

IN BALANCE WITH THIS LIFE

BY MAZZY SUE

It's worse than he thought. A lot worse. A kind of numb coldness grips him, as the stark truth of what is going to happen settles heavily on his stomach.

No time for reality. He'll have to go for the Disney scenario. The fairytale ending.

Reality is not an option he cares for given the current odds.

Bodie is lying on his back, and even from twenty yards through billowing smoke Doyle can see that Bodie's legs are broken. The fall from the rusting web of metal that purportedly held up this godforsaken warehouse has been a fall too far.

He remembers the howl of agony that sent adrenaline surging through him as he watched in disbelief. He wonders if Bodie is conscious. He hopes not. Then he hopes he is. He needs to tell him something.

Smoke is curling around the warehouse interior, and through the gaps Doyle can see the remains of the Capri, still burning. The car had gone up like a Molotov cocktail, and fire is now greedily consuming the crumbling building around them.

As the air thickens he remembers the conversation they blithely shared a couple of hours ago.

∞ **CI5** ∞

They'd been tooling down the East India Dock Road, content for once to idle along with the rest of the traffic, windows closed against the sooty diesel stink of the East End.

"So Ray, what d'ya think? Fishing or birdwatching this weekend?"

Bodie eased the car to a crawl as the traffic approached the Rotherhithe Tunnel. His hand grazed Doyle's knee as he changed gear, and Doyle flashed him a glance, and was rewarded by a pout and a kissing gesture. Jesus! Bodie could be so camp. Only someone as obviously macho could get away with so much preening, fluttering and poncing about. Doyle grinned at him in exasperation, trying to ignore the heat that lingered on his knee, the slow swoop of lust that left him faintly dizzy.

Sexy bastard. Bet he did it on bloody purpose.

"Can't we do both? Fish for birds? You usually organise these things with female company laid on. One or other of your obliging admirers. As long as we don't run into any terrorists this time. Don't need anymore busman's holidays, do we?"

Doyle watched Bodie, enjoying the smirk that spread nonchalantly across his face.

"Busmen? I had other things in mind Raymond. Other things entirely..."

Bodie changed back into third gear, and the Capri lurched

as he jerked the clutch.

Doyle grinned his wolfish grin, and ruefully shook his head.

“Cowley’ll have your guts for garters if you fuck up this gearbox again mate. **Slide** that clutch in slowly. **Ease** your foot off the pedal. Imagine you’re having sex with...”

Doyle almost bit his tongue as he realised what he had almost admitted. All that talk of sliding and easing had bypassed his safety mechanisms.

Sexy bastard.

∞ **CI5** ∞

Doyle crouches down in the shadow, checking his gun without looking at it. One full clip—enough cover to get him to Bodie’s side, but not enough to get either of them back. Options are limited. He could try his superman routine, and just risk an uncovered dash, hoping that the bullets would bounce off. He could—a sudden sound cuts through the thick silence, and his head goes up, looking straight to where Bodie lies, his legs twisted into a surreal arabesque.

The terrorist is leaning down, the barrel of his gun stroking the side of Bodie’s head.

Options are diminishing fast.

“Stop. He’s dead anyway. I’ll make a deal with you...”

Doyle allows the man to see him briefly, then slips back into the shadows, his back pressed against the rough wall. Literally and metaphorically. The wry thought makes his mouth widen in a kind of grin.

The terrorist moves a couple of steps away from Bodie, but the gun still threatens.

Stalemate.

∞ **CI5** ∞

The call from HQ had come just as they were about to enter the bloody tunnel. Bodie did one of his famous handbrake turns in the middle of the road, grinning hugely at the chaos he was causing, flooring the accelerator as they raced back into the heart of the city.

Cowley had sounded tetchy, and they both knew what that could mean.

Doyle relaxed back into his seat, and watched Bodie drive. It was like watching a lover focused on stroking every ounce of pleasure from a willing body. Blunt, capable hands moved with rough grace on the steering wheel, eyes slitted in concentration as his body leant forward with the movement of the car.

Doyle had to smile. Man and machine, in perfect harmony.

Poetry in motion.

They had been right to rush. Cowley was simmering nicely when they barrelled into his office, and both agents adopted their own particular version of a respectful and dutiful stance. Bodie stood at attention, chin jutting forward, eyes front and centre.

Doyle stood in the doorway, lounging only minimally against the doorframe, watching Cowley carefully.

