

Songs of Bliss

A Dancing Pig Originals novel

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Dedication:

For my darling wife, Karen, with us in spirit and without whom...

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Vagabond Shoes

"These days you have to stay in shape. My mother-in-law started walking five miles a day when she was sixty. She's ninety-seven now and I have no idea where she is..."

Polite but restrained laughter.

The comic sweats under the spotlights, his shiny gray suit starting to show signs of dampness around the armpits. He mops his brow with a handkerchief. One liners are his stock in trade, mostly borrowed from other, preferably dead, comedians.

Four seconds. Silence.

Ted Line, resident compere at Snuggle's Cabaret Bar, ploughs on.

"I remember the first time I had sex... I kept the receipt".

Deadpan.

Ted can't remember the last time he had sex. He's in freefall without a parachute, exposed and wounded, but Ted is a trouper and sticks to his script. Forged in the furnace of light entertainment, blending a vaguely remembered youthful enthusiasm and a brief middle aged flirtation with the bright lights of television, Ted is like Excalibur; wet and drowning.

In a former life he was the straight half of Bread and Line, a comedy duo in the mould of Morecambe and Wise or the Smothers Brothers, whose main claim to fame was that their combined earning power was reflected directly in their amusing stage soubriquet. The duo were asked to do a pilot for the BBC in the seventies but they were not asked back to do a series. Lenny Bread gave his last performance seven years ago, falling off a stage in Lowestoft mid way through a blonde joke. It was the funniest thing he'd ever done.

Lenny left Ted without an act. Prior to turning up on the doorstep at Snuggle's Cabaret Bar, Ted's solo career had peaked with a brief round of sombre interviews and one slot on a Channel 4 list program. Lenny, the funny man, lives on ambrosia with the great mother-in-law in the sky, while the straight man lives in a bed-sit in Barnstaple, on the North Devon coast, and keeps the punters from killing themselves in between acts of incredible bravado or, as is often more likely, awesome stupidity. Snuggle's Cabaret Bar is a tiny universe full of star struck kids and failed contenders.

Ted readjusts. The great British public's appetite for sexual innuendo and smut is being irrevocably embarrassed into a state of silent nausea. There's something about a sixty year old, down at heel chain smoker that kills the comic effect. Ted decides that it's time for something more highbrow.

"What if there were no hypothetical questions?"

From the wings, hissed, "What if there were no shit comics?"

Ted's left hand is behind his back, casually formal in a minor royal sort of way. He mops his brow with a bright red handkerchief and as he does so his free hand, the one behind his back, twists and he raises his index finger towards the shadows stage right.

Billy Whitlow, known to his devoted audience as Billy Nero, the 'Don of Doo Wap', sniggers as he prepares to wow the girls with his star spangled, Bennettesque delivery of classic era crooning. Like Ted, he is a regular at Snuggle's.

The wings are cramped and hot, although wings as a term is ambitious, there being only the one. The acts have to squeeze past each other during change overs. Props, instruments and the assorted paraphernalia of the lounge-bar spectacular come on and off stage the same way. Standing next to Billy is the lovely Leona, seventeen, and in her second year of theatre studies at North Devon College. Leona is the stage manager, which means she spends most of her evenings hissing into an old, ice-cream cone microphone, desperately trying to get the acts cued up for their moment of glory. The vibrating membrane in the speaker in the communal dressing room at the back of the club is badly frayed and the acts rarely understand a word Leona says. The running order, on the odd occasions that it gets typed up, rarely runs with anything approaching method or organisation.

Leona prods Billy with her pencil, giving him one of her well practiced 'God' looks. Billy puts a finger up to his lips and nods.

The stage is set simply, Snuggle's having no pretensions towards the theatrical. The stage has no proscenium arch nor does it boast complicated rigging, fancy lighting systems or tabs. The stage is open and semi-circular, running along the back wall of the cabaret room. The backdrop consists of four ancient and torn blacklegs held together with gaffer tape, over which hang an indeterminate number of metallic silver drapes. The silver fabric is split, like a fly curtain, and now hangs twisted and bent after years of shimmering behind acts of appalling mediocrity, reflecting the worn out spotlights in a thousand different directions.

Ted coughs in between jokes, partly because of his eighty a day habit, but mostly to fill the gaps where the laughter should be.

"Ever wonder about those people who spend two pounds on those little bottles of Evian water? Try spelling Evian backward."

This one gets a few tired chuckles.

At the far end of the room, sitting on a stool by the bar, Maggie Heard, the eponymous Snuggle, switches on a red shaded table lamp and drags a manicured, dusty pink fingernail across her throat. Ted knows the sign. Time's up.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, it's time to serve the main course. You've been lovely, you really have, and I'll see you all at the end of the show."

There's a groan from the bar.

"One last little observation before I go. Have you ever noticed the one nice thing about egotists is they don't talk about other people?"

A group of ladies of a certain age and outlook edge their chairs a little nearer to the stage. Ted instinctively takes a step back, turns towards the wings and raises his handkerchief hand in welcome.

"Put your hands together for your favourite egotist and mine, Billy Nero!"

Billy enters stage left, waving to his audience. Ted starts to walk in front of him, a deliberate foul, but checks himself at the last moment and slides around behind Billy and off stage.

Mild applause.

Cigarettes blossom in the gloom.

Young girls in black skirts and white blouses deliver over-blown shorts and sickly cocktails to tables. Billy takes a bow and plants himself firmly centre stage.

