

Hunting Rabbit

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Eventually, I came to look back on my meetings with Rabbit with wonderment rather than horror. I was in a rut then, single, dead-end job, no self-confidence. I spent alternate weekends following the fragile fortunes of Charlton Athletic, not a hardcore fan, just my attempt to belong to something. If I had been a genuine fan then I would have gone to the Arsenal game that Wednesday night rather than wait in for an unreliable builder to turn up. But he'd called and I'd chosen domesticity over a cold November night. That had left me with a spare ticket. I'd mentioned this to someone in the office as Rabbit had been passing.

"A ticket? For tonight's game? Dere's a feller I know'll kill for dat! Will ye sell it?"

"Sure. It's forty-three quid, mind."

Rabbit was a small, loud, fast-talking man with a Dublin accent, bad teeth and a permanent smile, part of an Irish decorating firm that had been working in our office. We'd chatted a few times, mainly about football.

"Look, I don't have the cash on me right now. Tell ye what, we're finished here today and I'll get paid. Come down to the Six Bells for a pint, I'll give ye the cash then."

When I got there, Rabbit and his three workmates were well into the beers. I was included on a round, which I didn't really have time for, but I thought it rude to decline. Rabbit was a non-stop stream of sectarian jokes.

"What do ye call 100 dead Unionists? A good start! What do ye call 100 Unionists buried up to their necks in sand? Not enough sand!" I could see a few other drinkers giving him looks. I needed to leave. "Do you still want this ticket?" I asked.

"No need to hurry lad", he replied. "Here, have another pint, my round, what'll it be, same again?" and he was away. I decided to follow it up at the bar, but as I arrived I saw Rabbit disappearing into the gents. As I waited, the barman lined five pints up in front of me, then waited awkwardly. I paid for them. As I carried the beers back, I wondered how old Rabbit was as he didn't seem old enough to be calling me "lad".

At the table, the firm's foreman, Donal, asked me what we did. "Investment company," I replied. "We look after other people's money. I do analysis work, look for new investments, that sort of thing." Donal lit a roll-up, looking unimpressed.

"Is Rabbit his real name?" I asked.

Donal laughed, "No, of course not. Real name is..." he looked puzzled "Jack, something or other. Rabbit's what everyone calls him."

"Why Rabbit?"

"Those teeth," said Donal.

"No, it's 'cause he's always giving it tha'," said one of the others, holding his hand up like a chattering mouth.

"Youse are both wrong," said the third, "It's because he's always on the sniff for a ride!"

"Oh ye got the pints in then, good man," said Rabbit, returning. I checked my watch – I had a train to catch. "The ticket..." I started to say.

"Yeah, yeah, the ticket," said Rabbit, beckoning. "Over here." I followed him to a quiet corner. He checked around theatrically then pulled a hefty roll of tens out of his pocket. "Sorry, I don't want people to see I'm carrying. Forty it was, yes? Dat's handy, I've no change." I pocketed the cash, anyway.

I got to Waterloo in time to see my train pulling away, so I waited in the bar with another pint. I was home just after 8 and settled down to wait with a magazine and a bottle of Stella. Tascuzzi, the builder, still hadn't shown by 9.30. I tried his mobile a few times, unsuccessfully, the normal state of affairs. By 10:30, I was steaming like Mount Etna and on my fourth bottle. I plonked myself on the couch to wait for the football highlights on TV. I woke up around 1:00 with the TV blaring and my next door neighbour banging on the wall. I had fallen asleep on the remote. I checked Ceefax: Arsenal had won three-nil and a bottle from the crowd had decked Thierry Henry, causing concussion. I went to bed, not entirely disappointed.

Problems started the next afternoon. I was called down to reception where two uniformed policemen were waiting. They asked me where I had been at 9:30 the previous night

"At home."

"Can anybody else verify that?"

"No."

"Mr Stanway, there was a bottle-throwing incident during the match last night. Review of CCTV footage showed us that the culprit had been sitting in the seat that you purchased the ticket for, according to the club. Unfortunately he was not apprehended at the ground."

I went cold. "But it wasn't me. You must be able to tell that from the video?"

"We don't have a very good image of him, but he was about your height and build."

I told them about selling the ticket to Rabbit. They didn't arrest me then but I had to attend the station on Saturday for further questioning, by when I had received a letter banning me for life from Charlton's ground.

At the station, a Scots detective with acne scars interviewed me whilst a sharp-faced middle-aged woman with greying auburn hair took notes. Apparently damaging 50 million pounds worth of talent was a big deal. I related my tale. The news I heard was not encouraging.

"No-one named Rabbit works for that company. The painters had a drink with you as you said but don't know anything about a ticket sale."

