

ERNEST INTERFERENCE

a short story by John Barker, 2005 ©

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The first time they met, Ricardo was staying at the Kensington Hilton on Shepherds Bush roundabout. He had a list of things he'd heard could be sorted on a fee basis. Didn't speak English too good, he said, but that was the gist of it.

Heard off of who? Gerry asked, under a plane tree in the park with his mobile, reading the feller's number off the display.

It took a while, his English wasn't good at all, couldn't get a grip of the question, till he said Sylvia, it was Sylvia had given him the intro.

I'll call you back, Gerry said.

Sylvia had been at home, she said the guy was all right and how she was helping Gerry, giving him a leg up.

They met at the hotel, went through the list: some things Gerry could do, others not, he said. Which was fine by Ricardo.

To complete the bits of business he'd guaranteed, Gerry insisted on making the meet different, a local library, the Herbert Morrison branch. I'll be sat where they read the newspapers, he'd said. Faultless the feller's behaviour and on the strength of it, left him a landline number. Told him he changed mobiles on a regular basis and would recommend it to anyone.

A long time back that had been. Had to be three years at least because Sylvia'd been in America for two, California and Montana mostly. Said she was tired of small ponds and wasn't coming back. And the library was never open any more, or they'd closed it down. At least three years.

On the phone Ricardo said, Hiya mate, how's it going. Lucky you've still got the same number, What's that mean, you're doing well or you're not doing well.

I'm all right, Gerry said after he'd worked out who the hell this was, and that he had left him the landline

Ricardo was down in South London, he said, a flat he'd had for a couple of years. There was some work Gerry might be interested in, did he fancy coming over.

Hard to say. He'd liked the guy well enough; friendly, no fantasies, paid on the dot; a good guy. Only he was tired. It was the other side of the river. He was tired, had been for several months. He worked now and then, he said, would think about it.

The next Sunday it turned out he had nothing on. He returned the call and set off early afternoon in a Peugeot 204. On the map the Rotherhithe Tunnel looked the best bet. That had to have been a few years too because it was a surprise, driving through. Fucking narrow for two-way traffic and tiled like it was the longest urinal in the country. In the world.

Another curve came and still no light at the end of. When it came it was bright and he was out on a concrete roundabout. He drove round twice to be sure of the right turn-off only that wasn't the end of it: if there were landmarks, he didn't know them. He stopped to check the A to Z. Then again at a painted map of the estate just off the pavement in front of four tower blocks. Blobs of undercoat took up half the board but he made out the letters CLEM ATTLE which had to be the one furthest back on the left.

He parked and walked across a spread of scrub criss-crossed by asphalt paths.

Clem Attlee House had a call-up on the entrance wall, Ricardo said to come on up. Eighth floor. He'd be waiting by the lift. Gerry took five, flipping through the possibilities. They were too unlikely, all of them. The lift doors were housed in bruised aluminium with stencilled floor numbers and a call button at chest height. No numbers lit up when he pressed it but he could hear a kick-off whirr somewhere in the shaft.

Fair play to Clem Attlee House, after a while the doors slid open in front of him. Inside SLEDGE SUCKS PUSSY was up on the wall in aerosol red. He pressed the button under the stencilled eight. Sledge sucks pussy. What was that supposed to be, a put down, like Sledge was some kind of wanker. Envy more like it. Lucky boy, Sledge the specialist.

Ricardo was stood on the landing with a big grin. He'd filled out, stockier. His arm round Gerry's shoulder. Hey man, you look great, he said.

It's just front, believe me, Gerry said.

They walked along a corridor, thick lino tiles dull under frosted lighting and stopped by an unlocked door. Inside. Ricardo locked the Chubb. A TV was audible. It was in the lounge, a big affair on a high trolley. Two women in black stood up from a round table that sat six. They nodded at him. They smiled.

Gerry smiled back and they were away, out of the room. Ricardo was all eyes on the TV, football. The commentator said Parma's build-up was patient. The table was covered by a crocheted cloth. On it sat cut glass bowls, walnuts in one with a cracker thing silver on top, oranges and bananas piled up in another. Gerry'd always seen himself as a tidy bloke but here it was no contest. Comprehensively spic and span. Like for one thing it was now obvious his own windows needed cleaning. From here, through the open space between the lace curtains, it was like there was no glass at all, the view of the block across the way.

Ricardo was shouting at the TV, cursing. Then he sat down on the other side of the table. You see that, he said. Fucking blind the ref, the number three holding Asprilla's shirt. You see it. The two ladies came back into the lounge one behind another. They carried trays heavy with stuff, glasses, little plates, confectionery.

Give the ball Asprilla you wanker. Faustino, the by-line Faustino.

Gerry stood up and crossed to the window. He could see the adjacent block

top to bottom. It was smudged concrete and bland windows. He scanned floors six to ten. All quiet on the curtain front. His chuckle of the day. The daily indispensable.

Hey Gerry, eat, drink.

The woman, the one who might be the younger, did it with her hands, that he should sit down. She pulled a chair out a little from the table. He said Gracias. She liked that and poured him matt black coffee into a small china cup, then pointed at a tin of Carnation milk.