"Ted Line, ladies and gentlemen, one of the golden oldies, talking of which, Maestro..."

Billy points at a three-piece band seated on the main floor by the far end of the stage. "*Spanish Eyes*".

Accompanied by the Snuggle's Show Band on Hammond organ, drums and lukewarm jazz guitar, Billy opens his set.

Billy segues straight out of *Spanish Eyes* into a medley of Nat King Cole standards, keeping the mood soft and his girls in direct eye contact. Girls. He likes to think of them in soft pink hues, although he knows the first blush of youth has faded from their cheeks. He has no illusions about his sex appeal. Way back in the late seventies, when The Don had his one and only minor hit with a saccharine version of *Let It Be Me*, he played games with mothers and daughters. The mothers are, for the most part, dead or institutionalised. A few of the daughters, matrons themselves now, keep the flames alive, and although they don't burn quite so brightly these days, Billy can still sometimes coax those old flames into a simulacrum of life so that they flicker gently on the dark waters of the Torridge Estuary.

Unlike Ted, Billy gets a good, solid, middle-aged round of applause. It helps to have the girls in the audience. Their enthusiasm and affection lifts the spirit of the rest of the punters, allowing him a certain degree of latitude when it comes to hitting the higher notes. Billy has a good head of hair, still looks fairly trim for someone in his mid fifties, so long as he buys his suits from the more expensive end of the peg, and he doesn't sweat too much under the lights.

"Thank you, very much. The real King there. As ever it's a privilege to be back at Snuggle's, and I hope you're enjoying the show. I'm going to take you on a trip down memory lane on a journey to the stars." Billy winces inside slightly as he mixes his

metaphors. "We'll be meeting up with Frank and Tony, Tom Jones, Vic, Matt Munro, Andy Williams and, of course, my own little offering to the wonderful world of song."

Billy smiles for Colgate and walks over to the band. The sound of the hurdy-gurdies cueing themselves in can just be heard over the clatter of pudding bowls and cheese plates being cleared from tables. Coffee cups and desert plates full of house branded bitter-mints take their place. The drummer starts to slide his brushes over taut skin. A false start. Heads turn. The band paddle frantically towards the melody pursued by Billy's shark infested smile. The opening bars of *From Russia with Love* emerge from the chaos and Billy Whitlow dives back under the thickly silted, melodic waters that keep The Don of Doo Wap afloat.

As he sings, running on autopilot, his body and larynx accustomed to the task after thirty years, Billy watches the room, trying to gauge the mood. He also watches the bar at the back of the hall. The foreground offers its usual mixed bag of bodies and clothes, displaying every type of posh frock, from the truly elegant to the mutton. People sip coffee, some adding to the alcohol already in their blood streams with large cognacs, scotches or Cointreau on the rocks. Feet tap and the girls, who know the set like the back of their hands, mouth the words.

Although he appears to have eyes just for the front row, Billy's attention is firmly fixed on his employer. She sits, as she always does, on a stool at the bar where she can watch the room. The red table lamp that she uses to chivvy the acts along when she feels the pace slacken is off now. Maggie is in a half-life light, broken occasionally by the irregular crystal flash from her glass of apple juice. Maggie doesn't usually drink when she's working. She says it's hard enough running the place without adding maudlin hangovers to the mix. Her companion at the bar drinks enough for the two of them anyway.

The apple of Maggie Heard's eye is one Jock Cascarino, once a little fish in a big Glaswegian pool of criminality, now the fattest catfish lurking at the bottom of Barnstaple's muddy puddle. Jock makes up for the initial disappointment of his rotund body and his square, thick head through the sheer force of his personality, a force measured in irregular bouts of violence served cold by his two faithful employees, the smugly efficient Brothers Grim. Billy hates Jock Cascarino viscerally. He is, though, fully aware that Jock is the alpha male in the immediate locale and that he, the Don, has to pay his dues, picking at scraps once the carcass of life has been dragged through North Devon's thick red dust. The groans from the bar that pierce Ted Line's heart come from Jock Cascarino.

Billy's set drifts through the Vegas heartland, sometimes languorous, occasionally animated, and always accompanied by the mediocrity of the Three Musketeers in the corner. Their motto, thinks Billy, should be 'All for one, but never quite at the same time'. The only constant is Billy's smile. He wraps up the set with a full blooded version of *My Way* and the band, who have meandered their way through classic arrangements like slugs in a beer mug, suddenly remember how to play. The audience cheers and Billy waves and bows, adrenalin pumping. He skips off, blowing kisses to his girls, and waits in the wings with Leona for his encore.

Some of the audience assume that it's time for dancing, time for the bar, and the

applause dies off far too quickly for Billy's liking. Trust the girls, he thinks, and, true to form, as the volume of general applause fades he can hear their voices calling out his name.

"Bill-ee, Bill-ee, Bill-ee".

One of the girls waves her lighter in the air.

The band knows the score. *Let It Be Me* begins. Half of the errant punters return dutifully to their seats. The remainder, the socially dysfunctional in glad rags now finally released from the unfamiliar etiquette of public dining, are too concerned with their urgent need to visit the lavatory or to attract the attention of the two young men tending the bar. It doesn't seem to matter that the tables have waitress service. These paying guests need to work off the soporific effects of the limited repertoire that comes steaming out of Snuggle's kitchen. They want to put a little distance between themselves and the stage. Billy has to compete with the general hum of conversation coming from the back of the room, but slowly, as the song unlocks the heavy cell doors that incarcerate old memories, he wins back their attention.

