

Thing To Do In Deptford When You're Dead.

by Paul David Brazill

The trouble with me is that I never realise how deep in the shit I am until I'm choking on the stuff.

Take last summer, for example. It started, as usual, in a pub and ended up, as always, in a graveyard. But that wasn't the problem.

You see, I'm a professional killer. A hit man. Twenty years in the business, man and boy. Booze and bullets and bodies are all par for the course in my game. But it was a bird that landed me in it. And not just any bird, mind you. It was the boss's bird.

Yes, I know what you're thinking; never shit on your own doorstep. And I'd normally agree. Shagging a married woman is a no-no for survival reasons, if nothing else.

And if that married woman happened to be hitched to an aging psychopath who had aptly earned the nickname Carl Carnage before his balls had dropped, well, you'd be forgiven for thinking that I had some sort of a death wish.

But then you've never met Velvet.

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The Blue Anchor on a Tuesday afternoon is usually about as lively as a Coldplay song. I was zoning out from the barflies' heated conversation — the smoking ban, for the thousandth time — when my phone rang. It was a number that I didn't recognise, which always set my spider senses tingling.

I answered.

'Aye,' I said, wringing out the sleeve of my knock-off Armani jacket, which I'd just plonked in a pool of spilt Stella.

There was a rasping sound, like a heavy breather was bashing the bishop on the other end.

'Cormac?' said a voice.

'Who wants to know?' I said.

Instinctively, I fiddled for my packet of Benson & Hedges. I had a vision of Christopher Walken as The Man With The Plan in that film with Andy Garcia and the old bloke from Back To the Future. It wasn't filling me with a sense of well-being, I can tell you.

'The Shadow Knows!' said the voice before bursting into a fit of laughter.

'Kenny, you tosser,' I said.

Kenny just kept on giggling, starting to sound a bit like Woody Woodpecker. He wasn't known as Kenny Cokehead for nothing and was clearly on the Jolly Dandruff already.

I gestured to Cameron the barman and pointed to the bottle of Mortlach behind the bar, thinking that if you can't beat them then at least attempt to join 'em.

'What's the craic, Kenny?' I said once the giggling had slowed down.

'Business. Work,' gurgled Kenny. 'Graft.'

I sipped my drink and gazed up at Phil Collins on the TV in the corner of the room and thought of how much he looked like he was wearing a stocking mask.

'Where? When? How much? And...who for?' I said. I'm very choosy about who I work for, professional pride and all that.

'Last one first,' said Kenny.

'Well,' I said. 'Don't keep me in suspenders.'

'Carl,' said Kenny. 'Carl Carnage. And he's paying top friggin' dollar, I can tell you.'

Cameron changed channels on the goggle box. Noel Edmonds was sat cross legged on the floor while the genius contestant got the old brain cells working, trying to make a life-altering decision.

I didn't take so long.

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Carl was out where the buses don't run in both meanings of the phrase. He lived in a swanky mock Tudor detached house in the depths of Deptford — far away from where public transport ceased. And he was also mental. Barking, and I don't mean the town in Essex.

Of course, Carl had always been a little, er, off the wall, but, over the years, the Old Timer's disease had spread like a plague and his behaviour was becoming more and more erratic.

I'd worked for Carl a few times over the years and he'd always paid well. The job usually involved a bit of travel, too. I once took out a matador in a bullring in Seville in 42 degree heat; a Helsinki

politician ended up in an underground car park. Well underground.

The last couple of times I'd seen him, however, Carl was just gazing out of the window with a Teddy Bear in his arms. Velvet had done all the talking. And I'd done all the looking.

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Velvet answered the door in a red leather dress that was made with just about enough material to make a wallet, and looking like a long limbed drink of water calling out to a thirsty man.

'Hello, stranger,' said Velvet, leaning forward and giving me a chaste kiss.

I followed her into the main room and thought about my brief fling with Velvet back in the days when she was just an up-and-coming glamour model. Emphasis on the coming.

I walked into the main room. Carl and Velvet's interior design taste was clearly similar to that of Jimmy Saville and Lily Savage and I considered putting my sunglasses back on.

And then I saw Carl.

Carl sat drooling in a leather armchair, the Teddy Bear ripped to shreds in his arms. He looked old. He was old, true, but he looked a lot older.

We followed the usual routine.

Velvet poured me a drink, I kept my eyes away from her Grand Canyon of a cleavage, and Carl handed me a large brown envelope.

I looked inside. There was a wad of cash, sure, but the prerequisite

picture of the target was missing.

'Carl,' I said, 'there's no...'

'I know,' said Carl, sounding weak. 'I know.'

Velvet sat on the arm chair and put an arm round him.

'The piece of business,' said Carl. 'The hit...' he coughed, '... is me...'

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So, the upshot was that Carl's Alzheimer's was getting worse and he was losing the plot. Shitting himself. Having violent tantrums. Bouts of depression. He wanted taken care of before it he became a drooling wreck.

And so, I did the job. I took him out when he was on holiday in Dublin. Velvet claimed on the insurance - which was a bonus - and everything went tickety boo.

And me and Velvet?

Yep, we got back together. Hitched a few months back. Just before little Stardust was born.

And here I am, all domesticated. Washing up, gardening and learning how to change shitty nappies.

Oh, yes, I'm up to my neck in it now, I really am.

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