The Road Not Taken  
by restorick  

Summary

What was Doyle's story about knifing someone?

Notes

I wrote this for a challenge story where Bodie and/or Doyle are aged 15, 20 or 25.

What was Doyle's story about knifing someone?

Doyle refers to this incident from his youth, in ‘Mixed Doubles’. While contributing to a tag story, I had Bodie mention that he’d noticed Doyle’s reluctance with knives, during their selection phase for CI5. Doyle tries to gloss over this for the time being, but knows he will need to share the experience with his new partner at some time…

See the end of the work for more notes

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference *

“Bodie? Hi, mate…Look, I’ve been thinking…Yeah okay, I know it’s a struggle for me. Just listen for a minute, will you? What you said about my reluctance with knives - you’re right, you need to give me some extra training…Yes, I’m sure. I’d rather it was you than Crane or Macklin.
The squad gym’s free later this evening, when no one’ll be about. Can you bring some of yours from home?...Yeah, really Bodie. I need it…Great, thanks. I’ll buy the beer and curry after…See you about eight. ‘Bye.”

I put the receiver down quickly before he could question me any more, not that he’d put up much resistance. He knew what I was talking about and now that we were established partners I needed to get this taboo out in the open, get the story off my conscience. Especially as Bodie could be seriously affected by my past if I faltered at any time. Cowley and probably Jack Crane and Macklin knew, from my file, but Bodie was the only other I’d trust with the knowledge. I had to, now.

Watching rain running down the window as I waited for the kettle to boil, I couldn’t take my mind from it. Now that I’d brought that time up from deepest memory there was no other way of getting past. I had to remember, trust Bodie to help me with the knife phobia and then I could move on. At least I hoped I could…

“Raymond Doyle! Did I just see you with that tearaway Brown boy?”

“No Dad, someone who looks like him.”

“Don’t give me that, young man! Why are you constantly lying to us, these days?”

“I’m not! The kid you saw outside is new at school. You don’t know him.”

“It was Billy Brown, Raymond and you can’t tell me different. Get in here and look me in the eye.”

“Okay, so it was Billy. I like him, he’s a good laugh. There’s nothing wrong with him; just ‘cos he’s in the kid’s home, you think he’s bad.”

“He’s a good-for-nothing, ne’er-do-well, Raymond. Do as your father says and keep well away from the lad, please. Now come and have your tea, before it gets cold.”

Distracted, I was still stirring the coffee and it had slopped everywhere. I picked up a cloth and mopped up. Wringing it out, I shook it open to dry…

“Look Ray, look what I got ‘ere!” The pudgy face was gleeful, his hands unwrapped a cloth that had come from his waistband.

“Flippin’ hell Billy! Where’d you get that?” I recognised what it was even before he popped the silver blade out.

“Shhh! Don’t say anythin’. The ‘ome mustn’t know I’ve got one. One of the lads gave it to me.”

“What, gave it to you, just like that?”

“No…I had to do a few things first.”

“Things?”

“Tasks. Y’know, a test; bit of duckin’ and divin’.”
“Like what, Bill?”

“Like stealin’ some fags from the shop, made a few crank calls. I got a fire engine out to the home! Tried to climb the ivy and break into that old house in Church Road but I’m too ‘eavy, so the lads did a window and we stayed there all night.”

“You’re s’posed to be back before eleven, aren’t you?”

“We were drinkin’ cider ’til the early hours, it was great! Got a bit hungry though, next time we’ll get some chips to take.”

“That’s all kid’s stuff, Billy. What’ll they get you to do next?”

“Probably a bit of fightin’. That gang from the estate are getting too big for their boots, Denny says. Wants me to join in sorting ‘em out.”

“That what the knife’s for, then?”

“Dunno...maybe. I’m not scared of a fight, Ray.”

“Be careful you don’t get into big trouble, mate. Not with being at the Oaks.”

“But it’s fun, Ray! I’m sick of bein’ told what to do by me social worker. You should come next time. I’ll get you in with the lads.”

