

Precious

By Willie Meikle

She lay on the wet concrete. The blood pooled around her head in a thick black circle as we stood in a huddle looking down at her, pretending not to notice what had been done. She was the sixth one that week.

They had all gone the same way. First a massive stab wound - big enough that you could put your fist inside and still have room to move it about. After that he had played with them a bit - before chopping off their fingers. And all of them watched over by the same eye, the four foot wide, red lidless eye which had been found painted on the wall above each of the victims.

Something about that eye disturbed me - I'd seen it before sometime in my past - but my subconscious wouldn't let it through the filters - not yet anyway. What came first? Did the killer paint the eye and then wait for the victim? Or was it the other way round? Had someone seen him at his paintings?

I could see that his latest conformed to the type. She was blonde, with long perfectly straight hair which once upon a time might have gleamed silver in the moonlight and, like the others, she was tall. I could see that in the length of her legs, the arch of her back. And she had green eyes; eyes which stared up at us as we milled around waiting for the coroner. We couldn't even close the lids - the bastard had taken them as well.

After the coroner had arrived I left him to it and headed for the car. I had some phone calls to make.

The next morning the papers were full of it. You know the type of thing:- 'Red Eye Strikes Again - Police Baffled' - all that crap. Only one paper mentioned my request for any green eyes blondes to come in and be given protection, and that was dismissive. Seemingly, there was an estimated ten thousand tall green eyed blondes in the city - I didn't know how I would deal with them all but I was prepared to jump that hurdle when I came to it.

I suppose the other papers were happy to let the mayhem continue - it certainly made good copy. I shouldn't complain too much - it brought her to me.

I didn't notice her at first. The forensic reports had started piling up on my desk and I had spent the morning and early afternoon going through them, trying to find a lead, something in common between the victims, anything to give us a foothold on the case.

Somebody entered my office and I waved them into a chair before finally looking up. You've heard the old cliché - she took my breath away? Well, it happened. She just sat there, long legs draped in the tightest pair of denims you ever saw, topped off with a white cotton man's shirt, looking clean and crisp and dry. Despite the heat and humidity in the office she wasn't sweating. That was all right - I was doing enough for both of us.

She certainly fitted the bill. Her hair hung down across the back of the chair in one golden sweep and her green eyes were crinkled in amusement as she looked at me.

I cleared my throat and started to speak.

"Well. What can I do for you Miss..." I let the sentence trail away, hoping that she would fill in the blanks.

She was fiddling with something on a chain around her neck. I couldn't see what it was, it was clenched up in her fist.

“O’Donnel - Mairi O’Donnel,” she said in a light Irish brogue. “I’m doing my duty as a citizen and coming in for protection.”

She was still smiling but I could see her eyes flicker towards the pictures on the walls, then just as quickly, flicker away again.

I kept her in the office as long as I could - explaining the details of the case to her, impressing on her the seriousness of her position - all that happy talk. And all the time I was watching, studying, falling in love with her.

I’d heard of love at first sight - the Italians called it ‘the thunderbolt’ - but I never expected it to happen to me. Not after the catalogue of misunderstandings, arguments and full scale knock down fights I’d suffered during my brief, abortive marriage. But there it was - the raised heartbeat, the hot flushes and the clammy palms - just like hitting puberty all over again. I couldn’t get enough of her and I was aware that I was grinning like a giddy schoolboy, but she didn’t seem to mind.

When that thick headed Sergeant of mine interrupted us I felt like knocking him down but my brain quickly switched up the gears when he spoke.

“Get off your butt Captain - I think we’ve got ourselves a witness.” He was talking to me but his eyes were all over the woman, checking her out like she was a fast car. “We’ve got him in the squad room. He says he saw someone painting the eye at the scene of the third one. Do you want to talk to him?”

“Yeah, of course I want to talk to him.” My Sergeant, although a beaver for paper work, was a bit short in the intuitive leaps department. By now he was fawning over Mairi - I’d already started thinking of her by her first name - fawning over her like a puppy faced with a piece of chocolate.

“Get someone to take Miss O’Donnel home - and assign a twenty-four hour watch on her. You know the drill.” He was nodding vigorously at me - I think he was planning the escort duty for himself.

“Get Kaminski to do it - he’s good. And you,” I said, pointing at him, “Meet me in the squad room in five.”

As I left she turned her smile on me again. “Thank you Captain. I hope I’ll be seeing you again.”

My mouth wouldn’t work. It had completely clammed up and all I could do was mumble something about checking up on her later. I left the room quickly before I was tempted to pounce on her.

Our witness wouldn’t stand up for a second in court. Jimmy was one of the old winos who frequented this patch, more often than not to be found sleeping in the railway station or at the back entrances of stores. I’d talked to him before - he was more lucid than most - but a good defence lawyer would eat him alive before breakfast.

