

She stands, tiptoed, on the very top of the mast, hundreds of feet up, and looks out across the city. There's a scream of terror in the distance, a mugging perhaps, or worse. 'Not tonight,' she thinks, and leaps into the darkness.

1. Chic.

"You should grow it" said one of the two care assistants getting him up, stroking his thick red crew cut admiringly. "Look there's not one grey hair, you're amazing Mr Champion." She peered a little closer, "Not a single one!" and rummaged, impressed, in his scalp. It was all far too personal if you asked him.

She was new, had only worked at the home for a few days, but they all did it: pawed away at you, grooming and petting. Chic didn't say anything, she was just being kind, after all.

"And all your own teeth! You're a miracle!" she squealed, giving his cheek a little pinch.

Chic slid into a long, magnolia corridor. He pulled a chain from round his neck and looked at the object on the end. A belt buckle of a silvery alloy, about two inches round. It had an intricate diagram of a star system inscribed on the front. It hadn't been worth it in the end, he thought, he'd lost everything. He slid it back under his vest.

His old biceps pumped the wheels rhythmically as he glided down the row of obsolete lives, marked off by identical blue doors, wheelchair groaning under his massive frame.

Chic had always been enormous. A born pugilist, he was boxing at middleweight by the time he was just eleven, and over the following years, a growing collection of trophies had crowded a little mantelpiece in Canning Town. The collection had stopped growing in 1940, when, along with the mantelpiece, the house and his parents, it was blown to smithereens by a German bomb. He'd signed up for the army the day after their funeral. And a year later he'd scrambled up a beach in Normandy, to kill boys his own age.

At the other end of the corridor was the day room, the aneurytic heart of Chestnut Lodge. Just outside was a whiteboard and on it was written the day and date in a green marker ink, to help orientate those residents that could, if not anchored properly, drift, lost in the past. No one had changed it in months.

Inside the day room an old lady clung to the straps of the crane-like hoist that was whirring her from her wheelchair to the high backed, wipe clean, plastic armchair that she would spend the rest of her day in. Terror and humiliation competed for dominance in her mind.

"Help me dear! I'm falling! Everyone can see my knickers! Help me dear!" Every day this process frightened and embarrassed her and every day as she panicked and blushed, knickers and limbs flapping like a dying pink pterodactyl in a nappy, two care assistants would try to calm and reassure her.

"You're OK Pearl."

"Don't worry, no one's looking."

"Try to keep still sweetheart, we're nearly there."

Across from Pearl sat Albert Goodman, leant over to one side and slowly slipping down inside a grey NHS wheelchair. A bored fly wandered aimlessly across his forehead, pausing now and then to lick tackily at his scalp, not liking what it found.

As far as Chic was concerned his name was not Albert Goodman at all, but Alexander Gourko. An evil genius and cold blooded killer. His arch nemesis. Chic didn't believe, for a second, that he was the helpless, dribbling fool sat across the way, quietly pissing himself. It was all a clever act, right

down to the stupid lopsided expression. Chic believed that he had come for the buckle around his neck. Without it, the belt was useless.

A glistening column of dribble descended like a hesitant abseiler from his enemy's lip.

They had been comrades once, fought alongside each other and led men into battle together. They had both been recruited, during the war, into an elite force called the Special Operations Executive: a clandestine outfit, charged by Churchill to set Europe ablaze and known as the Ministry for Ungentlemanly Warfare.

It was Chic's strength, courage and loyalty that had brought him to their attention. Alexander, on the other hand, had been a scarecrow of a man, but had shown a composure and a ruthless tenacity that was invaluable in the chaos and exhaustion of battle. Chic had never met anyone so unshakeable, he had mistaken this, at the time, for strength.

Chic glared at his adversary across the day room as another column of spittle began its descent onto the purée stained paper bib of evil.

"You bastard!" he screamed suddenly. "You murdering bastard! Come on, get up, you bloody charlatan! Get up!" He started to wheel himself slowly but threateningly towards his foe. One of the girls eyes rolled as if to say 'here we go again.' She took hold of the arms of his chair and began to push him slowly backwards towards the door, smiling.

