



The Girl
in the
Green Coat

MARK ANTHONY

Thanks to Safedem's William Sinclair for his help in the writing of this short story. He helped clarify some of the terminology used in this story and is the inspiration for many (though not all) of the protagonist's traits. This short story would have been impossible without him.

When everything is stripped away, the inside of all buildings is the colour of bones buried and long-forgotten.

CHAPTER ONE

Bill is a man of contradictions. Away from work and away from site, he is sociable, gregarious even. The life and soul of the party.

During work hours, he is different. He is focused, rejecting all distractions around him. He prefers to work with his mobile phone on silent or – better still – switched off entirely.

Although he commands the respect of his co-workers, most of them would describe him as a loner. Some might go so far as to call him unsociable.

But no-one can question his track record.

In a career spanning almost 30 years, he has personally carried out the explosive demolition of well over 100 structures including just over 40 tower blocks here in his native UK and as far afield as India and New Zealand.

And while a few of those structures have given him sleepless nights, and one or two proved to be rather more stubborn than he had anticipated, he had never experienced the ignominy and humiliation of a stand-up. Not one.

So on his latest project, his colleagues largely leave him to himself. They might share a morning coffee and some pre-work

chit-chat. But when Bill has his game face on, everyone gives him a wide berth.

And Bill is more than happy with that. He's happy that he can just focus entirely upon the job in hand. He's happy that he doesn't have to share tools, small talk or work space. And, most of all, Bill is happy that he doesn't have to explain for the gazillionth time quite why he works the way he does.

Some people are content with a "my way or the highway" philosophy. That is far too wishy-washy for Bill.

In Bill's world, it is Bill's way. Period. There is no "or". There is no second option. Bill selects the blast floors. Bill designs the blast sequence. Bill places the explosive charges. Bill hooks up the det' cord. And at the appointed time on the appointed day, when he is content with his preparations, Bill hits the plunger. There is no auction to see who presses the button on the day. There are no fireworks or pyrotechnics. There are no viewing platforms. And there is strictly no shouts of "fire in the hole". Bill dismisses this as American nonsense. "There is no fire, and there is no hole" he says, if anyone is stupid enough to ask.

CHAPTER ONE

Bill is a man of contradictions. Away from work and away from site, he is sociable, gregarious even. The life and soul of the party.

During work hours, he is different. He is focused, rejecting all distractions around him. He prefers to work with his mobile phone on silent or – better still – switched off entirely.

Although he commands the respect of his co-workers, most of them would describe him as a loner. Some might go so far as to call him unsociable.

But no-one can question his track record.

In a career spanning almost 30 years, he has personally carried out the explosive demolition of well over 100 structures including just over 40 tower blocks here in his native UK and as far afield as India and New Zealand.

And while a few of those structures have given him sleepless nights, and one or two proved to be rather more stubborn than he had anticipated, he had never experienced the ignominy and humiliation of a stand-up. Not one.

So on his latest project, his colleagues largely leave him to himself. They might share a morning coffee and some pre-work chit-chat. But when Bill has his game face on, everyone gives him a wide berth.

And Bill is more than happy with that. He's happy that he can just focus entirely upon the job in hand. He's happy that he doesn't have to share tools, small talk or work space. And, most of all, Bill is happy that he doesn't have to explain for the gazillionth time quite why he works the way he does.

Some people are content with a "my way or the highway" philosophy. That is far too wishy-washy for Bill.

In Bill's world, it is Bill's way. Period. There is no "or". There is no second option. Bill selects the blast floors. Bill designs the blast sequence. Bill places the explosive charges. Bill hooks up the det' cord. And at the appointed time on the appointed day, when he is content with his preparations, Bill hits the plunger. There is no auction to see who presses the button on the day. There are no fireworks or pyrotechnics. There are no viewing platforms. And there is strictly no shouts of "fire in the hole". Bill

dismisses this as American nonsense. “There is no fire, and there is no hole” he says, if anyone is stupid enough to ask.

CHAPTER TWO

Upton House was built in the late 1960s and was opened to its first residents in January 1970 at the dawning of a new decade.

