

OLD SINS, NEW SINS

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It was a wet day in June. The rain was pouring down in the cemetery. I could see it bouncing off the brims of the hats and the peaks of the baseball caps of the mourners as they gathered around the grave. There were only a few of them. Although cancer had finally caught up with him, he had still reached the age when most of his friends were dead. His inner circle was there; Dempsey, Brogan, Chavez, Black John, Ricardo and Placko, but not Patto. As the rain continued coming down upon the mourners in the cemetery, the scene before me reminded me of a similar scene in an old black and white movie starring Humphrey Bogart and Ava Gardner.

The Requiem Mass had been held in the old church of Saint Anthony of Padua. The church was icy cold that morning. The priest was Spanish, a Franciscan, his brown habit showing beneath his Mass vestments. His eulogy had been entirely in Spanish, but we had been handed a printed translation upon entering the church.

The Big Man was not there, but this was to be expected. He was now housebound and could not even cope with being pushed in a wheelchair. Soon we would be in this same church again for his Requiem.

The coffin, which the priest had blessed with holy water at the end of Mass, was made of cheap plywood with imitation brass handles. There were no flowers on it.

I had parked my car just outside the cemetery and I was watching the proceedings from there. Not because of the heavy rain. I was used to that in Paris where I lived. It was because I did not wish to intrude upon the internment. I had not been in his inner circle or the outer one either.

I watched as the coffin was lowered into the ground. It all seemed so final. The six mourners remained for some time, as if in silent prayer. Eventually four of them left with the priest; Chavez and Black John remaining for another twenty minutes before they also departed. I noticed that Chavez was holding a rosary, his fingers passing through the beads. Then I drove away. As I did so, the rain stopped and a weak sun peered slowly through the dark clouds.

It was a few months later that we were back again in the same church for the Requiem for the Big Man. This time the priest was an American, a secular priest and his eulogy was in English, albeit with a mid-West accent.

On the death of the Big Man, the quiet and unassuming Al Dempsey would be the top man with the large, robust ex-gangster Ben Brogan assisting him. These two opposites complemented each other, but Dempsey would be the stronger. He possessed an inner strength and determination.

This time I did not go to the cemetery. It was time for me to go home to Paris. When I got there it was raining.

Having settled back in my apartment in the 10th arrondissement, I made my way to Henri's Bar, just a short stroll from the Gare du Nord. Henri greeted me with his usual sombre show of respect.

There were just three of us inside. There was a bar fly sitting at the bar with a biere a la pression. Laporte was sitting on the far side on the left. He was doing battle with a large baguette of jambon and fromage. I sat nearby as that was the only seating away from the bar. I became aware that Laporte was giving me the hard stare. I do not do hard stare games so I ignored him. After a while he spoke: "You're Freddie Neale. You used to be in the Blue Brigade." I nodded. Then eventually I replied: "Yeah. Not for long. I wasn't good enough. I didn't make it to the outer circle."

"I did," he said.

I was surprised. I didn't rate him good enough either. I stared at him and compared him with those I knew in the outer circle: Sinclair, Steiner and the Weldon Brothers. He didn't match up to them. He saw my look and then confessed: "I wasn't actually in the outer circle, just on its fringe."

After a short silence, I surrendered to my curiosity. "Did you know Marcias?" I asked him. He shook his head. "No. Perhaps just as well."

"I did," I said with a degree of triumph. "He was good to me." He tried to appear unimpressed and then said: "You're a hard man to track down."

I remained silent, waiting for him to continue which he obviously intended to do.

"Plymouth, Exeter, Brentwood, Oxford, Hull, North Harrow. Now Paris. You get around." He said.

"I'm a nomad."

"The Blue Brigade has a little task for you."

"I'm not with the Blue Brigade now." A year ago I had retired as an accountant in Harrow. I now just did some consultancy work online which kept me in beer money. I was enjoying the easy life, the highlight being my almost daily visit to Henri's.

Laporte continued, obviously warming to his subject. "There is a terrorist, Ahmed Khan, MI5 have him on their books, but they are not taking any notice of him.

