

BEATING AROUND THE BUSH

Writers often take inspiration from real life, and unlikely as it seems, this little piece sprang from an ongoing situation in M. Fae's apartment complex. 'Noisy Neighbors' could easily be the story's subtitle: that's certainly what M. Fae has. And as for what those neighbors are up to, what Bodie and Doyle hear is exactly what entertains M. Fae every few days... (However, she does hasten to add that she personally does not use ladders for the same purpose!)

SPINE popping in noisy remembrance of just how many fights he'd been in over the past fortnight, Bodie sank down onto the settee with a sigh of almost pure relief spoiled only by the moan inspired by the achings in his bones and the protestings of his bruises.

"You know," Bodie said once he'd finally stopped both his stretching and his attendant ouchings, "I swear that OAPs are getting tougher every year."

"Why—the old dear that hit you have a brick in her handbag?"

"Brick? The way I feel," and his groan was as spectacular as the bruises left by someone's very irate granny, "it was the Great Wall of fucking China."

Doyle, himself about as limp a squashed cabbage and nowhere near as sweet-smelling, flopped down onto the sofa beside his partner. "At least all you got was whacked by Dickinson's granny. I'm the one that—"

"Got pushed into the canal. God, Doyle, you don't half whiff. Mind keeping downwind for the next month or two?"

Either because it wasn't worth it, or because those eyes genuinely were closed since Doyle had fallen asleep where he'd landed, there was no answer forthcoming.

Bodie took a good, long look at the cherubic innocence of that sleeping face, and gave his partner a hefty elbow in the ribs. "Can't you at least

have a bath? Or pour a bottle of Brut over that rat's nest you call hair? Here, hang on a minute," he muttered, leaning over, ignoring Doyle's now narrowed and exceedingly mistrustful eyes, "is that a bit of fish you've got in there?"

"Probably," Doyle replied, paying no attention to the purported fish as he batted Bodie's prying hands out of the way. "While you were having such a lovely little chat with Dickinson's granny, dear old Dickie was knocking me from one end of that bloody fish shop to the next. Surprised all you've found is one bit of fish—the sod tried to drown me in a barrel of bloody eels."

Bodie took one look at Doyle's expression and gave his joke a very hasty burial. "Poor old bugger," he said instead, doing a terrific job of keeping both face and voice straight. "Tell you what: you toddle off and have yourself a bath—a nice long one—and I'll nick round the corner and pick us up a curry. How does that sound?"

"Suspicious," replied Doyle, who knew Bodie better than to take such generosity at face value. "But a dream come true. Here," and he nearly gave Bodie a heart attack by reaching into his back pocket—a feat of quite mind-boggling physical dynamics—and not only taking out a tenner, but actually giving it to Bodie. "Get us a curry, bhaji, biryani and a couple of chapatis and anything else that looks good."

"And what am I going to eat?"

There was an answer for that, but Doyle wasn't

stupid enough to give it. “You can eat whatever you buy for yourself. But if it’s samosa,” he said, heaving himself to his feet and heading in the general direction of his bathroom and every aromatic potion he could muster, “make sure you get enough for me too, gannet.”

“Yes, sir, at once, sir,” Bodie clipped out smartly, executing the sort of salute his old sergeant major swooned over—MacKay had been a funny sort of bloke, actually, now that Bodie stopped to think about it.

“Yoo-hoo!” Doyle carolled less than sweetly and less than a foot from Bodie’s left ear, which explained why Bodie nearly wet himself. “I thought,” Doyle said rather loudly, as if Bodie were deaf as well as dumb, “you said you were going to pick us up a curry?”

“Not to mention half the bloody shop. Here, have you got enough beer in?”

“Dunno. Best check—unless you’re willing to settle for Harp? My dad brought me a case over last week, haven’t even touched it yet.”

“Oh, the joys, the joys,” Bodie declaimed over clasped hands and fluttering eyelashes, “of a daddy who runs an off-licence.”

“And if you don’t get on your bike, you’ll soon discover the joys of my boot up your arse.”

“Oooh, I love it when you go all butch on me,” Bodie fluted outrageously, camping it up even more when Doyle started turning all sorts of interesting shades in the interests of not bursting out laughing. “Be ever so nice,” Bodie winked this time and flapped a decidedly limp wrist just for good measure, “duckie-pool!”

That did it, Doyle’s choking on laughter having sweet and instantaneous revenge by simple dint of leaning on Bodie, who reacted, for once, in a perfectly normal, mature way: he took one noseful of Doyle’s eel-washed hair, turned tail and ran.