“That Denny bloke? He’s a bad ‘un, he’ll be in the nick before too long and borstal isn’t ‘fun’, Bill. I’m in enough grief with my Dad for bunking off school, as it is. I don’t know.”

“Come, pleeese! Denny’s leavin’ the Oaks soon, when he’s seventeen. Says he’s gonna do one last big face-off wiv the estate gang.”

The coffee was cooling by the time I picked it up and went back to the lounge. I checked my watch; another hour before I needed to leave and meet Bodie. Outside, a storm was relieving the day’s heat wave. I pushed my hair upward and then ran a hand down my hot, sticky neck, rubbing away at the tension and knotted muscles at the base...

That summer, I started to grow into myself. Being called ‘scrawny’ had always made me take on kids that agged me, even if they were bigger and older. I was getting surprisingly good at fighting and I’d gained a reputation that even my dad had heard about. After that, I started to pick my battles carefully. Used clever banter the rest of the time and seemed to gain respect from my previous tormentors by being smart, as well as handy. I hardly hung out with Billy when the summer break came round as I had other distractions.

My young life was getting pretty sweet. If no less wiry, I was growing stronger. Hair appeared on my chin, chest and elsewhere, which helped my budding confidence no end. And a girl called Annette reappeared in the neighbourhood. My first fumbling experience of the previous year became a slow, blissful exploration of her lovely body during those long, hot weeks of the holidays. I was in lust, not love. But Annette enjoyed me, as much as I did her, and she stayed in my memory for a long, long time.

I worked hard at the picture framing shop in town, soaking up all the skills and art knowledge and
using the money solely to pay off the moped that an older kid sold me. Mum and dad relaxed a bit, thinking that I was conforming again, that I’d wised up to the exams coming the next year, when really I was trying to kick over the traces of my dad’s authority and the suffocation of mum’s fussing.

Previously quite steady at most school subjects, when we returned in the autumn I took to skipping those classes or half days that I didn’t fancy or that left me downright bored. If I couldn’t meet Annette, I spent the time in the cinema or at the library, sketching still life and poring over art books and the occasional mucky novel that the middle-aged women surreptitiously returned.

Art and English were the exceptions at school, as well. The first for the genuine pleasure and aptitude I had for the subject; the other, for Miss Berry, whose figure, face and scent wafted though my wet dreams at night and held me transfixed every Monday and Friday morning. After a while, I realised that I loved words, literature and books for their own sakes and that Miss Berry was secondary to my attendance. Besides, she was shagging the deputy headmaster, Mr Jones, who was a least double her age!

I found myself standing next to the table in a stormy half light, mug still in hand with an inch of cold, scummy coffee in the bottom. I put it down to turn on a lamp and when I lifted it again, noticed that the base was still wet. It had left a ring on the surface. A shiny smeared circle...

“Bloody hell, Billy! I haven’t seen you for a couple of weeks and you get into trouble!” The bunch of kids in the school corridor parted as I approached, oblivious to anything other than my mate’s livid, purple eye socket and split lip. I pulled him away from the crowd, hustling Billy into the boys’ lavs, so I could get a better look. I let out the long, low whistle that I reserved for real horror or admiration. “Who the hell did this?”

“We ‘ad a rumble with the estate gang, last week. My ‘final initiation’, Denny called it. Got a right beatin’...” He touched his ribs, gingerly then sounded brighter than he looked. “I’m in, though. In the gang!”

I carefully pulled up his shirt to get a look at the bruises there. “Is it really worth this, Billy?”

“Ray, apart from you, no one talks to ‘the fat kid’. Everyone ignores me or tries to wind me up. You’ve heard ‘em: ‘stupid, fat Billy Brown lives in the Oaks on t’other side of town’” he chanted, in imitation of the playground taunts. “Used to get it at the home too, ‘til Denny took me under ‘is wing. Now I’m in the gang and no one bothers me!”

