

Through Another Night

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*See it burn, just burn.
Little flickering light that doesn't mean a damn.
And just lower it now, just a little lower.
See it catch. See it catch just the edge.
See it crawl along the paper, till it hits the wet.
And then...
Then stand back.
Stand back and watch it go...*

*

Eleven months ago, I was stabbed in the chest.

I didn't die.

They stuck me into intensive care and told me how lucky I'd been. I shut up and let them work. No use saying that luck didn't come into it. I'd been stupid enough to let the bastard get close and I wasn't going to start a conversation about it. Even if I'd been in a fit condition to.

Small knife, they said.

I already knew that. That's why I hadn't seen him holding it, covered in his hand, but that was why I'd been lucky, of course. It had gone in low on the right hand side, must have been a left-handed bastard, and caused a pneumothorax, a slight collapse of the lung. If it had been a longer knife, or more central, or higher, it would have been worse. I didn't need them to tell me that either.

And how, they'd asked, did I get a bullet graze on my shoulder.

Mumbled something about there being more than one of them, hearing a sharp crack, feeling a burning there on my upper arm, then I faked tiredness and sleep again. It wasn't difficult to fake either. I was played out. If I could've made it home without getting knifed, I'd have slept for a week. As it was, they patched me up, treated me for blood loss, talked about re-inflating the lung or something like that, but decided not to. Talked about it later and again decided not to and after two days, moved me out of intensive care into a ward. Somewhere along the line they packed my broken nose as well, but that was almost incidental. I'd had two visits from the police in that time and got away with mumbling, resting and not making any sense. The hospital had me down as Robert James, Bob being the first name that had come to mind

when the paramedic got to me and who knows where I got James from, or even when I told them that. Sure sign of delirium I reckoned. Brought on by the fact that I'd screwed it all up by being careless.

Once I knew I was going to live, the brain started trying to work out what to do next. Except for the police, who I could do without, no-one had come to see me in the hospital, no-one had asked for me. And there was a good reason for that. There *was* no-one to ask for me.

Jenny would be gone, tired of waiting in our one-room flat for someone who didn't arrive. I'd had to ditch my mobile and so she couldn't have called me if she'd wanted to, but she wouldn't have wanted to. I'd made a promise to be there and blown it. Not my fault the little creep had been waiting for me, but I should have avoided it. No excuses. I blew it.

Mick? Mick was safe now, but God alone knew where, hiding under the radar, away from the inevitable police questions to which he had no answers.

And Tony. In truth, Tony probably was wondering where the hell I was and if I was all right, but he wouldn't be looking for me. I was trouble, I'd caused him trouble and friend though he was, he'd know better than to ask around for me if I'd disappeared for a bit.

Three people, one of them maybe pleased to be rid of me, one of them grateful to me, but running scared and one letting me be and getting on with his legitimate life, his family and business, something that I couldn't seem to get close to.

– *'Cos you don't want to.*

– Hell do you know about what I want? You belong in a bloody Disney movie with Pinocchio.

I'd been in hospital four days, two and a half in intensive care, when the ward sister told me that the police would be back again the following day to interview me. I wasn't too worried. They were just chasing up what was a fairly obvious and probably routine stabbing in Camden Town. Nothing to connect it to a bloodbath in Acton. Then I remembered the bullet wound. That would push it up a few notches, even if it was only a graze. Maybe there was still nothing to connect me to Russian Mafia yet, but if they

thought there were kids with guns in Camden, it would still be enough to bring out the police questions. I'd give a false name and say I was homeless and dossing on someone's floor, but the police are pretty good at what they do and it would be easier not to answer their questions. I asked if I could speak with the doctor about my condition and they took that as a sign I was getting better and later on a nice Asian bloke told me that I'd been lucky, that the lung should mend itself if I didn't over-exert it and that the stitches could come out in about a week to ten days. I just had to take it easy for a while. I'd be weak and tired and I had to respect that.

I had no trouble respecting it, I just had to get home first.

My clothes, apart from my shoes, had been ruined – covered in blood and unwearable. I'd thought they'd binned them, unless the police had taken them, although I reckoned they might ask me first before they did that. When I did ask what had happened to them, one of the nurses brought me a plastic sack that held my shirt and trousers. There was a smaller plastic zipped bag with my wallet and a set of three keys. No ID though, no receipts, nothing. I'd carried none of that with me that night and I'd got rid of my jacket along with the phone. Keys would have been a problem when the police got to me though, they'd want to know what they fitted. Good job then, that I wasn't going to give them the opportunity to ask.

The guy in the next bed wanted to talk and I didn't, but given he had trousers and a shirt in his stuff, I played the nice guy. He'd been in a car smash and had been there for a while. I gave him the story about how I had no clothes and no-one to bring me any and offered him forty quid for a shirt and trousers which was almost all the money I had on me and luckily hadn't got covered in too much blood.

He said they'd never fit me, but I didn't care, they just had to stay up long enough for me to get out of there. And his missus could bring him more gear when he needed it.

I had a contingency, of course. If he'd said no, I'd just've nicked them later.

But he agreed, although he wasn't overly keen and when the ward started filling up with visitors, I levered myself out of the bed, realising again that I really wasn't too fit, took the clothes, my

wallet, keys and shoes and then shuffled, which was all I could manage, to the patients' toilets.

Luckily, it was a button shirt, not one that I had to lift over my head and as I struggled with the simple task of getting into a shirt and trousers and putting my shoes on – untied, with the laces just tucked inside, as there was no way I could get down to do them up – I wondered for the first time if I could actually make it out of the hospital, never mind home.

I opened the toilet door slightly and waited until I could see no-one on the ward desk. Then I started to move. I had no thought of the fact that I would have trouble walking, when it was my chest that had been injured, but it was difficult. More than difficult. The trick is always to look like you know exactly where you're going and what you are doing, but in a hospital that's difficult to do if you're breaking into a sweat just shuffling down a corridor. One foot in front of the other, I told myself, just to the lift and then you're most of the way there. They won't stop you unless it's one of your own doctors or nurses. Act like you're a visitor, not a patient.