Sniggering contentedly, Doyle took himself off to the bath, letting the water run onto a couple of handfuls of some mineral bath salts left behind by some overnight visitor, a dusty bath cube unearthed from the cupboard under the sink, and the dregs of the Womble bubble bath he’d half-inched from his niece last Christmas. With a sigh of relief that was actually pure—a fact no doubt inspired by the absence of Bodie’s filthy mind, although Doyle had been heard to opine that Bodie’s mind was always absent—Doyle sank into the scented water, bubbles coming up to his ears, some of them even

braving the tangled web that had occasionally been called hair. Leaning back, letting all the aches and pains leach out of his body, Doyle was somewhat revolted to discover a bit of fish caught not by a hook and line nor even a net—not even the hair net he secretly wore to bed the nights he washed his hair—but caught by dear old Dickie smashing him into that tray of mackerel. Distastefully, he picked the bit up by the fin and with some twisting and turning that would normally require a rubberised spine in the average mortal, he managed to get it down the toilet. He gave another sigh of relief, this one even purer than the other, and sank completely under the bubbles, letting the water come right up over his head, which turned out to be a less than wise decision. Surfacing like a U-Boat in the surf, he scrubbed the stinging perfume-filled soapy water from his eyes, finally opening them just in time to see a slimy, black, miniature Nessie slithering and bobbing, not prettily at all, under his chin. The highly trained CI5 agent, who had faced terrorists, primed-and-ticking atomic bombs and George Cowley first thing in the morning, did what any sensible person would do: he screamed, giving new life to the old expression ‘like a banshee’, and doing new justice to ‘like a kangaroo’, as in to leap like one, the water heaving upwards with him right over the sides of the bathtub to lie in little pools, each with its very own range of bubble mountains.

Of course, highly trained as he was, it only took the now shivering, blue-balled Doyle only a mere second to realise the slimy thing was, in fact, precisely that: a dead eel. Or at least a bit of it, and Doyle wasn’t about to examine it closely enough to find out which end of the eel it was.

“Bodie!” he shouted, on the general principle that if Bodie could always manage to be there when Doyle needed to have his life saved at the last minute then the least the jammy sod could do was show up when it was the contents of Doyle’s stomach that were in such danger. “Bodie!” Christ, what a time for Bodie to turn altruistic on him and offer to get the food in—always supposing any of it survived without being devoured on the way home. “Where are you when I bloody need you?” he muttered, unrolling screeds of toilet paper. Gingerly, and that adjective is wisely chosen due to the fact that Doyle was up on his tippy-toes, he approached the thing in his bathtub with all the courage of Little Miss Muffet on her tuffet, although his hair probably sported more ringlets

these days, André having been a bit over-keen this last time.

Fortunately, Doyle was able to pick up the eel, whichever end it was, without touching it with so much as a finger, and without screaming—again—or being frightened away. The slimy black eel, complete with the soggy wad of toilet paper that had dripped enough to add a puddle or two of its own to the sodden floor and accompanied by Doyle's heartfelt shudder, was given an appropriate burial at sea—or in the toilet bowl anyway. With a fastidious wiping of his hands, Doyle gratefully saw the eel off, and then climbed back into his bath—having first made sure, of course, that there were no other denizens of the deep invading his own shallow pond. Satisfied that he was alone for the time being until that other, somewhat less slimy but still definitely as slippery, relic of this afternoon's tempest in a fish shop came back with mounds of Indian food.

It wasn't until he'd washed his hair for the third time that it had dawned on him that he hadn't warned Bodie just precisely, and in graphically gory detail, what would happen to him if said toad brought back anything even vaguely resembling sea food. Such as prawn curry or scampi, although what Sabir would be doing with scampi wasn't a thought Doyle wanted to dwell upon. A hammering upon the door interrupted his contemplations of scampi à la tandoor, Bodie's bellowing enough to wake the dead, so you can imagine what it did to a sensitive-eared fellow like Doyle. That's right, he was startled enough that the soap went flying out of his hands to land, unnoticed, in one of those little puddles with the bubbles afloat on top.

Needless to say, when Bodie came barging in to drag Doyle out of the bath, he went skimming across the floor to land, with a surfeit of noise and a complete lack of dignity, on his bum with his feet threatening to decapitate Doyle—which was nothing compared to what the rest of Bodie threatened to do as soon as he caught both his breath and Doyle.

