

The Runner

by H. W. Moss

“Nice place you got here, I must say. You’ve done well for yourselves. A bit underground and dark like. But grand. Think they’d call this a growlery, where you can put your feet up and enjoy a pint and complain about the government.”

Sean settled back in the comfortable easy chair and glanced around the rec room. He held a glass of porter from which he drank a small sip.

“That’s a tradition here in this country as well, Sean,” his host replied taking a long pull on his own pint and draining the dark liquid nearly by half. “Slamming the regime.”

“And how are the boys, Liam? Grown lads now, eh?”

“That’s right, Sean, you wouldn’t have seen them these past ten year, would you? Thick as thieves, they are. Gavin is twenty-five y’know, and Ferhghal’s a year behind.”

“Grand. Brilliant. Work together, play together?”

Eilis with detectable reverence in her voice said, “Oh, that they do. They even moved in together.”

Liam took another taste of the dark malt and said, “Family. That’s what it is. Family is all that counts, y’know.”

“Well,” Eilis continued, “This country suits them.”

“This city, y’mean.” Liam was not defensive; he was merely explaining. “San Francisco is like nectar to bees when it comes to young people having their nights out. The two of ’em got an apartment and Gav has his own little computer programming business with Ferhghal in school at university. So we help him along. Doesn’t earn anything much to speak of.”

Eilis took over the conversation. “We have been able to take them back six times over the years to meet their gramps. But the Old Sod means nuttin’ to ’em. It’s all the here and the now and the iPods to them.”

In the background a fiddler wove an ancient tune and the three listened quietly for a moment. Then Liam stood and walked over to the liquor cabinet. He retrieved a brown quart size bottle and two glass tumblers. Sean lowered the pint from his lips when he saw the pour and saluted with his beer glass.

Liam handed one shot over and lifted the other, inhaled deeply through his nostrils and bared his teeth with a grin. “Ah, ’tis mother’s milk it is. A single malt you can be sure.”

Sean looked at Eilis as if she might want a spot, but she smiled weakly. “Oh, no, I’m a Pioneer. Well, at least ye quit tobacco,” she said firmly. “Ye have done, ha’n’t ye Sean? I know Liam has these past five year I think it’s been, hasn’t it dear?”

There was a brief silence in which Sean did not reply and Liam feigned indifference. He did not want his friend to think it mattered to him, because it did not matter whether or not he continued the habit. At last Liam said, “Now, now Lesh, don’t be botherin’ the man. You’re always botherin’ and pokin’ and sneakin’ and askin’ what none of us men folk want to tell or reveal.”

Eilis rose to her feet, straightened her skirt nonchalantly. “That’ll be his Majesty’s hint it’s time for me to do me shopping.” She held her hand out for Sean to bid goodbye. “I’ll see you when I get back, won’t I?”

Sean looked at Liam for the answer. Liam shook his head no, said, “Sean has an appointment to keep. We have some business to attend and then he’ll be off. So no, but if not this visit, certainly in a few months when he comes round again, right Sean-o?”

The Scotch was about to meet Sean’s lips when he halted before swallowing. He lifted the glass in acknowledgment toward Eilis and with a gentlemanly gesture and a great big smile said, “Right-o to that. Goodnight, Eilis. Was great having a chatwitcha.”

As soon as the door was firmly shut behind her, Liam rose and bolted it. “Can’t be too careful,” he said mysteriously as he pulled a thin cigarette from his breast pocket. “Tobacco, yes, I quit. Smoking dope I d’n’t. Care to toké one up with me?”

Liam lit the joint and inhaled deeply, passed it over to Sean. A new piece of music began playing in the background. The lyric refrain was “Send lawyers, guns and money.”

Sean said delightedly, “Warren Zevon. I loove it! Reminds me of me youth.” He held his breath and passed the joint back.

Liam accepted it, said, “Y’know what’s really boring? James Taylor singing ‘Going to Carolina in my Mind.’” He sucked in a lungful and with the exhale added, “Really really fookin’ boring.”

* * *

Gavin was engrossed in the computer screen.

Ferhghal said, “You know you’ve got a problem bro. Ever since I started working for Kroc you have been pissing away your money on some really stupid spreads.” A few seconds elapsed with no response. He said insistently and loudly, “Are you listening to me? Hunh? You listening?”