Easier said than done, when you're wearing a too small shirt, half unbuttoned, hanging out over a pair of trousers that you're holding up by keeping one hand in your pocket. Not to mention the shuffle, the sweating and the shortness of breath. One look from a doctor and they'll pull you in for being ill in a hospital.

I've done some difficult things in my life, but I genuinely think that was one of the hardest, breaking out of a London hospital in broad daylight.

I waved my last tenner at a cab and told him to take me as near to Hampstead tube as he could for a fiver. And when he dropped me, I waited and then took another cab for the fiver plus my loose pound coins as near to Camden as it would get me. I then staggered the last bit home and found I couldn't get up the stairs to my first floor flat above the shops. The dull ache in my chest was immense and I had to remind myself that I was okay, it wasn't a heart attack, I just had to take it easy. I waited on the steps for a good half-an-hour till I could move and I kept a look out for any police. All I needed was to make my escape from the hospital and then get picked up for vagrancy outside my own flat.

Eventually I made it up the stairs and unlocked the front door. For a moment as I pushed my way in, I thought maybe she'd be there, maybe she wouldn't have gone, but the empty room stared back at me. One mattress on the floor, one table, two chairs. I could see that none of her clothes were on the coat rail in the corner. I wanted to crash straight away, but I forced myself to check the table and the small kitchen the other side of the partition, in case she'd left a note. But there was nothing. It had only been four days, but the place had the feel of somewhere that had been empty for weeks and would stay empty. Hell, even the cat was somewhere else.

There was nothing else to do, so I did nothing. Just lay down on the mattress that had been our bed and stared upwards. The body needed to heal and that was all I was fit for. I let nature take its course.

That was eleven months ago.

It's been downhill ever since.

*

Sal was drunk again. Not roaring, over the top drunk, but slurry, whiny, habitual drunk. We were walking back from her local pub in Holloway to her one-room bedsit and she was leaning on me. Not heavily, but enough for me to feel the slight pull across my chest, where the scar was. She was nice enough when she was sober, but that wasn't most of the time. Truth was, she wasn't that bad drunk, otherwise I wouldn't have stuck around, but she wore me out when she was drunk, as I suppose most regular drunks wear their people out.

Ours was a strange relationship. It didn't work, yet we still kept it going. We'd met when I took a job working the door at a pub in North London. That had been a stupid idea, but I needed the money and I hadn't thought it all the way through.

It had been nearly five months after the stabbing before I felt good enough to work and even then I wasn't sure what would happen if I had to run, or throw a punch at anyone. But of course, there wasn't any work. I'd relied almost completely on Mick for jobs and he was still keeping his head down, living somewhere south of London, possibly on the coast, though he never actually

told me where and he only came to meet me once a fortnight to collect the rents from the properties he 'managed'. I had begun to think more and more about those properties. He didn't manage them, he arranged for me to collect the rents for them from the tenants, in cash and weekly, and in return I got a small self-contained bedsit rent free. Or maybe he really did manage them. Maybe if there was a problem with the plumbing, a tenant would ring a mobile for him and he'd sort it all out. At one point I even wondered if it was him that owned them, but I threw that idea out. It just didn't fit with Mick. I had no idea what he was actually doing, now that he was off his patch and no longer working as a fence and general mine of information to the criminal classes. He also had no bodyguarding jobs for me. Not that I could have taken any on straight after I'd been knifed, but it would have been useful to go back to. Instead I had to drum up some money on my own. Collecting the rents for him might give me somewhere to crash, but I still needed to eat and for that I needed more work.

So I looked at a few of the pubs in North London, near enough to me that I could get there easily, but with enough distance that they weren't on my doorstep. They had to be places that weren't bad trouble spots, because then they'd have people already looking after them and I didn't want to step on anyone's toes. A lot of the pubs get their muscle from one of only a very few groups and the last thing I wanted to do was piss them off. What I needed was a smallish place, where for a minor amount of cash they'd want someone to calm down a situation, or throw out the odd drunk. Not be a doorman, but just be around the place. And I would be cheap. I didn't need a living wage, just an existence payment. Enough to buy some food for the moment and keep myself going, while I worked out what the hell I was going to do next.

When I found the right sort of place, it didn't take long for me to realise that having a rep as an ex-boxer just attracted the guys who wanted to take a poke at you. And that attracted attention, which was the last thing I wanted. After two minor incidents in a reasonably good quality pub, no actual violence, but some guys mouthing off and posturing for their girlfriends, Henry, the landlord, took me to one side and had a 'quiet word'. Very sorry and all that, but this wasn't working out. I thought that was going

to be it, but he surprised me by saying that he did have another pub and he wanted someone to help out there, no specific door work, but general shifting and lifting and obviously keep an eye out that there was no trouble. Lousy money, but all I needed right then was something to do and this was fine. It was decent of him really and I'd forgotten that there were people out there like that, who'd give you a chance if they could. 'Course, he was getting dirt cheap part-time labour as well, but you can't be cynical all the time. One day off a year is about right.

And that was where I met Sally. Good looking, smiley, bleached-blond Sally. Life and soul of the party while she was with her girlfriends from the travel agents, although needing a little help from them by the end of the night. And then in as well when they weren't around, not for me, not for anyone, just for the booze. Social drinking taken just that half-step too far. She'd wanted company and I'd wanted... well, I didn't really know what I wanted, but Jenny wasn't around anymore and I allowed myself to fall in with Sally. Maybe because she was easy to be with when she wasn't drunk and maybe because she didn't ask any questions. She knew who I was, or as somebody had said to me a year or so before, 'who I'd once been' and I think she enjoyed the fact that I'd been a fighter, it gave her a sense of her own worth somehow. That she was with someone who had once been almost well known. Which is daft of course, no way to measure yourself and it meant nothing to me now, except that I was more recognisable than I wanted to be to blokes of a certain age and type.

