**NEIGHBOURS**

*By Tony Lawton*

“So what were you doing in England before you came to Javea?” Gemma asked, leaning across the gap between her third floor balcony to the balcony next door, where Danny was sitting with a wine glass and a nearly empty bottle of Rioja. The light was fading; the moon was up, and across the roof tops the sea was glinting in the moon's rays.

Danny James stared out into the street, down at the closed doors of the Azorin restaurant in Javea port. After a long pause he muttered, not taking his eyes off the street, “Oh, this and that, I was in sales, sort of export/import”. He coughed, nervously. Gemma laughed, and said “I hope you haven't got that bloody Coronavirus thing, I don't want any of that, better keep me distance; though I ain't got much choice really with this lockdown”. East End /Essex borders thought Danny, Romford or Ilford or one of those places.

Apart from the accent, she looked quite classy, he thought. She had said she was a hairdresser in a salon near the Arenal, been there a couple of years, and had been renting her apartment most of that time. The light wasn't good, but she looked about 30, blonde hair cut pretty short, good figure and a dazzling smile. He had not seen her since the day before, when they were both out on their balconies listening to the music played in the evening from several of the apartments in the street. It must be great living here in normal circumstances, lots of friendly people, lots of stories to tell, he reckoned.

He had only got to Javea at the weekend, after a mad dash to Bristol airport for the EasyJet flight to Alicante. He was a total stranger to the place. His mate Mad Dougie had given him the key, told him he could stay for a few weeks, and no one would have a clue where he was. He had used his fake passport, with his photo but a fake name, so no one could trace he had left the country.

To say he was a bit stressed was an understatement. Stitching up Birmingham's biggest drug baron, Sergei Timochenko, and walking away with over £800,000 in used notes, was a risky business. Most was in a safe hiding place in Bristol, but he had £200,000 with him, stashed in hidden compartments in two suitcases, his carry-on bag, in jacket pockets and in the soles of his shoes. He had made it out of his Edgbaston flat by the skin of his teeth, taken a hire car to Bristol avoiding the motorway, taken his cash to a left luggage box and getting a taxi to the airport. Mad Dougie had gone into hiding in Scotland. Even now, Danny couldn't relax; he knew Timo's goons would be after him, and would guess he may have left the country. Timo had a lot of contacts across Europe. Danny had been out to the Mas y Mas supermarket in the port for some food and some bottles of wine, but just wanted to lay low for a few days. He couldn't go to a bar or eat out anyway because of the curfew.

He realised Gemma was talking to him again: “Sorry, what did you say?” he asked. “I said, how long do you think this is going to last? My salon has closed down, and I can't live on fresh air”. “Dunno” said Danny, “but it's nice to have a bit of a rest, isn't it?”. He felt himself feeling a bit more tranquillo, as the locals said.. Maybe it was the wine. Maybe she was just easy to talk to. There was a lot of talk from the balconies nearby, a guy playing a guitar - pretty well too - and others just laughing and joking across to the opposite apartments.

Danny was about 40, still fairly slim and fit, still believing what friends had said ages ago that he looked a bit like a young Robert de Nero. He was a solicitor in Birmingham running his own little criminal law practice. That was how he had first come across Timo 10 years ago, when Timo was in the cells in Birmingham Magistrates Court on a possession charge, possessing quite a lot, it was alleged. Danny had got him off somehow and since then he had become a regular client, and a mate. As Timo's drugs empire grew, Danny grew with it. Timo trusted him, which is how he came to be the bagman, at the exchange with the Albanian gang, and found himself in possession of the biggest wad of cash he had ever seen. The temptation was just a bit too much. He was a single man, his wife Eva leaving him two years before when he had got a bit of a habit of sampling Timo's goods. He was getting bored with the daily grind of Magistrates and Crown Court, a merry-go-round of muggers, druggies, burglars, sex offenders and assorted perverts. A split second decision - he did a runner. Now, no turning back.

They talked a bit more. Gemma told him about her job, some funny stories about her customers. She thought Javea was a great place to live; Danny felt that under different circumstances, she was right, the weather had been fine today, and what he had seen of the port made him think he could settle down in a place like this; though he knew he was too close to home, and would need to move on once this pandemic was over. He planned to get to the Phillippines, to one of the small islands where he could disappear and live quietly and cheaply - maybe set up a small bar.

“You here on your own then?” Danny asked.

“Yes” she said “my husband died a couple of years ago, which is when I decided to come here and make a new life”.

“Sorry to hear that” said Danny; he didn't really want to ask any more, but after a pause said, “so what do you do with your spare time?”

“ I go to a gym, out with a few friends, go to see some live bands, go walking in the mountains, that sort of thing”.

“Sounds great, said Danny. Before he could say any more Gemma said, “I think I'll turn in for the night, may talk to you tomorrow?”

“Sure, goodnight” he called after her. She was gone.

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 Late morning: Danny had gone along the road to the Mas y Mas supermarket. There was a small queue outside, everyone two metres apart. He was at the meat counter when a voice said, “Fancy seeing you here!” Gemma had a great smile; she wore a vest and a pair of shorts and looked stunning. “You're a sight for sore eyes! You had better keep your distance!” he said.

“What are you getting?” she asked .

