

A Little ConDescending

His swollen purple head burst on the roof of my white BMW like a rotten cantaloupe. Fourteen floors of freefall regret, accompanied by a low whistle of wind resistance was how my boss sidestepped the drawn out agony of a death due to entropy.

Not that I heard it at the time, being inside the flat of the balcony he had been dropped from, behind a double glazed glass door exhibiting four bullet holes.

I only found this out when I exited the high rise estate's concrete structure and to my dismay found that his compressed corpse had collapsed the roof of my getaway vehicle, leaving me traipsing on foot to the North Western train station in the acidic rain. The biting northern wind ripped mercilessly with its fangs, tearing at the exposed skin of my cheeks.

I was there to shoot the man who was dangling him by his ankles over the balcony. Not that I knew that at the time.

I ditched the stolen Vespa in the undergrowth of the canal banks and stared into the still, dank waters of the grey canal. I took shelter under the overpass and I ate two cold meat and potato pies while sipping whiskey from the inscribed flask I still kept in my inside jacket pocket. I had loaded and unloaded the revolver over and over again, listening to the click of the trigger and feeling the giving point, before loading the chambers for the last time, teasing the steel to prepare for the moment of recoil. As the clock face of my watch ticked two I scrambled up the bank, jumped the fence, wearing a blood red bob hat to match my fleece. My boots' thick soles took the stairs as silently as possible, avoiding the lift for solid reasons. I kept a steady pace, my breathing regular. The physical exertion took the edge off the natural adrenal anticipation, before performing an execution.

Now I talk from experience of course. The thrill of the hunt and the finality of a job well done often outweighed the money or the motive, mostly business, sometimes personal. That day however was the first time I killed a man deliberately. Two men as it went, yet only the one on purpose.

I reached the top of the stairwell on the fourteenth floor without passing a soul. A mixture of pepper and pastry, whiskey and stomach acid scorched my throat as I crept along the balcony, making sure I didn't touch the yellow painted rail. The wind howled like a crying dog and with my hat pulled low around my ears making a muffle of everything around me I took my time. Flat eighty nine on the corner was open, as I was told it would be. An old safe house the police had

used in the seventies. Entering, I pulled my jacket zip to the top, covering my nose as best I could to avoid the stench of shit and piss. I heard nothing through the paper thin connecting wall to ninety one. I held my breath and listened hard, then kicked open the crudely constructed adjoining door to ninety one, swinging it back on its hinges with a sharp crack.

Giving half a second for bullets to come, I led with the revolver and my arm then stepped in, scanning the room, the gun sweeping all four corners of the abandoned empty shack. Out to my left I saw him, leaning over the flat's balcony appearing to be resting his forearms on the rail above the chipboard partition. He had his back to me and was staring down. The patio doors closed behind him. In that moment I was unnerved that he hadn't responded to the adjoining door rattling against the bare wall. I shouted his name, willing him to turn around, wanting him to see the muzzle pointing at his head. Wanting to see the realization in his eyes that he was going to die: by my hand. Again, I shouted his name, but he didn't so much as flinch. I remember thinking he must have simply been resigned to die and didn't want to give his killer the satisfaction of seeing his last moments. My heart thumped in my chest as I didn't want him to jump before I shot him.

"Timothy Smithill!" I shouted for the final time. The man who ran the security for the majority of the North West. It was definitely him. Six feet seven, broad back stretching his leather jacket. Cropped black hair on his head that was bowed over the rail. His arms were lowered out of view so giving him no time to make another move I pulled the trigger. The recoil was jarring, only for the first shot. The bullet ripped through the glass pane without deflecting, hitting the base of the skull leaving a scorched indent where the spine ended, killing him instantly. Of its own accord my finger let three more shots go into the base of his lower back, the biggest target area, given he was slumped over the rail at the waist. Tucking the gun into my belt line, I left the room back into eighty nine, peeked both ways, and bolted for the stairs. This is where the adrenaline kicked hard, buckling my knees as bile stung my throat. Stumbling down endless stairs, I remember my head was filled with sirens and blue flashing lights. Thoughts of being locked up and coppers boots pounding behind me and in front of me, at every turn. It was all in my head, though. No soul on the way up, no soul on the way down.

