

= "Trade War"
by Adam Nightingale

Two old ladies sifted through a cardboard box filled with second hand books.

"Another copy of Jaws?" Gwendolyn asked.

"Just the one." Louisa replied.

"Ian Flemings?"

"Two Goldfingers and a Live and let Die."

"Any Tom Clancys?"

"No."

"Anything interesting?"

"Some Christian books and quite a few slimming books."

"Oh."

The two old ladies concluded their sorting duties in silence. For the five years since their respective retirements, they had been the voluntary backbone of the modest charity outlet known as Plague on Pestilence. Both were spouseless and drawn to charity work not out of any great humanitarian impulse, but out of boredom. They begun working three half days a week. In time they were trusted with the full time running of the shop, the benevolent dictators of their own small kingdom.

Like many dear friends, Louisa and Gwendolyn hadn't at first gotten along. But their initial suspicion and territorial impulses had mellowed first to tolerance, and ultimately to fierce loyalty. Besides, there was the mutual enemy, the shared source of irritation, the charity shop opposite their own charity shop, in direct competition with them. Of course there can never be enough charity or charity shops to remove even the top soil of poverty, but these false prophets seemed to be flagrantly and deliberately competing with them.

Need had only been their neighbours for a short time. The building had previously been a video shop, privately owned, not a Blockbuster or Apollo, so not subject to family friendly film programming policies. They stocked (alongside the latest releases) pornography and horror and violent thrillers. Gwendolyn and Louisa did not like the video shop nor its owner. They wrote angry letters to their MP and to the local newspaper. The video shop had closed of its own accord, but Gwendolyn and Louisa claimed it as their own small victory. They were subsequently delighted when the news broke that the vacant building would be used to house another charity shop. Need had opened a few months later.

Need was run by twin ladies of indeterminate old age. The relationship between the two non profits was initially cordial, on the cusp of being friendly. Gwendolyn and Louisa were quick to offer their best hand made charity card as a good will offering. They paid the twins visits which were received graciously. They invited the twins over for cups of tea which were always politely and diplomatically refused. Greetings were exchanged frequently, but it was clear after a while that the sisters preferred to keep their own company.

It had taken Gwendolyn and Louisa a while to come to the conclusion that the twins were in direct commercial competition with them. They did not equate their first significant slump in trade with any kind of calculated sabotage. It was inevitable that they would lose a degree of business to the newcomers at first. They didn't mind; a bit of healthy competition was healthy, and a balance would be struck once the novelty of a new shop had worn off. But when the gentle slump failed completely to metamorph into a gentle upward trend, Gwendolyn and Louisa began to feel an unease about their neighbours.

Louisa was the first to notice that Need was undercutting Plague on Pestilence by a considerable margin. It was a Tuesday afternoon, and Louisa was alone arranging a display of children's toys in the window when she saw one of her favourite regulars coming out of Need with a carrier bag full of books.

This, of course, was not a crime in itself, but it was out of character for this particular regular. Bruce was a retired widower who visited the shop two or three times a week, mostly to talk. He was lonely and was, Louisa felt, soft on her. She wasn't interested but didn't mind. Bruce liked books and in time Louisa grew familiar with his tastes. She would look out for, and put aside the novels of his favourite authors when they were donated.

Today Bruce looked guilty. He did not want to be spotted. It was obvious he was not going to come over and say hello. Louisa was not bold like Gwen, but she couldn't let this platonic infidelity go unchallenged.

"Bruce."

Bruce pretended not to hear. Louisa's voice was not strong, so he could probably get away with it. She tried again.

"Bruce!" He turned around and smiled. "Bruce. Weren't you going to say hello?"

"I was in a bit of a hurry."

"You're never in a hurry, Bruce."

"You're annoyed about the books, aren't you?"

"You normally get them from us. We put books aside for you, Bruce."

Bruce was not a strong man. "I'm sorry, Lou, I'm really sorry, it's just that they were so cheap, incredibly cheap, so much incredibly cheaper than your shop."

