

Zero Hour

by Paul Phillips

The stone, rough-edged and hurled with some force, hits his shoulder like a truncheon and skips off, grazing his temple on its way. He spins around, nearly losing his balance.

“Get on with it,” Killer calls.

Rat touches his head and examines the blood on his fingertips. He nods.

His position atop the rubble mound is precarious. This is not one of those mounds that have been neatly stacked by the women; it has been created naturally by the avalanches and eruptions of collapsing buildings and there are unknown stresses and cavities.

Which is why Killer has chosen him.

He looks back down the steep slope of broken brickwork and detritus. The bigger boy stands at the bottom, shimmering in the strange light. Are they in Arabia? The ochre earth and muddy, bloody water holes, the haze of brick dust and the vast, uncertain expanses would have it so.

And Grub’s camel train, if that was real.

He can make her out from up here: standing near the other little ones and yet apart from them, one ragged arm flung up to shield her eyes. Then he spots one of Killer’s lieutenants picking up another stone to hand to his master.

The Rat begins to dig.

Bricks and brick dust and pieces of brick. Old stone and ornamental plasterwork. Old bits of balcony. Flattened steam pipes. Strands of flex. Mouldy curtains. The more you look at the ruins, the more the colours come alive: the rust-red girders, the virulent mosses and weeds and patches of lilac, the bright flecks of broken glass and porcelain, the septic swellings of old books and sheet-music, the blue-black slickness of his namesakes the rats and the faded floral print on a desiccated arm. The deeper you go, the less the brick dust, the deeper, darker, damper the materials and the colours. There are sharper odours, and echoes, and exhalations. Things start to resist, tangled all together and clinging to the underworld. Bedsprings. A birdcage. Wires and cables. And then, behind a splintered Chinese screen and a bullet-riddled advertisement for something beginning with Z, a door.

He raises his head out of the crater he has made. No one can see him from street level.

A door, or half a door. It's the driver's door of a tram, the remains of one. It must have been blasted up here onto an older mound before the rest of the building came down and buried it. There's no hope of opening it but the window – long ago replaced with wire-reinforced plastic – has buckled and blown in. A Rat should be able to force it aside and crawl through the hole.

As he lands inside the upended tramcar and scrabbles for a hand-hold he senses two things immediately: the terrible weight of rubble crushing down on this thin metal shell, threatening to squash it like a tube of toothpaste; and the fact that he is not alone in here. He feels and hears movement – not rats, something much bigger – and then there comes the sound of breathing, every bit as stressed and frightened as his own.

"Who's there?" he hears himself try to call out, though the dust and the dust-mask and his frenzied heartbeat choke the words. "I got pals with me. They got guns."

Near enough to be true, he thinks, though not exactly and Killer's no pal.

There's no reply, just the panting. His eyes are adjusting to the gloom, picking out upside-down posters with aeroplanes and gas masks, but all he can make sense of at the deeper, darker end of the cabin is a nest of charred timbers and an arrangement of blankets like a tent.

From somewhere in there a voice says: "I can pay you."

Rat tenses, baring his teeth, making his hands claws. He needs a knife, but Killer holds onto them too: he's not stupid.

A grown-up's voice – a man's, pain-wracked, but not so poorly as to make you think he's dying here. This is his hideout. And by his accent not a local but not a foreigner either. A fugitive. A deserter.

The next exchange confirms it.

"Pay me for what?"

"For not finding me, for not saying nothing to no-one. I can pay you," he gasps again and in spite of the situation Rat nearly laughs. Has the fellow been hiding here so long he doesn't know the world has stopped? From the smell of sickness and the smell of shit, and the flies, he's been shut up here awhile, but surely not long enough to still believe in money. It's a barter economy now, that's what Killer tells them. One egg equals four pieces of coal equals three cigarettes. Other options too, for the girls and some of the boys, but not the Rat, not yet at any rate, nor Grub if he can help it. Not that anyone would. Not that anyone can even bear to look at her except him.

Not for the first time, the glimmer of an idea flickers silently along the skyline of his consciousness.

"What you got?" he says.

There is rustling and grunting. (He's back in the green wood, trapping wild boar.) Then into the shaft of dusty light emerges a hand. At first he thinks it's burned and peeling too but that's only the old leather glove. Held between its finger and thumb are two flat green-grey tins.