“But they’re using you, mate” I pointed out. “Denny Watts gets you to fight people way bigger than you and steal stuff he doesn’t even need. What’s the point in that, eh? Where will it end?”

“Fuck off, Ray Doyle! I thought you were my friend. I’m ‘appy and you’re just jealous!” Billy started to push past, red in the face and on the verge of embarrassed adolescent tears.

I recognised that, whether I liked it or not, unintentionally, I was involved in this kid’s life. Until then, I’d just been his schoolmate, but now I had a horrible feeling that Billy’s involvement in the gang could end badly. I decided. “Okay, sorry. Look, I’ll come and meet Denny and the gang, if you like. Maybe he could use a new recruit?” I offered.

Billy’s face lit up again. “Yeah, that’d be great! Denny’s heard you’re useful with your fists. He’s been askin’ to meet you.”
I sat on the couch with a fresh, hot coffee, cupping it in my hands, as if I felt cold. It was muggy and stormy, but inside I felt the nihilism that had developed in me during that autumn, when I was fifteen...

Denny seemed to take to me readily, impressed by my self-assurance and skills in a brawl. He called me Doyle, as there was another boy called Ray in the gang. Denny and I also connected on another level to the others, as he attracted girls, too. There were a couple loosely attached to the group and one called Wendy, who I knew Denny got off with now and again, blatantly came on to me. He noticed but didn’t seem to mind. I was tempted by the thrill of the unknown, but wary of crossing the gang leader.

Eventually, raw lust got the better of me and one day, arriving early for a meet, Denny found me and Wendy in the stairwell of our HQ building, slaking our teenage needs with a swift stand up against a wall. Denny had just laughed, clapped me on the back and told us to come out when we were finished. Wendy and me happened a few times, after that but it was always just a quickie, tuck your clothes back into place and share a fag afterwards. Nothing like me and Annette.

Annette had started to cool on me, the more I’d become involved in the Oaks gang. Our summer of pleasure in the heat of a quiet corner of the park or her bedroom, both her parents being at work, became snatched hours here and there as we, and the weather, grew colder. The excitement of enjoying each others’ young bodies disintegrated into mere shagging, with only minimal clothing opened to get the job done. Missing the sensation of her skin against mine destroyed the real electricity between us and our times together became no better than my feral stand ups with Wendy.

It wasn’t just our physical closeness that I missed. We’d been friends too, talking about what we wanted to do in the future; not necessarily together, but for work, for fun, where we’d go. Just the usual ‘hopes and dreams’ kind of stuff of teenagers who felt their elders didn’t understand and that the adult world, in general, was against them. I grew more and more distant, guilty at the other things I was doing, hating myself but needing her, all the same; trying to cling onto what had been good.

Eventually, we stopped meeting altogether and I later heard that she was seeing someone from the sixth form. It hurt, but only for a while and, like I said, I’ve always fondly remembered Annette as not ‘the first one’, but as the first who, in the haze of that adolescent summer, I discovered love making with.

My art work suffered too. I’d enjoyed sketching Annette’s curves and lines from memory, but now they were done with an angry, rough hand, unsympathetic to the feelings I had for her. The girl’s features became more like the angular ones of Wendy’s hard face and frame. Other drawings were tinged with violence. My flowing, true to life forms became jagged and abstract depictions of fighting, warring figures. I threw them away and tried to recover my former style but it eluded me for some while, until I got the gang out of my system.

It was still raining. I got up and moved close to the window, watching it ripple down against the dark outside. Saw it forming puddles on the yard and splash upward as drops fell. Raining hard. A beat, a drumming on the windows, on the wall...
Running, booted feet echoed down the years, just as they had echoed in the alleyway when we ran together from a dust-up on the estate. Splitting up, I was relieved to find the two of us alone, catching our breath behind a wall. Billy may not have been afraid of a fight, but he was no good at it and not getting any better, either. During the ruck, I’d seen how the estate gang had him marked out as an easy target, the weakest link. He was taking one hell of a beating, again and none of the Oaks lot were helping him. In fact, I saw Denny push him into the fray, almost as if offering him up as a sacrifice. It gave the rest of us a breather and Denny called a stop.

