

TO RECEIVE IS BETTER

by

Michael Marshall Smith

I'd like to be going by car, but of course I don't know how to drive, and it would probably scare the shit out of me. A car would be much better, for lots of reasons. For a start, there's too many people out here. There's *so many* people. Wherever you turn there's more of them, looking tired, and rumped, but whole. That's the strange thing. Everybody is whole.

A car would also be quicker. Sooner or later they're going to track me down, and I've got somewhere to go before they do. The public transport system sucks, incidentally. Long periods of being crowded into carriages that smell, interspersed with long waits for another line, and I don't have a lot of time. It's intimidating too. People stare. They just look and look, and they don't know the danger they're in. Because in a minute one of them is going to look just one second too long, and I'm going to pull his fucking face off, which will do neither of us any good.

So instead I turn and look out the window. There's nothing to see, because we're in a tunnel, and I have to shut my eye to stop myself from screaming. The carriage is like another tunnel, a tunnel with windows, and I feel like I've been buried far too deep. I grew up in tunnels, ones that had no windows. The people who made them didn't even bother to pretend that there was something to look out on, something to look for. Because there wasn't. Nothing's coming up, nothing that isn't going to involve some fucker coming at you with a knife. So they don't pretend. I'll say that for them, at least: they don't taunt you with false hopes.

Manny did, in a way, which is why I feel complicated about him. On the one hand, he was the best thing that ever happened to us. But look at it another way, and maybe we'd have been better off without him. I'm being unreasonable. Without Manny, the whole thing would have been worse, thirty years of utter fucking pointlessness. I wouldn't have known, of course, but I do now: and I'm glad it wasn't that way. Without Manny I wouldn't be where I am now. Standing in a subway carriage, running out of time.

People are giving me a wide berth, which I guess isn't so surprising. Partly it'll be my face, and my leg. People don't like that kind of thing. But probably it's mainly me. I know the way I am, can feel the fury I radiate. It's not a nice way to be, I know that, but then my life has not been nice. Maybe you should try it, and see how calm you stay.

The other reason I feel weird towards Manny is I don't know why he did it. Why he helped us. Sue 2 says it doesn't matter, but I think it does. If it was just an experiment, a hobby, then I think that makes a difference. I think I would have liked him less. As it happens, I don't think it was. I think it was probably just humanity, whatever the fuck that is. I think if it was an experiment, then what happened an hour ago would have panned out differently. For a start, he probably wouldn't be dead.

If everything's gone okay, then Sue 2 will be nearly where she's going by now, much closer than me. That's a habit I'm going to have to break, for a start. It's Sue now, just Sue. No numeral. And I'm just plain old Jack, or I will be if I get where I am going.

The first thing I can remember, the earliest glimpse of life, is the colour blue. I know now what I was seeing, but at the time I didn't know anything different, and I thought that blue was the only colour there was. A soft, hazy blue, a blue that had a soft hum in it and was always the same clammy temperature.

I have to get out of this subway very soon. I've taken an hour of it, and that's about as far as I can go. It's very noisy in here too, not a hum but a horrendous clattering. This is not the way I want to spend what may be the only time I have. People keep surging around me, and they've all got places to go. For the first time in my life, I'm surrounded by people who've actually got somewhere to go.

And the tunnel is the wrong colour. Blue is the colour of tunnels. I can't understand a tunnel unless it's blue. I spent the first four years of my life, as far as I can work out, in one of them. If it weren't for Manny, I'd be in one still. When he came to work at the Farm I could tell he was different straight away. I don't know how: I couldn't even think then, let alone speak. Maybe it was just he behaved differently when he was near us to the way the previous keeper had. I found out a lot later that Manny's wife had died having a dead baby, so maybe that was it.

What he did was take some of us, and let us live outside the tunnels. At first it was just a few, and then about half of the entire stock of spares. Some of the others never took to the world outside the tunnels, such as it was. They'd just come out every now and then, moving hopelessly around, mouths opening and shutting, and they always looked kind of blue somehow, as if the tunnel light had seeped into their skin. There were a few who never came out of the tunnels at all, but that was mainly because they'd been used too much already. Three years old and no arms. Tell me that's fucking reasonable.

