

GUN MACHINE

Also by Warren Ellis

Crooked Little Vein

GUN MACHINE

WARREN ELLIS



First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Mulholland Books
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 73064 7
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 73065 4

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

For
Ariana and Molly
and
Lydia and Angela
and
Niki and Lili

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ONE

ON PLAYING back the 911 recording, it'd seem that Mrs. Stegman was more concerned that the man outside her apartment door was naked than that he had a big shotgun.

A 911 call is the pain signal that takes a relative age to travel from the dinosaur's tail to its brain. The lumbering thunder lizard of the NYPD informational mesh doesn't even see the swift, highly evolved mammals of phone data, wi-fi, and financial-sector communication that dart around the territory of the 1st Precinct under its feet.

It was a good seven minutes before someone realized that 1st Precinct detectives John Tallow and James Rosato were within eight hundred yards of naked shotgun man, and called upon them to attend the scene.

Tallow wound down the passenger-side window of their unit and spit nicotine gum onto Pearl Street. "You didn't want to do that," he said to Rosato, watching without interest as a cycle courier in lime Lycra gave him the finger and called him a criminal. "You've been bitching about your knees all week, and you just responded to a call at the last walk-up apartment building on Pearl."

Jim Rosato was recently married, to a Greek nurse. Rosato was

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half Irish and half Italian, and there was a pool on at the 1st as to which of the two would arrive at work wearing the other's skin as a hat within the year. The Greek nurse had prevailed upon Jim to improve his health, an emergency-scale program that included Jim jogging before and after each shift. In the past week, Jim had been lurching stiff-legged into the 1st with a face like a bulldog chewing a wasp, declaiming to any and all witnesses that his knees had fused solid and that he had only days to live.

When Rosato swore, his Dublin mother's accent spoke through him from the grave. "Shite. How do you even know that?"

The backseat of their unit was a shale formation of books, papers, magazines, a couple of e-readers, and a cracked gray-market iPad. One or the other of them often had to put a boot to it to create enough space to slide a suspect into the back. Tallow was a reader.

Rosato slapped the wheel, crossed traffic, and pulled the unit in beside the apartment building on Pearl Street. It was a grim gray thing, the squat building, a fossil husk for little humans to huddle in. Every other building on this side of the block had had, at the very least, dermabrasion and its teeth fixed. Two stood on either side of the old apartment building like smug Botoxed thirtysomethings bracing an elderly relative. Many of them looked empty, but nonetheless there were flocks of young men in good suits and bad ties with phones nailed to their heads, and rainbows of angular women stabbing out texts with sharp thumbs.

The shotgun blast from inside the old building made them all clatter away like flamingos.

"This was your idea," Tallow said quietly, popping the door. On the street, Tallow compulsively lifted and reseated his Glock in its holster, under his jacket. Rosato moved stiff-legged to the apartment building door.

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Lots of cops married nurses, Tallow knew. Nurses understood the life: murderous shiftwork, long stretches of boredom, sudden adrenaline spikes, blood everywhere. Tallow almost smiled as he followed his wincing partner into the apartment building. He made sure the door closed as silently as possible, and only then did he draw his firearm.

The hallway parquet crackled under their feet. It was cratered, here and there, exposing rotting-newspaper backing. Tallow recognized a masthead from the fifties poking out from under the parquet by the south wall. The plastic wallpaper was slick with ancient nicotine stains, the air was warm and wet, and the staircase handrail looked tarry.

“Shite,” Rosato said as he started up the stairs. Tallow made to slide past him, but Rosato waved him back. Rosato had had longer on the beat than Tallow before he made detective and felt it gave him innate superiority on the street. Tallow was too all up in his head, Rosato would tell people. Big Jim Rosato was a street police.

The voice of naked shotgun man was carrying down the stairwell. Naked shotgun man was apparently unhappy at the letter that had been slid under his door this morning explaining that the building was being purchased by a development company and that he had a generous three months to find other accommodations. Naked shotgun man was going to blow away any asshole who tried to take his home from him because this was his home and no one could make him do anything he didn't want to do and also he had a shotgun. He didn't mention being naked. Tallow presumed that he was simply too angry for clothes.

They made the second landing and looked up. “Bastard's on the third floor,” Rosato hissed.

“The guy's barely in his body, Jim. Listen to him. His voice is

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doing scales and he's repeating himself in the same sentence. We might just want to wait until someone with crazy-person skills arrives."

"Read him one of your history books. Maybe he'll pass out and fall on his shotgun."

"Seriously."

"Seriously, shite. We don't know yet if that shot he took hit anyone." Rosato pushed on, flexing his fingers around his gun, holding it down by his leg.

They quietly ascended. The voice got louder. Rosato made the landing before the third floor, raised his gun, and took a step up before declaring, in a sharp steady bark, that he was police. And then he took another step up.

His knee folded under him.

Naked shotgun man stepped to the top of the stairs and fired down.

The blast tore off the upper left side of Jim Rosato's head. There was a wet smack as a fistful of his brain hit the stairwell wall.

From his vantage, three steps back and to the right, Tallow could see Rosato's eye a good five inches outside Rosato's head and still attached to his eye socket by a mess of red worms. In that single second, Tallow abstractly realized that in his last moment of life, James Rosato could see his killer from two different angles.

Rosato's eyeball burst against the wall.

The thick air pulsated with shotgun reverberations.

The sound of Jim Rosato's killer racking another shell seemed to go on forever.

Tallow had his Glock in a two-handed hold, fourteen in the clip and one in the pipe. He'd taken first pressure without knowing it.

Jim Rosato's killer was a bodybuilder gone to burgers and long

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days on the sofa. He was trembling all over. Tallow could see the dim echoes of his muscle under the flab. The top of his head was bald and seemed too small to contain a human brain. His cock sat atop his pouchy balls like a gray clit. The name *Regina* was badly tattooed over his chest, stretched by his hairy tits. John Tallow could not in that moment see any reason why he should not just fucking kill him, so he put four hollow points through *Regina*, and a stopper through the shitbag's stupid tiny head.

The stopper sent Jim Rosato's killer falling backward. A thin stream of piss described the arc of his drop. He hit the floor, retched out one autonomic attempt at a breath, and died.

John Tallow, standing still, made himself breathe. The air was thick and bitter with gunshot residue and blood.

Nobody else was in the corridor. There was a hole in a wall behind the dead man. Maybe he had randomly shot a wall to get people's attention. Maybe he was just crazy.

Tallow didn't care. He called it in.

People wondered why John Tallow didn't put a hell of a lot of effort into being a cop anymore.