

# **THE WARM GUN Part 1**

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## 1. Like a Broken Doll

Some incidents, no matter how long ago, stay with you until the end of your days. It may be that pathetic smile you saw on people's faces when your father died; it may be that moment when you first see the hypocrisy of teachers, when you realise that they are as unexciting and banal as anyone else. It burns then, into the *mind*, the thing that is consciousness, the irrational thing that plays at rationality.

When the day broke it had begun to show promise. Spring was on its way. There was the threat of warm weather just around the corner. It had been a pretty boring evening, all told. Joe and Mario had been working the red brick estate selling papers for their wonderful political party which no one was buying. Everyone was either too poor or too sensible, it was difficult to say. The party was pro-IRA which didn't help. A lot later Joe decided that he had made a mistake. Saying that the cause was a just one was a lot different from agreeing with the methods that the organisation used, equally two wrongs have and will never make a right. But that was then.

Joe went back to Mario's place with him. Mario lived near where Hamilton, who had been a comrade of Joe's in older days when he was in a different party, lived. Joe decided to call on Hamilton and ask for the Roneo printer that he had paid for. He could either use it or sell it himself and get some money that he needed badly. He went across the patch of field with Mario and into the high rise that Hamilton lived in. They got the lift to the fourth floor and knocked at the door. Hamilton's politics made him very paranoid, in fact he acted like a drug dealer.

"Yeah?" There was a grunt from behind the door.

"All right, Hamilton? It's me. Have you got the Ronco printer?"

"No. I told you that it was stolen."

"No, you said that some things had been stolen. I didn't know that the printer was one of them." Joe decided that he couldn't do anything about it now. "Never mind, see you."

There was another grunt.

Joe didn't think about it and went down and away the short distance to Mario's house for a cup of tea. He was sitting in Mario's flat counting the pitiful amount of money that they had raised that night in the area, which was pretty poor and very hard to mouth. There was a knock at the door and Mario answered it. It was Hamilton for Joe.

Hamilton was on top form, in full psychopath swing, the Beast had awoken in him. but the discussion began peacefully enough. Hamilton had written a letter which, in his usual incoherent fashion, had not explained things particularly well. Joe said OK, I get the message now, it just wasn't clear. Then it started.

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"You were warned, Fish!" Hamilton opened his coat to reveal a baseball bat. Joe was too taken aback to say anything and too surprised as the first blow fell hard on his head. Hamilton hit him square just above the forehead and he fell on the floor in the doorway. He raised his hands to shield himself and the blows rained down with fierce intensity on his back and arms. Throughout the whole attack Hamilton ranted and raved, he was demented. Joe called out for Mario to help him. Mario tried to knock Hamilton down and failed. Hamilton was trained, in martial arts, indeed he was a black belt and ran a club. Despite this he needed a weapon, a macho penis to beat with. Mario ran out into the neon night for assistance.

Somehow Joe got up and staggered into the main living room at the end of the hallway and tried to shut the door. Hamilton burst through and pushed Joe up against the window, threatening him:

"D'you want to go through it?"

He pushed Joe up against the window and shouted at him some more. Joe was overwhelmed with a fear like a black thing boiling though him. This was burning the brain, all right, so deep that the scars would never heal.

Gary had been out quite independently of Mario and Joe and he appeared in the flat wondering what the hell was going on. Somehow he calmed Hamilton down and got the bat from him. It had pieces of Joe's scalp in it. Hamilton shouted some more at Joe:

"I could have brung me chopper!"

Joe was regaining some sense. Total outrage and anger came. He bit back an urge to tell Hamilton to fuck *off* because he could see that this would probably result in an attack on Gary. Eventually Hamilton left and Gary took Joe upstairs where he tried to clean him up a bit. Mario arrived a little too late with Tony.

Gary put Mario and Joe into a taxi to the hospital where Joe had seven stitches put in his head by a nervous houseman. The X-ray has shown no break in his skull, he had been lucky.

It was St. Patrick's night and while they were waiting to be attended to several people arrived. One had had a cup smashed on his head and another was a boy who refused to share his chips with someone he didn't know and had been belted for his trouble. The boy laughed when Joe asked him and said that the man still hadn't got any chips for his pains. There were more but Joe couldn't think straight any more. Mario told Joe of times when similar things had happened to party members and the attackers had been dealt with very severely. This comforted Joe for some reason.

Mario took him back. They had a cell meeting and decided to do nothing for the moment. Hamilton had been in typical Wild West style with another friend hiding behind the entry while he talked and said that his quarrel was with Joe. Joe thought a long time later that Hamilton was jealous of his intellect and ability. In his dark and angry opinion Hamilton

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would never amount to anything and would only ever be a dangerous nut case to be avoided.

He walked home, still riding on the false adrenalin confidence. In his thoughts that night he wreaked a terrible vengeance on Hamilton, knocking him down and setting him alight, making the bastard burn and scream. He also thought of breaking Hamilton's hands so that he could raise them against no one again.

Sleep was a long time coming.

## 2. Searching for an Angel

Billy needed protection. In his line of work one had to earn it but the payment was never enough. Billy had to find an angel for a man, a sister of mercy. A short blonde angel that was the right weight. This was his first mission and he knew that it wouldn't be the last. He sighed to himself as he watched the dead heads make their buy from a friend of his. The little prozzies with their need that made them strut their stuff on Faulkner Square, occasionally they took him for business and cadged a cigarette from him. One had said that they needn't do it in the street but could go inside. Billy had laughed.

He had been following his friend around all day armed with a camera with telephoto lens, discretely snapping the blondes for another friend. The cigarette lady was among them. She looked different without the imitation leather coat and the shades, tired and shorn of what little glamour that she may have possessed at one time. This was a stone city and it made hearts fashioned to suit.

The delivery round dragged, Billy was tired of it. How many dead head blonde junkie prozzies were there in this sick town for fuck's sake? Eventually his friend tipped him the nod and they went back to the House where Billy handed his camera to the butler who told him to wait in the library. Bill sat in the room and let his eyes scan the bookshelves. The titles meant little to him, would probably mean little to anybody who wasn't interested in dusty books from around the time of the War. He stood up and walked closer to a case. It was full of old Left Book Club editions, the mildewed leftie collectors' pieces that were best kept on a shelf. He picked out *The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism* by Stratchey and started to look through it, unlike most modern paperbacks there was no text on the cover exhorting the buyer to buy. Oh no, one had to know what the book was about.

He didn't like the house, it put the shits up him if the truth be told. It was big and it was evil. Billy had no idea of the kind of things that had been planned there and yet he could feel the ominous heaviness of the place. So far he had only dealt with *minions* and never met whoever was in charge, unless they liked pretending to be a minion. They were unflinching polite but never ever expected a no answer to any request. Billy put the book back and lit a cigarette.

The door from the hallway opened and a small man of indeterminate age stepped in. He was ordinary but for his eyes, which were an extraordinary greeny blue, like a greener version of that worrisome milky blue Irish eye. Billy turned to him and took a drag on his cigarette. The small man regarded him wordlessly for a while. Bill exhaled and took another drag, squeezing back the cough tickle that would have made him feel silly.

"Macho," said the small man, "macho." His voice was burred with smoking and vaguely that of Merseyside. He removed and opened a battered tin cigarette case from around the period of the Left Book Club books and pulled Out a Balkan Sobranie with the toasted tobacco, black paper and gold filter. He lit it with an even more battered Zippo lighter.

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The room filled with the sweet smell of the cigarette. Billy knew that this was the man he had come to see.

"You should be an actor", said Billy laconically, "that was a good entrance."

The small man smiled at Billy in such a way as to make him realise that this was not the sensible thing to say to him. There was nothing he could do about it now but bite his tongue and remember it for future reference.

"You are not as stupid as you pretend to be, I hope. You've done well, in fact, and have a use for you. We have been looking at the photographs you brought. You're good at this photography lark, in my opinion.

"Maybe you could do something for me. Do you want to get inside here, become a friend of ours?"

Billy sucked on his cigarette. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for for a long time. He was hungry for security and bread. He called himself an importer and indeed he did import things, but the margin was thin in manufactured antiques for gullible Americans. He imported other, softer, things and some harder ones. Skin was his game and the third world his living. He was a link in the chain that made contract cleaning companies so cheap. Filling up the work force with people who couldn't talk back or complain because of their status with the immigration authorities. The harder stuff was what kept the prossies on the game and their pimps fat and healthy. It fed a need in them and he, in true entrepreneurial spirit, met that need. It just wasn't any business to be in if you didn't want to get caught eventually. The House he stood in had contacts, good prosperous contacts and this was a way in to them. He nodded a yes to the small man.

The small man went back to the door, opened it, and returned with a still-wet photograph. He handed it to Joe, it was the Cigarette Lady. Joe smiled. The small man said:

"Friend of yours?"

"No, acquaintance. She likes to smoke other people's cigarettes."

"Bring her here as soon as you can, we would like to meet her."

Joe was a little shocked at this. Surely the house could get all the flesh it needed if it so required. What the fuck did it want with a dead head prostitute? Very weird and none of his business. Joe decided to push his luck:

"Is there any speciality you prefer to know she performs? Buggery? Does she give head?"

This was greeted with a thin smile. The small man blew smoke in his face and said:

"Just bring her and shut the fuck up."

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"OK, I'll see what I can do."

Billy liked living dangerously; it was one of his hobbies. He stubbed out the half smoked cigarette and nodded to the small man, saying:

"See you soon."

He left the House and was shown to his car by the butler, who handed him his keys. He got in and drove away. The small man watched from the window.

The small man wanted a girl that fitted a general physical description. Had to be the right height and so on. Dental records could be fixed and the face would be no problem. It was as near perfect as could be had for the job in progress.

Billy muttered to himself as he drove away : "Missing you already".

### 3. In the Shadow of Need

She had many names but she was defined by her need. Her habit cost her a hundred pounds a day and she was the breadwinner of her little family too. She and Red lived apart but together. They would get the cash together for a fix and then cut it down and sell it on to someone else. She had started injecting herself with the stuff years ago when it all made a crazy kind of sense, a delicious blocking out of the pain and grief.

She had awoken from a drugged night in Red's flat and she still felt OK. Red had gone out prowling, probably to sell something on or whatever it was he needed to do today to keep his head together. She bathed in his bath, using up the hot water but that didn't bother her. As far as she knew Red's electricity was paid for by taking money directly out of his benefits and as a consequence things like hot water and electric fires were on all of the time, so why worry? Her dirty clothes were unpleasant after bathing but she pulled them on anyway.

Did she love him? Who knows what love is when life is driven in such a way? Life was a headlong dash that would end eventually. When she was no longer able to sell herself for chemicals she would have to steal and then she would be caught. As it was the humiliations of her life were such that it would make little difference, anyway. Maybe Aids would carry her off from a dirty needle or a penis up the anus. It could be tomorrow, or maybe the next day, maybe never if you have the false belief in the invulnerability of youth. This was a short hard life – maybe it had already happened. At any moment while she sold herself some crazy could come and buy her whole life and she would be found in pieces somewhere off the M62. The whole thing was a risky business, one of the night girls had disappeared a few months ago. Her body had been found in Bury. Any anonymous nutter could appear and make her disappear.