"Come on Mr Champion, let's not have any of that today."

"He killed, he killed my--"

"I know, I know," she cooed, not letting him finish, not interested. "Let's see what's going on in the TV lounge shall we?" she suggested kindly.

"Bastard!" he shouted over the carer's sizeable, blue-checked backside as they exited. "Bastard!"

*

Six months before the end of the war, the two men had been sent on a mission high above the Arctic Circle to investigate ghostly sightings in the night skies over the Haldefjäll mountains. Something had come down, apparently intact, by an icy river. They were to identify its origins, no doubt military, and neutralise it.

As they approached, the scorched ground crackled under their feet like volcanic glass. What they found there had been a craft of some kind but, destroyed by the crash and cremating in its own fuels, more than that had been impossible to say. The pilot too, melted into the seat and controls, had been consumed beyond recognition.

Wrapped around this roasted corpse had been the belt, somehow untouched by the fire and soot, and cold to the touch despite the hissing and crackling of the carcass it embraced. And, lying apart but similarly unscathed, they'd found the small round buckle.

Chic fastened the two ends together with it. He could have sworn that it tingled and made his fist feel like a rock. Like he could punch out a cart horse, he'd said. He'd looked over at the thing in the seat. It barely looked human. But what else could it be? he'd thought.

Gourko knew. He'd looked up at the Milky Way, a dazzling scar of light ripping open the throat of the sky from ear to ear, and laughed. Even in space, he thought, they were fighting wars. It made him feel good, part of something. "Come on," he'd suggested cheerfully, cracking his knuckles "let's round up some peasants, find out what they saw." But before they could set off on their grizzly fact-finder, the spit of a rifle shot drew their attention outside. Gourko peeked through a smoking hole in the wreckage, "Shit!" he muttered, a platoon of the Schutzstaffel had them surrounded.

2. Halle.

Halle pedalled energetically up the drive to Chestnut Lodge, enjoying how the dancing gravel stung her thighs under her skirt. Chic sat at the top of the slope smoking a woodbine, beaming; she was the nearest thing he had to a friend. She beamed back. She thought Chic was great, he told amazing stories.

She'd ask often to hear the tale of that night in Lapland, when they'd been surrounded by the SS and how he'd fought off an entire platoon, thanks to the alien belt he'd put on and the power it had given him.

"Bowled them over like skittles," he'd told her grimly. She enjoyed especially the bit where he'd punched one soldier "thirty feet into the air and left him dangling from the branches of a tree like a forgotten kite, his life spilling onto the fresh snow in a long red tail." He had such an imagination. She liked the war stories better than the masked crime fighter ones, they were a bit silly. She'd tried to get him to write it all down once, but he'd told her that there was an act of parliament banning him from writing an autobiography. Old people were so funny.

She'd wanted to join the army, the year before, when she'd left school, but her boyfriend, Bailey, had pointed to Afghanistan and Iraq, he'd said there were no honest wars any more, and she'd seen his point. Still, she thought, the opportunities for heroism were poor in the bum wiping industry, and she wished that Chic's stories were true.

*

After the war, their unit was dissolved, peacetime Britain had no place for their brand of .38 calibre diplomacy. Like a lot of ex servicemen, they had both joined the police.

Ruby Catarrattis was the detective inspector directly over them. She hated having ex squaddies in her team. She'd believed that modern policing was about brains, not brawn, and DC Champion was about the brawniest creature she had ever met. He had been like an overgrown, untrained, puppy. There had been times when she'd honestly thought that he was going to jump on her and lick her. Quite the opposite of his friend, Alexander, who had been sophisticated and respectful, and handsome. No one could ever say that of Chic. But she'd never met a more genuine man, or more passionate, and he had adored her, from the word go. She'd been like a ruby herself he thought, bright and sharp and precious.

The two men had joined the police at a time when London's criminals were evolving into something nastier than their pre war ascendants. More organised and more dangerous, the new gangland bosses threw out the rulebooks of the old order. Chic and Ruby saw the death and misery the guns and drugs had brought, and had fought back against the rising tide.

