

The Bullet Trick

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Extract

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*Ah, sweet whisperer, my dear wanton, I
Have followed you, shawled in your warmth, since I
left the breast,
Been toady for you and pet bully,
And a woeful heartscald to the parish priest;
And look! If I took the mint by storm and spent it,
Heaping on you in one wild night the dazzle of a
king's whore,
And returned next morning with no money for a
curer,
Your publican would throw me out the door.*

'Raftery's Dialogue With The Whiskey', Padraic Fallon

Glasgow

THE AEROPLANE WHEELS touched the runway, jerking me awake.

‘I envy you, that’s a gift.’

The blonde woman in the next seat smiled. I wiped a hand over my face.

‘Sorry?’

‘You slept like the dead all the way from Tegel. You’re lucky, I don’t sleep like that in my own bed.’

Some other time I might have asked how she slept in strangers’ beds, but I kept my smart mouth shut and waited while the pilot bumped us into a smooth landing, just another flight. The seatbelt lights turned off and the business types got to their feet and started pulling their bags from the overhead lockers. A mobile phone chimed awake and a man said, *I’ll call you back in ten minutes. I’m on a plane.* He laughed. *No it’s OK, we’ve landed.* My insomniac neighbour stood up and I slipped my equipment case from under the seat in front. It felt heavy, but I’d added nothing to it in Berlin, except for the envelope packed tight with bank notes that I hadn’t bothered to count.

The queue of passengers edged along the aisle then down the metal staircase and onto the tarmac. No one

kissed the runway. I pulled my coat close and kept my eyes on the ground.

A long line of luggage lurched along the carousel but I'd left my broken suitcase along with its contents in a hotel room in Berlin.

The taxi-rank controller was bundled against the weather in a fluorescent jacket that looked regulation issue and an old checked bunnet that didn't. He slammed the cab door on the safely settled traveller in front then turned to me.

'Where to?'

'Glasgow.'

He smiled patiently, a man used to jet-lag and bad English, and asked, 'Where in Glasgow son?'

'City centre.'

He wrote something on his clipboard saying, 'That'll do.' And waved one of the white cabs forward.

The driver asked the same question that his supervisor had. This time I said, 'Do you know anywhere I could rent a bedsit in the city centre?'

He looked at me in the rear-view mirror, seeing the same face I'd splashed cold water on only minutes before in the gents. A nondescript face with a hard cleft in the centre of its brow that might suggest ruthlessness or worry, but nothing that would make me stand out in a crowd.

I said, 'There'll be a bung in it for you.'

And he swung the taxi out of the airport, down into Glasgow and towards the Gallowgate.

I sat in the back and closed my eyes, wondering how I'd got myself into this mess and what lay in store for me in the city I used to call home.

London

THE FIRST NIGHT I met Sylvie she saved me from dying. The clock has ticked round and the pages have been flipped on the calendar, its numbers switching from red to black and back, shades the same as playing-card suits, and I realise that over a year has passed since Sylvie and I first met.

In those dim days I was known as *William Wilson, Mentalist and Illusionist*. Conjuring was throwing off the shackles of the dinner suit and velvet bow tie. It had slipped off the family viewing prime-time TV slot and into the clubs, gone underground, kicked around with freak shows and circuses, and now the feeling was it was ripe to hit the big time again. I was one of the many who thought they might just be able to shake the profession back to life, if only I got the right break. Like a gambler waiting on the right cut of the cards.

I'd left Glasgow for London seven years ago and had been toiling through the British circuit ever since, long enough to almost recognise what town I was in, long enough not to care. I was a warm-up act for a whole trough of comedians and stand ups. The guy nobody came to see. I'd performed in the King's, the Queen's, the Prince's and the Consort; done my stuff in the Variety, the Civic, the

Epic and the Grand. I'd released doves across the ceiling of the Playhouse and watched them crap on the heads of the crowd in the Cliffs Pavilion. In Liverpool a woman fainted on stage and was dragged into the wings. In Portsmouth a row of sailors chased an usher through the aisles. In Belfast I slept with a girl in the Botanic Hotel.

