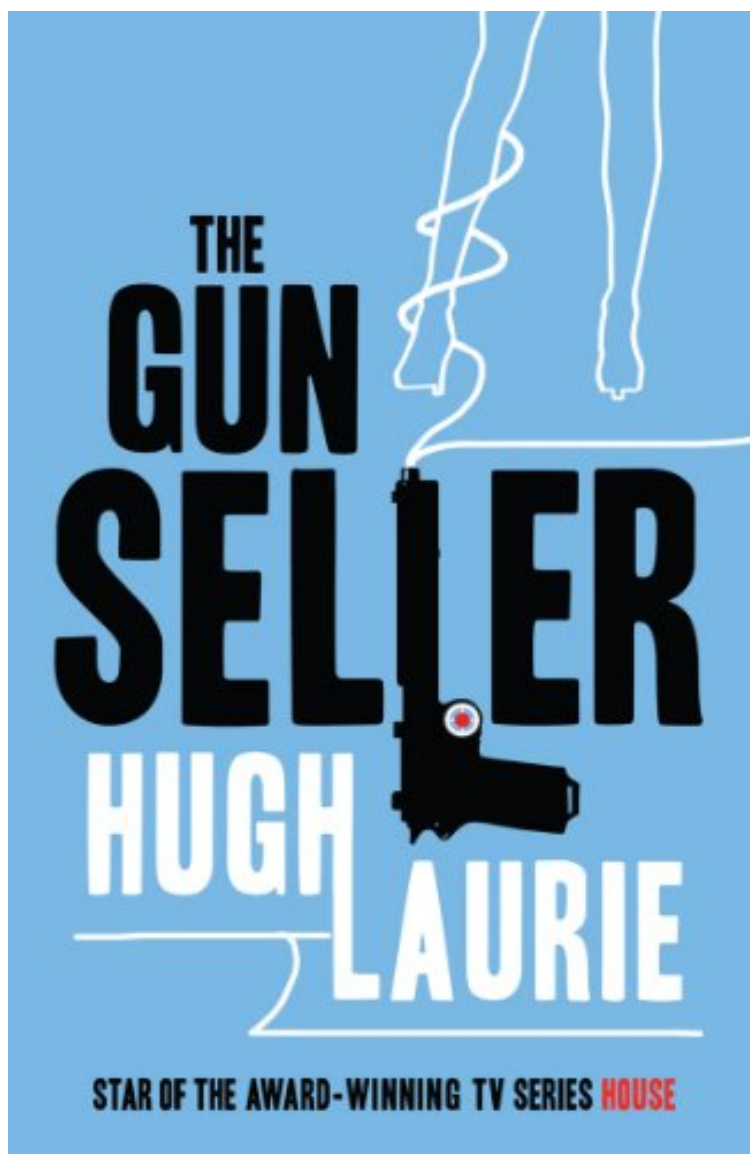


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# The Gun Seller



*Par Hugh Laurie*  
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[Library ebook] The Gun Seller

**Par Hugh Laurie : The Gun Seller** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Gun Seller:

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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWhen Thomas Lang, a hired gunman with a soft heart, is contracted to assassinate an American industrialist, he opts instead to warn the intended victim - a good deed that doesn't go unpunished. Within hours Lang is butting heads with a Buddha statue, matching wits with evil billionaires, and putting his life (among other things) in the hands of a bevy of femmes fatales, whilst trying to save a beautiful lady ... and prevent an international bloodbath to boot.A wonderfully funny novel from one of Britain's most famous comedians and star of award-winning US TV medical drama series, House..comBritish actor and comedian Hugh Laurie's first book is a spot-on spy spoof about hapless ex-soldier Thomas Lang, who is drawn unwittingly and unwillingly into the center of a dangerous James Bond-like plot of international

terrorists, arms dealing, high-tech weapons, and CIA spooks. You may recall having seen Laurie in the English television series *Jeeves and Wooster*; Laurie played Bertie Wooster, the clutzy hero of the P.G.