"What is it?" There's a squeak in his voice now, even as he tries to make himself sound bigger. He knows he's going to have to go down to that end of the cabin.

"Wound tablets. Sulfa." A pause. A nervous attempt at a chuckle, maybe, but sucked back in. "Gold dust, kid."

It's 'kid' that does it. He scampers down there and back almost with a roar. The floor nearly gives – the ceiling, of course. The tins are in his hand. And in his mind, behind his eyes, like that

time they sneaked up behind the sheet when the Invaders were showing their Weekly Review of prancing horses and trampled banners, the man's face.

The man's fear.

His father's cracked, black, military chronograph has a blue-tipped day hand and a window that displays the month. Both of these are out of date. Although he used to reset the time by the terminus clock and still winds the watch when he is able, he has never summoned the strength of will to correct the calendar settings and so with nearly every other month – and now two Februaries – the watch slips further into the past.

But the terminus clock lies beneath the rubble in the flooded subway, the church tower has snapped off like a rotten tooth and all the other clocks have stopped, or lost their hands, or vanished. Grub says she thinks she saw the astronomical clock from the plaza swaying atop an endless camel train that was taking loot across the island to the east. Curiosity might have driven her closer but a dust storm came up and swallowed everything.

Time has been stolen. The future has been stolen. Each day begins anew and ends where it began. The stars and planets have come adrift to spin chaotically across the sky. The past, what's left of it under the rubble, is no longer something to be cherished; nor can one maintain any kind of link with it, no matter how resolutely one tries to keep count. Memories are worthless.

That's what he tells himself, and her.

Three faces stare back at him. The biggest lies on its cheekbone in the churned-up earth, a woman's face, blank-eyed, scorched black then shrapnel-splashed and shot-up yellow-white again as though the world has faded to a photographic negative and it is damage that is pure. She has a torso draped in pretend cloth, and half an arm. Grub says the woman is sleeping like the other mothers and Rat gently concurs; but he recognises that bleached, dry gaze for what it is.

The smallest face in their little den is Grub's, of course. Her big eyes see everything, confident that no one will return her stare; it is a miracle they have survived in the ravaged face. Something squeezes in Rat's chest every time he looks at her – sickly sharp, like squeezing pus – but it isn't horror, more a kind of fury, like when he can't stretch any further into a hole to reach the treasure there. He wishes she were his sister; except that he doesn't think it, because he must not think about his sister.

Her eyes are on him as he examines the wristwatch. It isn't often these days that he gets it out from its hiding place beneath the toppled statue. Killer has spies everywhere and ruins, even ones like these where tombs and dwellings have become confused, have too many spy-holes.

She has been following his thoughts.

"Don't do it. You shouldn't trust him. It's *yours*."

Rat shakes his head. "It's a comm... a commodity. He's sending me to trade the drugs for food, but if I trade this as well I get something I need to keep me – us – alive."

"And what could that be?"

He grasps for the word but it too is out of reach.

"I will know where I stand, and it won't be on top of another bloody rubble mound. I give him what he wants and he won't send me into no more of those spaces."

But he can't explain it. It's like these ruins and this ground: turned over and over. Once a cemetery in a public park, then dug up as a victory garden, then trenches and tank-traps, then craters, then graves – but shallow now, in furrowed lines, or all a mass, in lime – then shelters like this, and back to gardens too. So much of the city is the same, although you would not know it unless you went beneath the ruins. It isn't just that the basements have survived: sometimes the storeys above them have survived in a condensed form; sometimes, when rooms from the upper floors have collapsed into the basements it is as if they coexist in the same space, past and present, life and death, the world above and the world below.

The third face he carries in his mind. The wide-eyed terror of the wounded deserter dying in his tramcar sepulchre. The grown-ups know nothing and never did.

“I’m going to do it,” he says.

The younger women of the city, those who have not become the living dead, know better than to show themselves by daylight. The smaller children and the cripples cannot carry the heavy buckets. So the lines at the water pump this morning are forming, as usual, of old women and old men. The clothes are well worn but hardly ragged like the refugees’. The lean, nut-brown faces beneath the scarves and caps wear toothless grimaces not of grief or anguish but rather of irritation and bewilderment.