Ted Line rolls on as soon as the last bar of the last song has been absorbed by the walls. He smells of cheap blended whisky. Ted thanks Billy, makes one last attempt to be funny and admits defeat, introducing the house band and inviting everyone to enjoy the facilities and the dance floor. The spots fade down to their dull gels and the cabaret is over.

Billy says thanks to Leona when she tells him how well it went and strides down the back hall to the communal dressing room. He changes his shirt, sprays on a little deodorant and checks his hair. In the old days, when he was a shooting star, he had the luxury of time and space. Now, desperate to avoid the ancient comic and his bad tempered, alcoholic ramblings, Billy makes a perfunctory visit to the world of personal hygiene, straightening his cuffs just as the old man wanders into the room.

"Nice one, Ted. Got to dash".

"Bastard", Ted mumbles to no one in particular as he walks over to a rickety refectory table and fills a plastic beaker with liquid rust. "Got to play the big-I-am with his fucking fan club. Has he seen the forearms on those women?"

Leona, who has followed Ted into the dressing room, grimaces as she switches off the tannoy speaker. Like Billy, she'll carry out her final duties of the evening with the minimum of effort and then head for the bar, although unlike Billy, who has no particular place to go, Leona has a crush on one of the boys serving drinks. She gives the back room a fleeting check over, fixes a straying strand of hair in the liver spotted mirror propped up at one end of the refectory table and makes her own exit, leaving Ted to his own declining devices.

The only way to get to the bar from the dressing room is across the stage. After the show and with the lights set for dancing the stage takes on a derelict ambience. Billy gets a slightly hollow feeling in his legs, as if he is about to leave fairyland and enter the land of mortals for the first time. Billy feels as though he is stardust caught in a decaying gravitational field. Billy lives in Bideford, just a few miles down the coast, so he is used to that peculiar West Country feeling of the down at heel, but he always feels discomfited when he leaves Billy Nero's comfort zone. He is fully aware that this part of the world has a

special affection for the slightly weird, for the wanderers of the twenty-first century, and while he knows that his happy face will see him through the next hour, he has to admit to a slight sense of fear. There is a screw loose out there. The world smells of wet rot.

A quick check of shirt collar and trouser hang and over the top he goes, moving across the abandoned theatre of dreams with his smile intact and already reaching for his pen. There are five of his girls waiting for him, table menus in hand, each one of whom he knows by name. He signs his stage name, pecks them on the cheek and invites them to join him at the bar. Wedding rings. A quick glass of something bubbly and a story or two. It's the game that pays his wages. It's been a long time since he felt true desire. Billy has little need for groupies, not now, not like he did when he was younger. Just occasionally, when the fire is in danger of dying down to the last embers, but not tonight.

Surrounded by other men's wives Billy berths himself on a stool, and orders a bottle of Cava and six glasses. The drinks are on the house. Sat in her corner station like an empress presiding over the games, Maggie nods and smiles. Publicity. Word of mouth. Every little bit helps and they won't be on the good stuff.

Billy glad hands, tells stories, cabaret tales and outrageous slanders, and takes the time to look like he is listening intently when appropriate. There are a few more autographs to sign, one of which, he is delighted and touched to find, is on the cover of his long playing record. A thirty-three and a third. Remaindered. A modern antique.

Speaking fluently while drinking little, he fulfils dreams, making a few low local horizons glow just that little bit brighter, thinking all the while of Bex, his daughter. Billy has to drive to Oxford in the morning to pick her up for a two week holiday with him in rainy Bideford. Tonight helps to pay the maintenance. She wants to be a vet, which means another five years of talking to her mother. Billy feels smugly warm inside when he thinks about Bex, his one lasting success, his sole real achievement in life, his sole number one.

One of the girls is about to leave and he gives her a little hug, a squeeze that she returns, and only then does he realise that she thinks the hug is really for her. He smiles back as she swoons and then totters homeward through the thinning crowd at the bar. Another Saturday night done and dusted. Tomorrow is Billy's day, the day when he sees Bex for the first time since Christmas.

The loose screw is Jock Cascarino.

At one-thirty the lights go up, encouraging the punters to collect their coats and head for home. By two o'clock, the club's licensed hour of closing on a Saturday night, the place is clear of people but littered with crumpled cigarette packets, discarded napkins and half full glasses. The low light, dreamlike ambience has been replaced by full strip light nakedness and the room smells of stale smoke. The doors are locked. Ted Line is asleep on the sofa in the dressing room, where he'll be left, as usual, to sleep through Saturday night and well into Sunday morning. The boys from the bar are stacking glasses, brushing a thousand cigarette tabs into buckets and, whenever the door is opened, disappearing in a cloud of steam that billows out from the wheezing cavern of an old, industrial dishwasher.

By the doors there are two frowning Colossi in black polo shirts and leather jackets, their arms folded across their chests. The brothers McCoist, Ken and Davie, are standing guard. They are a cliché, a lethally hackneyed idea.

Maggie is checking through the till rolls and sorting floats. Billy, Leona and Jock sit at the bar nursing drinks, that lock-in privilege of the inner circle. Leona, sitting to the right of the group, pays no attention to the two older men. She takes regular swigs from a bottle of some impossibly blue vodka kick and makes eyes at the lucky lad behind the bar who will drive her home when the glasses and ashtrays are gleaming.

