

ON BORROWED TIME

by Mat Coward

By now, Nash was in serious trouble, and his only remaining ambition was to get out of it without having to kill anyone. There were several people he might need to kill, and the way he saw it, if all of them were still alive a week from now, that'd be the nearest thing to a proper result he'd have achieved in years.

It's always good to have goals.

Nash had opened another man's mail, but that was fine; that was what he was paid to do. Every morning at four o'clock, post from a number of London sorting

offices was brought to his desk, where he would open it in a way which, when it was resealed, would leave the recipient unaware of anything untoward. He would study the contents, take notes in felt-tip on a pad of paper, and use a secure intranet to make others aware of anything they needed to be aware of. Then he'd seal the letters up again, and send them on their way.

The piece of post that blew his life up wasn't a letter; it was a small package.

Nash looked at the heavy, ornate man's wrist watch, and recognised the maker's name. He thought it must be worth a thousand pounds. More, perhaps. A thousand would give him the kind of breathing space he hadn't enjoyed in ages. It could keep him on track for, maybe, a week; two weeks. He put the watch and the packaging in his pocket.

If he'd been in, or even in an adjacent reality to, his right, unclouded mind, he would never have done it. But, to be fair, if he'd even once been in his right, unclouded mind at any time during the last seventeen years, then surely he would have been somewhere else that night, doing something else, so the point, really, was moot.

The watch, when he had a chance to look it up, was worth just under three thousand pounds. Nash got two hundred and fifty for it.

As soon as he was on the bus on his way back home, with an almost satirically small amount of money in the same pocket which had recently held Brother Ronnie Waggoner's three-thousand-quad timepiece, Nash realised he had done something new in his life. Qualitatively new, that is; he had

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committed an act of stupidity which was in a different category to any he had committed before.

At university Nash had done computer science. This was in the days when you could, in fact, become more proficient in matters computeroid by studying them at university for several years than by spending ten seconds downloading and installing an app. Why the Section's recruiter had targeted him, he'd never known. Had he offended the man unwittingly? Or had they simply run out of classicists that year?

Across the aisle, a man with a small child on his lap was doing a crossword. "What's another word for a cat?" he asked.

The child pondered, humming, for a second, and then said: "Naughty cat."

"Excellent," said the man, "let's pencil that in."

The child looked at Nash, proudly. Nash smiled. "I know where babies come from," the child told him.

Nash covered his ears with his hands. "Aaagh! Spoilers!"

When he'd begun his career with the Section—bearing in mind that *career* can also mean "to rush in an uncontrolled manner, especially downhill"—he'd loved all the jargon. It made him feel that his job (sitting at a desk, looking at stuff) was secret and important and thrilling.

The Section had a special name for just about everything, and that made Nash feel like an insider, holding the fort against a world of outsiders. It took him a humiliatingly long time to realise that that was the entire point of jargon.

The targets Nash and his colleagues monitored were not called *targets*, they were called *hobbies*. Nash didn't sit at his desk spying on union leaders on behalf of big business; the Senior Labour Table supervised a lock of hobbies at the request of "stakeholders."

What that meant was, Nash spied on union leaders on behalf of big business. Sitting at his desk. Sometimes he stood, but that wasn't because of any Section idiosyncrasy, that was just haemorrhoids.

His most important hobby was an assistant general-secretary at a trade union which had begun life in 1891 as the Manchester Fellowship of Turners, and currently went by the name "Activate." It no longer organised turners, whatever turners were, or once had been, in Manchester or elsewhere. After a century of mergers, Activate now consisted mostly of white-collar workers in the privatized public services. Asst-Gen-Sec Ronnie Waggoner was widely respected as a hard negotiator, a skilled organiser, and a persuasive media performer. He needed supervising more than most, in other words.

And Nash, in what really couldn't be dismissed as a moment of madness, because the word moment suggests transience, which with the best will in the world would not be accurate, had stolen Brother Waggoner's valuable wrist watch. And got peanuts for it.

The great thing about working for secret police forces, whatever euphemism they call themselves by and in any country in the world, is that much of what you are required to do is, at best, quasi-legal. Few are the nations where it is constitutional to tap someone's phone, for instance, without a court order; none are the nations where this is not done.

