

The man who was going to kill me pointed the revolver at my chest. I had found him bending over the drinks trolley. As he turned, putting down the bottle in his hand I saw the gun. He could hardly miss at that range.

He was unflustered, as though he were a welcome guest invited to help himself, rather the malign influence from which I had finally managed to escape. A distant cousin, orphaned in a road accident, he had come to live with me and my parents when I was 10. Because of his disrupted childhood, though more than a year older than me, he had been placed in my class at school, and we had been inseparable. I looked up to him at the time.

But now his blue eyes were cold and unblinking, not the happy eyes I had once seen dancing with Anglocentric merriment that time in our post O-level jaunt in France. A barman had used a spatula to scoop the froth off the top of the *pression* he had just dispensed (so unlike the *proper* way that I had first witnessed when I - a tallish 16-year-old, who passed muster in the low light of the pub - had gone with him to *The Shooting Brake* to celebrate his coming of drinking age). But that was half a lifetime ago, and there was nothing playful in the stare he levelled at me now, over the drink he had already poured himself. But the drink was in his left hand, and in his right was the gun. He meant to kill me.

'Surprised, John?' he asked.

'Not really, Roland', I said, more calmly than I felt. 'Not surprised that you should want to...' I paused, searching for the right euphemism, but knew that my main priority was to keep talking. '...kill me. There *is* the inheritance after all. Certainly not surprised by the betrayal either. We don't like each other now, I know that. I must say though that I'm a little surprised that you should choose *that* thing' - gesturing at the revolver. 'How do you mean to get away with it?'

I didn't add that I was surprised that he had the guts to kill me that way. I had come to realize, over the years, that Roland was rather a coward when it came to physical violence; something more abstract, devious, arm's length, would have fitted his character better. But I didn't want to sting him into pulling the trigger in a spasm of hurt pride.

'Why shouldn't I get away with it?' he asked. 'A tragic accident...'

'At gone eleven at night? People usually have shooting accidents in daylight, don't they?'

I was more interested in keeping him talking than in getting him to see reason, but this seemed to give him pause for thought. Not for long though,

'Unless you were cleaning the... No, wrong angle, you're right, I shall have to make it look like a burglary gone wrong. "John Toogood who lives alone and leaves no immediate family, was fatally shot after disturbing burglars..*etc etc*" - that sort of thing.'

'But don't you think the police will be suspicious, you being the only person who would benefit substantially from my death?' I wanted to keep him talking, but there was also a measure of desperation in my objection. I didn't want to die.

'Do you really think so? There's no reason to suppose there'll be a post-*mortem*, or even the most cursory of inquiries - just a Coroner's report. Besides, I took the precaution of arranging an alibi: whatever happened to you, I couldn't have had anything to do with it.'

'An alibi?'

'Yes. You know him actually: remember Atkins from school? Well he and I are in business together; and he's a bit of a scallywag. At this moment he's *in flagrante delicto* with some floosie half his age, and to keep his wife in the dark we've arranged to be working late together.

That was the Roland I had come to know - not just the mischievous partner in boyhood escapades (always putting one over on the grown-ups, and with an uncanny knack for diverting the blame from himself) but devious, machinating.

Yes, that was the word, *machinating*: he treated people as if they were machines - this happens, so that happens - dancing a Pavlovian minuet to his cynical tune.

It was when we both set our sights on the same girl (and she *was* only a girl at the time) that I was first made aware of Roland's mean and calculating streak. Over a drink in *The Shooting Brake*, in a display of big-brother-like worldliness ('*Won't you take this advice that I hand you like a brother*' - the words of the song came back to me whenever I remembered the exchange) he said 'John,' (maybe he even said "*Hey there*", but more probably he just put a brotherly arm round my shoulder): 'You know we've always shared everything. But there are some things a man can't share - Celia, for one.'

This impressed me no end: what a friend he was: strong, selfless, loyal, but still a man of the world. 'So, if you want her, go ahead and take her. If not, I will. And I can't wait for ever - do it now.'

So there was the ploy, though I couldn't see it at the time. Whatever could 'Take her' mean? A young man, hardly more than a boy, with no experience of women - and with nobody to ask (he'd made sure of that by ruling out my one mentor, himself) - I was bound to rush in and make a fool of myself. Which I duly did - just as Roland had planned.

Celia brushed away my mawkish overtures with gentle amusement, and fell happily into the well-placed arms of my cousin. When he came home, the night after Celia had turned me down, with a spring in his step and a tune on his lips (was it *that* tune - "*Hey there*"?), that's when I knew.

And there were other times, other little breaches of faith. Nothing too heinous, just enough to cause the gradual erosion of the trust there had once been between us - the trust that I at least had felt in him. So when he moved out I was glad to see him go. After years in his shadow, I was free at last.

But he wasn't talking.

'Clever', I said - the first word that came to my lips. Flattery comes easy when you're looking down the barrel of a revolver. 'But can you do it? You were always a bit squeamish. Remember running over that dog in Italy, after driving through the night? The aged crone at the side of the road, holding out a black bin bag, with a reproachful look that said "It's your mess. You clear it up"? And you couldn't do it. That was only a dog.'

'Hmm.' Roland thought for a while. 'You've got a point. I must think this through. Mind if I have another drink?'

'No': there was no point in being churlish now. 'My house is your...'; I stopped when I saw his smile.

'Not *quite* yet, I think. Allow at least a month or two for probate. But you don't seem to see the funny side. Still... One for you?' he asked, giving up on the joke and pouring himself another whisky. He poured with his left hand, his right still holding the revolver. I licked my lips. God I was thirsty. 'Brandy, if memory serves,' he went on. Putting down his drink he

picked up the brandy bottle, gesturing towards a fresh glass and raising an eyebrow. 'That's what you always drank at that pub we used to go to.'

*'The Shooting Brake'.*

'What a memory - shooting... ironic really.' He laughed. I didn't.

The brandy bottle was still in his left hand, his eyebrow still raised.

He took a meditative drink, and at last let the revolver drop. 'OK, you win. I'd have trouble shooting you in cold blood. Some other time, perhaps.' He drained his glass, turned to go, and opened the door. 'We must do this again. "Toodle-pip", as we used to say.'

Anger and relief swept together over me,, like two opposing waves crashing against each other, 'But?... Wha..? Is that *it* then? "Toodle-pip"? You come in here, wave a gun, threaten to kill me, and then breeze off as if nothing's happened?'

'Well yes, actually.' His laughing eyes mocked my impotent fury. 'What do you want me to do? Throttle you with my bare hands?' And he closed the door behind him.

Angry, frightened, confused, relieved, I reached a trembling hand for the brandy bottle - the one Roland had been holding when I disturbed him. And I filled a generous glass of the poisoned spirit for myself - just as Roland had planned.