Wodehouse comic novels that originated those characters. The lineage from Wodehouse's Wooster to Laurie's Lang is clear, and, if you like Wodehouse, you'll probably love *The Gun Seller*. Chapter 11 saw a man this morning Who did not wish to die; P. S. Stewart Imagine that you have to break someone's arm. Right or left, doesn't matter. The point is that you have to break it, because if you don't...well, that doesn't matter either. Let's just say bad things will happen if you don't. Now, my question goes like this: do you break the arm quickly -- snap, whoops, sorry, here let me help you with that improvised splint -- or do you drag the whole business out for a good eight minutes, every now and then increasing the pressure in the tiniest of increments, until the pain becomes pink and green and hot and cold and altogether howlingly unbearable? Well exactly. Of course. The right thing to do, the only thing to do, is to get it over with as quickly as possible. Break the arm, ply the brandy, be a good citizen. There can be no other answer. Unless. Unless unless unless. What if you were to hate the person on the other end of the arm? I mean really, really hate them. This was a thing I now had to consider. I say now, meaning then, meaning the moment I am describing; the moment fractionally, oh so bloody fractionally, before my wrist reached the back of my neck and my left humerus broke into at least two, very possibly more, floppily joined-together pieces. The arm we've been discussing, you see, is mine. It's not an abstract, philosopher's arm. The bone, the skin, the hairs, the small white scar on the point of the elbow, won from the corner of a storage heater at Gateshill Primary School -- they all belong to me. And now is the moment when I must consider the possibility that the man standing behind me, gripping my wrist and driving it up my spine with an almost sexual degree of care, hates me. I mean, really, really hates me. He is taking for ever. His name was Rayner. First name unknown. By me, at any rate, and therefore, presumably, by you too. I suppose someone, somewhere, must have known his first name -- must have baptised him with it, called him down to breakfast with it, taught him how to spell it -- and someone else must have shouted it across a bar with an offer of a drink, or murmured it during sex, or written it in a box on a life insurance application form. I know they must have done all these things. Just hard to picture, that's all. Rayner, I estimated, was ten years older than me. Which was fine. Nothing wrong with that. I have good, warm, non-arm-breaking relationships with plenty of people who are ten years older than me. People who are ten years older than me are, by and large, admirable. But Rayner was also three inches taller than me, four stones heavier, and at least eight however-you-measure-violence units more violent. He was uglier than a car park, with a big, hairless skull that dipped and bulged like a balloon full of spanners, and his flattened, fighter's nose, apparently drawn on his face by someone using their left hand, or perhaps even their left foot, spread out in a meandering, lopsided delta under the rough slab of his forehead. And God Almighty, what a forehead. Bricks, knives, bottles and reasoned arguments had, in their time, bounced harmlessly off this massive frontal plane, leaving only the feeblest indentations between its deep, widely-spaced pores. They were, I think, the deepest and most widely-spaced pores I have ever seen in human skin, so that I found myself thinking back to the council putting-green in Dalbeattie, at the end of the long, dry summer of '76. Moving now to the side elevation, we find that Rayner's ears had, long ago, been bitten off and spat back on to the side of his head, because the left one was definitely upside down, or inside out, or something that made you stare at it for a long time before thinking 'oh, it's an ear'. And on top of all this, in case you hadn't got the message, Rayner wore a black leather jacket over a black polo-neck. But of course you would have got the message. Rayner could have swathed himself in shimmering silk and put an orchid behind each ear, and nervous passers-by would still have paid him money first and wondered afterwards whether they had owed him any. As it happened, I didn't owe him money. Rayner belonged to that select group of people to whom I didn't owe anything at all, and if things had been going a little better between us, I might have suggested that he and his fellows have a special tie struck, to signify membership. A motif of crossed paths, perhaps. But, as I said, things weren't going well between us. A one-armed combat instructor called Cliff (yes, I know -- he taught unarmed combat, and he only had one arm -- very occasionally life is like that) once told me that pain was a thing you did to yourself. Other people did things to you -- they hit you, or stabbed you, or tried to break your arm -- but pain was of your own making. Therefore, said Cliff, who had spent a fortnight in Japan and so felt entitled to unload dogshit of this sort on his eager charges, it was always within your power to stop your own pain. Cliff was killed in a pub brawl three months later by a fifty-five-year-old widow, so I don't suppose I'll ever have a chance to set him straight. Pain is an event. It happens to you, and you deal with it in whatever way you can. The only thing in my favour was that, so far, I hadn't made any noise. Nothing to do with bravery, you