So we drifted along with very few demands on each other, except when she'd had too many, which I was finding out was most of the time.

"Why do I always have to drink on my own, when we're out?" she asked, her voice North London, by way of Essex night clubs.

"Because one of us has to make sure you get home," I answered.

She was at the in between stage. Sober enough to know what to ask me and far enough gone to go ahead with the question even though it would annoy me. Maybe that's what she wanted to do.

"You never drink with me," she said.

"I drink at home with you sometimes."

“You never drink with me when we’re out,” she said. “Why do you never drink with me when you’re out with me?”

“I told you, because one of us has to get you home and it’s not going to be you.”

A street light flickered off and then on again and a fox stopped outside a house and looked at us, poised to run at a second’s notice, but not scared, definitely not scared.

“I think it’s because you don’t like drinking with me.”

One or two of the ‘S’ sounds were a little off and the tone was complaining, but she wasn’t doing badly given what she’d put away.

And I could have taken the easy option, told her what she wanted to hear, but I couldn’t do that. I’d always had trouble doing that and when I met Jenny, everything had been too important to lie about, or even to coat the truth. And somehow I had to stick with that, I felt that was important.

“You’re right,” I said, “I don’t like drinking with you and I don’t like being drunk or out of control. And there’s no middle ground with you, it’s either not enough or too much.”

I didn’t add that there was a time when I had been drinking more than I should have been. And the fact that I didn’t add that, that she didn’t know that about me, just showed even more that it wasn’t right between us. Sally never came to my place. As far as she was concerned, I dosed in Tony’s office when I wasn’t with her. I don’t know if she really believed that, but she accepted it, which might have been even worse.

And yet here I was, supporting her home and probably going to stay the night. Or maybe I wouldn’t. It didn’t really matter either way. Which was the big problem. I had to live, but I didn’t really care how I went about it.

“You don’t love me,” she said.

I didn’t answer. This was one that came up regularly when she’d been drinking, but never when she was sober. If she’d ask me when she was sober, I’d answer.

We reached her place, a room in a shared house just like thousands of others, where those of us who are unlucky, or uneducated, or unloved, live out our lives waiting for the next thing to happen, or the next axe to fall.

I guess I missed out the sociopathic category from that list, for obvious reasons. None of us like to look in the mirror too often.

I helped her up the stairs, unlocked her room, which always surprised me by being neat and clean, no empties lying around to give the game away, and decided not to stay. Sally was drunk and I'd just reminded myself that I was lucky. I had my own place, small though it was and I'd had something more than many people ever get. It was just that I'd thrown it away.

She wasn't happy that I was going, but I told her she was too drunk for me and that I'd see her later the following day. And then I think she realised she was too drunk, because she quietened down and curled up on the bed. I put the duvet over her and closed the door gently on the way out.

Another sparkling day done in the story of my life.

And too many of them going the same way.

*

Tony was pushing me, but only slightly. We were sitting in his tiny office at the used car lot and I knew there was something on his mind, because he was in here with me when there were a couple of possible customers outside poking around at the cars.

"How's the fitness going?" he asked me, which was exactly the sort of thing he'd say if he really wanted to talk about something else.

"I can run all right now," I answered him, "but it's a little difficult getting the motivation to do it, 'specially as I used to run so much better for longer."

"But you're feeling fitter again," he said. It was a statement more than a question.

"Yeah, the breathing's okay, the lung's working, so I'm all right with it. Just not so fast anymore and not too much stamina."

It looked like it was going to rain again, so he should be out there getting the deals done. If it started to pour down, those customers would be off straight away. But he was still talking to me.

"Beard suits you," he said.

I'd been growing one for about ten days, not really deliberately, just out of neglect, but having Tony say it suited me was a little out

of character. I sat forwards in one of the two small chairs he has in the office. There's not much space in there and usually he sits on the table, not behind it. I've known Tony since we were both kids growing up out of school on our council estate and although we'd had our strained moments over the years, we were still good mates. I slightly envied him the fact that he'd worked his way out of nothing and now had the family, the car lot and was fairly settled. He in turn, I think, felt a little guilty that he had all of that and I didn't, so he let me borrow one of the older cars off the lot when I needed to, a car he'd be selling with a 'buyer beware' sign stuck on the windscreen. I was never sure what he got out of this, unless it was a sense of charity well done, but it worked for me. Right now it was a battered and very old Renault I was using. The flip side of this arrangement was that I really did owe him and although I'm sure he didn't think of it like that, if he wanted something he only had to ask. So I prompted him.

"Tony, if there's something you want to say, just come out and say it."

At which point there was a knock on the half open door and a lady poked her head through and said:

"Can I buy a car here, or are they all for show?"

Tony scooted off to deal with her and I settled down for what could be a longish wait. Tony's business was doing okay as far as I knew, but if the woman really was a buyer, then whatever he wanted from me would have to wait. He couldn't afford to turn customers away. After about twenty minutes I got up and left, signing for him to give me a bell later if he needed to. He waved back his agreement and I went off to the gym. Not one of your health club places, this was a large room with free weights and some hanging bags. I'd searched out the place while I was recovering. I had to train somewhere, get the chest and shoulder muscles moving again and build up the lung capacity once more. And it was working. I hadn't died, I hadn't been disabled. The pieces were back in reasonable working order and all I had to do was train them back up again. And I could do that. I knew how to and I knew when to push and when not to. I just had trouble finding the motivation to do any of it. I didn't need anything except enough money for the next meal and no-one that I cared

about needed anything from me. But the fact that I couldn't find any reason for anything, the fact that I didn't *want* to find any reason for anything, was driving me slowly insane.

*

Me, the cat, half a bottle of cheap 'n' nasty and some lousy stand-up on the box, unable to make me laugh. Nice domestic scene, except that the cat's not domesticated, the half bottle's three quarters empty and the comedian probably is funny, if you're not me.