If I had known at the time that the man who paid me to do the job, provided the gun and the white BMW, and the knowledge of Smithill's whereabouts at that precise moment; a man called Gordon Rendle, knew also that Smithill would at that precise moment have been dangling my boss, Donald the Giant Renson from his ankles, would I still have done it? Yes I probably would, but if Gordon had been upfront about it, I probably wouldn't have killed Gordon a week later. Gordon approached me because of a reputation I'd garnered, one which counts for nothing in the real world. A small town reputation where the locals respect you through fear. Nothing else, just fear. No glamour any more, nothing like that, just fear. I saw no problem doing Smithill, didn't expect my boss to mind much, even though I hadn't told him. I'd figured it would open up a slice of the market for Giant Donald, my boss. Nicknamed Giant because he was all of five feet tall with no inches, a joke name, ironic. Irony I never laughed at because I was only the one inch taller. I reasoned that what was good for him meant work for me. He didn't need to know, and I wasn't particularly interested in what Gordon's stake was in this: not until I beat it out of him and actually put it all together, that is.

So, reaching the bottom of the high rise I sprinted back where I'd come from, hopped the fence and down into the undergrowth by the canal. Crouching down, I took off my fleece and reversed it so now it was luminous yellow. Reversing my bob hat I went from all red to yellow and blue in an instant.

With nobody around, I strolled down the canal path and up the metal stairs onto the bridge. Rounding the corner back to the high rise I headed around front into the street, which is when I heard the sirens wailing through the whipping wind. Two women across the road, both in dressing gowns, both smoking and one with curlers in her hair were pointing to the BMW with Giant Donald's broken body resting on the dented roof. A growing crowd lined the street, none gesturing up which was all I needed to know.

I swerved on my boot heels and headed into the town centre, risking one glance back and up. Directly above the car, Smithill's lifeless form hung over the rail, from the distance looking like a black towel left to dry in the gale. I remember sitting in a corner booth with a pint of bitter in the King's Head trying to convince myself it was just a coincidence, the pair of them there at that exact moment, the bitter was

doing nothing to stop my stomach churning with anger. Anger at myself for being so naïve and at Gordon for knowing and exploiting it and me letting him without a thought. On the train back to town every pair of eyes glared at me and I struggled to work out which ones were in my imagination and which were real.

I spent four days in my flat with the television and radio off thinking and guessing and anticipating who or what would come for me. I sat in my armchair which I'd dragged into my hallway, facing the unlocked door, daring whoever was coming so I could greet them with the barrel of my shotgun. Just waiting. No one came of course. By day five I was stir crazy and I squeezed outside before the walls closed in and crushed me to death. Without consideration I headed straight for the golf club on the Flash knowing Gordon would be there, not caring who else.

The door men didn't even make eye contact with me as I entered, both staring down at their shoes. Into the bar, Gordon was the only one still laughing, as the others I didn't bother to register, sat around the mahogany table, had all fallen silent. Turning round, his grin stayed fixed, but didn't meet his eyes. I didn't speak, didn't need to. Just nodded my head to the exit and he followed me out the clubhouse and across the course towards the large reservoir that had formed from sunken disused mine shafts of the old collieries, filled with rain, known as the Flash.

We sat down on the stone steps of the bridge and before he spoke I pushed my thumb into his throat, forcing his head to grind against the corner of the stair, reminding him I wanted the truth. He nodded, saving himself the act of lying straight away. Explaining he knew Smithill would be taking Donald to the flat to thrash out a deal about Donald's fruit machines in his pubs and clubs, wanting a cut of his takings. Gordon knew full well the way Smithill negotiated involved dangling people at great heights.

He said he forgot to mention it to me, so I broke his nose and he apologized for lying, and with tears in his eyes and snot bubbles mixing with blood, he offered me partnership of what he thought was now his enterprises for the taking.

He tried to explain that he picked me for the shooting knowing I'd be the best to pull it off and that he was going to come find me with this proposal when the heat had died down. He couldn't look me in the face as he lied.

I explained to him that I thought he had set me up, taking out his two competitors, that I'd be a marked man, from both crews. No

protection now Donald had gone. I explained that I thought he had me do the shooting so that I would have to run. He shook his head softly, staring into the still darkness of the Flash.

He heaved dry sobs as I kicked him over and over and over, my boots making hollow thuds on his torso and head. I rolled him into the brown water with the heel of my foot, throwing the revolver in after him and headed back into the golf club with Gordon's blood on the shins of my faded denim jeans.

