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Written by Gordon Ferris

Published by Corvus

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THE HANGING SHED

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CORVUS

First published in Great Britain in 2010
by Corvus, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

This paperback edition first published in the UK in 2011
by Corvus, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Paperback ISBN: 978-0-85789-364-2
E-book ISBN: 978-0-85789-346-8

Printed in Great Britain.

Corvus
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26-27 Boswell Street
London WC1N 3JZ

www.corvus-books.co.uk

THE HANGING SHED

I'll take the big sordid
dirty crowded city.

Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye*

1

THERE ARE NO windows in a hanging shed. Only a sadistic architect would provide a last glimpse of the fair green hills. The same goes for paintings or potted plants. You're unlikely to divert the condemned man from the business in hand with a nice framed 'Monarch of the Glen' or a genteel aspidistra. Besides, he'll only visit once. Wearing a hood.

Before the war I was taken to the hanging shed of His Majesty's Prison Barlinnie. Years after, I can close my eyes and recite every dismal detail and dimension as though they were tattooed on my eyelids.

Think of a clutch of grey monoliths scarring the countryside on the outskirts of Glasgow. Each solid rectangle studded with tiny barred windows, the roofs festooned with Victorian chimneys. Like houses drawn by an obsessive child. The whole ugly mass surrounded by a tall grey wall. Focus in on the central courtyard and the building known as D Hall. Inside is a standard prison set-up: a high

vaulted chamber with galleries facing each other across a gulf. Cells stud the walls on each level. Metal decks bridge the galleries. Metal staircases connect the levels.

There is one special cell on the third floor. Its occupant has nowhere to go except across the short bridge and through the plain wooden door on the other side. Take the walk. Go through the door. Eyes open.

Inside, the air is inert and the white walls press inwards. In the centre, set in the floor, is a trapdoor. Alongside, and surely connected, stands a lever. There are three square holes in the ceiling directly above the trapdoor. You can see the long retaining beam in the room above. A noosed rope dangles from the beam through the central hole. The two other holes gape invitingly, ready for rush hour in the hanging shed, three at once. Jostling for position on the trapdoor.

Today a lone figure stands on a chalked T in the centre of the trap. A broad leather strap binds the upper body. A hood covers the head. The noose is draped over the hood and round the neck. Soft leather coats the noose. No abrasions here for a tender neck. The noose is held in place by a brass slip to make sure it tightens quickly and efficiently. To snap rather than throttle. The mark of a civilised society.

A man in a blue uniform walks across the echoing floorboards. He grips the lever and grins. There is a shocking clang and thud and the trapdoor falls open. The joist in the room above gives out a tortured creak as it

takes the weight. The figure plunges into the void of the floor below where a slab waits. The rope hardens and trembles like a plucked guitar string. The guard sneers at the white faces of the four new constables being shown round for their edification. He signals to the guard below to take down the dummy.

I can conjure it now, lying on my back, rocking in the top bunk of the overnight train to Glasgow. But this time the dummy has a face. Beneath me and all around me I feel the Royal Scot hurtling through the night, steel wheels clacking remorselessly on the rails. Occasionally the great beast splits the tomb-black landscape with a midnight shriek and I listen for an answering call that never comes. I'm going home for the first time in two and half years, and the thought of what I have to face there fills me with a hot mix of anger and dread. I take another pull at my cigarette and watch the tip glow and die, and the smoke drift and swirl away.

Four carefree days ago I was sitting in my wee attic room in South London. I was having a good spell. Almost a week of sleeping better and drinking less. Maybe the two were connected. My newly polished shoes – army indoctrination – were sitting by the door ready for their sprint to Fleet Street. The spring sun was already banking through the skylight window. I was hunched over the table nursing a second mug of tea while reading yesterday's *Times* and

my own paper the *London Bugle*. Know your enemy, my old drill sergeant used to say. Besides, I enjoy the adverts on the front of the *Times*. In their way they give as clear a picture of Britain as the inside news pages. Stories of a hard-up country where *gentlemen* were selling their *fine leather gloves,* or where an *ex-officer, RAF, DFC would make excellent private secretary*. Where trained mechanics were searching for work as drivers, and war heroes were on the lookout for *gardening jobs or other manual exercise*. The fruits of victory were bitter enough for some.

