Paying for It

Tony Black

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Extract

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FUNERALS MAKE MY EYES WATER. Don't get me wrong, not in the 'Oh, he was a lovely fellah taken from us too soon' sense. That stuff, I can handle. Old ladies with waterbag legs shoving egg-mayonnaise sandwiches at you, I can just about manage. Slipping them in the pocket beside the scoosh bottle is no problem for me. That type, they never listen to a word you say anyway. Fire out 'Is that right?', or 'Really? No, really?', and they're happy as Larry. Just don't stray into the 'And how's your Finlay doing in New Zealand?' minefield. Uh-uh. That can spell catastrophe.

It's details like cause of death that have me filling up. Send me reaching for the twelve-year-old Macallan they roll out for such occasions. And hitting it hard. Not just because that's what drinkers do. But because I know that, in my racket, it doesn't look good to be moved by things like funerals and death.

It's when death comes so close to home, stamps on your doorstep, then invites itself in that I wince. Really wince. I mean, who wouldn't wince at something like this?

'Gus. Gusgo. Gusie boy . . .'

The skill of the man, pure piss-artistry, to make poetry with my name like that.

'Gus, did you hear what happened before the . . . you know . . . ?' Malky Conroy, one of Edinburgh's widest gobshites, weighed his hands out in the air like he had hold of a mortar launcher.

'*Booka-booka*,' it was a pathetic attempt at gangster patter.

I tried to keep my tone serious. I mean, we were talking about a man's death here. A man I barely knew, granted. I had met him twice, tops. But out of respect to his father I wasn't going to mess about at Billy Boy's funeral.

'It's the noise a shotgun makes,' said Malky, 'when it goes off, like.'

I gave him a nod, straightened my back. 'Got ya.' I tipped back the last of my Red Eye laced coffee, crushed the Styrofoam cup.

For reasons best kept between Billy and the grave, the poor lad found himself on the wrong end of a sawn-off shotgun one evening. One evening, sounds so civilised, doesn't it? Not in the least. Unless you call finding a lad, barely into his twenties, with both barrels emptied in his face, civilised.

That's the sight that greeted some old biddie walking her Westie at the foot of Arthur's Seat one morning. The official verdict was suicide, but nobody was buying that.

'Like I was saying,' Malky crouched over, leaned into my lapels, 'before they, like . . .' He tried to whisper but in his pissed state it came out too loud. I moved my face

away from the gobs of spit he flung from his mouth. 'Well, you know what they did in the end. But before that, there was . . .'

Malky straightened himself and shuffled back a few steps. His Hush Puppies squeaked on the church hall's laminate flooring. And then he did it. I couldn't believe he did it, but he did . . . he touched the side of his nose and gave me a little wink.

It seemed a moment like no other. Make this a movie – that's your Oscar clip right there. He felt on form, in his own mind. This was the juiciest slice of gossip he'd had in years and he itched to serve it up.

He shuffled again, got right up close. God, he looked rough, like Johnny Cash circa 2008. A white ring of dried spit sat around Malky's mouth, catching in the corners, like the Mekong Delta . . . Jeez, you could have stripped the Forth Bridge with this guy's breath.

'Now, Gus, you never heard it from me,' he said, 'but I know for a fact there was . . .' he looked over his shoulder, and then, he did it again, winked, 'there was torture, his father told me so.'

'Spill it, Malky,' I said. Immediately, I regretted this, he belched up a wet sliver of lager-perfumed bile onto my tie. 'Man, be careful there,' I yelled, loosening the knot and tugging the wet loop of cloth over my head. 'It's ruined, Malky!'

'Sorry, it's the emotion.'

Emotion my arse, unless they're selling emotion in six packs these days.

'That poor boy . . . that poor bloody boy,' he said.

'*What*?' Steering a drunk to his point, without having taken a good bucket yourself, is a task and a half. I felt

ready to give up, try the sausage rolls. Then he hit me with it.

'His fingernails, and his toenails – they were pulled out,' said Malky. 'Blood everywhere.'

'Christ!'

'Can you imagine the pain of that, Gus? Hell, it's sore as buggery just catching one of those wee hangnails.'

I didn't need convincing.

'Plod said it was suicide, Malky.'