Like many of the tower blocks built during the same period, it was designed as a futuristic city in the sky; a 23-storey vertical dream town in its own right; an entire community of people stacked neatly on top of one another.

Also like many of the tower blocks built during the same period, the clouds gathered quickly around this city in the sky, and it soon fell into disrepair.

During the early years, that creeping dilapidation manifested itself as lifts that worked only sporadically and that smelled of piss constantly. Then came the graffiti and the wider vandalism.

Soon, Upton House and the neighbouring Boleyn Tower became a refuge for the poor and the underprivileged. Shortly after, the twin towers became a magnet to the criminal gangs that peddled drugs and quickly turned that dream town into a living nightmare.

The majority of homes on the ground floor and the first floor fell empty when residents grew tired of replacing broken windows on a weekly and sometimes daily basis.

Many more left during the 1990s when knife crime escalated into gun crime. Those that stayed did so not out of choice but through lack of choice. And they kept themselves to themselves. Which is why no-one noticed when the girl in the green coat stopped playing on the tiny grass verge outside the entrance to Upton House. Which is why no-one reported the smell coming from Flat 23 on the 11th floor. And which is why no-one apparently heard little Alice screaming that she didn't want to leave when the police finally led her away.

CHAPTER THREE

In his head, Bill had selected the blast floors the first time he walked through the now bare corridors of Upton House.

As usual, he would pop the ground and first floors, take out the fifth floor to further weaken the structure and then blast the 11th and 17th floors to allow gravity to drive the weight of the structure downwards into a controlled heap.

Each of those blasts would be controlled individually. Each would happen separately. But the entire sequence would last less than a second. And nine seconds later, the block would pancake under its own weight; turning 23-storeys of disused homes into roughly two storeys of concrete and rubble.

Bill was working on the 11th floor, and he was out of breath. In typical fashion, the lifts had long since been removed, meaning that he had to take the stairs. This was a double-edged sword.

Climbing the stairs to the 11th and then the 17th floors was hard work at his age. It played Hell with his knees and his calves. He often arrived at the appointed floor dripping in sweat. On

more than one occasion, he had been forced to sit on the stairs, dots dancing in front of his eyes.

But that hard work showed itself as a significant weight loss during the course of the preparations for a blow-down. In fact, he actually owned two pairs of jeans: one with a 42-inch waist for the start of a project; and second pair with a 38-inch waist for just prior to the blowdown.

The eleventh floor was thankfully open to the elements; the external cladding having been removed along with the doors, windows and partition walls. A gentle breeze greeted him as he mopped his brow once more and set to work.

The selected columns had already been drilled. With the blast now just over a day away, Bill was placing the explosives and meticulously connecting all the charges. And Bill was doing so in Bill's own unique way.

He gently placed each set of explosives into the pre-drilled hole by hand before pushing it into place using a podger; a crude wooden tool given to him more than 20 years ago by a Scottish blaster.

The podger was made out of a bit of old dowling. It was scratched and weathered. But after two decades of use, it had taken on a sentimental value in Bill's mind. And if Bill was involved in a blast, then that podger would be there too.

The wind, though light, continued to blow through the building, disturbing the dust on the floors and giving a gentle almost melodic soundtrack to Bill's work.

Bill had been in enough empty tower blocks to know that the soundtrack for each was as unique as the people that once lived in them. Some possess an almost ethereal tone, like a single note being played endlessly on a church organ. Others sound mournful, like distant whale song. He worked in several in Scotland that sounded like the wail of a banshee when the wind picked up.

But as Bill podged another set of explosives into place, the sound shifted, quickly and without warning, as if the wind had suddenly changed direction, rising in pitch and volume to a deafening scream. Bill didn't notice. He was in the zone and nothing could break his concentration.

CHAPTER FOUR

Seemingly, everyone knew Alice, the little girl that played on the grass verge outside the entrance to Upton House. Everyone would recognise her by the distinctive green coat that she seemed to wear almost year round. That green coat that seemed too nice and too expensive for these surroundings.