Gavin tore his nose away from the screen only when Ferhghal's hand grabbed the mouse and held it from him. "Gimme that back. I'm in the middle of an important workout here. I have to pick Miami over Green Bay in five minutes and get you out the door or the Crocodile won't take my bet. Why the hell doesn't he use email or a cell phone like everyone else? I'd have more time if he'd take book the modern way. What is he, a fuckin' Luddite?"

His brother released the mouse with the validity of the argument. "That's what I'm talking about, Gav. You don't give a shit that you lost ten big ones this week, do you?"

The money fact caused Gavin to react. "It's deductible."

Ferhghal sneered at this. "How the hell are your gambling losses deductible?"

"It isn't gambling. It's research. I asked my accountant. I write game programs. I have to play the games if I expect to make a great internet app."

His brother was not convinced and shook his head as he said, "You asked your accountant if your losses are deductible from your income and she said yes? What, are you nuts? Is Julie nuts? Yes, if you go to the track and keep your receipts and at the end of the year you can legitimately prove you have losses to offset short term capital gain winnings, then it's deductible. But that's legal gambling. Did you tell her you gamble through a bookie? Hunh? Did you tell her you make illegal bets on point spreads between NFL teams? Did you tell her that? Or did you pose it in some innocuous way like, 'What if it costs me money to make money?' Is that how you asked? Not, 'I make illegal bets and lose. Can I deduct that from my income?' Because I'm a finance major, remember? I took accounting. No, you may not deduct losses from illegal gambling."

The news did not appear to bother Gavin who said, “Six points. Take that to Kroc the Luddite.”

Ferhghal wrote the information on a small piece of paper. “He’s not a Luddite. He’s paranoid. Says he’d rather keep everything in his head or on these tiny note pads rather than risk having the cops get hold of electronic evidence.”

Gavin snorted disapproval. “I’ll say he’s paranoid. So paranoid he hired you to run for him.” He continued moving the mouse, highlighting information and once in a while he snorted.

“You sound like a dog when you do that. Or a pig looking for truffles.” Gavin did not take this as an insult although it was clearly meant to be one. Since childhood, the two used one another as punching bags and often made abusive, mean statements back and forth which each typically ignored. “He uses a computer the way you’re supposed to use one: as a computing device. He keeps tabs on his entire book with it. All the races, all the games, all the events his not so bright clients throw their money away on. Speaking of which: what part of vigorish do you not understand?”

Gavin avoided a response by moving and clicking the mouse.

Ferhghal refused to allow his brother’s silence to influence what he said. “I don’t cause trouble is why he pays me. And I turn out to have connections to one of his biggest losers among many customers: You.” He paused for effect, then asked, “And how much you going to lose this time?”

Gavin turned from the screen of his own volition, without his brother’s tampering. “Give me a dime. Green Bay. Two points.” He paused, then added, “And I have plans to change that.”

Ferhghal wrote in his notebook with a pencil stub and there was a moment of silence before he said, “Did I hear you right? Not the thousand but the subtext here. I know you, Gav, and you don’t say things like that unless you have some hidden meaning. Just remember: They don’t call him Crocodile for nothing. I mean, it’s said he cuts out human hearts and feeds them to his dogs.”

“Boy, have they got you bamboozled. That’s just propaganda. They call him that because his last name’s Kroc.”

Ferhghal persisted. “You’re way behind on the vig. Do you even know how far? And this bet is a dime line, y’know. Kroc wants his juice. He brought it up this morning. Now I gotta ask you for some of the vig to stave him off.”

Gavin glared at Ferhghal for a second, then reached inside the desktop drawer. He pulled out a check book. As he began writing he asked, “How much? Will a hundred hold him?”

“You gotta be kidding! A hundred won’t keep him from sending someone over to break your arm. More like five might do the trick. You have a huge pile of interest on the bets he’s made for you and it isn’t going away unless you start paying it down.”

“Three hundred. Here’s a check for three hundred.” Gavin ripped the strip of paper from the binder. “Take it or leave it.”

Grudgingly, Ferhghal took the draft, folded and slipped it between the pages of his notebook.