"How much cheaper?"

"Half price," Bruce replied.

"Go home, Bruce."

Bruce obeyed.

Louisa abandoned her display and waited for Gwendolyn. Gwendolyn's response was volcanic. She rebuked Louisa and then herself for not having noticed before now. Louisa pointed out that neither of them had been over to Needs for quite a few weeks. Gwendolyn launched herself across the tarmac and through Need's front door.

"Don't say anything rash, Gwen."

Twenty-five minutes later Gwendolyn returned.

"What did they say, Gwen?"

"It wasn't just the books, Lou, it was everything. Everything in that shop is exactly half the price of everything in this shop."

"What did they say, Gwen?"

"They apologised. They said that they had no idea."

"What did you say?"

"I told them that they were stealing our customers."

"And?"

"They said that perhaps we were losing sight of the big issues involved."

"Like what?"

"Charity. I said that to monopolise all our custom was hardly an act of charity."

"What did she, they do?"

"They said that they would adjust their prices if we would lower ours."

"What did you say?"

"I said I would consider it."

They both considered it and eventually agreed to lower their prices. Need were as good as their word and raised their own prices. Seeing this, the two friends grudgingly admitted that they had perhaps misjudged the situation and the twins' intentions, and their apology was accepted gracefully and politely. Regulars began drifting back through Plague's doors.

But now it appeared that a new skirmish was beginning.

"What have they got?"

"I sent Robin in for a look yesterday." Robin was Louisa's grand nephew.

"And?"

"Well, they seem to have quite a few current paperbacks and a few hardbacks that have only been in the shops a few weeks."

"Tell me."

"You'll upset yourself."

"Shut up. Tell me."

"The new Jackie Collins."

"In hardback?"

"In hardback. The new Stephen King."

"In hardback?"

"Hardback."

"Carry on."

"Thomas Harris, two copies hardback and the new Harry Potter."

"Stop!"

"Do you think that they buy the books themselves?"

"I am convinced of it."

"What are we going to do with this, Gwen?" Louisa was anxious to guide the conversation in a different direction. Gwendolyn appeared to be on the brink of a full-fledged speech, which was to be avoided. You couldn't reason with Gwendolyn when in full flow, but you could sometimes misdirect her if you were lucky enough.

"Do with what?"

"This, Gwen." Louisa held up a large sheathed oriental blade for inspection.

"Is that real?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Take it out of its scabbard." Louisa unsheathed the sword and touched the edge with her fore finger.

"It's still quite sharp."

"What is it, Chinese?"

"I'm not sure. Fetch me the Weapons Book."

The weapons book had been donated, along with umpteen volumes of mass slaughter, six months previously by a local amateur military historian. He had lost his appetite for war after his cousin had blasted his right leg by treading on an Argentinean land mine during a winter field trip studying penguins in the Falkland Islands.

Loath to burn his expensive martial library, the amateur military historian had donated them to his favourite local charity shop. Within a week most all of the books had been bought by local military enthusiasts. Gwendolyn and Louisa did feel slightly uneasy about profiting from the direct academic glorification of armed conflict, but they had made a tidy profit for a good cause and decided that the moral weights and measures would probably balance in their favour. They had kept the weapons book, though, since people would inexplicably donate weapons to Plague on Pestilence. More people than one would imagine.

Gwendolyn and Louisa did not, of course, approve of this. If someone were to attempt to donate a weapon during opening hours they would be politely censured by Louisa, or sternly lectured by Gwendolyn. But people rarely donate weapons in the daylight hours. They leave them sheathed in bin liners filled with second hand trousers

anonymously dumped to be discovered in the morning, and Gwendolyn and Louisa had quite a collection now, sitting in a box out back. One of these days they would hand them over to the police, but they hadn't yet gotten around to it.