I'd had professional excitements too. A TV scout who thought he might get me a slot that could lead to a series, an independent production company who proposed a documentary about my act. But in the end it seemed they were bigger failures than me. At least I could put a show on the road.

My agent was Richard Banks, Rich to his friends. He represented a slough of comedians, a couple of afternoon quiz show presenters and me. Rich had been an operator since the days when variety was king. In the fifties he'd mopped up the ENSA boys, the sixties had seen him branching into teenage pop and by the seventies he was a regular supplier of what he liked to call talent to piers from Brighton to Blackpool. A couple of his stable had even made it as far as *Saturday Night at the London Palladium*. Then entertainment had improved and Rich had moved on, signing a new generation of stand-ups to his fleet. Rich was realistic and adaptable but he was loyal too, after all, as he said, 'Loyalty costs nothing William.'

Though you can bet if it did Richard would have included it just above the VAT in his agent's fee. He brought loyalty up early in our relationship. He had an office in Crouch End. I'd popped in on spec, part because I was passing and part to remind him of my existence. I'd tried and failed to work a James Bond/Moneypenny routine with Mrs Pierce, Rich's steel-grey coiffured and steelier-eyed secretary. Now she just glanced at me from behind her word processor and said, 'Mr Banks has someone with him, but he

won't mind if you go through.'

The man in the visitor's chair was a sprightly seventy with a boyish face that should have been in black and white but was red-cheeked, purple-veined and rheumy-eyed. He'd leaned back in his chair, his pale hair flopping away from his forehead, a brilliant advert for toupee tape. His upside-down smile was tight. We both knew my unannounced entrance was his cue to leave. Rich introduced us and I remembered the name from long ago, though I still couldn't recall what I'd seen him in.

'Wilson, not a very stagey name,' he said over my shoulder to Richard as he shook my hand, trying and failing to squeeze my knuckles. I mugged a wince, just to please him, and his eyes sparkled.

'Times change,' said Rich, getting to his feet.

'They surely do.' The aged theatrical nodded his head and looked slowly round the room at the black and white photos of yesterday's stars that mingled with the portraits of Rich's current stable. Perhaps he was searching for a picture of himself, perhaps at his age you get used to looking at places as if you're never going to see them again. 'Well, Rich, it's been lovely but I can't sit gabbing to you all day.' He raised his mug, pinkie outstretched, and knocked back the last of his tea with a loud slurp. 'So what's this one? Another comic?'

'Conjurer.'

The elderly gent rose slowly, his thin body looking too young for his old man head, and pulled on a spotless gabardine I pegged as at least fifteen years old.

'Conjurer, eh? Known a few of them in my time. None of them made it big, but they were nice boys.'

I leered at him.

'I'm not a nice boy.'

‘No,’ his eyes glanced me up and down, ‘I didn’t think so. Still, nice or not I’d give the last ten years of my life to have six months at the age you are now. Bet the offers never stop coming in for this one, eh Rich?’

Rich gave a noncommittal smile and the old man laughed, suddenly spry as he gathered his hat, scarf, gloves, briefcase and a carrier bag of groceries, fluttering apologies to Richard for taking so much of his time. He winked at me on the way out and said, ‘Never mind dear, we all have our dry spells.’

I gave him a wide-boy grin and held the door open. When he was safe in the outer office, chatting to Mrs Pierce with a familiarity she’d never have tolerated from me, I took his seat, wincing against the warmth stored in the cushions and said, ‘Nobody loves a fairy when they’re forty.’

Rich gave me a long stare, as near to a frown as I’ve seen him come, then he gave me a lesson.

Stuffed at the back of his filing cabinets were the profiles of men with a million mother-in-law and darkie jokes, female impersonators, ventriloquists, crooners and jugglers. He plonked the files on the desk in front of me and I flicked through them for form’s sake. Each file had a photograph paperclipped to its top left-hand corner. Outmoded hairdos, polyester dinner suits, big bow ties and grins that had once seemed alive, but now looked desperate, caught in a mad moment twenty or so years ago.

‘I keep them on the books,’ Rich said, ‘there’s no harm in it. They don’t take up much space and it’s nice to be nice. After all, put together, these kids made me a lot of money at one time. And anyway, who knows when some post-modern ironist is going to suddenly discover one of these has-beens was a genius? But just remember son, it’s like they say in the financial ads, your shares may go down as well as up.’