I supped my tea and counted my blessings. In the last month I'd started to get a steady trickle of freelance assignments from the *Bugle* and there was a chance of a full-time job. I was making enough money to afford food, fags and Scotch, not necessarily in that order. But at least I would no longer simply be drinking away the last of my demob money. Two weeks ago I'd dragged my flabby body round to Les's Boxing Academy on the Old Kent Road and – aching limbs apart – I was already getting back a sense of physical well-being. Something I hadn't felt since the build-up and hard training for D Day. After a few days of the glums last week I was daring to hope that I was nearing the end of the tunnel. Sunshine on my face would be good. Such was my upbeat mood that I'd been crooning along with Lena Horne and whistling a tuneless descant to Artie Shaw on the Light Programme. Even my first fag tasted sweet instead of just satisfying a craving.

Then the phone rang down in the shared entry.

I glanced at my watch. It was just after seven-fifteen. Someone was starting early. I knew Mrs Jackson wouldn't answer it unless she'd cranked up her hearing aid; I wondered why her daughters had bothered getting the phone installed. Her voice was so loud it made the device redundant. The other three households in our entry rarely got calls, but we were all happy to chip in to pay for the rental. I sprang to my door, still in my slippers and collarless. I could have done with another fifteen minutes of paper-reading and crossword-filling, but maybe the *Bugle* was calling. I dived down the three flights of stairs and grabbed the shiny black set.

'Yes, hello? Brodie here,' I gasped.

'Is that Mr Douglas Brodie?' A posh voice. A professional voice. An operator's voice.

I got my breath back. 'Yes, that's me. Doug Brodie.'

'Please hold the line, I have a call for you. Go ahead, caller, please put your money in now.'

I heard the clank and rattle of coins going in. Several. At least a bob's worth, which meant long distance. My mother using her neighbour's phone? An accident? Bad news comes early. A man's voice started up. Scottish accent, *West* of Scotland. Like mine. Like mine used to be.

'Is that you, Dougie boy?'

A bucket of ice splashed down my neck. No one called me Dougie now. It had been Brodie for a decade. The voice scratched at my memory, but I couldn't put a face to it. *Wouldn't*. My mind simply rejected the likelihood. For

I hadn't seen him since I left Kilmarnock for Glasgow University back in '29. I heard odd snatches about him from my mother down the years, though she knew I hated every mention. He was a journeyman cooper at Johnnie Walker's at the same time I was making my way in the Glasgow police force. In '39 I went into the army, the Seaforth Highlanders, my dad's old regiment, though I was a lowlander. Donovan ended up in the RAF, Bomber Command. A tail gunner. A guaranteed way of getting yourself killed for real. Which was exactly what happened.

In a letter from my mother in 1943 I was told that Hugh Donovan had died in his bomber in the flames of Dresden. My first ungracious thought was: Serves you right, you sod. Then remorse made my cheeks burn. It prompted me to write to his mother saying how sorry I was to hear the news. But the guilt of that instant wasn't so easily erased.

'Shug? Is it *you*?'

'Aye, Dougie, it is.'

'But how, what the hell? I thought you were dead!' My voice cracked and echoed round the empty entry.

'So did I, old pal. So did I.'

'But this is great! Just fantastic!' I could stop feeling bad about him, about how we'd left things. Time to move on.

He cut in. 'Dougie. It's no' … It's no' great at all …'

2

THE TRAIN ROARED through a station, lights flickering briefly before we plunged back into the dark. The sour scent of cheap Scotch tinged the air. The bloke in the bunk below had sucked patiently on a half-bottle to get to sleep. Mother's milk where he came from; we came from, I reminded myself. I'd resolutely declined when he'd passed the bottle up to me. To prove I could. Now I wish I'd taken a slug or two. My brain was fidgeting. I lay in the dark and lit another fag and thought about going home, and what I meant by that.

There was Kilmarnock, the place where I was born and grew up. And there was Glasgow, where I'd gone to university, studied languages and, in a fit of rebellion, joined the police. A town and a city a mere twenty miles apart, but they might as well have been on different continents. It wasn't just that I left my boyhood behind on the short train journey from Kilmarnock. It was as though someone had carelessly spliced two strips of films together

innocence. But why me? Why call the man he shafted, the man who still nursed rancour for what he'd taken from me? Why the hell would he think I'd care whether he was guilty or not? Just when I was getting my life back in some sort of order, he kicks up the pieces and I lose the pattern again. And by the sound of it, and from the enquiries I made later that day, he was guilty as sin. It had taken just four months from his arrest in November 1945 to conviction and sentencing.

