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Gun Street Girl

Written by Adrian McKinty

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ADRIAN
McKINTY

**GUN
STREET
GIRL**



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Now the rain's like gravel on an old tin roof,
And the Burlington Northern's pulling out of the world,
A head full of bourbon and a dream in the straw,
And a Gun Street girl was the cause of it all . . .

Tom Waits, 'Gun Street Girl', 1985

I do not yet know what your gift is to me, but mine to you is
an awesome one: you may keep your days and nights.

Jorge Luis Borges, 'Blue Tigers', 1983

1: A SCANNER DARKLY

Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss . . .
Silence.

Sssssssssssssssssssssss . . .

Silence.

'I can't get it, sir.'

'Keep trying.'

'Yes, sir.'

Midnight.

Midnight and all the agents are asleep, and on the beach there are only disaffected, cold policemen silently sharing smokes and gazing through binoculars at the black Atlantic, hoping to catch the first glimpse of the running lights on what has become known to the ironists in Special Branch as the *Ship of Death*.

Sssssssssssssssssssssss . . .

Drizzle.

Static.

Oscillating waves of sound. A fragment of Dutch. A DJ from RFI informing the world with breathless excitement that '*EuroDisney sera construit à Paris*'.

We're on a beach near Derry on the wild north coast of Ireland. It's November 1985. Reagan's the president, Thatcher's the PM, Gorbachev has recently taken the reins of the USSR. The number-one album in the country is Sade's *Promise* and Jennifer Rush's torch song 'The Power Of Love' is still at the

top of the charts where it has remained for a dispiritingly long time . . .

Ssssssss and then finally the young constable in charge of the shortwave scanner finds the radio frequency of the *Our Lady of Knock*.

‘I’ve got them! They’re coming in, sir!’ he says.

Yes, this is what we were waiting for. The weather is perfect, the moon is up and the tide is on the ebb. ‘Aye, we have the bastards now!’ one of the Special Branch men mutters.

I say nothing. I have been brought in purely as a courtesy because one of my sources contributed a tip to this complicated international operation. It is not my place to speak or offer advice. Instead I pat my revolver and flip back through my notebook to the place where I have taped a postcard of Guido Reni’s *Michael Tramples Satan*. I discreetly make the sign of the cross and, in a whisper, ask for the continuing protection of St Michael, the Archangel, the patron saint of policemen. I am not sure I believe in the existence of St Michael the Archangel, the patron saint of peelers, but I am a member of the RUC, which is the police force with the highest mortality rate in the Western world, so every little bit of talismanic assistance helps. I close the notebook and light a cigarette for some evil-eyed goon who says he’s from Interpol but who looks like a spook from 140 Gower Street, come to keep an eye on the Paddies and make sure they don’t make a hash of the whole thing.

He mutters a thank-you and passes over a flask which turns out to contain high-quality gin.

‘Cheers,’ I say, take a swig, and pass it back.

‘Chin, chin,’ he says. Yeah – MI5.

A breeze moves the clouds from the face of the moon. Somewhere in the car park a dog barks.

The policemen wait. The spooks wait. The men on the boat wait. All of us tumbling into the future together.

We watch the waves and the chilly, black infinity where sky

and sea merge somewhere off Malin Head. Finally at 12.30 someone shouts 'There! I see her!' and we are ordered off the beach. Most of us retreat behind the dunes and a few of the wiser officers slink all the way back to the Land Rovers to warm up over spirit stoves and hot whiskies. I find myself behind a sandbar with two women in raincoats who appear to be Special Branch Intel.

'This is so exciting, isn't it?' the brunette says.

'It is.'

'Who are you?' her friend asks me in a funny Cork accent that sounds like a donkey falling down a well.

I tell her but as soon as the word 'inspector' has passed my lips I can see that she has lost interest. There are assistant chief constables and chief superintendents floating about tonight and I'm way down the food chain.

'About time!' someone says and we watch the *Our Lady of Knock* navigate its way into the channel and towards the surf. It's an odd-looking vessel. A small converted cargo boat, perhaps, or a trawler with the pulleys and chains removed. It doesn't really look seaworthy, but somehow it's made it all the way across three thousand miles of Atlantic Ocean.

About two hundred metres from the shore it drops anchor and after some unprofessional dithering a Zodiac is lowered into the water. Five men climb aboard the speedboat and it zooms eagerly towards the beach. As soon as they touch dry land the case will come under the jurisdiction of the RUC, even though all five gunrunners are American citizens and the ship has come from Boston.

