

# Horror

## *Umbrella Man*

*By: Steven Bruce*



### Steven Bruce

Steven Bruce is the author of *Thrown Up* and co-author of *Dark Matter 8*. His work has featured in *Picaroon Poetry*, *Building Bridges*, *No Tribal Dance*, *Forward*, *Lonesome October Lit*, and the *Black Light Engine Room Literary Magazine*. Some of his poems have been translated into Polish. In 2019, he graduated from Teesside University with a Master's Degree in Creative Writing.

Nick pinched his pudgy stomach

in the steamy bathroom mirror. *What happened to me?* he thought. *I've got to get back in shape. Cut out the sugar. It's now or never.*

He drifted into memories of his youth playing rugby in the amateur regional leagues. *Back then, I could eat like a pig and still see my abs.*

In the kitchen, the dull hum of the refrigerator filled the silence as he packed his bag with cheese sandwiches and jam doughnuts. *The diet starts on Monday.* He checked his watch. "Crap," he said. It was five to midnight.

He paced along the back road, his arms swishing against his nylon jacket. He stepped over the potholed tarmac through alternate spots of darkness and dingy streetlight. Darkness. Streetlight. Darkness.

At the train station, he answered his phone. "Ma, I got your voicemail. Don't worry about the results. It's early days. Listen, I'll pop over after work. We'll have breakfast together, like old times. Get some sleep, Ma. See you soon." He ended the call and rushed inside.

Axel vacated the cramped security kiosk. "Late again, laddie?" he said to Nick.

"Sorry. My ma—"

"Not my concern," Axel said, and scuttled to the exit.

"Halfwit," Nick said.

Danuta's voice startled him. "Should I clean here?"

"Please. And can you get rid of Axel's stink?"

She rummaged through her cart and presented two air fresheners. "Pine or lavender?"

"I'm feeling adventurous," Nick said.

"Use lavender."

She spritzed the kiosk. The floral scent mingled with Axel's musty body odour.

"Are you going home for Christmas, Danuta?"

"No, flights are too expensive," she said. "Two hundred pounds."

He almost offered to pay, but stopped himself. *She'll think I'm a right creep.*

"It will be my first Christmas alone," she said.

"Well, if you get desperate, you can join me."

She rubbed his freckled forearm.

"You're such a sweet guy."

"Thanks," he said, thinking about his years of savings gathering dust. *I could put the flight money in a card and say it's from the staff.*

"Can we get together one night?" she said and continued to rub his arm.

"That... We... I... Sure," he said, feeling an erection coming on. "If you'll excuse me, Danuta, I must take the rounds." He patted her plump hand

and rushed down the narrow

passageway to the bathroom. Nick locked himself in the grubby cubicle and unbuttoned his jeans. He imagined Danuta in black thigh-high stockings, welcoming rough penetration from another man. It was always the case with his sexual fantasies, he never starred in them.

As he ejaculated into a tissue, he noticed a ragged black boot poking under the cubicle door. "You shouldn't be in here," he said.

The boot crept away.

He cleaned himself, buttoned his jeans, and stepped out of the cubicle. A smell lingered, reminding him of a butcher's shop.

At the kiosk, Danuta had vanished, but her cart remained. Her mop lay abandoned across the floor. He picked it up and glanced across the platform. He spotted a tall, shabby figure standing in the dim light. The man wore a black trench coat, and the brim of his black umbrella concealed the top half of his face. His pale, round chin and red lips protruded into the light.

Nick called to him, "No more trains tonight, mate."

The umbrella man's mouth twisted into an oval smile, and he turned to leave.

Nick settled into the kiosk and unwrapped his sandwiches.

Twenty minutes later, Danuta still hadn't returned.

*Did I say something wrong? Why the hell did I ask her to join me?* He ate a third doughnut. *I should find her and apologize.*

He walked through the narrow, graffiti-stained passageways and stopped at the lunchroom. Peering through the murky glass, he saw a flickering neon light inside. *She's watching television,* he thought. He

hesitated, then knocked and opened the door.

A cold, blunt object struck his temple. Nick stumbled and steadied himself on the table. Another vicious blow hit the back of his head, and he lost consciousness.