"Not bad tonight", says Jock after a long silence. "Heard it all before, of course, but not bad. Could do with a bit of sprucing up, though, something new".

Billy can put up with Jock if Maggie is in the room. Nearly. The bait has been offered and although Billy sees it for what it is he can't resist taking a bite. "You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?" he says.

Delighting in Billy's obvious irritation Jock carries on in his flat Glaswegian demi-brogue, "I would, yeah. Something new, something a bit more up to date. Mind, I suppose when you're trading on the past like all those dead guys you talk about up there, it must be difficult to keep up with the times. That's the difference between you and me."

Billy groans. "Oh God, not the self made man speech."

"Why not? It's important. Take Maggie, for example. She's got something concrete here, literally, if you follow". Jock chuckles, warming to his task. Snuggle's is housed in what was once a mid-sixties estate pub, the perfect place to wind down a life as a nearly man. Suburban mediocrity writ large. "Some things stay the same, but she's always trying new stuff too, new menus, new acts, battle of the bands in a month or so. You should come along, by the way. Might be some new material you could borrow".

Billy shifts in his seat, staring straight ahead at the optics.

"I mean, I can see how tradition and style and that keeps you locked down, Billy, I really can, but you've got to have a plan for the future. Have you got a plan, Billy?"

"What?"

"Have you got a plan for the future Billy, something up your sleeve?"

Billy wishes he had an ice-pick up his sleeve and tries to savour the gore of a familiar image, of cold steel buried in Jock's forehead. He turns to look at Jock, picking his spot and catches sight of the McCoist brothers over by the door. He sighs, disappointed. The Glaswegian takes it to be a sign of defeat, but Billy smiles, drifting for a moment in the snapshot of Jock Cascarino lying prostrate in a pool of blood, before he answers.

"Well, yes, I do have a plan. Not the sort that needs gorillas or steel toe caps, just a simple little plan. I want to earn enough to pay my way and see Bex through college".

"Noble", says Jock as he casts a well practiced eye over Maggie's comfortably proportioned body as she moves behind the bar, checking the optics, "but predictable. I mean, that family stuff is all very nice, but isn't it just another way of saying you're giving up, that you're handing on the baton to another generation and waiting to die?"

"I think you're confusing me with Ted", says Billy draining the last of his scotch. He

puts the glass down on the bar and pours another slug from the bottle that he and Jock are sharing.

"Aye, maybe, but you are living in the past. For Christ's sake, look at the birds hanging on your every octave. Not one of them under fifty. They're dinosaurs, man".

Billy feels compelled to come their defence. "They're lovely. They're not eighteen year old nymphos, but what would I do with one of those? I've got nothing to say to kids. You can't be a teenager forever, well, most of us can't." He looks straight at Jock. "I like a woman to look like a woman, not a stick insect. Anyway, you're with Maggie and she's hardly a spring..."

Jock wags a finger under Billy's nose. "Off limits."

Billy looks away. He always does when Jock slides the hook deeper into his flesh.

Silence.

At times like this, with Jock's blunt needle wedged firmly under his finger nails, Billy hates himself. He'd swap any one of his girls for a night with Maggie. Billy and Jock trade blows with each other for this one simple reason. Jock is with Maggie. Billy has wanted her ever since he turned up for his first gig. He can see the moment clearly. He can still see her smile as she bought him a drink after that first show. That's the only real reason why he turns up once a month and sings in this God forsaken hole.

In spite of the Glaswegian gangster's goading, Billy feels as though he's doing all right, that he's getting through the swansong days of his life with a degree of dignity. He has a few regular spots in clubs around the South West, and he makes a nice living out of some of the region's more pretentious weddings. He gets invites to guest in Bristol, occasionally even London. The Palladium might as well be on the moon, but for a jobbing crooner he gets by. More importantly, he contributes to his daughter's well being and education.

The boys have finished clearing the bar. Ted and the cabaret room will be left for the morning cleaner. Leona and the boys say good night and are let out into the early morning darkness by the brothers McCoist. Jock deigns to offer a patriarchal wave to Leona as the door shuts and then turns back to the business in hand, back to Billy Whitlow.

"No, you should try harder, Billy. I'll admit my early days down here were a bit awkward. Drugs, girls, a little bit of this and that, but I changed. That's the point I'm making. I changed, Billy, got into property, bought up failing farms and converted them into holiday lets, second homes, you know the score. Wait for the daft old cowshed buggers to get in debt or for their bloody sheep to get sick with some fucking disease or other, move in, tidy up and pick the pockets of the stupid bastards pouring out of the Home Counties."

Billy has a question. He's asked it more than once, because he knows it's a way of returning Jock's fire, and that makes a little bit of a difference. It makes Billy feel as though he is fighting at the same weight. Jock is a self satisfied thug, who delights in winning, but the question keeps Billy in the game for a while. Billy knows that it's all smoke and mirrors, but he can't stop himself from playing the game. Ultimately he loses because Jock goes home to Maggie, but for a few moments he gets to watch the man squirm.

"Why did you really come down here?" Billy asks.

Jock sits, silent for a moment, a moment that Billy seizes.

"You've always said you were a player up there, so why come all this way to sleepy little Tarkaville? Something happen? Bit of bother with the polis?" That last word is emphasised in a cod Scots accent.