Gourko, on the other hand, had admired this new breed of celebrity gangster. He'd respected their ruthlessness and envied their lifestyles, and he transferred to the flying squad, to put himself in a position where he could become a part of this new felonious royalty.

*

Halle been told to have a word with Chic about his behaviour, he'd been shouting at poor old Albert again. He was confusing him with someone from one of his stories, called Gorky, or something. If it hadn't been so sad it would have been funny, a great big bloke like Chic, afraid of a puny little man like that.

The conversation wasn't going the way she'd hoped.

"I am not going to snoop around another resident's room for you Chic," she insisted again, "and that's that!"

"Just see if it's there," he carried on, "I'm not asking you to do anything, just look. Please?" Most of the residents that had dementia, arrived at the home like that. She had only known them as shells and remnants of their old selves.

She'd never seen it actually happening to someone, it was dreadful.

The odd thing was, that there actually was a military looking attaché case, just like the one Chic described, in Albert's wardrobe, but old people always had odd stuff like that in their wardrobes, didn't they?

Chic knew the belt was there though, he'd have to find another way.

*

Ruby read the headline again, 'Masked Hero Rescues Orphans from Inferno.' There had been a spate, in America, of people dressing up in undignified costumes and fighting crime. The last thing she needed was some clown pulling the same stunt on her patch. The desk sergeant chucked another paper onto the pile. This one read, 'Costumed Avenger Makes Streets Safe Again.'

"God almighty!" She sighed.

"They're saying he can fly in the Mail," he told her, grinning widely but mirthlessly. "To be honest Ma'am, most of the boys think he's pretty neat."

Well, she didn't. She thought the Bulldog, as he called himself, was a dangerous lunatic.

"We're supposed to be putting men in prison not hospital," she pointed out, "remember those little things we used to have, called trials?"

"Gets them off the streets," said the sergeant, chewing something that hadn't been in his mouth a moment before. "I had two last week just begging to be banged up: that scared of him they were."

*

Several of the residents were due to attend the local hospital. Chic watched as one by one they were parked, to wait for the transport, in a neat row at the top of the gravel slope that led down to the busy main road. Finally New Girl wheeled out the man he was waiting for. What's more, she only applied one of his brakes.

'Should be fired,' smiled Chic to himself as he flipped the brake off and, with a gentle elbow, nudged his foe onto a traffic bound trajectory. 'Let's see him keep up the act with a number thirty-seven bearing down on him,' he thought.

After a cautious start, the chair began to pick up speed quickly, and within a few feet it was going at a slow jog, its occupant oblivious to his chair's sudden bid for freedom.

First to notice was New Girl. She let out a squeak of horror and set off in hot, chubby pursuit, wheezing inaudible pleas for assistance as she went, clutching at herself to keep her phone and

change from springing from her inadequate pockets and her jewellery from slapping her around the face. Her large breasts, taken by surprise, bounced angrily in opposition to her momentum, fighting her and each other. She fought back, bravely.

The path steepened slightly and the chair, as though aware of its pursuer, picked up the pace and broke into a trot. Its wheels were small and thick, not designed for speed and it began to bounce and rock, playfully almost, over the white gravel.

'Let's see who's helpless now,' thought Chic, lighting a cigarette. Arms could be seen either side of the cantering metal chair, flailing lifelessly like a rag doll in a tumble dryer. 'Any second now,' thought Chic. Two other girls joined in the chase, but with little hope. Any. Second. Now.

*

"What good is a confession from a man who's had his hand plunged into a chip pan and been scared half to death by some deranged nut case in pantomime costume?" Ruby had complained to Chic over supper. It tore him up.

"He's on your side love."

"Without rules, he's no better than they are Chic, you should know that." He ached to tell her that it was him.

Whatever happened to those simple times?

When he'd been a child he'd stood in a ring and punched another boy in the face until he couldn't stand up any more.

Everyone had cheered and he'd been given a big silver cup.

His dad had tussled his red hair and said "Champion by name; Champion by nature!" Whatever happened?

"Sorry darling, I'm not cross with you," his wife was saying, "its just that costumed prick makes me so angry. God! What kind of childhood must he have had?"