'My arse! He moved in some shady circles, our young Billy.'

I felt loath to admit it, but Malky had my attention now. 'Was that it, just the nails?'

'If only it was, Gus. God, I hear they did his teeth as well.'

'Pulled them?'

'Think so. They say there wasn't much to go on after the gun went off in his face. Must have pissed off some serious people.'

'Have the filth any . . .' I needed to use the word – no other came to mind – but it stung my lips as it passed, made me sound like a character from *The Bill*, '*leads*?'

'They could give a tinker's toss. He was mixing it with gangsters, man. I kid you not, he was into all sorts. One less for them to worry about now, though.'

'What *was* he into?' I couldn't believe Billy had the marbles to . . . Hang on, it was precisely because he didn't have any nous that Billy *would* get involved with this kind of thing.

Malky shrugged. He remembered who he was talking to. The shoulder movement wasn't welcome and his frame looked fit to collapse before me. I felt glad, really. I'd no

desire to hear any more. It sounded like a tragedy of the type to make you want to pack up and leave this troubled city.

As if I needed to look for reasons.

I KNEW GUS DURY WHEN . . . *when*? When he held down a job? When he still had a wife? When he never drank himself to oblivion every night? I knew that's what they said, once Billy got put in the ground, and everyone ended up back at Col's pub.

The Wall, or the Holy Wall as Col's mates called it, is a bit different to the usual Edinburgh watering hole. There's no polished granite bar, Bacardi Breezers, or rocket salad on the menu. Down at heel is the way the ad agency ponytails might describe the Holy Wall. The floor's linoleum, the seats, PVC. There are so many layers of nicotine in the joint you'd get a decent rollie out the woodchips. It's rough beyond belief. Just my style.

The name suits too; you see Col has faith. The Big Faith. And faith in me. Don't know why, he just does. He says he sees something in me. I suspect it's the Grouse and Black. Col doesn't drink, but for me it's a full-time job.

'I was sorry to hear about how Billy . . . you know,

went, Col. Really very sorry,' I mumbled, broke up my words and choked on ciggie smoke. This was something I'd wanted to say from the heart, but it got slopped out. 'Malky – y'know the wido – he gave me the rundown. I'm so sorry, Col. Really very sorry.'

Col placed a hand on my shoulder, 'You heard all about it, did you?'

I lowered my brows; gave a brief nod.

'My Billy shouldn't have went like that. He was talking about making it big the last time we spoke – he was full of grand plans, you know.'

Col trembled, stammered on his words. He seemed to age decades before my eyes.

'He was full of talk about making his pile, Gus, but he went wrong somewhere. His mother's beside herself, the house is a total midden – you should see the state of it!'

I felt taken aback, but I saw he'd only reverted to type, tried to cover his feelings with humour.

I joined him, said, 'I don't do dusting, Col.'

Laughter.

We'd lightened the tone. Col tried a weak smile. 'I have no work for you in that line, but there *is* something you could do for me.'

He leaned on the bar. His eyes widened, showing their whites, but the dark centres haunted. 'You know about this kind of thing, don't you?'

I tried to look away but his eyes left me nowhere to hide.

'Col, I'm out the game.'

'But you have the form. This kind of thing's just your line.'

I knew what he meant, but that felt like another lifetime ago.

I raised my glass, drained it. 'This is my line now.'

'Gus, c'mon, you forget I knew you before.'

I knew what *before* meant right away.

The thing is, I owe Col. Not in a debt sense, just – well – morally. He's been good to me since my troubles started, a bit like a father figure. Not like my father though. Uh-uh. The mighty Cannis Dury has few to match him. You might say it's because Col is so unlike my old man that I feel he deserves my respect.

'I'd like to help, I really would, but what could I do?'

'Same as before when we had that spot of bother.'

When everything went tits up for me, Col helped out. Some of his employees thought they'd been recruited on two hundred a week and all they could pilfer. He gave me the security gig and a roof over my head. I felt very grateful. Still do.

'That was a different matter entirely.' On-site snoop to jumped-up gumshoe looked quite a leap to me. I felt happy enough with our current arrangement – free flat, only a stumble from the bar.

'Just have a look around in the city, go to your old mates and do some sniffing about.'

