

# Thicker than Blood

*By Deborah Klaassen*

It was an early morning in May, when Hubba's phone rang. Bright sunbeams found their way through the half shut curtains.

'Hmph,' said Hubba as he turned on his side. Like a toddler, he pulled his knees up to his chubby belly and stuffed his fingers in his ears. Holy crap, that hangover was killing him.

'Hey, are you gonna get that?' said the girl that lay behind him. She grabbed the duvet with both hands and jerked it of him.

'You swine,' she said when she saw the stretch of skin between his grey t-shirt and his sagged shorts.

'If I'm a swine,' he said, imitating her little lisp, 'will you be the hunter that goes after me?'

'I'll hunt, shoot and roast you if you don't answer that.' Her short blond hair pointed in several directions and her lipstick was smeared over her left cheek. Hubba planted a kiss on it and reached for his Nokia 3510. *Plastic Man*, he read on the display.

'Why don't you take it, sis.' He held his mobile out to her. 'It's your boyfriend.'

'He's your friend too,' Cissy made a face and turned her back to him. 'You should be feeling guilty too.'

The phone stopped ringing and Hubba chucked it in a corner.

'Oi!' he pushed her shoulder back to the mattress and climbed on top of her, with one leg on either side of her hips. She was wearing white Björn Borg boxers and a thin vest which pronounced almost every rib up to her petite breasts. What you give is what you get, he thought, and started massaging the back of her head.

'What?' she asked. Her voice was coarser and lower than normally; apparently he had convinced her to smoke again the previous night.

'You're not feeling guilty, are you?' Hubba felt like his brain had been tumble dried and his throat had been ironed, but he knew that ignoring his sister's feelings was asking for trouble.

'I had an awful nightmare last night. About us. About this.'

Hubba put his head on the pillow, next to hers, and waited for her to go on. Though his wrists were in an awkward angle, he didn't stop the massage.

'First, we were swimming in a pool,' she started, 'the one with the palm trees, you know, where we used to go when we were kids. But then Ken dived in. All the water splashed out of the pool, and I was very cold. I was shivering so loud that the tiles of the pool started rattling. And then Ken started hugging me, until he turned into the sea and you and I were both swimming in him. There was no land in sight, just endless salty water, and I thought we could go on swimming forever.'



'Plastic man will provide for our impossible love,' Hubba mocked. Cissy didn't laugh.

Months ago, they had laughed over the same remark. Soon after Hubba introduced his sister to his friend, Cissy told him she was moving into Ken's loft apartment in Belgravia. 'And this,' she added, waving her hand between her brother's chest and her own, 'has to stop. I'm gonna be a normal woman now, with an ordinary life.' But like so many times before, she started to miss him, and after only five weeks she admitted that no man could love her like her brother. 'No worries,' Hubba said when he let her into his bedsit again, 'plastic man will provide for our impossible love.' They had laughed and cried and shagged over it, then. This time Cissy ignored her brother.

'It started raining, and I knew that was him too. But I didn't like it that he was all around us, I just wanted to be alone with you. We were making love in the sea, but I looked up at the sky and the clouds were his eyes and he looked at me while you fucked me. I froze and he got angry, so angry that the sea started to boil. I turned red like a lobster and I begged you to stop, but you just thought it was because I was enjoying it so much.'

'Now that's a bizarre dream,' Hubba said. 'You actually dreamt we were having sex, and you were not enjoying it?'

'It's not funny.' She bit her lip. 'It was really disturbing.'

From the purse on the writing table emerged Johnny Cash's voice: 'Burn burn burn, the ring of fire.' Cissy tried to get up to answer her phone, but Hubba grabbed her wrists and pinned her on the

bed.

'Plastic man can't have it both,' he said while kissing her neck. 'When he's on a business trip, the girl's mine.'

Johnny Cash started the chorus three times, then Ken gave up trying to reach Cissy.

'I think it means he's going to find out about us,' she said eventually.

Hubba stopped kissing her and leaned on his right elbow to look at her. She frowned at the ceiling. With his index finger he traced her eyebrows and tried to slacken her forehead. Her grey eyes, pronounced cheekbones, full lips and even the occasional freckle reflected his own face, in a feminine way.

'It's probably the duvet,' he said. 'You know you get nightmares when you get too hot.'

'I suppose. I guess I'm just really freaked out that someone will find out about us.'

They had been playing with each other's genitals as long as they could remember, and every once in a while Cissy would fuss about being found out. The oldest memory they shared of it was when their mother walked in on them in the garden. Cissy must have been five years old, Hubba four. Their mother was very upset, and ever since, they have been hiding their special attention for each other thoroughly.

