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It was Glasgow on a Friday night, the city of the stare. Getting off the train in Central Station, Mickey Ballaster had a sense not only of having come north but of having gone back into his own past. Coming out on to the concourse, he paused briefly like an expert reminding himself of the fauna special to this area.

Yet there was nothing he couldn't have seen anywhere else. He was caught momentarily in the difficulty of isolating the sense of the place. Cities may all say essentially the same thing but the intonations are different. He was trying to re-attune himself to Glasgow's.

There were a few knots of people looking up at the series of windows where train departures were posted. They looked as if they were trying to threaten their own destination into appearing. On the benches across from him two women surrounded by plastic shopping-bags looked comfortably at home. Nearby a wino with a huge orange beard that suggested he was trying to grow his own bedclothes was in heated debate with a Guinness poster.

'They'll no serve ye, sir.' The speaker was a small man who had stopped to watch the wino. The small man was in his

sixties but his face was as playful as a pup. ‘I spent an hour last week tryin’ tae get a drink there.’ He glanced at Mickey before moving on. ‘Hope springs eternal in the human chest.’

It was the moment when Mickey arrived in Glasgow, in a city that was about proximity not anonymity, a place that in spite of its wide vistas and areas of dereliction often seemed as spacious as a rush-hour bus. He understood again the expectancy that overtook him every time he arrived. You never knew where the next invasion of your privateness was coming from.

He remembered, too, why he found Birmingham easier. This place was full of enthusiastic amateurs, Sunday punchers. You were as likely to get yours from a bus-conductor or a quiet man in a queue, especially at night. He remembered the words of a song about Glasgow that he liked:

*Going to start a revolution with a powder-keg of booze,
The next or next one that I take is going to light the fuse—
Two drinks from jail, I’m two drinks from jail.*

Still, it was good to be home, if only for a short trip, and knowing you would be leaving holding a lot more money than you came with. But there was no sign of Paddy Collins.

He crossed to the Royal Scot Bar in the station and went through the glass doors. The orange plastic hollows that were some designer’s abstract idea of seats held three or four separate people looking vaguely dispossessed of themselves, in transit between incarnations. The place had the gritty untidiness of belonging to no one, a litter bin for wasted time.

But the conversation at the bar, where he remembered to ask for a pint of ‘heavy’ instead of ‘bitter’, suggested that

this was a local for some. The barmaids might be the explanation for that. One was young and pretty, made up as colourfully as a butterfly. The other was older. She had been pretty. Now she was better than that. She looked mid to late thirties and as if she hadn't wasted the time. She had eyes that suggested you might find Ali Baba's cave behind them, if you knew the password, and had managed to arrive before the Forty Thieves.

Savouring the beer, he wondered about Paddy. He should have been here. It was a bad beginning to the trip. He couldn't imagine that there had been any complications because the whole thing seemed about as risky as mugging a baby in a pram.

A man with spectacles at the bar had got himself drunk enough to imagine that he was on a private line to the barmaid with the eyes. He had found Svengali at the bottom of his glass and was staring at her in a way no woman could resist.

'That's the truth,' he was saying. 'I'm telling you. You've got the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen.'

She looked mistily past him as she dunked a pint-dish up and down on the automatic cleaner. He might as well have been sneezing.

'I'm telling you. The most beautiful eyes I've ever seen.'

She glanced at him.

'Gonny give me the name of your optician? I'll send my man.'

Mickey decided this was long enough. He finished the pint and lifted his travelling-bag. He went downstairs to the lavatory and grudging paying his money at the turnstile.

Everything costs nowadays. Inside the cubicle, he unzipped the bag, ferreted in it for the loosely sheathed blade that had black tape for a handle. He put it in the long inside pocket of his jacket. He flushed the toilet.

As he came out, he watched a man who looked like an oil-worker tickling his heavy growth with one of the small, fitted electric razors. It must have been like sandpapering roughcast. He checked his bag into the left luggage and walked out into Gordon Street.

The weight of the knife felt good, as he didn't like going anywhere strange unless he had the message with him. From his other inside pocket he took a piece of paper and checked the address. The best way was to go up West Nile Street and keep going.

It was a pleasant evening. He walked up past Empire House, enjoying the place. He passed two men talking. One was on about his wife's attitude to drink. 'It wid put tits on an adder,' he said.

The entry was pretty scabby. The Italian name he was looking for was three stairs up. He pressed the bell and it made the electric razor sound tuneful. Nothing happened. He pressed it a long time and paused, listening. He heard high-heeled shoes on an uncarpeted hall. The door opened slightly. Her face was preoccupied, as if all of her hadn't arrived back from where she had been.