We exchanged pleasantries. That is, he bummed a couple of cigarettes and I told him I wouldn’t book him the next time if his information was genuine. He started talking before I could prompt him.

“It was the Goblin. That’s who it was alright. I seen him, all hunched up, those big eyes staring. He was doing something at the wall. At first I thought that it was one of those graffiti artists, you know? But then I sees the eye. Sent shivers right down my back it did. But it was the Goblin alright.”

I signed in disgust - just another drunken hallucination. He caught my disappointment.

“No you don’t understand. The Goblin is a person. He’s been around the neighbourhood for years. You might have seen him yourself. Big, skinny guy, hunchbacked, staring eyes like that fella in the old movies, always wears a long black trench-coat, buttoned up even in summer.”

I had a vague memory of having seen somebody like that around but I couldn’t pursue it at the time - Jimmy was still talking.

“Anyway - it shouldn’t be too hard for you guys to find him. You’ve had him in here before. His real name is Smee. Frank Smee.”

We checked. We had pulled him twice before, both times for suspicious behaviour. He’d been found hanging around school playgrounds. We couldn’t pin anything on him either time. I scanned the rest of his file. His last known address was three blocks from the scene of two of the murders.

That was good enough for me. I left the Sergeant trying to get rid of Jimmy while I went to rustle up some backup. Fifteen minutes later I was standing in front of a warped door in a fleas ridden brownstone, flanked by two officers who had been on patrol in the area. The door opened when I pushed it gently. I was glad - I hated those dramatic ‘kick it down and rush in firing’ entries.

The smell hit me first. It stung my nostrils and caught in the back of the throat - the stench of rotting fish. The room was dark, only the light from the corridor behind me seeping in.

I fumbled for the light switch but it merely clicked on and off, no light appearing. I could vaguely make out a pair of curtains on the other side of the room. I crossed quickly, kicking something over as I did so, and pulled the curtains open.

As my eyes adjusted I could see that the only furniture in the room was an old rusty bed and fridge. All other surfaces were painted - red lidless eyes - large ones and small ones, staring, in control of every corner. I looked down. I had kicked over a pile of jewellery, just rings, golden rings which were now spread across the uncarpeted floor.

A small patch of wall caught my attention. There were no eyes painted here. Instead there were pictures, seven of them, all blondes, all with green eyes.

Six of them had been defaced, with a razor blade I guessed. The seventh was of Mairi. I was on my way out, heading for the car, when they found the fingers in the fridge.

I left them bagging up the evidence. The room was getting dark as the sun went down, casting darkness over the eyes which winked open and shut in the shadows. I managed to get Kaminski on the radio - he was still over at Mairi’s place. I noted the address then filled him in on the situation, told him to sit tight and drove like a bat out of hell through the crowded streets. I had called for further backup but they wouldn’t be with me for at least ten minutes. Ten minutes was too long - far too long.

I couldn’t get the image of those fingers out of my mind - all trussed up like sausages, wrapped in cling film and stacked neatly in the corner of the freezer section.

Some of them showed signs of having been gnawed on.

Traffic had eased by the time I reached the coast road and I was able to put on a burst of speed. I was still too late.

Mairi had a beach house right on the foot of the cliffs. I turned off the siren when I was still a mile away and cruised down the long winding road to the shore, before leaving the car a hundred yards short and walking down to the house.

There was a light on in the front room, but no sign of Kaminski. I had visions of him and her together, in the bedroom - but these quickly turned off when I saw the body.

Kaminski was lying face down in a pot plant. It looked like he had been given no time to react - his gun still in his holster and the gaping wound in his neck was still pouring blood.

I checked for life signs, but, as I watched, the blood stopped flowing and he lay still and quiet. I took the gun and tucked it into the waistband in the small of my back - no sense leaving an extra weapon around for the killer to pick up.

Something told me that he hadn't made it inside - not yet. All was quiet as I made my way around the side of the house, holding my gun out in front, as if it would shield me. The sea was washing gently on the sand, making just enough noise to obscure my footsteps on the wooden pathway. I peered round the corner at the rear of the house.

My hunch had been right. There he was, just as Jimmy had described him, silhouetted in the black porch light, daubing a large red eye on the house side, taking paint from a pot at his feet.

He was even uglier than I expected, although my opinion was probably coloured with my memories of those packaged fingers. His eyes bulged from deep dark sockets and lank greasy hair hung in rope-like tangles over his face as he hunched over the final piece of the painting.

It was nearly time for my big tough cop trick. I moved towards him.

As I got closer I could hear him talking to himself. The pitch of his voice varied wildly as he spoke, from a soft sibilant whisper to a deep bass rumble.

"This time we'll get it my precious. Yes, we will. And Master will be happy with us and reward us. Yes. And maybe he'll give us a birthday present. Yes...yes... Our birthday present. We want it."

He made a gulping sound, a glottal stop in his throat. I was only six feet from him when he saw me and his head turned, eyes wide in surprise.