This means that secret police officers are not overscrutinised. Management *can't* know everything they do because if it did it would be legally obliged to

stop them—or else face the possibility of prosecution sometime in the future, following a change of regime, or merely of fashion.

Most secret police, therefore, are free to spend much of their time on private projects, for fun or profit.

The woman four cubicles down from Nash, as an example, devoted most of her office life to importing and wholesaling Taiwanese vitamin supplements. Her actual job was monitoring animal-rights activists. But as she'd said to Nash—one night when they'd got drunk together on an upskilling weekend and later gone to her room and pretended to have sex, each of them believing the other to be too tipsy to realise that nothing was actually happening—"Animal rights? I mean, what are they going to do—pour quinoa through the prime minister's letterbox?"

After a sleepless day, Nash arrived back at the Section at ten p.m. One of his near neighbours, another labour man, was ending his day shift as Nash began his night.

"All right, Gnasher? All going well?"

"Absolutely, thank you, Brad. My life, as ever, is running like clockwork." He kept his head down as he spoke, to signal his unwillingness to engage. Brad was a depressive; amongst the many people he depressed were Nash and everyone else who worked in the building.

Finally alone, Nash tried to assemble a mental sketch of the hole he was in. If he could reduce it to lines and angles, perhaps he'd spot a hidden exit.

He could remember where he had sold the watch—the smoking garden of a suburban pub with the right reputation—but not whom to. Faces were lost in the fuzziness of that mad hour between first seeing the watch and smiling at the child on the bus.

Didn't matter much. Even if he could remember, he couldn't offer to buy the piece back. He had literally no money, literally no available credit. Payday loan sharks hid when they saw him. He had taken to shoving Bumlick von Kitchen-counter, his inauthentically Prussian cat, through other people's cat flaps to get fed. As for himself, he mostly worked nights, and was therefore usually able to steal sufficient biscuits from colleagues' desk drawers to get by until the brief, almost momentary—in fact, almost hallucinatory—relief of payday.

He could kill the person he'd sold the watch to, and steal it back. He knew, in theory, how to kill someone with an empty syringe, but again, that would involve knowing whom he'd sold the watch to. Besides, it would involve killing someone. And anyway, he hadn't got a syringe.

He could hope that when the watch didn't arrive, Brother Waggoner would assume it had been stolen by postal staff. Fine; except that the watch was worth a lot of money, so Waggoner would report it missing, and an investigation would ensue. Then someone at the Royal Mail would notice that Waggoner's address was listed as "special," and would contact the Section. Nash would be, if not under active suspicion, at least in the spotlight. They'd never prove he'd stolen the watch, even if they ever came to believe he had, but the thing was—if people started looking at him closely, he wouldn't like what they found. Any investigation, no matter how token, had the clear potential to snag a thread on Nash's sleeve and unravel it till he was naked.

Why did the bloody man even *need* a wrist watch? Hadn't he got a mobile phone?

The coffee machine at the Section was theoretically coin-operated, but most of the staff had, at one time or another, been on the most popular of all upskilling weekends, *Going Commando: Surviving Behind Enemy Lines Without Money*. After a three-hour, twelve-course, self-serve dinner of free coffee and biscuits, Nash at last came up with a question which sounded as if it might be worth asking.

Did Waggoner know the watch was coming?

Nash supervised all of Waggoner's written communications, electronic as well as postal, incoming and outward-bound, and he was pretty certain there'd been no mention of it there. But the sender might have told Waggoner about it in a phone conversation, and those were handled at a different table. Or, of course, in a flesh-to-flesh conversation; those were handled in a different building.

He'd saved a couple of Bourbon Creams for pudding, and he washed them down now with a fresh cup of coffee. He had identified a task, and that made him feel a bit better: Find out if Waggoner knew to expect the watch. If not, that would be enormously helpful, because at least it would mean he wouldn't have to kill Waggoner.

Amid the biscuits, and the occasional very welcome banana, Nash would sometimes find in his co-spies' desk drawers abandoned false IDs. Under Section regulations, any ID which was no longer required, or which had been rejected due to processing errors, must be destroyed within one hour in the presence of a senior officer. Under Section practice, they were invariably shoved in a drawer and forgotten about, to be eventually chucked in the bin when the person whose drawer it was died, retired, or ran away with his next-door neighbour's niece.