Gavin looked at his brother with a sly smile and said, “Told you I have a plan. How would you like to make two hundred fifty thousand? I’ve got this little idea, but it takes two. I need your help.”

“Why do I have a feeling you’re not going to be working any angles? Instead, you want me to just rip off my own boss, right? I know I shouldn’t be listening to this.”

Gavin turned his attention completely away from the computer and faced his brother. “Yah. But it’s really easy and he will never figure out you’re in on it. Believe me, I got it all worked out. All you have to do is place a couple bets. It’s all in the tuh-tuh-tuh-timing as they say.”

“Save it,” Ferhghal said as he pulled on his coat. “Gotta get the run in. You’re not the only loser on his books. I’ll talk at you tonight.”

Gavin sat alone for a few seconds watching the door before he turned his attention to the screen. “Atlanta over Detroit. Shoulda done that.”

* * *

“Ill give you the Raiders over the Chiefs by ten,” Liam offered.

Sean seemed perplexed. “What the fook are they?”

“American Football teams.”

Sean looked pain stricken. “Football? Americans don’t play soccer.”

“No, no, no. Football to them is with a oblong thing they throw from place to place on the field or carry. No feet actually involved except for running. Sometimes they kick. I was just giving you a wager, is all.”

“That’s not football! And I bet they never heard of hurlin’.” Sean was not going to leave it alone. “That’s a game you can sink yer teeth into. Older than the history of Ireland, y’know. I’d give you odds there.”

Liam set his whiskey next to his beer glass and retrieved a set of keys from his pocket. He walked over to a tall wall cabinet and inserted one key in the lock while Sean

continued his monologue. “You want a wager? I’ll give you Ireland over Scotland in the Shinty.”

Liam said nothing as he reached into the cabinet and retrieved a cloth covered object. It was obviously heavy because he needed two hands to carry it. He turned with it in his arms and said with a sneer in his voice, “That’s no wager. Ireland any day over Scotland. But let’s to business. Now, take this little beauty for the apex of American ingenuity.”

The canvas cover was removed and the gun revealed in all its dull blue steel barrel and circular clip glory. Sean was suitably impressed. He whistled his appreciation. “Ahh. The Irish Sword no less.”

Liam said, “Yes indeed. They call it the Chicago street sweeper. It’s a 1921 model Thompson sub-machine gun. See that dinner plate sized magazine here? That’s the C drum, holds 100 rounds and the gun itself is capable of 700 rounds a minute. Run through, just pop another one in.” He walked over to what appeared to be a closet. But when the folding doors parted Sean was astonished to see a full length shooting range wide enough for two people to stand. On a pulley at the fifty foot mark was a paper with the upper torso of a man in black silhouette.

“The den we’re in is underground at the base of a small mountain called Bernal Heights,” Liam explained. “Bought the place with this in mind. Faces into the mountain. Excavated it myself.”

“Ah, the labors of our youth pay off,” Sean opined.

“Right you are. Just muscle work. Not unlike clearing a meadow of stones that the kine might graze the fertile fields of Durrow.” He gave a set of ear muffs to his

companion and placed a similar pair over his own head. “No one can hear a ting. ’Course we can, so I advise putting these on.” Sean did as he was told. “Go ahead, try it. It’s fully automatic. Like a camera, just point and shoot.”

But instead of handing the gun over to Sean, Liam mouthed the words to the song playing in the background, “Back in baby’s arms again,” which he lip-synched as he raised the weapon to his shoulder, planted his legs in a sturdy stance and fired off a burst that struck the center of the target taking out a fist sized chunk. “Ahhhh. That feels good.”

He placed the piece in Sean’s hands. Sean hefted the butt of the stock to his shoulder, wrapped his hand around the forward grip, placed a finger on the trigger and pulled. The sharp burp of at least ten rounds cracked the air. A practiced marksman, the recoil altered his aim only slightly. He paused to examine his handiwork. The paper lay in two parts, an upper and a lower half. The lower one dangled from the upper by a thread.

Burned powder smoke swirled in the air around them. He fired one more single shot and separated the two pieces of paper target.

“Oh, the lad’s’ll love it.” He glanced at the brass at his feet. “Looks like forty-fives.”

