

GET ME A STINKING GOOSEFOOT

The back of his head had sunk into the cushion of marigolds and roses. I leaned over to look straight into his eyes. They stared back with the grey, poached lack of curiosity of a dead fish.

*His eyes should be closed. Someone should have closed his eyes.* These were my first words in his company after his life ended. There was no-one around to hear them – of course there wasn't, there never had been, we'd always been alone here.

The first thing he ever said to me came back. *How the hell can you sleep, boy, now that Monday Man has returned?* Finger-prodding words, unearthed from some dump in his mind; the question whose answer, I learned, was best left unspoken to avoid a swift blow to the chin. I learned to side-step, step-drag, step back, duck, cower. I learned that you don't want to mess with him.

He said he could get me anything I ever wanted, anything I dreamed of. It felt as though I, at fifteen years old, had my own biddable three-wish genie.

It was midnight on a Scottish Sunday and the boats were leaving. The voices of wives, mothers, children up too late with school tomorrow, built into a deafening farewell as chilling as the deathly screeching of the birds accompanying the men's disappearance. The boats passed by so close you could smell the rust, each signalling its departure by filling the air with a final kick of salt spray and a dwelling must of seaweed. The fisher families stood on the harbour edge just fifty feet away from us, but no-one would have known we were there.

What concealed us were the blood-red granite walls of the abandoned blubber house, feet thick, windowless, rough-hewn and home for many years to the man who now lay still before me. His body was cradled as if in a stone sarcophagus by the deep channel that once sluiced the remnants of skinning, sawing and rendering out to sea. The building covered the entire surface of a tiny island, once linked to the town by a ramshackle bridge but now isolated and shunned. Not because the whaling trade had long since died but because the people of the town wanted nothing to do with the man they had heard rumours about, who was sometimes spotted as a shadowy movement over there by late-night stragglers leaving the harbour-side bar, whose sounds could be heard through the mist and beyond the foghorn. Strange sounds to them *urgent, chirking unhuman sounds* but to him *a thin bony howling of wireless messages warning of another wave of them, the enemy, an enemy he thought was done with, then an amplified voice from away in the distance beyond the straggling dug-outs and barbed wire they've been watching us Welcome Abraham Lincoln Brigade We Been Watching You* his face was contorted and teeth clenched until his eyes snapped open and chest heaved with the gigantic gasp for breath of a man plunged into ice cold water.

This was how he'd been when I woke him on that very first encounter on the island. I'd stood over him for an age, wondering. His waking was birth-like.

And now he was so still.

He stared at me for an age, after he'd woken to find his solitude invaded. A rheumy stare, jowls suspended between bark and bite, his first words making me reel with their rhythm. He spoke like the black-hats in the picture house on Saturday mornings, as they dusted their chaps and click-spurred their way into the saloon for a brawl. He was an American. An exotic foreigner. I'd never seen the like.

When I gave no answer to his opening question his face crumpled into a smile and he gestured me to sit. He'd made the dank space almost warm, the steel hooks in the ceiling polished, ropes on the wall coiled, the blood and oil-soaked floor burnished. In the corner was an oversize metal wireless hooked up to an acid battery. It whispered away, insect voices, tinny music. He had no curiosity about how or why I was there, just as the rest of the town had no curiosity about him. I felt stranded in a no man's land. Disoriented. Not knowing whether to flee or stay put. Then his silence ends.

"Don't go," he says. "Stay a while."

"If you're sure."

"Sure I'm sure." He takes a long hard look at the clothes I'm wearing. My elbow is poking through my woollen jumper, the jumper is too short, I grew out of it months ago, my shoes are scuffed, the sole is flapping. I have buttons missing everywhere.

"I can get you some real nice clothes, if you like."

"Really?"

"I can get you anything. It's what I do."

"I don't have any money." I feel my fist tighten around the few coppers I have in my pocket.

He smiles. "Don't need money. It's what I do." He leans back against the wall, stretching out his legs and raising his eyes to the roof, as if conjuring up an image from the past. "Ever been to the circus?"

I nod.

"All those fine clothes, fancy feathers, spangly suits, them next-to-nothings the coochie girls wear, they don't just appear out of thin air."

"I know."

"Actually," he changes tack, "they do. 'Cause I make them appear out of thin air. A Monday Man, long time ago that was me, a Monday Man. When the circus was in town, every Monday, wash day, I would sneak out and steal clothes off the lines. Everyone in that ring looked the best. And the coochie girls, they were grateful," he gives me a grown-up nod. "Monday Man, that was me."

*“How can you tell the enemy?”*

He fired the words at me.

*“HOW CAN YOU TELL THE ENEMY?”*

Then he answered himself. “They wear mustard-coloured sneakers.”

I’m fascinated. It hadn’t been easy, no money in my family, stuck on the weed and weevil infested farm, and this little glimpse into a way of gathering some extra happiness, for free, sounds fun, not stealing really not *stealing crops and scraps and villagers’ animals in the darkness fighting off not the enemy not the enemy fighting off fellow strugglers more and more ruthless desperate how have I become so ruthless* “how have I become so ruthless?” he asks out of the blue. Already, I’ve learned not to answer.

He hadn’t coped well with the rawness of conflict in the Spanish War, in Teruel, the misery of exposure to brutality, the mess, the sheer mess of it. What inspired him was the way those who had been dispossessed, shunted, sidelined, left to starve, had found a way to survive. It was brutal, it was a mess, it left the weakest to starve, but it served his purpose. He became what had been known to previous armies as a sutler. The man who, even if you’re waist deep in freezing mud or bunkered down in No Man’s Land, can get you anything you want, whenever you want it.