It took a while, but Doyle did actually manage to stop laughing, although the mouthful of bubbles and scummy, shampoo-laden water probably had more to do with that than any compassion for poor Bodie's well-bruised bum.

It took an even longer while, but Doyle was finally out of the bath, hair hanging in rats' tails about his ears and his oldest, tattiest and therefore best-loved dressing-gown trailing from his shoul-

ders. Bodie took one look at this vision of sartorial, not to mention tonsorial, elegance, stifled a severe attack of the giggles, preened haughtily, and then beat the hastiest of retreats before Doyle could catch him.

In the living room, there was a flurry of plates and almost a cascade of biryani, as Bodie handed it to Doyle who thought Bodie was putting it on the table, and both of them ended up licking more than a few grains of rice off respective wrists and hands. With enough lager to wet the whistles of an entire band, enough food (and Doyle was more or less pleased to note that Bodie had refrained from bringing home a prawn curry, which was a bit of a pity because Doyle had some of his best threats already loaded and ready to go) to feed even a hungry Bodie for a couple of hours, they settled themselves down in front of the telly for a nicely undemanding night of goggle-box gazing and gob-stuffing. As the theme music finished, the programme (neither one of them could have told you what it was, Bodie caring only that it wasn't about pensioners and Doyle relieved that it wasn't about fish, alive, dead or tangled in his hair) just starting, there was a pregnant pause before the punchline was delivered.

The unmistakable sound didn't come from the TV set or either one of them, but they both heard it—for that matter, the dead in the cemetery up the hill probably heard it. It was instantly recognisable for anyone apart from the terminally innocent, and that was an epithet that could hardly be hurled at Bodie or Doyle. They were men of the world, or at least men of the local urban area, both of them rather quick to recount their exploits—suitably enhanced, of course. Coming from next door was nothing so mundane, boring, or amusing as that most favourite prop of farce and cheap hotel: the headboard banging rhythmically against the wall. Oh, no, not for Ray Doyle who always had had a talent for landing himself right in it. There was a resounding slap of hand on skin, followed by the muted roar of what could only be a man wearing a gag.

Most people would at least look at the person they were with if they heard that sort of noise, even the appallingly restrained English, and while Bodie and Doyle could both be accused of being English, no-one in their right mind would ever call them restrained. With the sound still echoing slightly, Bodie didn't look at Doyle and Doyle didn't look at Bodie. The pair of them sat there like ornaments on

a mantelpiece, staring at the television as if they were both absolutely fascinated by yet another summer repeat of *Dad's bloody Army*. In fact, they had both become even more engrossed, which had nothing to do with the unfunny series and everything to do with sound of another slap and a far more enthusiastic muffled roar of approval.

Captain Mainwaring was doing something on the screen that was supposed to be taken as terribly rude, but which paled, just the teensiest little bit, when compared to the rippling waves of sound coming from next door.

The next noise was that little bit louder, and sounded for all the world like someone getting a singularly good thrashing. Every single time the room resounded with the slap of skin on skin and the appreciative, not to mention incredibly loud, moans of approval, Doyle wouldn't look at Bodie and Bodie certainly wasn't going to look at Doyle. They sat there, still side by side on that settee, methodically working their way through the pile of Indian food, wading their way through *Dad's Army* and on to the next comedy (which most people tended to think of as the reliable and completely accurate evening news), their faces matching each other in a complete lack of expression. Now, given that these two were never quiet for more than two minutes at a time, given that they both hated the news and *Dad's Army*, given that both of them were bursting for the toilet, the fact that neither of them budged was enough to make any enquiring mind want to know why. Even ones of such apparently guilty consciences as these two.

Doyle could always use the excuse that he rode bikes—souped up motorbikes, of course, none of those namby-pamby little pedal-powered things for a tough man like him, or at least that's what he told the bloke who did his perm for him—as explanation of the fact that he knew what the next sound was, that duller not-quite-slapping sound of leather on skin, but he didn't much fancy trying to convince Bodie's legendary, filthy mind that Doyle had used profound innocence to suss out the perverted sexual practices of his next door neighbours.

There was another bellow, again not from the television, and then—silence. Still neither one of them looked at each other, although Doyle did shift uneasily in his seat and Bodie did check his watch as the silence stretched and stretched.

Well, that was it, then: they'd had their fun, had a lovely time, and were now probably cuddling

together, which meant that Bodie and Doyle could both sigh, and relax, and Bodie could toss—still not quite looking at Doyle, of course—a casual comment to Doyle about the crap on the telly.