“Yep and it’s completely legal to own in some American states, partially legal in others as long as the gun was manufactured before 1986.”

“How much?”

Liam looked sheepish. “Well, trouble is they’ve become collectible. And there’s a limited supply. For you, \$15,000 which includes my commish.”

“A bit steep.”

“Yes, but two exactly this type gun were used in the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre. And I have a line on a 500 round drum, but I haven’t actually seen one.”

“Imagine that. A piece o’ history. How many can we get?”

“I can get me hands on 20 or 30.”

“Done deal,” Sean said as he took aim again and fired at the remaining upper half.

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“I know I’m going to regret what you are about to say,” Ferhghal stifled a yawn.

“So out with it. Who are we creaming?”

The living room was not particularly cheerful and could use a woman’s touch. Gavin and Ferhghal were not particularly tidy nor did either consider their apartment much more than a place to eat, sleep and change clothes. Their schedules were completely different and breakfast was one of the few times during a day they might actually see one another face to face. That is, if Ferhghal decided to get out of bed. The student in him preferred staying up long after Gavin found it necessary to hit the hay. But not always.

“Didn’t hear you come in last night, bro. Must of been late.”

“Work’s the curse of the drinking class as Dad would say.” Gavin poured milk over his cereal. “I’d really rather not go in today.”

“Yes, but your name’s on the door. That means you get there first and leave last.”

“Yah? Says who? You get my bet in to Kroc on time?”

“Course I did. No problemo. Just another dumb spread. You lost again, you know.”

Ferhghal sounded exasperated as he delivered the news.

“You think so? Well, before I get the hell out of here, here’s the deal.” He set his spoon down and ignored the softening cereal. He spoke earnestly. “All those bad spreads were for a reason. I’ve been salting the mine you might say. That way the Crocodile won’t smell anything fishy when I land a half million.”

Gavin could be persuasive, especially when he wanted his younger brother to do something. Ferhghal still held a modicum of awe for his older sibling and listened intently, even though he was sure the proposal would go against his better judgment.

“I’ve been making these really bad bets on purpose, making it look like I’m not a chalk player, that I’m taking the price because the big one is coming up. Just like the Giants and Patriots Superbowl, this one pays 24 to 1. Maybe 30 to 1. They’re still figuring it out in Vegas.”

Ferhghal quickly pointed out, “That’s if you get the spread right. You can pick the underdog, but that doesn’t give you the big odds. You have to figure out by how much.”

“You are correct, sir,” Gavin said in mock respect for his brother’s insight. “And that’s where you come in.”

“Somehow I don’t think I’m going to like this,” Ferhghal ventured.

“Don’t worry. I got it all worked out. All you have to do is get the spread in after the game is played. But Kroc won’t know the game is already over. In fact, his timing is going to be so far off, he’ll accept the bet and pay it without realizing what happened.”

“And how am I going to do that? It sounds impossible.”

“He uses a computer to keep track of his book. We -- that’s you and me -- change the internal clock. It will be off by two hours. You put the bet in with the correct score and spread as if I picked it. Then we re-set the clock.”

Ferhghal said nothing. He wore a contemplative stare. Finally, he said, “Why me?”

“Who else can I trust as much? That’s what brothers are for.” Gavin tilted his cell phone clipped to his belt. “But I gotta run, catch a Fillmore bus or I’ll be late.” He chugged a small glass of orange juice and pulled his suit coat off the back of his chair. “Think about it. You have two days.”

Ferhghal sat there nursing a cup of coffee, thinking the thing through until he yawned, stretched and went back to bed.

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The phone call came late at night. Ferhghal picked the cell up from the night stand and read the time: nearly two a.m. The caller I D said it was Gavin. “Yah? Hello?”

“I need to make a bet.”

Ferhghal held the phone away from his face and stared at it. “It’s two in the fucking morning. What could you possible bet on?”

“I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. What’s out there?”

“Nothing. It’s two ayem for god’s sake. Where are you?”

Gavin sounded slightly drunk. “They’re closing the Buss Stop. I need to get a bet in before everyone gets kicked out the door. What’s on tomorrow?”