Lack of everything. Enthusiasm, interest, hope, faith and especially charity. Time to move in order to get myself out of this rut, so I grabbed a pair of shorts and went for a run. No longer in training, but I'd been pushing myself daily to get some kind of fitness back after the stabbing and in some ways it was the only goal I had open to me. As long as I didn't think about why I was bothering to do it.

'Cos there wasn't a reason.

One foot in front of the other, day in, day out and through the nights.

*

On a Wednesday night, I got into a fight. Not a major fight, but worth noting because I hit someone properly for the first time since I'd got out of the hospital and it didn't hurt to do it. And I'd felt like doing it, which doesn't sound good, but was a signal that something in me was ready for that kind of work again.

It wasn't anything to speak of, just some bloke who'd had too much and needed to be helped out of the place and whose friends weren't going to do it for him, which was unusual in this pub of Henry's, we didn't really have that kind of a problem often. So I 'helped' him on his way, but then his friends decided to get uptight about me taking him outside and one of them followed us out and grabbed at me and I blocked his arm outwards and fairly gently placed my hand on his chest and shoved him away. I probably should have been less gentle, because he moved back in swinging, which surprised me slightly as most of these guys have to talk about it a bit first, build themselves up a little, tell you what they're

going to do to you, but this guy just swung in at me and I had to block two punches with my arms before I jabbed him a straight left with a lot of weight behind it, smack on his nose and it broke and he stumbled back and sat down heavily, eyes watering and blood flowing.

At which point, of course, it can go several ways. All of his friends might wade in throwing punches, they could get all righteous and call the police, or they can back off. I'd shoved the drunk man further out and away from the pub and stepped back into the doorway to give myself some cover and make sure they could only approach from the front, but it wasn't going to happen. And given I had witnesses that the guy had thrown punches at me first, I didn't think he'd want the police called, so it all calmed down apart from the blood dripping and the friends now telling me what I was and what they were going to come back and do to me. I'd keep an eye out, but I didn't think they'd be back. They weren't the type.

Stupidly, the whole thing had left me feeling quite good, which was odd, as in the past, apart from always avoiding that kind of trouble if I could, it never gave me a kick to thump someone who I knew I could quite easily take out. I didn't like the fact that I felt good about the punch and I didn't like the fact that I seemed to be turning into a pub doorman, which I wasn't cut out to be. Apart from the fact that I'm not physically big enough to intimidate someone who has had eight pints, is off his head and isn't focussing properly, it's just not my game. Too many people around, too many witnesses to say 'he did this', or 'she did that'. And always the off chance that someone will know who I am from the boxing days and either want to talk about it for hours, which I don't, or try to take my head off to prove how tough he is, which I can also do without.

At the end of the night, I'd just finished changing a barrel of Pride and was making my way back up to the customers' part of the pub, when Henry called me over. We'd closed up and the place was quiet. I guessed what it was about and I'd just been unlucky. Most of the time he was at the other, busier pub. For him to be here at the one time I have a little trouble was just the way it was going for me at the moment.

“Wanted to have a word, Garron, just on all that bother there.”

Henry had an odd, slow way of speaking sometimes, which gave his comments much more weight than maybe they deserved. He was a nice enough bloke, mid-sixties I’d guess, running down the clock until he could sell the pubs off and retire. Provided nobody caused too much trouble in the meantime.

“Go on then, Henry, what’s up?”

“Not your fault, I know, but you have to keep your head down here.”

“Henry, I couldn’t let the guy get any drunker, he had to leave. Otherwise you’ll lose your other customers.”

He sighed at me. As I mentioned, Henry was a good guy, but he did take his time about things. So I prompted him.

“Do you want me to clear out?”

He looked shocked, if anyone can look shocked in a very slow, deliberate manner.

“Good Lord, no,” he said, “I don’t want you to go anywhere.”

There was another pause as Henry debated with himself as to what was to come next, so I prompted him again.

“You don’t want me to go anywhere, *but...*”

“Well, it’s just that we moved you to this pub because it was quieter, to keep you out of trouble, but it does seem to follow you around.”

This time I just waited. If he was going to throw me out after all, I wasn’t going to keep contributing to it.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to go back to the kitchen.

“Is that it, Henry? Is that all you have to say?”

He looked back and smiled at me.

“You don’t need me to tell you anything, son, you know how you are better than anyone else. But just watch yourself. I saw you there. Don’t get to enjoying it. There’s no way back from there.”

He walked away into his kitchen and I managed not to shout after him that he was wrong, that he didn’t know what he was talking about.

Like he said, I know myself better than anyone else.

*

Flame.

Just the sound of the word.

Fire.

And... Burn.

I can control it.

I can bend it to my will.

Because I respect it.

Because I respect it, it will let me take control.

And I will burn.

Anything.

*

It was the following Saturday, I was round at Sal's and she was sober and quite relaxed, even if she was playing some 80s rubbish radio station in the background. I'd said I'd take her down to the River, but then I got the call from Mick. As usual on the phone, he said almost nothing, just wanted to meet up that lunchtime, collect the latest set of rents and have a chat. Sal wasn't happy, she'd wanted the day out, but I told her I'd go with her to the centre of town, nip off and meet Mick and then catch up with her again. She didn't want to go though.

“What am I going to do on my own while you're off?”

“Anything you like,” I said. “I'll drop you near the Tate, or the National Gallery or the British Museum or something. Or you can get a cup of coffee and read a book or a mag for a while.”

But she wasn't interested and again I got that pang that she wasn't Jenny. Not that she had to be, but Jenny had shown me what it was like to be interested in different things, to try to be open to stuff that I wouldn't have thought about before. I'd never been in an art gallery until I'd met Jenny and even if I didn't like some of what we went to, I could appreciate why other people maybe did.

“I could go shopping,” Sal said.

“On your budget, Sally, not on mine.”

