

AN HONEST MAN

PROLOGUE

On the last morning of her life, Hilary Prentice rose feeling unaccountably happy. It was just another day, a Monday; Bob had to be packed off to work as usual and she had to clean the house and do some Christmas cooking, but for some reason the good humour of the weekend had remained with her. They'd held a dinner party on the Saturday night, their first for years, and they'd had such a lovely time. She'd had three or four sherries and got quite tipsy. The snowfall had become so heavy that after helping to clear up her brother and sister-in-law, Peter and Anne, had decided against driving home, so they stayed and slept on the put-you-up. And on the Sunday morning, rather than heading off straight away, they'd all gone to the pub for lunch.

Hilary pulled on her dressing gown and gave Bob a shove to re-awaken him.

'It's twenty to six. You'll miss your train,' she said. He had a business meeting in Northampton that day, hence the early start. He didn't respond, so she shoved him harder.

'Bob!' she hissed, keeping her voice down, forgetting momentarily that the twins, whose term had ended last week, had spent the night at the Bells' and were not due home until that afternoon. Her husband groaned but he did eventually turn over, opening a bleary eye.

‘How can you be so perky at this ungodly hour?’ he demanded, his voice hoarse.

She grinned. ‘Don’t know.’ She sat on the edge of the bed next to him, and smoothed the thinning greying hair out of his eyes. ‘It was a lovely weekend, wasn’t it?’

‘Hmm?’ Bob opened his eyes again with an effort. ‘What? Yes, it was.’

‘Can we do it again?’

‘Sure. But with less alcohol.’ He sat up and swung his legs out of bed. ‘You’ve completely made up with Anne, then?’

‘Oh, that was just silly. Families and Christmas - always stressful.’ She rose again. ‘I’ll put the kettle on.’

A small convoy of vehicles travelled into Coulsdon up the Brighton Road from the south, two North Thames Gas Board vans and two expensive saloons. It was still dark, and they travelled with headlights on. The snow covering the carriageway had been cleared into the gutters but the road surface sparkled with frost. The convoy passed shops decked in Christmas finery and ablaze with coloured lights - only three more shopping days – and slowed. The driver of the leading vehicle, a Wolsey, peered ahead into the dark, looking for a landmark. Apparently satisfied, he pulled swiftly over to the kerb where the Brighton Road met a side road, The Avenue, causing a wave of dirty snow and slush to be displaced onto the pavement. He opened the driver’s door and leaned out from his seat. Illuminated by the glare of the lights from the vehicles behind, he waved urgently to those behind to pull in. The first Gas Board van stopped immediately behind the Wolsey; the second continued past it and stopped in front. The yellow hazard lights on top of each vehicle began to revolve. The last car, a Ford Zephyr, turned round neatly and came to a halt on the far side of the road, pointing in the direction from which the convoy had come.

Men decamped from all the vehicles and immediately set about their tasks. There was a sense of controlled urgency about them and they worked efficiently, a well-trained - almost

military - team. One man wearing Gas Board overalls lifted a manhole cover in the centre of the road and unfolded a red and white striped screen around the hole. A second, also in Gas Board overalls, ran back down the road and placed metal paraffin lanterns at two-pace intervals so the road was gradually closed off into one lane. Another man followed him, carrying a large double-sided “Stop-Go” traffic sign. He stood on the northbound carriageway where the paraffin lanterns stopped and watched a colleague stoop to each of the lanterns in turn and light their wicks. At the same time another team of two men carried out the same procedure in relation to the southbound carriageway. They had been fortunate, as no traffic had passed in either direction. A line of cars did then approach from the south, and the man standing in the road turned his sign to the green “Go” side, and waved them through.

The driver of the Ford Zephyr was the last to emerge onto the road. As he did so he reached back into the car and took something off the passenger seat. It was about two feet long and wrapped in oilskin. He placed the object under his arm and walked to the rear of the second van, climbed into the back and pulled the doors closed behind him. The two men already inside the van stood, waiting for orders.

Bob Prentice saw flashing yellow lights through the obscured glass of the bathroom window as he shaved, half his attention on the Home Service blaring from the kitchen as he waited for the weather report. He tried to open the window with one hand, his razor in the other, but his fingers were foamy and he couldn't get a good grip on the handle. He grunted and continued with his shaving. He could see from his watch, propped on top of the cabinet against the tooth mug, that he had only twelve minutes to leave the house or he'd miss his train to London, and thus his connection at Euston. The smell of toast reached him from the kitchen but he doubted he'd have time to eat it.

