

May 2007: One With A Bullet

A gunshot is not a subtle sound. Even the tiniest, sleekest, most unassuming pistol takes on a certain brash quality when it is aimed and fired at someone. A silencer still makes a statement. Guns don't just speak, they scream.

Unfortunately, many of their targets do not. The woman now standing in front of me, twisting a slim brown envelope in her hands, is—ironically—living proof of this. “I require your—*particular* services, Mr. Noone.”

That's the second female proposition I've heard this morning, following an entreaty from a hard-up husband chaser who tried for a freebie the good ol' way. “You don't know how *grateful* I could be,” my previous visitor had intoned in a Superkings-husky voice, trying for seductive and missing by a country mile.

Not that she'd have had much chance in any case. Wrong age, wrong gender, wrong time, wrong place—wrong altogether, since I am no longer single. Maybe she thought the poor wee fella must be desperate enough on the fornication front to be ecstatic at the prospect of screwing a fiftysomething matron with control hose and a bad perm.

“Sorry ma'am, I'm married,” I had told her, gesturing at a picture of my beautiful twenty-year-old boyfriend on the desk and trying not to feel too smug. I don't wear a ring on my finger, but we're twinned in all the ways that matter.

“You might want to try the Personal Ads in the *Metro*, if you need it *gratis*,” I continued, handing over a copy of the Underground's free paper that I picked up at Waterloo Station on my commute in to the office. I'd never have believed such a hefty gal could move so fast...

Thankfully, Mrs. Stella Smith is not of that ilk. She's a millimetre-or-so closer to being my type. Early forties, slender, poised. A straight man might have called her pretty, if he could get past that hard glint in her eyes. And unlike Mrs. Superkings, my newest acquaintance seems to be financially secure—minted enough to do all her grocery shopping at Waitrose or M & S Simply Food, anyway.

“How can I be of assistance?” I ask.

“I want you to prove this is all lies.” Mrs. Smith transfers the brown envelope from her perfectly-manicured fingers into mine, and I shake out a thin coroner's report and three sparse newspaper clippings, with several post-mortem pictures of a man with three eyes—eight openings in his face instead of the regulation seven—as a bonus.

Together, they tell the story of her late spouse's final hours. Simon Smith, forty-nine, had worked as a number-cruncher for the firm of Snook, Westcott and Winterbone for the past six years, rarely distinguishing himself in any way whatsoever until the last day of his life, when he had uncharacteristically called in sick with an unspecified ailment. Mrs. Smith had left him dozing on the sofa in their sumptuous “den” while she went out to the chiropodist for a couple of hours, returning in the early afternoon to find him in the same place but now plus a recently-discharged automatic pistol and minus a pulse.

The case looks pretty cut and dried—a standard issue self-termination. The police certainly thought so (it was closed within twelve weeks, fast work for a fatal). The only thing that seems unusual here is the weapon itself—a pretty little replica Beretta, the gold V85 9MM.

The false Beretta was a vintage movie prop gun, loaded with blank wadded cartridges rather than bullets, meaning you had to shoot at very close range to be sure of a successful result. Slightly strange choice for a suicide, I think, but maybe that was all he could get his hands on.

Stella clocks my frown. “You're wondering about the gun.”

She tells me that she used to be an actress, and met her hubby on the set of *Gravity Kills*, a film-noirish cheapie from 1987 in which the-then Stella St. John played a minor femme fatale who gets nixed around the half-way point after an attempt to double-cross her gangster fiancé goes wrong. Simon had a job in the accounting department, and they locked eyes over croissants one day in the queue for the craft services truck. Six months later, Stella was a Miss no longer.

The presumed empty-chambered Beretta, which the actor playing “Marco “Bang-Bang” Morechi” used onscreen to rub out Stella's “Marnie The Moll” character, was a souvenir from this mutual celluloid adventure.

It had been left forgotten in the loft these past two decades, until one ancient, stray cartridge did for Mr. Smith. Killed by a supposedly-safe prop like my first celebrity crush Jon-Erik Hexum, a golden boy forever frozen in time. Simon was never so pretty, even without the extra eye.

I think back to my own early forays in the entertainment industry—Mrs. Smith is not the only ex-thesp in the room. My previous career was in similarly lo-budgeted screen fare, standing in for demonic dollies in multi-syllabled horror sequels and occasionally stunt-doubling for kiddy actors, “stunt” being the operative word. Even got to play a Culkín once. I quit when CGI took over, and you didn’t need a live human in *E.T.* any more. If George Lucas ever gets round to filming *Star Wars* seven, eight and nine, there won’t be a real Ewok in sight.