Skip, skip, skip goes the little Zodiac, oblivious of rocks or hidden reefs, of which there are many along this stretch of coast. It miraculously avoids them all and zips up the surf on to the beach. The men get out and start looking around them for errant dog walkers or lovers or other witnesses. Spotting no one, they shout 'Yes!' and 'Booyah!' One man gets on his

knees and, emulating the Holy Father, kisses the sand. He has dedication, this lad – the tarmac at Dublin Airport is one thing, but this gravelly, greasy beach downwind from one of Derry’s main sewage plants is quite another matter.

They open a bottle and begin passing it around. One of them is wearing a John Lennon sweatshirt. These young American men who have come across the sea to bring us death in the form of mortars and machine guns.

‘Yanks, eh? They think they can do what they like, don’t they?’ one of the Special Branch officers says.

I resist the temptation to pile on. Although these Irish–American gunrunners are undoubtedly naive and ignorant I understand where they’re coming from. Patriotism is a hard disease to eradicate and ennui stamps us all . . .

The men on the beach begin to look at their watches and wonder what to do next. They are expecting a lorry driver called Nick McCready and his son Joe, both of whom are already in custody.

One of them lights a flare and begins waving it above his head.

‘What are they going to do next? Set off fireworks?’ someone grumbles behind me.

‘What are *we* going to do next?’ I say back, loud enough for the Assistant Chief Constable to hear. I mean, how much longer are we going to have to wait here? If there are guns on the boat, we have them, and if there are no guns on the boat we don’t have them, but either way the time to arrest them is now.

‘Quiet in the ranks!’ someone says.

If I was in charge I’d announce our presence with a loudspeaker and spotlights and patiently explain the situation: *You are surrounded, your vessel cannot escape the lough, please put your hands up and come quietly . . .*

But I’m not in charge and that is not what happens. This being an RUC–Gardai–FBI–MI5–Interpol operation we are headed for debacle . . . A high-ranking uniformed policeman begins

marching towards the men on the beach like Alec Guinness at the beginning of *Bridge on the River Kwai*.

‘What the hell is he doing?’ I say to myself.

The gunrunners don’t see him yet and the one with a flare is making it do figures of eight in the air to the delight of the others.

The uniformed officer reaches the top of a dune. ‘All right, chaps, the game’s up!’ he announces in a loud *Dixon of Dock Green* voice.

All right, chaps, the game’s up?

The Americans immediately draw their weapons and run for the Zodiac. One of them takes a potshot at the uniformed peeler, making him hit the deck. *I say, chaps, that’s a little unsporting*, he’s probably thinking.

‘Put your hands up!’ another copper belatedly yells through a megaphone.

The Americans fire blindly into the darkness with an impressive arsenal that includes shotguns and assault rifles. Some of the policemen begin to shoot back. The night is lit up by white flares and red muzzle bursts and arcs of orange tracer.

Yes, now we have well and truly crossed the border into the realm of international screw-up.

‘Lay down your arms!’ the copper with the megaphone shouts with an air of desperation.

A police marksman brings down one of the Yanks with a bullet in the shoulder, but the gunrunners still don’t give up. They’re confused, seasick, exhausted. They have no idea who is shooting at them or why. Two of them begin pushing the Zodiac back towards the surf. They don’t realise that they’re outnumbered ten to one and that if by some miracle they do make it back to the *Our Lady of Knock*, they’re just going to get boarded by the Special Boat Service.

The surf tosses the Zodiac upside down.

‘This is the police, you are surrounded, cease firing at once!’

the men are ordered through the megaphone. But blood has been spilled and they respond with a fusillade of machine-gun fire. I light another ciggie, touch St Michael and make my way to the car park.

I walk past the rows of Land Rovers and get in my car. I turn the key in the ignition and the engine growls into life. Radio 3 is playing Berlioz. I flip to Radio 1 and it's a Feargal Sharkey ballad – Feargal Sharkey's successful solo career telling you everything you needed to know about the contemporary music scene. I kill the radio and turn on the lights.

A box of ammo explodes with a deafening blast and an enormous fireball that I can see from here. I lean my head against the steering wheel and take a deep breath.

A very young constable in charge of car-park security taps on the driver's-side window. 'Oi, where do you think you're going?'

I wind the window down. 'Home,' I tell him.

'Who said you could go?'

'No one said I had to stay, so I'm leaving.'

'You can't just leave!'

'Watch me.'

'But . . . but . . .'

'Move out of the way, son.'

'But don't you want to see how everything turns out?' he asks breathlessly.

'Farce isn't my cup of tea,' I tell him, wind the window up, and pull out of the car park. The me in the rear-view mirror shakes his head. That was a silly remark. For out here, on the edge of the dying British Empire, farce is the only mode of narrative discourse that makes any sense at all.