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Opening extract from
Body Blow

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Published by
Walker Books Ltd

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PROLOGUE

Donnie blew out a thin stream of smoke; a grey slipstream against the blue of the sky. He'd started to smoke cigars since he'd been down here. The fags were not much cheaper than at home, what with the euro and everything, whereas the la-di-das were cheap as chips. And here he had the time to sit back and enjoy a leisurely smoke on his sunbed.

It was hot.

The temperature averaged around twenty degrees all year, so it never got cold, but today it was pushing up into the thirties. Donnie stretched out his aching legs and fanned himself with a yellowing copy of yesterday's Sun, then took the last swig from his warming bottle of San Miguel. The beer wasn't cheap any more either. Donnie remembered when he had come out here years before and a handful of pesetas would buy a round. Now he had to be a little more careful and supplemented his beer drinking with Spanish brandy, which wasn't expensive and had plenty of kick, but could give you a very angry headache in the afternoon heat.

Cigars and brandy. Sun. Life could be worse, he thought.

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He knew the day would come, once the heat was off, when he would be asked to get back to work. But for the moment, although it wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind, it was sweet.

Donnie had always imagined a whitewashed villa in the hills, with a pool and a stream of young birds in bikinis or less. The villa turned out to be as imaginary as the pay-off he had thought he might get. It wasn't a villa so much as a one-bedroom apartment in a block that had been built to separate retirement couples from their life savings. Most of the couples had long since gone, driven away by disco music, Germans and package hooligans on the piss; the last of them paid a third of the value to naff off back to Blighty and their gas fires. Paid by the family firm that now owned the whole block; the firm Donnie worked for. It was the kind of firm you never left. Once you were in, it was for life, or until they retired you in a wooden box.

The apartment wasn't that bad. It was clean and tidy, and Donnie had no possessions to clutter it up. If he poked his head over the balcony and cranked it ninety degrees to the left, he could just about see the sea. His bedroom had a ceiling fan, which he would watch on the nights he couldn't sleep because of the heat or the pounding house music, or if he hadn't had quite enough brandy to send him off. There was a shared swimming pool and Donnie would sometimes attempt a couple of early-morning lengths and a wallow, once the vomit of the previous night's revelries had been skimmed off and a hefty dose of chlorine had been added by the concierge.

The complex had a bar, where he would have his morning coffee, full English and first brandy of the day – and his last, near enough to manage the stagger back upstairs to the fourth floor. His favourite bar was the one behind him now on the

scruffy end of the beach, a flyblown place with a faded palm roof and no bongo-bongo music to spoil his P&Q. They did a nice plate of sardines or squid rings for lunch, with chips.

The rough, black cigar was beginning to taste harsh and he stubbed it into the sand at his side, next to the dry corpses of others. He squirted a gobbet of white sunscreen over his reddening expanse of belly and rubbed it in, matting the forest of hair, which, he noticed, was beginning to turn white.

Donnie blinked the sweat from his eyes and squinted to his left, where his lady was lying on her back on the sunbed next to him.

She hadn't been quite what he had imagined either, with a few more miles on the clock and more upholstery than he had fantasized. He guessed mid-forties, built for comfort not for speed, but not bad-looking at all.

She was Spanish, Valerie. He'd met her in a bar where she was serving. She had laughed at the way he said her name, explained that in her part of Spain they pronounced "V" as "B".

He had told her his name was Vic, Victor Value, and she'd repeated it: "Bictor Balue". He'd told her he was a builder.

Donnie had thought she was cute, with her accent and lively black eyes, and he had laughed for the first time in a while. She seemed completely comfortable with him, treated him like a cuddly old bear. She'd said her ex had been a heroin addict, some skinny little rat of a junkie long since banged up just outside Málaga. She had said she liked a strong man.

A big man.

Bic and Balerie. He chuckled to himself and sat up. Thought he might have a rare splash in the sea to cool the stirrings of lust in his black Speedos.

Then sat down again, any desire suddenly extinguished.

He recognized the man walking up the beach, even with the sun behind him; knew his silhouette – the wide shoulders and muscular physique – although the round gut sticking out from his unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt like a watermelon was new. Donnie also recognized the hair, the blond, wavy mullet that hadn't changed since they'd first met back in the Eighties.

Donnie looked at the sulky-looking brass who held the mullet's hand, long enough to think tit-job. He looked at the two heavies, one black, one white, who walked a couple of paces behind them on the shoreline. The brass and the muscle would change on a monthly basis, Donnie knew. But the mullet was still the same: leopards never change their spots.

Donnie fanned out his copy of The Sun and covered his face and chest with it, like a holidaymaker having an afternoon nap. He breathed in the smell of hot newsprint, the scandalous news stories of economic despair, sex and crime from back home.

And as Donnie hid, waiting for the man to pass, he knew that his temporary retirement would soon be at an end.



Novillada

Novilladas are bullfights that use bulls of three to four years old. The bullfighters are amateurs who have not yet taken part in the “alternativa”, the rites-of-passage fight at which they will become matadors.

ONE

It was raining again.

Rain, rain and more rain. And when it didn't rain, it went back to being grey and cold.

It had been more than six months since I had been shot in the stomach by Donnie Mulvaney and left for dead. Four months since his boss, Tommy Kelly, had been given three life sentences. Every time it rained, the scars on my stomach seemed to ache and I would instinctively put my hand inside my shirt to touch the puckered skin around the entry wound.

I looked out across the wet streets and beyond, to where the stubby, red-brick bodies of disused pottery kilns were dotted across the landscape like a beaten terracotta army.

I drew the curtains and climbed back into my warm bed. I checked my watch: ten-thirty. With any luck I might be able to sleep till lunchtime.