At which point she got in a huff, sat on the bed, told me I was a cheapskate and that my beard made me look old and said she'd stay home, which was not what I'd meant to happen and not what I wanted to hear. Home meant, eventually, a drink and that would be the first of the day and too early. I looked at her and wondered

what she really meant to me. The problem was, it wasn't much. Ours was not an equal relationship and although I didn't want to hurt her, it was becoming more and more difficult to avoid being almost her carer, rather than caring for her.

I squatted down on the floor in front of her.

"Listen, Sal, I have to go and give Mick the money from the rents. I didn't think he was going to be in London today, but if he is and he wants the money, then I have to go give it to him. He's my employer for this."

"But can't I come with you?"

Somehow, since he was effectively hiding out still, the idea of Mick meeting anyone, especially Sally, didn't strike me as a good one.

"Mick doesn't like meeting anyone." I tried to lighten the tone. "I don't think he even likes meeting me, but he hasn't got a choice about that. Look, I won't be long with him and I'll meet up again with you after."

But she'd got fed up with me and decided. Her day was ruined, so she was going to stay home. I sometimes wondered how she held down her job when she could be such a pain, but I also thought that maybe it was me bringing out the worst in her. She was going to stay and I had to go, so I told her I'd see her later on that night and left her there. And the worst of it was, while I really did feel sorry for not being able to take her out, I also felt relieved we weren't going. Whatever that said about me.

*

This time I met Mick in a caff in Mile End in East London. I'd like to have called it a café, but it wasn't, it was a bloody caff and I didn't much fancy anything they had there, so I stuck at a cup of tea and parked myself in a corner facing the door and waited for him. Facing the door, I thought, old habits die hard.

It had been once every couple of weeks since I'd been back on my feet at whatever place he'd suggested, just to hand over the rents I'd collected for him for whatever he did with them, or whoever he gave them to and I had no idea that this meet would be any different. Until he walked in with a lead and what could loosely be described as a dog at the other end of it. The last dog

I'd seen Mick with had been his trained to kill, lethal guard and attack dog. Given that Mick isn't the biggest of guys, it was always a shock to see him with a dog that was almost as large as he was and much more athletic. This thing, though, was about six inches off the floor, a foot long and couldn't seem to make up its mind if it was waddling or jumping to move forwards.

"What," I said, "is that?"

"Girlfriend's dog," he replied. It was the first time he'd mentioned a girlfriend.

"You sure?"

"Well it's nobody else's, I know that."

I paused for a moment, then took another look down at the squashed up face at the end of the lead.

"No, I meant are you sure it's a dog?"

He sat down heavily and the dog dropped flat on the floor at the side of the table.

"Very funny, I've been saddled with the thing all day."

"Which, the girlfriend or the dog?"

He looked at me, intending it to be a hard look, but I couldn't take him seriously, not with him walking a lap dog around East London. I said:

"You better make sure none of your old mates see you with that, or you'll have no rep left at all."

"I'd better make sure no-one I know sees me anyway, Garron, remember? I've disappeared."

That was true and as far as I knew he only came to London to see me. I took a quick glance round to make sure no local hard nut was taking any notice of us, so that he didn't have any trouble later, and handed over a large envelope with the rent cash inside.

"Ta," was all he said and I decided to wait him out.

He looked at me for a while. "Go on, you're dying to ask about her."

I glanced down at the dog again, knowing he meant the girlfriend.

"Oh, it's a female is it? I wouldn't have known from here."

"Real comedian today, aren't you?" he said. "I met this woman a while ago and I've moved in with her now."

"She obviously doesn't know much about you then," I said,

enjoying myself.

“And she wanted to come down to London this time with me,” he went on, ignoring my comment completely, “and that means taking the bloody dog. Dog can’t go in the posh shops, so I’m stuck with it.”

“Lucky dog,” I said, “gets to see the back end of London town. Still it’s given me a laugh, so it’s been worth it.”

Mick sighed, got up and said:

“Not sure about the beard, Garron, bit too much grey in it,” and wandered off to buy a tea and some rock cake or something like it, which I hoped was for the dog. It wasn’t. He dunked it in the tea, I guessed to make it edible, and asked how I was feeling. That was a little unusual in itself, he’d maybe ask me what I was doing, but not how I was feeling. I told him I’d had happier days, but seeing him with the dog was brightening this one up.

“No, I mean how are you feeling physically?”

“I’m okay. I’m running a bit to keep the lungs working and the heart pumping and I haven’t collapsed yet, so I think I’m all right.”

“Up to a bit of work?”

That caught me by surprise. Before Mick had left London, he’d been the source of my jobs and if he was offering me something now, then he must be getting back in touch with some of his old contacts.

“Bodyguarding stuff?”

He made a slight face.

“Not really, it’s a bit of an odd one.”

I asked him where he picked it up from and did he trust the source.

“Oh yes,” he said, “I know what you’re thinking, but I’m being very careful as ever, with who I talk to and about what. I had to cut out most of the people I used before and I’ve just been back in touch with a couple who I’m happy will keep me safe.”

I thought about that one. As far as I was aware, Mick had no real friends except me and hadn’t since Al died, but then again I’d only know otherwise if he chose to tell me.

“And I’ve worked on a few new people and we may get something out of them in the future, but only if you’re up to it.”

Said I was, even though I wasn’t totally convinced.

Mick didn't look convinced either, but he'd have to take my word for it.

"What's this job then, Mick, what's odd about it? It's minding or bodyguarding, right?"

"Not exactly. It's looking after something, but it's a building not a person."

I sat back in the chair and shook my head at him.

"Forget it," I said, "I'm not a security guard, you know that. Get some local firm in."

"Hold on, mate, give it a chance. Let me get to the end of the sentence, then you can decide."

I'd listen, but there wasn't a chance. I owed him something for all the jobs he'd given me over time, but there was no way I was going to walk round some place with a torch and a uniform.

Mick was still talking.

"Bloke I know now, knows someone who's got a pub in London. Little off your patch, but still north of the river, so you won't feel too out of it."

I didn't laugh. Mick's jokes were even worse than mine.