His coffee was surrounded by plates, pastries, nuts, some stuff looked like jam. The two women had sat down, watching and waiting. He pushed a pastry with his fork and was given a paper napkin. His mouth was jammed up, chunks of crumbling stuff. He swallowed some coffee as it was.

Direct hit. Wham. It made you wonder, why they bothered with the charlie.

The crowd roared, Ricardo roared, and a shot smashed into an Inter-American hoarding just wide of the left post. Ricardo's arms went up and wide.

Asprilla was it? Gerry asked. Colombian is he?

Ricardo looked at him like Gerry was pulling his leg.

Just lucky the goalie wasn't in the way, he said and got up to open a wall cupboard. He put a bottle of Chivas on the table and poured two glasses. The women smiled at him. Gerry wasn't sure, not after all the sweet stuff. He finished his coffee and picked up some cashew nuts. The players were walking off the pitch, blue shirts and white. On screen the packed stadium closed down. A jolly tune played. Some guy was really in the shit only it turned out he wasn't in the shit at all. He'd been prudent, gone PRUDENTIAL.

What they selling? Ricardo said.

Insurance.

Only one insurance, Ricardo said.

What, what was he going to say? Guns, death, mad stuff? If so, he was out of here.

Money in the pocket, money in the bank, Ricardo said. Hey man, you don't like the Chivas?

It'd go with another coffee.

The woman who did the coffee was up like a shot.

Pure Colombian, Ricardo said and slapped his knee laughing like there was no tomorrow.

. The women were smiling at him, waving at the plates on the table. Ricardo had turned back to the TV, a new motor with its anti-theft gizmos featured. Gerry said Muy bueno, shrugged and mimed a fat stomach. They tutted like he was talking bullshit.

Too much central heating, that wasn't bullshit. The sweat was inching out all over him.

Ricardo was rubbing his hands. Faustino's going to score this half. For

sure. You want a bet.

No, this was not on. Not another 45 minutes. As it happened his afternoon had been free: True there was a letter from Sylvia that he was in no rush to read, sat there since Saturday morning with US stamps on; sure the hospitality was terrific. It was, couldn't be faulted. But he was tired, couldn't any bastard see that, he was tired.

Lets go for a walk, Gerry said.

Ricardo looked at him like he was pulling his leg.

You can video it, Gerry said. Then he said he'd got an appointment.

Ricardo shrugged like there was nothing else for it; OK, if that's the way it had to be; fucking crazy guy. Then he said, We can talk here.

The women knew the score, they were gone.

No way, Gerry said.

Ricardo shrugged, said he'd fix the video because if one thing was for fucking

sure it was Faustino Asprillo was going to score this half.

It won't kill you, a bit of fresh air, he said, when Ricardo came out and unlocked the Chubb.

When the lift door opened there was a guy in a shell suit and a girl with a wet-look perm, their backs to each other.

Ground floor? Gerry said and pressed G.

Downstairs Ricardo pulled a yellow scarf round and round his neck like there was going to be a vicious wind out there, Arctic. It was spring for fucks sake, sunny.

Only It was like the blocks had some kind of force field round them. A fucking hurricane the first yards.

Then it dropped down to gale force where two kids were having a kick about. The goalie was pissed off, walking right back to the perimeter railings for a shot that had just missed. The next one went spinning wide. Ricardo was on to it and played a curling cross. Then he settled down to tell Gerry the situation.

They reached the pavement by the estate map board and turned left.

You see what I'm saying, Ricardo said, what's needed.

Gerry nodded. It all hung together, he could see it.

They reached a corner building in red-brick with metal grilled windows and an all round plastic strip above door level, BENSON & HEDGES. Ricardo followed it round to the left. He stopped on the pavement.

So can you do any of it?

It's what I'm thinking about, Gerry said. Let me make sure I've got it right. Five items in all. Yes?

Ricardo ticked them off on his fingers. Right, five things.

He could definitely do three, Gerry said, standard rates. The other two maybe, he'd know for sure by Tuesday, the price on those negotiable. He didn't say it but even if they were possible it was going to take a lot of running around and the way he felt a lot of running around was going to

cost. Like enough for a vacation, a month of it on a hot beach. He said he'd like a down payment on the three.

Sure Gerry, that's what I'm saying. I got the money up in the flat but you got to take us out for a walk, Ricardo said and turned back round the corner.

Lets have it right man, a few hundred yards we've walked.

See Gerry I play football Saturdays, we've got a team. We play Saturdays, train Wednesday evening. I got enough exercise.

Gerry wasn't getting through, some communication problem, but you had to try. Ricardo, we haven't had any fucking exercise.

So what did we come out for?

They were turning in towards the flats. There was a big guy in a double-breasted suit and thick round specs blocking the asphalt. An old boy, pensioner age but big with it. Smoking a pipe.

Nearly 50 years since I've been here, he said.

Is that right, Gerry said. The guy hadn't moved.

Course there's been a lot of changes since then. These blocks for one thing. They tell me one of them is called Clem Attlee House, is that right.

Sharp his tone, sharp eyes even behind the specs. Official. You could smell it, that and the pipe. And still the cunt hadn't moved.