understand, I simply hadn't got round to it. Up until this moment, Rayner and I had been ping-ponging off the walls and furniture in a sweatily male silence, with only the occasional grunt to show that we were both still concentrating. But now, with not much more than five seconds to go before I passed out or the bone finally gave way -- now was the ideal moment to introduce a new element. And sound was all I could think of. So I inhaled deeply through my nose, straightened up to get as close as I could to his face, held the breath for a moment, and then let out what Japanese martial artists refer to as a *kiai* -- you'd probably call it a very loud noise, and that wouldn't be so far off -- a scream of such blinding, shocking, what-the-fuck-was-that intensity, that I frightened myself quite badly. On Rayner, the effect was pretty much as advertised, because he shifted involuntarily to one side, easing the grip on my arm for about a twelfth of a second. I threw my head back into his face as hard as I could, feeling the gristle in his nose adjust itself around the shape of my skull and a silky wetness spreading across my scalp, then brought my heel up towards his groin, scraping the inside of his thigh before connecting with an impressive bundle of genitalia. By the time the twelfth of a second had elapsed, Rayner was no longer breaking my arm, and I was aware, suddenly, of being drenched in sweat. I backed away from him, dancing on my toes like a very old St. Bernard, and looked around for a weapon. The venue for this pro-am contest of one fifteen-minute round was a small, inelegantly furnished sitting-room in Belgravia. The interior designer had done a perfectly horrible job, as all interior designers do, every single time, without fail, no exceptions -- but at that moment his or her liking for heavy, portable objets happened to coincide with mine. I selected an eighteen-inch Buddha from the mantelpiece with my good arm, and found that the little fellow's ears afforded a satisfyingly snug grip for the one-handed player. Rayner was kneeling now, vomiting on a Chinese carpet and improving its colour no end. I chose my spot, braced myself, and swung at him back-handed, plugging the corner of the Buddha's plinth into the soft space behind his left ear. There was a dull, flat noise, of the kind that only human tissue under attack can make, and he rolled over on to his side. I didn't bother to see whether he was still alive. Callous, perhaps, but there you go. I wiped some of the sweat from my face and walked through into the hall. I tried to listen, but if there was any sound from the house or from the street outside I would never have heard it, because my heart was going like a road drill. Or perhaps there really was a road drill outside. I was too busy sucking in great suitcase-sized chunks of air to notice. I opened the front door and immediately felt cool drizzle on my face. It mingled with the sweat, diluting it, diluting the pain in my arm, diluting everything, and I closed my eyes and let it fall. It was one of the nicest things I've ever experienced. You may say that it's a pretty poor life I've been leading. But then, you see, context is everything. I left the door on the latch, stepped down on to the pavement and lit a cigarette. Gradually, grumpily, my heart sorted itself out, and my breathing followed at a distance. The pain in my arm was terrible, and I knew it would be with me for days, if not weeks, but at least it wasn't my smoking arm. I went back into the house and saw that Rayner was where I'd left him, lying in a pool of vomit. He was dead, or he was grievously-bodily-harmed, either of which meant at least five years. Ten, with time added on for bad behaviour. And this, from my point of view, was bad. I've been in prison, you see. Only three weeks, and only on remand, but when you've had to play chess twice a day with a monosyllabic West Ham supporter, who has 'HATE' tattooed on one hand, and 'HATE' on the other -- using a set missing six pawns, all the rooks and two of the bishops -- you find yourself cherishing