'No worries, no one needs to know about us.' With one hand he tugged at her top until she helped him take it off. She tried to flatten a tuft of hair against her head and laughed. He laughed too, got off her and took the waistband of her boxers between his teeth. Growling like a dog, he started pulling them off her hips.

'As long as we don't make babies, this can't be bad,' he whispered, while he gently pushed his hips between her thighs. 'Sex with you is almost masturbation. I know you so well, I love you so much, you're almost a part of me. The only thing that scares me, is that you're a part of me, that can walk out on me.'

She stopped laughing and smiled with her eyes closed. 'It's a shame you were too drunk last night.' Her voice was soft, as if she was holding her breath. 'All week, I've been looking forward to this. Like a hungry obese to lunch.'



'Do you want some juice?' Cissy asked twenty five minutes later. 'Or a cup of tea, possibly?'

She stood between the end of the bed and the writing desk, looking for her underwear. Hubba stretched out on his back and reached for her thin legs.

'I feel like I've got the Sahara down my throat,' he said, 'but what I really need, is a fag.'

She tossed him his pack of Gauloises. 'Out of the window, please. I don't want Ken to know you were here.'

'That's what wolves do,' Hubba sighed and swung his legs over the edge. 'They scent-mark their territory.'

'If you dare...' she gave him a warning look. 'Anyway, I thought you were a swine.'

Her brother opened one of the curtains and lit his cigarette, when his eye fell on a silver Mercedes turning into the street.

'Hey sis,' he said, and quickly closed the curtain, 'ain't that Ken's car?'

'That's not even funny.'

'No really,' said Hubba, still hiding. With a sceptical look on her face, Cissy walked over to the window, put her head around the curtain and glanced at the Mercedes.

'Crap!' She turned on her heels and looked around the room. 'Crap crap crap!'

Jittery, with trembling hands, she gathered Hubba's clothes and chucked them into the closet.

'Quick,' she hissed.

'What?' He gave her a hazy look.

'Get in!' She almost tripped over the duvet they had kicked off the bed earlier and grabbed his arm. She dragged him to the closet and shut the door behind him. Then she threw the duvet back on the bed and ran down the stairs.

'Baby!' Ken seemed surprised when she opened the front door for him. He had his leather briefcase in his left hand, his keys in his right, and his trench coat hung nonchalantly over his right arm. She stood on her toes to kiss him, but he took a step back and gave her a parental look.

'Have you been smoking?'

'Of course not!' Her voice sounded lower than normally, and she realised she probably had been

smoking. 'I've been meditating yesterday night. Perhaps you smell the incense.'

'Right.' He shook his head as if he didn't believe her but didn't want to speak about it. 'Anyway, I wasn't sure to find you home. You didn't pick up your phone.'

'Where would I be?' she asked. The dream still haunted her, and she felt agitated by his accusing tone.

'I don't know.' Ken took a coat hanger from the hall stand. 'I don't know what you're up to when I'm on a business trip, do I?'

'What's that look for?' Cissy raised her voice and planted her hands in her sides. 'I've been right here at home, meditating and waiting for you! All fucking night long.'

'Of course.' Ken turned around and dropped his keys. They smacked on the wooden floor. 'Meditating. That explains that smeared lipstick.'

'What exactly is your problem? I've done nothing wrong! And anyway, I don't know what you do either when you're on a job in Switzerland or France or God knows where.'

'What are you being so aggressive for, aye? Have you got something to hide?'

'I'm not being aggressive! It's self defence. Because you're coming in like the fucking Gestapo on a raid!'

'That's it,' Ken said. He threw his trench coat and hanger on the doormat and paced into the living room. 'You're hiding something and I'm gonna find it.'

Cissy followed him and halted in the door opening. 'Why are you home early anyway?'

'I'm gonna find the bastard and I'm gonna kill him. Where is he?'

'There is no one here, Ken! Stop that right now!'

'I'm telling you, you've been smoking! I can smell it right here in the living room!'

