No Reason To Die

Hilary Bonner

One

The young man fell heavily. His right shoulder hit the floor first and the pain made him grunt. Then the rest of his body followed quite slowly. It was a bit like the final act of a very bad ballet. His head bounced just once on the ancient flagstones, while his arms flayed the air desperately searching for something to hang on to, until, after a final, ineffectually limp, kick of one leg, he lay spreadeagled, limbs outstretched, face up, eyes and mouth wide open in surprise.

There was a trickle of blood on his forehead where he had caught it against the edge of the bar on the way down. After the grunt he did not make a sound, but then the fall must have made it even harder for him to speak than it had been before. Neither did he attempt to move. But movement had also been pretty difficult before.

Kelly was sitting on a stool in the corner, as far away from the pool table as possible. Kelly didn't like pool in pubs. The cues, and the gyrating bottoms of those brandishing them, turned your average bar room into an obstacle course. There was nobody playing pool that evening, but there were some things in life which even Kelly would take no chances with.

There was actually hardly anybody in the pub at all. It was a wet Monday night in early November and the rain had been falling incessantly since early morning. It had been almost horizontal across the car park when Kelly had arrived a couple of hours earlier, and the driving easterly wind had been so strong that walking against it had not been easy. This had hardly been a day for a drive over the moors to The Wild Dog, an isolated eighteenth-century coaching inn, built alongside one of the handful of roads crisscrossing the heart of Dartmoor. Kelly, however, was prepared to undertake almost anything almost any time, except the things he should be doing with his life.

An elderly couple were sitting at a table at the far end of the bar, in the lounge area which Charlie Cooke, the landlord, a likeable but inadequate amateur from Birmingham, now used as a glorified dining room. Apart from the young man lying prostrate on the floor, they and Kelly were the only customers. In summer The Wild Dog was packed, and even in the winter, over weekends blessed with half-decent weather, the old inn attracted a quite respectable level of business with customers motoring out for lunch and dinner from the towns and cities on the edge of the moors, like Plymouth, Newton Abbot, and even Kelly's own home town of Torquay down on the coast. But The Dog had little or no local drinking trade and, in common with so many country pubs, had come to rely entirely on the provision of food and

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the seasonal influxes of tourists. Pubs just weren't pubs any more, thought Kelly morosely.

He had watched the young man's fall with a kind of detached fascination. It had been more of a slide really, head and shoulders first, as he had bent at the waist so far backwards that gravity had refused to allow his body to remain any longer on the stool. Then there had been that last almost lazy kick-out with one leg, as he had gradually descended to the floor, the weight of his lower body causing him to slide along the flagstones, worn slippery with age, until he lay full length, his head nearly inside the mighty old inglenook which dominated the room. He was, however, in no danger of burning. Only a small modern oil stove smouldered fitfully in the centre of the huge fireplace.

The elderly couple continued to concentrate very hard on finishing their microwaved frozen lasagne. Charlie's wife, who did most of the catering herself, didn't cook on out-of-season weekdays, but Charlie reckoned he was a dab hand with the microwave. Kelly didn't agree. He'd once eaten Charlie's microwaved lasagne. It had been cool and soggy in the middle, dry and chewy round the edges, and totally and utterly tasteless. However, when the young man fell off his stool the elderly couple focused every bit of their attention on the sorry meal before them, as if it were a mouth-watering gourmet experience. And they gave absolutely no sign whatsoever of noticing the only bit of action The Wild Dog was likely to see that day.

Kelly noticed. But then Kelly noticed everything. It was his life's work really. One way or another, he had made a living since he was a boy out of watching and listening and then writing it all down. He had been a journalist for many years, at the very top in Fleet Street until he let the demons get to him, and then back to his local paper roots in South Devon. But that was all behind Kelly now. Kelly had had enough of destroying lives. He was no saintly philanthropist and he'd been a damned good investigative reporter, with a real nose for a story - the type of journalist who, by and large and with one or two notable exceptions, had achieved marginally more good than harm. It was the destruction of his own life Kelly had wanted to halt, far more than that of anybody else. He had decided he was going to be a novelist. Indeed he was already a novelist - in as much as that he had given up the day job and written half a treatment and almost two chapters of his first novel.

However, Kelly was at the displacement activity stage. It seemed to be lasting rather a long time and Kelly suspected that it would probably last throughout whatever passed for his writing career.