Yes, but did she love him? She knew that despite all of the propaganda that was around, what she did had nothing to do with selling love. It may be that there were moments of terrible loneliness that she helped to mitigate for some lost soul. It was the sickness of pornography that made people into objects rather than human beings but this sickness was in itself part of the sickness of *commodity*, of buying and selling. Love was not this buying and selling, there was trust in there somewhere, it was something human. It is possible that buying and selling is also something human.

She loved him as far as anyone could love in this ridiculous life. She loved him as far as the cross she bore would allow, but when and if the need took her over she would sell him like an old coat if she had to because that was the deal.

She had once been able to read books, to concentrate longer than five minutes on things that were more than just tomorrow's slow death. She knew of the wheel of Becoming, of the turning wheel that was always Now but she knew also of death and the fear it brought from bitter experience.

## 4. The Dream and the Wound

Joe was stretched out upon the rack as once again the Dream came. The Beast was with him and it laughed as it lay down hammer blows upon his head and again he knew the pain and the dark dazed feeling of the blood coming. Again he knew the need to submit as the blows came down upon his head with an almost sexual intensity. Fear held him close in its arms and he was drowning again.

He woke with a strangled shout. The walls pounced in on his mind. His breathing was restricted by the winding sheets of cheated death, he gasped while his mind played *if*.

He was shaking like an old wino.

It had been like this for many nights now, the Dream and the Wound in an endless procession of a dance macabre. He had given up on sleeping tablets because they made it impossible to think, he had given them up because they were a quick path to yet another dependence, he had given up his freedom to be whatever he wanted to be to the Beast.

Outside the orange neon hummed in tune to the hissing tempo of the passing car wheels on tarmac. The anonymous faces held tight in the late night rictus. The boys in blue patrolled somewhere out there. Who would think that such brightly lit streets could contain the Beast and many more like it? The neon holds back the darkness with an orange mask hiding deeper emptiness.

The soft deadly amber air passed through his lungs and his head ached. The skylight shed the soft pastels of the neon upon the scene. He tried to speak but only managed another crow's noise. The strength slowly returned to his aching limbs. He had come close to dying in his confrontation with the Beast, nearly found the unadmitted thing that his misery kept prompting him to.

He touched the wound in his scalp. Its knobby texture and the green thread that passed through his scalp made him shudder. Seven green reminders in his scalp. He would have to wait for the Dawn and the re-emergence of the pleasant liveable surfaces that it heralded.

He had to learn to laugh again.

The amber choked him and he had to move. The wooden club had had traces of his hair in it, so nearly it could have had traces of the end of his life. At the snap of the switch the light obediently illuminated the other room in his flat. The armchairs sat waiting patiently to eat the unsuspecting into themselves. He eased into one and it was cold against his skin. A book lay nearby and he picked it up, but the words only danced on the page and jeered at him. He got up and walked slowly, carefully, to the front door and touched the shiny new bolts and locks but even they paled into insignificance against the neon's darkness that was not darkness. The gas could still pass under the door.

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Some time passed and he found himself again in the armchair, sipping scalding-hot black tea and reading with heavy eyes.

*The way that can be spoken of*

*Is not the constant way*

*The name that can be named*

*Is not the constant name.*

The Wound spoke to him, demanding attention, and he curled up into the chair and sheltered it with his hands. It *existed*, as did the wounds all over his back. The extractor fan in the kitchen rumbled quietly though this. His right hand wouldn't close properly because of the bruises in the bone where he had tried to ward off the blows. It would be years before he would be able to grip things properly because of the damage it received. He hated himself for all his weakness and knew the hatred for the thing that had led him there. His hand ached, his head ached, his back ached, his arm ached, his soul ached.

He was driven and felt he must move, he must confront his fear and kill it. He would go out into the street, he would go *now*. He would rob the neon of its magic. He began to dress. The half-empty container of sleeping tablets sat on the dresser and looked at him.

The way could not be spoken of but it had to be endured.

## 5. Angel Delivery

Billy started his car when he saw the cigarette lady leave her house. She was wearing black today, with heavy shades to hide her eyes. Probably stoned out of her head, he thought, but that would make it easier. She probably needed to be stoned out of her head to endure the life she lived. Chicken and egg: if she didn't have the need for Mother Poppy she wouldn't need to sell herself in the first place. These are desperate times.

She stood by the 'phone box on the corner, playing the old waiting for a call trick in case the police were to walk by. Billy drew his car up to the 'phone box. He leaned over and undid the passenger door lock. The cigarette lady got into the car and Billy moved off. For a while they didn't say anything. She asked Billy for a cigarette, true to form. Billy one handedly dug a packet out of his leather jacket and passed it to her. She lit one with the cigarette lighter in the dash. Her voice was husky, whether from some idea of being sexy or just smoking too much was difficult to say:

"So, what d'you want?"

Billy was a little cagey. He also found this woman, probably willing to do almost anything if he could afford it, a turn on. This made him feel ashamed. He said:

"Have you got a name?"

"Mona, whatever you want, Bernadette? Chloe? Mary?"

"Mary, I have a friend who wants to meet you but he's too shy to come himself," she looked alarmed, "don't worry - he's rich and easily satisfied." They were reaching the end of Queens Drive where the house stood. He turned into the driveway and the gate opened. Mary began to look a little worried, saying:

"What is this? I've been here before, they hurt people here, they have parties - weird parties." She started trying to get out of the car so Billy decided to play his trump card. He reached into his pocket again and pulled out a small plastic bag full of white powder. Mary was shocked, she had never seen so much at the same time before. Billy returned it to his pocket and Mary stopped trying to get out of the car. The pulled up in front of the house and got out. Billy made a sweeping gesture to the main door, where the butler was waiting. Mary walked unsteadily up the steps and Billy followed. The butler waved him away and he heard the door shut behind him.

Billy got in his car and tried not to think about it, even though he felt a weight steal upon his soul.

## 6. Angel Fall

Mary was shown to a drawing room at the back of the house where she was given a drink and then left alone. She didn't like whiskey, nasty stuff. She felt cheap and dirty, like shit, a dingleberry on god's arse if not worse. But how else is one supposed to survive? This time, in all the hard times she had been through, all the rapes of body and soul, she was truly afraid. Normally things passed by comfortably hazed and numb when she had her stuff, but her man had used the last gram before locking himself in his flat, nailing up the doors and throwing the keys down to a friend in another futile attempt to come off it and join the real world.

She had kept hold of Billy's packet of cigarettes and drew one out. She was shaking so uncontrollably that it was almost impossible for her to match it up with the match she struck. Anything for a fix, now, and please god can I get through this one? Every day was purgatory until the sweet release on the needle's end. The pain and humiliation, the feeling of being used and pawed over forgotten. The unnatural bent of clients not sickening anymore. She started to live, then, and was no longer a toilet that was used and flushed away.

When her father introduced her to being used he had always covered his absence from the matrimonial bed with the toilet flushing so her mother wouldn't know. He used to hurt her and all the time and call it fatherly love. During menarche her brother bore the brunt of this beast's power games. And she was worthless, so worthless and life gave such pain. At fifteen she ran to the street and found temporary paradise in abandoned garages and playgrounds. Then the need took hold and shaped her life. The using and humiliation were nothing new.

The small man watched the pitiful performance with the cigarette through the surveillance system that was fitted throughout the house. He knew everything about everybody in his domain, even the butler's *penchant* for anything with chocolate in it. He waited for the drug to take hold of her. She was the right size and weight. Pretty too but for the lines of care etched on her face and the weak mouth. Such a waste, he thought to himself, but business was business.

Mary was dizzy now. It must be the cigarettes on an empty stomach. She blinked as her vision blurred over and she slumped back into the armchair.

The final moments of her conscious life happened some time later when she woke to the smell of petrol. She was moving forward, rolling and bumping with the features of the road she opened her eyes to see a dry stone wall a few feet ahead of her. Things were moving with such relentless speed. It was all too fast and the car hit the way. Then pain, burning her face. She tried to scream and the hot air came into her lungs. Some moments and there was nothing more. She was gone.

## 7. A lion in his den

Red looked out of the window in his nasty flat. He could see the central reservation of Princes Road and the beginnings of the streets that led to Granby. His skin stood out like the turkey of the legend and he shivered. His legs were weak and he had eaten nothing for a couple of days. He needed a fix but couldn't get out to find one. He had been expecting his girl to come round for about a day or so, she was sure to have something for him.

The television, for the moment unsold, blinked to life when he pressed the switch. A woman told of her fight to have a test tube baby after her husband had died of cancer. Eventually someone had agreed to treat her but the treatment had failed and her husband's sperm was all gone. Red tried to think what it would be like to be such a child, but he could not remember being a child. He could not remember being anything before he became this thing that *needed* with such hunger.

Most people need a hundred pounds a day to feed a serious habit and Red had been beyond even that. After he had moved into the building his friends could get past the front door. They had broken into all of the other flats in the building and robbed whatever wasn't nailed down. The desperate stealing from the poor. In the days before the cuts he had had a grant for carpets, a cooker, a fridge and some simple furniture but he had done a deal with the shop owners and been given most of the grant in cash while they kept the rest for themselves. All this was a long time ago.

This time he was determined to break from his old life and start anew. He knew, for he was an intelligent man, that he must break permanently with all of the people he knew and form other, safer, associations. This is not a trivial task. He would have to throw away all of his associates from the last five or six years of his life and try to find a way back to somewhere. And what was there, anyway? There was no money in the corporate kitty for a man of his dubious qualifications. What could he get employment with? There was little available for a man with a serious habit and housebreaking skills. Maybe he could join the security forces and keep his skills in use. Even if he lost his habit he would still have to obtain some skill and references that could be used to convince an employer that he was capable of holding down a job. What job was there anyway?

He shambled up and down a little and then negotiated the stairs down to the kitchen. He was so *ill* that it would have been nearly impossible for him to have prepared anything, even if he had had a cooker. All there was was his faithful kettle and an electric pan cooker. He had had a full size gas cooker and sold it, it was of no use anyway because the alcoholic who lived on the ground floor had a large number of cats that used to cellar to shit in and the men from the gas company wouldn't go in there to connect it because of the nauseating smell and the danger of slipping in the mess.

The stairs to the kitchen took him to the back of the house which looked out on a vacant plot of land. At the back of the house there was an another unholy mess where the alcoholic had thrown his rubbish out of the back door without bothering to bag it up first.

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In addition there were things like decaying mattresses and sofas, all smelling in their own delightful way. This was another reason for the smell that the gas men wouldn't risk. All of the flats were infested with fleas to boot, but that was a small worry.

Electricity was free; the supply was wired from a buss bar in the basement where the meters were supposed to be. Some flats had a legitimate supply so the electricity company couldn't just cut it all off. Occasionally a brave electric henchman would brace himself for long enough to destroy the wiring and force Red to re-jig it but he didn't care too much and had some candles stashed away in one of the drawers anyway. It amused him that these people could stand it long enough to rip his supply out but none of them would come to fit one when he had tried to get it through the proper channels. He had been on pay direct, with the money coming out of his benefits directly, in his last flat but now who cared?