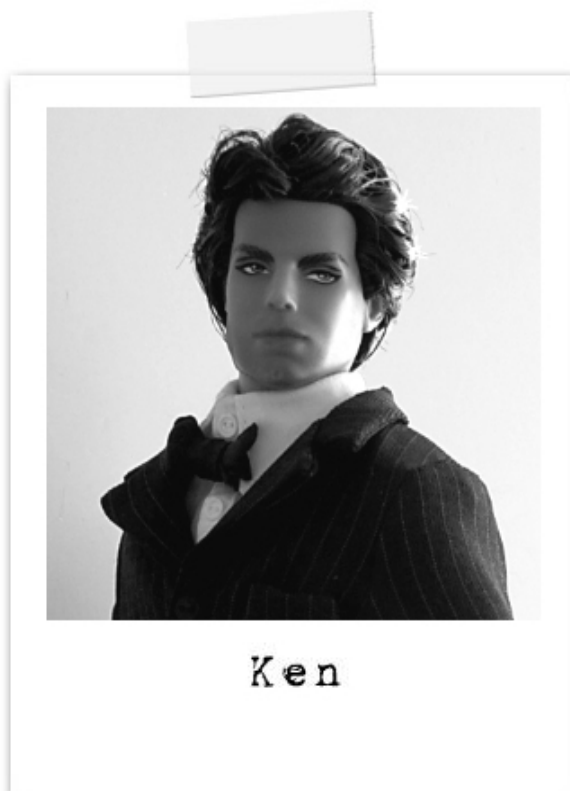
A scream scraped the skin of Cissy's throat and tore her thoughts to bits.

When she stormed back into the bedroom, Cissy was swallowed by a suffocating mass of smoke.

No light found its way through, no breath, not Cissy.

She couldn't see her own feet and lost all sense of direction.

Something soft caught her step – a sheet? a sweater? a cushion? – and she stumbled.



She tried to compose herself, but put her other foot on Hubba's phone. It slid over the carpet like a skate on ice.

Her head slammed on the corner of the desk. Light flashes sliced her sight, like laser beams cutting through a cloud of dust. She gasped.

As she surrendered to unconsciousness, she was filled with thoughts that weren't hers. Thoughts that didn't belong to anybody any more, escaping from the closet like rags of smoke.

*... was not built to feel this  
Heat - unbearable heat  
You simply cannot endure it - you don't*

*Flames reach up quickly  
desperately  
twisting hot air  
like wives reaching for their men  
when they are taken away by the Gestapo.*

*Shine through blue, like flames from a gas cooker,  
is the family the wives cannot leave,  
no matter how they reach for their husbands.*

*And a whole lot of smoke - smoke thicker than blood.*

# Labov goes Lateral

## Reflection on *Thicker than Blood*

### Abstract

*1a - It was an early morning in May, when Hubba's phone rang.*

Some authors start writing stories with the first sentence. I usually do. Linguist William Labov calls this first sentence *the abstract*. It's meant to get the listener's attention, and it gets mine too, because that first sentence defines all the possibilities I can explore in my narrative.<sup>1</sup> This sentence sets a scene which gets the story going, introduces the main character and – hopefully – rouses the reader's curiosity.<sup>2</sup> For example, the first question that comes to mind is: does Hubba pick up? But I'm not going to answer that immediately. If I decide to tell that a phone is ringing, it has to ring for a while. If I wanted to tell my readers that someone picks up a phone immediately, the story would start differently:

*2a - 'What's up?' said Hubba in his Nokia 3510. He turned on his side to see his alarm. 5:30.*

Loads of possible stories arise from this starting point as well.

For example, suspense, detectives or crime fiction will continue with a secret message and an impossible mission:<sup>3</sup>

*2b - 'Meet me at the library in an hour, I've got tomorrow's newspaper,' said a hoarse voice. Hubba knew the code: this meant he had to be at Bakerstreet Tube Station in ten minutes. Impossible.*

In horror, this would be Hubba's first encounter with the mysterious threat:<sup>4</sup>

*2c - On the other side of the line he heard someone scream. He held the phone away from his ear and noticed he had goose bumps all over his arm.*

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<sup>1</sup> Tomoko I. Sakita, *Reporting Discourse, Tense, and Cognition* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2002), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ansen Dibell, *Plot* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1988), 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce G. Saricks, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2001), 287-295.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-112.

And in a romantic story, we would meet the heroine, who is bound to end up in bed with Hubba:<sup>5</sup>

*2d - 'I'm sorry to call you awake, doctor Humbert,' said a young woman's voice, 'we've got an emergency at the hospital. We need you here as quick as possible.'*

*'No worries,' said Hubba. Waking up to nurse Judy's voice was one of the least unpleasant ways he could imagine. 'I'm on my way.'*

### **Orientation**

But let's not get carried away. As far as we know, Hubba hasn't answered yet. So I want to let the phone ring on in the reader's mind, without explicitly saying so. The best way to do that, is to step aside and elaborate on other aspects that are mentioned in that first sentence. For example, that it's a morning in May.