"So this bloke, let's call him 'John', he –"

I cut in.

"Why are we calling him John, what's he hiding?"

Mick looked at me, glanced around the caff and leaned in. He whispered:

"We're calling him John, 'cos that's his name." Then he sat back laughing. "You're too predictable, Garron, I couldn't resist it."

Like I said, about his jokes. And he'd annoyed me now. I didn't want a security job on a building and I didn't like being wound up.

"Get on with it, before I go home," I said.

Mick pulled himself together and started again.

"So John's locking up for the night and this guy walks in. Says he wants £2,000 or he torches the pub."

"What, just like that?"

"Just like that. Two grand or the pub goes at some point in the next six months."

"He's a nutter," I said, "got to be mad."

The dog moved at Mick's feet, yelped slightly and looked up at him.

“What is that dog anyway, does it have a breed?” I asked.

“Yeah, part dog, part alien,” he said. “Can we focus on John’s problem here, please?”

“Either forget it or call the police,” I said. “They have lists of idiots who try to pull stunts like that, they’re the best people for this.”

“Quite right, so John tells the bloke to piss off, goes to bed and forgets about it. Next day when he wakes up, burned into the front door of the pub is ‘£2,000’ and the word ‘BURN’. Rest of the door’s fine, just the words actually burned into the door.”

“Very, er, what’s the word... theatrical. Go to the police.”

The dog farted. At least I think it was the dog. It wasn’t me anyway.

“Ah, Mick, tell me it doesn’t do that often.”

“Only when he’s hungry, which is most of the time. You’re changing the subject again.”

“No, this time I had it changed for me,” I said. “This is ridiculous. What’s the job? Just tell me, then I can tell you I’m not doing it and we can all go home and you can take that smelly animal with you.”

The caff owner came over and asked us to take the dog outside. Said he hadn’t noticed it when it’d arrived, though that wasn’t true. Mick was going to argue, but I was already out of my seat and heading for the door. He joined me outside, dragging the dog behind him and we started walking down towards Stepney Green tube.

“I’m not interested,” I said, “it’s not my thing.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, you don’t have a ‘thing’ anymore, you’re unemployed and damn near unemployable.”

“And you’re not exactly chock full of jobs either, mate.”

“But I’ve got this one. You want it or not?”

I sighed. There was a time when I’d thought Mick was right about a lot of things. The fact I didn’t any longer, was probably a sign I had grown up a bit. Or maybe he was still right about everything and I was just dumb. Either could be the case. But he was right that I needed to be working and if this wasn’t actual bodyguarding, it could be a way to ease back into things.

“All right, Mick, let me have the rest.”

As we walked back to the station, Mick told me that John had in fact called the police, showed them the writing on the door and filed a complaint. Then he'd found out that there had been a similar threat to another pub about six months earlier, but three or four miles away and there had been a small fire there that had damaged a side room of the building. The only thing the two pubs had in common was a lack of doormen or formal security staff.

"So why doesn't he get security?" I asked.

"Cost. How long can he keep security going round the clock. And he's more worried because he sleeps upstairs in the pub itself. The police say they'll keep an eye on the place, but you know what that means. And of course they'll 'conduct their enquiries', but unless the guy's a known arsonist, that's a needle in a haystack job."

"Mick, what do you expect me to do? I can't hang around every night waiting in case this guy turns up and I also want paying, so what's this John bloke asking for?"

"He wants you to hang around until the guy turns up again, he has to if he wants to arrange for the money to be paid. Then he wants you to take him the money and bring the money and the bloke back again."

I laughed. I actually laughed out loud.

"You got to be joking, Mick, you can see the holes in this a mile off. This is like a ransom without a body."

"Garron, there's money in this job and there may be other work after this, connected from this guy. Probably this arsonist dickhead is just a chancer. Probably nothing will happen, but for you to sit outside his pub for a couple of nights and if, yes it may well not happen, but if he gets a call, take the call and make the arrangements for him, even if it means calling the police back in at that point, then we get paid and he stays happy." He stopped for a second. Mick had a good few years on me and had always shown it, but suddenly he looked much older still.

"I've had to start from scratch, mate, all the way back to the beginning in a new place. Contacts from nothing, build up the confidence, earn the trust. There's chancers everywhere, but it takes time to understand them, find your place with them, know which ones are at the level you're prepared to deal with and which

are way past you. And all this without referring to the past, without using anyone's name or rep to help me get in, because that could put me right back in a London nick answering questions that I can't answer. I don't think I'm up to that anymore. I need to build up what I had before and I don't have the time now that it takes. And I know you've had to start again as well, but you had no contacts, only me really, so no-one to – ”

He stopped there. He was going to say no-one to lose, but I'd effectively lost Jenny and I think he still felt as though part of that was his fault, though it wasn't, so he pulled himself up. It was quite a speech for him, as much as I'd heard him say in one go for years. And he'd made his point. We had to start somewhere and if this wasn't the Ritz, it was a paying job. And he was a mate.

“Go on, Mick, give me the guy's number.”

He read it off a scrawl of paper and I repeated it a few times to myself till it lodged in my brain.

I promised I'd get straight on it and left him by the underground at Stepney Green. I'd walk up Whitechapel Road towards the Aldgate, being careful not to look up Brick Lane where there were too many memories, none of them good. In truth, I could have gone into the tube station with Mick and made my way back from there, but I didn't want to. Mick was probably pushing fifty now and last year he'd had to uproot his whole life, the life he'd spent time carefully constructing for himself and it had taken its toll. I glanced back and saw what looked like a small old man in a long coat with a mangy dog on a lead and it depressed the hell out of me. Of course if I could have seen me through his eyes, I might have felt even worse.

*

John was a nice enough bloke, late fifties, early sixties, something like that, grey haired going white and the sort of comfortable face that you'd be quite happy to have a pint with. Which was a good thing in his profession. His pub was as near to a country pub as you get in London itself. It wasn't exactly secluded, but it was at the end of a street with no houses that bordered what could have been a park if it had been a better area. He showed me the door where the message had been, though that was a bit pointless as

he'd had it removed after the police had seen it and then told me that this character had been in touch again giving him a time and place for the money drop.