He put his pint glass down on the bar. It contained a couple of inches or so of warm, flat, Diet Coke. Kelly didn't drink alcohol any more, not because he didn't want to but because he knew, and this time round he really did know, that if he ever started drinking again it would kill him. Simple as that. But there was only so much Diet Coke a man could force down, and Kelly had been sitting in his corner of the bar for two hours, pretending to think. It had been a sorry pretence; his mind had remained more or less blank throughout. And the young man's fall had been the only real diversion of his day.

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Kelly stared idly at the still prostrate figure on the floor. He supposed somebody should do something. He glanced towards the bar. On the other side of it he could just see the top edge of an open trap door, but there was no sign at all of the landlord. Charlie had disappeared into the cellar more than ten minutes previously, ostensibly to change a barrel. Kelly thought it likely he was bored rigid and wanted a change of scenery, and couldn't say he blamed him. Business was hardly brisk.

Kelly's back ached from sitting on the tall, angular, wooden stool for so long. He reached behind his head to rub his neck muscles through the thick oily wool of his dark blue fisherman's sweater, then stretched his arms above his head. He didn't know what he was doing in a pub at all, to be honest. It was habit, he supposed. That morning he'd spent three hours at his screen playing computer games and periodically checking his email, which invariably consisted of unsolicited messages from suppliers of deeply sad soft porn and little else, before giving up even kidding himself that he was about to start writing at any moment. He'd made himself some scrambled eggs on toast for lunch and then gone through the same charade for most of the afternoon. By teatime he'd had enough. In a state of total frustration he'd taken off in his car and had made himself head for The Wild Dog, rather than a potentially cheerier hostelry nearer to home, so that he would be unlikely to find disruptive company. He was, after all, he told himself, merely looking for a change of scene, seeking out some new and convivial surroundings in which to plot his next chapter. Kelly sighed. Yet more selfdeception. He had been just as unable to concentrate on the great novel in the pub as he had been at home, and The Dog was hardly convivial, as he had of course known it could not possibly be, in that weather, on a Monday evening in November. There was often just a touch of sackcloth and ashes about his behaviour, Kelly reflected.

He took a deep drag on his cigarette, then hastily removed it from his mouth. Kelly made his own rollups, and this one had burned so close to the end that it felt dangerously hot to his lips. He stubbed out the remains in an overflowing ashtray. Its contents were all Kelly's own work, an unedifying pile of tobacco waste produced entirely by his own appallingly abused lungs. Smoking was Kelly's sole remaining vice, although he'd only given up the others because he'd had no choice. He smoked a lot and he didn't care any more. The only thing about smoking he intended to give up was even pretending that he wanted to stop.

Automatically, he reached for the tobacco and the packet of Rizla papers in his pocket. Then the boy on the floor made a sort of half-strangled gurgling sound. The elderly couple bent their heads so close to their plates of lasagne it looked as if they might be about to disappear into them. Kelly glanced down at the boy without enthusiasm. Oh, shit, he thought.

'Charlie,' he called anxiously across the bar. 'Charlie.'

The young man rolled over onto his side and made an unsuccessful attempt to rise up on one shoulder.

'Charlie,' called Kelly again. There was no reply. Kelly leaned over the bar and peered down through the open trap door. There was a light shining up from below,

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but if Charlie was still in the cellar he made no response. The pub was built on the side of a hill and Kelly knew that there was a delivery door to one side of the cellar leading out into the yard and the beer garden beyond. If the night outside were not so bleak he might have suspected that Charlie had finally done a runner, for which Kelly would not have blamed him one bit. Charlie, a city boy who had previously been a motor insurance salesman, readily told the story of how throughout his adulthood he had dreamed the romantic dream of life as a country publican. But The Wild Dog, while being just the place for a writer who can't write to torture himself in, had given Charlie a rude awakening, Kelly reckoned. It was, in Kelly's opinion, a morgue in the winter and a tourists' hellhole in the summer.

Wondering what on earth he was doing in the place anyway, Kelly leaned a little further across the bar, until his attention was again demanded by more gurgling sounds from the floor. He swung round on the stool for another look. The young man's eyes were popping and his lower jaw drooped alarmingly. Kelly had a dreadful feeling he knew what was going to happen next. And he was right. The young man began to retch, great heaving motions racking his body.

'Oh, fuck,' said Kelly.

He'd always been able to move fast for a big man, and somewhat amazingly he still could. In a single smooth movement he was alongside and bending over the fallen drinker. With one hand, he caught hold of the collar of the boy's jacket at the back of his neck, while at the same time hooking the other beneath one of his arms.

'Right, sunshine, up!' he yelled.