Manny let us have the run of the facility, and sometimes let us go outside. He had to be careful, because there was a road a little too close to one side of the farm. People would have noticed a group of naked people stumbling around in the grass, and of course we were naked, because *they didn't give us any fucking clothes*. Right to the end we didn't have any clothes, and for years I thought it was always raining on the outside, because that's the only time he'd let us out.

I'm wearing one of Manny's suits now, and Sue's got some blue jeans and a shirt. The pants itch like hell, but I feel like a prince. Princes used to live in castles and fight monsters and sometimes they'd marry princesses and live happy ever after. I know about princes because I've been told.

Manny told us stuff, taught us. He tried to, anyway. With most of us it was too late. With *me* it was too late, probably. I can't write, and I can't read. I know there's big gaps in my head. Every now and then I can follow something through, and the way that makes me feel makes me realise that most of the time it doesn't happen. Things fall between the tracks. I can talk quite well, though. I was always one of Manny's favourites, and he used to talk to me a lot. I learnt from him. Part of what makes me so fucking angry is that I think I could have been clever. Manny said so. Sue says so. But it's too late now. It's far too fucking late.

I was ten when they first came for me. Manny got a phone call and suddenly he was in a panic. There were spares spread all over the facility and he had to run around, herding us all up. He got us into the tunnels just in time and we just sat in there, wondering what was going on.

In a while Manny came to the tunnel I was in, and he had this other guy with him who was big and nasty. They walked down the tunnel, the big guy kicking people out of the way. Everyone knew enough not to say anything: Manny had told us about that. Some of the people who never came out of the tunnels were crawling and shambling around, banging off the walls like they do, and the big guy just shoved them out of the way. They fell over like lumps of meat and then kept moving, making noises with their mouths.

Eventually Manny got to where I was and pointed me out. His hand was shaking and his face looked strange, like he was trying not to cry. The big guy grabbed me by the arm and took me out of the tunnel. He dragged me down to the operating room, where there were two more guys in white clothes and they put me on the table in there and cut off two of my fingers.

That's why I can't write. I'm right-handed, and they cut off my fucking fingers. Then they put a needle into my hand with see-through thread and sewed it up like they were in a hurry, and the big man took me back to the tunnel, opened the door and shoved me in. I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything the whole time.

Later Manny came and found me, and I shrank away from him, because I thought they were going to do something else. But he put his arms round me and I could tell the difference, and so I let him take me out into the main room. He put me in a chair and washed my hand which was all bloody, and then he sprayed it with some stuff that made it hurt a little less. Then he told me. He explained where I was, and why.

I was a spare, and I lived on a Farm. When people with money got pregnant, Manny said, doctors took a cell from the foetus and cloned another baby, so it had exactly the same cells as the baby that was going to be born. They grew the second baby until it could breathe, and then they sent it to a farm.

The spares live on the farm until something happens to the proper baby. If the proper baby damages a part of itself, then the doctors come to the farm and cut a bit off the spare and sew it onto the real baby, because it's easier that way because of cell rejection and stuff that I don't really understand. They sew the spare baby up again and push it back into the tunnels and the spare sits there until the real baby does something else to itself. And when it does, the doctors come back again.

Manny told me, and I told the others, and so we knew.

We were very, very lucky, and we knew it. There are farms dotted all over the place, and every one but ours was full of blue people that just crawled up and down the tunnels, sheets of paper with nothing written on them. Manny said that some keepers made extra money by letting real people in at night. Sometimes the real people would just drink beer and laugh at the spares, and sometimes they would fuck them. Nobody knows, and nobody cares. There's no point teaching spares, no point giving them a life. All that's going to happen is they're going to get whittled down.

On the other hand, maybe they have it easier. Because once you know how things stand, it becomes very difficult to take it. You just sit around, and wait, like all the others, but you *know* what you're waiting for. And you know who's to blame.