The new sword, according to the weapons book, was a replica Japanese Wakazashi. It went into the box next to a Bowie knife, a flick knife and butterfly knife, an air pistol and pellets, an unabated fencing sword, a knuckle duster, an African stabbing spear, a Mexican machete, a hunting boomerang.

"We've never had a Wakazashi before, have we Lou?"

"No. It will look lovely next to the Assegai."

"What is the Assegai?"

"The African stabbing spear, silly. Zulu in origin, remember?"

"Of course."

Apart from a Chinese throwing star being added to the weapons box, nothing out of the ordinary happened for the next few weeks. And then a sign appeared in Needs window: a celebrity personal appearance in celebration of their official opening.

"Official opening? They've been open for about six weeks, is it not a little late for an official opening?"

The celebrity in question turned out to be Burt Kwouk (pronounced Kwok), nominal star of the Pink Panther films. He was a very nice man, and the opening was a great success. A lot of money changed hands for worthy causes.

Feathers were ruffled on the other side of the street, but it seemed churlish to complain. Besides, Gwendolyn knew Roger Daltrey. Roger made his personal appearance a fortnight later. He even sang an acoustic version of "Won't Get Fooled Again" (the full 8 min 32 second version). People were blocking the pavement trying to hear him. It made the newspapers.

Two days later they received a visit from the police. A fat constable had received a complaint that they were harbouring a cache of weapons. Gwen and Lou were flustered and embarrassed. They didn't deny it. They brought the weapons out for the policeman to take away. They apologised profusely and explained that it had always been their absolute intention to hand the weapons over. The policeman chided them and looked through the box. "Oh, a Wakazashi," he said, and took the box away. They were let off with a warning.

"Louisa?"

"Yes, Gwen."

"You told them about the weapons box."

"No, I did not."

"Did you tell anybody about the weapons box?"

"I don't think so...Oh dear."

"What?"

"I told Bruce once."

"He must have told them."

"He might not have done, Gwen."

"He's a jellyfish!"

Bruce didn't visit Louisa again. Things were quiet for a while. Need prospered. Gwen and Louisa couldn't relax. They pretended that all was well, that they had been taught a lesson. It was a lesson that they didn't feel they particularly needed to learn, but they had learnt it anyway.

One month later, Need announced a sale. Records this time. The latest chart hits, CDs and tapes (some of which had been released that week), everything the kids were into. There was no way in heaven, on earth or under the earth that the public had donated all of them.

Gwendolyn exploded.

"Waaaaar!"

"Calm down. You'll hurt yourself."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up, Lou! We have tried it your way. It doesn't work."

Louisa was genuinely baffled by the last part of the outburst. As far as she was aware the two of them had never sat down and had a strategy meeting during which they had mutually agreed to try things "her way". Louisa started to cry.

Gwendolyn stopped.

"I'm sorry my love. I didn't mean that."

Louisa sniffled. "That's all right. This is exactly what they want, you know. They want us to fight each other. They are probably looking at us now with some high powered telescope from their bedroom window. Or they've got our shop bugged, like in that Cliff Richard song."

Gwendolyn was about to rebuke Louisa afresh for exaggerating, but she stopped herself. The idea didn't sound so far fetched. "Let's go for a walk Lou, shall we? Shall we, Lou?"

They both shut up the shop and went for a coffee, where they could be reasonably sure they wouldn't be eavesdropped on. They admitted that the problem was more serious than they had thought. It was total, brutal, compassionless trade war. They both knew about war. They had both been blitzed out of their homes. They agreed that social niceties were a luxury. It took them longer to arrive at the next conclusion, but they eventually admitted that even legality was a luxury at this point if they wanted to win.

They would have a video sale. They couldn't afford to buy videos, so they would steal them. This was Gwendolyn's suggestion. Louisa was less surprised than she thought she would be, especially after Gwendolyn reminded her that in war it was not called stealing, it was called requisitioning. Besides, it would also be poetic justice. Need was a video shop once.

"How, Gwen? It's madness. We don't know anything about films or shoplifting."