“Yeh, 's all rubbish this time of year. I think they think everyone's outside enjoying all that summer sunshine.” It had rained every single day since Bank Holiday Monday, today being the first day without actual rain, one of those really disgusting, clammy days, perfect for not much more than making fish stink, a fact to which Doyle for one could attest.

“Still,” Bodie mused, spine bowing as he slid down the settee to rest his shoes amidst the mess on the coffee table, “gives us a chance to catch up to what's been on the telly, doesn't it?”

“Oh, yes,” Doyle agreed stentoriously, “and we must be grateful for small mercies, mustn't we?”

The Devil himself probably couldn't have mustered such a twinkle in his eyes. “Such as no longer stinking like a fishwife. Course,” one blunty-fingered hand tweaked a few still-damp curls, “there's still that striking resemblance—”

“Striking? The only striking round here—”

Was not, apparently, going to be Doyle fulfilling one of life's great ambitions on Bodie, but the neighbours, starting up again, and it was beginning to sound as if these blokes must have had a few megaphones lying around.

With the first sound, Bodie stopped looking at Doyle and Doyle stopped looking at Bodie, and both of them started staring at the blaring cops&spy programme unravelling on the screen.

This time, when silence fell, neither one of them was in any hurry to rush right in there and assume they were home free. Ten minutes, twenty minutes, half-an-hour.

Either it was genuine exhaustion, or it was disappointment that the floor show from next door had stopped, but Bodie announced he was going home.

“Fair enough,” Doyle said, not making the offer for Bodie to kip here, there being some rather urgent business for him to take care of. “See you tomorrow then.”

“What,” Bodie made rather a point of being appalled, “aren't you going to see me out?”

“Why, you lost again?” Doyle retorted making a point of matching Bodie in the appalled stakes, but he got to his feet anyway, traipsing along behind his still spit-and-polished partner, wondering how

the hell Bodie managed to stay so clean and pressed, and why anyone would want to even start out that way. "Here's the door," he said in his best *Watch With Mother* voice, "and here's the handle. I'm sure you'll be able to do this all by yourself next time." He actually tweaked Bodie's cheek, the one on his face, not his bum. "You're such a big boy now."

Bodie, never one to be outdone, said smugly: "Yeh, I am, aren't I?" and looked down at the front of his trousers. And promptly wished he'd kept his big mouth shut about his even bigger problem. Well, it was the first time he'd worn these trousers, how was he supposed to know they'd reveal a man in all his glory first chance they got—or first exposure to Doyle's new neighbours?

"So you are," Doyle managed to sound completely unimpressed, although he was having to fight the urge to cross his legs in self-preservation: Bodie was a big bugger, and given Doyle's proclivities, the very thought of bugger, and that big, in the same sentence was enough to make him reach for a bucket of KY. "And you can stop pointing that thing at me, Jake the Peg, and toddle off home."

"But then again," Bodie winked and rubbed his hands, succeeding in looking like the raddled old man from *Steptoe and Sons*, which was not a pretty picture and in fact threatened the reappearance of Doyle's curry, biryani and bhaji, "I might just pop in to see Claire..."

"Pop that in, and she'll probably explode." It dawned on Doyle that standing on the doorstep, discussing the size of his partner's cock was hardly the wisest thing to do, given that he and the other blokes had all moved in on the first of the month, that the racket had been going on, that the other blokes were smart enough to keep themselves discreetly from view right now, and that there were doors peeking open all down the hallway. Oh, great, he thought, shoving a very surprised, one might even say taken aback, Bodie back out the door and into the corridor, the door shutting firmly on Bodie's howl of protest, now they were all going to think it was he and Bodie making all that noise. Brilliant. He'd never be able to show his face in the lift again.

This time, their encounter had been with nothing more dangerous than stacked files, and although Bodie had a nasty papercut on his left pinky, they had survived the day in one piece, if

not unscathed, Cowley having been prowling the corridors like a bear with a sore head it was determined to share.

They were sitting blank-eyed in front of *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, at least, that's what Doyle had thought it was, but there was so much kow-towing and odd little bows directed to one of the upper boxes, and so much really boring crappy old stuff on, he was beginning to wonder.

"Here," he said, thumping his partner in the ribs again, which was always a most satisfying way of getting Bodie's attention, "I thought you said Rod Stewart was going to be on, with the Faces as well?"

"That's what Murphy told me."