Ferhghal was befuddled, but had the presence of mind to say, “One o’clock Panthers and Vikings. That’s the earliest.”

“Thanks. I’ll take the Panthers up by six. Gimme a dollar. Got that? Goodbye.”

The line went dead and Ferhghal once more held the phone away from his head like it was a hot rock burning his ear. This was not the first time his brother had pestered him

in the wee hours although it was, perhaps, the shortest conversation he had in months with Gavin.

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The box arrived in a canvas sack Ferhghal carried under his arm. Gavin did a double take when it tumbled out onto their kitchen table. He said, “Naw. Too small. How could such a small thing hold so much money? You sure there’s half a mil in there, Ferg?”

Using a small blade pen knife, Ferhghal began cutting the plastic tape at the edges. First the sides, then the top down the middle until the flaps popped open and revealed a kapok filled interior. Plastic peanuts dribbled onto the floor as he reached his hand inside and withdrew a wad of bills.

“Hundreds. It’s in hundreds.” He fanned the packet like a deck of cards. Gotta be ten thousand dollars in this bundle. Only need fifty of these babies. Twenty-five each sound right?”

Two piles of equal size resulted in their satisfied high five slap of palms. “Yah!” they said in unison.

Gavin stayed his brother’s hand as he began pulling his share toward him. “You know you can’t take this into a bank, don’t you?”

There is no word, no description for the sound Ferhghal emitted which was close to the most contemptuous response he could utter: air blew out through his nose and mouth, his lips flapped and a groan rose in his throat. “Of course,” was all he said.

“That so? Where you going to keep it?”

“Under my mattress, where do you think?”

Gavin turned serious. “Don’t be funny. If you take more than two thousand cash into a bank you’ll raise questions. I suggest you open several bank accounts, one a day for a week, then repeat the process depositing two grand a week in each. Never show up with more and never visit the same bank in seven days. Longer if you can manage.”

Ferhghal became defensive. “What about you? You got a steady safe way to handle that much cash?”

“Believe me, Ferg, if I didn’t, I wouldn’t have set this up in the first place. This has been a long time in the planning. Why else do you think I got you the job with The Crocodile?”

Ferhghal was astonished. “What?! You didn’t get me the job. I got it through Vinnie whose uncle bets with Kroc.”

“And who let Vinnie know the slot was open? You don’t think Vinnie’s uncle says squat to Vinnie about who his bookie is, do you? Nope, that was me letting it be known through him so’s you’d apply direct. Yah, I been planning this a long time. Why else you think I kept doubling up, letting the vig pile up? Which reminds me. Here’s the twenty I owe Kroc.” He picked two bundles off the top of his pile and tossed them to Ferhghal. “Give this to your boss. And take him another ten,” Gavin placed a third in Ferhghal’s hand, “to do a number on the Giants who I say will lose tonight by five. In overtime. Yah, I know, same dumb bet. Can’t change dicks in the middle of a screw.”

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During the next several weeks, Gavin gave nearly half his newfound wealth back to the bookie in the form of very high, very bad wagers. He lost even though he really wanted to win, primarily because he continued to bet the puppy. He did this to throw off

suspicion and continue duplicating his previous tactics, but after a while he changed, started playing like a square using systems and trends.

He still lost.

Ferhghal, on the other hand, developed several bad habits Gavin attributed to newly acquired cash. He began wearing expensive designer clothes, bought a Ferrari, stopped attending class and slept until late in the afternoon.

One day Gavin kicked him with the tip of his shoe. “Get up you lazy head. I have to get this to the Crocodile. You want to get up and take it to him?”

Ferhghal stretched and said, “Naw. I quit the business.”

The look on Gavin’s face was one of contained outrage. “You asshole. You really don’t get it, do you? What do you expect Kroc thinks? That you made a killing in the stock market? He’s going to figure out something’s wrong and he’s been smarting over how much it hurt to give you a box of money to carry to me, he’s going to smell a rat. You. You’re the first rat he’s going to catch.”

Ferhghal yawned, stretched again. “Don’t be such a worry wart.”

“Driving a Ferrari for god’s sake. You’re a student. Student’s don’t own Ferraris.”

“Hey, what’s the big deal?” Ferhghal asked defensively. “I bought it used. Not like I paid too much either. It’s an investment.”