After a struggle he managed to make himself a cup of tea, using dried milk because the wet stuff wouldn't keep. He didn't normally take sugar but put about four into the cup, hoping that he could keep it down and give his beleaguered body some limited kind of resources to keep moving.

## 8. Message Boy

Billy's day had begun easily enough when the 'phone rang at about 7 am. He hadn't had too much to drink the night before for once. After all, women are not impressed by drinkers and he had been with a friend. She liked him and he liked her. She didn't know what he was and that suited him because he was ashamed.

Billy had killed a few men in his time when they lost their usefulness. He had an associate, one who could be trusted at least for the moment that he used for awkward errands where he didn't want to be seen. This man did the running for him, made the buys and did the deals. Billy was the contacts man with the brains.

It was a symbiotic relationship. The man was known as Sam to all. Even Billy was unsure as to his real name but knew where he lived and who with. Sam did Billy's fighting and cleaned his laundry if it needed cleaning.

It was the small man:

"I need you to pick something up for me. Get one of your crew to go to the Sands and meet a man. Pick up a package."

"What's in the package?"

"Something you borrowed yourself once. Just get it and have it delivered here."

"OK."

The small man could provide weapons of various calibres and makes, depending upon what one needed. They were untraceable, smuggled in via Eastern Europe. Old Russian stuff from the wars that never happened, Uzis from who knew where. Billy had once needed to cut a rival in half and the Uzi had done the trick. He let his dear friend Sam do that kind of stuff now, it was easier.

It was time to go down to the scrap yard and find him, time to start the ball rolling. The small man must have known who he would send. He had things on Sam that meant he was totally loyal. Anyway, Sam didn't do much *thinking*, it wasn't his thing. He was more a *hitting* kind of person, and didn't care who he hit. Just as well, really.

Billy steeled himself for the long words of once syllable explanation of the task ahead of them.

## 9. The Glow

Joe's wild possessed figure burst out onto the street beneath the glow. From on high the lights drew down the vault of heaven close enough to touch with their oppressiveness. The cars hissed slowly or quickly past. The light itself was indifferent to him. A dark street lay away past the zebra crossing and he turned there deliberately, walking into the heavier velvet, dank and starless for clouds. He was determined to break the chain of the *ageis* that the Beast had laid upon him.

There was a shout in the distance so he paused and narrowed his eyes into the night. He merged into protective shadow. Breaking chains was one thing, stupidly getting whacked again was another. He could see an argument in progress at the far end of the street. The men were too well dressed, seemingly too old to be a problem. Their faces lacked the hunger that made an attacker and woke the Beast in all its red angry glory.

There was a fair amount of incoherent shouting. One of the men lashed out and struck the other to the floor and started kicking him heavily. His hair was red-orange in the neon. Joe heard a dull thud and the angry face faded over into oblivion. The prostrate man heaved himself up and started wheezing, catching his breath. The red head breathed no more, the back of his head splattered over the brickwork of the back alley. Joe could see the heavy glint of gun in the living man's hand. It was such a small thing.

Murder in the street where children played and Saturday lunchtime drunks shambled in the daylight. Murder in the street where skinny lads wandered doing the springing hard man walk, thin shoulders fighting to be seen through the padded jackets. Murder in the street where thousands walked to the DHSS on the forced march of Thursday's penury.

Joe did that strange thing called *don't see me*. He attempted to be one with the walls and pavement or maybe a tree that let the wind pass through it.

His eyes watched carefully until the crack of a piece of brick from the wall and a zing noise made him realise he had been seen. He was so calm now, like ice, and he skipped away to the side alley. He could feel the strength of his hate burning in him. Not this time would he be a loser. The elephant approached, his chest still playing symphony for piccolo. Joe waited while the steps closed, ready. As the man drew round the corner he struck with the low and hard kick that he had learned since his encounter with the Beast and the fat man tumbled, dropping the gun at Joe's feet.

Quite consciously Joe picked up a piece of brick and struck the man as hard as he could on the head. His hand moved in a perfect arc. Now there would be another Wound, Joe's was no longer alone.

As oblivion crossed the fat face he stooped to pick up the gun. The man saw the mark of the Wound clearly as he faded. Joe walked away with the gun in his jacket pocket. His fear was coming back but also now there was a deadly, heady sense of triumph.

## The Warm Gun

The fat man was very strong and it was only a few moments before he began to see the world again. As it turned sickeningly around him his bruised ribs joined in with the throbbing in his head and balls. Shouting his defiance he pulled himself up a wall. He snarled and cursed his way back to his car amidst the beginnings of rain. The blood seeped out to make a hideous mask of his face.

The corpse lay there, another life thrown down the toilet of striving.

## 10. Interlude with Stitches

Well it had to happen. Billy had always known it, one day Sam would pull one of his usual stunts and the costs would be bloody and fierce in both a literal and a time and money sense. This was no way to run a business.

"Oww, woman! That hurts. Waddaya playin' a?"

To top it all Sam had to prove what a showman he was. Diana was patching the stupid fat get up out of the kindness of her heart. Things were all marriage and children before the idiot had turned up playing the wounded soldier. At that, there was a great deal he had to tell her. Billy played the philosopher and sighed.

Sam was a mean and useful fighter, usually no more than a threat-man carrying messages. As a rule Billy made every effort not to show his own face. There was no question yet of Sam joining his predecessor, now holding up part of the M6, his neck broken cleanly (and humanely) by a quick blow from Billy's pick-axe handle. Billy sighed again, the ice was thinner these days and skating anyway becoming a lost art.

Diana extracted a promise from Sam that he would get a tetanus injection. Billy knew he wouldn't go but said nothing, if he hadn't caught tetanus yet he never would.

"Could you leave us alone, please, Di? I need to talk with Sammy here."

Her green eyes looked worried as she left the room. Billy looked tiredly at Sam:

"Well?"

"It was Red. He wouldn't shut up about wondering what had happened to his girl, said we were connected. Started kicking me."

"He and me both! You should have got away from him. Anyway, I know that something else must have happened because this isn't his style. He doesn't mark people like this.

"There's also the small matter of the item you were supposed to be collecting for me."

Sam was contrite but not too contrite. "I haven't got it." His head span again as Billy struck him across the head with the back of his hand. A little blood seeped down where Diana had stitched him up.

"Tell me the rest."

Sam assembled his story about the demise of Red and the Crazy who had made off with the gun. The kid's face haunted him. Witnesses had to die.

## The Warm Gun

He closed his eyes for a while and remembered again the nightmare journey to Billy's house with the blood threatening to cover his eyes. He would brush it away and see the gouts of neon and the poorly-seen lights from other vehicles. His stomach turned like a nacerous jelly from the shock of his wounding and the awful curry he had ingested in the club before Red had appeared. He had prayed to every god that had ever protected a murderer that the cops would stay hidden like they usually did when it rained.

Red was a difficult man to get rid of when he had got on the scent. Sam had drunk too much to keep his fat mouth as tightly shut as it should have been. Now there was no more Red and the gun was missing. No witnesses. Witnesses had to die.

Billy sighed again.

When Sam found it difficult to stand up, swaying like a drunk on Saturday night at closing time, Billy told him to wait where he was. Billy and Diana then helped him up the stairs into the spare room. Billy thought that he should perhaps go to hospital for observation but there was a danger of him becoming delirious and suffering from a wagging tongue. Diana was a nurse and started to press Billy about this but he showed a side of himself that she decided she didn't like and became quiet again. It had been a confusing evening for everyone, particularly poor Red.

Billy sighed again. There was no rest for the wicked. He decided he would call the doctoring types in the morning, assuming Sam hadn't died from some complication or other in the night.

## 11. The Hunchback on a Swinging Rope

Joe the Crazy was afraid to go home and his feet took him many hunted miles, cutting right the way down towards the docks, kicking the stones as he passed over the wasted areas of the city. It would have been warm despite the rain but for the wind, stealing the heat through his damp coat.

The weight of the gun lay comfortably near to hand. He thought that because of the lack of revolving chambers it was an automatic pistol. He didn't even know how many bullets there were in the magazine. The quick glance he had allowed himself had showed a crude silencer packed with cotton wool on the end of the gun. Maybe it was good enough for one more shot, how would he know?

There is so much violence around us and yet we know nothing of the mechanics of it; in our ignorance we can conceive the strength, the sexual power, of the bullet but we know nothing of the *how* of it until it thunders unbidden into our lives. Then it is too late to know.

The cold was eating at his will; it was as cold as the stranger who had wounded him for little reason. His eyes were weary and he was afraid to close them even for a moment, in case he fell with exhaustion and lost the gun in the emergent dawn. He needed to rest badly and he needed to trust someone. He needed sanctuary, some hunchback on a swinging rope to bear him away to the steps of the cathedral, except that *he* was Quasimodo. He shook his head against the encroaching murkiness of his mind.

He stood thinking foggily while an age passed. He drew a deep breath and called on the last of the reserves of strength left from the old day, the day now as dead as the eternal Yesterday with all the food burned for energy or stored as fat. He began to walk with a purpose. This time Esmeralda could rescue *him*.

After more distance a telephone box loomed and by some miracle it worked. This was a good omen. He dialled the number of his beloved that lived at the top of a cathedral without bells. He hoped to be allowed the renewal of worship. *Somewhere they can't find me...* in the words of the forgotten poem, whoever they are.

Joe was in conversation:

"Hello," he croaked, "it's me. Yes I know it's early for you. I can't wait sweetheart, I need to talk to you. Something's happened. I can't talk over the phone.

"No I just thought of you, I needed to visit the temple. What? You don't understand? It's just a thought I had.

"Yeah, OK, five minutes. I'm just round the corner."

## The Warm Gun

He picked up his hump and shambled as fast as he could to his goal. The path still stretched a fair distance but soon he could *arrive*, then he could *leave*.

Sweet freedom stretched out ahead and he was afraid.

## 12. Conversation Pieces

Billy picked up the 'phone and once again decided that he didn't like the new dial tone that British Telecom had inflicted on people without asking them. He had undertaken to deliver the gun for someone who wouldn't now be very pleased.

"Billy."

"Billy liar, my friend! Have you finished the little job I asked you to?"

"That's why I was ringing -"

"Good. Bring it round then."

"No, you don't understand. I haven't got it and I don't know where it is."

"It'll take you around half an hour to get here. I suggest you start making tracks pretty soon."

"But I haven't got the, err ... wheelbrace. I don't even know where it is."

"You've got a story. I like stories and I want to hear this one. I have friends who like stories too."

Billy was struggling for a way out. "I'm looking after Sam, he's ill."

"Fuck him. Get here. Just do it."

The 'phone went dead in Billy's hand and he turned round to be surprised by Diana standing close behind him, looking worried.

"Sam's been sick all over the bedroom! Don't grind your teeth. What's all this about a wheelbrace? You can borrow mine if you want. He's asleep now."

"It's more complicated than that. I have to go out for a while. Can you look after the fat idiot for me? When he wakes up properly he can clean it up. What a night!"

"Why d'you have to go? Won't it wait until morning?"

"I was talking to a business associate. You don't keep him waiting if you've got any sense. Can you look after our fallen hero?"

"He should be in hospital. He might have concussion!"