At a retirement community in Dundee, Nash showed his ID to Mrs. Wills, widow, to prove that he was who he claimed to be: a post-office investigator. She didn't offer him a cup of tea, or a piece of cake, which disappointed him, as he'd had nothing to eat or drink since leaving his office many hours earlier. Hunger he was more or less used to, but thirst made him stern.

First of all, he told her, he needed to know whether she was the person responsible for causing a valuable item, namely a watch, to be sent through the ordinary post without insurance. She didn't deny it; the watch had belonged to her late husband, and she had sent it, as per the deceased's expressed wishes, to his only remaining relative—a nephew, in London.

Nash sighed and rolled his eyes. "In that case," he said, sitting down without invitation, "I need to ask you how Mr. Wills originally came by the watch. Did he buy it, win it . . . ?"

"Win it!" Mrs. Wills laughed. "That man couldn't win a sausage in an everybody-wins-a-sausage competition. No, dear, he stole it."

Nash raised his eyebrows. "You're very frank."

She smiled. "Well, dear, it'd be your word against mine, wouldn't it?"

"What if I'm recording this conversation?" said Nash.

"Well, then it'd be my word against my own, wouldn't it? And I'm bound to win that one."

Nash wondered if there was any sustenance to be found in this revelation. Handling stolen goods might be mildly embarrassing for a prominent union man, but it might just as likely form the basis of a comical story that he could turn to his PR advantage. Anyway, he *hadn't* handled it.

Nash realised he hadn't said anything for a while. He looked around the

room for inspiration. "I suppose that's Mr. Wills on the mantelpiece, is it?"

"What?" The widow clutched a hand to her chest and wheeled round in her chair to look where Nash was pointing. "Oh, good Lord, no, you absurd man, that's just a picture of him!"

After several seconds, Nash said: "It is, of course. Now I look closer, I can see it is."

The Section didn't send its staff on so many courses these days, what with the recession, but there had been a golden time not long ago when its bosses struggled to spend their budgets fast enough and almost every weekend Nash and his fellows had been away on what were generally known as Adultery Days. Nash's favourite course had been the one where they trained you to throw your silence, the way a ventriloquist throws his voice, to make people think you're hiding in a different room than the one you're actually hiding in. He'd never found a use for it yet, but wasn't that true of all life's most elegant skills?

The point being, if he did need to kill this woman and make it look like a heart attack he was confident he could do so. If he told her that, would she make him a cup of tea? Or would she see through him, and pierce him with a cruel laugh?

"You're very wet behind the ears," she said, "for a postal investigator."

It may have been the hunger by that time, but was more likely still the thirst, which made him snap back at her. "As it happens, I have been married seven times."

She shook her head. "No, you haven't, dear, you're not old enough. I bet you still live with your mother."

"My mother is dead, madam."

Mrs. Wills snorted. "You do know that doesn't actually make it any better?"

Nash consulted his notes. Now he was telling truths to strangers! He needed to grab a grip. "This Mr. Waggoner to whom you posted the uninsured item—was he expecting it?"

"I left a message on his answering machine, just before I sent it."

Oh God. Nash felt his heart sink. Even not killing someone as rude as this old creature would have been an accomplishment of sorts.

"Not that he'll have had any idea who I was. I was his uncle's third wife, and I don't think *he'd* seen young Ronnie since he was a toddler. He's some sort of union man, you know." She wrinkled her nose at the bad smell of bolshevism. "Not my sort at all, nor my late husband's, but there you go—family is family."

While his enervated brain was trying to arrange the implications of this new information in the form of a flow chart, his mouth managed to say something. "Third wife?"

"We met here, you see, both ended up on our own. His second divorce was down to me," she said with pride, "but the first one wasn't really anyone's fault. I mean, how're you supposed to know you're a lesbian until you meet a woman you fancy more than your husband?"

"Fair point," said Nash, who was willing to give Mrs. Wills all the points she could swallow now that he was able to see a way of not killing her. "So you've been widowed twice?"

"Oh no, dear," she replied. "My first husband buggered off and left me, years ago, without any warning whatsoever."

"I can't imagine," said Nash.

"I know!" said Mrs. Wills. "After about a fortnight I began to think, 'Blimey,

he's been in that loo a long time.'”

Sitting in a Section pool car, drinking from a half-empty bottle of water he'd found in the glove compartment, on a very cold day near Dundee, Nash reckoned it came down to this: Waggoner *did* know that the watch was coming, but he didn't know what it looked like. All Nash had to do was find a convincing replacement and put it in the post. Before Waggoner reported the first one missing.