Yet no-one seemed to recall her mother. Or her father. Or any siblings. In fact, save for a few people that actually lived on the 11th floor themselves, very few people seemed entirely sure that the little girl or her family actually lived at Upton House at all.

But Alice and her mother had been there for almost six years. Her father lived there for a short while too although no-one – including Alice who was less than a year old when he left – actually remembered him.

Which was probably just as well. Her father had been an alcoholic; an angry and violent drunk who sought to avenge the bad hand life had dealt him by punching his wife whenever he had drink on him.

That was bad enough when he was still managing to hold down a job and when pay-day would finance a weekend-long bender. But when he predictably lost his job for arriving at work stinking of booze one time too many, he no longer felt the need to wait for pay-day; and the beatings grew more frequent, and more brutal.

By the time the police finally hauled him away, his wife – Alice's mother – was a spent ruin; old before her time. She was painfully thin, her eyes sunken and lined in black. She rarely ventured outside, preferring to send Alice to the nearby corner shop instead.

On the rare occasions she was spotted outside, local residents spoke of her as frail and nervous. Most assumed that she was one of the many customers of the local drug gangs.

Even her own mother – Alice's maternal grandmother – was certain she was a junkie. In fact, the grandmother was so sure that her daughter would spend all her money on drugs that she stopped giving her any.

She might arrive carrying bags of food and groceries, to make sure that little Alice would have something to eat. But she would not give her daughter cash. And she wouldn't give Alice money either, in case her daughter stole it and snorted it, injected it or whatever else these druggies did.

That was how Alice came to possess that striking green coat. Her grandmother had bought it for her birthday while on a shopping trip in London's West End.

She'd bought it in the sale, but even then it had been expensive. And the grandmother had written Alice's name on the lining, just below the collar, in case one of the kids on that terrible housing estate stole it and claimed it as their own.

Even as little Alice was unwrapping it and trying it for size, her grandmother was convinced that her daughter would probably sell it to fund her drug habit the moment her back was turned.

She never did. In fact, Alice's mother had never so much as tried drugs. And while she had once enjoyed the occasional glass of wine with friends, she had seen what booze had done to her husband, and she didn't drink any more either.

The bruises and scars from the countless beatings she had endured over the years had long since faded and disappeared. But the effects remained.

After years of trying to appear small and even invisible, she had largely managed both. She ate rarely, ventured outside even less. And when she finally died at the age of just 31, virtually no-one noticed.

Except Alice.

CHAPTER FIVE

The wind has picked up noticeably when Bill arrives for work. He grabs his hard hat from the boot of his trusty Land Rover Discovery and pops the collar of his lined high vis' jacket to protect his face from the stiffening breeze.

With just over 24 hours to go until the long-awaited blast, Bill is staring down the barrel of a very busy day indeed.

After a cup of coffee in the site office, he heads to the secure store with young Dave. Young Dave isn't actually that young. But when there are two Daves working on a site, you have to find some way to differentiate between them. The lads had tried numbering them, but Old Dave took it badly when the younger lads started calling him Number Two.

They each pick up a box of det' cord, walk around the side of Upton House and into the biting wind before climbing the stairs to the 11th floor.

Although he doesn't say it out loud, Bill makes it very clear that young Dave's presence is no longer required. Dave doesn't

need telling twice and is about the head back down the stairs when he stops, his head cocked slightly like a confused dog.

“Did you hear that?” Dave asks.

“Hear what,” Bill responds, already slightly impatiently.

“It sounded like a voice; like someone screaming.”

“It’s just the wind,” Bill says as he walks away, keen to bring to a close this pointless conversation.

“No, seriously,” says young Dave. “It sounded like someone screaming ‘I can’t leave’”

Bill keeps walking, shaking his head slightly in a mixture of disbelief and displeasure.

Dave, clearly rattled, heads towards the stairwell again. And again he stops. “There it is again!”

But Bill is out of earshot and, frankly, he has made it very clear that he is not even remotely interested.

By now, Bill has set about the task in hand; wiring up the det' cord ahead of tomorrow's blast.