"No way. The fat might really get in the fire then. He knows things that I can't let a loose mouth say. It would make a lot of trouble for me. Concussed people can't control their tongues and there's a lot of things of a business nature that he knows."

## The Warm Gun

"Business nature"? What do you mean?"

It was come clean time for Billy: "I'm a crook, sweetheart. Where does an ignorant get like me get the money to live like a property developer from the City, all this view of the river and all?"

"What choice is there? Kill myself for poxy productivity bonuses at Ford's or just die like a discarded piece of shit at the side of the road?"

"I'm a crook and I love you. This is really nasty and if I don't get to sweet talk my way out I could be dead tomorrow, just to make it all worthwhile. Sam's really messed up and I have to do some explaining."

"I'll look after him. I love you too. You shouldn't do yourself down like that. You're a clever man and you could do anything you wanted to."

"I can't stay love. I'm stuck in it for the moment whatever."

They masticated each other's faces for a while and Billy left, feeling the weight of shadows upon him.

The world is full of clever men.

A couple of minutes later Billy watched the windscreen wipers pace restlessly across his field of vision, throwing hotly orange rivers to the side at each passage over the toughened glass. It was a big car, built for distance travelling. The income tax thought he was an importer of antiques and the police didn't have any thoughts about him at all. He was careful to live within his declared income but a bookmaker friend could launder the odd few thousand if he needed them in a hurry.

Most of his fortune was being rented out to various enterprises; there was a network of bribery and mutual assistance that went a great distance, some as far as South Africa and Latin America. Billy liked to see his money around so his stuff was mostly local to the UK. A couple of take the money and run companies that kept opening up in 'enterprise zones' and folding after a few months or years groaning under the weight of government grants. He also ran some Heroin from Pakistan through a yacht, but you try proving it.

Like all of those in his profession he had some debts which weren't financial and which were never paid.

Billy reached the end of a long road, Queen's Drive, which circled the edge of the City and headed towards a large house at the end of a private road. A discreet video camera followed his progress up the driveway. The car was placed in a large incongruous red brick garage next to the main building. Billy stepped through the brass-bound panelled door. It shut quietly behind him. It was like he had never been there.

## The Warm Gun

A light flicked on at the front of the house in what would have been called a study in the speckled Victorian books you find in second-hand bookshops. Perhaps this was merely random chance or some other trophic movement that had no obvious explanation.

### 13. A Visit to the Temple

There were a great many steps to mount to get to Kazz's house, Joe thought, pushing himself up the side of the high-rise building's mass of stairway. As usual the fucking lift was broken - well, it was only the tenth floor and maybe he needed the exercise. It was fairly lucky that she hadn't had somebody with her. Joe was her 'special' man, he knew, but he never asked what happened when he wasn't there because it was none of his business. If the poor fool had but known there was no other needed or wanted. They couldn't live together but they needed each other. Life is so complex and difficult that it can be boring.

People had been mugged in the lifts and stairways of the awful building but Joe wasn't worried. It was too early for the bleary-eyed scally's to have emerged from their cocoons of the night. Besides, he had the warm gun close by as a talisman to keep away the danger and the colder machinations of the fates.

He was nearly out of breath and panted his way to a door and then to a corridor which had one side open to the elements. The wind squalled and whipped at him as he moved along it, pushing warm intrusive rain at him. He reached his goal and lifted the door knocker and let it fall a couple of times making aluminium thucks as it did so. Kazz opened the door and she didn't look angry, just puzzled. It was half past six in the morning and the sky was grey.

As he stepped through the door she kissed him and said:

"I've missed you, you dumb bastard. What's so important that you have to wake me up at six a.m.? I've put some coffee on."

Joe pulled the gun out of his inside his coat and handed it to her, saying:

"What d'you think of this? Is it worth ringing you up at six a.m.?"

Kazz shut the door forcefully and lent on it until the latch clicked comfortably. She led Joe into the kitchen, done out lovingly in pre-cuts DHSS early 1980's style, recon cooker and all. The gun was put on the table in the centre of the tiny room. For a while nothing was said, Joe was asleep practically on his feet and Kazz was thinking what the hell has J got himself involved in this time? Eventually the light began to strengthen through the frosted glass of the window.

The window looked out onto an abyss of the mind. The residents of Valium Valley were leaving in droves as fast as their little legs could carry them in a vain attempt to escape the mess bequeathed by planners who didn't have to live in the shit they create. This was never suburbia, the old North Lea, rechristened Netherly and left as a place to bring graphobic toddlers into the world. Joe knew a lot about walls too. Four walls and damp.

## The Warm Gun

Eventually Joe opened his mouth to yawn and the words started coming as well. He talked through his cup of coffee, the steam condensing on his face.

"Well... it's a long ..... I couldn't sleep and the pills frighten me. I went out for a walk.

"Sounds OK so far?"

"I witnessed a murder and when the murderer tried to kill me I got his gun from him."

Kazz watched horrified as he picked it up and pulled the magazine from the handle. He discovered that there were six cartridges left as he counted them onto the table. Kazz was for once rendered speechless by this turn of events. Joe started talking again:

"I don't know what to do ... The police are out because of what happened over *this*." He touched the Wound on his head. "I know they didn't do it but they were no use and didn't give a shit. Why should I help them? Besides, " He had been putting the bullets back into the magazine as he spoke, "I want *this*," he brandished the gun into the air. "Now I can feel safe. No-one can touch me without me touching them back. It's a good solid feeling for this town."

Kazz cried out:

"Put it *down* Joe. I think that you should go to the police. It's a serious charge, withholding information, and it's a *murder* we're talking about. Put it down, you're frightening me and I don't like it."

Joe did as he was told and said:

"I have to sleep Kazz"

He walked out of the kitchen and then came back to get the gun.

"I'll sleep with this under my pillow. You of all people should understand why I want to keep it. I'll talk about it later when I've had some sleep. OK?"

He went into the bedroom without waiting for a reply.

Kazz absently washed the cups and then decided that she wanted another. She tapped the automatic switch on the kettle to put some zip back into the water. Joe isn't the same man, she thought, yet he is the same man.

A decision would come to her eventually.

## 14. Back with Termination

The thick velvet curtains were pulled close against the inclement weather. They robbed the world outside of its substance. No-one appeared to come into the building and when you crossed the gates of the grounds you came into a sudden myth, only you were part of the myth. It had a terrible fascination that fed some previously unawoken hunger. This place was a place of real power; life, death and all of the places in between, but only if you agreed to the rules. Orwell's room 101 lived and breathed here but the supplicant's personal rat-fear was never used to intimidate.

Here, definitely, the power really lived. Never mind the five-yearly pilgrimage to the house of good boys or the little one now and again at the centre of the city with all of the corrupt, fat burgermeisters, never mind the quaintness of Trotsky's biography or the Stalin / Hitler parades on Love Me Avenue - here was the root from which all branches sprang. The diffuse centre of the One Tree, the tree of life and death throughout the world.

Billy sat nervously in his comfortable chair. He had been offered a brandy and accepted it from the hugely quiet butler. The man had then left him to his own devices. Billy felt watched, the weight of the house pressed down on him and he shuddered inwardly at the enormity of some of the things that must have been planned there. Despite the crackling wood fire a cold hand wrapped itself gently around him, searching for his testicles and hold them ponderingly.

The butler had introduced a small quantity of LSD into the brandy and he was feeling its effects, feeding upon some basic fear and magnifying it inexorably. He pulled on his collar which was too tight.

The wait continued for so long it became unbearable. Billy wanted to cry out but his tongue was made of lead. He was afraid.

The small man watched Billy's face on the TV screen in his office. He was doing some administrative work at his desk and kept looking up from time to time. He slept mostly during the day; the day was boring and nothing of any interest ever happened then. The day was for minions to worry about. They could always wake him if needed.

He paused and sat back in his chair, reflexively tugging at his left ear where a tiny gold stud gleamed. His fingers were yellow with nicotine and his voice and the gentle burr of the heavy smoker. He was a gentle looking soul, without that hardness that is usually associated with leaders, but his outlook was a cold as a Siberian winter. His was the hand that Billy could feel.

Billy seemed about ready for an interview but leave him a little longer to make sure. Raw food is so unpalatable and Billy was his meat.

Another age passed and Billy jumped as the door was flung open. He cursed and vowed to every god he knew that he would get even with Sam for getting him in this position.

## The Warm Gun

The small man didn't have a particularly deep voice. Neither was it particularly high. His *ordinariness* was far more intimidating than anything else. He spoke mildly:

"Ah, Billy, I expected you a little earlier; I hope nothing untoward happened to delay you?"

"No," Billy croaked, annoyed with himself for showing his fear, "it's just that I needed to get someone to look after Sam. He's had an accident."

"No charades, please! What happened to the gun? The committee have appointed me to find out."

The small man *was* the committee but Billy didn't know that. It was a ruse to keep him in fear of an even greater number of these frighteningly ordinary men, calm and sombre in middle-budget business Suits. He maintained this fiction with all of his servants on the outside. It may be that other houses were run so. He didn't care as long as favours were exchanged and acted upon.

"Sam managed to lose it, but he's fallen unconscious and I don't know how to get the details from him. I don't even dare get rid of him until I know the score."

Billy lied well.

The small man smiled, nor I you, his smile said. Billy felt his throat constrict with fear and tried to sip more brandy, but it was finished. He felt very strange and the small man continued to smile at him, waiting for him to speak again. Billy had never taken any of the drugs that he dealt in. The small man's serene face kept changing subtly. Billy had to speak, to say something, say anything:

"Look he's round at my place at the moment. He's got a bad head wound and I'm worried that he may have concussion. I think he wasted somebody with the gun. Obviously we can't let him go to hospital in case he becomes delirious."

"Obviously."

"So I'm keeping him at the moment. A nurse friend of mine is looking after him, and we'll have to wait 'til he comes round."

The small man thought for a little while and then said:

"No, my friend, I think we'll bring him here, and the 'nurse friend'. We can all have a little chat."

He stood and left Billy alone in the terrifying room.

## 15. Cathedral Blues

Joe slept in Kazz's bed, oblivious to the turmoil that he had created in her mind. What was she to do about him and the warm gun? He needed a shave, she thought, as she looked at his troubled face. His eyes were moving under the lids, he was dreaming. She sat on the edge of the bed and touched his hair, loving him and yet realising that she was afraid of him for the first time. In certain situations he could be bloody and dangerous, but not with me. She kissed him, and then began to wake him up in the old way she used when they lived together all that time ago, needing him now more than she had ever done. He woke and they made slow, careful love in the strengthening sunlight before sleep took him again, this time he slept without fear. She smiled and lay beside him, thinking about what could be if only, but that's an old game.

Joe was standing in a cathedral with massive stained glass windows pouring light over him. He was naked and at peace. He stepped off the central dais and walked slowly down the long path past the empty seats, the light following him, giving him its full attention. He came to the beginning of a long spiral sloping corridor that went down into the basement, the catacombs full of darkness. He wasn't afraid; there was something he must find, even if the finding was difficult because for the moment he had his peace and could at least pretend to be a free man.