He couldn't buy one, and he couldn't borrow or beg one, so unavoidably he would have to, as one of his weekend instructors used to put it, *source* one. But how? He couldn't see himself just clouting some bloke over the head and sourcing the watch right off his wrist. And he lacked the skills to break into anywhere as primed as a high-class jeweller's. He could con one, he supposed, but that would take time to set up.

The question was—who has old watches, and poor security?

Just as soon as he phrased it that way to himself, out loud, he heard his mind click as it made a little logical connection. Nash yelped with delight.

Well—where did Waggoner get *his* watch from (given that he never did get it)? From an old man in a home.

He'd brought his whole collection of dodgy IDs with him, because you never knew. And because he didn't want someone nicking them out of his desk while he was away.

The Autumn Days Trust, other than being nonexistent, was an admirable organisation. It specialised in surprise visits to old folks' homes, to check how the inmates were being treated. In fact, it had recently won an outsourced contract to manage the entire inspection regime for this region. How do you do? Just pretend I'm not here.

Nash spent the rest of the day touring senior-citizen depositories. He spent the night sleeping in the car. Petrol was on expenses, but you had to claim it back two months in arrears. Meanwhile, in the here and now, he reckoned he had a maximum of thirty-six hours before a computer somewhere noticed that the credit card he was using to fill his tank didn't exist—or rather, existed physically, but not virtually, which these days was the wrong way round. He couldn't risk using it to rent a bed as well. At least the rooms of old people he inspected often contained biscuits, so he hadn't fainted in front of anyone yet.

It took him until lunchtime the next day to locate a sourceable watch. Just outside Birmingham, on the edge of an industrial estate, in a stuffy room in an understaffed home, a man who was made primarily of wrinkles and dust lay fast asleep in a chair in front of a television, his left arm dragged down by a fine watch which probably weighed more than he did.

Nash worked quickly, but with even greater emphasis on silence. If the man woke up during the sourcing, he might have to kill him. He noted a toffee hammer on the table next to the chair, in easy reach. Nash had once attended an upskilling weekend on *The Rudiments of Self-Defence*, which included rudiments such as how to sneak up behind someone in the dark and self-defend yourself against them with a garrote. There'd been a whole section on toffee hammers immediately after the midafternoon cigarette break.

The watch was a good enough match, as far as Nash could remember. Same sort of vintage. He checked it wasn't engraved with “Happy 100th Birthday

Dad” or anything. It wasn’t. The ancient man slept on. Perfect. Right up until Nash noticed the equally ancient woman watching him from the doorway.

“What are you doing to Douglas?” she asked him, closing the door behind her and leaning against it.

Nash picked up the toffee hammer and screwed up his eyes, trying to peek a few moments into the future, so that he could find out what he was going to do with it. “Hello!” he said. “And indeed, good afternoon. I don’t think we’ve met yet? I am here to instigate a trial program of counterintuitive therapy.”

“Never heard of it; never heard of you.”

“It’s a new form of alternative medicine,” Nash explained. “Supposing you came to us with—well, like this chap here, with a pain in the head. What we’d do is, we’d tap you repeatedly on the head with this therapeutic medical tapper.”

The old woman said: “That’s a toffee hammer.”

“Made by the same company, in fact,” Nash confirmed, “on the banks of the Ruhr. Repeatedly on the skull, like this, you see? The idea being that this is the very *last* thing the pain expects us to do—therefore it is the one thing it doesn’t have any defences against.” He smiled and put the toffee hammer in his breast pocket in what he hoped was a mannerism suggestive of medical school.

The old woman looked at him. “But that doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Nash, “I thought I said—alternative medicine.”

The old woman looked at him some more. Then she licked her lips. “Tell you what, young man—if you make love to me all night without pause, I won’t tell anyone what I’ve seen.” She held it for about three beats, then she doubled over, hands locked onto her knees, shoulders shaking. “Oh my God, your face! No, seriously, give us ten quid or I’ll scream for the matron.”

“That seems fair,” said Nash, thinking that this woman was so old, the easiest way to kill her might be to just stand there and wait. He hadn’t got ten quid, naturally. “I’ll have to fetch the money from my car. I’ll bring it to your room—what’s the number?”