But Billy couldn’t hear, his head in an arm lock and face being pummelled, as it was. I’d flown in, kicked and punched my way through. Respectful of my effective street fighting, they dropped him and I got Billy out. The Oaks gang were away through the back to backs. Bill and I ran, as well, and the estate lot didn’t follow.

“Cheers, Ray.”

“Will you give up on this, now?”

“How am I gonna do that? Most of us live in the same home; I know what they get up to. Won’t let me leave just like that, will they?”

I saw his point. Shrugging, I saw only one way out. “Think you’re gonna have to talk to your social worker. He’ll do something, but it’s not going to be easy, mate.”

We strolled back to our own streets, hands in pockets and each quietly contemplating how deep in the shit we were. Me, not so. I could walk away any time I wanted, or so I thought. But Billy was either going to have to wave or drown, in my view.

“There you are. Wondered when you two’d turn up again.” Denny and his usual two man entourage appeared suddenly before us, on a street corner. “Right Doyle, you’re in, if you pass one last test.”

“And what’s that?”

“An act of loyalty. Show us how faithful to the gang you are. Tomorrow afternoon, the usual place. Be there!”

A sudden flash brought me back. Just like when we were kids, I started to count in my head ‘One potato, two potato...’ until the answering clap of thunder told me how far away the storm was. I peered upwards at the dark grumbling sky, waiting for the lightning to come again...

“So, what’s this test then, Denny?”

“Like I said, a show of loyalty.” The group parted, moved out and formed a circle around us.

I was instantly alert, wary of attack. “So, what’s it to be? All of you gonna have goes, are you? Last man standing, that sort of thing?”

“No. Him or me, Doyle...” Denny shoved Billy towards me. He staggered and stopped, staring at me, at the ring of boys. I’d been ready with my hands and feet to take them all on, but now I couldn’t work out what was happening. It seemed Billy was also none the wiser.

“You’ve not used a knife yet, Doyle. Time you did.” Denny laughed and shoved Billy again, then
flung a flick knife onto the floor at my feet and stepped quickly back, to form part of the cordon around us.

“So, that’s it. Prove myself loyal to you, by cutting Billy. Choose between him or you, Denny?”

“That’s right. Choose, Doyle!”

Billy was the weakest member, the millstone around Denny’s neck; useful for a time, a bit of a laugh. But, now he’d got tired of carrying him, I was going to get rid of Billy for the gang leader. I had a choice: either him or Billy. Or me, if Billy cut me first. I knew there’d be no end to this unless I took the lead. “I don’t need a knife Denny, you know that. Look, Bill’s just some fat kid who’s no good at anything. Let him go and I’ll forget you ever said anything of the sort.”

Denny’s stare was unrelenting. He wasn’t to be talked down and my verbal skills weren’t going to work. Not this time.

“I’m not doing this; it’s mental!” I tried to leave but the circle closed in. Their faces told me that if I fought them, it would still end badly for the both of us inside the ring. I turned back, Billy was the proverbial rabbit in headlights. I picked up the flick knife, went towards him and got close enough so the faces around us could hardly see ours. I whispered “Just trust me, Bill. I might have to hurt you, but I won’t use the knife.”

His panicked face hardly registered. I popped out the blade and nodded that he should do the same. Shaking all over, the pathetic boy stooped to retrieve his from a sock and that was when I launched myself forward...

Thunder was rumbling and lightning flashed almost directly overhead. There was no need to count ‘potatoes’ now, it was here...

My idea had been to run at Billy so hard that our momentum took us together through the circle of boys. Breaking out, I’d planned to get Billy away and defend his retreat, hoping that I could outfight, then outrun the five others. Looking back, it was a stupid plan with no real likelihood of success, but I was desperate not to stay there, desperate to avoid wounding this easily-led boy and suddenly clear that the gang was no longer the lifestyle for either of us.