A magic act, complete with the sort of fluffy white bunnies that always made Bodie think longingly of his Gran's rabbit stew, came on next, much to the applause of the lobotomised audience and the hoots and boos of Bodie and Doyle. Casting a jaded eye towards the screen—metaphorically speaking, of course, Doyle's eyes not being jade and Cowley not being the type to sympathise with someone half-blinding himself to protest what passed for television these days—Doyle made his decision. "This much rubbish—definitely has to be a Command Performance. See?" he said, the camera panning the audience giving him new evidence. "All them jewels, white tie and tails, sequined evening gowns—"

"And that's just the men."

Which was when those other men next door decided to start another session.

Funnier than the semi-slapstick, would-be comedy act on the screen, Bodie and Doyle sat side by side, not looking at each other. Then one would glance, look away quickly before getting caught. Then the other would do the same thing. They actually managed to keep this up enough to end up looking like the men's final at Wimbledon, until a particularly loud roar was followed by a very sudden silence. Needless to say, both their imaginations were running riot. A quick glance from Bodie, a quick glance from Doyle, the sudden resumption of life's little pleasures next door, and that was the recipe for two grown men dissolving completely into giggles. Not chuckles, guffaws, sniggerings or hilarity. Giggles. They'd be ashamed of themselves in the morning, or would have been, if any of their chums from CI5 had been privy to big butch Bodie and dangerous Doyle giggling like schoolgirls who

haven't yet moved on to bigger and better things.

The entire thing wasn't exactly helped by the next act on the telly, some bloke in black using a whip to crack cigarettes out of his assistant's mouth, the lash of his whip not even half as loud as the racket coming from next door.

Recovering somewhat, although his ribs would thank him to behave in a more adult, mature and less side-splitting manner next time, Doyle hiccupped: "But seriously," at which point Bodie started giggling again, setting Doyle off while next door there was something going on that seemed to involve a great deal of moaning, groaning, huffing, puffing and leather whips cracking. "No, no, I'm serious, Bodie."

"Yes, yes," Bodie plastered on his High Court Judge face, kept specially for occasions such as this and dressings-down from Cowley, "of course. The entire matter is of the utmost seriousness."

"Prat," Doyle said affectionately, thumping him in the ribs again. He nodded his head towards the wall whence came all those amazing sounds. "What d'you think they're up to in there?"

Bodie looked at him askance for that, or perhaps it was just that they were sitting side by side and he didn't want to risk looking at Doyle full on, not now that next door was shouting something about mounting and Bodie didn't think they were talking about butterflies or philately. "If I need to tell you, mate, then believe me, grey hairs or not, you're too bloody young to know."

Doyle looked at Bodie askance, which was hardly surprising: no-one ever mentioned Doyle's greying hair. Well, no-one but the bloke who put the colour rinse through it, but he was letting his mind wander, which wasn't a particularly good idea, given the way Bodie was looking at him. "No, it's all right," Doyle hastened to say, with a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that had absolutely nothing to do with the garlic toast and spaghetti bolognese he and Bodie had had for supper and had everything to do with being perceived as an innocent lacking in carnal experience: let Bodie think that and he'd never hear the end of Bodie's 'when I was in Africa...' stories with their insatiable women and rampant erections the size of rhino horns. Mind you, he still wasn't about to harp on about himself being older than Bodie and there was no way he was even going to mention the grey hairs that other people were polite enough not to notice. "Of course I bloody know

what they're doing in there—the Mother bloody Superior would know what they're doing. I was just curious about the specifics, that's all."

"Oh, the specifics," Bodie camped, fluttering those eyelashes again. "You mean what type of whip, whether or not they use a crop or a quirt, or sjambok?"

"Nah," Doyle replied loftily, refusing to be outdone whatever the hell Bodie's 'shambook' was, casually picking garlic-bread crumbs off his jeans, all the better to avoid looking at Bodie, "with that amount of sound, they have to be using a belt. A two-incher, I'd say."

Bodie craned round and looked at Doyle's crotch, then nodded sagely. "Yeh, two inches is about right. But never mind, little boy, when you grow up and your body starts to change, your little thing will start to get bigger."

If he had thought he could win, Doyle would have challenged Bodie to a ruler right then and there, but having not forgotten a single millimetre of what he'd seen the last time Bodie had been over, Doyle decided to let sleeping logs lie. "You'd be surprised how much it grows," Doyle opined, reclining back against the cushions as if he'd just won hands—or other parts of the anatomy—down.

There was a resounding crash from next door, enough to make these two tough agents wince and to make the man next door orgasm. Loudly, and in detail, and for once, with perfect diction.