the little things in life. Like not being in prison. I was contemplating these and related matters, and starting to think of all the hot countries I'd never got around to visiting, when I realised that that noise -- that soft, creaking, shuffling, scraping noise -- was definitely not coming from my heart. Nor from my lungs, nor from any other part of my yelping body. That noise was definitely external. Someone, or something, was making an utterly hopeless job of coming down the stairs quietly. I left the Buddha where it was, picked up a hideous alabaster table lighter and moved towards the door, which was also hideous. How can one make a hideous door? you may ask. Well, it takes some doing, certainly, but believe me, the top interior designers can knock off this kind of thing before breakfast. I tried to hold my breath and couldn't, so I waited noisily. A light switch flicked on somewhere, waited, then flicked off. A door opened, pause, nothing there either, closed. Stand still. Think. Try the sitting-room. There was a rustle of clothing, a soft footfall, and then suddenly I found I was relaxing my grip on the alabaster lighter, and leaning back against the wall in something close to relief. Because even in my frightened, wounded state, I was ready to stake my life on the fact that Nina Ricci's Fleur de Fleurs is just not a fighting scent. She stopped in the doorway and looked around the room. The lights were out, but the curtains were wide open and there was plenty of light coming in from the street. I waited until her gaze fell on Rayner's body before I put my hand over her mouth. We went through all the usual exchanges dictated by Hollywood and polite society. She tried to scream and bite the palm of my hand, and I told her to be quiet

because I wasn't going to hurt her unless she shouted. She shouted and I hurt her. Pretty standard stuff, really. By and by she was sitting on the hideous sofa with half a pint of what I thought was brandy but turned out to be Calvados, and I was standing by the door wearing my smartest and best 'I am psychiatrically A1' expression. I'd rolled Rayner on to his side, into a kind of recovery position, to stop him from choking on his own vomit. Or anyone else's, if it came to that. She'd wanted to get up and fiddle with him, to see if he was all right -- pillows, damp cloths, bandages, all the things that help to make the bystander feel better -- but I told her to stay where she was because I'd already called an ambulance, and all in all it would be better to leave him alone. She had started to tremble slightly. It started in the hands, as they clutched the glass, then moved to her elbows and up to her shoulders, and it got worse every time she looked at Rayner. Of course, trembling is probably not an uncommon reaction to discovering a mixture of dead person and vomit on your carpet in the middle of the night, but I didn't want her getting any worse. As I lit a cigarette with the alabaster lighter -- and yes, even the flame was hideous -- I tried to take in as much information as I could before the Calvados booted her up and she started asking questions. I could see her face three times in that room: once in a silver-framed photograph on the mantelpiece, with her in Ray Bans, dangling from a ski-lift; once in a huge and terrible oil portrait, done by someone who can't have liked her all that much, hanging by the window; and finally, and definitely the best of all, in a sofa ten feet away. She couldn't have been more than nineteen, with square shoulders and long brown hair that waved and cheered as it disappeared behind her neck. The high, round cheek-bones implied Orientalness, but that disappeared as soon as you reached her eyes, which were also round, and large, and bright grey. If that makes any sense. She was wearing a red silk dressing-gown, and one elegant slipper with fancy gold thread across the toes. I glanced around the room, but its mate was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she could only afford one. She cleared some husk from her throat. 'Who is he?' she said. I think I'd known she was going to be American before she opened her mouth. Too healthy to be anything else. And where do they get those teeth?' His name was Rayner,' I said, and then realised that this sounded a little thin as an answer, so I thought I'd add something. 'He was a very dangerous man.' 'Dangerous?' She looked worried by that, and quite right too. It was probably crossing her mind, as it was crossing mine, that if Rayner was dangerous, and I'd killed him, then that, hierarchically-speaking, made me very dangerous. 'Dangerous,' I said again, and watched her closely as she looked away. She seemed to be trembling less, which was good. Or maybe her trembling had just fallen into sync with mine, so I noticed it less. 