The judge at Glasgow's High Court had donned the black cap. In just over four short weeks, on the spring morning of 30 April, they would hang Hugh Donovan by the neck until he was dead.

Good riddance.

I walked past the towering wheels of the Royal Scot and resisted giving her steaming flanks a pat for getting us safely here on time. All around the familiar accents of home burst on my ears like rain after a long drought.

Two young men slouching by: 'Ma heid's gowpin', so it is.'

'Nae wunner. Ye were stocious last nicht.'

'Ye wurnae exactly singin' wi' the Sally Ally yersel'.'

A conductor in uniform giving a trainee a clout on the ear: 'Tak' a tummle tae yersel', ya glaikit wee nyaf.'

Two old women with string bags and bare legs knotted with veins: 'See you, Ah says. If that was ma wean, Ah'd a gi'en her a gid skelp in the lug.'

'Aye, ye cannae ca' yir ain mither a wee hairy, neither ye can. Even if she is, Jessie …'

It took me a minute or two to tune in, like finding the Home Service on a crystal set. But then it was like music. Scarcely Brahms, more Buddy Rich, all hard edges and rhythms. My spirits rose despite my mission. I was back among kin. It brought me unexpected pleasure and sharp regret that I'd put off this return for so long. Tonight I'd catch the local train back down to Kilmarnock and give my mother a surprise. But this morning I had a date with a murderer.

I dropped off my case in the left-luggage office and came out through the great blackened Victorian arches of St Enoch's into the bracing Glasgow air. Ten degrees cooler than the lucky south-east of England, but with the

great marching skies that I'd forgotten. The air was tangy with the reek of house and factory fires but the steady breeze up the Clyde was keeping the smog away. There had been days before the war when the only way you could tell if a tram was coming was by its bell sounding through the murk.

I stopped and looked around. It was as though the war hadn't happened. No signs of bomb damage, and a bustle and an urgency that London lacked. As well as being a mainline station, St Enoch's was a tram and trolley terminus, so I shouldn't have been surprised, but I felt as if I'd walked on to the stage of a mad ballet of machines. The square was heaving with the great cars, their network of overhead wires like a drunken spider-web. There was even the choice of an underground: the Glasgow Subway, but that would have taken me round in a circle south under the Clyde, then west to Govan, back north over the river to Partick, and east again to where I stood. I could have walked from here to the Eastern Division police station in Tobago Street. My first job. But I'd save that pleasure for later.

I got help from a patient tram inspector who reminded me of the colour coding system. I made him repeat his directions and started what seemed like an epic journey east out of the city along the Edinburgh road and then north-east to a quiet suburb with open fields beyond. I changed trams twice and then took a bus. I got off it at the terminus and walked down Lee Avenue. Already I could

see the bulk looming over the few houses. Finally I saw the whole massive set of blocks sitting at the end of this forsaken avenue like a disused factory. Which I suppose it was. His Majesty's Prison Barlinnie takes men in and processes them. They go in defiant or terrified, and come out angry or broken, but certainly paler and thinner. Some, like Hugh Donovan, never come out, but are interred in unsanctified ground in the yard near the hanging shed.

The prison cast a long sullen shadow. I began to feel guilty as I walked towards the huge metal door in the centre of the six-storey grey-stone building. I hadn't done anything, but the sense of oppression made me check off my past sins to see if any were jailable crimes. One or two perhaps, but who would know? I felt watched all the way. When I got to the man-sized door set into the giant-sized gate, a grille opened.

'Visitor?' asked a head with a cap on.

'I'm here to see a prisoner. I made an appointment.'

'Name?'

'Mine or the prisoner's?'

There was a narrowing of eyes. 'Both.'

'I'm Brodie. Here to see Hugh Donovan.'

'Donovan, is it? Well, you'd better be quick,' he said with a malevolent grin.

He slammed the hatch down and then opened the door. He stood back to let me step over the threshold. I walked in and stood in a narrow alleyway with a further metal-grilled gate ahead and an office either side. Two other

guards in black uniform stood casually in front of the inner gate.