So,' he tapped his nose like a tipster revealing a cert, 'remember, loyalty costs nothing.'

Once upon a time Rich had thought I might be in the new wave of conjurers, 'the post-Paul Daniels brigade' he called them. These days we weren't close, but he let me call his answerphone direct. The evening this story starts was the first time in weeks he'd called me back.

'It may not be the big time William' – Richard hailed originally from Southend. He had a voice as loud as a McGill postcard, all whelks, beer and fat ladies flashing their drawers. I held the receiver an inch or two from my ear; there was no premium in adding deafness to my problems. 'But there'll be some interesting people there. You never know who you'll meet.' I'd made some noncommittal sound, and Rich had gone on with his spiel, selling it to me though he knew I'd take it. 'You'll have fun. It's a police retirement night.'

'Lovely, just what I need. The filth interrogating me on how I do my act.'

'Is that any attitude to have towards Her Majesty's finest? Anyway they'll love it, William. These guys are into lies and misdirection big time.' Rich paused and I could hear him dragging on his cigarette. 'Tell you, here's an idea, pick on the weediest one and do some funny business with his handcuffs.' His laugh caught in his throat and there was a pause as he struggled to catch his breath. I wondered if he was lying down on his office divan.

'That's wonderful advice, Richard: pick on a weedy looking polis, the one with the Napoleon complex. I'll remember that. So who am I opening for?'

'You know these events, William. They're not name in lights occasions, but they have the benefit of equality, there's no headline act.'

‘OK, am I on first or second?’

‘My understanding would be first.’

‘So who am I preceding?’

‘A fine duo known as The Divines.’

‘Tell me they’re mind-readers and not strippers.’

‘They’re billed as erotic dancers.’

‘Really pitching me high, Richard, support act to a pair of lap-dancers.’

‘Don’t knock it, William. I’ve seen these girls, they need a lot of support if you get my drift.’

‘What’s the bottom line?’

‘Peachy, you could write a symphony about their bottom lines.’

I was beginning to understand why Richard had so few female artistes on his books.

‘What’s my fee?’

‘Two-fifty. Hey, who knows, maybe you could buddy up with the girls for the night? Make some of their clothes disappear?’

‘A real novelty act.’

Down the line more smoke was sucked into lungs.

‘Don’t be so bloody Scottish. Tell you what, if you get laid I’ll waive my ten percent.’

I said, ‘You’re a prince, Richard.’

And heard his laugh collapse back into coughs as I hung up the receiver.

*

That evening a bomb scare on the tube shut down main stations and the flatmate of the girl who filled in as

my occasional assistant informed me that Julie had got *a proper acting job*. When I asked her if she fancied taking over instead she'd laughed and said, 'After the stories Julie told me? You must be joking,' and hung up still laughing.

I wondered if I could get a volunteer from the audience, but half-cut coppers waiting for a skin act didn't seem promising recruitment material. Hurling beneath the city in a carriage, pressed amongst jaded commuters who would rather take their chances than be rerouted and nervous tourists bracing themselves for an explosion, my mind drifted towards the dog track. A quick change of underground line and I could be there in time to place a bet on the third race. There was a young dog in the running that I fancied, it was untested enough to have high odds, but could do well if the conditions were right. I was onto a sure two-twenty-five from the gig once Richard had shaved his commission off the top, but if luck was on my side I could win a lot more. I thought about the money I owed my bookie and the demand for rent that the landlord had slipped under the door that morning after he'd got tired of battering on it. Next time he'd send one of his sons with a key and a couple of helpers to give me a hand shifting my gear onto the street.

We pulled into the station where I needed to switch line if I was going to abscond and I almost got to my feet, but I'd never missed a show to go gambling yet. Only addicts took a bet on their job.

The club turned out to be a private members' place in Soho. I found the street, walked three blocks, then realised I'd overshot it and had to retrace my steps. The entrance was at street level, an anonymous green door with no sign or brass plate to distinguish it, just a number beside an unmarked

buzzer. I pressed the buzzer and somewhere in the building a mechanical droning announced my presence.