The Brigade has always considered MI5 to be inefficient and ineffective. This man is geared to strike somewhere in London in a few weeks. If we don't stop him, there will be another Westminster Bridge, a potential mass murder. You used to live in Pinner Road, North Harrow. Khan is at present living just two doors from your old house there. All we want you to do is to return to live in North Harrow for a few weeks and keep an eye on him, for that is where he is based, North Harrow. He won't suspect you, returning home. We've even bought your old home there. You're a good observer. Just watch him for us and let us know when he is ready to strike. Patto and the others will do the rest.

At the mention of Patto – the absentee at the cemetery – I felt a cold shiver run down the back of my spine. The Blue Brigade had their hit men; their immaculate killers they called them. Patto was the number one. His speciality the Mexican stiletto. Then there was one known just as the Ferret, a vicious little creature. I shuddered. The B.B. did not believe in taking prisoners. Anyone in their sights would soon experience the big sleep.

Laporte continued: "The Big Man recommended you just before he died."

I was surprised. "I was never aware that he had even heard of me, let alone know of me," I replied.

"He knew most things. He had his network of spies, especially when he became housebound in a wheelchair."

When he mentioned the Big Man I thought about what the Blue Brigade wanted me to do. Although I had never met him, I admired the Big Man from afar. I did not approve of their killing tactics, but the fact was that if what they said was true, another Westminster Bridge incident could occur. The only part I would play was to observe this man and report back on his movements. This could be done by texting or e-mailing and Laporte assured me that all e-mails would be deleted including on hard drive.

It was weird being back in my old house in Pinner Road. 1929/1930, semi-detached, large rooms, well built. It had not altered, only the furniture which now was sparse, just the basic necessities. In the lounge a sofa, two arm-chairs, a coffee table, a TV, computer and ipad. In the kitchen just a table and one chair, which I thought was significant. The bedroom had just a bed and a small bedside table. Also in the lounge was an empty bookcase, except for one paperback, a copy of the Lady in the Lake by Raymond Chandler.

There were several photographs of Khan on the ipad. I was surprised by what I saw – a man in his late 20s or early 30s dressed in a pin-striped suit, white shirt and blue tie. I was told on e-mail that he worked for the Revenue and Customs.

The next ten days were strange, nostalgic, restrictive and somewhat boring. It was strange and nostalgic being back in my North Harrow existence. There was still the One Shop in Station Road where I could stock up on provisions. It was restrictive because I had to be in constant observation of Khan who was staying two doors away from me. Boring because I couldn't do anything or go anywhere, except watch him. When in London, as in Paris, there are so many things you want to do or visit. All I could do was to follow Khan all the time – on the Metropolitan Line and Bakerloo tube to Whitehall and the 186 bus to Harrow from which I followed him to the Mosque in Harrow Wealdstone. When was he going to do something? When was he going to strike? Was he ever going to strike?

And then it happened!

It was a Saturday morning. He left his house and turning right, walked pass the traffic lights at the crossroad, pass the gym and crossed the road to the row of shops and two pubs on the other side.

Finally Khan entered one of the small shops there in Pinner Road, near to the bus stop. I was watching from across the street. Suddenly Patto and the Ferret were beside me as if from nowhere. I pointed to the shop that Khan had entered. They crossed the road and followed him into the shop. Too late they realised that it was a trap. There was a mighty explosion. The shop and its neighbours were blown apart. Two passers-by were killed by the blast, the air sucked out of their lungs. A car passing by was blown onto its side. A double decker bus was blown off course, fortunately remaining erect. Across the road, the blast blew me to the ground. I struggled up onto my feet. I could hear screams, but only just about because the blast had deadened my ear-drums. Then came the loud wailing of sirens approaching. Soon there would be police, ambulances, fire engines.

No one could have survived that terrible explosion. I hoped that Khan had killed himself as well as Patto and the Ferret.