The couple eating their supper shrunk further into their chairs, their heads buried even deeper into their lasagne. Meanwhile the young man, perhaps startled into something loosely resembling consciousness by Kelly's authoritative voice, began to at least come close to finding his feet, and, with Kelly's help, rose almost upright, still retching. Ducking to avoid the gnarled old beams laced across the pub's low ceiling, Kelly half dragged, half lifted him into the gents' toilet, kicking open the door with one foot. Once inside, he pushed the boy's head into the nearest latrine. He knew there wouldn't be time to get him into a cubicle.

They only just made it. The boy was at once resoundingly sick. Kelly leaned against the door breathing heavily. He might still be able to move fast, but all those years of self-abuse had left him monumentally short of breath nowadays whenever he took any form of exercise, however brief. And heaving a near dead-weight drunk into a toilet was actually a pretty demanding sort of exercise.

Kelly began to feel slightly nauseous himself. But he stood his ground. He told himself he didn't want the lad to choke on his own vomit, and that he was quite out of his head enough to do so. But there was also a further element of self-punishment about it. So-called writers who spend the best part of an entire day playing computer games don't deserve to have a good time. It seemed only right and proper to Kelly that he should suffer that day.

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The boy remained slumped over the latrine for several seconds after he had finished vomiting, before lurching to one side and swinging himself around, leaning against the wall for support, so that he was looking directly towards Kelly. His face was flushed and blotchy, and he was of very average height and build, but through the drunkenness Kelly could see that this was an extremely fit young man. There was not an ounce of spare flesh on him, and his light reddish-brown hair was cut extremely short, shaven at the back and sides and only slightly longer on top. He could well be a boy soldier or a young wannabe marine out of Plymouth, thought Kelly idly as he turned away to bend over a washbasin in order to splash his own face with cold water.

'What's your name, mate?' he asked conversationally, straightening up and running the fingers of one hand through his thinning, once black hair.

The boy focused on him uncertainly, his eyes still glazed. He did not speak.

'Your name?' repeated Kelly, rather more loudly, and with exaggerated clarity.

'Whassit to you,' came the muttered reply.

'I was going to buy you a drink,' responded Kelly. 'And I only buy drinks for people whose names I know.'

Kelly spoke the language of drunks. He understood the logic. He was quite sure of the response he would get to that remark, and he was not disappointed.

'Oh, right, yeah. It'sh Alan, my name'sh Alan.' The young man spoke with a heavy Scottish accent which made it even more difficult to decipher his slurred tones. But Kelly managed it.

'OK Alan, time for a bath.'

Kelly moved quickly again, crossing the small room in two long strides and once more catching hold of the young man by the back of his jacket. Then he half dragged him, barely protesting at all, over to the basin, which he had already filled with water, and dunked his head in it. Alan spluttered a bit, but was uncomplaining when Kelly let go of his head and allowed him to stand upright again, or rather, as near to upright as he could manage. He was still very drunk and his eyes were glazed as, dripping water over himself, he propped himself uncertainly against the washbasin. Kelly threw him a handful of paper towels, then, reckoning he'd done quite enough thank you, and that it was time to leave the lad to it, he headed for the door back into the bar.

'Just clean yourself up, there's a good boy,' he said.

With the resilience of youth Alan seemed to recover almost immediately, enough to be able to walk, anyway, which in his case that night was a considerable improvement. He quickly followed Kelly into the bar, arriving just as the would-be writer was settling on his stool again and as Charlie emerged from the trap door.

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The lad looked uncertainly around him. 'Where'sh my pint?' he asked, still barely able to get the words out, and equally unable to see that his half-full glass remained where he had left it further up the bar.

Charlie, perhaps indicating that he had been well enough aware of what was going on but had chosen to leave Kelly to deal with it, promptly removed the glass of beer, but was not quite quick enough. The young man, with perhaps surprising comprehension under the circumstances, both saw and grasped exactly what was happening.

''Ere, I want my pint,' he half growled, making a real attempt to appear aggressive.

'Now, now . . .' began Charlie.

Kelly sighed again. If there was one person in the world who knew all about dealing with drunks, it was John Kelly. After all, he'd been there. In spades.

'It's all right, mate,' he said. 'Come and sit down with me, and I'll get you another one.'

He steered the boy to a table by the wall and more or less pushed him into a chair. There was something about Kelly that allowed him to get away with it where another man might not. Perhaps even in his drunken state the lad could sense something of Kelly's chequered past.