Gavin was angry and frustrated. He grabbed the mattress by its exposed handles where Ferhghal’s sheets were pulled away and in one uplift turned it over throwing his brother nearly naked on the floor.

“You make me crazy!” Gavin shouted as he stormed out of the bedroom. “And you’re going to get us both killed!” he yelled as he slammed the front door behind him.

Ferhghal scratched his head, then scratched his ass, then clambered his way up and out of the rumpled tangle of sheets, bedding and mattress.

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Gavin's cell chimed the steeplechase trumpet which indicated someone interested in the games was on the horn. But who? The caller ID was blocked; he had an apprehensive feeling as he answered. He said, "Hello?"

"We gotta have a face to face so I can tell you what's what dipshit."

Gavin said with surprise, "Angelo?"

"Yah, dummass, it's me. And I want to see you at my condo on Greenwich in half an hour. Capiche?"

Dread ran like an eel up Gavin's spine setting the hairs on the back of his neck tingling. He closed the clamshell and thought about his next move. He wanted to do nothing. He wanted to hide. He wanted to run away, but knew no direction to head. The money, what was left of it, was secure and he could pick it up any time. In fact, he realized, that was a hold card. Whatever Kroc wanted to discuss it had to do with his stash which was his to deliver if need be. Perhaps he could buy his way out of this jam.

"Dad only has one leg. He lost it to an armored Saracen FV 603 in Northern Ireland when he was a teenager. But you can't see his limp, the prosthesis is so good. He always says, 'The Troubles may be over, they may not. But during peace, prepare for war.' Sun Tzu."

None of what Gavin said as small talk seemed to land on Leo the Dude who asked, "You know where the B-Boys be breakin' at?"

Kroc said, "You really are an idiot."

"And you've never been anything but trouble and dust," Leo said with the kind of resentful insight only the terminally stupid can offer.

Angelo Kroc was wearing a bathrobe. He stood beside the kitchen island work space granite counter top casually chopping an onion. When the front door buzzer sounded and he punched the button, the door opened and Gavin entered. There was a comfy feeling about the place which belied the potential hurt hidden behind its owner's simple domestic chores. Next to the onion was a slab of red meat.

"You know why you're here?" Angelo asked rather congenially, Gavin thought, for a man who was about to threaten his life. Angelo took a sip from a long stem wine glass and waved the chopping knife like a baton in the air.

"No." Gavin felt the first gambit should be denial even if it was probably in the face of the truth which somehow the Crocodile had got hold of. "Why am I here? I owe some vig? That it? You want carrying costs?"

"No asshole, I want the whole bag of cash back and I want your right thumb."

Gavin's next thought was, "Sheesh. Is that all? I'm getting off easy." But he was still in denial mode and was sure he sounded sincere when he said, "Hunh? What the fuck you talking about Kroc? My what? You want my thumb? Hunh?" He tried to sound incredulous and stupefied and surprised and thought maybe he was doing a pretty good job of it as Angelo took the meat, gave it a couple quick slices to flatten it out and threw it into a hot skillet. Oil sizzled loudly.

Gavin tried to change the subject. "What kind of meat is that?"

This seemed a reasonable question to Angelo who replied, “Something I love since I was a kid. Fried onions and heart.”

“Yah?” Gavin was suddenly apprehensive. “What kind of heart?”

“I could tell you it’s beef.” Angelo sipped again from his wine glass. “But I won’t.”

“Yah?” Gavin said brightly. Then shrewdly, “You got any pets?”

Angelo sounded slightly put off by this question which must have seemed a complete non sequitur. “What pets? You mean like a cat or something?”

“Dogs.”

“Yah, I got dogs. I also know you cheated me, I just don’t know how. What I want is my money back and I want to know what you did to make me think I owed you half a mil. Capiche?”

Gavin backpedaled. “How could I possibly have cheated you?”

“Like I says, I don’t know exactly. But your brother already gave his share up in exchange for being allowed to live. Now where’s the rest of my money?”

That was news, bad news. Ferhghal had already come clean? That was bad. Maybe it was time to fess up. “Most of it’s gone, Angelo. What’s left my father’s keeping for me.”