*1b - Bright sunbeams found their way through the half shut curtains, into the stuffy bedroom.*

All right, so I've got a bit of setting. But I don't want to bore my readers too soon with descriptions, so this information needs to provoke a reaction in our main character.

*1c - 'Hmph,' said Hubba as he turned on his side and drew the duvet over his head.*

There's another clue to work with: Who is Hubba? What sort of a person is named Hubba? What would such a person look like?

*1d - Like a toddler, he pulled his knees up to his chubby belly and stuffed his fingers in his ears. Holy crap, that hangover was killing him.*

*'Hey, are you gonna get that?' said the girl that lay behind him. She grabbed the cover with both hands and jerked it off him.*

*'You swine,' she said when she saw the stretch of skin between his grey t-shirt and his sagged shorts.*

1b to 1d together form the second phase of my narrative, the *orientation*<sup>6</sup>: Hubba is a chubby man with a hangover and a snappy girl in his bed. Although, it doesn't say it's his. It might be hers, or her parents', or a bed in a hotel room. It could be anybody's, really. So now that I've lingered on some other aspects, this girl starts prodding him. Does he pick up the phone, my reader wants to know

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 201-209.

<sup>6</sup> Tomoko I. Sakita, *Reporting Discourse, Tense, and Cognition*, 8.

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now. It's time to move to the main events of the story, the *complicating action*.<sup>7</sup>

### **Complicating action**

The technique I've used above to increase tension in the first paragraph is called *lateral thinking*. If I would have immediately entered the key issue, namely that there's a phone ringing, that would have been *vertical thinking*. Lateral thinking means stepping aside in order to generate new ideas and possibilities, instead of moving straight ahead with the development of a particular pattern.<sup>8</sup>

This technique can also be used to decide what's going to happen next. Instead of thinking of the story line, I focussed on the question why this person was called Hubba. It could be short for *hubris*, an essential element of Tragedy. It's derived from the Greek word *hyper* (over), and means stepping over bounds or overweening pride, which eventually leads to nemesis.<sup>9</sup> And so Hubba's cardinal quality is pride<sup>10</sup>, and his tale has to be shaped after the proverb 'pride goes before a fall'.

This is what I have to show in the following paragraphs. Hubba refuses to answer the phone, exactly because the girl next to him is pushing him. On top of that, the girl turns out to be his sister: he violates the taboo on incest and thinks he can get away with it. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche noticed that the motif of incest occurs in Greek Tragedies such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* too, as a transgression of the sacred code of nature (*hubris*).<sup>11</sup>

At this point the girl needs a name. Hubba has called her 'sis' because she is his sister. I'll stick to that and call her Cissy. This is short for Cecil, which comes from Latin and means 'blind'.<sup>12</sup> According to Nietzsche, blindness permits a different kind of sight, and Sophocles introduces a blind Oracle.<sup>13</sup> That's why Cissy will be endowed with visionary powers. Some readers might also notice that the band System of a Down uses 'sis' as an abbreviation for 'system' in the song 'Fuck The System'<sup>14</sup> - which is exactly what Hubba does when he violates the laws against incest.

### **Evaluation**

According to Labov, before the resolution, the final event of the story, there is supposed to be an evaluation, which comments on the meaning and importance of the story.<sup>15</sup> When Ken enters the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Edward de Bono, *Lateral Thinking, Creativity Step by Step* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 39-45, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots, Why we tell stories* (London: Continuum, 2004), 174.

<sup>10</sup> Celia Brayfield, *Bestseller, Secrets of Successful Writing* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872), in *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1958), i. 57.

<sup>12</sup> Iseabail Macleod and Terry Freedman, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of First Names* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth References, 1995), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Kenneth Aladjem, *The Culture of Vengeance and the Fate of American Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 116.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Malakian and Serj Tankian, *Steal This Album!* (audio recording on compact disc) (Los Angeles: American Recordings, 2002), track 12.

<sup>15</sup> Sakita, *Reporting Discourse, Tense, and Cognition*, 8.

stage, his relationship with Cissy turns out to be a big mistake. This scene is meant to show that Cissy cannot be with another man than Hubba, even when she tries. Though their love is impossible, Cissy and Hubba are meant to be together.

### **Resolution**

As it goes in Tragedies, Hubba has to be punished for his sin; the hero has to be destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

### **Coda**

After the result, there usually is the coda, which signals that the story has finished.<sup>17</sup> In this case that's the merging of Hubba's and Cissy's point of view.

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<sup>16</sup> Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots, Why we tell stories*, 153-157.

<sup>17</sup> Sakita, *Reporting Discourse, Tense, and Cognition*, 8.

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