At the bar he ordered a pint of ginger ale for the lad and another pint of Diet Coke for himself, resigned to the fact that he was going to do nothing constructive with the rest of that night, anyway, so he might just as well stay a little longer in The Dog. The ginger ale was warm, wet, pale brown and slightly fizzy. Kelly had a small bet with himself that the boy wouldn't even notice that it wasn't a pint of bitter.

He put the drink on the table next to the young Scotsman who picked it up and downed half of it in one swallow. Then he sat back in his seat and studied the glass in his hand with some puzzlement. For a moment it seemed he may not have been fooled and that he was about to comment on the true nature of its contents, but Kelly didn't give him chance to dwell on the matter.

'You a squaddie or something?' he asked.

Alan did not reply but looked directly at Kelly, obviously making a determined effort to focus. In his eyes there was just a glimpse of something beyond drunken incomprehension, but Kelly was not quite sure what it was.

'Well, are you?' Kelly repeated.

Alan nodded, reached for his glass again and, in doing so knocked it from the table so that it fell, sending a cascade of ginger ale over both Kelly and himself. The glass smashed into hundreds of small pieces on the flagstoned floor.

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'Shit,' said Kelly.

Alan slumped back in his chair, eyes blank again, looking as if he was only vaguely aware of what was happening.

'Right,' said Charlie, finally playing the role of publican, as he approached from behind the bar with a cloth and a dustpan and brush. 'That's it. You're out of here, mate.'

The order was entirely wasted. Alan's eyes were closed and he seemed to have fallen asleep, or certainly slumped into drunken semi-consciousness. 'It's all right, Charlie, I'll sort him out,' said Kelly, who had been unceremoniously removed from more than his fair share of pubs in his time and saved from the same fate in numerous others thanks only to the assistance of various drinking companions.

Kelly shook the young man by the shoulders. Alan's eyes shot open, unnaturally wide.

'Look, I think you could do with a bit of a helping hand, old son,' he said gently. 'Where are you stationed? Why don't I call one of your mates. Somebody will come and pick you up, for certain.'

'No. No, I don't want that. No. You mushn't call anyone.' Alan shouted. He was still having difficulty getting his words out, but he had no difficulty whatsoever with his message. Kelly was mildly surprised by the strength of his reaction. He sounded quite alarmed at the prospect of being collected by his army mates.

'Well, you can't stay here, you know,' Kelly continued. 'Maybe I could drop you off.'

It wouldn't be such a bad idea. He might just as well, he thought. It would get him out of the pub anyway, and maybe on the road back to a late-night writing session after all.

'No.' The boy was adamant.

'Well, how else are you going to get back to your billet, Alan? Don't tell me you've got a vehicle parked outside? There's no way you could drive, anyway.'

Alan shook his head, in an almost dreamy sort of way. 'No, I walked here, didn't I?'

'Right.' Kelly thought for a moment, trying to remember an army base within anything like walking distance of The Wild Dog. He knew the moors, indeed that whole area of South Devon, extremely well, but could think of nowhere military nearby.

'So where did you walk from?' he asked casually.

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'Hangridge,' replied the boy, and then seemed to realise that he'd divulged information he had not intended to. 'But I'm not bloody going back there, so don't even think about it,' he continued, so emphatically that for just a moment he sounded almost sober.

'Hangridge,' Kelly repeated. He knew about the place, of course. The isolated barracks built on a remote Dartmoor hilltop was the headquarters of the Devonshire Fusiliers and a major infantry training base. Farmers settled in moorland valleys, the army always chose hilltops. Hangridge was known not only for its bleakness, exposed by its geography to the most vicious of Dartmoor's elements, but also for the toughness of the regime endured by the young recruits stationed there. But the Devonshire Fusiliers was an elite regiment with a proud history, and Hangridge's training programme was designed to produce only top-notch professional soldiers. Idly, Kelly wondered how a Scots lad had come to join a regiment which he knew still drew around sixty per cent of its intake from Devon, its home county.

Kelly had been to Hangridge once, the previous year when his paper had sent him to cover an anniversary visit by the minor royal who was the regiment's colonel in chief, but for a moment he couldn't quite place its exact location in relation to The Wild Dog. He attempted to visualise a map of Dartmoor. The pub was on the south side of the moor, on one of the highest points of the road between the villages of Hexworthy and Buckfast, just forty-five minutes' or so drive out of Torquay. Hangridge was considerably further north, on the far side of the moor heading towards Okehampton. Kelly half closed his eyes, trying to measure the distances involved.

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