The volume of traffic on the Brighton Road was increasing. A small queue of vehicles was by now accumulating in each direction when faced with a “Stop” sign, particularly in the

northbound direction, as early commuters attempted to beat the rush hour. They watched the activities of the Gas Board employees who appeared intent on the leak or whatever it was in the middle of the road, with irritation.

Bob Prentice took a bite of toast and struggled into his coat, his briefcase in hand. Hilary handed him his gloves, and stood by the front door. He took another bite and placed the last of the uneaten slice on the hall table.

‘Sorry,’ he said with a grin, spraying crumbs.

‘It’s okay. Have a nice day.’

‘I’ll phone from Northampton soon as I’m finished,’ he said, pulling on a glove.

‘Bye,’ she said, leaning forward and kissing him briefly for the last time.

Hilary opened the door for him, the blast of cold air making her shiver, and Bob waved from the gate, turned, and walked off to the station. Hilary was about to close the door when she noticed the vans outside. She peered out to see what all the activity was for, but, apart from the flashing lights, she could see nothing. She had thought of going back to bed for an hour, but if they were going to start digging up the road, there wasn’t much point. She closed the door behind her and picked up the toast, popping it into her mouth. She swept the crumbs into her hand, straightened the photo of the girls on the hall table – two freckly, giggling 12-year olds - and went back to the kitchen. The house was on a corner and from where she stood by the sink she could see the road more clearly. For the first time she realised that it was gas men working outside. The thought suddenly occurred to her that if they were working on the main, they might have to turn the supply off. Damn, she thought, that’s all I need - with half the cooking still to be done! She absently reached for the radio knob on the formica kitchen surface, turned it off, drew the curtains back and stared outside. She wondered whether it might be worth trying to get the mince pies into the oven.

‘What the fuck’s she doing?’

‘Dunno. Just watching, far as I can tell.’

The men’s voices echoed around the inside of the van. The one first to speak joined the other and replaced him at a spy hole in the side of the van. He could see the middle-aged woman standing in her kitchen, the net curtain pulled to one side.

‘What if she rings –’ began the other.

‘I know!’ he hissed. He turned from the spy hole, looking grim. His long black hair was pulled back from his face and tied in a pony-tail. A tiny shaft of light entered the dark interior of the van and fell across his face, picking out a scar that slanted down his forehead and cheek. His brow contracted in furious concentration and his cold dark eyes flashed. His companions watched him, waiting patiently for orders.

‘Okay!’ said the man with the scar. ‘Dairy, come with me. And bring the shooter.’

Hilary had finished her now lukewarm cup of tea and had decided to get dressed. She was climbing the stairs when the back door of the house opened and two men with balaclava helmets pulled over their faces crept into the kitchen. Hilary heard a noise, but thought that it was the cat-flap. She paused on the staircase and leaned over the balustrade.

‘Billy?’ she called.

The two men stormed into the hallway and ran at her. It was so fast and unexpected that although Hilary drew a breath to cry out she had no time before her dressing gown hem was pulled hard. She leaned back to prevent herself falling head-first, her slippers slid on the stair carpet, and she found herself being dragged on her back down the stairs. Her bottom hit the hall floor hard and then she let out a short cry, cut short as a gloved hand swiped her hard across the cheek. One man grabbed her feet and the other her shoulders, and they half-carried, half-dragged her into the dining room. They slung her on the floor with such force that the breath was knocked out of her. As she lay there gasping for air one of them sat astride her waist, pinning her hands to the floor on either side of her head. Hilary felt a ball

of material shoved hard into her mouth, so far that she almost gagged. She felt a draft of cold air around her buttocks and thighs, and realised that her dressing gown had been pulled open. I'm going to be raped! she thought, and she started writhing furiously.

'Grab her feet!' ordered the man on top of her. Hilary started kicking even harder. She felt a sudden second blow across her face, harder than the first.

'Pack that in!' She looked up at the speaker. The hand he had used to strike her was now holding a revolver half an inch from her nose.

'You either lie there quietly while we tie you up, or I'll kill you here and now.' Hilary went suddenly still and looked into the eyes of her attacker. He stared back at her, his chest heaving from the struggle, but his eyes calm and steady. She believed him.

'That's better. Now if you're sensible, this'll all be over in ten minutes, and you'll be fine. If not...' - and he wagged the gun in his hand, and shrugged.