There was a brief pause, then a bustling beyond the door and a Judas hole slid back with a crack. A pair of green eyes painted with emerald glitter and fringed by false eyelashes appeared behind a tiny wrought-iron grill. They stared at me unblinking, like an exotic anchorite.

I said, 'Joe sent me.' And the Judas hole slammed shut. When it became clear that the door wasn't going to open I buzzed again. This time when the hatch slid back I gave my name and when that got no response added, 'I'm the conjurer.'

'The what?'

The voice was cockney, younger than I'd expected and full of scorn. I gave her the benefit of the William Wilson grin and said, 'The magician.'

The eyes looked me up and down, and found me wanting. The voice said. 'That's funny, I thought you were a bloody comedian.' And buzzed me in.

'You're late.'

The door led straight into a tiny entrance hallway divided by a counter into a reception and cloakroom. Black carpet ran across the floor, ceiling and walls. A harsh neon strip revealed fag burn melts and ooze between the jet pile. I guessed a TV design guru wouldn't approve, but once the lights were down it would suit the musty come-alive-at-night feel of the place.

The green eyes belonged to a large pale girl, squeezed into a red and black dress whose lace-up bodice was losing the struggle to control her bosoms. She was the kind of girl old gentlemen like to pinch: ripe and big, with skin that fitted like skin should. Once you got past the hardness of her stare she'd be a fine pillow against the world. Her hair was

a mass of white-gold curls, piled high and tumbling on the top of her head. A soft blush of down brushed her cheek. The overall effect was voluptuous, blowsy and somehow Victorian. My grandmother would have called her a strumpet, but I thought she looked too good for this place.

The girl lifted a flap on the counter and put it between her and me.

I smiled and asked, 'All on your own?'

I was aiming for avuncular, but it sounded like a line that Crippen might have used. The girl ignored me and switched on the Tiffany lamp on the counter, then started to dim the overheads.

'What's in the case?'

'My props.'

'Have you got a rabbit?'

'Aye, but he's invisible.'

She gave me a disgusted look that suddenly revealed the teenager beneath the makeup.

'Bill's upstairs chatting up the tarts.'

I guessed she was used to creeps and thought of saying something to show her I wasn't one of them, but couldn't come up with anything other than, 'Maybe I should go and introduce myself.'

She shrugged with a look that said she expected nothing less and pointed towards a set of swing doors.

'Changing rooms are through the bar and up the stairs.'

The bar was a larger, more dimly lit version of the foyer. A disco light bounced a coloured spectrum half-heartedly against the walls and from somewhere an eighties chart hit, that I dimly remembered from a stint I'd done at a holiday camp in Kos, was blasting across a tiny dance floor. A few

men who looked too serious to consider dancing sat drinking at dimpled copper tables. I might be late, but the party wasn't swinging. They dropped their voices and followed me with their eyes as I passed. They would be hard men to entertain, hard men full stop. I gave them a nod and they kept their gaze level, each man's stare a mirror of his companion's even look. I thought of a school of fish, each in tune with the other, slipping as one through a dark ocean. I wondered if Rich had meant two-fifty before or after his cut. I always forgot to ask.

At first glance Bill looked vintage doorman. Broad-shouldered, squat-nosed and tuxedoed. He was leaning against a dressing-table, arms folded, long legs crossed. The door to the room was half-closed but I could see two slim girls reflected in the mirror behind him, one Asian, the other a Jean Harlow blonde. The blonde girl was the shorter of the two, but they looked strikingly alike, monochrome sisters, hair styled into the same short curly bob, jeans and T-shirts not identical but similar enough to be interchangeable. I was no connoisseur of ballet, but I thought I might be able to tolerate watching them dance.

Bill leaned back slowly, giving me a good glimpse of his long profile, and said in a public school mockney that made me suspect he'd got his broken nose at a hunt meeting, ' . . . everyone has a good time'.

I banged my case against the banister to avoid hearing the rest of his instructions and he pushed open the door gently with the toe of his smart black shoe, revealing a quick flash of metal segs. The toe was slim, but I suspected it would be steel capped.