"Taken the gag off, I hear," Doyle said casually, crossing his legs. It didn't take much to get him going, so it was no surprise that the carryings-on next door were having a very predictable, not to mention embarrassing, effect.

"Hmm, does sound that way, doesn't it?" Bodie agreed demurely, picking up last Sunday's newspaper and putting it on his lap to read, a ploy that failed miserably due to the minor detail that not only was the newspaper upside down, but he was wearing his good suit trousers which allowed rather more room for growth than was either wise or discreet. So much for thinking these were a better idea than the cream-coloured cords. Next time he came to Doyle's, Bodie vowed to himself, he was going to wear his brown gabardines, a long polo-neck, his three-quarter length coat and his cricket cup—but not necessarily in that order, of course.

Doyle, meanwhile, was beginning to put two and two together, what with Bodie's upside-down,

bulging newspaper and the last evening's delineating cords. "Here," he said, all bright eyed and bushy haired, "I've just realised something! About you, mate."

Cowley would have been most impressed by how well their infamous near-telepathy was working tonight. Bodie was just relieved: there was no mistaking that expression on Doyle's face, and there was not a snowball's chance that he was going to sit here and let Doyle say it. "Oh, look at the time," he said, not even trying to sound convincing, which was just as well considering how it came out, "and as our beloved boss would say, the night's are fair drawing in." Which was a lie, this being summer and the night's were getting like Doyle's patience, i.e. shorter. "I'd best be getting home."

"Course you should," Doyle told him, winking. "After all that hashing and bashing next door, I can see why you'd be in such a rush to get home. Need any help finding it?" Meaning, of course, the door.

Which meant it went without saying that Bodie misunderstood, blushing bright and ever so casually clasping his jacket at crotch level. "Thanks all the same," he said, standing on his dignity and a pea from last week's nearly dropped biryani, "but I know where it is."

Doyle, whose mind was probably filthier than Bodie's, caught on immediately. "Then you won't need to borrow my magnifying glass then, will you?"

"Course not," Bodie replied from the safety of the doorway, poised and ready for flight down the hall, "it's not *your* pud I'll be pulling, is it?"

It was Bodie's best exit line ever. It was also completely fellatious, sorry, fallacious, but that joyous event was for us to know about and them to find out.

This time, it was Bodie's new flat that was to blame. Some hideous office tower block stood between him and the BBC transmitter, resulting in broadcasts that bore a startling resemblance to Siberia in winter. Hence, Bodie got himself thence, inviting himself over to Doyle's to watch the *Old Grey Whistle Test*, never mind the fact that not everyone would consider it polite to turn up, unannounced at that, on someone's doorstep at eleven o'clock at night. Leaning on Doyle's doorbell, Bodie juggled the bags of chips and pickled onion that were alternately dripping vinegar down

his sleeve and burning his hands.

Doyle opened the door and, highly trained as he was, saw Bodie. "Beware Greeks bearing gifts," he said, stepping aside to let his partner in. "What're you after this time? Claire's brother find out you've been shagging both his sisters at the same time?"

"Duncan's a brain-dead twat who wouldn't recognise a shagging if it sat on his face," Bodie replied in a fine example of his breeding and background. "Wanted to see the *Old Grey Whistle Test* tonight—"

Doyle brought yet more of the Harp lager through, the bottle of tomato sauce balanced precariously on top, and when Bodie found out where Doyle had been carrying the brown sauce, that worthy would probably throw a fit. "What d'you want to see that for? Bunch of pretentious farts—"

"Just because the only taste you have in music is fucking *disco*—"

"It's not disco, it's dance music."

"Oh, yeh? And what's the difference?" Bodie grimaced as he rescued the brown sauce from Doyle's back pocket, but didn't hesitate to liberally cover his cod and chips. "See, you can't answer that, cause there isn't any difference—Abba, disco, 'dance', it's all the bloody same, isn't it?"

Not really, no, Doyle thought, 'dance' being what he heard in the straight clubs, and disco being what he fucked to in the gay ones.

"Well," Bodie said round a mouthful of too-hot cod, "apart from the fact that dance is the latest word so that people won't think a bloke's been hanging about queer clubs listening to disco."

"Oh," Doyle said lamely, stuffing a good-sized handful of chips into his mouth so he wouldn't have to answer, discovering to his dismay just how hot the damned chips were. Manfully restraining his tears, he mumbled: "I thought it was a musical difference myself..."

"You? Yeh, but you're stone deaf, aren't you?"

Doyle wondered if Bodie knew where this conversation were leading or if Bodie was just living down to his reputation of all brawn, no brain.

