

Sinister Stories Three Times Is a Sentence by Lois McIntyre

'Spare any change?'

Dan barely noticed the bloke at his feet as he made his way into the newsagents on Maccies Road. He was late for a party, was fumbling for his phone to find the right address when he felt a hand tug at his trouser leg. Involuntarily, he recoiled.



'What on earth do you think you're doing?'

The man was probably about his own age – late teens, at a guess. His face was covered in stubble, and he had long, lanky hair poking out from beneath a grubby beanie hat. He was dressed in old jeans and a dark hoody and Dan was pretty sure that the sickly-sweet reek which had just reached his nostrils was emanating from him. He backed off hurriedly.

'Can you spare any change, mate?'

The homeless man's voice was cracked and gruff. It sounded much older than he looked.

Dan slipped his phone into his pocket, partly to keep it out of sight and partly to make sure that his wallet was still firmly intact. He felt the reassuring bulge of leather stuffed with notes and cards.

'Sorry mate. I've not got anything on me.'



He stepped into the shop quickly and picked up the drink he needed to take to the party. While he was handing his crisp twenty over to the girl behind the counter, he noticed some snacks on special offer.

'Better get some of those, too.'

She handed him his change and he swung out of the shop, whistling. As he pulled the door closed, a packet of Zingy Bites went tumbling out of his grasp and landed on the pavement. A grubby hand picked them up and handed them over.

'Here you go, mate.'

'Thanks.' Dan took the packet awkwardly, balancing it with his cans and his wallet which he hadn't yet rammed back into his pocket. He'd forgotten the homeless guy.

'No problem. Enjoy your night.'

'Right.' Dan coughed. 'Er... you too.'

'Oh, I will, thanks. And remember: once is a request, twice is a warning, three times is a sentence.'

'What?'

But there was a couple about to enter the shop and the woman was digging in her purse for change so the homeless guy was suddenly obscured from view. Nutter, thought Dan, as he ran to catch the 19 bus. Complete nutter.



Two weeks later, Dan was walking into town to meet Lisa. He'd met her at the party; she was a friend of Darren's girlfriend, and he'd had to really screw up his courage to ask her out. But she'd seemed interested, and here they were, going on a second date to the posh Italian in Beek Street. It cost an arm and leg, but Lisa was worth it. She was classy.

He had put on his sharp new designer suit and bought some new aftershave for the occasion. He felt a bit awkward – suits weren't really his thing – but he wanted to impress her and he could afford to splash out, so why not? He was just crossing the road to the cash point, when he nearly tripped over a dirty trainer lying on the pavement.

On closer inspection, Dan realised that the trainer belonged to the homeless guy from the other week.

'Watch it mate, you nearly went flying.'

'Sorry.' Dan straightened up and felt a twinge of annoyance. He shouldn't be the one apologising – it wasn't his leg sprawled across the pavement.

'That's alright, mate.' The guy seemed quite cheerful, although Dan couldn't imagine why. The evening was really cold and the pavement did not look particularly clean. 'You off anywhere nice?'

'Just the cashpoint.' Dan gestured awkwardly at the machine on the other side of the road.

'Little bit overdressed for that, aren't you?'

Dan looked down at his suit and felt suddenly embarrassed.



'Oh. Well, I...'

'It's alright mate. I'm just joshing with you.' The homeless guy grinned. 'Can you spare any change?'

'Sorry, I've not got anything on me.' Dan's reply was automatic – he just wanted to get away. He started to cross the road.

'That's alright. But remember: once is a request, twice is a warning, three times is a sentence.'

Dan thought that was what he said, but a passing car drowned out the words so they were hard to make out. When he reached the other side of the road, he turned to see if the guy had been addressing him, but there was no-one there. The pavement was empty. Strange, he thought. I wonder where he's gone?

The date with Lisa went well, and over the next few weeks they saw more and more of each other. Three months later, they were a definite couple. They went out together every weekend, and people started to refer to them as a unit. Dan-and-Lisa. It felt good, thought Dan, as he walked into town that evening. It felt like he was part of something permanent, something definite.

He was meeting Lisa and taking her for dinner. She was working late, and darkness had already fallen. There was an odd, cloying mist in the air which coated everything in a damp sheen. Street lamps glowed dully and sounds were muffled – it was like someone had laid a cold, wet blanket over the world.

Dan was early, so he was meandering more than he usually would. He was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, and was bitterly regretting his decision not to bring a jacket. Since seeing Lisa, he'd started to go



to the local gym. It was expensive, but he wanted to improve his physique for Lisa, to show her he was making an effort. He thought he'd already improved his abs quite a bit, and the T-shirt showed them off nicely. Or he'd thought it had, when he looked at himself in the mirror at home. Now, though, he just felt like a bit of an idiot. The T-shirt clung to his torso and he felt goosebumps running up and down his arms. Why hadn't he at least brought a jumper?

'You'll catch your death.'

The voice broke into his thoughts and he looked around him for a second, confused about where it had come from. Then he looked down, and saw the homeless guy at his feet, sitting in a shop doorway. His clothes were just the same as they always had been, but this time he had a sleeping bag huddled around his feet, to keep him warm. Dan felt a flash of envy.

'You alright, mate?'

The homeless guy was looking at him with a strange grin which made Dan feel uneasy. He couldn't say why – there was just the feeling that something wasn't quite right, somehow.

'What did you say?' He tried to keep his voice confident, strong, but the mist muffled it and made him sound subdued – like he wasn't really there.

'I asked if you were alright, mate.'

'No – before that. You said something before that.'



'Oh.' The homeless guy gave a humourless chuckle. 'I said you'll catch your death in that T-shirt. You've forgotten your coat, mate.'

Dan looked down at his hands. His fingernails were now blue with cold. He stuffed them into his jeans pockets and tried for a nonchalant shrug. 'Doesn't bother me.'

'You're more of a man than I am, then.' The homeless guy gave another of his laughs. 'I'm so cold I can barely feel my feet. Can you spare any change, mate?'

'Sorry.' Dan shook his head and started to move away. Why did the guy always have to pester him like that? Couldn't he take no for an answer? Why should he have part with his hard-earned cash to some dosser? He felt his irritation rise.

'That's OK, mate. But remember what I said: once is a request, twice is a warning, three times is a sentence.'

This time, Dan was sure he'd heard him correctly. The mist was making everything muffled, but he was convinced of those words. 'What did you say?'

This time, the homeless man didn't laugh. In fact, he didn't smile at all. 'I think you heard me. I think you've heard me every time, haven't you?'

'You what?'

The man started to stand, his sleeping bag falling from his legs so it balled at his feet. Dan was



suddenly uncomfortably aware that he was very tall. The sickly-sweet smell was overpowering, too.

And there was something else – something in his eyes that Dan couldn't quite put his finger on.

Anger? Pity? Or another, stranger emotion?

'Isn't that your Lisa over there?' The guy was pointing, his hand raised straight out in front of him, gesturing to the other side of the road. Dan turned, and there, sure enough, was Lisa walking down the pavement opposite. He felt a jolt of panic.

'Lisa!'

She didn't hear him – she just kept walking. She'd miss him if he didn't catch her attention.

'Lisa!'

Dan stepped into the road. He didn't think to ask himself how the homeless man knew Lisa's name. He didn't stop to consider the man's strange words. And he didn't see the car, speeding past as he stepped out. He felt himself thrown up into the air in a graceful arc, before landing with a life-shattering thud on the ground.

Through hazy eyes, this time not clouded by the mist but by something else, Dan watched the homeless man swim into view one last time.

'I told you, mate. Three times is a sentence.'

Dan's eyes closed.