Sleep off the boredom of half the day.

I had been up here for a while, staying at my mum's in an anonymous street in a suburb of Stoke-on-Trent. It had

been judged the safest place for me to cool my heels.

I had almost forgotten the name Eddie Savage. Had put it behind me, wanting to move on. My criminal intelligence service bosses had told me that, to all intents and purposes, Eddie Savage was dead. Dead to the few friends I had made on the case, dead to the Kelly crime family; alive simply as a code name on an intelligence file.

My mother called me by my real name sometimes, but mostly just called me "love". Protective. She had good cause.

I had spent eight weeks in hospital in London. The bullet hole in my stomach had healed relatively quickly, and all that remained was a thumbprint-sized scar, still thick and red with a few holes where it had been stitched up. It looked like a second belly button.

The lung had been more complicated.

It had collapsed, which was agony, and then it had become infected, which was more painful still. The fluid they were draining off it turned from pink, through yellow, to pale green. I was on morphine and running a high temperature, hallucinating about people being sliced up, shot to bits, burnt and thrown off bridges into vats of wet cement. These horrifying visions were closer to the reality than most people could have imagined, and disturbingly they became confused with memories of Tommy Kelly's daughter, Sophie, my desire for her warped by violent nightmares.

At one point my temperature went through the roof and I had a seizure. My busted ribs refused to heal and kept me on my back and in constant pain. It was a

nightmarish daily cycle of pain, painkillers, fever, vomiting, more pain, more morphine, sweats, visions, broken sleep and back to pain.

Hell.

My weight went down to forty-five kilos and the faces that looked over my bed every day had started to appear worried. My mentor, Tony Morris, had come in to see me one afternoon and the look in his eyes made me wonder if I didn't have long left to live. And you know what? I didn't care. Slipping under the morphine blanket would have been a merciful release from what I was going through, and part of me would have liked to have seen the guilt on Tony's face if I had croaked.

After all, Tony had got me into this mess in the first place.

Finally, somehow I turned a corner and found myself up and shuffling around the ward, pushing along a trolley that held my saline drip and lung drain. Then I went into therapy.

Post-traumatic stress disorder, she had said. PTSD.

Dr Reeta Patel was my shrink. A specialist, trained in intelligence, who would know and understand what I had been through. She was young; brisk and efficient in her white coat, but there was warmth and kindness in her dark brown eyes.

Every rattle or door slam made me flinch, every noise a potential fear-inducing explosion. A car alarm could reduce me to tears. I told Reeta and she said it was normal to feel like this after the kind of events I'd been through. She had treated a lot of shell-shocked soldiers and didn't

think my case was too bad – compared with having my legs blown off by an Afghan mine. She said it was because I was beginning to deal with things, that they were starting to come to the surface.

“I don’t want to think about those things,” I told her. “But my mind keeps playing them over and over again.”

“Again, quite normal,” Reeta said. “You’ve been mentally scarred by them. They’re imprinted on your mind.”

She said it was also common to forget the nice stuff, as if my brain had rejected the memory of all the good things that had ever happened to me. My sense of safety and trust had been shattered, she explained, but the way forward was not to avoid the trauma that had brought me this far, but to relive it. I needed to go through the feelings; identify my emotions, put them into perspective.

So I agreed to her sessions. Cognitive therapy, she called it.

They made me feel a little better. I felt flattered, just talking about myself – and my experiences seemed to interest her.

I told Reeta how I’d pulled Sophie Kelly, the best-looking girl I had ever seen. How I had fallen in love with her, but how those emotions were now mixed up with the bad feelings about her old man. How I had used Sophie to get close to Tommy Kelly, her dad, who ran the largest, slickest, most violent crime organization in South London. I felt guilty about her, but weirdly also about him. Guilty that I’d gained their trust, and love, to gather intelligence against them for Tony’s organization.

"Tommy took me under his wing," I explained. "He treated me like a son."

"Does he have a son?" Reeta asked.

"Yes," I said. "That was the trouble. Jason, his son, was – is – a psycho. He was up to his neck in drink and drugs, porn, dog fights ... the lot."

"He sounds charming." Reeta smiled.

I gave half a laugh. "Oh, he is," I said. "He'll be right at home where he is now, in Belmarsh. He'll have plenty of mates."

"Did you get on?"

"He hated me," I said. "He hated the fact that his family liked me, that his dad liked me."

"Do you think his dad preferred you?" Reeta asked. "Were you the son he would have liked?"

"Yeah," I admitted. "Probably." Again, images flashed through my mind: in the car with Tommy, sailing in Croatia, looking at paintings.

Like father and son. I had no father to speak of, and the idea of a father figure had appealed to me.

"So do you feel betrayed by Tommy Kelly?"

I thought about it for a moment.

"No," I said finally. "He did the right thing in the end. He looked after his own. Blood's thicker than water and all that. Even though he knew it would shaft him, his priority was to look out for Jason, love him or hate him, his own son. If anything, I betrayed Tommy."

"You sound as if you admire him," Reeta said.

"I suppose I do in a way." Despite the ruthlessness of the gang he ran and the violence he approved, I did have

a sneaking admiration for Tommy Kelly. I felt sick when I thought back to fighting him out on the marshes, when I remembered smashing my fist into his face.

Despite knowing that the bloke was an arch-villain, in my heart of hearts it had felt wrong.

“Do you feel betrayed by *anyone*, Eddie?” Reeta held me in her gaze.

I thought about the bloke who had been around all through my childhood. The uncle figure who had been a support for me, my mum and my brother but who had ultimately recruited my brother and me into intelligence work.

“Yes,” I said. “Tony Morris.”