The darkness of the crypt oppressed him but he knew what he was looking for as he tried the doors that lined the snaking corridors, up and down. Eventually he found one open and stepped into a high ceilinged room with a tiny window set at the apex of the vaulted roof. There was a dim shaft of light falling through the gloom, lighting up an altar-like structure in the centre, of a black light-absorbing marble. The air was musty and dank in the crypt, he breathed deeply, trying to control the fear that had begun to grip him as he looked at the shining object in the centre of the altar; it was the warm gun! His heart leaped and he ran toward it, only to be confronted by a stranger.

He knew all of a sudden that he was not alone. Something had waited outside the light above, far away from the temple of rationality that he had stood in when immersed in light, and that something was himself. A dark shadow that had stopped him running from the psychopath who had given him the Wound that still hurt in places other than his head. A dark shadow that could help him be able to kill if the moment came. He stepped through it and reached to the terrible, potent thing that had gleamed in the light.

He knew then that he had gained admission to another temple, more beautiful even than the one he had come to visit when he went to see Kazz; a temple that rose majestically over him. The Temple of Life and Death. He embraced the shadow that was himself and woke to feel Kazz eating at him hungrily. It was good, again it was good!

He awoke laughing to her touch like he had never known the heavy weight that had plagued him. He awoke and the Wound was gone, and the Dream something that belonged to another man. Now it was but a few green stitches on his head. The had lost

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their power and he could breathe. He had tasted death and had a warm gun to keep him free. He was more terrible in his violence and more gentle in his gentleness than he had ever been.

## 16. In The Valley of the Shadow

Diana sat in a speeding car, following the route that Billy had taken perhaps two hours earlier. She didn't know what was going on but when the man driving the car had let himself in using Billy's keys and said in a cold voice that she had to come with him and "bring the invalid" she hadn't argued at all.

Men are generally physically stronger than women and she was only too painfully aware of it; the man hadn't needed to even threaten her to make her come, he just had a calm certainty that wouldn't take a no answer. She hadn't even bothered to ask the usual indignant questions that are asked in such situations because there seemed little point. Billy saying that he was a crook stuck in her mind and she worried it like you would a sore tooth.

Sam's colour was a lot better now. It had been fairly easy to wake him up. She noticed a look of abject terror on her face when he saw the driver of the car, like he had been threatened with evisceration. One of the first things that he had said was "Christ, that fucking curry," and then grabbed at his stomach. Fortunately he had already emptied it on Billy's carpet so that was no longer a problem. Perhaps it didn't matter anyway. Diana held on to thinking that she was no threat to the forces mounting around her, surely they would be able to see that? She knew nothing. She started praying to a god she hadn't thought of in years.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." The driver of the car continued the prayer:

"For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me." He continued in a more normal voice "Very apt and very comforting is prayer too. Don't worry, you won't need it." He gave her a look which made her feel even greater fear than before. The man smiled. She wasn't in any danger from him, he liked his fish willing, but there's no harm in making sure that they won't tell any lies.

Diana realised that her comfortable, almost rustic little life had taken a new and dangerously random turn away from the ABC, XYZ floors of wards and patients she worked with. She was afraid, beyond even prayer.

Around this time Joe was still wandering, not having reached Kazz's place. The car's tyres hissed along the wet tarmac as it swung off the main route onto the private road. The gate opened in front of the car and, once again, the cyclopean camera followed them up the driveway until the car disappeared into the waiting maw of the garage. The leaving night left all still, nothing to see had been seen.

The camera watched the gate again.

Sam would bloody well have to be reasonable clear headed, Billy thought, wondering at his own lack of clarity. The thick curtains had hidden the beginning of day, but it didn't

## The Warm Gun

matter for no time passed here. He kept dozing off and waking himself up again with a start as he began to fall. The small man had filed him away waiting further action.

The small man had decided to see them all together because it would be quicker and easier to put the story together, and catch the inevitable lies. On his video screen he watched Billy nearly fall off his seat again, good, he'd be hard put to keep his guard up. The small man waited for his errand boy to finish his errand; he had finished up his paper work and now was playing an old Bobby Fischer game on his board. His watch told him that there might be just enough time to finish. A large white car came through the gate, oh well, some things were more interesting than chess. He closed the book but left the board to go back to.

There is no hurry, why hurry to death? What does that achieve? His smile came back as he went to greet his guests.

Joe had awakened to the sound of the rain that had come after the brief dawn falling noisily on Kazz's window. Perhaps the sun had only been in his dream and his lovemaking. He neither knew nor cared if the truth be told. He decided to do his ablutions and make some breakfast. It was now midday, which was a fairly normal time to be waking up after he had received the Wound and the bad dreams that accompanied it. He sat on the toilet and wished that he had something to read because he always read a book on the toilet out of habit that has started when he was a child.

He decided not to risk a shave because the Bic razors that Kazz kept for occasions such as this cut his face to ribbons and made it go blotchy; he would have to wait until he got back to his trusty foil electric razor when he go home. If they were not available he would have grown a beard.

Kazz came into the dingy kitchen as he began the toast and kissed him sleepily on the back of the neck, He suddenly wanted to burst into tears because he loved her so much but it would have frightened her. He concentrated on toast until the moment passed. He said:

"Eggs?"

"Got none."

"Then what?"

"Jam, haven't even got marge. Wrong time in the fortnight for feeding lovely men breakfasts."

"I don't see any lovely men."

"Well you *are*, so stop trying to hide your self hatred in a joke. I think you're lovely and gorgeous so shut up; I..."

## The Warm Gun

She couldn't say it so he said:

"So do I, whatever it is, so do I."

The toast burned so they had each other instead. Joe spent some of his last five pounds on breakfast materials at the corner shop. These were used to make a more substantial lunch.

Such is the wheel of life.

Diana looked around the antique room. It was somehow *outside* the daylight and the ordinary. Some large, corncomfortable-looking chairs had been pulled into a half-circle so that they faced each other. The small man sat at a small table with a small notebook in front of him at the focus of the circle; he was obviously in control. Sam looked the freshest of them all, she thought, for at least he'd had something approaching rest that night. There was a sense of being watched, of playing to an audience. She refused a drink, which was just as well. Billy looked a little overwrought and confused. She didn't know about the drug or its confusing effects.

"Well, here we are then!" said the small man with an air of false bonhomie. "Now we can get down to business. First, Sammy boy! Tell me how you managed to acquire that lovely ornament on your head."

There was a pause as Sam collected his thoughts, you shouldn't rush when your head is in the lion's mouth: you might lose it.

"I was in the Sands, that's a club on the Avenue. Bumped into an old friend of ours. Don't know the name, we call him Red 'cause of his hair and his politics. He knew the girl, remember that one we had to find with a certain description? Well, she's disappeared." Diana swallowed inaudibly; it felt like she was swallowing a house brick. "I tried to tell him to leave it alone but he wouldn't. I know the manager so I had him booted out. I didn't think anything of it, really."

"I had another beer and finished my curry. Staggered out and thought I'd pop round and see someone while the beer wore off. I turned the corner, Upper Warwick Street, and there he was by my car. Started shouting and throwing punches. He got me on the floor and was about to start on my head so I shot him." Sam looked nervously at Diana.

"Should she really be listening to this?"

"Get on with it, we'll sort that out later."

"Well, you know me, he was poleaxed and no mistake. I never miss. Thing is, there was this kid up the other end of the street, the dark sidey, who seen it all. I went after him but he'd skipped off down an entry. When I came round the corner he got me one in the balls and smacked me over the head when I went down. I couldn't think straight for a while but I do remember that he had a big wound at the middle of his forehead, just above the hairline. I saw it when he picked the gun up. Just like the one he gave me. I went to Billy's and you should know the rest."

## The Warm Gun

Diana made an exclamation when she heard about the Wound and then wished that she hadn't. All the attention had shifted to her and Sam had become silent. She could have bitten her tongue out but decided to say nothing further. The silence lengthened and the small man made a sudden movement, he began cleaning his fingernails with a pocket knife. Eventually Diana gave in and spoke:

"I work in casualty, right? About two weeks ago there was a man came in with his head pouring with blood. I remember it would stop slightly and then he would sneeze and it would start again. He kept laughing but he looked really done in. I remember he was shaking. He said that the man who had done it threatened him with being thrown through the window of his flat. He knew the man and had argued with him about something. The man pulled a baseball bat Out of his coat and laid into him. It was very nasty."

The small man said:

"Did he have an address? Can you get one? Of course you can. Just look the file up and we can pay him a little courtesy visit."

"Oh, I couldn't do that, it's against the law."

The small man started laughing hysterically, what a joke, he thought, the girl has talent! Diana looked down at the floor. The small man said:

"Well, let me see; we've established that we know nothing about disappearing girls, we've established that we *do* know something about guns and a corpse, we've established that you *shouldn't* know about them and we've established that you know or can get to know something we need to know. Am I right?"

Diana nodded, her eyes on the intricate patterns in the carpet, "Now, you tell me, why should we care about what's legal? If you're not a good girl then you can join the bad ones. D'you think we care? I'll give you a 'phone number. Are you working tonight?" There was another nod. "Ring this number and tell the address to the person that answers." He made no discernible movement but the errand boy reappeared and gestured to her. Diana followed him and the heavy door closed softly, like a velvet eye.

He looked at the two remaining: "You pair are going to be surplus to requirements if you don't get this sussed. You were asked to fetch the gun, not use it." Sam tried to interject, saying that he'd only just picked it up, but the small man wasn't interested. "How do you think we get away with the things we get away with? The killings and the arm twisting on contract, the heroin? How? *Discretion*, nothing less and you've well fucked up. If you didn't have a car with you I'd make you walk the seven miles home, you fat slobs. FYI, there's been nothing on the news about the gun. He's either decided to keep it or he's being hidden by the cops. Either way he has to be put to sleep.

"The word, my friends, is *hygiene*, you follow? I'll ring with the details, or I might ring somebody with the details and your details too. I haven't thought about it yet. Remember

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one whisper and you'll never whisper again. We have friends everywhere, you never know who you might be whispering to. Go on!"

Billy realised that Diana was out of his hands, probably forever. He was very busy worrying about himself, like the old joke, Nelson at Trafalgar: "Hardy, pass me my red shirt and the brown trousers, camouflage." He suppressed a smile because would have been too dangerous and nodded to Sam.

Some things were definitely more interesting than chess! Some sport at last! A pawn promoted rook, perhaps queen, hiding on a board called Liverpool. Fairy chess! Unknown and invisible pieces appearing from nowhere, interesting. We'll see if he survives these dunderheads, failure breeds failure. Waiter, bring me the winner! A cup of tea and then back to dear old Bobby Fischer. "Tea!" He called to the camera "tea in my office." The door closed again and the room was left thinking its own thoughts; remembering dim times now sepia and lace, long gone.

## 17. Tai No Sen

In *A Book of Five Rings* it says: "The true way of strategy is revealed in the long sword." The small man also knew that *Tai No Sen* (to wait for the initiative) is always the best course when there is no information. There was a body on the news but no witnesses, he must have decided to keep the gun and say nothing. There was no longer any hurry, *Tai No Sen*.

It was time to think about bed. It had been a long night. The small man decided to put a few miles in on his exercise bike before allowing sleep to claim him. He would leave instructions for a 'phone call to be made to a friend with inside information from the police. Sam wouldn't need a 'holiday' because there were so many interesting skeletons buried in various places that made people forget things when investigating because they were too distracting.