'You like to come back later, please?'

The accent was Italian all right.

'No,' he said and pushed open the door.

'You just wait a minute, you.'

But he was already inside. Flummoxed, she had tried to

hold the door and the pink dressing-gown had opened briefly. He saw that she was wearing only a black suspender-belt, stockings and stiletto-heeled shoes. Whoever was in the bedroom was a shoe-man. He closed the door.

‘Friend of Paddy Collins,’ he said. ‘If you’re busy, get unbusy.’

He walked along the hall into a sitting-room-cum-dining-room that had started out with good intentions. There was a wickerwork chair with a red cushion, a moquette chair and settee. There was a white circular table with white chairs. But the room was untidy and dusty. There were unwashed cups on the table, a heel of dried bread.

She had followed him in, re-tying the belt of her dressing-gown. She looked troubled.

‘I can’t do that,’ she said, and didn’t believe her own words.

‘Oh yes, you can.’

In the doorway a man appeared. He had pulled on his trousers and his belly wobbled over the waistband. His bare feet looked vulnerable. His face had the petulance of somebody used to good service and disappointed.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘What’s going on here?’

‘Put yer clothes on,’ Mickey said.

‘Listen. I paid good money.’

‘Ye don’t want tae go home with a sore face. Yer wife’ll wonder where ye got it.’

‘Listen—’

‘I’ve listened all I’m gonny listen. On yer bike. Like now. Unless ye want tae take yer face home in a hanky.’

Mickey sat down in the wickerwork chair. The man went back through to the bedroom. The woman made to go after him but glanced at Mickey. He nodded her towards the

moquette chair. She sat down. She wasn't bad for a scrubber, Mickey thought, going fat a bit but not quite shapeless yet. The shoes helped her legs, which would have been too heavy otherwise. She took a packet of cigarettes from the coffee-table beside her chair, offered Mickey one. He shook his head. She lit up and they listened to the man getting ready in the bedroom.

He appeared again in the doorway. He looked a lot more impressive in his suit. He seemed to have put on indignation with his clothes.

He said, 'I think—'

'Good for you,' Mickey said. 'Keep doin' that. Now piss off.'

The man went out. Mickey waited till the door closed before he spoke.

'So you're Gina.'

She nodded nervously.

'I'm Mickey Ballater.'

Her eyes widened and she crossed her legs. The dressing-gown fell away and he let his eyes rest on her thigh.

'Where's Paddy Collins? He was supposed to meet me.'

She shrugged and looked at the ceiling. Mickey got up and walked across to her. Leaning over her carefully, he slapped her face very hard. She started to cry. He walked back and sat in his chair. He looked round the room while she composed herself.

'Where's Paddy Collins?'

'He is in the hospital.'

'How?'

'He has been stabbed.'

‘How do you know?’

‘His brother-of-law is here yesterday. Very angry. He tells me Paddy is stabbed. Serious. He thinks he will die.’

It didn’t take long for the images of Paddy Collins that occurred to Mickey to convert from regret to energy, like old photographs thrown on a fire. If Paddy Collins died, the pay-off would be better for himself if he could find Tony Veitch. But there were problems.

‘His brother-in-law, Cam Colvin? You’re sure it was him?’

‘Mr Colvin.’

‘That’s all we need. How did he know about you?’

‘My address is in Paddy’s clothes.’

‘That’s handy. What did you tell him?’

‘How Paddy is lookin’ for Tony Veitch.’

‘It looks as if he found him. What else?’

‘Nothin’ else. I know nothin’ else.’

Mickey found the Scottish inflections in her Italian accent attractive. He began to notice her again.

‘Did you tell him about me?’

She shook her head.

‘You’re sure?’

‘Paddy said silence. Or.’

She made a throat-cutting gesture. Mickey almost laughed. It sounded like Paddy all right, good at frightening women and still following the script of an old Edward G. Robinson film.

‘What else did Paddy tell you?’

‘To do the things he says and be all right.’

That sounded convincing too. Paddy hadn’t told Mickey much that mattered either. All he could remember was that

Veitch knew Hook Hawkins' brother. And it looked as if Paddy was going to get even better at keeping a secret.

'Where *is* Tony Veitch?'

'Nobody knows still.'

'Come on. Cam Colvin must have been at the hospital.'

'He is in a com-combo?'

'Jesus Christ. Hidin' in a band?'

'Como. Comma?'

Mickey stared at her.

'Coma. You mean Paddy's in a coma?'

'He doesn't speak.'

'But *you* know Tony Veitch.'

'Not since the trouble with Paddy. Since two weeks nobody can find him.'