"Shut up, Lou. Keep your voice low, people will hear you."

"Sorry, Gwen. But it sounds so outrageous a solution to our problem."

Gwendolyn had a plan. Robin, Louisa's grand nephew, knew about films. He could tell them what was popular without ever having to know the real reason. Louisa could say it was for somebody's birthday or something.

Louisa objected. "I don't like lying to him. We're close, you know."

Gwendolyn reminded her that it was war.

"That doesn't explain how we're going to steal them."

"How many times do I have to tell you to keep your voice down. Besides, you're not the only one with an admirer, you know." Gwen stated.

Gwen had a friend named Nicholas Denby. He was a mildly notorious local eccentric, an outspoken veteran and bore of the local British legion. He was also known as Nick the Plate on account of a large steel plate that made for the better part of his cranium. He had had it fitted after sustaining injuries during the battle for Arnheim bridge in the closing melees of the second world war. Nick Denby was defined by two things, his metal skull and his unrequited love for Gwendolyn Magenta Garret. More to the point, it was common local knowledge that he could set off shop alarms with his head.

"No, Gwen. You can't." Louisa protested.

"We must, Lou. Nobody will get hurt. Nobody will suspect a thing."

Nick the Plate, Gwen continued, would steal a popular video title from a different local record shop each day for a week. His skull would immediately establish his alibi the moment he passed through the electronic security screen. The alarms would go off, he would explain about his head. The shop assistants would be understanding. He would pinch the film and exit the shop, the alarms would go off but Nick would be waved through.

"Nick would never agree. You could never get him to agree to that!"

The power of amour was still potent in Nick's grizzled loins. Gwendolyn, as Louisa knew perfectly well, would be able to persuade Nick do exactly anything she wanted.

"He might get caught. He could go to prison. We could go to prison, Gwen."

"You're such an extremist, Lou."

The factor that converted Louisa from conscientious objector to fully fledged warmonger was the nightmare. The twins were having another sale. Pride of place in their shop window display were glass snow domes, the kind where you shake them and the combination of water and diced white stuff produces a snow storm effect. There were four domes on display. Each contained a miniaturised Louisa, Gwendolyn, Nick and Robin. All four of them were flailing, always on the point of drowning but destined never to die.

Louisa didn't have nightmares. She was of a permanently nervous disposition, but she didn't have nightmares. But the image of Robin drowning made the difference. Louisa phoned her friend first thing in the morning.

"Let's do it."

It did not take long to recruit Nick the Plate. Gwendolyn came on strong. Surprised at first, Nick was arrogant enough to believe that genuine disinterest had been a simple case of the hard to get all these years. His allegiance was easily and quickly and bogusly purchased.

Louisa's task was easy by comparison. She simply had to ask Robin to provide a list of trendy film titles. She still felt guilty.

Nick honed his shoplifting within the safe confines of Plague's walls. He would return his swag at the end of the day, coming in through the back entrance so as not to be spotted. They would all go for a drink at the local pub and Louisa and Gwendolyn would give him notes. They would crit his shoplifting skills, which were lamentably obvious at first but improved at a surprisingly rapid rate. On the third day's rehearsal Nick seemed to slip into a zone. He was a commando again and it was 1944 and he was slitting the throats of his enemies. After a week and three days Nick was ready.

Nick 'the Plate' Denby turned out to be a very good thief. He averaged two shops a day, a film per shop. Within a week Louisa and Gwendolyn had fourteen video titles and a bonus DVD that Nick had boosted above and beyond the prescribed limits of his mission brief.

Gwendolyn and Louisa kept the stolen goods at home. They did not want a repeat of the weapons box experience, although they were reasonably convinced of their scot-free status. Their alibi was a simple case of inadvertently receiving a stolen donation. They were old ladies. Naivete was not a crime. It worked for the twins, didn't it?