Bill's move was smooth and unhurried but his expression flashed from smile to wary then to smile again as he

spotted first me, then my equipment case with its motif of gold stars, and guessed who I was.

‘Mr Magic, we were just wondering when you’d appear.’

‘We thought you might come in a puff of smoke,’ cut in the blonde girl.

I said, ‘There’s time yet.’

And we all laughed.

Bill straightened up with the elegance of a sneak thief.

‘Meet Shaz,’ he put his arm around the Asian girl’s waist, ‘and Jacque.’ His free arm snaked around the small blonde. Bill squeezed his captives who staggered slightly on their high heels. He smiled. ‘Lovely. Well I guess we should leave you ladies to powder your noses.’

He kissed them twice, continental style, then closed the door gently behind him and fished out a white hanky, absently wiping his mouth before folding it back into a perfect triangle and returning it to his breast pocket. He held his hand out to me.

‘Mr Williams.’

‘Wilson.’ I didn’t like the way he’d wiped the feel of the girls’ flesh from his lips. I wondered if he would wash my handshake from his palm. I thought I might his.

‘Mr *Wilson*,’ he let the emphasis hang on my name as if he was amused I’d bothered to correct him. Letting me know it didn’t matter to him who I was, or perhaps that in his world one name served as well as another. ‘The girls have commandeered our only dressing room, but there’s a few cubby holes on offer if you need to change or,’ he paused, smiling, ‘fix your makeup.’

‘Are you trying to tell me my mascara’s run?’ He gave me a quick sharp look, then laughed. ‘I’d appreciate somewhere to go through my props.’

Bill showed me into a shabby bedroom equipped with two single beds draped with orange and brown floral covers and polyester valences that had long lost their bounce. He leant against the doorjamb. Leaning in doorways seemed to be Bill's thing. He watched as I laid the suitcase on one of the beds and unfastened its clasp.

'You based in London, Mr Wilson?'

'Ealing.'

'Travel much?'

'When required.' Bill might just be making casual conversation or he might be looking for a travelling man to deliver a parcel or two. I set a pack of playing cards on the bed and changed the subject. 'So how's business? Club keeping you busy?'

'Busy enough. Keeps me out of mischief. Speaking of which,' he turned to go, 'anything I can get you before I start mingling with the invited guests?'

'I could manage a white wine.' I slapped my stomach. 'I'm on a bit of a health kick.'

Bill smiled.

'I'll have a bottle sent up.'

I turned back to my case. In truth there was nothing I needed to do to prepare, but Bill still lingered in the doorway.

'A word of warning on tonight.' I looked back at him. 'These guys are here for the booze and the girls, for most of them you're an unexpected bonus.'

'Nice to know you think I can improve on booze and girls.'

Bill's smile looked like a threat.

'The inspector who's retiring is nicknamed the Magician. I think you're more in the way of an in-joke.'

'Good to be in.'

‘Just remember this isn’t a kid’s birthday party. If I were you I’d keep it short and snappy.’

‘Don’t worry, I know my place.’

‘Good, always best to make sure everyone understands each other. I reckon they’ll be ready in about half an hour, so take all the time you need.’

‘As long as it’s short of thirty minutes.’

Bill smiled.

‘We don’t want people getting impatient.’

I’d expected the door girl to bring up the wine, but when the knock came it brought a familiar face.

‘Sam?’

‘The one and only.’ Sam Rosensweet smiled. He slid himself and a tray holding two glasses, a corkscrew and a bottle of white wine into the room. ‘How you doing?’

‘Great.’ I got to my feet and slapped him on the back. ‘Good to see you, man.’

‘Hey!’ Sam raised the tray in the air, like a ship’s waiter serving through a squall. ‘Watch the merchandise.’

I pushed the lamp on the small bedside table to one side and Sam settled the tray in the gap. ‘So how are you?’

Sam started to work the corkscrew into the bottle’s cork and grinned.

‘Never better.’

‘Nice threads.’

He glanced at his suit.

‘Yeah well,’ Sam pulled the cork from the bottle and poured us each a glass. ‘When in Rome.’ He handed me my drink. ‘How about you, William? Still a slave to the gee-gees?’

‘You know me, always the animal lover.’

He shook his head.