'Ach!' Ballater's eyes strafed the ceiling. He pointed at her. 'Listen. Ah didn't come up here for the view. Anything you know ye better tell me.'

'Only you are to be my husband for Tony.'

He watched her carefully. She didn't look hard, more like an amateur still slightly surprised to be getting paid for it. When Paddy had set her up for Veitch, the second stage of the ploy with himself appearing as a husband who had to be bought off must have taken her by surprise. She probably couldn't help.

But time was short. If Veitch had done Paddy, buying a box of matches could be a foolishly long-term investment for him, unless he wanted to leave it in his will. Mickey would have to move fast but carefully. He knew this place well enough to know that he didn't know it well enough any more. He remembered another couple of lines of the song:

They're nice until they think that God has gone
a bit too far
And you've got the macho chorus swelling
out of every bar.

You don't skip through minefields. He needed a bomb-detector. It came to him as a small inspiration that the obvious one was Cam Colvin himself.

'What hospital is Paddy in?' he asked suddenly.

'Victoria Infirmary.'

A baby started to cry. He watched her stubbing out the cigarette, careful of her nails. She got up and he heard her feet on the floor of the hall, then those private noises a mother makes to a child, as if she knows the whole world's against it but she's telling it a secret that will see it through.

He went out of the room and found the phone in the empty bedroom, where the light was still on and the bed was mussed. The voice in the Victoria Infirmary told him that the relatives of Mr Collins were with him. He reckoned he still had a little time.

When he came back into the sitting-room she was standing uncertainly at the fire. She turned as he crossed towards her. She contracted slightly as if he was going to hit her. He pulled the belt of her dressing-gown and slipped the garment off to fall on the floor. He pointed towards the bedroom. As she stilted awkwardly ahead of him, he watched her flesh quiver.

'Ye're supposed to be ma wife,' he said. 'We might as well have the honeymoon.'

2

The phone-call seemed just a casual interruption, but then one stone can start an avalanche.

‘And then,’ Ena had been saying. ‘What do you think? The car conked out completely. Just died on me. In the middle of the Clyde Tunnel. And where was Jack? On a case, of course. In Morecambe!’

Laidlaw had heard the story before. He had once suggested to Ena that presumably everyone had heard it, with the possible exception of the North Vietnamese. His rancour came from understanding the bizarre meaning the story had come to assume for Ena: the failure of the internal combustion engine equals marital neglect.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I should’ve been running after it. I just forgot.’

The remark was accepted by the others as being funny as a dirty joke at a funeral. Laidlaw could feel his sense of isolation grow aggressive. He was saved by the phone.

‘I’ll get that,’ he said.

He was careful to moderate the pace of his departure, in case he burned the carpet. The phone was in the hall.

‘Hello?’

'Is that Detective Inspector Jack Laidlaw?'

'That's right.'

'Is this *the* Detective Inspector Jack Laidlaw? Doyen of the Crime Squad? Protector of the Poor? The Punters' Choice?'

Laidlaw recognised first the style and then the voice. It was Eddie Devlin of the *Glasgow Herald*.

'Christ, Eddie,' he said. 'Your copy's getting worse. Could you not get your sub-editor to come on the phone with you?'

'It's all this giving the public what it wants. Listen, Jack. There's somebody in casualty at the Royal who wants you to go in and see him.'

'Tonight? Did they say whether I was to bring Maltesers or black grapes? What is this, Eddie?'

'No. Straight up, Jack. I got a tip from one of the porters. Old bloke brought in. Chin like a Brillo-pad. Smelling like a grape harvest. Just about conscious. But he kept asking for Jack Laidlaw. Must see Jack Laidlaw. Porter in there is one of my tipsters. You know? Well, he's heard me mention you before. So he thinks he better let me know. But I wouldn't think there's anything there for me. He's probably just got the dt's. No offence, Jack. I mean, you're not Errol Flynn. But you've probably got the edge on spiders and pink elephants.'

'Any wounds?' Laidlaw said.

'Didn't seem to be. But I didn't get too much information. He's a trier, this. But he's not too hot on the verbals.'

'When did you get this call, Eddie?'

'Got it at the pub here. Five minutes ago. I thought I'd better let you know before I leave. I want to look in at the Vicky. The Paddy Collins thing. I might get some famous last words. Anyway, it's up to you, Jack.'

‘Thanks, Eddie. I owe you one.’

‘Aye. When the revolution comes, I’d like a press-card. Cheers, Jack.’

‘Cheers.’

Laidlaw put down the phone. The sound of Eddie’s voice had been an injection through the ear. Things were happening in the city. But he had guests. Well, Ena had guests. He tried to be fair and decided they wouldn’t miss him. His absence would probably be a relief.