All fourteen videos plus the one DVD were sold within a few hours. A lot of money was made that day. Gwendolyn and Louisa were still lagging on points, but this was a moral victory more than anything else. It was a two finger salute across the tarmac. It was a gesture that was duly noted.

Trade improved in the coming weeks. The twins were quiet. Many regular customers returned. Louisa and Gwendolyn were pleased with themselves, but not so pleased that they were blind to the prospect of a counterattack. They even looked forward to it slightly.

The next round would be the last.

At first Gwendolyn thought it was the cats. It was the cats in actual fact, but that in itself was strange. Cats did not as a general rule destroy charity bin liners, yet this particular morning the cats had ripped and slashed and chewed their way through the charity donation pile outside the shop. Gwendolyn investigated. She found a dead mouse, or rather what was left of a dead mouse. It was a natural occurrence and not something that should send every sensory alarm bell in her ringing.

The cats left them alone for three days.

On the fourth day, they attacked the bins with the same gusto as the first time. And for the same reason, a dead mouse. This time, Gwendolyn saw the inconsistency. The mouse remains were too clean (the bits that weren't flecked with mouse gore that is). City mice, like pigeons, were dirty and greasy. The remains of both their mice, she realized, were united by a clean healthy sheen that screamed pet shop. There was little economic sense in this. It was an act of gratuitous meanness.

Louisa was surprisingly easy to convince about this particular conspiracy theory. Events had trained her mind to read the presence of wicked design in every break with routine.

"So the twins control the animal kingdom now," said Gwendolyn.

"It appears so," replied Louisa.

"Are we going to retaliate?" asked Louisa

"I think that would be the correct thing to do," responded Gwendolyn.

At the local coffee shop for a war council, the friends debated as to whether the accumulation of proof was a necessity. They could scour the local pet shops with descriptions of the twins. This was pointless. The twins knew better than to use a local pet shop, or the same pet shop twice.

Gwendolyn had a plan. It was a plan that months ago would have been as alien as China to a Surrey woman drawing her pension. Now it seemed a reasonable response to an extraordinary situation.

Gwendolyn bought an air pistol and pellets. She was familiar with the workings of the air pistol from the glory days of the weapons box. One time in the kitchen, Robin had demonstrated how to fire an air pistol. She had gone through the motions in private a number of times for no other reason than the morbid magnetic pull that all firearms exert. She didn't understand the fascination at the time and took no one into her confidence about it; it would have been an embarrassing admission. Now it seemed a preordained event.

The twins must be planting the mice very late at night. Gwendolyn would wait for them within the shop and shoot whichever one of them decided to be the delivery girl that evening.

"You wouldn't kill them, would you, Gwen?"

"No. Air pistols don't kill people. One of them will get a nasty sting, that's all. Like a very powerful bee."

"What if they've got a weak heart?"

"That's not very likely, is it?"

All of this presupposed that the twins would try the mouse trick a third time. There was also no way to predict what night, if any, the ladies would attack. But Gwendolyn was convinced that they would attack again in precisely the same manner, and she didn't care if she had to wait for a week without sleep if it afforded her just one opportunity to confront her enemies face to face.

"How are you going to stay awake all that time, Gwen?"

"Coffee and pills."

"No?"

"I am serious."

"Why don't we split the shifts?"

"I don't know if I want you involved at this level, my love."

"I want to be."

"I don't know, Lou."

"I want to be."

"Are you sure?"

"I want to be involved."

For the rest of the day, Louisa became familiar with the air pistol.

The most important thing, they decided, was to preserve a sense of routine in the eyes of their enemies. They would conduct their business as normal. They would leave the shop at closing time and walk their respective routes home. They would split up, wait for the dark, double back and reunite at a prearranged point. Then they would make their way to the rear of the shop via side streets and back alleys, switch off the alarms and begin the vigil, in three-hour shifts. One would sleep on the fold out bed in the upstairs back room. The other would sit on a stool in a dark corner of the shop floor and wait.