“*Gravity Kills*, eh?” I say.

Mrs. Smith nods. “Even if he was planning to—to take his own life, he would never have done it that way. He didn’t have that kind of—imagination. He wouldn’t even have remembered we still had the damn gun, and he certainly wouldn’t have had a clue how to fire it. Besides, Simon was always very neat. He’d have hated the idea of all that—mess.”

“Well,” I tell her, trying to affix a sympathetic expression to my face, “a rational suicide is a rare thing.”

She gives a restrained sniff. “Clearly you’ve never lived with an obsessive then, Mr. Noone. So, your fees are...please?”

I reach inside my desk drawer for a laminated A4 printout with my service charges on it. In fact I have two of these, the Prosperous version—my Rolex rate—and and the Pauper version, which I pick based on my client’s perceived relative affluence. Mrs. Smith takes one look at the Prosperous sheet that I hand her and selects the £2,000 option, which buys me for seven days, 20 hours minimum spent on your case guaranteed, with a 50% reduction offered for the second week.

I can’t remember the last occasion I had multiple requests for my services before lunchtime—surely a cause for celebration. After Mrs. Smith departs with one of my business cards safely tucked in her handbag in case she has an urgent need of Noone, I decide to give the office (well, cubbyhole really) a bit of a spruce-up.

It won’t take long. Barely matching the dimensions of a single bed, my workspace consists of a desk with—besides Brandon’s photograph—a phone/answerphone and a laptop and printer/scanner, plus two rickety chairs, a flip-top bin and a filing cabinet on which reposes an urn containing the mortal remains of each of my parents.

After their double funeral following a car smash a decade ago, I mixed the ashes together (half of Dad with Mom, half of Mom with Dad) so they would at least be united *in vita proxima*. Brandon is concerned that if we get burgled—a not unlikely possibility given the state of our neighbourhood—someone might take the urns, so while its twin remains in our flat, this little urn now lives in my office. As I run a duster over it, I imagine someone casting parts of my folks to the four winds, fruitlessly searching for buried treasure in that powdery tombola.

The only other non-functional item in the room is a detailed print of a fantasy landscape—complete with unicorns, dragons, noble warriors, fair maidens and yes, dwarves—that hangs on the wall behind my chair. Impressive in itself, even more so when you consider that the artist was a triple-amputee who painted the original with two toes.

The foot picture—bizarrely titled “Are Your Eyes Bigger Than Your Heart?”—was was a parting gift from Brandon, who left me (temporarily, I hasten to add) last year, for Property Management and Investment at the University of Salford. Wants to be an estate agent, of the ethical kind—he wouldn’t know a gazumper if he sat on one. That’s my Brandy, helping others’ dreams of moving up the property ladder come true, steering Sloanies around houses we could never hope to afford.

Still, courtesy of Mrs. Smith’s retainer, I can at least spring for a couple of throw pillows from Mrs. Shah, who owns Fabrique, the textile shop downstairs, to welcome him back to my boudoir with when term time ends. She’s gotten much friendlier since we officially coupled up, and only tries to hammer me with that “past sin” tripe occasionally these days. Clearly Brandon is good karma.

I switch on my answerphone (which includes a mobile number for emergencies, not that there are many outside the Big Three’s remit), pick up Mrs. Smith’s cheque, and tuck it inside the brown envelope containing

her husband's gory dossier, which Stella agreed to leave with me for a second perusal later. Truth be told, the exclusivity clause in our contract is pretty superfluous. For the moment, I am hers alone in any case.

Descending to Fabrique, I select two tassely cushions in something called "russet," which looks brown to me but will go nicely with the bedroom curtains. Mrs. Shah gushes over my *amorata*—"He's such a sweet boy!" while her perpetually-laconic husband silently bags up my purchases with a nod of what I take to be approval.

After banking the cheque at my local Barclays, I head back home. It's getting on for three years since Brandon and his parents moved into the apartment directly under mine, and it's been 18 blissful months since Bob and Marge—"the Timeshare Two"—joined one of their daughters and a gaggle of grandchildren in Spain, waving a cheery *adiós* to their only son, who promptly moved his pretty ass up a floor.

The flat is now thoroughly Brandified, my minimalist décor long-buried under a plethora of cuddly toys, lava lamps, figurines, snow globes and various rugs, place mats, throws, pillows and bedsheets from Mrs. Shah's. No wonder she's such a fan.