'Well...what is he doing here?' she said at last. 'What did he want?' 'It's difficult to say.' 'Difficult for me, at any rate. 'Maybe he was after money, maybe the silver...' 'You mean ... he didn't tell you?' Her voice was suddenly loud. 'You hit this guy, without knowing who he was? What he was doing here?' Despite the shock, her brain seemed to be coming along pretty nicely. 'I hit him because he was trying to kill me,' I said. 'I'm like that. I tried a roguish smile, then caught sight of it in the mirror over the mantelpiece and realised it hadn't worked. 'You're like that,' she repeated, unlovingly. 'And who are you?' 'Well now. I was going to have to wear some very soft shoes at this juncture. This was where things could suddenly get a lot worse than they already were. I tried looking surprised, and perhaps just a little bit hurt. 'You mean you don't recognise me?' 'No.' 'Huh. Odd. Fincham. James Fincham.' I held out my hand. She didn't take it, so I converted the movement into a nonchalant brush of the hair. 'That's a name,' she said. 'That's not who you are.' 'I'm a friend of your father's.' She considered this for a moment. 'Business friend?' 'Sort of.' 'Sort of.' She nodded. 'You're James Fincham, you're a sort of business friend of my father's, and you've just killed a man in our house.' I put my head on one side, and tried to show that yes, sometimes it's an absolute bugger of a world. She showed her teeth again. 'And that's it, is it? That's your CV?' I reprised the roguish smile, to no better effect. 'Wait a second,' she said. She looked at Rayner, then suddenly sat up a little straighter, as if a thought had just struck her. 'You didn't call anybody, did you?' Come to think of it, all things considered, she must have been nearer twenty-four. 'You mean...' I was floundering now. 'I mean, she said, 'there's no ambulance coming here. Jesus.' She put the glass down on the carpet by her feet, got up and walked towards the phone. 'Look,' I said, 'before you do anything silly...' I started to move towards her, but the way she spun round made me realise that staying still was probably the better plan. I didn't want to be pulling bits of telephone receiver out of my face for the next few weeks. 'You stay right there, Mr James Fincham,' she hissed at me. 'There's nothing silly about this. I'm calling an ambulance, and I'm calling the police. This is an internationally approved procedure. Men come round with big sticks and take you away. Nothing silly about it at all.' 'Look,' I said, 'I haven't been entirely straight with you.' She turned towards me and narrowed her eyes. If you know what I mean by that. Narrowed them horizontally, not vertically. I suppose one should say she shortened her eyes, but nobody ever does. She narrowed her eyes. 'What the hell do you mean "not

entirely straight"? You only told me two things. You mean one of them was a lie?' She had me on the ropes, there's no question about that. I was in trouble. But then again, she'd only dialled the first nine. 'My name is Fincham,' I said, 'and I do know your father.' 'Yeah, what brand of cigarette does he smoke?' 'Dunhill.' 'Never smoked a cigarette in his life.' She was late-twenties, possibly. Thirty at a pinch. I took a deep breath while she dialled the second nine. 'All right, I don't know him. But I am trying to help.' 'Right. You've come to fix the shower.' 'Third nine. Play the big card.' 'Someone is trying to kill him,' I said. There was a faint click and I could hear somebody, somewhere, asking which service we wanted. Very slowly she turned towards me, holding the receiver away from her face. 'What did you say?' 'Someone is trying to kill your father,' I repeated. 'I don't know who, and I don't know why. But I'm trying to stop them. That's who I am, and that's what I'm doing here.' She looked at me long and hard. A clock ticked somewhere, hideously. 'This man,' I pointed at Rayner, 'had something to do with it.' I could see that she thought this unfair, as Rayner was hardly in a position to contradict me; so I softened my tone a little, looking around anxiously as if I was every bit as mystified and fretted-up as she was. 'I can't say he came here to kill,' I said, 'because we didn't get a chance to talk much. But it's not impossible.' She carried on staring at me. The operator was squeaking hellos down the line and probably trying to trace the call. She waited. For what, I'm not sure. 