The door men looked down at their shoes again, saw the blood on mine, then looked up at the foggy starless black sky, whistling as I passed between them. Back into the clubhouse bar no one said a word, the patrons just stared into the foam of their pint glasses. The barman poured me a pint of bitter and a double Grouse and busied himself polishing glasses. I nursed the drinks then headed home, not one word was said as I'd sat there.

Thinking back, Gordon had made a very big mistake expecting people to come after me for revenge. In fact it had the opposite effect, especially with Gordon's body found bobbing amongst the ducks at the Flash. The local boys all needed work, most of them didn't particularly care who was paying their wages and even if they did, they never once said it out loud. Never dare let the man who'd taken out all three top players in the space of a week hear dissent. They'd assumed it was a coup, the whole town whispered many different versions of their demise. I confirmed and embellished whatever rumor was spread. And that was it. I was the king of the doors, the gambling machines, the lot. The kings were dead, the pretender was dead. Nobody wanted to come near the new king. Not after that. I never even met a copper, not once. People suspected I had some inside connections protecting me in the police force. It wasn't the case at all; just luck. No willing witnesses, no evidence, just a suspicion that the local cops were happy to let it stay that way. Inside connections, another rumour I fostered and exaggerated, another thing that made potential revenge hunters think twice about coming for me. All those years ago.

As I sit here on the edge of the roof of that same sixteen floor tower block, my feet dangling over the edge, I can hear the roar of the crowd in the rugby stadium, carried by the ever present wind. I can see all the lights on King Street in the distance. The cars crawling around like

smoking beetles. The clubs, pubs, living room lights and the stars were winking through the black sky thinly veiled by smog. All the places I can't go. Don't even want to go. Wherever I walk I see men shift their hands in the pockets and I know there's a blade or a pistol coming out. Whenever I go into a bar, a club or a church, people's eyes go to the ground or the ceiling faster than the door men's did all those years ago, even the priests and vicars, even the cops and the cons, especially my parents before they died. They never spoke to me after that week, when they knew what the rest of the town knew, all those years ago. To this day, when eyes meet mine, the surrounding muscles twitch and fixed fake smiles appear, curt nods, stiff necks wait impatiently for me to pass so they are out of a danger they create in their own minds. Women flirt, throw themselves at me even at my age, all ages and sizes. Batting eye lashes seeing cash or diamonds or protection or making their ex-boyfriends jealous, knowing they can do nothing. Even the ones without a story could be a plant, to poison me or stab me or shoot me while I sleep. A niece or granddaughter of a man dead by my hand or in my name. No honest women, no marriage or children, too easy a target for kidnapping or killing in revenge, I'd never have an innocent suffer for me and my times and crimes. My friends aren't my friends for who I am because I have never been who I am since all those years ago. They aren't my friends, they keep me in eye and ear shot for their own survival, keeping your friends close and enemies closer still. Loyal through the fear, work for him or against him, do their jobs and keep their heads down. Laughing at every joke before I stopped telling any, buying every drink I supped before I stopped going out. I gave up long ago giving orders, left them to their own devices and the town just ticks along rolling on day to week to month to year to decade.

As I stand on the edge of the sixteen floor tower block daring the blowing wind, my own death a stride away, my life hasn't flashed before my eyes. Just the episodes that played out all those years ago that paved the path to me sitting and standing on the sixteenth floor of a high rise block of flats high above the town, my town, night after night after night, daring the wind. Inviting the footsteps of the next face to take the reign and make their name. Night after night, no one dare comes to accept the invitation, a stride away with a fist in the centre of my back, a bullet in the back of my head. The gift my death offers to the brave, to snatch it all, all of it roaring and murmuring and glistening below me. The brave or the foolish? The gift or the curse? A stride away and a stubborn wind unresponsive to dares.

I take out the flask of whiskey, draining it in one swallow,

brushing my thumb across the engraved front that has inscribed on it *Nil Desperandum*. The flask that travelled back with my grandfather from the bloody killing fields of the Great War. I look down; the depth perception wobbles my knees as the wind whips my back and I laugh out loud, tears streaming down my face, remembering my father's favourite joke, my favourite joke, a joke I haven't told in years:

Two policemen are standing outside Strangeways Nick, over the wall comes a rope.

Look, there's a midget escaping down the wall', one shouts, nudging the other Bobby. His mate replies,

'Midget? Now, that's a little condescending'