Any weekend that Laidlaw wasn’t working was pre-arranged for him. Familiar with the anti-social hours policemen kept, Ena had learned to try and compensate. If Laidlaw insisted on treating the calendar the way an alcoholic treats liquor – big benders of absence, brief domestic drying-outs – she was determined to ensure that his off-duty time was spent exclusively with her.

She deployed baby-sitters like chessmen – check, mate. She counteracted his thirst for the streets of Glasgow with events carefully bottled like home-made wine, each neatly labelled in advance. ‘Friday – Frank and Sally coming.’ ‘Saturday – Mike and Aileen’s party.’ ‘Saturday – Al Pacino film at La Scala. Baby-sitter arranged.’

Tonight was ‘Friday – Donald and Ria.’ It wasn’t one of her best vintages, a mild cabbagey flavour that never got you high but which might, Laidlaw suspected, rot the social taste-buds over a prolonged period so that you couldn’t tell a bromide from the elixir of life. He tried not to have anything against Donald and Ria. It was just that the four of them together gave him the feeling of being involved in field-work on group sedation.

Besides, maybe it was someone who had done him a favour. Maybe it was someone who was dying. Nobody was dying in the room he had left. Maybe four or so of them were dead. But nobody was dying.

He was wearing a red polo-neck and black slacks. Reaching into the cupboard in the hall, he took out his denim jacket and put it on. He might as well announce his intention to the committee. They'd veto it, of course, but he'd made his decision. He felt guilty but that was a familiar feeling.

3

From Simshill in Cathcart, where Laidlaw lived, to the Royal Infirmary in Cathedral Street was a short trip but a big distance. Fortunately, the architecture changed in stages, like decompression chambers, so that you didn't get the bends.

One half of the first gate was open yet and he drove in. A lot of cars were in the parking area but there was plenty of room. Locking the car, he was struck again by the size of the place, three huge linked units, each with its own imposing dome. It seemed to him a castle of black stone. It made illness appear not a leveller but an accolade that admitted you to a Gothic aristocracy.

Across the courtyard was the single-storey casualty department like a gatehouse where they examined your credentials. He went in. It was after eleven.

The hallway was the parking place for the blue leather invalid-chairs, maybe thirty of them. On one of them a boy of twenty or so was sitting. But he wasn't an invalid. He looked ill enough to chew railings. The slight skinning on his right cheek only accentuated his appearance of hardness. He was nursing a light jacket the shoulders of which were black with

blood, like the patch on a Wimpey reefer. He was waiting for someone.

‘Hey, you,’ he said as Laidlaw came in. ‘Gonny give us a fag?’

Laidlaw looked over curiously. He recognised drink but not drunkenness and the residual aggression from a fight not lost, the adrenalin spin-off that could be captioned ‘Who’s next?’ Laidlaw turned towards the doorway to casualty.

‘Hey, you! Big man. Ah’m talkin’ to you. Gi’es a fag!’

Laidlaw went over.

‘Here, son,’ he said. ‘So far you’ve only managed mild abrasions. Is this you trying for intensive care?’

The boy looked momentarily blank at the medical references but the tone was Esperanto.

The boy said, ‘Come on. Ah asked a wee favour.’

‘So don’t make it sound like a threat.’

Laidlaw gave him a cigarette.

‘You put the tipped end in your mouth. Then you light the other bit.’

The boy was smiling. Laidlaw turned to the casualty room. It is a single, long, arched place, both basic and ornate, like a Victorian nissen hut. Laidlaw entered it like a time-warp.

The first things he noticed were a couple of ghosts of his youth, two constables whose faces were fresh-laid eggs. Near them stood a group wearing doctors’ white coats. Laidlaw hoped they were students. All of them, policemen and doctors, looked young enough to have been given their uniforms for Christmas. Suddenly, Laidlaw was Rip Van Winkle.

He checked the treatment room on the right. While two nurses looked on, a doctor was remonstrating with a boy who

was stripped to the waist. From hairline to belt, the boy was blood. The red made the place look like a dressing-room for one of the more preposterous Elizabethan tragedies, say *Titus Andronicus*.

‘No problem!’ the boy was saying.

Physically, he seemed to be alright. Laidlaw could see a long cut on the back of his neck and nothing else. He was obviously enjoying that taste of the heroic your own spilled blood can give you. Probably the worst thing they could do for him would be to wash him clean. Then he would have to settle for himself again. Laidlaw didn’t know him but perhaps he would.