Eye contact. Flat and glassy. But then Jock smiles and says, "You need to get out more, pal", and with that he downs his drink, rises from his stool and wolf whistles at Maggie as she puts the last of the till rolls into her briefcase. The tills are cleared and the takings are in the safe, although with Jock Cascarino as her boyfriend, there is little likelihood of robbery. Even the local kids know not to mess with the club. It helps that the brothers McCoist live in the flat above the shop.

Jock blows Maggie a final kiss and says, "See you later babe, bit of business to do."

He and Maggie have obviously already discussed the matter. Maggie puts the briefcase on the bar and sighs. "Yeah, have a ball. Don't wake me when you get in."

She walks round to the front of the bar as Jock and his goons unlock the doors and leave. She locks up again and, as Jock's Lexus pulls out of the car park, she pours herself and Billy one for the road.

Billy is the first to speak. "I just don't get it. What do you see in Kray Minor?"

Maggie sits on Jock's still warm bar stool and leans against Billy's shoulder. "Security. And he wouldn't hurt me, Billy, not in a thousand years. He'll hurt anyone else who gets in his way, but he'll never lay a finger on me, which is more than I can say for some. He's not so different from you, you know."

Billy is appalled that Maggie should think of him in the same light as Jock, but he doesn't let it show. The conversation drifts and ebbs away, spiralling down through Billy's plans for Bex and the state of his love life. Maggie knocks back the dregs of her first and last drink of the evening, a little luxury at the end of another long week. Her bobbed, dyed blonde hair falls away from her head, revealing the soft skin of her earlobes. Billy wants to kiss her, imagines himself doing it and blanches.

Maggie straightens up, stands and says, "Come on, you old groaner, time to hit the road".

Maggie and Billy kill the lights and walk out of the club. Maggie sets the alarm and puts the keys into her briefcase. Once outside Billy offers Maggie his arm, which she takes, and they walk across the car park to her car, a bright blue Mini convertible.

"You're a good man, Billy Whitlow", she says as he turns to leave. "Don't let Jock get to you. In his own way he's a good man too. See you soon."

This is the moment, the minute when he breaks the spell. Alone in a car park under sodium orange lights, with the world tucked up and Jock out of sight, Billy can feel Maggie in his arms, can see her brief but ultimately useless protest fade away as she realises that Billy is her man. He hesitates, checks his step and wills Maggie to say something, anything that might call him back to her side. All that he hears is the beep of central locking and a car door opening. His foot falls back to earth with a dew damp, tarmac slap. He

coughs and heads away from the woman of his dreams, whispering a gentle adieu.

"Take care, Maggie".

It's three o'clock on Sunday morning.

Billy has a choice of route home. He could take the coast road that runs through Fremington's quiet little world of bungalow boredom, but he prefers to see the lights of Bideford scatter along the Torridge Estuary as he breasts the last hill on the main trunk.

The Little White Town has tucked itself up for the night and the roads are clear. Billy's Vauxhall is the only car on the new bridge, a perfect time for suicide. The Samaritans sign is positioned at the apex, the reading of which offers a last moment of redemption to the jumper. Jumping is not uncommon.

The tide is in and the street lights along the quay are reflected on gentle ripples. Rope lights are strung in the rigging of the Kathleen and May, the country's last operating merchant schooner, and they're switched on at night now to advertise the boat as a tourist attraction for Easter.

At the roundabout just after the bridge Billy turns left into the town centre, slows as he passes a speed camera and at the next junction, where a second hand car dealer spends his days polishing tired paintwork, Billy swings right and up the hill. The headlight beams from his car narrow and concentrate on to a green painted garage door and Billy pulls up on the drive in front of a compact, thirties, bay window semi-detached house. All of the neighbours' lights are out bar one house a few doors down. Saturday, sex, late night flicks, who knows. Billy yawns as he puts the key in the lock. The house is dark and quiet. Billy drops his keys on a glass topped telephone table, hangs his jacket on the banister and visibly sags as he walks into the sitting room.

Instead of Jock Cascarino's preferred tippie, a reasonable blend but a blend nonetheless, Billy pours himself a stiff single malt, picks a well thumbed copy of his favourite record from a shelf and slides the black vinyl from its cover. It's an act of love. Careful not to touch the record's grooves he places it on a Linn Sondek turntable, one of the few indulgences in an otherwise spare and simple interior. He sets the sound system so that his final memories of another long Saturday night will be soft and mellow. Billy lets Vic Damone sing him lullabies.

The record is his favourite, the one he always plays to himself after a show. *Linger Awhile with Vic Damone*. It's one of his hero's better recordings for Capitol from nineteen sixty-two, the stuff of dreams. Damone was signed by Capitol in sixty-one when they lost Sinatra to Reprise. Not bad for a boy who had to drop out of school and take a job as an usher and elevator operator in a movie theatre, the Paramount, in Manhattan.

Billy thinks about Bex, about the Gingerbread House, a term he uses to describe the place where his ex-wife spins her sugared web, and about the good old days. Like Vic, Billy bummed around in dead end jobs, singing in pubs for a few beers and little bit of cash on a Friday night, but unlike his hero Billy never did bump into Perry Como. He took the traditional route; working men's clubs, hard grind and a little luck.

He was spotted in summer season in Eastbourne by a producer looking for the new Tony Orlando. The build up was fun, but the choice of songs was poor and the timing sucked. They broke him with *Let It Be Me* the same week that the Sex Pistols split up in America.