'Hacks have no mates, Col.'

'You're no hack – quality you are boyo!'

I laughed. 'Half right. I'm no hack any more.'

I raised my glass, motioned to the whisky on the shelf. Col fired off a refill, planted it in front of me. His eyes widened again. When I looked in them I saw they'd grown rimmed in red. I saw the worry there. Genuine grief. I knew the territory.

‘No promises,’ I said.

He smiled, and those eyes of his shone like headlamps. ‘It’s a deal. Gus, I could ask no more. You’ve no idea what this means to me. The father–son bond is a very precious thing.’

‘Tell me about it,’ I said.

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I've been soaking up dosser life. A year anyway, maybe longer. Most of my time's been spent at the Holy Wall, listening to Col's sermons, but never acting on them. He's funny that way: deep in his religion. It's like we're both a world apart, which truth be told, is probably just what I need.

I know his heart's in the right place. He wants to motivate me, get me back into the life. But I already know I don't want it. I haven't the stomach for it. All I want now is a few beers of an evening, plenty of whisky chasers. Some good books would be nice, and maybe a dog. Would have to be a mutt, a real mongrel. Mutts are definitely the most loyal.

'You can keep the rest – possessions, people, respect,' I thought as I strolled through the city.

Everywhere the old place was being torn down, brand new glass and chrome apartments going up in place of memories. I just didn't buy into this new lifestyle thing. I aimed for an anti-lifestyle. Trendy magazines weren't

queuing up to feature my idea of happiness in their glossy pages.

I headed up Abbeyhill in the East End, on my way to Calton Hill. It's the place they put on all the postcards. Edinburgh – the place to be, huh? City of spires and cobbled streets. Tartan and bagpipes. A culture capital, a gourmet's delight . . . don't get me started: I know the real story.

Now, with most days to myself, I like to take to the high ground and look down. Just watch the place. Think about the time I played a role in the mess, before I fell off the merry-go-round.

Seagulls squawked overhead, threatened to shit on me. I looked up, shouted, 'Bugger off, would you?'

Bloody vermin. Rats with wings, that's what they are. Birds and me don't get on, just ask my soon to be ex-wife.

'Piss off, vermin,' I yelled.

An old woman stuck out her bobble-hatted head.

'Sorry, missus,' I said. A killer frown fired at me. 'Sorry, again.'

I slunk off to a bench. Dipped into my mobile mini-bar. It's very mini – I only carry the basics – quarter bottle of scoosh in a brown paper bag.

I know, I know. A real jakey look with the bag. But I like it. There's an honesty about it. The first time I bought a quarter bottle and the bloke in Booze and News put it in a brown bag I thought, 'No way.' Simply too dero, even for me.

I carried it about, rustling inside my pocket for hours before I could touch it. But when I did, it felt like I'd put on a badge of honour that read: 'I drink! Get over it!'

A few quick shots settled me down. Always does the trick. Nothing like it for cooling the blood.

I tucked away the scoosh and ferreted for a piece of paper with some details from Col. 'What am I getting into now?' I thought. I'd enough to deal with on my own without taking on someone else's problems. But like they say, I could hardly say no.

The note was written on Basildon Bond. Col's careful copperplate handwriting listed some of the people I should talk to about Billy. People who knew him before his very public demise.

I scanned the names. 'Christ, Billy, you were a silly boy, weren't you?' I whispered.

The list read like a police round-up. I knew some of old. Mostly, they were small-time crims and hard men. Knuckle breakers and old pugs. I wouldn't be too keen to drop in on any for a chat.

Some of the names made me think. Made me think I wanted to fire down some more whisky. It's the drinker's way: it burns, so you drink and it doesn't. But this was Col's gig. The holding-folding in my pocket was for finding his boy's killer, not pissing up the wall.

I got moving.

Started to roll over what Col had told me.

There was a girl in the picture, her name was Nadja, and she gave Col what the Scots call the bowk. For a placid guy he'd got pretty steamed up at the mention of her. I reckoned her to be a long shot to begin with, but Col supplied a number for her, and I had to start somewhere.

I picked up my mobi. It stank of fags: Benson's.

'Hello? Hello there, my name's Gus Dury.'

Silence.

I heard breathing on the other end of the line.