Nine months after Brandon moved in, we became a family of three, with the patter of tiny claws. Or not so tiny, when you feel them jabbing sharply into your shoulder. Myna, a cantankerous sulphur-crested cockatoo, was an unexpected inheritance from my late friend Duncan Felix, a Scottish stuntman I met on the set of *Porcelain Parasites: Dolls Who Steal Your Souls* in the mid-1990's and who later mentored me through my tricky first weeks in the gumshoe game, having made the transition himself a few years earlier.

The cockatoo—named after Duncan's formidable mother—is not officially allowed in the flat, so she spends most of her time shrieking and shitting on the balcony, occasionally calling out "Big One!" to startled passers-by. I've never found out exactly what that refers to, though given Dunc's obsession with those vital extra inches, it isn't hard to guess. He was a classic dour Glaswegian until he hit the dance floor.

Speaking of floors—we're hoping to eventually qualify for a mortgage on our own little home with an "up" as well as a downstairs, which Brandon will doubtless fill with even more tassely tat. Well, that dream just got £2,000 closer, I think, as I arrange the new cushions on his currently-empty side of the bed beside a stack of vintage Garfield soft toys. My parental endowment just about covers the cost of leasing the office, but it is my current vocation that keeps this other roof over our heads.

The next day, I start on the Simon Smith investigation in earnest, paying a visit to the premises of Snook, Westcott and Winterbone. Ms. Winterbone obligingly provides me with a meeting room that is five times the size of my office to interrogate her staff in. From the roll call of Simon's sixteen "closest" colleagues, I get blank looks and shrugs from at least a third of them, plus half of the rest have only heard his name through (inaccurate) office gossip about "that chap who blew his own head off."

One grungy-looking young Kurt Cobain fan from the sanitation department, Gaz-Short-For-Gareth, seems particularly disappointed when I correct the decapitation mistake. "So, not like, *actually* severed?" he says. His cleaning cupboard is a haven to the 27 Club, but unfortunately this kid has a rock-solid alibi—he was bungee-jumping off a bridge in New Zealand when Mr. Smith received his new orifice.

"Hey, have you seen *The Omen*? Bitchin' slice scene in that."

"Not for a while," I tell Gaz, thinking he'd probably enjoy some of my back catalogue, particularly the novel use of an office guillotine, two staplers and a paper shredder in the final ceramic bloody battle of *Porcelain Parasites III*. "So, you can't think of anyone who had a grudge against Mr. Smith, then?"

"Grudge?" he says. "Now that's a good movie. I liked the second one more though, when that girl outta *The Ring* gets her neck twisted around and you hear the sound of it goin' snap...Amber, her name is. Amber Tamblyn. Pretty..."

I thank him and move on to the typing pool, whose chatter is lighter on the beheading angle but similarly unproductive. Both the male and the female secretaries, who I decide to interview in single-sexed pairs, just laugh horsily when I raise the possibility of Simon having had a secret lover.

"Him? Wouldn't know an erogenous zone from a No Parking zone!" a young lady named Jocasta says.

"No Jo, or a fallopian tube from a tube of toothpaste neither," adds the second girl, Hayley, obviously trying to one-up her chum in the sexual simile stakes. "I think he had a wife, but he never said much about her."

"Yeah, hard to believe, isn't it Hay?" Jocasta replies. "That he'd of found someone who wanted to marry him, I mean. Not to speak ill of the dead, but he wouldn't know the difference between—uh...well..."

"Let me guess—a Dutch cap and a baseball cap?" I venture, as her prim face crinkles in thought.

This provokes more braying giggles from the two girls, but gets me no closer to discovering a motive. "You're a funny little fella," says Jocasta. "Ain't he cute, Hay?"

"Oh trust me, ladies," I say. "I'm a riot..."

I save Ms. Winterbone—the only employee of the firm still present in its name, the Snooks and Westcotts having long since died or retired—until last. "We're accountancy *consultants*, Mr. Noone," she tells me sternly, when I inquire as to Mr. Smith's competency with numericals. "There's much more to it than mere mathematical prowess. He didn't quite project the right aura of confidence, I'm sorry to say, so to be honest, we were thinking of letting him go."

"Image problems, huh?" I reply, declining her offer of a third watery coffee and taking my leave of the labyrinthine room. I don't want to have to make too many pee stops on the way home. "Many thanks for your co-operation, ma'am."