Suddenly Cowley was watching him.

“Stand up straight laddie. Look at this fine example in front of me. A credit to his unit. When he’s obeying orders...”

Bodie had the grace to smother his smug grin with a cough. Doyle straightened a fraction, and moved into the room to stand beside Bodie. The Cow **was** tetchy, and that meant he was about to tell them to do something dangerous. Something potentially fatal.

“The South Africans have brought the meeting forward. They’re getting nervous, and they don’t trust their middleman. Our man in the field tells us that the deal will be done tomorrow, at the warehouse in Deptford. You two need to get down there tonight, and consolidate your positions. I don’t want any cock-ups. I’ll come down and check it personally in a couple of hours. The Prime Minister is on my back with this one, and God knows she’s a stickler for a job well done.”

Cowley pushed his chair back and stood awkwardly, favouring his bad leg.

“And you’re not?” muttered Doyle, and smiled when he got the reaction he’d been pushing for.

“Aye laddie, I believe that a job’s not worth doing if it’s not done bloody perfectly. So you two, be on your way, and make sure I don’t have anything to complain about later.”

Bodie had given him a little poke in the ribs as they scrambled out of the dingy offices and onto the street.

“D’ya want some lessons in parade drill mate? I think with a little discipline you’d make a decent officer. Have to do something about the bloody hair though.”

Bodie’s eyebrows had waggled alarmingly, and Doyle, itching to wipe the smirk off his face, had chased him to the car, breathless and laughing as they fought for the driver’s seat.

∞ **CI5** ∞

As Doyle remembers Cowley’s parting words, he glances at his watch. It’s been at least two hours since they left HQ. Their boss should turn up in true cavalry style any minute now, probably with Murphy in tow.

The hard, cold roughness of the wall at his back brings him back to the present, and he edges back into the light. A sudden commotion from his left makes him lunge forward, ready to run for Bodie if it looks like the game is up.

A guttural shout brings him to attention, and he turns to face the noise, gun snapping up in a double handed grip. The barrel rests on his cheek, the cold metal a soothing distraction. There, in the swirling smoke, he can see two large men, carrying what looks like a sack of something between them. As the smoke eddies around the figures, Doyle realises that the sack is, in fact, an unconscious and possibly dead George Cowley.

The cavalry option is looking less likely by the minute.

Doyle turns the situation over in his head, ignoring the whisper of panic that hisses behind his eyes.

Bodie is lying half-dead, bleeding and going into shock at this very moment.

Cowley is unconscious, in the hands of ruthless, drug smuggling South Africans, who should’ve bloody turned up tomorrow, not tonight.

Doyle swears, inventively.

The two men holding Cowley step forward, and Doyle gets a good look at the controller. He is alive, and barely conscious. His gammy leg is dragging alarmingly, and his head is down. The old bugger must have come alone, and been very careless. Doyle allows himself a tight little smile at the thought of how very pissed off George Cowley must be feeling.

Doyle drags in a lungful of air, and doubling up as the thickening smoke burns its way into his lungs, he coughs his way through a string of profanity. The warehouse is going up like a roman candle, and pretty soon they’ll all be bloody barbecued. He feels the hysteria rise in his throat, and clamps it back down with ruthless control. He has a big problem here, and his brain is in danger of going into complete denial at the choice he is going to have to make.

One clip, two people to save, three terrorists.

Not good. Not good at all.

∞ **CI5** ∞

The journey east to the wilds of Deptford had been uneventful. Bodie had eventually let Doyle drive, and then complained all the way about how Doyle drove like an old man.

“Come on mate—put your foot down. I’m ageing before your very eyes here. We’ll need to stop off and collect our bleeding pension before we get south of the river.”

Doyle had just slowed to 30 miles an hour, smiling beatifically at the impatience on display next to him.

“That’ll teach him to be so damn sexy, ’ Doyle thought, as they cruised along Commercial Road.

They stopped for some food, and parked in a lay-by, eating the hot, greasy chips with relish.

“Well?” Bodie mused. “D’ya think these cowboys know something’s up? Are we in for any nasty little surprises tomorrow night?”

Doyle looked over to where his partner leaned against the inside of the car, nose wrinkled in a frown, his long, powerful body folded into the Capri’s cramped passenger seat.

“Maybe. Maybe not. We’ll find out when we get there, won’t we, you impatient sod.”