"So do you think he's serious?" he asked me, as though I was some kind of expert.

"Your guess is as good as mine, but he'll be serious about getting his money. What do the police say?"

"I haven't told them yet. They thought he was a crank, though they sent someone round to look at the place. They agreed that it's an attempt at extortion at the least, but they obviously think it's rubbish. I mean, who burns a pub down like this guy says he will? They did say to get in touch if he made contact again, but they didn't think he would."

"So why not do that? Go back to them. They've got the resources, they've got enough people to catch this guy."

He sort of shrugged and I got the impression again of a fairly decent man, not sure what to do.

"He did say not to get the police involved, or he'd disappear and do the pub. Truth is, Garron, I don't want to go at all myself. It's some place down in Canning Town, which is a right hole and the police say that the guy's probably been in the pub and will know me and if I turn up with another guy, he'll most likely guess I've called the police in and just fade. And then we're back to the beginning and I'm the only one who's even got an idea of what he looks like. And I don't want to leave my mother that late at night, she's not too well. I'd have to get someone in. I just don't know what to do."

"John, the police are the best bet. If there's anything that requires manpower, they can do this and I can't. How did he get in touch this time?" I asked.

"Phone call. I thought maybe the police could trace it but he said he was in a call box."

"They might still be able to trace him, John, if there's a camera near the phone he used they might get a shot of him, or if someone saw him around the place. It's worth trying."

He looked hopelessly at me.

"But he sounded like he knew what he was doing. I just want him off my back, Garron. I think the police are probably right, but

if they catch him, they're not going to do anything and he'll be out on bail and then he'll know I went to the police when he told me not to and if he wants to he'll do the pub anyway. There was that fire at that other pub, you know, though no-one's come out yet and said it was arson."

"That's what every extortionist plays on, John, the fact that you're worried enough about him not to go to the police. And if they do get hold of him, he'll have to behave himself." I said this even though I wasn't sure of it. Some bloke who threatens to burn your place down is probably half a slice short of a toasted sandwich so he might do anything, but if John was lucky and it was just a kid trying it on, then odds were he'd toe the line once the police were involved. And then I wondered if there was any other reason that John wanted to keep away from the police, but that was just me being my usual trusting self.

"Can you scare him off, or not?" he asked me.

I sighed. Why did everyone want a guarantee.

"I can try John and I'm quite good at what I do, but I can't promise. If the guy's a nutter, or in fact there are four of them or something like that, then it's anybody's guess. But I can try."

He looked pleased with that, almost as though it was no longer his problem but mine.

"That's good enough for me," he said and we started on the road to Armageddon.

*

I'd said I'd go back to Sally's that Saturday evening and I wasn't working till much later on, as John's nutter, with a full sense of the dramatic had set the meet for midnight, so I found myself drifting round to Sally's place and waiting there while she worked out what she wanted to do with the evening. I'd suggested driving out somewhere, but she'd said no, then I wouldn't be able to have a drink with her.

"That's fine," I said, "I don't need to drink and I have to work later."

"But I like you to have a drink with me," she said.

Which was a conversation we'd had many times before, as though me having a drink with her somehow made her drinking

acceptable.

“Let’s just go to Henry’s,” she said, “we know everyone there.”

I looked at her and thought about another wasted night with a foregone conclusion round at Henry’s pub.

“Do you not want to try something different, go somewhere different?”

She sulked a little then.

“I like Henry’s pub, they know me there,” she said again, as though repeating it would make it even more of a reason to go.

Which I guess was her point. They knew her and tolerated her as long as she stayed just within a certain line. Or as long as I was there to deal with her.

“What would you like to do, then?” she asked me, the two of us sounding like a pair of bloody teenagers.

“Anything, Sal, anything different. Anything that takes us somewhere else, anything that doesn’t rely on alcohol to have us enjoy ourselves.”

“You’re on about the drinking again, it always comes back to that. The fact that I like to enjoy myself sometimes and have a drink – ”

And I tuned her out as she was speaking. I hadn’t got the energy to argue with her, or maybe I didn’t have the commitment to her to push back. If she wanted to, we’d go to the pub.

What was it that I wanted? I wasn’t sure I even knew anymore. Maybe it was just not to be responsible for Sally. Or maybe if I could overcome my inability to care about anything that I was doing, I’d get the energy to leave her behind. But to split with her, I’d have to be able to lose the responsibility.

I could do that, I thought, as I tried to get my head back into what she was saying. A few more nights and conversations like this and I could do that.

What did I owe to Sal?

A chance, I thought. A chance to sort herself out and some support if she chose to do that. But I couldn’t do it for her. Nobody could. She had to want to work on the drinking and she showed no signs of wanting to do that.

I picked up my jacket and she stopped what she was saying and instead came out with:

“What are you doing?”

“Going to Henry’s just like you wanted.”

She smiled at me and took my hand and for the walk down there and the first couple of drinks at least, I could almost pretend we were together.

After that I was on autopilot, dealing with Sal as she started to lose it, but thinking ahead to the meet with John’s extortionist.

*

Canning Town is about to be ‘regenerated’, whatever that means. It’s supposed to have new buildings and millions of pounds of investment. Maybe it’ll work, but until then it remains a hole with high rise tower blocks dotted around it. It might be possible to find one where the lift is either working or clean, but certainly not both. The last time I’d been here had been to reclaim a car that some bloke was convinced had been nicked and dumped near one of the blocks. It hadn’t, but I’d had a fun old time wandering carefully around other people’s territory not finding it.