The carousel starts to spin. Vic Damone, born Vito Rocco Farinola in nineteen twenty-eight, reaches track five, *Stella by Starlight*, and Billy reaches a state of grace. His soul reels in the thread by which Billy has dragged it around since waking, settles on his shoulder and together they fall asleep in the armchair as Vic croons softly into their cotton wool ears.

The Night Has a Thousand Eyes

A steel grey Mercedes taxi swings round and leaves a solitary male figure standing at the kerb of the Avinguda de la Mar. It's early April, three o'clock in the morning and the temperature is even and comfortable. Lights flicker in dilapidated shop windows. The threat of garish neon that fills most of the visible street front signage hangs cool and dull. The late traveller picks up a single sports holdall and starts to trudge down the Carrer de L'Ingenyer Serrano Lloberes, towards the harsh brilliance of the lonely, night-owl bars that stay open into the small hours for insomniac sailors working the aggregate freighters along the Mediterranean coast and beyond. This is the Paseo de Bonavista and the Factoria Rio Tinto, Castellon de la Plana, Spain.

Apartment lights sneak out through shutters closed to the night above the shop facades, and in one of them a crooner sings gently through a tinny transistor radio speaker. American schmaltz. A fifties throw-back. Alex Berisa stops at the traffic island at the end of the Serrano Lloberes and watches a lone scooter whine along the Paseo. The sound of drilled out baffles echoes off the stripped back and bare sides of the empty street. A fine layer of dust from the Factoria's processing and shipping of aggregates mutes the surfaces of the street furniture. Shop windows show streaks and diffused shades of colour under the street lights. Everything that Alex looks at or touches is coated in a whimsy of pulverised stone dust and he wonders what the place is like in high summer when the heat stifles and the breezes off the sea carry thick, choking clouds of powder into the lungs of the local inhabitants. The low level industrial rawness of the port area does not seem so very different from home.

Home is where the heart is, except that Alex's heart is broken. It is not the breaking of bonds with a lover, nor is it the failure of family blood that erodes care and tenderness with the dull edged disappointment that hollows out the soul slowly over the years. Alex is tired. The family, the blood and the honour, the unswerving loyalty are all that he has to sustain him. The empty streets down which he walks at the dead hour of the night are a fitting place for the terminally ill, and he feels as though he has a cancer in his bones, a tumour of hate and revenge placed there by Arbnor Jasari. A doctor. The family doctor. The magician. The chemist. Betrayal lies at the heart of it all, betrayal and a sister who is condemned to spend what remains of her life living like a vegetable. Betrayal and shame.

Alex is the Capo Bastone, the trusted captain, the man in day-to-day charge of affairs, managing the family's business interests in the coastal Adriatic clubs and bars that sit within his family's sphere of influence.

The port area around the Factoria is brutally familiar, just like Durres, a place that Alex has already visited and left behind in his search. Arbnor Jasari is on the run, on the high seas with a satchel full of the family's dollars and little regard for the damage that he has done, for the destruction, for the living death that he has inflicted. Alex nearly chokes on the pain of it all as he heads along the Paseo. A bright red and yellow sign draws him down the street. At arms length, in places where people make their choices and live with the consequences, Alex has never before given a second thought to what he does. He cannot afford the luxury of sentiment. It is business, a chance to put the record straight, to make good the loss of honour, to avenge.

The ritual of death, the killing of a couple of family soldiers, is something to be expected. These things happen from time to time in the Berisa family business. For Alex the betrayal is in the doctor's running, is in his failure to face up to his responsibilities. It is why Alex is here now, at this late hour, in an industrial dust bowl in a foreign country. He is facing his own responsibilities, and in the facing of them, although he might not mend his heart, he will take a grim satisfaction in doing the right thing. It will sustain him through the hard months and years to come, through the inevitable moments when he has to look at his sister. Rezarta. Beautiful, vacant Rezarta.

As he walks away from the Factoria towards the late night bars frequented by a polyglot sea of sailors and the hardier members of the local community, he turns to look at the lights on the cargo ships that lie at anchor, loading and unloading, ploughing their way through blue Mediterranean waters. Jasari made his way from Vlore to Durres and hooked up with one of the freight lines, Med-Seva, Russian owned and Maltese registered, spending dollars on a private passage out of Albania. Alex has called in favours to get this far and now he too must spend dollars. The doctor can run, but he can never hide from the Berisa family. Not now. Alex tells himself this again and again as he steps in and out of shadows, but in truth Alex feels the trail already wearing thin. The doctor has a head start of almost a week and Alex is certain that his quarry is already running again.

Low lights and hunched shoulders. Some of the conversation in the bar stops as Alex enters. He is out of place, a tourist, a lamb for the slaughter. He is sporting a day's stubble and he knows that he looks like a fool with a wallet full of hard currency. Alex surveys the room, looking for the tell tale signs of fellow travellers, ideally someone from his own place and people, but the pale base skin of a Russian will do. In the deep gloom of the bar everyone looks weather beaten, but Alex has a keen eye and a sensitive ear. Slavic undertones. Mannerisms out of place. Alex is also aware of the atmosphere, of the calculations being made about him. He walks up to the bar and orders a beer in faltering Spanish. A table to his right, towards the back of the bar, has a half finished bottle of vodka on it. Two men sit at the table in quiet conversation. Polo shirts and jeans. Jackets on the backs of their chairs. Western styles. Unmistakable.