Starting opposite the treatment room is a row of cubicles. They presented Laidlaw, as he went, with a succession of tableaux that might have come from a contemporary mystery play. A girl whose eyes were still in shock was holding a bloodstained bedspread, waiting for someone or something. There was a young man with a left eye like a piece of bad fruit. He was protesting hysterically about injustice while a doctor attended him. A woman was crying while her arm was being bandaged. ‘He gives me some awfu’ kickings,’ she was saying. A middle-aged man was explaining to a nurse, ‘It’s a kinda shifting pain,’ while two young policemen looked on. Laidlaw recognised a familiar art, that of postponing arrest by young policemen through the contraction of sudden, mysterious maladies.

Cubicle E, the one Laidlaw knew to be used for delousing, was empty but showed signs of recent use. He recognised nobody, except perhaps the two plain-clothesmen who had just come in. He didn’t know them as individuals but he knew

that style of moving on tramlines of professional preoccupation. They merged with the rest of the scene as subtly as Mormons.

Looking back along the room, Laidlaw found nothing specific to him, only the city processing its Friday night pain. The place was a confessional. You came here to admit to frailty, brittle bones, thin skin, frangible organs – the pathetic, haphazard machinery we make bear the weight of our pretensions.

Most of all, you came to admit to blood. It was everywhere here, on the people, the swabs, the floor, the coats of the doctors. Like a betrayal, it leaked out of the spurious certainties we make of our natures. Like honesty, it was difficult to look at.

Laidlaw felt here more strongly what he had against that other room he had just come from, where Ena and Donald and Ria were still sitting. It told lies. This one tried to do the same, no doubt, but it at least was compelled to unavoidable admissions of its common humanity. That other room was simply exclusive. It was based on inaccurate assumptions about what people are like. Laidlaw remembered that one of the things he hated most was élitism. We share in everyone else or forego ourselves.

‘Hullo there, captain.’

He was an elderly man, slightly cut at the edge of his eye and more than slightly drunk. Laidlaw had noticed him wandering along the room accosting people vaguely, an ancient mariner short of a wedding guest.

‘You a doctor then, sir? It’s ma eye here. Played at headers wi’ the pavement. Ye know? Pavement beat me wan-nothin’. Ah would’ve won if ah hadny been drunk.’

Laidlaw smiled and shrugged.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m a stranger here myself.’

The man went on past the partition at the end of the room. Beyond that lay the legendary Room 9, resuscitation room at the Royal, a place that has seen a lot of what there is to see in the way of physical calamity. The man was ushered out again at once by a doctor who directed him back along the casualty room.

‘Excuse me,’ Laidlaw said. ‘I’m looking for someone.’

Laidlaw showed his identification-card. The doctor looked at it, his tongue resting on his front teeth, and nodded, showing nothing. He couldn’t have been older than late twenties, bespectacled and shaggy-haired, but already he looked the type who might raise his eyebrows at an earthquake. His coat was speckled brown with the statutory bloodstains.

‘A heavy night,’ Laidlaw suggested.

‘No. This is a quiet one. Although a couple of R.T.A.’s and an M.I. through here.’ He nodded towards Room 9. ‘So who are you looking for?’

‘I don’t know,’ Laidlaw said.

The doctor didn’t show surprise or amusement or interest. He just waited. He was checking the progress of the elderly man along the room. Laidlaw knew that an R.T.A. was a Road Traffic Accident. He thought he’d better not ask about the M.I. The doctor didn’t look in the mood to stand in for a medical dictionary.

‘I’ve been told somebody was brought in here asking for me. Asking for Jack Laidlaw. An old bloke. Unshaven. Probably well bevved.’

The elderly man had found the haven of a nurse. The doctor’s

eyes came to rest on the floor. He looked up at Laidlaw, as if measuring him for an improbable connection.

‘You mean the old wino?’

‘I might.’

‘Yes. That *was* the name, I think. Kept repeating it. I thought maybe it was his own. Could get nothing else out of him. Having trouble with his airways. They had him in E. God, he was filthy. Didn’t know whether to dialyse or cauterise. A walking Bubonic.’

‘So what happened?’

‘He just got worse. Seemed to use the last of himself just getting here. Cleaned him up. They had him in the Lavage Room. Alcohol and Belair were about all they got, I think.’

‘So what’s wrong?’

The doctor shook his head.

‘How about everything?’ His eyes were moving around the room again. ‘The nearest they got to a diagnosis was imminent death. The respiratory problem was getting worse. Rather than intubate him here, they took him straight to Intensive Care. He’s just gone.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Surgical block. That’s—’

‘I know.’

‘But they’ll probably not welcome you.’

‘They don’t have to,’ Laidlaw said.

On the way out, he threw a cigarette to the young man on the invalid chair. Placate the gods.