And here, once again, Bill has his own way of doing things. He carefully suspends and connects all the det' cord at waist height.

He originally started doing this years ago to allow him to check and re-check connections without having to scrabble around in the dirt. He also adopted this approach to avoid having what he describes as "pounds of spaghetti" strewn across the floor as a potential trip hazard.

But in his advancing years, he now has another unspoken reason for arranging all the connections at waist height. Having walked up dozens of flights of stairs, the last thing his knees need is to be constantly bending, squatting, kneeling and standing.

There is another reason too; also unspoken. Bill wants – in fact Bill NEEDS – the spider's web of det' cord to look pleasing to the eye. Hardly anyone else will actually get to see his handiwork at

this late stage. So, in truth, that intricate spider's web has to satisfy only his critical eye.

After several hours, Bill takes a break. There is a rickety wooden chair in the corner of the 11th floor. Quite why it is there when everything else has been removed is something of a mystery. But he is grateful of it.

He takes a seat, grabs his Thermos flask from his rucksack, and pours himself a coffee.

The wind is howling now, blowing the steam from his freshly-poured coffee horizontally. He smiles to himself as the wind screams through the building. Although he couldn't hear actual words, he had to admit there was something vaguely human about the sound it made; not that he would ever say as much to young Dave.

Bill cups his hands around the piping hot cup, and surveys his morning's work. He is pleasantly satisfied. All the right angles run at right angles; all the cord is off the ground; and all the

connections look to be in place. He sits back in the chair which groans slightly under his weight.

Hundreds of people used to live in this block. Whole families, living their lives; cradle to grave. The colour of their homes would have reflected those lives. The colour of the carpets, the patterns of the wallpaper they had chosen, the hue of the furniture and of the clothes they wore.

But those people have long gone; and they have taken those colours with them.

And when everything is stripped away, the inside of all buildings is the colour of bones buried and long-forgotten; a neutral non-colour that is somewhere between beige and battleship grey.

Aside from the 1970s yellow of the det' cord, that bone colour is the only shade that Bill can see.

He reaches for his iPhone to take a couple of snaps of his morning's work. These will join the hundreds of very similar photos on his phone's Camera Roll. No-one else will ever get to

see them. Truth be told, Bill rarely looks at them himself. But they are an additional check that he can run over tonight at the hotel, if he chooses to.

He finishes the coffee, shakes a few last drops from the cup and puts his flask back in his backpack.

The wind shrieks with its human voice once again. And even Bill – ever the sceptic – admits to himself that it does sound like someone screaming “I can’t leave.”

CHAPTER SIX

The local newspapers claimed that Alice's mother had been dead for just over a week before she was finally discovered. Neighbours reckoned it was closer to three weeks; that the smell that greeted the police actually made several of them vomit in the corridor.

Neighbours also claimed that the body had been blackened by decay and decomposition; that the entire 11th floor filled with flies when the police broke in; that Alice was sat on the sofa beside her mother, holding her hand and talking gently to her.

But it was all little more than ghoulish speculation. The police were greeted with an horrendous stench, and yes, there were a good many flies. But all of this took place away from the prying eyes of residents. No-one aside from the police saw where Alice was when they arrived. And her mother's body was bagged and tagged before it left the flat.

The only part of the story where the police, local people and the local newspapers concurred was in the removal of Alice from the premises.

She refused to leave. She shouted that she wanted to stay with her mother. She shouted to her mother. She shouted AT her mother.

Eventually, a female police officer was called to take little Alice away. She swept the little girl into her arms. She felt frail, like a baby bird.

Her face was dirty; her hair matted. And her expensive-looking green coat was caked in mud and filth.

As the police officer carried her out of the flat, little Alice grabbed the frame of the front door in a last attempt to stay with her mother.

“I can’t leave,” she screamed. “That’s my mum. I can’t leave.”

Next door neighbours swear they could still hear Alice screaming “I can’t leave” as the elevator carried her down to the ground floor and away to a waiting police car.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bill secures the final connection on the 11th floor, turns and takes one last look at his day's work. He walks along each line of cord, weighing each connection lightly in his hand to assure himself that all the connections are secure.