Killer’s here with his lieutenants. One of them, Wart, tall for his age, wears an armband that looks official. Many wear armbands nowadays; they’re a better sign of a person’s intentions than the remnants of uniforms which, patched up, handed down and mixed pell-mell, have become very nearly meaningless. It’s to Wart that newcomers shuffle for guidance, but his eye is always on Killer, lolling at the bucket-stall in the shade of the cankered linden. One casual-seeming gesture of that full-length roll-up can spell favourable treatment or a long walk to the next pump with an empty bucket and no one wants to risk that; stray off your own street, or the ghost of it, and you’re easy meat, no matter who you are.

The usual game is kicking off. As the clots of people compose themselves into a long, irregular line that follows the trail between the rubble mounds like a vein on the skinned cadaver of the city, the little ones start tugging on pin-striped trouser legs and pinned-up sleeves, offering to keep people’s places in the queue with a persistent wheedling that has become a substitute dawn chorus. And it’s so tempting, with other lines to wait in: for ration-stamps, for papers, for work on the rubble gangs, for news (look at the messages taped to the pump, look at the chalk-scrawks on the stumps of the apartment buildings, look at the crowds when a bulletin is pasted up). So they agree, against their better judgement, and they let the urchin take their place. If they pay up-front – a nugget of coal, a green potato – the kid will walk

their precious bucket over to Killer's stall as soon as they're gone; if they don't, they'll come back to a bigger kid holding their bucket and his other hand open; if they balk at paying more or buying back a bucket, here's Slider or Wart, brushing past, bumping shoulders, slashing hamstrings with his shiv; and if they collapse onto the rubble, if anyone goes down, for even a moment, out comes the pack of little ones, from holes in the ground, doll's house rooms and the red-rusted shells of cars, to strip the carcass to the bone.

Rat steps down into the street. His legs have been shaking since first light and his meeting with the Invader, even though the Invader with whom they trade is almost as much of an outcast as they are – puffy-faced, slit-eyed and shiny red, like a man pounded raw by the elements, and camped alone on the fringes of his comrades' forces, beyond their open latrines. But that funny-painted wagon of his is better than the world's most wondrous basement, like something from a story-book the Rat once saw, and a sliver of a memory - his father's voice - Aladdin's cave. That's what really started his legs a-quivering, the excitement, like needing a wee; but now all that is behind him and the shaking is like an empty cellar room with the ruins of the building about to fall. He's hardly able to walk for fear the thing in his pocket is dragging his coat out of shape; it's so heavy it must be obvious. Every over-tensed muscle, every instinct urges him to turn around and go back into the rubble.

But Grub is there, holding his hand, stopping him from falling.

He tips his cap to Killer. Their salute.

Killer flicks ash. Wart moves forward to intercept him.

Rat leans on one hip and looks casual. He looks around the mounds – looking at, but not lingering on, the tall, precarious one with the piece of tramcar buried on top. Last night, snuggled in their shelter amid the graves, they heard the search team of Invaders and their dogs.

“Done it?”

He shows Wart the feedsack. Not full but there are bulges there. Not as big as the bulge in his coat pocket though; not as big as the lump in his throat.

“Anything good?” Wart’s nearly licking his lips.

He manages a grin.

“I want to show him, personal.”

And then the grin’s real and he’s walking, fast as he can on cold, stiff legs across the broken ground. He lets go Grub’s hand – or she lets go his – and wrestles out the object. It doesn’t matter now if he guesses what it is.

Holding it up as he advances, as the line at the water pump breaks up – look, boss, look what I got for you.

It doesn’t matter because of what he knows, which is that Killer’s pistol is broken. Rat saw him drop it in the rubble once, and watched him try to fix it all day long.

You won’t send me into no more holes when I give you this...

The first bullet takes him in the chest and makes him stagger backwards. Dust flies up from his jacket in a cloud. He opens his eyes wide and his mouth twists in a kind of snarl. Then the second bullet hits him right in the eye-socket and down into his bucket-stall he goes.

When the sound and its echoes stop, the crossroads is nearly deserted. The pump stands unattended, its messages fluttering like feathers. The rubble mounds and eyeless facades are crags and cliffs trembling in the strange light of impending snow.

The remaining figures move slowly and deliberately, their hands half-raised. Wart and Slider, his lieutenants now. Some of the older little ones, one or two starting to smile.

Grub. Standing near and yet apart.