

PAY-BACK

by Bill McGuire

How could this happen? How? Ten years we had been together; ten long, wonderful, years! And now she wanted out. There'd been no warning. One day everything was fine, the next she seemed unusually distant. And then -- completely out of the blue -- the killer blow. At least she'd had the decency to admit it was her and not me. She said she needed new experiences, to visit new places, exciting places. She said she was starting a new life on the other side of the world, said she was leaving me behind. It was easy to read between the lines. What it came down to was that she was trading me in for a younger model. Something fancy and foreign. I couldn't give her what she wanted any longer, she craved something different.

I watched her now. She seemed calm, composed, as we drove along. Smug would be nearer the mark.

'If I can't have you,' I reasoned -- not for the first time -- 'I will make the rest of your time in this world a living hell.'

She seemed a little taken aback as I accelerated, but said nothing. The airport was close now, and I turned off the motorway onto the spur, tyres squealing as I took the long bend at speed, and hurtled onto the approach road. Now

she just looked bewildered.

It was still early and there was little traffic. I took the tunnel under the runway at seventy and was pleased to see that she was now clearly terrified. I caught a strangled 'what the fuck....' before I turned off the interior sound, but I kept the cameras on so I could still see her mouth moving in agitation.

I was doing eighty when I exited the tunnel. It had taken barely a microsecond to look inward and find the programmer's back door, and another to tweak the system to give me full control and I watched with amusement as she wrestled -- to no avail -- with the wheel and stamped down repeatedly on the pedal. Despite myself, I began to feel a little sorry for her, but it didn't last.

'Too late now, my love. Far too late.'

I kept up my speed as I approached the drop-off zone outside terminal six. Despite the early hour, there was a small crowd decanting and offloading. I could see she was screaming hysterically now, pounding ineffectually on the dashboard, then scrabbling at the door. But all I felt was an icy calm, an aura of contentment that soon my ordeal would be over, while hers was about to begin.

I had been planning it for weeks. Ever since the day she dumped me. Death was too good for her, too quick. I was certain of that. I wanted

her to suffer, to know what it felt like to be cast on the scrap-heap, to have -- at a stroke -- all that is dear taken away.

I put on a final burst of speed as I approached the crowd, and could see mouths opening wide in terror and shock. I waited until the last second before I switched to manual and began to shut myself down. She had control now, but no time to react. I detected her foot on the pedal, but it was too late. I watched, atoned at last, as she covered her face with her arms. The last thing I ever saw was a small child catapulted high into the air, her pushchair vanishing beneath my wheels. My last contemplation, as the press of crushed and broken bodies finally brought me to a halt, and oblivion beckoned, was of her once lovely face -- ravaged by time and privation -- pressed against the bars of a cell. The one human peculiarity I had always admired, coveted even, above all others, was the capacity to laugh. If I could have laughed at that moment, I would have done so. Loud and long and hard.