Like my brother Jack, for example. Jamming two fingers in a door when he was ten was only the start of it. When he was eighteen he rolled his expensive car and smashed up the bones in his leg. That's another of the reasons I don't want to be on this fucking subway: people notice when something like that's missing. Just like they notice that the left side of my face is raw, where they took a graft off when some woman threw scalding water at him. He's got most of my stomach, too. Stupid fucker ate too much spicy food, drank too much wine. Don't know what those kind of things are like, of course: but they can't have been that nice. They can't have been nice enough. And then last year he went to some party, got drunk, got into a fight and lost his right eye. And so, of course, I lost mine.

It's a laugh being in a farm. It's a real riot. People stomp around, dripping fluids, clapping hands with no fingers together and shitting into colostomy bags. I don't know what was worse: the ones who knew what was going on and felt hate like a cancer, or those who just ricocheted slowly round the tunnels like grubs. Sometimes the tunnel people would stay still for days, sometimes they would move around. There was no telling what they'd do, because there was no-one inside their heads. That's what Manny did for us, in fact, for Sue and Jenny and me: he put people inside our heads. Sometimes we used to sit around and talk about the real people, imagine what they were doing, what it would be like to be them instead of us. Manny said that wasn't good for us, but we did it anyway. Even spares should be allowed to dream.

It could have gone on like that forever, or until the real people started to get old and fall apart. The end comes quickly then, I'm told. There's a limit to what you can cut off. Or at least there's supposed to be; but when you've seen blind spares with no arms and legs wriggling in dark corners, you wonder.

But then this afternoon the phone went, and we all dutifully stood up and limped into the tunnel. I went with Sue

2, and we sat next to each other. Many used to say we loved each other, but how the fuck do I know? I feel happier when she's around, that's all I know. She doesn't have any teeth and her left arm's gone and they've taken both of her ovaries, but I like her. She makes me laugh.

Eventually Manny came in with the usual kind of heavy guy and I saw that this time Manny looked worse than ever. He took a long time walking around, until the guy with him started shouting, and then in the end he found Jenny 2, and pointed at her.

Jenny 2 was one of Manny's favourites. Her and Sue and me, we were the ones he could talk to. The man took Jenny out and Manny watched him go. When the door was shut he sat down and started to cry.

The real Jenny was in a hotel fire. All her skin was gone. Jenny 2 wasn't going to be coming back.

We sat with Manny, and waited, and then suddenly he stood up. He grabbed Sue by the hand and told me to follow and he took us to his quarters and gave me the clothes I'm wearing now. He gave us some money, and told us where to go. I think somehow he knew what was going to happen. Either that, or he just couldn't take it any more.

We'd hardly got our clothes on when all hell broke loose. We hid when the men came to find Manny, and we heard what happened.

Jenny 2 had spoken. They don't use drugs or anaesthetic, except when the shock of the operation will actually kill the spare. Obviously. Why bother? Jenny 2 was in a terminal operation, so she was awake. When the guy stood over her, smiling as he was about to take the first slice out of her face, she couldn't help herself, and I don't blame her.

"Please," she said. "Please don't."

Three words. It isn't much. It isn't so fucking much. But it was enough. She shouldn't have been able to say anything at all.

Manny got in the way as they tried to open the tunnels and so they shot him and went in anyway. We ran then, so I don't know what they did. I shouldn't think they killed them, because most had lots of parts left. Cut out bits of their brain, probably, to make sure they were all tunnel people.

We ran, and we walked and we finally made the city. I said goodbye to Sue at the subway, because she was going home on foot. I've got further to go, and they'll be looking for us, so we had to split up. We knew it made sense, and I don't know about love, but I'd lose both of my hands to have her with me now.

Time's running out for both of us, but I don't care. Manny got addresses for us, so we know where to go. Sue thinks we'll be able to take their places. I don't, but I couldn't tell her. We would give ourselves away too soon, because we just don't know enough. We wouldn't have a chance. It was always just a dream, really, something to talk about.

But one thing I'm going to do. I'm going to meet him. I'm going to find Jack's house, and walk up to his door, and I'm going to look at him face to face.

And before they come and find me, I'm going to take a few things back.