There was a moment in which Kroc flipped the contents of the greasy fry pan saying nothing. Then, “Gimme your cell phone.” Gavin passed it over. Kroc nodded to the Dude who took hold of Gavin’s other hand and planted it palm side down on the counter top. Kroc menaced Gavin’s thumb with the butcher knife. He handed the phone back. “Call your pop.” When the dialing sequence was begun, Kroc grabbed the phone

and held it up to Gavin's ear placing his own head next to Gavin's so that he could hear both parts of the conversation. "Tell him you're coming over to get your loot."

Gavin spoke into the mouthpiece saying, "Dad. Me, Gav. I need your help."

"Ah, Gav. Now yer singin' me song. Son, you don't know the warmth in my heart to hear you turn to yer old man and ask for aid. All these years on your own and me and yer mum on the outside lookin' in thinking what a wonderful ting to have sons so independent yet what a horrible ting to have sons so independent they never need nor if you offered wanted your help. And nothing's so forlorn as a key what's lost its lock. Eilis used to say how much she wished you'd stayed four years old all your lives instead of growing up to be men who . . ."

Kroc indicated he was tired of listening to the self pity and homey homilies. The Dude pressed Gavin's hand harder on the cold surface.

"Dad!" Gavin interrupted the monologue. "They say they're going to cut off my right thumb." There was no response. "Dad get me out of this."

Silence which Gavin took to mean his father may not have understood. Then, "Gavin my boy. It warms the cockles of me heart to have you calling on me in your time of need."

Kroc's face was wrathful. He pulled the phone away and made a backhand slashing motion with the butcher knife. Gavin would never know whether the bookie meant to actually cut him because at that instant the door burst open like an eggshell cracking inward.

Liam stood in the threshold with a wistful smile on his face and a large violin case in his hands. In an instant Liam opened the case and pulled the Thompson out with his

finger immediately on the trigger and his other hand on the barrel grip. He aimed it in the general direction of the three and took ten quick paces to cross the room.

That's a large bore rifle, Gavin thought. Then, correct that. A large bore machine gun. He recognized the Tommy gun from its strange profile, the dinner plate magazine flat side facing his direction.

"O'Connor!" Kroc shouted at the intruder. "What the fuck you doing here?"

Liam marched over to where Leo the Dude held Gavin's hand on the kitchen island counter top while Kroc hung frozen with the knife in mid air. Liam said nothing, merely raised the gun barrel and placed it directly against Leo's head. Kroc dropped the knife which clattered on the floor. He nodded at Leo who let go of Gavin's hand. Released, Gavin took a step back and then a few hurried steps around the counter to stand shoulder to shoulder with Liam.

There was an awkward silence during which none of the four said a word. Then Liam grinned impishly and said, "A granite counter top. Grand. I used to be in the building trade myself, y'know, but these were very high end. My customers never could afford granite. It's said they'll last a lifetime and bullets bounce off. Been wanting to try this ever since I heard that."

Gavin, Kroc and Leo figured out what Liam was chatting about at precisely the same instant. Gavin stood his ground but the other two looked one another in the eye and, as Liam lowered the muzzle toward the colorful surface, dove together below its sanctuary.

The gun went off with a repeating series of explosions as Liam turned his body in a slow arc. The bullets streaked the granite and dug out a snail trail here and there but, for

the most part they did, indeed, bounce and ricochet off taking different trajectories. Over the thundering roar of the pounding breech as it expelled casings could be heard the shattering of glass and metal pots being struck and the chunk-chunk-chunk as lead punched holes in the kitchen walls.

Through the burned cordite smoke filled air, Liam said, “Ah. Now that was a great revelation. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

Kroc and Dude raised their heads above the counter investigating whether or not the shooting spree was over, Liam said, “Now if that had been Formica it would have gone straight through and taken your ears off, believe me. Yes, indeed. I’m sold on granite.”

“You guys know each other?” Gavin had regained his composure and sounded incredulous.

His father was over the initial excitement of having fired the weapon out in the open, not in his shooting gallery.

“You kidding? Crocodile and me go back twenty years, don’t we Kroc? Who do ya think handles the Irish Sweepstakes or takes our bets on the Darby? Somebody’s got to make book on the horses in Ireland.”