But Denny was ready for any such ruse. His knife was out, too, and Billy was caught and then spun around the circle until he reached the leader. Maybe Denny had meant to frighten Billy back toward me, maybe he’d not meant the blade to slide into the boy’s side...

With a shocked gasp, Billy staggered back, fumbling at his shirt. He found the hole and grasped at it. He looked at me, as he tottered on and then fell at my feet.

“Back off! Back off, now!” Hunkered over the boy on the floor, I snatched a weapon up with my left and lashed out. I don’t know if it was Bill’s or mine. I hadn’t thought about it, back then, but I know now it wasn’t just a reflex swing to ward the gang off. I wanted to hurt them, wanted to hurt Denny for all he’d done to Billy and for how the gang had made me feel. I felt my budding adult scruples welling up. Coupled with the emerging strength, it made me dangerous that day.

I’ve been good with my left, ever since.

Denny Watts was used to brawls. He’d anticipated some sort of attack, having seen me in fights, but not that the ‘scrawny kid’ would use the knife on him. Having brought up his forearm to parry
a punch or kick, it took the first cut from the keen edge which slid along the bare flesh, directed by the bone beneath. He yelped, but before he could move, the momentum of my swing took the weapon upward in an arc toward the exposed face, above.

I felt it reconnect, more lightly, as his face was further away, as the tip of the blade caught the bone above his eye. It continued on, to my utter horror, scoring Denny’s surprised brow, across the furrowed forehead and finally arced away, just after entering his cropped hairline. Blood rose, bubbled, then curtained down his face. He grabbed it with both hands and gore trickled out between, to join that running down his arm.

There was a moment of utter silence, then a distant emergency siren broke the quiet. The gang grabbed Denny by the shoulders and they all ran, guiding their wounded leader. I just stood, shocked and hardly able to breathe, the knife hanging in my loose, shaking fingers. I looked down and dropped it as if it had bitten me. The siren was getting nearer and I instinctively knew that someone had called plod and they were coming for me. I could also hear another stranger sound, much closer. Remembering Billy, I swung round.

The air indoors was humid and oppressive but pressing a palm against the glass, it was wonderfully cold. The heat of my hand formed mist around the spread fingers. I took it away and saw the negative image fade, gradually. I shivered. Pressing. Cold. Fading…

Pulling at Billy’s clothing, I found the wound. It didn’t look big and was bleeding, but not profusely. I thought, with some irony, how his bulk had probably saved him from worse. Then I heard the strange wheezing sound from his terrified face. I looked again and my boy scout’s first aid came back to me: ‘sucking wound’. Into the chest cavity, a wound breached the sealed space and as a victim tried to breathe, air was sucked in via the wound, not the mouth. His chest would fill with air outside the lungs and make one or both collapse. But what to do? ‘Plug it, Raymond’ I heard my scout master’s voice advise me, and clapped my palm over the bloody hole. The slurping noise stopped and Billy started to breathe a little easier, but he was still scrabbling at my arm and his eyes pleaded with me for help.

“What’s going on here, then?”

“Ambulance...Billy needs an ambulance!” I looked to the adults who’d come to our aid and recognised one. “He needs to get to hospital, copper!”

“Constable Brooks’ to you, sonny!” As his partner went to radio in for medical support, Brooks held my shoulder firmly. Looking back, I’m fairly sure it wasn’t just to keep me from fleeing but also to steady me, to reassure me while I shook with fear and shock but still kept the pressure on Billy’s heaving side. He was looking pale, sweaty and felt cold beneath my hand. He was fading. I put my other into his and gripped onto him for dear life.