She told him, and he set off at a run.

Bedside cabinet, he reckoned; if he was going to avoid killing the old woman, that was his best hope. Hope smiled on him for once, and by the time she arrived back at her room, he was standing outside it holding a ten-pound note.

“Pleasure doing blackmail with you,” she said, and Nash had to agree, because when he’d taken the tenner from her bedside cabinet, he’d added a fiver so that he could buy a sandwich for lunch. A handling charge, really.

He sourced the padded envelope and three books of postage stamps by shoving them up his jumper in a village shop run by a man on crutches and running like hell. One of his upskilling instructors had once said, “Subtlety is great, but sometimes a kick in the balls is quicker,” and that lesson had stayed in Nash’s head. Money well spent by his employers, you’d have to say.

He drove back to Dundee, posted the watch to Waggoner, and drove home.

He waited a week before finally admitting to himself that the packet containing the watch was never going to turn up on his table. Some crooked *bastard* had pinched his watch.

Essentially, nothing had changed. Sooner or later—and surely closer to sooner than to later—Brother Waggoner would think, *That’s funny, my old uncle’s watch never showed up*, and make enquiries. He would assume that it had

been pinched by a postal worker, and the annoying thing was that this time he would probably be right. But that wouldn't matter, as far as Nash was concerned; because Waggoner was a public figure, his loss would be thoroughly investigated. The investigators would discover that his post took a daily detour, and would liaise with the Section. And managerial attention would drop upon Nash like a piano falling through rotten floorboards.

How long did he have? The mail had got a lot slower since privatization, that was one thing working in his favour. But even so, Waggoner was going to start wondering about the watch before long. He was a busy man, but no one's too busy to get annoyed when a promised present doesn't arrive.

Nash couldn't steal another watch. Even if he had the time, he didn't have the energy. Or, good God, the petrol. Anyway, it was Nash's long-held conviction that even in the most disastrous life, absurdity should be subject to some limits.

He was back to having to kill people, and to trying not to. He'd done so many distasteful things since the day he completed his computer degree, and lately, for some reason or for no reason, or perhaps a combination of the both, he'd started to feel thoroughly sick about them. He couldn't do anything about them now, but he could try not to do too many more. He'd have to do *some* more, obviously, otherwise they'd stop paying him.

Nash liked to think he had some good points to his character. He was notably patient with children, and firm with cats. He didn't hold grudges. Or, well, he *held* them, but he didn't use them.

"Cup of coffee, Gnasher? My treat."

He hadn't realised he wasn't alone. He hoped he hadn't been vocalising his thoughts; the list of murders he didn't want to commit was long enough already.

He thanked Brad for the coffee. Brad leaned a buttock against the corner of Nash's table, clearly intent not just on a coffee but a coffee break.

"You working late, Brad?" said Nash, meaning, "Will you please sod off, I've got things to do."

Brad nodded, excitement in his pink face. "Oh yes, we're in the middle of a special."

He'd made his reputation originally as a knocker-up during the miners' strike: knocking on activists' doors, dressed in police uniform, at regular intervals throughout the night to disorientate them before big pitched battles. Brad was very proud of this, but to Nash it sounded like the very epitome of unskilled manual labour.

"That's nice for you, Brad. Who's the—"

"Post-workers' union," said Brad, and Nash took a first sip of his coffee.

"Is that right?" he said.

Brad wobbled his cheeks. "There are developments imminent which the posties are not going to approve of, so before that happens our masters would prefer them to enjoy somewhat less public support than they currently do."

They worked for big business, there at the Section. At various times within Nash's own memory this had been presented to staff as working for the Government, or the Nation, or the State. During one particularly idealistic period, when the Section had spent millions of pounds on something called an "internal relaunch," they had all had to attend rebranding seminars in which they were told that they worked for the Public. Shortly afterwards, the government had decided to launch a war against a small and distant country, had presumably

failed to brand the war properly, and the public had campaigned in its millions against the government's policy. The Section had had to work flat out to prevent the government being defeated by the public, and that had been the end of that relaunch.

These days, nobody really bothered pretending anymore: They worked for big business, as did all government departments, and that was that.

"And it's your job," said Nash, "to turn the public against the postal workers? Well, Brad, they couldn't have tasked a better man." No half-yearly assessment of Brad had ever included the phrase "Immune to flattery."