The small man shrugged and went to change in preparation for his journey into nowhere. Fischer had won with the sacrifice of a major piece to gain a decisive and unstoppable amount of tempo, again *Tai No Sen*.

Joe was feeling the best he had felt since the attack on his head; in fact the best he had felt for a long time. The terrible heritage of fear that had been bequeathed him by living in what was called a "rough area" and all the late-night, make sure you're properly locked up, paranoia that was a result of it now meant nothing. He was calm and protected. The message of the old Burt Reynolds film made sense to him: if the dumb bastards wanted to wear the same style of jacket and make believe it was New York then let them have a taste of what it's supposed to be like there.

Now that he had the Warm Gun they'd soon find out. All the machismo means nothing when you've a long sword that can reach further and faster than any fist. Joe had yet to learn that there are two edges to any sword. Action brings reaction: it is only by ***not opposing*** that you can be free of the grip of fear, you can decide your actions yourself and come out unhurt. The ***other's action*** undoes their plans and costs you nothing. He had moved only a little; he had read ***The way that can be known is not the infinite way*** and he thought he knew his way. The finger of reaction was waiting for him, it was awakening to him, and he knew it not.

A nervous voice spoke the address into the answering machine and the small man listened as it did so. Diana had learned her first lesson. A pawn had learned its first lesson. He cut into the machine on the line and spoke directly to her:

"You know nothing, you were never here last night, and pray that we never want to know you again. If you see your man again it's your business. Be careful, now."

He waited until she had put the 'phone down and pressed the autodial for Billy's number, it hardly rang at all. He gave them the address and instructions to find out anything about the man that they could, "But be ***subtle***, no warning him away and making it difficult, or

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your arse is in a sling and off to Bangor." He forgot about the problem until he could know more.

It was the first of the month. All over the North West the House paid varying amounts into bank and building society accounts of its friends. The House accounts swelled by a greater amount. He was winning. Instalments on jobs done or to be done were being paid, all in proportion to the nature of the service required: information, fatal or non-fatal accidents (specified in the contract), arm twisting of many degrees of sophistication, union officials using tickets for their dream holiday just before important decisions had to be made and a whole host of other things.

The House didn't deal in drugs, it just protected people who could pay it to as best it could. All of the dealers owed more than mere money and occasionally undertook reciprocal services, Billy was such a man. The House was protected by a whole system of handshakes and old school ties, the small man was an unseen pillar of the establishment.

Sam had referred to a service he had provided: a woman knew too much but had information and names. She had to disappear. By a strange coincidence another woman disappeared, a useless junkie that nobody would miss. The problem woman then died in a terrible car crash, the face was unrecognisable but the dental records matched. A wealthy woman bought a villa on the continent. Only the small man and she knew the full story, the network that had put the pieces together might wonder but it would never know. Only the Grandmaster could know and he could outplay them all. As part of the deal the woman had had to do the killing so that everybody had something on everybody else to ensure happiness for everybody.

The cogs turned and the early visitors began, carefully checked through the Brotherhood, requesting services, goods and services, that only he could provide. After all Britain is moving into a services economy, ask anyone, anyone with the power to provide those services.

The flat stank. It was dry rot. Sam recognised the smell and decided that it wasn't a good idea to lean on the window frame. There was a nice view down Mulgrave, but apart from that he'd have called the RSPCA. He had, by now, established that the gun wasn't there and neither was the mad kid. He farted loudly and left, leaving a mess behind him, but he had located an address book. Billy had said to get one if he could find one. It was the only way to look for hiding places.

The small man's first directive had been broken; this was as subtle as a baseball bat in the knackers. Sam did as Billy had suggested in turning the place over. Perhaps he'd think this was just an ordinary burglary. Sam wasn't sure that the dizziness was the Kaolin and Morphine on an empty stomach or the hole in his head. It wasn't important.

The outer door opened and closed after six flights of stairs.

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The bus forged through the summer drizzle and a lazy rainbow had formed somewhere off in the distance. The weather was a proper monkey's wedding, mixed up. The wind raced across the open spaces that linked the urban outflow with the city, its heartsblood, and made the temperatures like those of winter. The journey outward gave one the odd-seeming impression of being hidden when you reached a certain point, suddenly disappearing when you rounded a corner until a few minutes later the bus would stop in front of a block of flats and leave you just before a network of passageways. This is where the youth played tag with the police after dark. The locals knew where not to go after a certain time, to do so marked you for a stranger and game for bored hunters.

Joe was heading away from this, smiling slightly at the memory of the intensity of Kazz's touch and taste which was already beginning to fade: he hated leaving her, just as he had hated leaving all of the women he had ever known throughout the years. He never lost this *need* of them and a sudden remembrance of them could bring the old, too familiar, tearing feeling. It could be that there was some far older loss that he didn't recognise, maybe before he could even speak, that made further losses even harder to bear.

He had tried hard to perfect the science of *unlearning*, of becoming free, but he always returned to the touch and taste. Now he was happy and ignoring the things which would make his attention wander from the moment and think of something not so new. The gun sat in his pocket, it had a few questions yet to ask of him.

Billy sat in his car and sighed eloquently. This was really boring, he rubbed the mounting stubble on his chin with the back of his hand and listened to the rasping noise irritably. He'd been waiting several hours for the kid to show. They had a name and an address but both were useless without the body that went with them. The small man may not have wanted them to do anything once they had found him but Billy and Sam had other ideas on that score.

The sky had cleared and it was getting dark. Soon the lights would be on on the Avenue. Billy didn't know about the Glow but he did about the Wound. He wished he hadn't given up smoking because it would have given him something to do with his hands. Sam came back from Granby Street armed with some food from an unhealthy looking chippy. Billy groaned inwardly at the thought of having to converse with the pig again. Billy wasn't at all surprised that Sam had become ill from food because all he ever did was eat and wheeze.

The hands of the clock in the car moved relentlessly.

There is a somewhat overpriced cafe buried in the side of the hill on the way to Lime Street Station. This is where we find Joe later on after disembarking from the bus. He is drinking a cup of expensive coffee and reading the local paper. The murder made the front page in the first edition but there was some new scandal about the Royals pushing it off at the second. There was even a photograph of the end of the street. Joe thinks how different the area seems when you look at it in daylight, without the Glow giving it a sickly pallor of unreality.

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A little more coffee trickles into his oesophagus and is subject to that wave-like movement that helps it towards his stomach. Ordinarily he would have walked the few hundred yards to a cheaper cafe but his legs ache from all of the walking to Kazz's place. The ache and the tiredness are pleasant because they have been earned, a different tiredness from a hangover or an activity that is *bad*. When he feels better he will go back to his flat and start packing. It's a long way to Scotland.

The warm sun has broken through to burn the damp off the pavements. Amidst the confusion the people are beginning to sweat in their raincoats. The newspaper makes a little go a long way, and a big typeface helps too. It calls itself the voice of Merseyside but is rumoured to be buying printing facilities outside of the area. The chamber of commerce no longer prints its newsletter there either.

After staring secretively and longingly at a dark-haired girl for a while he gets up and leaves the paper for the next person with more money than sense to come to the cafe.

Suddenly his thoughts are filled with Kazz and he wants to run until he sees her again but his legs won't let him run anywhere. The dark girl looks through him as he passes. He misses the bus and has to wait. Suddenly he stopped living in the moment and a sense of sadness overtook him.

Joe didn't go all of the way home and stopped off to see a friend who lived near the end of Catherine Street, before Joe's began. They drank black tea and Joe showed him the gun. Tales were told and other things discussed. His friend said:

"Why d'you want to go to Scotland, Joe? It's a long way from here."

"I don't want the police to find me. I want to keep this," he waved the gun about, "and I'll have to give it up." He took another piece of halva from the saucer positioned on the arm of the chair and sucked on its sweetness. "I'll be back when it all blows over. I've got relatives there that won't ask questions."

"Be reasonable Joe, you can't carry that thing around with you. You're bound to be searched or seen by someone and reported and then you'll really be in the shit. Covering up evidence and not reporting a crime to the police, we're talking murder here. Be sensible."

There was a pause. Joe said:

"Yes, but I don't really give a fuck any more. We all know that it's dog eat dog and all the cops want is a quiet life. They let the psychos get away with their muggings and harassment because they'll be called racist by the liberal press. They probably are racists too, but then again if all you ever see is the worst of people then you'll form ideas based on that worst. I know is that dross have attacked me, you and some of our other friends were mostly black, but that's because we live in a ghetto area. If the decent people in that community would bring their kids under control then it would be OK. It's so easy to shout

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racist at people. This gun will not discriminate, whatever the colour of the next kid to threaten me I'll put holes in them. Robbing people as poor as you are yourself is sick.

"I've lived in other rough areas and never had to put up with what I've had here. I'm not sheep for some wolf to feed on. That's supposed to be a capitalistic attitude, even capitalists are alleged to be more enlightened now. They're living in the nineteenth century and what they want is some nineteenth century reaction to their attitudes. I intend to give them some if they ask for it. I've just had enough, fuck them, *I live here too.*"

"It's not the answer Joe. You should just move away, it's easier. For all you know you're just kidding yourself and you won't be able to use the gun when it comes down to it. All that's happening is that you're regressing socially, d'you want to become as backward as they are? D'you need vendettas and some weird Liverpool 8 revival of the samurai code, of Bushido? They've won. These 'decent people' haven't had a chance to do or say anything. Remember it may just be that the race thing brings all of the realities of the other areas into much sharper focus.

"I don't want to live in a world where this way of thinking is dominant, because I'd have to think that way too in order to survive. It would be forced on me by the nature of the reality you're advocating. The decent people have moved out anyway. Most of the rest just want some scabby reactionary little village where they police themselves and hang strangers. They want a wall. If you live in a village like that you'll die from the fallout from a war you're no longer capable of understanding."

"I've still had enough and nothing can change it! I want to think like you but I've been pushed beyond it. It's been thrust upon me too. I've decided: with the gun *I am in control*, and that's what matters to me. Forget it, let's talk about something else."

They listened to some Debussy and drank more tea. They talked of Zen and Proust. They ate the halva. They were friends as friends should be and loved each other. When the moment was full Joe left to walk home along Mulgrave Street, no-one bothered him that night.

It was dark now but the Glow had lost its significance, it was just another way light could taste upon the eye.

## 18. The Long Sword

Joe's shadow moved regularly thrown by the succession of streetlights. He was walking quickly, moving with all his awareness along what could have been a pleasant street if it didn't have such unpleasant associations. The incident involving the Wound was only one in a long series of such. At least it seemed long when you lived it. The fear and helplessness had built up over years, like some sedimentary rock weighing on everyday consciousness. If Billy and Sam expected to find someone easily caught then they would have been wrong. Life can pass blindingly fast here and youth be old before it should.

Necessity is a wonderful thing.

Joe hated the street for the tension that it built up in him and would have destroyed it. He knew that the attacker lived here and there others had chosen to be part of the dream of the street by not making it of a saner stamp; they tacitly allowed what went on and the mothers in the laundrette talked violence when their children went out looking for trouble, for in their eyes they could do no wrong.