Breathing deeply, my throat felt tight from the memory. Backing away from the glass, I caught the anxious expression reflected there. I took myself in hand, focusing on the present. “You’re not that kid, anymore. You’re Ray Doyle, latterly of the Metropolitan police, now of George Cowley’s CI5” I reminded myself, aloud and managed a relieved nod to the man looking back at me. The thunder made a last faint rumble, as if in approval...
Constable Brooks was of the old school variety of copper. Didn’t ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’, that one. Not averse to clipping a lad around the ear and giving him a ferocious telling off or an hour stewing in the cells, to get his message home in the days when a community accepted that their local police were the law. Most parents welcomed this extra help with deterring their kids from getting into more trouble than could be considered just high jinks. Of course they can’t go so far these days, but it was what I based my early policing style upon and it did neither me, nor the youth that I dealt with, any harm at all.

A good copper was Brooks. Back at the station he boxed my ears during a right bollocking, took me to see Billy and the graphic wound after he was sewn up, and scared me halfway to hell with the threat of what would happen if our paths ever crossed again. But he also gave me the credit for staying with Billy instead of running, trying to help him and standing up for him in the face of bigger, tougher boys. Then he played down my part in the scuffle with his Sarge, who also knew that Denny Watts and the gang were guilty of so much more besides. I was reported to have acted in defence of myself and Billy.

“Mrs Doyle? Constable Brooks, m’am. Believe we met at your Women’s Institute fete, at Easter.”

My Mum was polite but anxiously looking past the bobby on her neat suburban doorstep, to her errant dishevelled son. “Oh, yes Constable, of course. Is Raymond in trouble?”

“Shall we go inside Mrs Doyle? I’ll explain everything when we’re in private.”

The experienced copper knew about the curtain-twitching neighbours in nicer streets and felt for a parent who’d not had a visit of this kind, before. Once inside, he asked for my father and, as he wasn’t yet back from work, sat my mum down to break the news gently. I was made to stand, shocked and shaking, before them both. Mum saw the blood on my T-shirt and jeans and began to frantically search me for injury, before it became clear that I wasn’t hurt. Then she started to cry with relief and humiliation. Dad came in soon after and, with Mum drying her tears, Brooks went over the whole situation again, as he saw it. “So, Mr and Mrs Doyle, Raymond has learned his lesson, I feel.”

“Not in my opinion, he hasn’t! School and straight home every day from now on, young man. No moped, no cinema and no going out until you’ve passed your exams!” Dad’s voice boomed but he held his temper in check at the presence of a uniform.

“Now, now, Mr Doyle. I’ve had a few good stern words with the young tyke and I really think he’ll not step out of line again. Will you, Raymond?”

“No...Sir.”

“Apply your own punishment as you see fit, but the lad just got in with the wrong crowd for a while. The two who got hurt aren’t in danger. Billy Brown will heal up nicely and be moved to a different area for his own good. The Watts youth is set for borstal, I’m sorry to say. But he’s rotten to the core. A badge of honour like the scar he’ll have, won’t be out of place where he’s going.” He saw my mum’s horrified look at me and softened his approach. “Mrs Doyle, Raymond’s not a violent boy. This has shaken some sense into him and he knows I’ll be keeping an eye from now on.”

“Thank Constable Brooks for his help and being so lenient with you, Raymond.”

“Thank you, Constable Brooks, sir” I dutifully spoke up, faint with relief, despite anticipating what my dad would mete out to me after Brooks had gone.
“Well, keep your nose clean, Raymond, and you and I won’t be needing to speak again unless it’s to say ‘hello’ on my beat, will we?” His beady eyes searched mine and he nodded minutely, the understanding between us unspoken.

My watch told me it was time to go. To go and confront the last legacy of that day when I used a knife to wound another kid.

As I stepped out into the now gentler rain and jogged to the car, I reflected that I hadn’t turned into an angel that night or in the years since, but I had made the most of my chance to take a better path than the one I might have gone down. Yeah, a good copper saved my backside as I was coming up sixteen and thought I knew it all. I hadn’t felt anything like it again until ten years later, when I blew the whistle on corrupt fellow police officers. That was a bastard of a moment, too, but still I stood firm for what I believed in. And I got through it to be summoned by another man, who set me on a different road.