Nothing happened the first evening. Louisa slept through her alarm and didn't relieve Gwendolyn, who had also fallen asleep. Both of them managed to wake up in time to leave by the back exit, go home, change and open the shop on time.

The day's trade was a huge effort. Their bodies exacted revenge for the nights exertions. Louisa did a drug run to the local chemist and supermarket. She came back with a shopping bag full of coffee, painkillers, high energy fizzy drinks, a bottle of gin and a flask. That night they flew with the angels. The twins did not make an appearance.

The comedown the next day was almost more than their systems could tolerate. The day passed in a blur. They coasted on autopilot until close and met in the shop kitchen for a war council.

"I'm not sure my body can take another evening of this, Gwen."

"I know what you mean."

"What do you say?"

"I'm tempted to give in, Lou."

"No. What if they come tonight? One more evening, Gwen, please?"

"One more evening."

They upped the dosage of their strange cocktail. An unholy energy possessed their wasted muscles and frayed wits. The passage of the hours seemed to accelerate. Gwen thought about an H.G. Wells story, and Louisa thought about Robin.

Tomorrow would be physically intolerable.

At twenty past four in the morning, the front door of Need opened. A twin stepped onto the pavement. She looked left and then right and crossed the road.

Gwendolyn was awake this time and watched her through the window display. The twin reached into her duffel coat and produced a small sealed see through plastic bag containing a dead mouse. She removed the mouse by the tail and rummaged for a cosy hiding place amongst the pullovers.

Gwendolyn stood up and moved toward the shop door, the air pistol nestled in the pleats of her skirts. Gwendolyn drew the latch and stepped out. The sister was on her knees. She looked up at Gwen. Gwen didn't say a word. In her mental rehearsals she had always shot the old lady in the wrist or the leg, but that didn't seem remotely appropriate now. She shot the sister in the head.

The sister screamed. She fell backwards into the street, got to her feet and lurched into her own shop entrance. The door stood unclosed, a black mouth daring Gwen to press the point a little further. Gwen crossed the road, reloading the air gun.

"What's the matter? Come out and play with your aunty Gwen!"

Gwendolyn fired a second pellet at the store front window. A crack appeared.

"Which one did I hit? I think I should be able to tell you apart now." Gwendolyn reloaded. Out of the black, the sister came back at Gwen, bleeding from the head and swinging a golf club. The club cracked a bone in Gwendolyn's shoulder. She raised her gun hand to shoot, but a blow smashed her fingers. Gwendolyn was on her knees. The twin hit her for a third time. Gwendolyn was on her face, then she had passed out on the pavement.

Louisa covered the ground between the two shops quickly and in silence.

A warning shout from an upper window alerted the twin on the street too late. Louisa grabbed the twin's hair and slid a kitchen knife into her belly. The sister screamed. Louisa sobbed. Bedroom lights and twitching curtains. The twin's body thrashed on the tarmac.

The sound of a thousand kitchens being ransacked roared from inside Need. The second sister stood in the doorway with an aerosol can and a cigarette lighter. Louisa didn't lift a finger to protect herself as the second sister set her on fire. Louisa staggered, screamed and walked through the glass of her own shop front window.

Gwendolyn came around in time to watch her best friend die. She gripped the air pistol in her left hand and hid it beneath her stomach. Everything hurt.

"Please don't kill me!"

The remaining sister turned and looked at her.

"Let me live?"

The twin didn't say a word. She took a step toward Gwen and stood above her. Gwen raised the air pistol and shot the woman in the throat. The sister fell into a sitting position, coughing and gurgling Gwendolyn pushed herself into a sitting position as the twin tried to stand up. Gwendolyn slashed her face with the gun barrel, hit again, and then one more time. She felt something break in her enemy's face that was never going to be repaired. The sister slumped into curb and didn't move. Gwen looked at the burning shop and thought of Louisa for a final time. She eased herself down and waited to die.

When the police arrived, they didn't know what to think.

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