Nick woke to the stench of dried blood and dead animals. His bleary eyes adjusted to see Danuta strapped to a chair across the room, her gagged, panicked face illuminated by a video camera's pale light. The umbrella man scuffed out of the shadows; his heavy breath palpable. He towered over Danuta.

In his white, lumpy hand, he gripped a silver knitting needle. "I can smell your piss, lassie," he whispered. He steadied his shaky hand and slid the needle deep into her ear canal. A vein swelled on her forehead. Her left eye rolled white, while her right eye locked onto Nick's with a frantic stare. He hyperventilated and blacked out.

He woke to a steady tip-tip sound. As Nick's vision cleared, he saw Danuta's flayed torso suspended from the ceiling, her entrails hanging like macabre garlands. The last of her blood dribbled onto the umbrella. Under it, the murderer's lips moved out of sync with his voice. "It must be inside of you," he said.

"Please," Nick said. The camera's light shifted onto him, and he groaned and fainted.

"Nick," the nurse said, "the police are here if you're feeling up to it?"

His voice was hoarse. "Yes."

She fetched the officer, a middle-aged man with tired eyes. He couldn't bring himself to look at Nick's face.

"Mr. Barlowe, I'm Chief Inspector Harrison. I understand you've been

through a lot, so I'll keep this brief. Can you tell me anything about the man who did this?"

"Not much," Nick said. "He was tall. Wore a black overcoat. Carried a black umbrella."

"Black umbrella?"

"Yes. That's all I remember. Nurse, water, please."

"Okay," the inspector said, "that'll be all for now."

Harrison left the room, and the nurse brought a glass of water.

"Any visitors?" Nick said.

"Yes," she said. "Your mother came by and left a letter. I'll get it for you. Try and rest, Mr. Barlowe. The surgeon will be here soon."

Nick arrived early at his therapist's office and sat facing the door. He glanced around the sterile waiting room. His fingers traced the thick scar running from temple to chin.

Dr. Sandrino's voice startled him.

"Nick, please, come in."

He entered her office and perched on the cracked leather couch. His voice trembled. "I still can't get her out of my head."

"It's understandable, Nick." Dr. Sandrino nodded. "What happened was traumatic—"

Nick gripped his thigh. "I don't mean her butchering, goddamn it." He looked up from his shoes. "I'm sorry, Doctor."

"Please continue," she said.

"I'd hoped to find a keepsake of hers at work, but Axel said management dumped her things at the charity shop." He buried his face in his hands. "If I'd stayed with her, things would be different."

"That's the survivor's guilt talking," Dr. Sandrino said. "Don't blame yourself for the actions of a madman."

Nick took a sharp breath. "I see his

sick smile in my nightmares. Every time I shut my eyes, he's there." "It's important to face the memories," Dr. Sandrino said. "We'll work through this together."

"I keep expecting him to be in my room when I wake up, waiting to finish me off."

"We suffer more in imagination than in reality."

Nick looked up. "Who said that?"

"Seneca."

"Did he have his face peeled off with a paring knife too?" Nick frowned.

"Sorry, Doctor."

"It's okay. You need to express your feelings, no matter how big or small they seem. Tell me, is your family supporting you?"

"Right now, I don't have any. Dah left when I was a boy. Mah disowned me after the attack."

"She did?"

"Yes." He bowed his head. "She said she could endure having a fat son, but not an ugly one."

Dr. Sandrino's eyes widened. "That's awful. What did you say to her?"

"Well, she told me by letter, so I couldn't reply. She's right—"

"No," Dr. Sandrino said, "she's wrong."

"I don't know where I go from here. I can't see any kind of future."

understand why you feel that way, and I'm here to help you through it. But remember, there's always hope, even in our darkest moments. You've already shown so much strength and perseverance. I know you can overcome this."

Nick took a breath and nodded. "I want to honor Danuta's memory." He choked up. "She was—"

"A friend," Dr. Sandrino said. "It's important to remember who she was, not how she died."

yellow bouquet in hand. He laid the flowers on the rain-slicked platform.

"Sorry, Danuta," he whispered.

Axel opened his umbrella and put his arm around Nick. "Come on, laddie, let's get you home."

The two lumbering figures vanished into the swirling crowd of human fog.

Nick stood at the train station, a