"I would offer you a biscuit to go with the coffee," said Brad, "but some bugger's half-inched them."

"Probably a mole," suggested Nash. He needed to be strong now. He needed to keep Brad chatting. If there was something big and dirty going on in the Royal Mail, there had to be, surely, some way Nash could use it.

For all his resolution, though, Nash found himself drifting in and out as Brad led him through a remarkably limited repertoire of astonishingly anticlimactic anecdotes from his days in the field.

For a while, he'd specialised in following people, before mobile phones came in and rendered an entire worldwide community of secret police operatives as redundant as the turners of Victorian Manchester. Nash tuned in just in time to hear the end of a story about how Brad had once been tailing a Greenpeace hobby and thought he was going to have to tail her right onto a paddock full of dung and puddles, while only wearing canvas deck shoes, but in the end hadn't had to.

"Extraordinary," said Nash when he realised the story was over. "You were literally minutes from mild discomfort."

It reminded him of one of Brad's best-known stories, the one in which he was following a taxi through rush-hour traffic when he fell off his bicycle. He survived, but he permanently lost the use of his spectacles.

Half an hour's half-listening, and halfhearted attempts at info-pumping earned Nash nothing of use, but at last the dull man went off to his dull bed, and Nash was able to have a rummage through his desk drawers instead. What he found proved yet again (not that Nash needed any proof, he took this as axiomatic) that talking to people was mostly a waste of time, whereas brazen criminality rarely was.

The forged Royal Mail ID was useless because it had printed slantwise, but Nash could still recognise the face in the photo: that of an investigative reporter, well known around the Section as a "friendly." So, Brad was using a journalist, undercover, in his plan to discredit the postal unions. Not very original, and also not what excited Nash. It was the location at which the reporter would be undertaking his uncovering that caught Nash's bloodshot eye: Greater London's busiest sorting office.

Nash put two and two together and, quite deliberately, came up with more than four, blessing, as he did so, his employers for once sending him on an upskilling which had been entitled *Intelligence Arithmetic: Making Five From Two Twos*.

Worth a try anyway. He had no better ideas, which was here being used to mean "no ideas."

Not only that, but in Brad's bottom drawer he found an almost full packet of chocolate digestives.



His business in the reporter's deserted office took only a short time. Nash was just picking up his paint pot and stepladder, ready to leave, when a tall young woman with a nineteen-fifties hairdo asked him, quite politely, what he was up to.

That dented his good cheer. Realistically, how many more people could he get away with not killing?

"There you are, miss," he cockneyed, handing her a grubby business card, "that'll explain."

She looked at it, and frowned. "You're a horse painter."

"What?" said Nash, failing to hide his irritation, and, in fact, failing to try. "Well, what the hell's a horse painter?"

She pointed at the card, which she still held. "It says horse painter and decorator."

Nash was so tired, his shoulder sagged under the weight of the stepladder. He put it down and tried to remember what he knew about how to fake a suicide in an office. "Yes, yes, that's right," he said. "Horse painter. Why is that so strange?"

She gave him an old-fashioned look to go with the hair. "Surely there's no dispute on the strangeness, is there? I mean, was there someone you met once who told you it *wasn't* strange?"

"Well," Nash replied, and then thought he ought to add something. "I suppose other people's trades always seem a bit odd, though, don't they?"

"Only when they're horse painters." She wasn't letting go of the card.

Nash put the paint down as well, and realised he'd forgotten to bring any brushes. Oh well, too late to worry about that now. "So, young miss, you imagine horses paint themselves, do you? Typical metropolitan, if you don't mind me saying so. You know nothing about country life, yet you presume to judge it. By contrast, your editor is a keen and knowledgeable equestrian, and that is why I am—"

She said, "You don't think it's a misprint, do you? Only, house painter would make a lot more sense."

He couldn't help it. He gave the paint tin a good kick. "Well, for God's sake, why didn't you say that in the first place?"

For the first time, she looked a little defensive. "This isn't a house, is it?"

Nash was having none of that. "Don't be so bloody pedantic. We do offices as well, obviously."

"As well as horses? How was I supposed to know?" Then she giggled, and gave him back his card. "Listen, matey, I don't care where you stick your brushes—I know what you're doing here."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Nash.

