

Balke

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A bit of original fiction. Crime/mystery I suppose.

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Chapter 1 - Untitled

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Did you ever hear of a man named Balke? Emille Balke, actually, but you'd very rarely hear his first name - I don't suppose he liked it very much. He grew up here, so he'd have been in this pub before. Perhaps sat where you are now. If you hadn't heard of him last year, I'd imagine you'll have heard of him now - he's the guy who was killed in that car-smash down the road...that's why those flowers are always stacked against the railings.

Hang on - Waiter! I'd like a lager please, and my friend'll have - what would you like? You're still going? Suit yourself. Just a pint of lager please.

What did you say you're name was? Right. Anyhow...where was I? Ah yes, Balke. Well, he was in a band called Sea7. Yeah, try saying that after a couple more drinks. They cottoned on to the fact that their name was awful about a year ago, and changed it to...hang on, it'll come to me... The Narnians. You've heard of them? Yeah, the ones that released Poppies. Good song, that - video was awful though.

By the time they made it big, Balke was their lead singer. He wasn't that good, but he had amazing hair - defied gravity. Must have cost him a fortune every week. Some people say I look like him in fact. The light's wrong here - but you'd be able to see it if we were outside. Looking like him is only one of a whole catalogue of similarities we share - we're connected on a supernatural level.

No, I'm not asking for money. Would you stop interrupting me please? Now, as I was saying, Balke and I are connected. We live the same life, exactly seven years apart. I was born on the Fifth of April, seven years to the day after Balke, at the same hospital, and I'd be prepared to bet it was in the same bed. We went to the same school, the best in the area, and studied the same subjects. I ended up leaving seven years later, with the same qualifications, in the same subjects, and the same school prizes as Balke. And I collected my Service to sport certificate while nursing a broken leg - just as Balke did.

Obviously, I'd never heard of him at that time, since he was just an average student. It was when Sea7 started playing regular gigs in the area that the local paper decided to write a profile on him - it was one of the freakiest pieces of writing I've ever read. Literally my own life story, barring the years. I did a little research on him, not difficult really since most of the teachers who had taught him were still at my school. All I needed was the plausible excuse of writing an article about him for the student magazine, and they told me all they knew. If they'd been more intelligent, perhaps they would have noticed the link, but I suppose it takes an uncommon mind to pick up on these things.

The information they gave me was enough to convince me that something seriously odd was going on. I'd discovered that my life was not my own - something or someone was messing with it. I did the only thing I could in the circumstances - I fought the link, with considerable gusto. It always failed though - in fact, it was like being on elastic. The harder I tried to get away, the sooner I was sucked right back to where I began.

Like, I found out what he did at university, and which one he attended. I tore the page for that place out of my UCAS book, and found a completely different course, at a different place. Got an offer too - I

thought it was a pretty easy one, but as it turned out, it wasn't to be. I only missed my grades by a whisker, and yet they wouldn't even consider me. I ended up going through clearing, much to the dismay of my family - they had rather high hopes of me. I had them moaning at me from one side, my teachers offering 'helpful' advice on the other side, and I just got so confused that I accepted the first course I found.

Then I got home and looked up the course. At least, I tried to, but the page was missing. Then I realised - that was the course Balke took. Not only had I endured a lot of worry and hassle, I'd also still not escaped from his life.

And - wait a sec, I need a refill. Waiter! Another beer please. No, I don't think I've 'had enough' thank you very much. I'm a paying customer - I don't need to put up with hassle from idiots like you.

Sorry about that. I think the power goes to their heads sometimes. Right, I'd just told you about the uni place, yeah? Well, after that I decided that the easiest thing to do would be to get on with my life, and let fate play whatever games it liked. After all, Balke wasn't doing so badly - there are definitely worse lives to live than his.

Taking the decision was amazing - straight away my life improved. Things were so easy it was laughable, and if I had any difficult decisions to make I'd just see what Balke did and act accordingly. It wasn't hard to find things out about him; he was getting more and more famous and my interest in his life would have been put down to a natural fascination for celebrity, if, indeed, it was noticed at all. For over a year I was the happiest I'd ever been. I was pleasing fate, I wasn't having to make difficult decisions, and I was living the life of someone who'd had a lot of fun at university.

I should have realised that things like that don't last.

It was little things at first. I got slightly better marks in my end-of-year exams. I got promoted in my weekend job. Things that, on the surface, should have been good. But they hadn't happened to Balke. The last time I'd tried to cheat fate, I ended up hurting everyone, including myself. What if it looked as if I were trying to cheat fate again? I wasn't trying, but I had been working hard at uni. Too hard, I berated myself - Balke had spent his time relaxing. Obviously being like Balke took a bit more effort than I'd assumed, but I wasn't deterred. I let my coursework slip and started studying him instead.

Of course, it meant doing a lot of research, but I found that I had a surprising talent for it. I soon knew which restaurants he'd patronised, his favourite lager - of course, I switched to it straight away. I still drink it now, in fact. All the little facts which would convince fate that I really was trying. My marks slipped, but that was OK. I lost my job, but again, it didn't matter - in fact, it was a good thing, because Balke had lost his job at about the same time. It a special relief to me because I hadn't even been trying to get fired, which told me that the old connection was still there. The same life, seven years later.