'This way, *sir*.'

The guard who'd let me in walked off in front of me and began a slow ritual with multiple keys through several inner gates and doors. There was a familiar smell: like the cells in Tobago Street nick writ large. Floor polish, fag smoke, male sweat and, from one branching corridor, the pungent smell of cooked greens. We fetched up outside a door marked 'Mr Colin Hislop, Deputy Governor'. I was shown inside. It was an outer office with a pale secretary manning the defence of the inner sanctum. I was made to wait the obligatory twenty minutes before her desk buzzer went and she showed me into the deputy's presence.

He was a careworn clerk in a bad suit with too much in his in-tray and not enough in his out. He took off his glasses and we shook fingers over his pile of papers.

'I'm sorry to be taking up your time, Mr Hislop.'

He looked despairingly at his paperwork for a long second. 'It's perfectly all right. It was important I saw you. Donovan's request that you visit him was, shall we say, unusual.'

His accent was curious: local, certainly, but trying to gild the working-class vowels with the drawl of Kelvinside. Like a mutton pie coated in cream. Then I wondered how mine sounded after all this time mixing with the regimental accents of Sutherland and the Hebrides. Maybe we both sounded like phonies.

'Unusual? Why?'

He dug in his drawer and pulled out a paper. 'His application said you're an old friend and that he wanted to see you. Is that correct?'

Old friend was pushing it, to put it mildly. Old foe, old adversary, old *I wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire* would be more accurate. Which made me wonder again at my being here.

'We grew up together. I only heard about the trial and verdict four days ago. When Hugh phoned me.'

'Yes, quite. Prisoners in his – category are permitted one such call a week.'

'So, may I see him?'

He pointed his finger at the papers in front of him. 'It says you attended Glasgow university then became a *policeman*, a detective sergeant with the Glasgow constabulary.' Said with disbelief as though you'd have to be daft to toss away a good education to pound the beat. He had a point. 'Then you joined up. The Seaforths? A *battlefield* commission, I gather?' He sniffed, as though he personally would have turned it down. Not that he'd been within five hundred miles of action. I felt my anger levels pick up.

'I don't know what you're reading there, but the commission was confirmed. As was the next. It was *Major* Brodie, acting Major. I reverted to Captain when I demobbed.' Why should I care what this little prick thought of me? But it seems I did.

He went on as though I hadn't spoken, 'Now you're a *reporter*, I believe?' Said like *wife-beater*.

'That's right. Where did you get all this?'

'We can't be too careful. In the circumstances. I contacted the Glasgow Chief Constable's office.'

Hislop began to look ever more uncomfortable and put his specs back on. To stop me hitting him, maybe. 'What I'd like to know – *we'd* like to know – is why you want to see him. What I mean to say is, we don't want any more *headlines*. Do you see?'

I stared at him. So that was it. 'I'm here in a private capacity, not a reporter. The London papers don't cover regional stuff.'

He gripped his typed sheet for comfort. 'Well, of course, it's just with your police affiliation, and all the fuss we've had …'

I cut in, exasperated with all this shilly-shallying. 'I'm just a friend. Wanting to see an old pal. I wish I'd heard sooner, before the trial. Are you refusing to let me see him?'

Off came the glasses again. 'No, no, of course not. It's just … with so little time the appeal, et cetera … we don't want any problems. Do you see?'

I didn't feel like being helpful. 'I don't think I do.'

He pushed back his chair. 'Perhaps you haven't been aware of the uproar there has been in Scotland? The public were, shall we say, quite upset by it all. We don't want to stir things up, do we?'

I noticed sweat beading his thin top lip. My, my, Shug, look what you've done. 'Mr Hislop, all I'm asking is to visit a man who has four weeks left to live.'

'Quite, quite.' Hislop fussed around, moving some papers on his table and generally making me want to grab him by the lapels and give him a good cuff round the ears to spur him into action. Finally he leaned over to his desk buzzer and when his pale assistant responded he told her to arrange for me to see Hugh in the visitors' wing.

'Half an hour only, Mr Brodie. And of course – ahem – we will require you to be searched beforehand. If you don't mind. Can't be too careful, you know …' He trailed to an end and I left him to gnaw at his desk or whatever he did to control his inner rages. Practise his elocution perhaps.