Bottle in one hand, bag in the other, Alex walks to the table at the back of the bar and speaks Russian clearly and concisely, "Are you Russian? May I join you for a moment?"

The two men turn silently to look at Alex. They remain seated and soundless for moments that seem to thicken around Alex. The man furthest from him is the first to break eye contact, turning back to his drink, which he downs in one. The second man replies in a thickly accented English accent, "Who wants to know?"

Alex maintains eye contact with the second man as he walks around the table and takes a chair from another empty booth. He sits, putting his bag down between his feet and his beer on the table next to the bottle of vodka. His Russian is accented but technically almost flawless, an essential skill in his line of family business. "No one in particular". He reaches into his inside jacket pocket and pulls out a rough Polaroid picture and a crisp hundred dollar bill. "No one at all".

Away from the table the conversation levels rise again. It is nothing new, just Russians playing their games in the dark. The locals steer clear. A couple of anonymous merchant marine boys pay for a bottle cheap Spanish brandy and leave the bar. Alex passes the picture to the two sailors at his table and they both stare at the face in the picture for a few seconds. The man in the picture is Doctor Jasari. He looks almost emaciated, but has bright eyes. He has a receding hair line, but the hair is still long, like a prematurely ageing teenage rocker. Dark skin. A smile on thin lips. They both make the same monosyllabic reply to Alex's unasked question; "No".

Alex stands and reaches forward to pick up the picture, but before he can the second of the two Russian sailors slams his hand down on the hundred dollar bill. Alex smiles and nods. The man's hand closes over the foreign currency, leaving the picture for Alex to pick up. The first sailor looks up at Alex briefly and makes a movement with his eyes towards another group of three men sitting next to the bar's window. "Albanian fucks, like you".

Alex continues to smile at the two Russians. He can feel eyes on his back. A television set on a wall mounted bracket behind the bar is playing satellite Euro-sport. A Spanish commentator is going into overdrive about a sweating pack of cyclists. Alex picks up his drink and his bag, steps away from the table slowly and walks towards the front of the bar. The owner of the place is starting to get the fidgets. People asking questions at three-thirty in the morning freak him out. Alex puts his bottle of beer on a free table, walks over to the bar, asks for a bottle of brandy, pays with another hundred dollar bill and tells the bar owner to keep the change. Green-backs always take the sting out of the situation. Nearly always. Alex takes a second to lock down the faces and shapes of a couple of guys falling prey to money-lust over in the far corner. For their sakes he hopes that they don't think him easy to shake down.

The group by the window respond to a familiar accent. One of them is even acquainted with the family name, which helps to lubricate those parts of the conversation that the brandy and three further folded bills cannot reach. The picture is passed round the group, but none of them have anything positive to say. Alex is already scanning the bar for other likely sources of information as the men take a second large shot from the bottle of

brandy. The conversation drifts to stories of home, Tirana, Vlore, dreams of fishing boats and fat, fecund wives. The travelling world is full of stories of home, stories of darling little girls ripped from the bosom of beauty. Alex bids them have a good night and, spotting no more likely targets, picks up his bag and heads for the door.

He is followed. Alex knows that he is being followed. The tail is good but not good enough. In fact, thinks Alex, oddly not good enough, as though his shadower is trying too hard not to be spotted. Alex has flown to Spain and he is relatively unarmed, carrying only a knife borrowed from one of the airport canteens, which makes it a difficult but not an impossible situation. He heads for the Factoria. There are no cars on the road, no mopeds, nothing but the lights along the Paseo. Alex is in no mood to play games. He is tired and frustrated. He turns to face the following footsteps. It takes Alex a second to recognise the face of the second Russian. He was expecting one of the green-eyed boys from the table in the far corner of the bar. The Russian sailor beckons Alex into a doorway beyond the dim street lighting.

"You have more money?"

Alex nods slowly but he doesn't reach for his jacket pocket. "Depends on what you've got to say".

The Russian considers this for a moment and then shrugs his shoulders. He whispers in good English, "This face, I saw it. We are held up here by another ship. Kozlov line. Some problem with engine. This face, he was on board. Paid big dollars to one of her officers, a stupid Ukrainian boy who fancied himself and had a big mouth. The man in the picture sailed on that boat. He left some days ago, maybe two weeks, for England."

Alex can feel his heart rate quickening. The man has yet to give him any detail that can be corroborated, but the smell of Jasari is suddenly in the air, in his nostrils. Alex needs facts. "Yes, that's good, but how, where did you see him, what was the ship's name, where was it heading?"

The Russian looks at Alex and then at his jacket pocket. "I give you information. You want more you pay".

Cold, hard cash. It is what it all boils down to every single time. Alex feeds the man one more bill and holds another four in his hand. "So?"

"I say, Kozlov line. Valentin. I know this man is on board. I saw him one night in the ship's mess. We went over to play cards, to take this Ukrainian boy's money. Your man was sitting quietly in a corner reading a book. I'm sure it was him. The Valentin goes to Bideford, Devon and then on to Lovissa, Finland"

A grand. Ten big ones. The world turns on every black and white, Bogart cliché and every one of those old, worn out phrases is worth the breathe and billfold. Alex has a destination, somewhere to aim for, a target upon which he can train his sights. He is on his way, walking the empty streets of Castellon de la Plana with a spring in his step. A taxi. A train. A flight to Paris and the Eurostar. How long, he wonders, does it take to sail from Castellon to England? He forgot to ask.