The familiar (to Bodie at least, Doyle having no time and not enough hearing left for Whispering Bob) theme music started, and Bodie actually shushed Doyle, who co-operated for once, mainly because he could hear odd, and really relatively quiet noises coming from next door. The usual

spanking noises were absent, and the roars of approval. All he could hear was a low murmuring and a creaking sound and maybe, just maybe...

"Oi, Bodie," he said as he turned the volume on the set down, "can you hear something from next door?"

Next door being synonymous with hearing things, Bodie gave Doyle a look and came over, turning the volume back up.

Doyle switched the set off completely, and grabbed Bodie by the arm. "No, I'm serious, listen."

Bodie listened, heard the same low moaning, the same metallic creaking, and under it, a low buzz that was probably some absolutely normal plaything, but which might, just might, be nastier.

"You don't suppose..." Doyle trailed off, verbally, not mentally.

"Look, just because they're not making their usual racket..." Bodie trailed off, mentally in his case, because there had been something said next door, something that sounded...happy.

"What the hell are they up to in there?" Doyle demanded.

"That, my old china," Bodie told him, steering him neatly back towards the sofa, "is none of our business."

There was a resounding yell of 'no!' from next door, and a very hefty thud.

Bodie looked at Doyle, and Doyle looked at Bodie.

They kept on looking at each other while the quiet from next door went on and on and on.

"What if something's gone wrong?" Doyle asked quite reasonably: funny how weeks of listening to someone having sex tended to make a person feel like he knew his neighbours.

There were more sounds coming from next door, dragging noises, the occasional thump and bump, which should have made a pleasant change from the tradition bump-and-grind.

Bodie shrugged, casting one last, lingering gaze at the television where he just knew Genesis were doing their thing right now. But then, next door might still be doing their thing and— "It's a brilliant excuse to find out exactly what they get up to, isn't it?"

Doyle grinned like a gargoyle but with far less connection to any church building. "We'd be like Boy Scouts, wouldn't we? Doing our bit for the community."

"Helping little old ladies across the road."

"Making sure our sadomasochistic neighbours haven't got themselves tied up in the wrong knots..."

"Boy Scouts always do knots," Bodie said, bowing his partner out the front door. "And if we're really lucky," he said just before Doyle turned the corridor corner, "they'll invite us in."

Doyle popped his head back round the corner. "For a spot of tea," he said with wide-eyed innocence.

Bodie nearly ruptured himself laughing—Doyle, innocent? Oh, that was a good one!

Being quiet as a mouse although considerably larger, Bodie crept round the corner, almost colliding with Doyle's bum. The rest of Doyle was in the way too, but it was his rear-end doing the sticking out, and Bodie very nearly availed himself of the opportunity to fondle his crouched-down partner. "Ray," he whispered.

No response.

"Ray!"

Doyle finally looked up from where he'd been peering through the letter box. "Can't see a fucking thing. Can't see any fucking either."

"That's what I was going to tell you. The window cleaner was here today, right?"

"How the hell would I know? I was at work, which is more than I can say for some people."

"I was working too," Bodie muttered, not telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth, going through a blackmailer's confiscated collection of compromising photographs not exactly arduous labour. "But I knew the window cleaner was here because he's left his ladder here to finish the job tomorrow."

"His ladder, did you say?" Doyle did actually say. "Outside, where we can put it up to the window?"

That chuckle should carry a government warning or an X rating, or both, Bodie decided, following his rapidly disappearing partner along the corridor and down the stairs. Doyle couldn't half move when he put his mind, and those long legs of his, to it. By the time Bodie was round the back of the building, squeezing between the parked lorry and the windowless side wall of the next block of flats, Doyle had already found the ladder and was trying to angle it up to the appropriate window.

"For god's sake, Ray, make that much noise and they'll hear you!"

"That pair? Once they get started, they wouldn't

hear the second coming unless it was one of them.”

“Yes, but we’re supposed to be spying on private citizens out of concern for them, due to the possibly dangerous change in their normal practices, aren’t we?”

“Oh, yeh, we are, aren’t we? Anyway,” between them, Bodie and Doyle had manoeuvred the ladder into position and Doyle was already scaling it like a diva rehearsing an opera, “it’s not as if we’re doing any harm, is it? Oh, my,” he whispered, and Bodie couldn’t hear the comment, could only see Doyle’s lips move and his eyes widen. “Oh, my, my.”

“What?” Bodie whispered fiercely.

Doyle just grinned.