*

The chair lurched, continuing down the drive like a drunken robot antelope, balancing skilfully on two wheels for a moment, hurtling towards the busy road.

'He's cutting it mighty fine,' thought Chic with reluctant respect, fully expecting the man to leap from the chair at any second.

And then the macabre spectacle reached its gruesome climax.

A wheel hit a particularly large piece of gravel, and the chair sprung several feet into the air, and toppled forwards, crashing down, with a skidding crunch that ended at the feet of a woman who had been walking her dog and who then ran around in little circles calling for an ambulance as though there were one within earshot. Bloodied and broken, mouth and nose full of driveway, the man under the wheelchair closed his eyes.

The dog, eager to share in the excitement, ran around, barking enthusiastically. First at the man lying in the reddening gravel, and then at the three panting women in blue uniforms, holding in their heaving chests, bent double, hands on knees. This was great, thought the dog, relieving himself on the man.

*

Gourko had known all along who the masked man was, he'd encouraged him. He'd hoped to manipulate the great lump to his own ends. The fear that the Bulldog had created amongst the underworld had been very useful to the scheming cop. Chic, though had proved too principled, and too dumb.

"I don't care about 'the grander scheme' Alexander," he'd told him, "a heroin dealer is a heroin dealer." They looked down, the floor of the public toilet was awash with blood, a panicked gurgling emanated from behind a cubicle door, "He needed teaching a lesson," Chic explained. He had flushed the brown powder down the pan, no idea that his friend had bankrolled the deal, then he'd angrily smashed the toilet bowl to pieces with the dealer's face. He would have to go, thought Gourko. He'd become a liability.

It took just a single phone call.

*

Chic looked up at Halle's disappointed face. He was defeated, he knew that. It was over and he'd lost. His eyes stung with failure.

"Its a bit late to be sorry now," she said coldly but hating seeing him so distraught. "They're gonna move you to another home Chic."

"I know," he said, not looking at her, "The CO told me," he meant the matron.

"It won't be a nice home Chic, it'll be a home-" she was going to say 'for people like you.' The thought of him in a psycho-geriatric ward filled her with sadness "I'll come and see you." she said quietly.

"He'll come for me now," he told her, "tonight probably." What was he on about? "Apotoxin." he explained.

"What?"

"Apotoxin 4869," it was Gourko's favourite poison, untraceable and irreversible. It attacked the brain's fear centres. The victim died in terror, the expression frozen on their face forever. She'd never seen Chic look so scared before, it unsettled her.

*

Ruby found it, just as the call had told her, in a military attaché case under the floorboards in their flat. The Bulldog's costume, and some daft looking belt. It could've been a plant of course, but then there were the photos. There was no mistaking her husband's brick wall features. She sat down. She didn't move for a long time.

*

Halle hadn't wanted to take the buckle, but he'd almost begged her. It was encouraging his fantasies, she realised, but he'd been close to tears. She'd made things worse though, hadn't she?

He'd wanted her to throw it in the river or bury it somewhere anything to stop him getting hold of it. She wouldn't, she decided, she would give it back, say sorry, explain, in the morning.

But she didn't, because in the morning, Chic Champion was dead.

3. Ruby.

Arresting her husband was the hardest thing Ruby had ever had to do.

"Why you?" he'd asked as he'd meekly let her handcuff him. "There's a hundred boys at the station. Why you?"

"Because you would have fought anyone else Chic." She was right, he would. She didn't know what hurt more, that he hadn't told her, or that she hadn't known the man she'd married. The man in front of her, this Bulldog, was a stranger, a violent psychopath. Sure her Chic was a bit of a tough guy, but this? She thought about the eighteen year old boy that they'd scraped off a toilet floor the day before. Could Chic have done that?

When he started gabbling on about superpowers and magic belts, she realised: he'd lost his mind. Her heart broke for the third time that day. Poor Chic. It wasn't really his fault then, was it? Poor Chic. How had she not seen it? Still, he could plead DR, they'd get him help and she'd look after him, make him better.

*

New Girl had never seen a dead body.