I got to HQ in good time, spun Freddie some line about being late with a report for Cowley and made my way to the gym. Bodie wasn’t there but I hadn’t long to wait.

He walked in, cool as a cucumber as usual, already dressed for the task in a tracksuit and plonked his sports bag onto a bench. “Right Sunshine,” He was rummaging in the bag. “what d’you want to start with, the Bowie or my Fairbairn-Sykes?” Smiling broadly, he produced two sheathed knives, one slightly longer and slimmer than the other.

“Give me the biggest that you’ve got” I replied, my mouth starting to dry rapidly at the sight.

“Well, bigger is not necessarily nastier. It’s how you use ‘em. Which one looks most like it?” Bodie unsheathed first one, then the other blade.

Both shone wickedly in the harsh gym lighting and my throat felt like sandpaper. I suddenly latched onto his last few words. “What do you mean, ’most like it’?”

“The knife you have a problem with. The one you used…”

“What?”

“In that brawl when you were fifteen.”

“You’ve been into my file, you…you…”

“’Nosy Parker’ is the term I think you’re looking for, mate.” He grinned sheepishly. “Look, I like to know what or who I’m dealing with before I start on a particular job.”

“And I’m just one of your ‘jobs’, am I?” I fumed, indignant that this man, who I’d been working with only a short while, had the heads up on me; on me, the experienced detective constable!

“No Ray, you’re my partner. It’s okay, I’m not going to spread it about. If you need help with this, I’m here, ready to get it done and dusted, once and for all. Come on, which one?”

I recognised the sincerity in his tone and reminded myself that I needed to trust him. Hands on hips, I dropped my head and started the confession. “A flick...’twas a flick knife. Hand sized, stubbier than those.”
There was a grunt of satisfaction from across the space between us. “A good one to begin with, common on the mean streets we now walk. I have a very nice wee Scarab here.” I looked up, to see Bodie had put away the first two and come up with an alternative. He held it forward, employing the mechanism and the familiar looking weapon sprang into life. “An OTF,” he instructed me. Then elaborated at my blank look “We call ‘em ‘out the front’. A switchblade.”

The memories started to flood back. I tried to swallow but there was no spit left in my mouth.

“All right,” Bodie’s voice was gentle. He retracted the blade and lowered it before starting towards me. “Let’s start at the beginning, shall we?”

We put in discreet sessions whenever we could, around work and gym availability and only when we’d be least likely to be disturbed. After the second, we sat in my place eating my signature pasta dish and seeing off a bottle of Chianti. Wine gone, we hit some vodka that Bodie swiftly bought at the corner shop. Spirits had never been my first choice but the camaraderie of our new partnership was starting to flow. Both loosened my tongue and I filled in the gaps for him about me, Billy Brown and Denny Watts. For once, Bodie listened without making any smart comment or jokes and when I’d finished, he just nodded knowingly and raised his glass. “Gang culture’s loss, my gain” he slurried. “And you couldn’t’ve come to a better teacher.” His customary modesty ever present.

I woke next day, covered by a throw from the back of my couch and Bodie having locked up and gone home.

And he was true to his word. He stuck with it, and me, for several weeks until I was happier, more confident and he’d pronounced me “Cured, my son!” Bodie was patient and thorough without being patronising. Safe and proficient with the weapons, his ease started to rub off on me. He coaxed and cajoled my insecurities out, replacing them with respect for the weapons by gradually exposing me to, not only the dreaded flick knife, but also other fearsome blades of which, it appeared, he had many.

I’m sure even the MOD doesn’t know where he got them all, I didn’t ask. Some were displayed back on the wall of his lounge, when I next visited, and some were never seen again, so I guess those weren’t acquired legitimately. But that was his business and I returned the tact and understanding he showed me. He never mentioned that time to anyone else. Never used it, even in jest and, perhaps, more than our day to day work and the booze and takeaways, those sessions started a deeper understanding between us.

I needn’t have worried. It was all going to be fine.

End Notes

* Excerpt from ‘The Road Not Taken’ by Robert Frost

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