They were part of it and they wanted to sleep within the dream so let them burn too. Joe was tired of it, you cannot speak with walls and expect to hear anything of worth from them. They absorb sound without changing their nature, they *oppose*. Burn it all and break into some new thing where they would be forced from the village. His friend was right but hadn't said that the wall was already there, like Lady Macbeth's Dagger of the Mind. The people's windowed eyes were shuttered to what went on. How do you burn a wall of the mind?

Scotland was a good idea, get into the fresh country air and away from the craziness of other people. Maybe he would throw the Warm Gun away after he had had time to think.

He breast the telephone box from which the receiver had been stolen months ago by kids. Let them burn too when the emergency services couldn't be summoned. Stupidity is its own reward.

He was too preoccupied to notice the recumbent figure in the white car or the bored-looking driver. They appeared to be waiting for something. Joe didn't know but the finger was pointing steadily at him.

So much for I am in control.

Billy wasn't at all happy. The comfortable shield that he had assembled between himself and how he made his living had been seriously damaged. This area had too many curious faces that would remember him, and, worse still, remember that he had been with Sam. Sam was a face some of them would know.

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To cap it all he had lost Diana. Just as something better than the awful life he led was about to happen all this silliness had to break in. Now there may be no escape into Engels' reactionary utopia, wedded bliss. He was stuck with the consequences of his actions.

This *operation*, if it could be dignified with such a title, was just for the "big" men. They wanted no minions finding things out that they shouldn't. If the knowledge spread no further then Sam was safe. Otherwise it was another man helping hold up a motorway. Billy didn't feel that safe either.

Billy and Sam, with their wolves' arrogance, hadn't bothered to bring guns themselves because they couldn't believe that the kid could shoot straight. They thought they could run him down and get gun in the confusion. Then he would have to die.

If Billy had been concentrating then he would have noticed Joe cross the road and pass by the house, maybe he would have asked Sam if he recognised him. Joe walked round the side down the street where the murder had taken place in order to get some shopping at a corner shop.

Joe's feet were tired but he was out of cheese. There was nothing for it but to walk another hundred yards or so. He placed his feet, each one in front of the other, wearily on his path. He saw a police notice board appealing for witnesses with the main 'phone number 709 6010 written large upon it. He was moved to think of other times when he had seen such boards perched on the sides of roads with the word "murder" written on them. In the past ten years he'd seen a few.

He remembered in particular that there was one right at the top of the hill where you could get a bus to anywhere, even Manchester. It was near where he waited to get the bus to his Mother's house. He had wondered how someone had been murdered right in the heart of the town, this is England after all. Such things aren't that common despite what the papers say.

Perhaps it was hit and run.

Joe pushed the door of the shop open and the bell tinged at him. The windows were all enmeshed. The shopkeeper was a cheerful Pakistani. Even in the heart of an "integrated" community there was a lot of friction, a lot of silly upside-down racism. It was amusing and sad to see Afro-Caribbean kids taking on the Enoch Powell attitudes to Asians and vice versa. There was a peculiar competition going on to see who was the most British. Joe thought that being British wasn't so hot really. Even the unpatriotic left fight with one another to be the best patriots. Empires are a bad thing to have ingrained in your culture.

Joe whipped round the shelves and assembled a basketful of necessities like cheese, bread and eggs. The remains of his money stretched just far enough. He would have to go to the bloody bank and be in the bloody red again.

The feeling of Kazz was near to him as he walked out of the door of the shop. He felt like he could shut his eyes and feel her arms around him. He blinked a little with tears that he

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didn't want to shed because he wanted nothing to come to an end and everything always did. You have to die anyway and memory only exists in the present.

His feet placed themselves in an automatic, slow walk to the back door of the house that he lived in. He passed down the street where some kid had painted "BACK STREET ROBERS" on a garage door. Joe laughed at the thought of these kids running around in togas. It was nearly as good as his English teacher's hoary old chestnut: "They raped him in a blanket after he had fallen in the river."

The stairs smelt of cat piss and the musty old chair that people had turned out of their flats that had just been left to clutter the way. On the second landing a worn-out strip light flickered at the darkness of the windowless corridors above and below. Joe passed unthinking by the point on the banister where some stranger had "liberated" his bicycle some weeks before. The supporting bar for the rail was now missing. The new bike was more securely chained to the banister proper.

The flat was his citadel against the world, standing three storeys above the ground it seemed to him that no-one would bother climbing the stairs to burgle the place. It was eternal and safe to live in.

He rounded the final landing of four and looked up the rise at his front door. It was hanging off its hinges where Sam had left it. The white paint was scuffed with footmarks where it had been kicked at. He turned the hall light off in order not to make a silhouette when he came through the door, like it says in the thrillers. He laid his carrier bag down quietly.

It felt like he was entering the flat by his sense of smell, maybe he was using the skin of his face to detect the tell-tale heat of another out there in the void of the room ahead of him. His feet had become cat paws that passed unheard through the hole where the door had been. Again he could see the gun-metal, but this time in his hand where it jumped with a heady magic.

The kitchen light was on and it illuminated the mess that was his flat. The fan that was linked to the switch brought Joe and audio-kinetic memory from the previous night. He snapped back the curtain that led to his bedroom and found nothing. The bathroom had nothing in it, neither did the cupboard by the door, nor the wardrobe. He decided to get his groceries and get something to eat.

Maybe he would call the police but what was the point? He would make a list of what was missing and hear nothing. He walked into the main room and snapped the light on. The smell of aftershave reminded him of someone. He thought about it for a while and began to set things right. He put the kettle on.

Through the open door he heard the front door of the building slam and thought nothing of it. He heard the sound of feet on the stairs and a familiar wheezing. In a breath he was out of the flat. He tried to snap a shot down the stairwell but the safety was on the pistol.

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He panicked and ran through the fire door into the adjoining building. He took a deep breath to still himself and began to go down the mirror stairs of the house opposite as quietly as possible to keep attention away.

Feet thundered up the stairs on the other side of the wall that joined the two houses. He came to the bottom and went through the back passage back into his own building. Fighting for calm he started to unchain his bike in preparation for a rush out of the door and away. He heard the noise of the door being kicked out of the way and then the shouting as they discovered that he wasn't there. In his mind's eye he could see them standing on the landing with the aspect of dogs sniffing for a scent. He dropped the chain with a loud clatter, cursing. The feet began to come down the stairs, attracted by the noise.

Soon he was out and pedalling furiously towards the park, in case of pursuit by cars because they couldn't go that way. He heard one start up and the engine going at full tilt. He shot between two parked cars, the pursuer missing by inches. Now the gun almost had its first question ready for him: could he use it? The next involve the levels and powers of use. At the moment the answer was not yet available.

The car screeched to a halt and began to back up furiously towards his position on the pavement. He had buckled his front wheel slightly but that was beside the point at the moment. He had to get away and flew down a side street that the car couldn't get down because of the bollards. A door banged and he could hear running. He made some turns and ended up back on the main road, only nearer his goal. The car started after him again. Joe pulled the gun and fumbled with the catch. More by luck than anything else he shot the front tire of the car and it slewed across the road and ended up facing the wrong way. The engine stalled as the driver savagely tried to change gear. Joe was in the park in the blink of an eye.

Billy's troubles were only just beginning: in this community everybody made it their business to know everybody else's. Sam had told him of a person who had gone to the local sports centre and discovered that the people there knew everything about him, including his habits and his old granny. His face was doubtless now inside the heads of quite a few people that it shouldn't have been. He'd been seen with Sam. Their quarry had got away and he had a flat tyre. Sam had had a long boring argument with a bus driver who couldn't get past while Billy got on with changing the wheel.

He didn't want to tell the small man but he knew he would have to. The small man probably had other contacts who would have told him already. Billy wanted anonymity above all else. The people he should have asked to do this job were probably out chasing girls or boys: it was Saturday night. He wished that he hadn't used his own car, it was big, expensive and too easy to remember.

Eventually he went home before attracting even more attention. Out of sight is out of mind. He might have some immunity to prying eyes and policemen but it was only if he

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wasn't too outrageous. The small man would not be pleased. Maybe he could get a different gun for whatever he had needed it for and they could just forget it.

Fat chance.

## 19. Tomorrow Lives In The Axe

The door shook resoundingly. Kazz lived on a floor where she was the only person left. There were no neighbours, all were boarded up. People wouldn't even squat in them, they were that bad. The door shook again. It was an axe! If only she had been disabled or a single parent then she would have been priority for rehousing. They were trying to get in with an axe! Her telephone wasn't working.

She needed defence, and quickly. A friend had been to the states and mailed her a device which sprayed a small amount of CS gas in the face of an attacker. She ran to the drawer where she kept it. The door was holding up pretty well. She took the device and squeezed herself into the cupboard behind the door where the meters were kept.

There was some heavy wheezing breath as the door went in. They went first into the bedroom opposite and then to the living room. She sprang from the cupboard and made her escape. A cry went up. Down, through the door at the top of the stairway and then down and down. All the time the feet seemed to be gaining on her. Her lungs must burst soon and she'd have to stop but she reached the bottom and outside.

Billy felt that he was getting too old for this game. Chasing people fifteen years younger than himself through concrete mazes wasn't in his line at all. That useless bastard Sam had given up the ghost in a coughing fit. That'll teach the stupid get to smoke, the car had stunk of it yesterday. Billy had had to use mountains of the old Shake 'n Vac to get rid of the smell.

He was gaining on her. There's life in the old dog yet! The address book had fallen open here. She ran round a corner of a block that was all red steel plate windows. He'd soon catch her. Then he had a slight problem, his face and eyes started to sting and burn and he couldn't stop coughing. He leant weakly against the corner he had just passed and cried until the gas wore off.

It wasn't fair! First the kid had managed to shoot up his car and get away, now this girl had a nasty sting like this in her tail. What's the world coming to? Where have the old lie back and enjoy it ideals gone? People were fighting back. It just wasn't fair! He walked shakily back to the car where Sam was waiting for him. He didn't seem to realise that this was a matter of life and death. What should have been a fairly easy thing to do had become ugly. It was falling to bits around them.

They could die of this as sure as yellow fever.

Joe reached the motorway intersection at 8 a.m. It was one of those cold clear mornings that you can get at any time of year. The M57 could take him part of the way and there is nothing quite so difficult to find as a hitchhiker on thousands of miles of roads. It was a good way to be hidden in plain view, which was always the best place to hide. He was standing there patiently and a car stopped, it was going South, to London and he thanked

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them and said no. As if to make his day Kazz came round the corner with a knapsack on her back. She was going South, and told Joe the reason.

"I'm sorry love. I didn't want to bring it to you. I didn't know what I was bringing."

Another car stopped, Newcastle which was on Joe's way by a fair step but he didn't want to leave Kazz so he thanked them and drove off. A little later Kazz did the same. They gave up and decided to walk back and catch a bus back into Liverpool. Joe suggested that they went to visit Sal, who live just below the opening that became the Wirral peninsula where the Mersey first began to make itself felt and had forced the earth apart. It was pleasant there and they could regroup and think out whatever they had to think out: did they love each other and did they want to be parted? This was made more difficult by the fact that seeing each other again made them realise how they would have lost something if their mutual escapes had not thrown them back together.