Hilary felt the belt of her dressing gown being pulled from under her waist, and then her feet were being tied. The man astride her got off.

'Roll over onto your front,' he ordered. Hilary complied, her nightie rucked up and her bottom showing. The man tying her ankles pulled her nightie down for her and she felt a sudden wave of gratitude to him. He fastened her ankles and brought the belt up to her back. Hilary felt her wrists being pulled down. He was trying to tie them with the end of the same belt but it wasn't quite long enough.

'For God's sake, give it to me!' ordered the other.

He yanked her feet up behind her and Hilary was suddenly bent like a bow, her stomach on the ground and her shoulders and knees pulled into the air. Her body suddenly convulsed, her feet thrashing, striking her attacker in the face. She was thrown violently onto her back again, her feet still tied together but her arms free, and the gun was pointed at her head. She

seemed not to notice it. Her hands clutched at her breast and her eyes stared wildly. Her two attackers gaped at her, uncomprehending.

‘What’s she doing, Kenny?’ asked one, his voice taut with fear. Kenny brandished the gun again, putting it right to her forehead. He saw beads of perspiration starting from her brow and her face, only seconds ago red and flushed from the struggle, was now a dull grey colour. He pulled the gag from her mouth with his free hand but it made no difference. Hilary tried to sit up but only managed to raise her head a few inches above the carpet. Her torso shook once, twice, three times, and then with a gasp, her hands fell from her chest, and she sank back to the floor, completely still. The room was suddenly and completely quiet.

‘Jesus Christ! Jesus, Kenny, look at her! Jesus Christ!’

‘Shut the fuck up, Ray!’ ordered Kenny, leaning across Hilary’s body, trying to locate a heartbeat.

‘Jesus Christ!’ repeated Ray.

‘I said shut up!’ hissed Kenny savagely. He pressed his ear to her left breast. Nothing. He stood back and looked at her face again. The sheen of perspiration on her grey face made it look like wet concrete and her lips were tinged with blue.

‘Is she dead? Kenny? Is she dead?’ Ray’s voice rose half an octave with each question.

‘It fuckin’ looks that way, don’t it?’

‘But how? How, Kenny? We barely touched her.’

‘How the fuck do I know? I ain’t no doctor. Heart attack, looked like.’

‘Oh Jesus – ’

‘If you say that once more, I’ll fuckin’ do *you*, I swear it.’

‘What’re we gonna do?’

Kenny paused. ‘Get her shoulders,’ he ordered, untying her ankles and stuffing the belt in his pocket. Ray stood there, his eyes vacant, his mouth open. ‘I said get her shoulders, you nonce!’

They carried her back to the hall. ‘Stand her up a minute,’ ordered Kenny. Ray slid his hands under Hilary’s armpits and, with an effort, lifted her upright. He held her in a tight embrace, conscious of her breasts pressing into his chest. His face was buried in her tousled hair, and he suddenly recognised the smell of her shampoo - one his ex-wife used to use - and he felt a sudden confusing wave of arousal, sadness and sympathy for the dead woman in his arms.

Kenny rearranged her nightie and dressing gown, threading the belt back in its loops, and tied it again across her front.

‘Keep her upright while I grab her feet,’ he ordered.

They arranged her body at the foot of the stairs with her feet pointing to the front door, her bottom on the lowest stair and her head three or four above that.

‘There,’ said Kenny with some satisfaction. ‘The lady fell down the stairs and had a heart attack. Or the other way round.’ He examined her ankles. They’d been lucky. The belt was made of towelling and had barely left a mark on her.

‘You can see something there,’ pointed out Ray.

‘Yeh, but you do get marks and so on if you fall down stairs, don’t you? She’s probably got a bruise on her bum too, where she fell, right?’

‘Christ, Kenny, I never expected this...’ whined Ray.

‘For God’s sake, Ray, what d’you expect me to do? It was an accident, but she’s dead, right? There ain’t nothing we can do about it.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Come on. The van’ll be along any second.’

Kenny strode off down the hallway and into the kitchen at the back of the house. Ray didn't move. He was staring at Hilary's body, his face contorted.

'I bet she was a nice woman,' he said quietly. He crouched down and gently brushed the hair off Hilary's face, a gesture strangely reminiscent of Hilary's own, five minutes earlier, when she sat on the bed for the last time with her husband. 'I'm so sorry, missus,' whispered Ray.

Then Kenny was by his side, hauling him up by the sleeve and dragging him through the kitchen, back out into the cold dawn.