I needed to get away from there. I was still shaken, but no injuries as far as I could tell. As fast as I could I made my way along Pinner Road in the direction of Pinner. Suddenly from another surviving side alley on the far side, Khan appeared. He must have triggered the bomb from a remote control device. He was still neatly dressed: suit, white shirt, blue tie. He crossed the road and went down Canterbury Road. I followed him at a discreet distance. I had never killed anyone before, but, although I didn't like them, I was determined to avenge Patto and the Ferret. They would have done the same for me.

I had my large Bowie knife, old but recently sharpened. I drew it from my pocket. At the end of that section of Canterbury Road, Khan turned left into Station Road. I followed him around the corner. He was waiting for me. He was drawing a small Derringer pistol, but he was not quick enough. I stabbed the Bowie into

him below the ribs, another blow between the ribs and a third above the ribs. One stab for Patto, one for the Ferret and one for me. The second strike killed him and he crumpled to the pavement, blood pouring down his white shirt and trousers and onto the pavement. It was messy. I confirmed that he was dead.

There was no traffic going by. I dragged the body into an open front garden and hid it behind a small wall. Now I had to get away from there. Turning still left along this residential section of Station Road, I walked semi-fast along the street.

Suddenly two men in smart suits appeared before me. The old bill, I thought. I couldn't avoid them. I would be arrested. I felt my hand tighten its grip upon the Bowie, now back inside my pocket. Then one of them called out to me: "Come on, Freddie, let's get you out of here." A car roared up at speed, a black one, maybe a Jag. The two men bundled me into it. It sped up Station Road, jumped a red light at the crossroads and careered right onto the A404, avoiding all the debris from the explosion.

On the left we passed a field with cattle in it. The car stopped at the next field which was empty. The two men bundled me out of the car into the field and left me there and departed in the speeding car. A helicopter was landing in the field; the wind from it blew me to the ground. Before it had fully landed, a man jumped out from it, grabbed me and hauled me into the copter. It took off. In a couple of hours I was back where it all started, Henri's Bar. Laporte was already there. Henri brought me a biere a la pression, grande. Laporte had paid for it.

"Once in the Blue Brigade, always in the Blue Brigade," he said.

"Not me," I replied.

I drank my biere, got up from the table and left the bar without another glance or word to Laporte.

I felt in my pocket for the Bowie. It has a channel down the blade to drip off the blood. Unfortunately Khan's blood had drained into my jacket pocket. The jacket would have to be cleaned, but I would ditch it. I wouldn't want to wear it again. It was soiled.

I was back in my apartment in the 10th arrondissement. I remembered there was a full bottle of Nuit St. Georges in the drinks cabinet in the sideboard. I opened the door and took out the bottle and a glass. Then I saw that there was a paperback on top of the sideboard. It was the one from the bookcase in my old house in North Harrow – The Lady in the Lake by Raymond Chandler. I had already read it, but I thought that I would read it again. Chandler always told a good story. Then I noticed the large brown envelope inside the leaves of the book. I retrieved it and opened it. Inside was a stack of used 5 euros notes. It took me sometime to count them – 20,000 euros. Blood money, I thought.

I cooked a ready-made meal in the microwave; cottage pie and drank some wine. I looked again at the stack of notes. Later that week I would have dinner and wine in the Georges Cinq.

I learnt later that Patto had somehow survived the blast, just about. The Ferret did not. Patto, the indestructible as they were calling him, spent over a year in hospital recovering, which he did not fully do so. He was back home across the Pond now.

Old sins haunt you; new sins take over from them and haunt you even more. I had become a killer which would live with me for the rest of my life. I thought how easy it was to kill a man, but I did not want to become another Patto. The Blue Brigade is good at revenge. If you kill any of their guys you don't survive. They like to refer to an old Apache saying: 'If you step on my toe I will crush your foot.' I believed in another saying that vengeance is God's.

I would never again become involved with the Blue Brigade and I probably would never return to Harrow, my last thought of which was a more amusing saying: 'On Sunday in Harrow, the Asian people go to the Catholic Church, the Black people go to the International Christian Centre and the White people go to Tesco.'