"We've known ever since the pay dispute started that the owners are bugging the reporters' work stations."

"You clever thing," said Nash, and felt the pain in his shoulders begin to recede.

"So: Either the union informs management that we caught you in the act, and presumably you lose your job. Or, you show me precisely where each bug is, and we use them to feed the proprietor disinformation."

She did a little curtsey, patted her retro hair, and Nash showed her where all the bugs were. There weren't any, of course, but he showed her anyway, because a deal's a deal.



Ronnie Waggoner had a reputation as someone who understood the importance of honouring negotiated settlements, and as someone who always played the ball, not the man, and that was what Nash was relying on.

Inside a letter asking Waggoner to speak at the AGM of the Campaign for Open Government, he folded a note requesting a meeting. Two days later, he received a reply: a letter addressed to Waggoner, and written by Waggoner.

They met the following afternoon, on a bench outside a pawnbroker's on a run-down estate in an unloved suburb.

When Nash sat down next to him, Waggoner was watching a gull in the gutter trying to eat the remains of a fish supper. They both watched, until the gull gave up in frustration and flapped off.

"Batter can be neither created nor destroyed," said Waggoner. "I remember that from physics O Level. How do you do? I'm Ronnie."

They shook gloves. "And I'm the man who reads your post," said Nash, "as you'll have gathered."

Waggoner shook his head. "So disappointing, I'd always pictured you as a very attractive woman. Quite severe, you know, not excessively young, but very attractive."

"Anyway," said Nash, "I'd just like to clear the air by apologising for the whole abusing your right to privacy stuff, and the treating you like some left-wing extremist, and—"

"Oh, I don't mind being called a left-wing extremist." Waggoner waved the thought away. "Listen, my friend: Everything we've got that makes this country decent—socialised medicine, old-age pensions, votes for women, the abolition of child labour—everything that's worth having has started out being fought for by left-wing extremists and terrorists, and opposed by sensible, decent-minded moderates. *Literally* everything."

Nash wasn't sure where that left the smell of bluebells, or sitting outside a country pub on a warm summer's evening holding a forbidden hand, but he didn't feel it was his place to argue, and besides, Waggoner hadn't finished: "At any given moment, the consensus is always wrong. That is one of history's most easily demonstrable laws." He gave Nash a fraternal slap on the leg. "As for the invasion of privacy, I'm sure you had your reasons. There's very rarely only one side to an argument."

"Well," said Nash, "that's remarkably generous of—"

"Although, admittedly—World War Two . . ." Waggoner waggled his glove.

Nash nodded. "There are always exceptions, quite."

They watched as another bird, this time a pigeon, tried to eat the same piece of batter. It failed too, but at least it tried, which has surely got to count for something in times like these?

Nash wondered whether he was really going to do this. He wished he could have asked someone's advice, but he couldn't have, so he hadn't, and in any case it was too late for that now.

The job meant he didn't have many friends. At least, he hoped it was the job. He hoped it wasn't vice versa. At any rate, there was no one he could turn to and say, "You know what? I think I've broken something. In fact, I think I've broken everything." The years had not been kind to Nash, Nash felt. Although, to be fair, 1994 did buy him a pizza once.

Anyway: He had nothing else. Just this.

At the newspaper office, on the undercover reporter's computer, he'd found annotated photographs of Waggoner's watch, and, in the same file, several other moderately valuable items. The annotations referred to the losers, each of them a person prominent in public life. Or, at the very least, a TV celebrity.

On the plus side, it didn't really matter if what Nash had deduced was true, just so long as it was believable. If the newspaper or the Section denied it, after all, Waggoner would just think, "Well, they would, wouldn't they?" And Nash knew it was true in essence, if not in detail.

"Your watch has been stolen," he began, "but—"

"Watch?" Waggoner looked at the modest timepiece on his wrist, and it was only then Nash remembered that there was no reason why the union man should share his obsession.

"Sorry, yes—your late uncle's watch. It was posted to you by—"

"Right, yeah, right—I'm with you. My great heirloom from an uncle I last saw when I was four! Well, they're welcome to that."

"*Now you bloody tell me,*" Nash was careful not to say. Instead he said: "Your uncle was estranged from your family?"

"He was a career thief, the story goes, and once he came out of prison the first time he had nothing more to do with the family."

"They disowned him?" asked Nash.