Thus it progressed. Tascuzzi had called around just before eight o'clock that night, to find I wasn't home. The neighbours didn't know I was home until the disturbance of the small hours. Nobody could prove that I wasn't at the ground. After two hours they charged me with assault. I had to return for a line-up in a week.

I was at home that night, drinking, when the doorbell rang. It was the female detective, who introduced herself with a faint Irish accent as DI Foulkes. I ushered her to my sofa where she pulled out her notebook.

"You're not the first person who's mentioned the name Rabbit in connection with a crime recently. Tell me more about the conversations you had with him, what he did and said. I'm not interested in his appearance."

I told her about the jokes, the smiles, the nickname. Oddly, I found it increasingly difficult to picture his face in my mind. "Let me get this correct," she said, "He offered you a drink but you ended up paying for it? And he didn't pay you full price for the ticket? And he delayed you long enough to miss your appointment?"

"That's right."

"That sounds familiar." Her lips curled up in a smile, exposing neat, slightly pointed white teeth. In the softness of my living room she looked younger than I had previously thought, her hair more red, less grey, her skin less lined. Her scent was rich and the swish of nylon as she uncrossed her legs would give me problems walking. "He's well known to us. A tricky customer."

"But the decorators said he didn't exist?"

"They said he didn't work for them. He'd be casual labour, off the books. The customer gets charged full rate, the firm pays the casual half and pockets the rest. Common, not legal." She leaned closer to me on the sofa. I was fascinated by her pale blue eyes and hardly took in what she was saying. "Listen, he may try and contact you again. He's marked you now and he doesn't know when to leave off. If he does, then arrange to meet him, but let me know about it." She handed me a business card and got up to leave, but stopped at the door: "You know those cartoons, Bugs Bunny? How he drops anvils and things onto that hunter's head? Imagine someone who'd do that in real life, for a laugh, and you're that hunter. Call me."

"OK. Do you know his real name?"

"Brother Rabbit?" She gazed at me, a little hungrily, I thought. Or hoped. "No, not his true name. That would make life much easier." I watched her melt into the night.

Rabbit called me at the office three days later. He said he'd lost his car keys, perhaps they were in our office somewhere, could he come around and look? He wouldn't tell me who he'd sold the ticket to - "that would be grassing up a mate and I couldn't do that, now" - but he would sign a statement that he'd bought it from me. He would be around at seven. Foulkes said she would be there, waiting.

Some time after seven, the night watchman showed Rabbit into my office and left. Rabbit grinned up at me, all crooked teeth and big eyes. I showed him the statement I had prepared. He read it and something small but menacing changed in that smile. It reminded me of the weird kid at school, the one who was always left well alone in the playground.

"No lad, I'm sorry, but I'm not happy with that wording. Maybe you could just fire up that computer you have there, I'll give you something new to type."

I unlocked my PC. I had been nervous before the meeting but my heart was now fluttering like an autumn leaf in a gale. I was bigger than him, but I also remembered that weird kid at school launching into older bully boys, kicking, scratching, biting. Winning. Rabbit was standing behind my chair, looking over my shoulder. He continued to talk, softly. "Amazing things computers, aren't they? So much valuable information sitting there, such clever things they can do and yet so susceptible to viruses written by naughty, tricky schoolboys...."

As I started to say "what happened to your accent?" I saw a movement reflected in the monitor. I jerked sideways and felt a shocking blast of pain on my left shoulder. I screamed and continued sideways, the chair overturning. I hit the floor and looked back up at Rabbit, standing above me, raising a heavy wrench again. Perhaps it was the light, but I could have sworn that the eyes glinting down at me rolled over, black as a shark's.

"RRRABBIT!" The voice was high, shrill, snarling.

Rabbit froze, his nose twitched once and he looked toward the office door. Foulkes stood there, somehow different, bigger, her red hair spiking out like she'd been electrocuted, her lips paring back to reveal vicious fangs. Rabbit shrieked and leapt toward her, unbelievably clearing the desks from a standing start. I saw Foulkes launch herself at him as he was still in the air and then I saw my broken shoulder blade poking through my skin and shirt. That was when I passed out.

I awoke in hospital, full of painkillers. The police visited and I told them what little I knew. The night watchman had been knocked over by two fighting figures as he'd sprinted up the stairs to investigate the commotion; he didn't know what became of them. Blood other than mine was found in the office. DI Foulkes was missing; I haven't heard from her or Rabbit since. The charges against me were dropped after none of the other fans seated near the bottle-throwing incident could pick me out from a line-up. I got a two-month sabbatical from work.

I became a hunt saboteur. I don't watch cartoons anymore.