"Do they all die like that?" she asked, horror-struck. She meant the expression of terror frozen on Chic's face. Halle ignored her, covered him back up, her bladder turning to ice as she put the pieces together.

"Look, someone's been through his stuff," she nodded towards the wardrobe.

"How do you know?"

"It's all messed up, look, Chic was meticulous."

"Is anything missing?" asked New Girl. Halle's eyes scanned what Chic had called his locker.

"No, I don't think so, no."

"Maybe he was looking for something before he, you know." offered New Girl.

"Yeah, maybe." 'Chic would never leave his stuff like that' she thought, 'Even if he was dying he fold his shirts.' The thought brought a smile to her face, followed by a tear.

*

It was a cold night, Ruby's lungs puffed little clouds into the dark of the alley. Why had he wanted to meet here, and why did he want her to bring the case?

Before she had left him in that cold, black cell, Chic had begged her to do one thing. It had seemed harmless and she couldn't stand him thinking she had betrayed him any longer. So she took the little disc of metal with the star map from the evidence bag and hid it, exactly as he'd asked. It was just a bauble, a stage prop to his madness, it meant nothing but he might start to trust her again, and let her help him.

Why was Gourko so furious that it wasn't there? How did he even know about it? And why was he screwing a silencer onto his pistol? She was suddenly very scared; he was pulling on gloves.

“Where is it?” he screamed into her face covering her in hot spit, digging the pistol hard into her ribs. She feigned ignorance. It was how she'd found it, she swore. It was convincing enough to send him back to the case to check.

Had they both gone mad? She looked around desperately for an escape route.

*

They had told Halle to go home, said that she was not well, that Chic's death had affected her more than she realised. They hadn't believed her. She was told to take a few days off, see how she felt, maybe go see her GP.

They hadn't believed her but he had spoken to her. As she'd left his room. Three terrifying, croaky words, her address. Why? Then she'd frozen on the spot realising, and he'd added “You know what I want you little bitch.” She'd turned round, trembling, he was just lying there, covered in bandages, like he had been all along, staring into space. She'd run, tumbling into the office, and told them. Of course they hadn't believed her. He'd known they wouldn't.

She went to see Chic in the funeral parlour and told him what had happened. They had managed to remove the mask of terror from his face somehow, although not completely, he still looked a little worried. She held his hand as though he really were feeling that way and patted it. She told him her plan, to get the old devil Gourko, how she would be recording with her phone the next time he spoke, she would make him talk, she wasn't scared, not any more. Chic would be proud of her, but he still looked worried.

Then she sat and let the tears fall, silently, not trying to stop them and when she was done she sat in a bookshop drinking cappuccinos.

A large spider crawled onto her table. She cupped her hand over it and felt it wriggle. Then she brought her hand down, very gently, until she had it pinned. It wriggled harder, tickling her palm like raindrops. She continued to press down, as slowly as she could, shuddering as the little creature burst and spilled against her palm. Bits of her tingled. She turned over her hand staring closely at its contents, a little leg waved at her from a pile of goo. She wiped it clean with a napkin. Outside it was getting dark. 'Soon,' she thought.

*

Gourko shot Ruby in the throat, and he watched her die in silence. She had tried to say something, but all that came from her mouth was a plume of thick red bubbles. When it was over, he tore off a piece of the Bulldog's, easily recognisable, costume, and put it in her hand, jamming her nails into it, breaking them. 'She would've put up a good fight', he thought.

Then he found a phone, called the station and told them to release Champion.

*

Getting into the home was easy. They never locked anything. Halle crept silently down a half lit corridor. There would be three members of staff on duty, probably only one awake. She knew him, Kyle, he would be in the TV lounge.

He sat in a big armchair, tugging at himself frantically in front of the big plasma TV. He was easy to sneak past. Halle watched him for a moment, disgusted, fascinated.

She imagined she was a giantess, crushing him slowly, like the spiders. She tried to picture him all squished and twitching in her powerful hand. To think that, at school, she had fancied him. Yuk!

But then an urgent beeping made her start. One of the residents had pulled their chord. Down the corridor a red light blinked over a darkened doorway, Pearl's. Kyle was getting up, walking her way. It was dark though and she was in shadow, She pushed back into the wall until it hurt.

