says, "Is it my brakes yeh wanna check?"

The soldier cannot hear him. He smiles at the sweet sound of the shortened back pipe of the four-into-one exhaust. It pops with back-crackle, and punctuates the engine's growl. *For fuck's sake*, Tony thinks, *is this inspection or foreplay?* He studies the soldier, a boy hardly a year older, but more muscular than himself, and—serious as a punch in the face—into the authority of the laces, straps, and buckles of his uniform. His bored mates have long since turned into their cigarettes.

"So why," asks the soldier, "do ye fuck up the looks," pointing to the mud-scarred casings, "o' such a beautiful machine?"

"Clean bikes have a nasty habit of disappearing, especially in the courier game. Who do yeh think would steal a rat bike like this?"

The soldier laughs and nods.

Tony gets it. *Yeh'd steal it*, he thinks. *Yeh fuck! Yer a beauty under that uniform.*

"Ye got some piece of machinery all right..."

Yeah, it fits between my legs.

"Not much to look at," the soldier says, "but good performance?"

The ambiguity of machines.

The soldier's long index finger rubs his gun's long barrel.

This could be very unsafe sex.

The tip of the barrel grazes the leather on Tony's knee cap.

Accident? Threat? Come-on? Tony hardens. What's he inferring: *We kill queers? Suck my dick?*

"Where ye headed?"

Tony's dick squirms.

Business or pleasure?

"I'm delivering papers to a solicitor's office in Belfast."

"Where ye coming from?"

"Dublin."

"Are ye stayin' overnight?"

What's the answer?

"God no! Just a quick drop and straight back."

"That's two hundred miles. Rather ye than me, mate."

The soldier chucks his own chin up. "Too bad," he says. He finishes with a wink.

Too late.

Tony's heart pounds.

"Take her handy," the soldier says.

Too dangerous.

Tony taps his Honda four-hundred-four into first gear, slipping the clutch with a hardon little rise of the front spoked wheel, gunning up the courier bike, smiling at last, rocketing on out, happy, heading north alone, with the six condoms of drugs safe up his bursting arse, up toward the town of Newry.

Left standing in the cloud of blue exhaust, the soldier calls to his stood-back mates: "Fag."