Doyle’s chirpy reply hid his sudden unease. He shook off a shiver, and twisted the key in the ignition, easing into the early rush hour traffic.

“What’s the matter Ray? Someone walk over your grave?”

Bodie’s voice was suddenly dangerously soft, and Doyle glanced sideways. Bodie had moved back to the centre of the car, leaning into the driver’s space. Doyle could smell him, Paco Rabanne aftershave, sweat and a faint hint of chip fat and vinegar. He could feel the heat of Bodie’s knee where it touched his, and gripped his fingers on the leather of the steering wheel to stop himself from reaching down and—

“Bodie.”

“Ray.”

Doyle forced his attention back to the road. The tension in the car was stretched to breaking point, and Doyle was very, very afraid that he was about to do something terribly impetuous. Like pull over and reach out and grab hold of Bodie and...

Bodie exhaled beside him, and moved back against the door. The moment passed, and Doyle could breathe again. His hands were slippery on the steering wheel, and he choked back a sigh of frustration. Bodie just finished his chips, a tiny smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

Doyle asks himself the impossible question, as he looks back and forth between Cowley and Bodie. He goes through his options:

The RTs are gone—blown up with the Capri.

The cavalry is already here, dangling between two Afrikaner dope smugglers.

It’s doubtful that anyone will check on the Cow’s whereabouts for at least half an hour, and that is half an hour too long.

Bodie is totally helpless, with broken legs and quite possibly a spinal injury. Doyle suppresses the jolt of icy panic that greets that new thought.

The warehouse is burning down spectacularly, and there is his one tiny glimmer of hope. Even though they are out in the wilderness of the old derelict docks, miles from any residential areas, someone will surely see the fire, and call the Fire Brigade. And they could come and sift through the ashes. Maybe find a bone or two...

A strangled moan from the warehouse floor drifts over, through the smoke and muted crackling of burning timber. Doyle thinks he can hear his name in the sound. His name and a sharp accent of fear.

Gripping his gun viciously, Doyle begins to swear softly under his breath. He chants the words like a mantra, shutting down his emotions one by one. He holds onto fear, knowing the adrenaline will give him some kind of edge, and makes himself a terrible promise.

The third terrorist, the one who has been guarding Bodie, stumbles into view, and barks something at the two holding Cowley. The temperature is rising steadily, and Doyle reckons they have only a few minutes before the roof begins to crash down on them all. The wall at his back is becoming uncomfortably warm, and he pushes away from it with his shoulders, curling into a half crouch, gun steady in his hands.

The three men glance in his direction, and

then one pulls a pistol, waves it about for Doyle to see, fires off a shot to show it is loaded, and then holds it to Cowley's lolling head. Doyle knows that if he shoots either of the other men, Cowley will be dead too.

Another cry from Bodie floats into the scorching air, and Doyle feels his world collapse into one terrible moment.

He has to choose.

He could follow the terrorists out, hoping for a moment in the confusion of the fire to at least attempt to rescue Cowley.

He could go back and rescue what is left of Bodie, and even if they didn't make it, he could at least hold him, and tell him what he needs to tell him.

It isn't a choice really.

Doyle is too well-trained. Even as he mentally dashes across the warehouse floor, to Bodie's broken body, and bends down to brush his fingers across his partner's face, he is moving physically along the wall towards the drug smugglers.

Cowley is more important. Bodie is expendable. He forces his mind to follow his body, and holds onto his gun with a rock steady grip.

∞ **CI5** ∞

They had arrived at the warehouse just as the sun was sliding down into the murky west. The winter air was damp and shadows were long and tortuous on the cracked concrete. Doyle slid from the Capri that he had carelessly parked inside the vast empty building with a flourish of the wheel and an over-dramatic grab of the handbrake. Boy Racer, Bodie had called him, with a ruffle of his hair and a friendly shove.

Doyle had been glad to put some space between them; he was more than a little alarmed at his reactions over the last few hours. It was as though he had suddenly become abnormally sensitised to his partner. He could feel his nose itching, his senses picking up far too many details of the man.

Jesus. He didn't want to think about how Bodie smelt, for God's sake! Or how his breath caught and held if he was doing something tricky, like overtaking on the inside in rush hour traffic. Or how his eyes would darken and lose focus when he cleaned his gun, rhythmically stroking the barrel with an oily cloth, working mainly by touch. Probably a method learned in the dark corners of the SAS. Or in darker times before.