He stopped, she thought he'd seen her but he was just adjusting something inside his trousers. He sniffed at his hand, and disappeared into Pearl's room, his flies still gaping. She breathed again and made her way to the door where she'd stood shaking in fear that morning.

*

A wanted cop killer and hated by the press that had so adored him, Chic Champion ran. From the law and from Gourko. Country after country, never stopping, always looking over his shoulder, sleeping with one eye open, for nearly forty years.

Until one day, in bar in Bandung, he'd been ignoring a documentary about DNA or something when he'd heard the presenter mention his name. He'd made everyone in the bar shut up. He'd been cleared of his wife's murder, apparently.

They showed old black and white footage of his shiny precious Ruby and he'd gone out and got blind drunk, staggered out in front of a tram and never walked again.

He came back to England and moved into Chestnut lodge. He had four peaceful, almost happy, years before the devil found him, but he'd always known he would.

4. Pearl.

Halle closed the door silently behind her and peered across the dark room. She could hear him breathing. He would have no reason to keep up the pretence, she thought, once she offered him the buckle. Not that she intended to give it to him. She had her phone and tucked into the waist of her black Pepe jeans were twelve inches of stainless steel kitchen knife. She flicked on the bedside lamp. His eyes were already open, staring blankly up at the ceiling.

What she hadn't expected was for him to keep up the charade. She told him that she had what he wanted. Nothing. She showed him, she waved it in his face, prodded him with it. What was he playing at? Was it her, she wondered, had she been hearing things? She hadn't had anything like that for years, not since middle school, when she'd hurt that boy, but she'd been just a girl then. Doctors had bored the voices away, she was fine now. She'd show him just how sane she was. She pulled the angry steel with a dark hush from its denim sheath. It smelt of strawberry-pop body cream.

Pearl could not remember why she had called, when Kyle got there, or even if she had.

"I don't think it was me dear," she said worriedly. He smiled, she was always like this. He peeked under the cover, without thinking, for a second, to ask. The sheets were wet, he'd thought so. "I don't know who did that," Pearl commented, seriously.

"Come on," he smiled again, "let's get you cleaned up shall we." He lifted her into her chair single handed, he didn't want to wake the others and she was tiny. "Like a bony little chicken," he told her. He couldn't be bothered washing her but he didn't want her lying there wet, so he changed her nightie and went to get clean sheets.

He stopped and wiped his damp hands on his shirt and peered again down the corridor. There was a glow coming from under Albert's door. Someone must have left the light on.

Halle tried to hold the knife steady, it wasn't easy, she was shaking like an old phone. The viscous point barely pricked the skin, but he wasn't going to move with it there, she thought.

But he still wouldn't talk, despite her threats, so she pushed, gingerly, on the handle and made him a sadistic promise, in a voice that wasn't hers. She shuddered at what she was doing, disgust and exhilaration mixing like volatile chemicals in her blood, making her fizz.

All he did was blow a little bubble of spit. It mocked her, she thought, it thought she was weak. "That your best shot?" it said "That all you got, little girl?" Anger spread through her, like jungle fires at night and she kept her promise. It took her several moment to realise the giggling was coming from her.

"What the fuck?" said a surprised voice behind her, "Halle, is that- What is going on?" It was Kyle. 'What is she doing to Albert?' he thought. 'Why is his duvet on the floor?' and then 'Why is he sitting up?'"

The old man swung into a sitting position. As Halle turned he brought his heel down hard on her knee. It would buy him the seconds he needed, he was slow and stiff with the weeks of inactivity. With one hand he reached under the bed, there was a rip of tape and his hand emerged holding a large revolver; with the other he sent the knife flying expertly across the room. Kyle staggered backwards clutching his throat, slipping in his own blood. 'Still got it.' thought the old man.

Halle's knee had exploded with pain. Shock waves rang through her bones, and she staggered, the room was swaying. Then he was on her shoving the gun in her face, pushing her up against the wall, telling her things, things she didn't want to hear.