Deductions so far: no-one seemed to care enough about the late Mr. Smith to want to do him in. Most people barely realised he existed. To paraphrase my old friend Duncan, if apathy was fatal, he'd have been dead long ago. *You have the right to remain silent. Forever...*

*Charmless Man* could have been this guy's anthem. No tiger hidden behind the mouse this time. Ordinary with a capital O. This little Mickey was just that. There is nothing that stands out about Simon Smith except—and it's a big "except," granted—for that darn faux bullet in him. The only interesting thing he ever did was get shot.

However, I resolve to keep digging. Things that look too simple rarely are (Conversely, things that look sinister are often simple. Mrs. Shah once asked me to do a favour for her and deliver a large Persian rug—just the right size to wrap a body in—to a sharp-suited Italian guy in a penthouse at 2 am. Turned out the dude just really liked expensive carpets). Exactly where does Mrs. Smith fit in, I wonder, as I sit alone in my flat with Myna snoozing on top of her night cage, her head tucked under her wing.

I lean back on the sofa and shove a couple of Brandon's plushes onto the floor, which just about allows all three-foot-eleven inches of me to attain a horizontal position amongst the remaining gonks. It sometimes feels like I'm living in one of those claw grabber machines you get at cheap seaside arcades, I think, as I squish a large Bagpuss into a temporary pillow. Fortunately none of the characters I briefly enacted on the big screen were ever merchandised into soft toys, or Brandon would probably have built up quite a collection of them as well.

*Cherchez la femme...* I'm finding it hard to picture the Smiths together, the ballbreaker and the sap. But then—I guess people thought the same about my folks. My buoyant Cockney father and my pensive New Yorker mother, Dad's hopeless optimism versus Mom's glacial calm. She was the iceberg, and he was the Titanic. I glance up at the urn on the mantelpiece and reflect on how Mom would feel about my intermingling. I like to think Dad mellows her, even *post vitam*.

I'm still pondering the enigma that is Mr. and Mrs. Smith in my office the next day, when the quick half of that duo unexpectedly arrives. "Looks like I was wrong, Mr. Noone," Stella declares, brandishing a note in her husband's handwriting she fortuitously found when she decided to have a clear-out of his old paperwork after hiring me.

"*I disappointed you. I'm sorry, C. Farewell,*" it says.

I ask what the "C" stands for, and am informed that Simon's pet name for his wife in the early days was "Cupcake," which I can't quite believe. Arctic Roll would be more likely.

Something is rotten in the state of Smithville. Stella insists that this missive must be an indication of suicide, after all, but I'm not convinced. Since she has paid for my services for another five days, I tell her that I will continue the investigation.

"Oh, I'm not worried about trying to get a *refund*," she says, as I pop the note inside the brown envelope with the rest of the Smith Papers before she can ask for it back. "I just wouldn't want to waste your time."

"No problem," I reply. "We want to be sure, don't we?"

Once she has gone, I get a sudden inspiration and look up *Gravity Kills* on IMDb Pro. I still have a few contacts in The Business—I always think of it capitalized, like The Mafia. The firm who did the catering for the film—and thus supplied the croissants which helped to unite Stella and Simon in matrimonial unbliss—is called Picks 'n Flicks and conveniently also provided pastries for my *Porcelain Parasites* series.

I try phoning a few of the longer-serving staff whose names I can still recall in hope of finding some scuttlebutt on the Smiths. The first two didn't work on *Gravity Kills*, but number three brings home the bacon. Karen Frampton used to be in Continuity, so she has a good memory for even the most characterless types.

"Simon Smith?" Karen says. "Yeah, he was always skulking around the set, especially during the love scenes with his missus and the other ladies. Scribbling things on little bits of paper."

"What, quadratic equations and the like?"

"No, honey. Looked more like a script to me..."

So Mr. Smith was a secret screenwriter—not the most ghastly of revelations, but perhaps a glimmer of a motive there. I concur with Karen that we should "do lunch" sometime, then call up the merry widow and ask if I can please see the other papers that the apparent suicide note was found with.

"Just testing a theory," I say. Stella deigns to let me visit Casa Smith, which is a well-kept detached five-bedroomed property in Dulwich, but doesn't invite me inside to view the scene of the crime, so I have to be content with collecting the goods on her doorstep.

"I don't see how these will be much use to you," Stella says icily, passing me a plastic crate containing a sheaf of ring-binders and A4 cardboard wallets, "but you're welcome to take a look. It can't matter to poor Simon now."

"Thanks, ma'am," I say, groaning under the weight of the chunky box. "I'll take good care of it."