Doyle shook himself like a dog. Bloody Bodie. Bloody bloody Bodie.

A sudden whistle of gunfire in through the gaping double doors had thrown them both to the ground, cursing and spitting gravel as they crawled commando style to the nearest wall.

*"They're fucking **here**." Bodie hissed, wriggling to a sitting position against the inside of the warehouse, fumbling for his gun, eyes glinting with violence and that little edge of madness that made Doyle glad he was his partner, not his prey.*

"How? Why? Do they know who we are? Is it a fucking trap? What the bloody hell is going on?"

Doyle could only babble questions. His gun was cold and wonderfully heavy in his hands, and he glanced over at Bodie.

"Ray—who the fuck knows. They're here, they've seen us, and we're in trouble mate. That was automatic weapon fire, and I reckon there must be at least three of them. They're outside, near the doors. Shit."

Bullets arced into the cavernous space of the warehouse and riddled the Capri. There was a moment of immense silence, and Doyle looked questioningly at Bodie, his gun cocked and ready. Bodie had smiled at him, and curled his mouth into an ironic pout.

Then the car had exploded, and everything had gone crazy.

∞ **CI5** ∞

Doyle chokes on the smoke that eddies around him, squinting into the thick, grey

cloud ahead. He can see the two men dragging Cowley along the wall to his left, their guns shoved carelessly in the back of their trouser waistbands. Cowley must be an awkward bundle, and they will probably want him alive to use as currency, to buy a way out of the country. The third man is ahead of them, calling them on, beckoning towards the small side door fifty yards along the wall, appearing and disappearing like a spectre in the heaving greyness of the air.

Doyle waits until they reach the middle of the longest wall, and then drops to his belly. The smoke is less dense down there, and he makes good progress, using the rough bricks at his side to navigate along the side of the space. He stops when he can see two pairs of boots and Cowley's scuffed brogues ten yards ahead of him.

His brain has divided neatly into two. The bulk of his intellect is focussed on rescuing Cowley, but a small part of him is huddled next to Bodie, stroking the hair from his face, tangling his fingers in a fierce, unbreakable grip.

He hears himself murmuring "Shhhh, shhhh, it's okay, it'll be okay, I promise..." and isn't sure if he is reassuring himself, or fantasising about Bodie. He is holding onto both versions, the schizophrenia the only way he can function.

He bites his lip to stop any further sounds, and inches towards the boots. The men have stopped to hoist Cowley into a more upright position, and Doyle gauges the distance.

As he calculates his run, a terrible metallic groan shivers through the air, followed by a crash and the sound of walls crumbling. Doyle uses the confusion to attack, and rushes the small huddle of men, grabbing for the guns and letting some of his rage and grief and fury escape in a single yell.

He hears one gun go off, and then his hands are around a throat, and he steadies himself by squeezing as hard as he can, whilst kicking at the legs in front of him. The man

falls, and Doyle notes the appalling sound of a neck breaking with some kind of pleasure.

The air is incredibly hot, like a physical thing pressing into his lungs, and he scrabbles around in the smoke and dust until he feels rough wool beneath his fingers. Cowley's coat. Cowley's elegant camel coat. Doyle hooks his fingers into the fabric and hauls, sucking in lungfuls of burning gas and air, choking and yelling and swearing as the old man struggles in his grip.

"Keep still you old bastard. Don't make me hurt you. Keep fucking still..."

He can see the doorway ahead of him, and closes his mind to the pain and the stench and the horror. He stumbles over the body of one of the terrorists, overcome by the smoke. Two accounted for. The last one will be waiting by the door.

∞ **CI5** ∞

It had been barely half an hour ago that they had both been sitting inside the smouldering warehouse, one each side of the door, knees bent, guns ready. Doyle had thought they were like bookends. Two of a pair. Opposites and equals. Halves of a whole. He had snorted at his own foolishness, and had looked up to catch Bodie's lazy stare.

It had been like being run through with a sword. He sucked in air, breath catching with what he saw in Bodie's eyes. Bodie didn't falter. He just looked back. Letting Doyle see. Showing him the truth of it, the truth of them.

It was like falling into a dark mirror. It didn't last long. They were working, and Bodie was ever the consummate soldier. A few seconds of exposure, but Doyle knew that everything had changed. Would change.