"No, he disowned *them*—thought he was too good for them now he'd been inside. Thought he was the big man, the master criminal. Which he was, if his master plan was to spend about a third of his adult life behind bars." Waggoner chuckled to himself and then gave Nash another slap on the knee. "Sorry, son, go on with your story."

"The watch has been stolen but not, as you are supposed to presume, by a crooked postie. I have evidence, which I will make available to you subject to certain understandings, that your watch was stolen as part of a bigger plan, hatched between my office and elements in the press, to turn the public against the postal workers."

Waggoner got it straight away, as Nash had hoped he would. "Make them out to be a bunch of thieving toerags, so nobody'll back them when they come out on strike?" He rubbed his gloves together. "Yes, comrade, I could certainly find a good home for evidence of such a thing. But tell me about these 'certain understandings.' You're not hoping for money, I trust?"

"I'm always hoping for money." Though hoping wasn't the right word; it didn't sound desperate enough. Nash had been married seven times and divorced seven times and, yes, thank you, he was aware that he didn't look old enough, but who said anything about the marriages being consecutive?

He had a problem—an inability to sleep with a woman without falling in love with her—and a solution (an inexhaustible supply of false identities) which made the problem much worse. Eleven children, so far. There'd be more; he didn't fool himself about that. More children, and more wives. And more divorces, which was the specific bit that he devoted so much energy to trying to forget.

Nash blamed the shift work for the way his life had turned out. It had never occurred to him when he'd agreed to become a secret policeman in his tutor's room at university that it would involve shifts. He should have thought of it, perhaps, but there you are—he hadn't. He was always very weary, always, and

always the world was slightly out of focus.

It was feasible, the ever-objective Nash acknowledged, that the booze didn't help—and the diet pills definitely didn't, which was why he only used them two or three times a week—but essentially, it was all down to shift work subverting his biorhythms. There were reams of medical literature supporting this point, and anyone who didn't believe him could bloody well look it up, and that included himself.

"But no," he told Waggoner, "I know you can't risk being stung, bribing a civil servant. All I want from you, Mr. Waggoner, is your word that you will never, under any circumstances, give any hint of my existence to any living person."

"You have it," said Waggoner, "and you may rely on it."

Nash stood up, unzipped his jacket, and took out a large envelope. He handed it to Waggoner, but for the moment, the union man kept his hands in his lap. "What's your motive in all this, son?" he asked.

It had come to Nash sometime on the final drive back from Dundee that in future he wanted to tell the truth whenever the opportunity arose, however rarely, and this was an opportunity, wasn't it? "I just don't want to kill anyone," he said. Waggoner frowned, nodded, and took the envelope.

Not that it mattered, because as far as he was concerned the affair was over (No one would ever connect Nash with the missing watch, since the watch wouldn't be missing, it'd be on Waggoner's wrist. Or eBay.) but Nash did harbour a certain professional curiosity as to how Waggoner would use what Nash had given him.

When the answer came it was, perhaps, disappointingly unimaginative; a union-sponsored member of Parliament used parliamentary privilege to name the journalist in the House, and to accuse him of theft and conspiracy. He also managed to imply that the reporter himself was the inadvertent source of this information.

Waggoner's watch, because of the amusing story of how it had been stolen twice (which inaccuracy gave Nash his first belly-laugh in months), became the central image of Watchgate, displayed behind newsreaders' heads and on the front pages of newspapers.

In the Section, as across the invisible government, the para-civil service, attack temporarily gave way to defence. The priority was to ensure that a sensation about a rogue reporter did not become a scandal about rogue intelligence officers.

None of this was of great practical consequence to Nash, except insofar as it resulted in more of his colleagues working night shifts, which made it harder for him to source food from their desks.

It was a week or so later when Nash, routinely sorting through Brother Waggoner's mail one early dawn, picked up a handwritten envelope, post-marked Birmingham. Something about that gave him a nasty premonition.

Inside was a newspaper cutting, showing a large, clear, closeup photo of the watch which Nash had stolen. The second watch; the Watchgate watch. The old man's watch. And a letter from the old man's granddaughter.

Nash went cold; went hot; stuffed the letter, and the cutting, and the envelope, into his pocket. He stood at the machine, drinking coffee, and thinking that if he could get through the next few days without killing anyone, that would be a great thing—not to mention extremely surprising.