The instructions from this arsonist psycho were easy enough to follow; the east side of a specific block at midnight. I wanted to be there in advance, but it wasn’t a good place to be hanging around, so I couldn’t just roll up early and wait around the corner. So I drove past three or four times as near as I could to the block without actually parking up in the residents’ car park and making myself too obvious and then I gave up, parked on the nearest large road where I hoped the car would still be when I got back, took the small baton out of the boot, the one which expanded to about a foot and a half when you flicked it out and walked over to the meet.

This was an odd area. It was a mess, no doubt, but as these high rises were separate entities with car parks, grassland, or really just wasteland in between, they didn’t have quite the same air of menace that some of the closed estates have. Desolate yes, and rundown, with that air of the potential for violence, but there was space and somehow that made just some kind of small difference to the outsider. At least while you were out in the open.

I walked casually along to the meeting place, feeling a lot better for the fact that I had the expanding baton in my pocket. Any kind

of weapon right now in that place gave me some level of comfort. I'd have felt even better with an Uzi, but that was just macho wishful thinking. I could see no-one yet, but there was no reason to think he wasn't watching everyone who approached. And of course, he wouldn't know who I was, might be expecting John himself if he was a little naïve. Got to the tower block and moved around to the east side and walked on, noting the figure in a doorway, partly in shadow and then got fed up with the theatrics as I'd called them myself and turned sharply and stood facing him. He moved slowly to the side out of the shadow and leaned back against the block.

"So you're it," I said.

He didn't say anything, just stood there, leaning against the wall. A tall, impossibly thin, shaven-headed man, with no real movement about him. His face could have been a skull without the grin, his eyes sunken back in his head and dark to the point of black. He was wearing skinny jeans and a mod type jacket and his hands, when he took them out of the pockets, were bigger than you expected. I couldn't tell his age at all. He could have been anything from early twenties to late thirties. It didn't show. He was, in fact, a little unnerving, standing there in the half light from the bulb on the side of the building wall. He looked like he had a secret that no-one else knew about and never would and I had to remind myself that he was just a punk. A cheap extortionist. Two grand or your pub goes up. With you inside.

He hadn't answered, so I tried again.

"What do I call you then, during our brief negotiations?"

More silence as he seemed to weigh up the question, then in a quiet voice, with no trace of any real accent, he said:

"It was on the door."

Meant the message burned into the door of the pub.

"Oh, I call you 'Two Thousand Pounds' do I?"

But he didn't rise to it, just said the word.

"Burn."

Nothing else, except the mean and moody bit from him again, so I decided to rile him a bit.

"Burn. I just call you Burn. Come off it, mate, your mum didn't shout out 'Burn' when she called you in for tea, did she."

Nothing from him, no reaction, no movement away from the wall.

“So what are you then? A Terry, an Ian, a Matthew, what are you? I know, I’ll bet you’re a Humphrey, I’ll bet that’s your given name and you do all this just to get away from it. But Humphrey isn’t a good enough reason to get yourself either arrested for extortion, or beaten up by someone who doesn’t think you’re funny.”

He didn’t say a word, just stayed leaning back on the wall, looking at me. I hadn’t credited him with being intelligent, but he wasn’t rising to my bait, so I left it to him for the next move.

And nothing happened. We stood there at the back end of a high rise block in Canning Town and stared at each other. The night was dark around us and I wondered whether we’d still be standing here when the local night crawlers had been and gone. Then he pushed himself off the wall and took two steps towards me, the dark eyes drilling at me. The same quiet voice said:

“You got the money?”

I smiled at him. I didn’t think that threatening this guy would make much difference to him, I wasn’t sure he was all there, though he didn’t look to be high on anything at the moment. I had to persuade him that causing trouble for John and his pub wasn’t worth the hassle it would bring down on him. And for that he had to believe that I wasn’t some lone agent working for a lone pub landlord.

“You don’t get it do you, Humphrey. Your mark isn’t going to pay this time. He has his own protection, so either you just walk away, or I’m going to beat the crap out of you as a warning. Personally I’d rather kill you stone dead, but that’s not the instruction. Doesn’t matter to me either way, but that pub is out of bounds for you.” I took one step closer to him. “You have to leave it alone.”

For a moment the eyes flashed and it changed him completely. For that maybe half-second I saw something that was dangerous and unpredictable, yes, possibly even unhinged and then the shutters came down again and he stepped back.

“Got to burn the pub then,” he said and started to back away from me.

I slid my hand into my jacket pocket, gripped the expanding baton and moved forwards.

“Can’t let you do that,” I said.

“Don’t get too close, mister. You may be doing just what you’re paid to do, but I’ll hurt you.”

I stopped for a second in surprise. It didn’t sound like bravado and I wondered for that moment if he’d got a gun on him somewhere that I couldn’t see and whether I really had been an idiot and walked into a psycho’s play without the hardware to get out of it. But he’d not pulled a thing yet and by now he should have done if he’d been going to. Especially a gun. Guy like this with a gun in his pocket, he should’ve been aching to show me how tough he was. So I stepped forwards again and he stepped back slightly and drew out a can of some kind in his right hand from his outside jacket pocket and I saw he was holding something else in his left. Then I threw myself to the side as the lighter flicked on and he sprayed whatever the hell it was out of the can at me and set it alight. Home-made bloody flame-thrower and I was scrambling away across the stones and scrub, while for a second the heat was very close and I wondered if I was in fact burning, before it eased and I rolled on the ground just in case and looked up from there and he was gone. Only a few seconds, but not time that I’d like to go through again. The night was dark once more, the brilliant flash of fire gone as though it had never been there and the man Burn vanished just as easily. His patch, I thought to myself as I got carefully up off the floor, took my jacket off and checked the back of it. Apart from the debris from the ground it was unmarked. I put it back on and looked around.

“That went well then,” I said to no-one.

I checked I still had my car keys and walked back to the car. But not in a straight line. If this was his area, he could be watching me now and with the various tower blocks around and in the dark, I wouldn’t see him. He’d taken me like I was a bloody schoolboy and as I drove off I wasn’t sure what was more worrying, the fact that I was so out of practice, or the fact that I’d have to tell Mick what had happened.