'I'm not sure following form quite qualifies you as St Francis. Won't keep you warm at night neither. You want to quit all that and get yourself hooked up with a nice bird.'

'That's good advice coming from you.'

Sam grinned.

'You know what I mean. How's old Fagin? You seen him lately?'

'He set me up with tonight.'

'Aha.' He sat down on the single bed opposite me and took a sip of his drink. 'That's where you're wrong. You've got old Sam-I-Am to thank for this particular box of tricks.'

'Yeah?' I tried to look grateful. 'Rich didn't say anything.'

'Well he wouldn't would he? Wants to make sure of his 10 per cent, greedy sod.'

'Cheers, Sam.' I raised my glass in a toast, then put it to my lips and took a sip. Its cheap sourness cut through the chill. 'Thanks.'

'No worries, you and me go way back.'

'And ... ?'

Sam laughed.

'You may not be a whizz with girls and horses ...'

'You can add dogs to that.'

'Ah, William.' Sam shook his head, looking like a priest caught between sorrow at the sin and the satisfaction of being able to squeeze a few more 'Our Fathers' from the sinner. 'Despite all your weaknesses, when it comes down to it, there's no flies on you. OK there might be a bit more to tonight than meets the eye. But you just sit tight and it'll all come out cushy.'

Sam was a young comic who had also been under Rich's tough love care. We'd spent a long summer season together until he'd decided he could do better under new

management. I'd not seen him for a year, maybe longer. In that time he'd grown leaner, but in a sleek way. He chinked my glass and knocked back the last of his wine.

'I'd better shift myself. Bill's got a jealous streak. He's already suspicious about why I suggested you.'

'You mean you and him ...?'

'Yeah,' Sam's face lit up. 'You wouldn't think it to look at him would you?'

'No, you wouldn't.'

'Yep, he's a mean queen-killing machine. For me to so much as look at a bloke is to condemn him to a cement overcoat.'

'Maybe you should open the door then, let him see there's nothing to worry about.'

Sam laughed.

'Your face, William. Don't worry. I'm just having you on. Now he's seen you he won't be worried.'

'What do you mean?'

Sam got to his feet and moved to the door.

'That's what I love about you William, always able to laugh at yourself. I'll catch you after the show eh? Bill likes me to stay in the wings when he's got business on, but we'll grab a drink, the three of us, when you've done your set.' He gave me a last grin and I thought I could see a new, tougher Sam beneath the comic I'd known. It was hard to imagine this new shiny version bothering to parry some of the heckling I'd seen the old Sam spar with. He said, 'Don't let me down. I gave you a big build.' Then shut the door gently behind him.

I sat for a moment, after Sam's footsteps had faded down the stairs, wondering what I had got myself into. Then I took the bottle by the neck, slipped into the hallway and

tapped at the door of the girls' dressing room. A female voice said, 'Oh, for fuck's sake!'

There was the sound of another woman laughing then the Asian girl opened the door. I held up the bottle of wine.

'I thought you might fancy a wee drink.'

Shaz leaned in the doorway, her left hip jutting towards me, right arm swinging the door slowly against her body.

'We've got our own thanks.'

Through the slim gap I could see the blonde sitting at the dressing-table, intent on her reflection. Both girls were wrapped in long cotton dressing gowns, their makeup bright and showgirl thick. The door started to close on Shaz's smile. I slid a foot into the room, and her smile died. She said in a calm voice, 'Jacque, will you phone down to the bar and tell them we've got a wanker up here?'

Jacque looked up from the dressing-table. I held a hand up in surrender, but kept my foot where it was.

'No, look, don't, I've got a proposition for you.'

Jacque's voice was weary.

'In case you haven't noticed we've got all the work we need right now, love.'

'That's right,' the other girl was calm but there was an edge to her voice that had been absent before. 'We're going to have our hands full.'

'It'll be an easy score for one of you.'

'There's no such thing, mate.'

'Oh, ask him what he wants Shaz.'

I looked beyond the gatekeeper at the girl in the mirror.

'Purely business.'

She kept her gaze on her reflection; concentrating on pencilling a beauty spot on her left cheekbone, level with the corner of her eye. She frowned at the pressure of the pencil against her skin.