"Ready Raymond?" Bodie breathed the words like a lover, like he was asking Ray if he could fuck him, be fucked by him. "Ready?"

Doyle let the heat touch his own face for a moment, and was rewarded with a flare of nostrils.

"Yeah. Let's see what we've got here. I'll

go out, and see if I can get them to come inside. You cover me from up there.”

Doyle waved his gun towards the spindly twist of metal leading up to the disintegrating roof, a web of broken glass, wooden beams and rusting girders. Bodie nodded once, and trotted off, climbing quickly and powerfully up into the ruined ceiling. Doyle edged into the doorframe, scanning the space outside, in front of the building. It was worryingly quiet.

The Capri was still blazing behind him, and the explosion had thrown burning debris over a wide area. The fire eerily lit the rapidly darkening interior, and shadows skittered across the decrepit brick. As he watched Bodie climb, he noted with a faint stirring of alarm that flames were curling up the warehouse walls, that there was a lot of smoke billowing across the front of the roof.

He heard Bodie cursing softly above him, and the click of a safety catch being released. A tiny stone caught him on the back of the head, and he looked up again, nodding once at Bodie’s upturned thumb. The terrorists would be easy targets.

He moved forward slowly, and poked the blunt muzzle of his gun out into the thickening air. He fired once, jumping back as a hail of automatic gunfire sprayed across the doorway. He gave a convincingly agonised yell, followed by a series of loud theatrical moans, and then fell silent, waiting for the jackals to come looking for their kill.

Suddenly there was a startled and all-too-real shout from above him and twenty yards into the hangar-like space, and Bodie fell like a stone from the treacherous roof. It was a sickening fall of some thirty feet, and Doyle would never forget the sound his partner made as he hit the concrete floor. Wood and metal crashed around him, and smoke rushed in through the gaps. Bodie spasmed once, a high, terrifying cry smashed from his lungs, and then he was sickeningly still. Like a corpse. Like a body.

Doyle remembered the word No.

He didn’t know if he whispered it, yelled it, or merely thought it. But the force of the denial kept him standing long enough to see the terrorist slink up to his partner out of the half-darkness and hold a gun over him.

∞ **CI5** ∞

Doyle has Cowley by the arms, and drags him without mercy towards the dim shape of the doorway. There is a slight movement in his peripheral vision and he shoots into the smoke without a second thought. This sacrifice has to count for something.

His second shot finds a target, and Doyle hears the wet sounds of a bullet ripping through flesh with a grim satisfaction.

He bursts from the burning building with the dead weight of his boss slumped over his shoulder, staggering clear of the blaze, half throwing, half lowering the semi-conscious man to the ground. Dropping to his knees Doyle rolls Cowley onto his side, muttering and swearing as the old man splutters and wheezes into a kind of waking state.

Behind them both the warehouse is a raging inferno. Doyle can feel the terrible heat on his back. He can hear Bodie inside his head. He can hear the struggle for breath, hear him whimper with the pain of his injuries. Doyle knows Bodie will be looking for him, hands reaching blindly for him as the life is burnt out of him.

He has always known it will be like this, and the events of the day suddenly collapse into this instant. They have admitted everything to each other with a look and a smile, and now there is just time to finish it.

The heat is intolerable, but he walks through it, hand over his face, aware of the smell of his hair burning. It seemed so far on the way out, but Doyle makes it to Bodie’s side almost without moving. Things are slipping away. He can hear the phantom wail of a fire engine, and the distant clamour of people, and the faint Scottish bark of a frail old man. He can hear the rush of the flames, and the hiss

of the fumes and the coil of the smoke. He can see nothing, and he can only feel the terrible heat.

Then, suddenly, in the chaos and the madness he is in a quiet space. Kneeling beside Bodie he leans over and strokes the hair from his face, tangling his fingers in a fierce, unbreakable grip, kissing his mouth, breathing for him. He hears himself murmuring “Shhhh, shhhh, it’s okay, it’ll be okay, I promise...” and

he hears Bodie sigh, and feels him smile against his own mouth, feels the wetness of tears, the heat of the fire, the heat of the skin under his fingers and the darkness is coming and it will take them both and that is how it should be and it is okay, he has done what he can and Bodie pulls him into the dark and the heat is gone and he knows that he has made the right choice. ∞

*“I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.”*

From *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*
By W.B. Yeats