That's right, Gerry said.

A genuinely modest man, Clem was, but not as soft as he'd have you believe. A memorial he might have approved of. So you live there yourself?

Gerry didn't like it. He could see Ricardo didn't like it either.

Catch you later then Richard, he said and stood his ground. No, just visiting, he said, if it's any of your business.

My business? No. In a hurry is he, your friend Richard?

An official and entitled to a smack on the jaw the way he was carrying on, only with a guy that age how could you know, have a heart attack just to spite you.

I believe he is, Gerry said, he's a football fanatic.

What, on a Sunday?

Gerry laughed. A false alarm. An official nutter more like. Or a born-again. Bit old for that kind of thing wasn't he?

Football? seven days a week I believe, he said. Anyway nice talking to you.

When he did move, the old boy, he was quick. An about turn.

I'll accompany you if I may, Clem Attlee House. The map's not very good is it, they need to pull their socks up in maintenance. They've let things slide and I wouldn't like to end up in the wrong building.

Gerry was moving at pace. Quiet the place was. Not a soul. That was South London for you. And the old boy was still there at his shoulder.

Just visiting you said, so where is it you're living?

Green Lanes, Gerry said.

Green Lanes eh, I'll bet that's changed a bit.

Had it? Gerry hadn't been there in years. Full of Greeks as far as he knew.

And Turks. He shrugged and pushed through the block's main door. And the guy was still at his shoulder. Stepped into the lift with him.

On a Sunday, a day of rest, here was this old guy nosey like he had every right to be nosey, like he'd been getting away with it since the year dot. And he was wearing it. Not the pipe though, he told him so, to put it out.

The old geezer was surprised, you could see it. Then he shrugged and put his

thumb over the pipe bowl.

What floor, Gerry said.

Oh, I think I'll have the eighth. Yes, a lot of people underestimated old Clem.

What was it, this 'I Think I'll Have'. Just what was it?

To their cost, the man said.

Mine's the fourteenth, Gerry said, pressing the two buttons in sequence.

He turned to look at his own piece of wall. SLEDGE SUCKS PUSSY. He could feel the movement, like the lift was being sucked up a tube.

A decent man with a vision, the man said. Quite a suntan your friend Richard has, still I suppose that with the package holiday of today all things are possible for the ordinary working man. As indeed they should be. For the honest, hard working man making his contribution.

The lift had stopped, the doors were open and still the cunt was talking.

Your floor I believe, Gerry said.

And what does the guy do? Takes a wallet out of the inside pocket of his double-breasted. Puts away his specs. Pulls out another pair in a case. Puts them on. Gets close up to a piece of paper out of his wallet.

Eighth floor, Clem Attlee House, SE. That's right isn't it?

Gerry turned away from his wall.

Why don't you fuck off and leave me alone, he said.

I thought so, the man said. When I first clapped eyes on you, I knew it.

He knew fucking what!

You're a spiv, that's what you are, stands out a mile.

A spiv? So? What did the guy think? Why pick on him?

Gerry pressed the fourteen button again. The guy was shaking his head like it was a sad business.

The lift doors closed. Where had the geezer been all his life? He stepped out at the fourteenth and started down the stairs. Didn't get back in the lift till he was down on the sixth. Walked straight out on the ground floor and out through the block's main door without looking back. Walked all the way to the Peugeot without looking back.

He didn't fancy the tunnel and instead headed for Tower Bridge. Driving across he looked over west at St Pauls, its dome gleaming in the sunlight. Half way over a group of Japanese had their cameras out. He turned to look east. When he was a kid it had been full of big ships. Busy. Ships and foghorns in the fog.

Three items he could do for Ricardo no sweat. Good money, no sweat.

Straight ahead the tower was gleaming white stone, a fortress out of toytown. On the north side he doubled back round a filter, cruised round a square two times and came out into Fenchurch Street. Bank names in copper relief gleamed in the sun. Not another car in sight.

By the Barbican he pulled up at a phone box.

Hi, Ricardo, he said. We should meet up. Like I said, at least some of your workload I can handle. Not your end though, a bit smelly some of the old people down your way.

He could hear crowd noise. Then Ricardo said, What?

Like they needed a bath. Hey, remember the first place we met? There, Tuesday,

four o'clock in the bar. You remember? Four o'clock.

If Ricardo grumbled: if Ricardo whinged: if Ricardo said anything except OK, that was it. Finished.

OK, Ricardo said.

He got back in the Peugeot to drive home. He could imagine it, the wrong move. Down in the lift from the fourteenth and the fucking thing stopping at the eighth. Your man standing there with a sarky comment like he was a big wheel, puffing on his pipe and stepping in.

Inside the flat Gerry locked the double Chubb and put his feet up.

On the envelope was George Washington in triplicate. Who never said a lie, they said.

Bollox.

Or he'd had it very easy.

"I don't know what it is with you Gerry," Sylvia's letter said. "If you don't widen your horizons soon they'll shrink for ever."

Yes, yes, yes. Sure. Montana, why not. Only he was tired.

Couldn't any bastard see that, he was tired.