The Warm Gun still had a question that Joe had yet to answer.

The small man was very amused. The piece was very definitely a queen and had forked him twice in a difficult position where he could have lost a knight and gone a piece down if it had believed in its own destructive capabilities. He wanted to keep it blissfully ignorant. In his own way he had watched the busses and trains that Joe could have used but nothing had come of it. The queen must still be hiding somewhere. Joe's mother was out, the small man knew that he wouldn't risk it. This left a careful checking of the rest of the address book.

The job had been split between Diana's errand boy and Billy and Sam. It had to be done carefully, this time no warnings to the quarry before all exits were blocked. Time was awasting and there was nothing he could do about it. The small man was still safe in his house.

The axe was Billy's idea. It seemed that the poor love was getting a little desperate and afraid for his skin so he took extreme measures because he didn't want to wait about while they had persuaded her to tell what she knew. He had wanted to inject a healthy dose of fear. It was a good idea, ten out of ten, but Billy had screwed up. So many of Billy's good ideas hadn't worked out lately.

Because of the problems with the gun that job had had to be farmed out to friends and that had cost. There should have been a fair profit and now there was a loss. Billy was approaching his last chance. Protection could be withdrawn and the queues at the gates of the land of milk and honey move on a place. There were plenty of people who were willing to prove themselves to him as Billy had done.

Billy should know by now that axes and other unsubtle things didn't always work. People start *resisting* if you give them enough reason and opportunity to learn that it is possible.

Other jobs were beginning to take priority but Joe had to go because he knew too many faces. If he managed to kill Billy and Sam or they him then so much the better. The link

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would be broken. He wasn't interested in pursuit beyond that. He wasn't in business for revenge, but he could have it carried out for a fee if you knew the right people.

Sal just hadn't grown up at all, in Joe's opinion there had been a sacrosanct refusal to grow up. Living out where it was quiet and the pubs didn't shut 'til eleven, wandering through the country parks at the weekend and *refusing* to worry about anything, even when it could make you unhappy if you didn't deal with it. Sal bolted his mind with mild soporific drugs of many kinds. When the bills came he'd just refuse to acknowledge their existence until he was cut off and he'd complain about it in between bouts of being even less compos mentis than usual. Eventually he would starve himself or sell a painting and pay all the bills in one fell swoop. It would be very wrong to think him a valueless person, he just wasn't interested in the things that most thought necessary.

Joe and Kazz were sleeping curled around each other like spoons. They had decided never to leave each other's company again. Running had united them, at least for the moment. Joe said quietly:

"At least we can die together."

"Mmmmm?"

"At least we can die together, before it all fades into another thing that just worried you like an old toothache when you're feeling down. You know, when you can't believe in anything but the certainty of death and wish it were soon."

"Shut up. Forget about the bad, this is the good, you'll only spoil it."

She stuffed a pillow over his face and he fought it off. They went back to sleep until Sal brought them some tea. Joe started crying for some reason but no-one noticed, including Joe. He had felt the gentle hand of an old memory touch his neck.

"We'll have to be going soon, Sal."

"OK, but take care. Where y'goin'?"

"I thought off up to Josie's and a bike ride out to Leesow if we can borrow some."

"Hitching?"

"Yeah."

"Then what?"

"Search me, I don't know at all."

"That's always the best way. Take care you lock the door properly when you go 'cos I'm going out now. I thought I'd do some drawing out on the ship canal with me pad."

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"OK Sal, thanks."

"For what? Good luck."

That was when Sal was free of everything, when he was lost in his flowers on summer days. Sal left. Joe's body stopped crying and the two lay for a few moments longer in silence.

Joe got up and started pulling clothes on.

The hired car had the wheels slightly out of alignment. It was a bitch to keep straight. Billy decided that he could give the bastards a roasting when he took it back. They pulled off the winding country road at the village. It was one of those places that if you sneezed you'd miss it, but that was the reason Sal lived there. The car doors slammed, at least the doors would shut!

Billy and Sam went to the cottage door and knocked. They were in luck because Sal had forgotten something and come back for it. They explained what they wanted and Sal was more than willing to help them. Joe and Kazz had just left to walk across the fields to the main road that Billy and Sam had just come from, no, it was no trouble. The doors slammed again after Billy had made a call from the pub.

## 20. A Question Unanswered

Kazz and Joe came out of the bushes beside the road that led across to the motorway. They would stick their thumbs out for as long as it took, the weather was fine and sunny and there was no hurry. A green 2CV stopped but it was going to Liverpool. Another car stopped and Joe looked round to see that Billy and Sam were in it. He pulled the gun out and waved it in the surprised 2CV driver's face. He shouted at Kazz to get in and he opened the door of the passenger seat.

"Don't worry, I won't steal your car but you have to get away from the men behind us because they're after my life. If I were you I'd get moving: this gun has already killed at least one man that I know of and it might even kill you."

The man put the car into gear and sped off, followed by Billy's hire car. It was fast even if it was unstable. The 2CV's speed clambered slowly as it was asked to do more than it had been designed for. It was already stuffed with farm produce. They reached a roundabout that led to a motorway exchange roundabout further on. Joe prodded the driver's ribs and they shot across the roundabout in front of a large articulated lorry. Billy was forced to stop while it passed. Joe decided that they'd be reasonably safe on the M53 since all that his pursuers could do was follow him or try to force him off the road.

The 2CV complained its way back up to a reasonably high speed, definitely showing its age. The driver was getting frantic and kept looking at Joe but his face was impassive. There was absolutely no difference that any action of his could make to whatever the future held. It was in the hands of God, or some other word used when the deterministic model breaks down. The second roundabout was coming up relentlessly and the hire car was gaining erratically. Joe made a decision, he said:

"When this roundabout comes you're going go round the wrong way. You're going to brake suddenly and go round the wrong way. If they catch us we're all dead anyway."

The moment came:

"Do it!"

The 2CV did something totally unexpected, something silly and dangerous. It surprised Billy so much that he forgot to fight with the steering of his car. It eventually went tumbling down from where the interchange had been built over the motorway. Billy's last thought before the torque broke his neck was:

"At last, how sweet, so this is how it is. Free, nothing is nothing." He smiled.

Sam's last thought was:

"Fucking hire cars. I knew it! I just knew it."

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They bounced a few times against the roof and thought no more.

Joe and Kazz got out of the car near Bebbington. He said to the driver: "Nothing is nothing. We know nothing of each other. You never saw me. I don't exist." Their eyes met without the passage of understanding, so Joe said: "I could always use this and then no-one would ever know." He shrugged and put his arm around Kazz and left the driver wondering if it had been a nightmare, some illusion of the day. The two walked to get a bus because they'd had enough hitching for that day. The A road passed by some open spaces and they heard the singing of the summer birds that had been hiding from the weather.

The sky was just too blue.

The cellnet 'phone in the car started to warble at the errand boy so he pulled over and picked it up.

"Yeah?"

"They've found them and gone after them. I've got no more info other than they said something about Birkenhead. Keep an eye out if there's anywhere they can be."

"I'm miles away."

"Just look at your copy of the book and get there. Stop off here if you can. You know what to do anyway."

He moved off and irritably hunted for a turn off back the way that he had come. He would pass by the House anyway because he was hungry and tired of this fruitless job.

It was still relatively early in the day so they decided that they would take the bike trip out to Leesowe now rather than tomorrow. They came out of Liscard down Manor Road and made an eventual way down the promenade. There was no hurry. The sea in the estuary looked clean and the salt of it bit at them through the slight breeze as they ambled along. The gulls wheeled overhead in a perfect sky as the weather finally remembered that it was summer, even if it was England. They turned the corner into the Promenade proper where the cars rumble their discontent and the Irish Sea looks out at you. The roads leading back to the peninsula sloped frighteningly steep away back to a sanity protected from the winter winds and gales but now the sea showed its other face. Today it would only eat the foolish.

All sign of human habitat gradually disappeared. They pushed up a steep hill and were rewarded by being able to coast down a path that changed from various states of graveliness to concrete. This was where the architects battled with the sea and its erosion of their bastion. The land and seascape took on a peculiar admixture of natural sandbanks out some way across a small piece of either sea or Mersey and a nearer beach that was a symmetrical construction of concrete sloping well-ruled into the sea. A buoy danced away

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under an observation tower and some youths splashed attempted rainbows across at the sandbank. They couldn't soak each other because they were already wet.

Joe unpacked the bread and other goodies that they had brought with them from his bag. After making the sandwiches the two sat in silence eating them. There was nothing to say, not really, not now. He took Kazz's hand and they sat like this for perhaps twenty minutes. Talk wasn't pointless, it just wasn't necessary. Why profess love? They were together and apart from that maybe there wasn't much else to say. Like every one who loves you never love what is, only what you see. They didn't know each other, not really, not now. It didn't matter.

It didn't matter.

Joe got up and began to strip in order to swim across to the sand bar. Kazz joined in. Soon they were naked in the cold sea, swimming and gasping for the pleasure of the moment awakening. Joe put one of Kazz's salty nipples in his mouth for a moment and then they started off in earnest to swim across. The youth had gone and they had the islet to themselves. They laughed and threw the fine sand that had once been perhaps the steady foothold of the burgers of centuries ago before it wore away at each other. They became caked in it as it stuck to their wetness. Joe's hair was solid with it and Kazz's wasn't far behind. It didn't matter, nothing is nothing, and the Warm Gun lay silent in Joe's jacket by the shore.

Something flew past Joe's ear. It could have been a bee but he looked round to see the errand boy leaning out of the passenger seat of his car with a nasty-looking hunting rifle in his arms. Joe was in its sights. Joe got out of them and made his way across the seaward side of the sandbar where Kazz was sitting unknowing. A slight breeze was goose pimpling their skin. Joe said nothing for a long, long time and they just sat looking out to the sea, naked but for the sand giving them a piebald look where their skin peeked through.

Joe kissed Kazz's hand and then more intimate places. They made love with the sound of the sea in their ears. Joe looked into Kazz's eyes as things came to their conclusion, their blue frightened him, burning him in some secret place where there was no possibility of willingly letting go of her or of the moment they were living in. He started crying and so did she. Nothing is nothing, there was no guarantee that life would ever give them this again. Kazz said:

"Let's swim some more."

"Where?"

"Home."

"Where's that?"

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"Over there," and she pointed into the sea. Maybe she meant back across to the Liverpool side of the estuary. Maybe she meant the ancestral lungfish had made a mistake and it was time to correct it. Maybe she meant nothing is nothing and it would be good to lose consciousness for a sojourn once again as the ancient stone.

"Nothing is nothing."

They walked slowly outwards until only their heads were visible and began to swim

After a time the wind and tide removed all trace of their having been there.

The errand boy had borrowed a boat and arrived at the sandbank.

The sea lapped against the side of the boat and made a friendly noise in the sand.

There was nobody there.

Nobody

Now the Warm Gun was as cold as ice and the question remained unanswered.

Joe remembered thinking "from stone to stone, from nothing to nothing. I am empty."  
Kazz was near and nothing else mattered.

The wind forgot nothing for it had no memory.