Pearl wasn't sure how long she'd waited but she thought it had been a long time. There had been a boy, hadn't there? He'd gone to get something. Or had he? Or was it the doctor? That could be it. She was getting one of her heads. She'd go and have a look.

He was telling her she was about to die. He wasn't lying. Who the Hell did she think she was? Stupid! Little! Child! He punctuated these words with sharp, painful jabs of the gun, cutting her cheek. He rubbed at his groin, she'd hurt him at least, she thought. He looked her straight in the eye, and stood back holding the gun, arm's length, to her throat . He pulled his head back and away, shielding his eyes with the other hand.

Pearl pushed her way down the corridor. Someone had left an awful mess at the other end, she thought. It was all over the walls and floor, she was sure that it wasn't meant to be like that, but people seemed to know what they were doing. There was the boy lying in the middle of it all. It seemed odd to her but she didn't say anything. She didn't want to look stupid.

She wheeled herself carefully around Kyle's twitching body.

His flies were open. She tutted loudly, as she rounded a corner. Young people! Honestly! "Excuse me dear," she said to Gourko, "sorry to be a bother-"

Gourko swung the gun round automatically at the little old lady and then realised his mistake. Halle punched him in the face with all she had, he reeled back and the gun flew from his grip.

'Ooh dear!' thought Pearl as the Colt Diamondback landed on her lap, 'whatever next?' She had little feeling in her legs but the heavy lump of carbon steel landed with a thump that shook her chair.

This was odd, she thought, but she wasn't sure. A lonely neuron ran around a burnt out library in her brain panicking, trying to find a reference. She couldn't remember where it had come from now. Well she better do something, they were probably waiting for her to do something, she didn't want to look stupid. She picked the gun up and held it out like she had seen in the movies. It was heavy and wobbled in her hands. It was wobbling straight at Halle and Gourko. They both shouted "No!" Halle adding

"Pearl!" Now what was it you said? thought Pearl. That was it!

"Go ahead punk," she giggled, "make my tea!" and pulled the trigger.

Gourko was dead before he hit the wall. Halle looked over at the old man, half of him seemed to be missing or dripping from things. She tried to stagger over to the sink to throw up but passed out on the way.

As welcome unconsciousness enveloped her she could hear a little voice.

Pearl's chair had been knocked over backwards by the recoil. Lying on her back with her legs in the air and her nightie over her face, she wondered how long she had been there.

"Everyone can see my knickers!" she complained again.

Halle's boyfriend, Bailey, sits engrossed in the contents of the old attaché case. Its full of old photos and papers, yellow and curled, tied up in little bundles with tiny ribbons and neatly knotted string. She had laughed when he'd asked if that was it, and called him pathetic. What had he expected, Kryptonite?

Halle leaves him to the rusty brown envelopes and telegrams.

She climbs out onto the fire escape, up onto their roof. Takes off her top, and jeans, folds them neatly, slips off her Nike Skyraiders and stands shivering in a skimpy, brightly coloured, and clearly home made, costume.

She takes it out of her bag, it is too long to go around her waist so she fashions it into a figure eight crossing it between her breasts and fastening it behind her neck. The rush nearly knocks her off her feet and she staggers and falls over the edge.

Without thinking, she lands nimbly on a lamp post twenty five feet below. She feels its long glowing arm flex under her and spring back. She rides it, turning a slow somersault, high across the street, landing gracefully on a telegraph pole, her balance nanometre perfect.

The young woman runs effortlessly along the wires, scampers fifty feet up a wall and sits perched on a high roof like a bird, panting wildly.

She crosses the city in minutes. Swinging from lampposts jumping over walls, running along the train cables, tumbling over the roofs and chimneys: a blur in the night sky. A few people spot her and scream excitedly.

Halle comes to rest on a phone mast on the roof of a tall building halfway across town, sweaty and exhilarated. The seam on one of her shoulders is giving way, she is terrible at sewing, she hopes the crotch will hold.

She stands, tiptoed, on the very top of the mast, hundreds of feet up, and looks out across the city, there's a scream of terror in the distance, a mugging perhaps, or worse. 'Not tonight,' she thinks, and leaps into the darkness.