I lost my girlfriend, which was more of a blow. But, of course, she wasn't as important as Balke. It would have been stupid to put her before him - in fact, selfish too, since when fate rebounded it would hurt the people I loved - including her. So I was protecting her from fate. Besides, I doubt she would have stayed with me much longer anyway; I caught her looking at me very strangely several times during the final few weeks of the relationship.

I started sending letters to Balke, telling him all about our connection, but he was never allowed to answer them himself - it was always one of his minders. At first I got polite form letters with a free signed photograph - as if I didn't know what he looked like - but as I persisted, the replies started getting nastier, until they eventually accused me of harassment and threatened me with legal action.

I don't blame Balke of course - I doubt if he ever saw the letters. I expect he got lots of fan mail, so it's understandable that he should employ people to deal with it, but they should have passed my letters on. I mean, any fool could see they were important, and I'm sure he would have helped by giving me information. I was his kindred spirit, after all, so I ought to know these things.

Oh s**t - I've knocked my drink over. I'll just go to the bar and get another - I don't trust the waiters not to spit in anything I order. They take insults personally, you know. D'you want a drink? Fair enough.

Ok, I'm back. Now...ah yes. What I wanted most of all was access to Balke's medical records - I needed to know when he'd been ill, or injured, so I could plan for similar setbacks. I tried everything I could think of - feigning illness to get into the surgery, then trying to rummage through the filing cabinet when the doctor left the room. It was locked though - I suppose they didn't want some idiot stealing records. I was different though; I needed that information. I didn't dare ask the doctor outright, the answer would have been too predictable, but I thought it might be safe asking a receptionist. Unfortunately they were too stupid to see my need, and too stuck-up to accept money for what was, really, only a tiny bit of information. They started kicking up a fuss, so I had to dash off sharpish, but I was very annoyed.

In the end, I had to resort to archive issues of the regional paper - I figured that major accidents might have been reported there, while I'd have to take my chance with everything else. An unsatisfactory way to live, but the best I could manage, and, as it turns out, it was helpful. In fact, without the back issues I might never have found out about the crash Balke was in.

There wasn't a mention of the crash at the time, but a few months later a special report on the state of the roads in the area had brief interviews with people who'd been in accidents - and there was Balke staring out of the paper, with a couple of lines saying he'd broken his arm in a head-on collision at the roundabout on the 12th of May, earlier in the year. I stared at the year for a few seconds before realising that it was dated seven years previous to the time I was reading - in April. I had only a month to prepare for a car crash.

I panicked at first, but I've always been a rational fellow and after I few deep breathes I had a plan. I reasoned that as long as I could get myself a car, I didn't have a problem, since I knew I wouldn't be badly injured in the crash. Getting a car proved to be really easy, actually - I found one for four-hundred quid, on the road. I took this as a sign that the crash was meant to be.

I can't deny that I was nervous - after all, how many people get up in the morning ready to drive into someone else? Perhaps quite a lot, but not many of them intentionally. Nevertheless, I duly started preparing to for the crash. I had a stiff drink - admittedly it was early in the morning, but I was terrified I would lose my nerve. I mean, I'm the type of person who gets terrified waiting for a roller coaster, and that's perfectly safe. It's always the waiting that gets to me.

It got to me that morning, badly. I kept pacing across the room, back and forth, getting worked up, until I couldn't bear it any longer - I knew that if I didn't do it that moment I never would.

I left the flat, running down the stairs to get to the car. My hands were shaking so much I dropped the keys in the gutter, and even when I picked them up I had a job actually getting the car unlocked. I sat in the car a minute, just breathing deeply, until I knew I was as ready as could be expected in the circumstances. I started the car and drove slowly towards the roundabout, picking up speed, until it was in sight, at which point I slammed on the accelerator and drove straight at it. I can't remember seeing anything - I might even have had my eyes closed - but I remember the sounds better than anything, even better than the pain. The engine, protesting at being worked so hard, car horns and brakes screaming as cars dived out of my way, and a squeal of brakes straight in front of me, from a car I knew wouldn't get out of the way in time. Then the noise was everywhere, worse than I could have imagined, hurting my ears, and going straight through my head. There were other things too - the blood, getting into my eyes and up my nose, and pressures on parts of my body that really weren't used to them. As I'd expected, it was my arm that hurt most, but I scarcely noticed at the time. All I was conscious of was the silence.

At first it was a relief, because the noise had been so dreadful, but the silence itself was sour, intrusive even, because I knew that something, somewhere, was very, very wrong. There should have been screaming and scrambling. For the first time, I opened my eyes, wiping the blood out of them the best I could, and looked around. People were just stood in silence, staring, or silently trying to open my car, or the other car.

There was no sound at all, until distant sirens drifted over, getting louder until they became the familiar wail that was so welcome right then. It seemed to take forever for them to cut me free, but at last I was out of the car, and dared to glance round, to see what had happened to the other driver.

That was the moment my world froze, and I realised that, whatever I did in the future, my life would end in seven years.

Being lifted out of the other car, and manoeuvred into a Body-Bag, was Balke.