Safety be damned: Bodie was up that ladder in two seconds flat, standing one rung below Doyle, clinging on precariously just under Doyle’s white knuckled hands.

Bodie peered over Doyle’s shoulder, looking in between the slats on the half-opened venetian blinds that weren’t blinding much from view at all. “Fucking hell!” Bodie breathed out loud, in genuine and awestruck admiration. “Would you take a look at that!”

“I already have,” Doyle whispered back, eyes front, fixed on the source of all that noise. It was definitely a blackroom, complete with festoonings of leather, everything from chest harnesses to the wickedest ball-stretchers that ever made a non-masochist cross his legs. There were whips and quirts and yes, Bodie saw, right there between the heavy leather belts and the ivory-handled cat-o’-nine-tails, was a beautiful sjambok. There were racks and racks of other stuff hanging about, but Bodie and Doyle were more interested in what was hanging about in the middle of the room. Two middle-aged men, one in full leather hood with mouthpiece, tit-clamps, English cage and ball-stretcher, the other middle-aged man naked apart from a very nice studded leather harness across his chest and the gleam of nipple-rings. The one in the hood was trying, with the very gentle help of his friend, to climb back into the leather sling that was suspended from the two-by-six attached to some sort of wooden support frame. The entire rig was ingenious, but obviously new, judging by the fact that the hooded man had fallen out of the thing, thus explaining the thud and the dragging sounds.

“Not murder, just mayhem,” Bodie murmured into the hair over Doyle’s right ear.

“Looks that way. Here, look at that! Christ, small

wonder we could hear it buzzing on the other side of the wall.” A long pause as they both watched, dry-mouthed, as one man slid that huge vibrator up the other man’s well-lubricated bum. “Ouch,” Doyle said quietly.

“Oh, sorry,” Bodie said, trying to lean back far enough that his erection wouldn’t be poking at Doyle.

It hadn’t been Doyle Bodie had been poking, but one of the ladder rungs. Bodie now having moved, the same thing could no longer be said. Well, it could be said, but it would be a bare-faced lie, and it wasn’t Bodie’s *face* Doyle was particularly interested in baring. “Getting to you too, is it?” he asked, moving his leg as much as he could, which was surprisingly much, considering he was up a great big ladder.

“Me too? You mean you—”

“That’s my Bodie,” Doyle whispered, “the articulate half of our team.”

“Yeh, well,” Bodie replied, forgetting to finish his comment as the unrestrained man in the room turned towards the window.

It was probably the fastest retreat in British history.

They neither one of them stopped until they were safely inside Doyle’s flat, door locked and the pair of them posed on the couch as if they’d never even heard of ladders in their lives before.

It was awfully, awfully quiet.

“Quiet, aren’t they?” Bodie said.

“Yeh. They are,” Doyle said. Another little pause. “I make more noise than that myself.”

“Do you?” Bodie replied remarkably calmly considering his cock was boring a hole through his underwear and his heart was thumping its way through his chest wall. “I’m neither one way or the other.”

“Oh,” Doyle said, realising he could take that anyway he fancied. He sat there, hands primly in his lap to cover his very unprim response, not looking at Bodie, trying to work out if Bodie’s little performance—well, pretty huge, really, now that he stopped to think about it again—on the ladder were just generalised lust for anything still warm, under fifty and willing, or if it had something to do with the fact that Bodie had been plastered against Doyle watching someone get a vibrator up his bum.

“So,” Bodie said, “you’re loud in bed then, are you?”

Next door, the neighbours had obviously

discarded the hood and mouthpiece, although that sling just might still be in use: something was being done that involved shrieks of ‘ride ‘em, cowboy’ and someone bellowing like a bull.

“Yeh,” Doyle replied as soon as the racket had died down. “Yourself? You said neither one nor the other?”

Bodie could feel the mood-spoiling giggles just waiting to rise as prominently as his cock: typical, he thought, the two of us sitting here discussing our sex habits the way other people chat over a cup of tea with the Vicar. “Well, you know how it is. Sometimes it’s best to be quiet, and then other

times, I’ve been told I make more noise coming into the station than the Flying Scotsman—and no, they’ve never even met Cowley never mind given him any drugs.”

“Fair enough,” Doyle said ever so casually, pausing a minute as they both crossed their legs in response to the call for gelding that came bellowing enthusiastically from next door. “Fancy drowning that pair out?”

“Why not,” said Bodie, grabbing Doyle by the hand and leading him off into the bedroom, a long way from gelding but hopefully only minutes away from mounting. “Save us a fortune on earplugs...”