He then walks into one corner and takes a photo. Walks to the opposite corner, and takes another. In all, he takes six final photos of the 11th floor before picking up his bag, his det' cord, and heading up the stairwell to repeat the process on the 17th floor.

The wind shrieks one final time before falling largely silent as he climbs the stairs to complete the blast preparations. As he sets about completing the connections on the 17th floor, the wind is nothing more than faint whisper.

CHAPTER EIGHT

With this part of the project almost at an end, some of the lads are planning a night on the tiles, heading up West for a celebratory beer or six.

Bill stays in the hotel, same as always. He eats alone in the hotel restaurant, same as always. And as his work here is almost done, he rewards himself with a large steak – well done – and chips. Same as always.

Even though it is Saturday night, the hotel restaurant is surprisingly quiet. Like Bill, most of those dining are doing so alone. Some exchange glances and nods; British short-hand for “yes, I am eating alone but don’t think for one minute that gives you permission to join me”.

This is familiar territory to Bill. And rather than having to engage in small talk with a shower curtain salesman from Grimsby, Bill does the same thing he always does in these situations.

He places his phone on the table and begins to half-read the days’ news.

He has just about caught up with the latest goings-on in the world when his steak arrives. He thanks the waiter and tucks in.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a man looking in his direction, quite possibly about to interrupt Bill's dinner. So he makes a pre-emptive strike; reaching for his phone and flicking through a few apps to keep the man at bay.

As he chews another piece of steak, his index finger alights on his Photos and his Camera Roll. Without even thinking about it, he opens the app and begins to flick through the photos he took on the 17th floor.

It shows the neat spider's web of det' cord and connections that he finished just a few hours before. He flicks through all six photos with growing satisfaction.

He then gets to the photos of the 11th floor. He can tell immediately that it is the 11th floor because that rickety old chair still sits in the corner.

The walls are that familiar grey/beige; the det' cord that even more familiar yellow.

But as he swipes across his iPhone screen to the second photo, something catches his eye. There, in the corner, right by that old chair is a flash of green he doesn't recall seeing.

He rotates his phone through 90 degrees to take a closer look and – sure enough, there it is; a green shape right by the chair upon which he had drunk his coffee.

He swipes to the next photo, and there is that green shape again. Only this time, it is over by the stairwell.

He swipes to the next one and then the next. Each photo has that green shape in it somewhere. Each time, it is in a different position. And each time, it is at roughly the same height, the middle of that green shape falling roughly in line with the height of the det' cord.

CHAPTER NINE

Bill rarely sleeps well the night before an implosion, as he plays over the connections and blast sequences in his head. But this time, he doesn't sleep at all.

Several times in the night, he reaches for his phone which is on charge on the hotel night-stand to look at those photos one more time, possibly in the hope that the green shape has somehow gone away.

But it hasn't.

Eventually, he accepts the fact that sleep will elude him tonight. He slips out of bed, makes himself a cup of tea, and starts to get dressed, slipping easily into the pair of 38-inch waist jeans he wears on blast day.

It is still dark outside, and it is a good five hours before he will hit that plunger to bring down Upton House once and for all.

He paces uneasily in his room before finally giving in to his instincts. He picks up his gear and heads for his car.

The streets are almost entirely empty, save for the occasional black cab. So he arrives on site while it is still dark.

He rotates the combination on the padlock that secures the main gate to the site and drives in, locking the gate behind him.

It is only now that he actually starts to question quite what he is going to do next. But, in his heart of hearts, he already knows.

He puts on his PPE and climbs the stairs to the 11th floor.

The chair is precisely where he left it. The det' cord still pleases his eye and satisfies that very peculiar brand of OCD that Bill apparently possesses.

He sweeps his torch through 180 degrees as he walks around the 11th floor. There is no green shape. In fact, there is no colour whatsoever, just his flashlight illuminating thousands of tiny dust particles that hover and float in mid-air.