Back at the office after an uncomfortable couple of bus rides, I spread Mr. Smith's paperwork out across my desk. While it is mostly indecipherable jargon about audits and back-ends, I manage to dig out a fifteen-page summary of the story of "Morris and Claudine" from amongst the accountancy blah.

Morris—who works in a bank—and Claudine—the manager of a small gift shop—are are a sort of menopausal Romeo and Juliet, who worry more about Viagra and varicose veins than cod charms and sleeping potions. Simon had even made a start on some of the dialogue—"Claudine, did you just kiss me?" "There's nothing *'just'* about my kisses, Morris."

Morris turns out to be a bit of an old roué, who vacillates about leaving his rough-tongued harpy of a wife through several tedious scenes. Finally tiring of him making Hamlet look impulsive by comparison, Claudine gives her portly paramour an ultimatum.

"C. chastises M. for his lack of courage," Mr. Smith has written in his synopsis. "M. sees only one other (noble?) way out."

Unfortunately, the document ends there, but it is a Eureka moment nonetheless. I take Mr. Smith's so-called "suicide note" and place it on top of the screenplay summary. Morris's "noble" way out—or Simon's last stanza? The final severing of conjugal relations. The big split. The dirt nap that ended the nuptials. The deadly alternative to divorce...

Yes, it fits. You clever girl, "Cupcake."

So, who would be the best person to share my theory of possible mariticide with? I scroll through my email contact list and pick out Philip Barney. The Barnster is a freelance journalist I first encountered at a Comic Con back in 1996 when he wrote copy profiling trashfest monster movies for the likes of *Fangoria*, but who has since graduated from reviewing celluloid horrors to reporting on real-life ones.

"Hi Phil, early Christmas pressie for you," I type, scanning in the faux suicide note, the screenplay synopsis and a few pages of dialogue from the Morris and Claudine script. I attach them to the email message along with my own précis of how I believe the Smith affair actually played out.

I don't have to wait long for the climax. "Looks like you were right, Noone," a gruff voice barks in my ear, when my BlackBerry goes off at 10 am the next morning. Phil had paid his own visit to the Smith residence under his oft-adopted guise as a "friend" of the Metropolitan Police, prompting a hysterical confession from the lady of the house.

Mrs. Smith, it transpires, had indeed been the architect of her husband's demise, having actually dispatched Mr. Smith to the sweet hereafter by her own hand—and gun—before leaving home for her pedicure. Little expecting her murder-disguised-as-suicide plan to work, she had found herself becoming increasingly unsettled by its apparent total success.

Worried someone would eventually re-open the case and tumble that it was murder after all, the lovely Stella had tried to allay the potential suspicion against her by hiring a private investigator to prove that very thing. She couldn't believe she'd actually gotten away with it—and if she couldn't, who else would? Well, everyone else, it seems, until she walked into my office and tied the noose around her neck.

"She say why she did it?" I ask.

"Now even *you* couldn't worm that out of her, Noone," Phil replies. "She's as tight-lipped as a Papal prozzie on Ascension Sunday."

My journalist friend is not the most politically correct of police informants, I think. "Well, I guess it's not really my department. Would be nice to know that some of what I do has meaning, though."

"Yeah, well, that's what trials are for. Thanks for the tip anyway, Noone. Hey, we should do lunch soon, OK?"

Phil rings off to write up the exclusive and leaves me to my musings on the first bona fide spousal snuffing-out of my private eye career. Mrs. Smith must have been the real obsessive in that relationship, I decide. After all, a gun *is* benign until someone pulls the trigger.

I wonder what pulled Mrs. Smith's. Would she still have taken on the role of murderess, if the Beretta had remained safely consigned to oblivion in the attic? Did she turn it up by chance while hunting around for some other bauble, or dig it out deliberately after hubby's attempt to set the silver screen alight suggested quite a different denouement in her mind?

I imagine the irony of the Smith story being turned into its own movie, Mr. Smith's dream coming true in a way he never intended. *The Accountant Killing: When Your Number's Up, It's Up*.

Stella looks like the type that does well in prison. With that stalactite puss she'll be the queen of the cunt block. Thelma *and* Louise...

I think back to my lost second-week option with a sigh. No more client, no more cash. "Guess our pied-à-Terrace is just going to have to wait," I say to Brandon's photograph. "The lack of luxury to which you have become accustomed, honey...we're not moving up the property ladder just yet."

On impulse, I raise the photo to my lips and quickly kiss the glass. He's *my* number one with a bullet, no doubt.