“Looking for some meat to make a casserole, enough for a couple of days. I'm not a bad cook, as it happens. Look I have had a thought - do you fancy coming round tonight and sharing it?” he said nervously.

“Well, it’s only across the landing; no one's going to notice; we can sit at opposite ends of the table and play pass the salt! Go on, it’s a bit boring on your own, I promise to keep my distance” he said.

She thought for a few moments: “OK then, why not? It’s something to do. But only if I bring a decent bottle of red.”

“You're on, see you at 7?”

“I'll be there, I'm not planning on going anywhere else!” She disappeared, with a big smile, towards the wine shelves.

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7pm. Ring on the doorbell. Danny was nervous. He had been racing around most of the afternoon making a beef casserole, which he was proud to say looked and smelt delicious; he had also been cleaning the apartment, showering, and putting on a clean pair of jeans and his best shirt.

Gemma took his breath away, standing there smiling at him, wearing a turquoise dress which showed off her tan, faultless make-up and hair, and with a small handbag in one hand and a bottle of good red wine in the other.

“Wow, come in” - he stated to go to kiss her on the cheek, and then jumped back in mock terror. She walked past him, leaving behind what he thought was an expensive perfume.

“Sit down, sit down” he said, “We had better sit inside, don't want the neighbours seeing us out on the balcony together”. He had set out on the table some tapas he had found in the supermarket - patatas bravas, boquerones, olives, alioli and some good fresh bread. He opened Gemma's bottle - something quite expensive looking from Rioja - and poured them both a generous glassful. “Well cheers” he said, “here's to a nice evening”.

“I'll drink to that” agreed Gemma, breaking off a hunk of the bread and a large spoonful of the alioli. They talked about the lockdown for a few minutes, then Danny went to check the casserole - it really smells good, he thought. He brought it to the table in an oval dish, and put out two large servings, filling up their wine glasses at the same time.

“This is beautiful” said Gemma,” where did you learn to cook like this?”

“Just a hobby of mine, I love good food” - and he thought, I'm doing well here.

“You can cook for me any time” Gemma smiled at him. She moved her chair round closer to him. They looked at each other, both smiling. “Listen, I've got a little surprise for you in my handbag” she said..

“Oh yes, what is it? - by now he was thinking the evening couldn't get much better.

“You’ve got to shut your eyes”, she said with a very flirtatious smile.

“OK, I'll cover my eyes” he laughed, and put both hands over them.

The hypodermic syringe went straight into the right side of his neck, and was pushed home. Danny let out a strangled cough, staggered to his feet, muttered “whaa”, and slumped to the floor. “Present from Uncle Timo” said Gemma.

She waited over him for a few minutes. His breathing got slower. She felt his pulse. He had gone. She put on her gloves and started cleaning up. After a quick visit across the landing, she returned with cleaning materials; then put the food in the bin, got the plates and glasses cleaned, all surfaces sprayed with bleach and cleaned, the chairs and the table treated the same. She had made sure not to touch anything else since coming in.

She dragged his body across the tiled floor, and with a lot of effort got Danny into bed and pulled the covers up. Then she went through all his cases and bags, finding all the compartments with the hidden cash, and also the key to the left luggage.

It had been, she had been told, a hard job getting out of Mad Bob where Danny had gone, and where the rest of the cash was. Mad Bob's body was now somewhere in the River Severn, weighed down with concrete. A quick bit of research had shown that the apartment across the landing was for rent, which was when Gemma got her orders and made the journey up from her apartment in Alicante. This was the first time she had killed anyone, but orders are orders. She was Uncle Timo's head of Spanish operations, and to say no - well, she wouldn't want to think about that. She had never met Danny, who was only involved in Birmingham, so there was nothing to rouse his suspicion. She had picked up the hypo from a local drugs guy, who she knew wouldn't talk.

After a final check, she took out all the rubbish, and closed the door. She cleared all her clothes and possessions, put her key in an envelope to the agents across the road, with a note saying she had to go back to England.

She had filled the back of the car with a couple of full bags of shopping, so that if stopped by the police she could show what she had been doing. She drove carefully to Alicante, keeping off the motorway but going from town to town along the N332. When she got there, she left a coded message with Tim that the job was done, and got one back saying to stay put, one of his men would collect the money.

She kept thinking about what had happened. Danny had been a really nice guy, much better than most she had the misfortune to have met. Day after day, she went over it in her head. She felt so guilty. And she felt angry about Uncle Timo and the whole business. Danny - what a poor bastard, she thought. Is my life always going to be like this? She waited days, which turned into a week. Flights had been stopped, ferries cancelled, everything was chaos. No one came. After 10 days, she left the apartment and never returned. No one knows where she went. She never returned to England, or saw her family in Ilford. Someone said she was in Colombia. Another said she had been seen on a little island in the Philippines.

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There was a ring on the doorbell at 52 Addison Road, Edgbaston. The kids were making a hell of a racket, and she shouted, “shut It!”, as she opened the door. She signed for a parcel addressed to her - Mrs Eva James. Inside was a key, an address in Bristol, and a typed note which just said, “I'm sorry”. One of Danny's little jokes she thought. I haven't heard from him for weeks; he hasn't phoned to speak to the kids. I suppose I'll have to take a trip down to Bristol to find out what he's done now, she thought, and wandered back inside to make the kids their tea.