Outside, the air is silent. There is no wind, no traffic noise. But in about four hours, Bill knows that peace will be momentarily shattered.

He takes one last look around and heads down to the site office. It is almost three hours before anyone else arrives. It is almost four hours before the police carry out their final security sweep, cordon off the various roads around Upton House and give Bill and his team the green light to proceed.

The team retires to a designated area more than 300 metres from the base of the building. Bill stands alone about 50 metres closer to the foot of Upton House.

As the countdown begins, he scans the surrounding area. As the countdown reaches seven, Bill turns his face up, his eyes quickly calculating which of these otherwise identical floors is the 11th.

He holds the plunger in his left hand, his right hand raised ready to strike the button that will initiate the blast sequence. His eyes, meanwhile, dart back and forth searching the 11th floor for a green shape.

But he sees nothing.

As the countdown reaches zero, he strikes the button just as he has done dozens of times before.

There is a noise that sounds like rapid gunfire, followed by a brief pause. Then a series of deep, echoing booms as the main charges go off; then the roar of the building falling in on itself. A structure that took over a year to erect crumbles in under 10 seconds as dust plumes rise into the morning air.

From Bill's vantage point, he sees the building begin to fall before vanishing behind a huge dust cloud.

He can hear applause far off to his right, quite possibly from his work colleagues. He can hear whoops and shouts off to his left where a number of local residents have gathered to see their skyline changed forever.

As the dust begins to slide away to Bill's left, the remnants of the 23-storey Upton House emerge slowly into view.

The edge of the rubble pile is precisely where it should be. The building appears to have broken up, exactly as planned.

Soon, the dust dissipates to reveal the entire rubble pile. The building has fallen in on itself, gravity turning 23-storeys into just two or three. But to Bill's expert eye, there is something strange.

One of the floors looks to have survived the fall almost entirely. There are thousands of tonnes of rubble piled on top of it. There are thousands of tonnes of rubble all around it.

But this one floor looks as if it has been lowered gently to the ground. In fact, as the air clears, Bill realises that he can see straight through that one intact floor. And he is pretty sure he can see a spider's web of yellow det' cord criss-crossing it.

A structural engineer will need to take a very close look before that remaining floor can be demolished using one of the three excavators standing by in the nearby compound. There will be a de-briefing in which Bill will need to explain quite why the charges on that particular floor failed to initiate.

He will need to retrace his steps to find out just what went wrong and where. But he already knows where.

Even without taking a step towards the last vestiges of Upton House, he already knows that it is the 11th floor that has survived.

CHAPTER TEN

The structural engineer's analysis takes several days. Getting the nod from the Health and Safety Executive takes even longer.

So it is just over a week before Bill and the team are allowed back onto the site to begin the mechanical demolition of the former Upton House.

But before Bill allows the excavators to do their thing, he wants to take one last look; make one last check of the charges and connectors that failed.

He carefully climbs over a huge heap of rubble, making his way to the gaping maw of that single storey that survived both the blast and the subsequent fall from the heavens.

All the det' cord is precisely where he left it. All the connections remain in place. There is no visible reason why the blast sequence failed. No reason at all.

As he walks the length and breadth of the floor, he spies the back of that rickety of chair upon which he had sat while he took those photos.

The chair is still upright, seemingly unmoved by its sudden decent.

Bill walks towards it, half considering sitting upon it one last time as he attempts to fathom just why this tiny section of the building had remained intact. How one floor out of 23 had survived both the blast AND the fall.

As he gets closer to the chair, Bill can see there is something on it. Something that wasn't on it before. Something that has no place in an environment the colour of bones buried and long-forgotten.

It is a coat; the sort of coat that might fit a little girl of around seven or eight years old. It is the same green colour that Bill had spotted in the photos from the 11th floor just prior to the blast. It is dirty and dusty but it looks expensive, far too nice to be in a place like this.

It has been folded neatly and lovingly onto the chair.

Like someone had placed it there carefully, one last time before they left.

And there in the lining of the coat, just below the collar, someone has written a single word in indelible marker.

Alice