Kroc nodded assent. “I should have suspected these were your boys O’Connor. But it never crossed my mind.”

With a big all encompassing smile Liam put an arm around Gavin’s shoulders. “Yep. Them’s me boys all grown up and all.” His smile turned stiff with lips pursed. “Speaking of which, Kroc, you messed with my family.”

Before he could continue, there was a tremendous explosion outside which reverberated through the condominium like a thunderclap.

Another smile split Liam's face as he said, "Ah, that'll be my bride, that wonderful woman my wife watching my back."

* * *

Later, back in the recreation room on Bernal Heights, when Liam asked how it could possibly have happened, Eilis had to admit she was taken by surprise. Gavin and Ferhghal listened intently as she told the story of waiting downstairs in the back alley while Liam went up to fetch Gavin. She was, she said, paying too much attention to the comings and goings of the other owners in the building when a man walked up and said she could not hang out there.

"'Oh, and why is that?' I asked all innocent and simple minded like. He said it was because he told me so, as if that's an explanation of any kind. Then he turned and all casual like waved a hand gun in me general direction. He says something like, 'Don't worry, ma'am. I'm well versed in firearms.' Which I took to mean he was just trying to scare me off. I said all calm like, 'Oh, I don't see anything to be worried about if all you've got is that peashooter.' And I reached into me purse and withdrew me favorite pistol and aimed it at his head. 'I prefer something a little more powerful meself' I said and assumed a steady two hand stance with me right index finger on the trigger and me right elbow bent ever so slightly. That way when the gun went off with a thunderous roar that I could see left him wondering why he was still alive, the recoil of the weapon took me hands up in the air beside me head instead of smack into me brains. I think that's when he figured out it was a warning shot. I missed on purpose. I said, 'I'm equally well

practiced, y'see. The next one will be between your eyes and I dare say it will take the back of your head off.' He says, 'What the fook is that thing?' So I tell's him, 'It's A ladies' gun.'" She told the story with complete equanimity and an unreadable smile on her lips. "He says something like, 'Ladies' gun? That's no ladies' gun. That's a goddam cannon!'"

While the rest of her family sat in rapt attention to the details, Eilis reached into the very purse she had just described and withdrew the hand gun. It was a Smith and Wesson 500.

"I told him it uses 50 caliber BAR shells. Here. Want another?' He shook his head no. And just then the brick wall behind him which had withstood the initial punch, a hole as large as a loaf of bread, just after I asked the question, but before he could reply in the negative which was a fore drawn conclusion you know, a rumbling from the brick and mortar caught his ear. He turned his potentially exploding head to see the massive structure crumple into thousands of red pieces at his feet. I was quite proud of meself. He dropped his puny weapon on top of the pile of rubble with a frightened expression on his face and instantly raised his hands."

The men applauded as she finished her tale.

"But, Dad," Gavin said when the room fell silent. "How the heck did you know where I was?"

Liam beamed with pride as he responded to the question. "Your brother, of course. He came right over when they let him go taking all his cash and he signed the car over to them, right lad?" Ferhghal looked sheepish as he replied in the affirmative. "And plus every cell phone these days has a GPS."

Gavin did not appear convinced. "I was literally on the phone with you for ten seconds when you came through the door. You had to have been outside waiting. Right?"

"Oh, that I was."

"But I had just called. I mean, you didn't have time to get to the other side of town. You knew where I was before I called. You couldn't have followed the GPS. You already knew."

"Well, yes, lad, I did."

"But how?"

"I have to admit a sordid truth to you boys. Your mother and I have had such a protective feeling towards the two of you. It's a family thing; we can't help it. Remember the birthday present we gave you each the day you turned 18? The tattoo on your ankle? The one just like mine, just like your mum has? The beautiful Irish tricolour, the symbol of the Old Sod you always said you wanted but we wouldn't allow until we couldn't forbid it? Well, under the colored skin is a little tiny piece of electronic equipment about the size of a grain of rice we had inserted which tells me where you are at all times of the day or night. I mean, after all, we can't be too careful can we? Who knows. Some day it might come in handy as it did yesterday."

The boys were surprised but not unhappy to learn this. It was, after all, a family thing.

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