Alex makes a call on his mobile, long distance, roaming the night's dusty airwaves

for the comfort delivered by a familiar voice. The receiving phone rings ten or eleven times before someone picks up and a woolly voice answers.

Alex gets down to the gist of it without delay. "Xhev, it's London. Meet me as soon as you can. I'm going to be travelling for a couple of days so call me with the details. Oh, I'll need a hire car and the proper equipment. Make the arrangements, Okay?"

Why Was I Born?

Three men sit in silence. No conversation. The Lexus hums quietly. The only other audible sound is the rumble of rubber on tarmac. Ken McCoist, driving, manoeuvres the car to avoid potholes and sunken drain covers. White lining. Jock Cascarino sits in the back.

They pass a mock Gothic bus stop at Fairy Cross, heading out towards Hartland peninsular. Jock stares straight ahead, letting the soft digital glow from the dashboard wash through his thoughts. There's nothing worth looking at through the side windows. The North Devon Expressway is, for the most part, unlit. Trees line the road. The ghostly shapes of cream rendered houses flash by. Devon is a rural county, spread wide and thin. Jock hates the great outdoors.

The car speeds along the winding road, dipping down into a hard right at The Hoops Inn and on through Bucks Cross, ignoring the speed limit, lurching slightly on a tight left-hand bend. On the right, lit up and festooned in banners, Bideford Bay Holiday Park announces yet another sale of chalets and static caravans. Jock's meditation is broken.

"Have you phoned ahead?" he asks.

"Aye, he's ready", replies Davie from the front passenger seat.

"Good. Did you make the deliveries like he asked?"

"Oh, aye, picked up three on Friday night. They should be tucked up safely by now".

Jock moves to the centre of the rear bench seat, sitting forward so that he can look through the windscreen. The car takes a series of sharp curves. Ahead the lights of Clovelly Cross stand out in the darkness. A couple of miles to go.

"The good doctor seems to be settling in," he says, and chuckles. The brothers McCoist chuckle too.

Jock considers the workings of providence and finds that all is well with the world. The good Lord is in his heaven and the good doctor is on the farm. A perfect combination. Jock runs through the story again, scarcely able to believe his luck.

The good doctor is a refugee, but not of the political kind. True, thinks Jock, he'd qualify. There's every likelihood he'd be tortured and killed by his own government, but then again he's as likely to be tortured and killed by his old friends. And now he's mine, and, for the moment, I choose life.

Arbnor Jasari is on the run. Arbnor Jasari is valuable. Arbnor Jasari is known locally as the good Doctor Albania.

Ken McCoist sends the Lexus barreling down a narrow lane, spraying loose chippings into the hedgerows. This spindle thin thoroughfare is the main route into the ancient market town of Hartland, now nothing more than a large village. Lundy can usually be seen from this road during the day if the mists and the rain keep away, but it's pitch black now.

Full beam on the headlights announces their arrival even though there's still half a mile to go. The farm sits on a gentle down slope that has been scoured by Atlantic squalls for centuries. The trees are twisted, pushing their branches out towards the south-west in the direction of the prevailing wind. The rain, when it falls, which it does more often than not, is almost horizontal.

The farm. The old Sillick place. Built in the late nineteenth century by a fanatical gentleman farmer as a model of classical Victorian modernity, adorned with brick arches and eagle topped buttresses, the farm is a wreck. Jock bought the place six years ago, one of his first ventures in the property market, but the sheer cost and scale of the renovation work means it will stay derelict. It keeps the tourists away. Jock has other plans for the place now, anyway.

The site consists of a large, seven bed farmhouse, part of which has been made habitable again, and a range of huge, stone built barns, each one of which has walls three feet thick. The Sillicks raised pigs and the remains of sties decay in the winter gales. Abandoned machinery, seized solid with rust, litters the courtyard around which the barns are arranged. The house is in darkness. Doctor Jasari prefers to sleep where he works.

"I hate this place", says Jock as the car bumps down an unmade track, passes the old farm house and pulls into the courtyard. "Fucking albatross. A licence to burn money. Did I tell you about the Sillicks. Mad as hatters. The old man lost an arm in a combine. Could still knock seven shades of shit out of his boys and the wife, though. She, so they say, ran off with another woman. Can't say I blame her. When the old man died the brothers took to drink. I bought the place for a hundred and forty grand, lock stock and barrel. Reminds me of Glasgow after the ships went to Korea. Fucked."

The walls, which should be rendered, show salt leached brickwork in huge, naked patches. Window frames rot. Doors hang loose. To the left of the car is the old dairy, a two storey stone megalith just like the barns. At first glance it too looks like a shell, like a skeletal memory, but the car headlights reveal solid metal doors and steel shutters on the windows. From the upper floor a thin sliver of electric light can be seen where one of the shutters has warped slightly. Doctor Albania is at home.

Ken McCoist gets out of the car and opens the rear door for his employer. Davie stays put like he always does, on duty, watching. Simple Davie. All grunt and gristle.

Doors slam. Footsteps echo off barn walls. To reach the upper level of the dairy Jock and Ken go down a narrow passage at one end of the building. As they enter the passageway a motion sensor triggers a mesh encased light. The passageway leads to a staircase. Ken takes point, climbing two steps at a time and knocks on the door at the top, while Jock waits at the foot of the stairwell.

There is a closed circuit television camera mounted on the wall above the door. A

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