"But what's this? Another meddler like the last one? I wonder what this one has got in his pocketses?"

I couldn't make any sense out of what he was saying so I reverted to procedure.

"OK, up against the wall and spread them. Quick."

He had been through it before, he knew what to do, but he smiled at me from under drooping eyelids as he turned to the wall, dropping the paintbrush to the ground and facing the red staring eye.

He smelled. I noticed it as soon as I got close enough - the same rotting fish odour as there had been in his apartment.

I reached around him to feel under his coat, found that I had to undo the buttons, and then he hit me.

He was fast, faster than anyone else I'd ever come across. One second I was leaning over him, the next he had me pinned against the wall, the long, strong fingers of his left hand coiled around my neck. His right hand came up and over to his left and I could see the sword, a short, wide bladed flash of black steel. He brought it down, hard, and my right arm went numb as the pistol fell to the ground. I could feel the heat from the blood running down inside my sleeve, but there was no pain. That would come later.

The white face leaned forward and looked at me closely. It was all I could do to stop myself retching at the stench as he spoke.

"Now we'll see. Oh yes my precious. Now we'll find out what this one keeps in its pocketses. It won't be able to play any tricks on us now." Smee's left hand tightened and tightened, cutting off my air. I tried to prise him away but my strength was going rapidly and blackness started to creep in at the edges of my sight.

I was just about all in when the pressure eased slightly, allowing me to draw a thin, gasping breath. His head twitched to one side, as if he was listening to something and his pupils contracted, speeding down into pinpoints.

I heard a voice to my right, a soft Irish brogue.

“Precious. I have it here - your birthday present. Do you want it?”

The gulping, glottal sound came again from deep in his throat. Seemingly without effort, he lifted me in the air, my feet dangling and kicking against the wall, overturning the paint pot to spill redly against the boards. His left hand moved, pulling me against the wall, before rapidly smashing me back against it, my head snapping backwards into the solid wooden boards and crashing me down into a black haze of pain as I was thrown roughly aside.

I couldn't have been out for long, but when I came round I felt dislocated from my surroundings, seeing everything as if through the lens of a camera, as if I was watching a movie. It stills plays back in my mind, deep at night, in vivid, three dimensional dreams.

I am lying on the ground, on my right side, a dull ache spreading the length of my body, counterpointed by the flashing white pain from what is left of my right arm. I am grateful that I cannot see how much damage has been done.

Mairi is standing ten feet away, her back to the eye on the wall. The Goblin is facing her, tentatively reaching forward for something which dangles from her clenched fist.

He is talking, each phrase punctuated by the glottal pulp, his voice now all whisper and lisp.

“Give it here my precious. It's ours and we wants it. We wont hurt the pretty lady - we just wants our present.” All the time he is edging closer to Mairi who is sidling backwards, back towards the eye.

Something has gone wrong with my vision - the eye has become completely black, deep and inviting like a quarry pool on a warm day. I am reaching round to get hold of the gun in my waistband. The Goblin takes hold of the chain and pulls it from Mairi's hand, raising a welt across her palm as it leaves.

He takes a gold ring from the chain, a ring which shines unnaturally bright in the porch light, and makes to put it on his right index finger, just at the same time as I reach the gun and in one movement, raise and fire.

My aim is way off, the gun too heavy for my weakened condition. I see the bullet hit, straight in the middle of the black eye, which immediately reverts to its plain red painted form.

Mairi has used the diversion to grab the ring back from the Goblin. They dance around, her trying to reach the sword, him striving for the ring. And then it happens fast. I see a series of quickly cut shots, like a rock video.

Mairi lets the Goblin have the ring. His grip loosens on the sword and Mairi manages to wrench it from his grasp. The Goblin raises the ring and puts it on. He starts to fade out, wavering hazily. I shake my head, to clear it, and Mairi raises the sword, a Viking princess.

With one strong backhand sweep she cleaves the Goblin's head from his shoulders. The head bounces once, landing on the ground in front of me. The lips form one word - “Precious.” And then close for the last time. The last thing I see before blacking out is Mairi picking up the ring.

I was pensioned out of the force two months later. We now live in the beach house, soothed by the calming sea. Mairi gave me the book to read while I was convalescing, the one with the red eye on the cover, the one I'd seen years ago and forgotten about. She had heard me challenging Smee, heard his reply and immediately thought of the book. That's how she knew what would distract him. That's my wife - not just beautiful and deadly, but intelligent with it.

We don't talk much of the events of that night and I have never told her of the eye - a blow to the head can often make a man see things which are not there. But I get a weird feeling when I touch that sword and sometimes the ring lies hot and heavy on its chain, nestled in its new home in my chest.

Late, in the depths of night, I have dreams. Dreams of a great black eye, an eye with blood red rims, an eye which is searching, always searching.

I think my bullet might have hit the right target after all.