'Ambulance' she said at last, still looking at me, and then turned away slightly and gave the address. She nodded, and then slowly, very slowly, put the receiver back on its cradle and turned to me. There was one of those pauses that you know is going to be long as soon as it starts, so I shook out another cigarette and offered her the packet. She came towards me and stopped. She was shorter than she'd looked on the other side of the room. I smiled again, and she took a cigarette from the packet, but didn't light it. She just played with it slowly, and then pointed a pair of grey eyes at me. I say a pair. I mean her pair. She didn't get a pair of someone else's out from a drawer and point them at me. She pointed her own pair of huge, pale, grey, pale, huge eyes at me. The sort of eyes that can make a grown man talk gibberish to himself. Get a grip, for Christ's sake. 'You're a liar,' she said. Not angry. Not scared. Just matter-of-fact. You're a liar. 'Well, yes,' I said, 'generally speaking, I am. But at this particular moment, I happen to be telling the truth.' She kept on staring at my face, the way I sometimes do when I've finished shaving, but she didn't seem to get any more answers than I ever have. Then she blinked once, and the blink seemed to change things somehow. Something had been released, or switched off, or at least turned down a bit. I started to relax. 'Why would anyone want to kill my father?' Her voice was softer now. 'I honestly don't know,' I said. 'I've only just found out he doesn't smoke.' She pressed straight on, as if she hadn't heard me. 'And tell me Mr Fincham,' she said, 'how you came by all this?' This was the tricky bit. The really tricky bit. Trickiness cubed. 'Because I was offered the job,' I said. She stopped breathing. I mean, she actually stopped breathing. And didn't look as if she had any plans to start again in the near future. I carried on, as calmly as I could. 'Someone offered me a lot of money to kill your father,' I said, and she frowned in disbelief. 'I turned it down.' I shouldn't have added that. I really shouldn't. Newton's Third Law of Conversation, if it existed, would hold that every statement implies an equal and opposite statement. To say that I'd turned the offer down raised the possibility that I might not have done. Which was not a thing I wanted floating round the room at this moment. But she started breathing again, so maybe she hadn't noticed. 'Why?' 'Why what?' Her left eye had a tiny streak of green that went off from the pupil in a north-easterly direction. I stood there, looking into her eyes and trying not to, because I was in terrible trouble at this moment. In lots of ways. 'Why'd you turn it down?' 'Because...' I began, then stopped, because I had to get this absolutely right. 'Yes?' 'Because I don't kill people.' There was a pause while she took this in and swilled it round her mouth a few times. Then she glanced over at Rayner's body. 'I told you,' I said. 'He started it.' She stared into me for another three hundred years and then, still turning the cigarette slowly between her fingers, moved away towards the sofa, apparently deep in thought. 'Honestly,' I said, trying to get a hold of myself and the situation. 'I'm nice. I give to Oxfam, I recycle newspapers, everything.' She reached Rayner's body and stopped. 'So when did all this happen?' 'Well...just now,' I stammered, like an idiot. She closed her eyes for a moment. 'I mean you getting asked.' 'Right,' I said. 'Ten days ago.' 'Where?' 'Amsterdam.' 'Holland, right?' That was a relief. That made me feel a lot better. It's nice to be looked up to by the young every now and then. You don't want it all the time, just every now and then. 'Right,' I said. 'And who was it offered you the job?' 'Never seen him before or since.' She stooped for the glass, took a sip of Calvados and grimaced at the taste of it. 'And I'm supposed to believe this?' 'Well...' 'I mean, help me out here,' she said, starting to get louder again. She nodded towards Rayner. 'We have a guy here, who isn't going to back up your story, I wouldn't say, and I'm supposed to believe you because of what? Because you have a nice face?' I couldn't help myself. I should have helped myself, I know, but I just couldn't. 'Why not?' I said, and tried to look

charming. 'I'd believe anything you said.' Terrible mistake. Really terrible. One of the crassest, most ridiculous remarks I've ever made, in a long, ridiculous-remark-packed life. She turned to me, suddenly very angry. 'You can drop that shit right now.' 'All I meant...' I said, but I was glad when she cut me off, because I honestly didn't know what I'd meant. 'I said drop it. There's a guy dying in here.' I nodded, guiltily, and we both bowed our heads at Rayner, as if paying our respects. And then she seemed to snap the hymn book shut and move on. Her shoulders relaxed, and she held out the glass to me. 'I'm Sarah,' she said. 