“Whatever anyone wanted, I could get it. I could provide it. Yes, sir. At a price, of course. I ran, yes I did, from that Brigade. But not away. I was running towards something tougher. I was providing food, providing warmth, comfort, maybe a little pleasure, hell without me they were smoking dried oak leaves, drinking acorn coffee, chewing on donkey meat. Real French tobacco, I could get it. Strong cognac, chicken smoked over sweet wood. You want a phial of perfume, a glittery diamond, I got it. For us, them, even someone I thought was the General himself. Life was good.”

He curls up his legs again, holding them tight around his knees and drawing them up against his body.

“Anything?” I ask him.

“Anything.”

Now his feet were pointing heavenward. He was wearing army issue boots. I’d never noticed before. Old, hacked, polished, cherished. The sole of one had a deep scar.

He told me they dug holes. A whole group of them would dig for days. A huge hole in the middle of the compound.

I ask him what he thought about, while he was digging.

“Not just digging, but every day of that war,” he says, “I think about food and nothing else *foraging vegetable cart tracks and jostling with the dirty kids at the sidings hustling filthy pictures cheap rings through glassless windows for food stealing pigs you know* You know -” he says with pride, “- I once made sure my battalion had a Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings, hear that, all the trimmings, and that was in the middle of April.”

He'd been caught one night in the depths of winter with two pigs he'd stolen from an old farmer and his wife. This was all the food they had to see them through, and he'd left them to starve. The first straggle of foot soldiers he stumbled upon were stranded fascists desperate for food and he struck a deal. Not a good one. They stuck the pigs, then shafted him. His luck had run out.

They would dig for days.

Then they'd write a note, lay it in the bottom of the hole, and fill it in. Stand back and watch. The guards would dig it all up again to find the scrap of paper. All it said was *you're welcome*.

Anything.

I can't think. Day after day. There is a stillness in the town; I feel submerged, suffocated by an unfamiliar change in the air: an excitement shallow-buried by the women, the men restless in the turbulent unfolding of a plan of action, an imminent assault. It starts with one manipulator, spreading the fetor of lies, soon followed by a growing mass. I keep imagining what is about to happen then dismiss each thought as, hard behind, another, harsher, more absolute fear advances upon me and brings certainty just as a comber gives way to a terrible destructive trough.

I pick up on stray words. Scattered clues among their laughter.

Then it comes to me.

"Anything?" I say to him. "Right. Get me a stinking goosefoot."

He won't stop running. Running round in circles, and it looks as if he's been doing it for hours when I arrive.

"Any luck?" I venture.

He begins to yell, his voice jolted in beats by his stomping feet as he squalls again and again and again.

His boots lay unlaced on the ground, encircled by clumps of wool shorn from his socks, his feet are freshly blistered. Suddenly he stops. He stares into my eyes. I say nothing.

"Die?" he responds, as if I had spoken. "Why would I die? *I planted sunflowers help the old farmer plant sunflowers millions of them they cleanse the soil after the filth of war cleanse it purify it and I stole his pig it was kill or be killed purify or* his eyes seemed tired when he looked at me, "Why would I die?"

Monday Man was defeated by his search for a stinking goosefoot. Beaten for the first time. Now that I knew what I really wanted it was beyond him. I was afraid it might burn him out and told him so.

*"What diverts the blood to the thighs and ankles?"*

I ignore his question and say, "Come with me."

The pair of us made our way in silence through the town. There were nudges and unspoken barbs but no-one hindered our progress. Past the women with their baskets and prams, the children with faces pressed against the bars of the school playground, the old men seated on a wall. The only pause was when we began our trek into the countryside and a field full of prisoners with hoes stopped to look and he stopped to look back.

Soon we were at the farm. I led him far beyond the crumbled barn and down into a deep hollow, so waterlogged it sucked at your boots and tried to stop you right there. No further.

On, though, because just beyond was what I wanted. We stood and looked down at it.

“Press your boot on it,” I said.

“Why?” he kept staring at the straggly nubbed plant.

“Just do it.”

The squashing of the leaves let go a ferocious stench of rotten fish.

“That’s it. Definitely. You could look for years and never find this stuff. Stinking goosefoot.”

When the boats return from the sea the island in the harbour is no longer a dull miserable block, a brooding blood-coloured obstacle to be rounded. The blubber house walls are cosseted in the goosefoot we brought from the farm, the garlanded roof reflects the sky, the gullies run with their flowers as if spume on tumbling waves. The fishermen are greeted home by the stench of fish. This was the only thing I really wanted.

Looking at his still face now, the muscles relaxed but surely poised for one last piece of mischief, I think he knew all along where to find the plant. He wanted to walk in the town with me and without the cover of darkness, to confront in silence those who had neither the wit to welcome him nor the courage to drive him away. Maybe he also knew why I wanted that plant so much, knew that the town was going to demolish the blubber house, flatten it, dump the rubble in the sea.

And that the only thing that could prevent it was that rarest of plants, the plant that diverts the blood to the thighs and ankles, the plant that must never be destroyed, the stinking goosefoot. Wreathed as it is now, the blubber house will always stand.

The cushion of marigolds and roses would have wilted, then his head would loll as if in shame. I make my way over to the town with the flowers in my arms, handing them back one by one to those who had brought them to him, the women, the children, the old men. *How the hell can you sleep?* I ask. And in every eye I look for some sign that the flowers had been a gesture of welcome, not a warning.

I shout *will you ever sleep, now that the Monday Man has returned* and I turn back towards my island.