'Hello,' I said again, 'I was wondering if . . . Look, is this Nadja? Billy's father, Col, gave me your number.'

'This is Nadja.' The accent sounded thick, Eastern European. She reminded me of the Bond character Onatopp. I hoped she wasn't going to be as much trouble.

I kept it brief. 'I wondered if we could meet. I'd like to talk to you about Billy.'

I expected a few tears. Word shuffling at least, but got, 'I have nothing to say.'

I moved the phone to my other hand. 'Look, I knew Billy a bit, and I really think—'

She cut me off. 'That means no-thing to me.' The phone got shuffled, hand to hand. 'You are finished, yes?'

I drew in the big guns, showed her I wasn't messing here. 'Look, lady, if I'm finished with you already, the filth's my next stop.'

Silence, again.

I pitched my tone to a whisper, got that edge of menace in there. 'You hearing me?'

She let that bounce about a bit, then the line fizzed from her end. 'There is a place, the Shandwick, do you know it?'

A hotel in the New Town, the classier end, green and tweeds territory. 'Yeah, George Street. Bit outta my league.'

'Be there at three.'

I put the phone down, the screen misted over. My mind felt pretty cloudy too.

I had a few hours to play with so trailed the cobbles

down to Leith Walk and on to the Bull's Head. Inside I ordered a Jim Beam and chased it with another. Felt the fire of it settle my insides and raised the glass again. The heavy barman, gut like a wrecking ball, promptly filled up.

A danger sign flashed in my mind, 'Steady, Gus.' A siren wailed, but got howled out by a gale of cravings. In the mirror over the bar I caught sight of someone I half recognised. His skin looked white as a maggot, his eyes dipped in mustard. I took a drink and instantly felt just like when you're in the station and the train next to yours starts to move.

I stared at myself some more. I looked rough as guts and only half as welcoming. I thought, 'I wouldn't like to bump into myself on a dark night.'

My hair looked too long and I had the bloated Jim Morrison, Paris '71 look about me – the way he looked on four packs of Marlboro and a couple of bottles of brandy a day.

I kept hearing 'The End'. Round and round in my head, 'This is the e-e-end'. After a power of drink I passed out. Came to with bats swooping me. My hands shook so badly I missed with every swipe at them. But they soon left. They never last long. And anyway, it's the buzzards you really need to worry about.

I glanced up at the barman; he polished a pint glass, arm rested on his gut. He'd missed my blackout and I didn't want to stay for him to catch the next one. I got up to leave.

In the daylight outside, I squinted. The sun started to creep through the clouds. I stumbled into the touristy centre of the city. Kilted mannequins strayed from every

shop front and cutesy Greyfriars Bobby dogs begged to be picked up and drop-kicked into touch.

'Enough's enough,' I thought. 'Get me back to the East End and some blue-collar bliss.'

The Scott Monument looked black against the skyline, casting a shadow toward the tightly packed tenements of the Old Town. A breeze brought up the city smog, blew it down Princes Street. Diesel fumes, strong enough to taste, swirled about. The only thing that knocks out those babies is the brewery fumes. I thanked Christ for their absence.

I felt no joy to be this deep in the heart of a chocolate box. A crippling embarrassment crept up on me, and I pulled up my collar. All very Mel Gibson in *Conspiracy Theory* – but who was I kidding?

'The way you look, Dury, your own mother would be lucky to pick you,' I told myself.

On the pavement an American tourist stopped me. He looked like he'd just walked from the pages of a Ralph Lauren catalogue. All veneered teeth and spray-on tan. Hitting fifty, but fighting it. He smarmed at me; I expected to be asked something as dumb and inane as all Americans ask when they stop you on Princes Street. Something like: 'Can you tell me how to get to Rabbi Burns' synagogue?'

I tried a side step. Tourist was light on his feet, obviously working out too. He jumped before me and produced a Groucho Marx style cigar. 'Have you a match, buddy?' he said.

I looked him in the eye and hit him with: 'Not since Errol Flynn died!'

He stepped back to let me pass. As I walked off, I

glanced round to catch him put his mouth into an O and remove the cigar, stupefied.

Some people are so easy to set straight. But something told me Nadja might not be such a pushover.