'See if you can get me a Coke.' She did ring the police eventually, and they turned up just as the ambulance crew were scooping Rayner, apparently still breathing, on to a collapsible stretcher. They hummed and harred, and picked things up off the mantelpiece and looked at the underneath, and generally had that air of wanting to be somewhere else. Policemen, as a rule, don't like to hear of new cases. Not because they're lazy, but because they want, like everyone else, to find a meaning, a connectedness, in the great mess of random unhappiness in which they work. If, in the middle of trying to catch some teenager who's been nicking hub-caps, they're called to the scene of a mass murder, they just can't stop themselves from checking under the sofa to see if there are any hub-caps there. They want to find something that connects to what they've already seen, that will make sense out of the chaos. So they can say to themselves, this happened because that happened. When they don't find it -- when all they see is another lot of stuff that has to be written about, and filed, and lost, and found in someone's bottom drawer, and lost again, and eventually chalked up against no one's name -- they get, well, disappointed. They were particularly disappointed by our story. Sarah and I had rehearsed what we thought was a reasonable scenario, and we played three performances of it to officers of ascending rank, finishing up with an appallingly young inspector who said his name was Brock. Brock sat on the sofa, occasionally glancing at his fingernails, and nodded his youthful way through the story of the intrepid James Fincham, friend of the family, staying in the spare-room on the first floor. Heard noises, crept downstairs to investigate, nasty man in leather jacket and black polo-neck, no never seen him before, fight, fall over, oh my god, hit head. Sarah Woolf, d.o.b. 29th August, 1964, heard sounds of struggle, came down, saw the whole thing. Drink, Inspector? Tea? Ribena? Yes, of course, the setting helped. If we'd tried the same story in a council flat in Deptford, we'd have been on the floor of the van in seconds, asking fit young men with short hair if they wouldn't mind getting off our heads for a moment while we got comfortable. But in leafy, stuccoed Belgravia, the police are more inclined to believe you than not. I think it's included in the rates. As we signed our statements, they asked us not to do anything silly like leave the country without informing the local station, and generally encouraged us to abide at every opportunity. Two hours after he'd tried to break my arm, all that was left of Rayner, first name unknown, was a smell. I let myself out of the house, and felt the pain creep back to centre stage as I walked. I lit a cigarette and smoked my way down to the corner, where I turned left into a cobbled mews that had once housed horses. It'd have to be an extremely rich horse who could afford to live here now, obviously, but the stabling character of the mews had hung about the place, and that's why it had felt right to tether the bike there. With a bucket of oats and some straw under the back wheel. The bike was where I'd left it, which sounds like a dull remark, but isn't these days. Among bikers, leaving your machine in a dark place for more than an hour, even with padlock and alarm, and finding it still there when you come back, is something of a talking point. Particularly when the bike is a Kawasaki ZZR 1100. Now I won't deny that the Japanese were well off-side at Pearl Harbor, and that their ideas on preparing fish for the table are undoubtedly poor -- but by golly, they do know some things about making motorcycles. Twist the throttle wide open in any gear on this machine, and it'd push your eyeballs through the back of your head. All right, so maybe that's not a sensation most people are looking for in their choice of personal transport, but since I'd won the bike in a game of backgammon, getting home with an outrageously fluke only-throw 4-1 and three consecutive double sixes, I enjoyed it a lot. It was black, and big, and it allowed even the average rider to visit other galaxies. I started the motor, revved it loud enough to wake a few fat Belgravian financiers, and set off for Notting Hill. I had to take it easy in the rain, so there was plenty of time for reflection on the night's business. The one thing that stayed in my mind, as I jinked the bike along the slick, yellow-lit streets, was Sarah telling me to drop 'that shit'. And the reason I had to drop it was because there was a dying man in the room. Newtonian Conversation, I thought to myself. The implication was that I could have kept on holding that shit, if the room hadn't had a dying man in it. That cheered me up. I started to think that if I couldn't work things so that one day she and I would be together in a room with no dying men in it at all, then my name isn't James Fincham. Which, of course, it isn't. Copyright

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