

Thick As Thieves

Adam George

‘You’ve got to live it fast, Steve my old son. There’s no fucking point otherwise, is there?’ Stumpy took a long pull on his pint and stared at me, eyes glazed and speech slurred. ‘I’ve had enough of all this bollocks,’ he said. ‘People just take the piss, you know what I mean?’

His voice wavered and I was alarmed to see tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

In embarrassment I turned away and looked for a bit of light relief.

Some of the boys had been drinking all day and were beginning to look a bit worse for wear.

Scouse was slumped at the bar, amusing himself by lobbing peanuts at the barmaid Tracey.

Tommy Peters was next to him, fast asleep with his head in an ashtray and The Beast sat in the far corner of the pub, mumbling to himself as he rolled spliffs on a filthy table.

Harry Johnson was drunkenly trying to feed pound coins into the juke box, while at the same time chatting up a bird who looked as though she’d consumed the pub’s entire stock of Bacardi Breezers. They stood there, swaying and slurring at each other and it was a toss up between who was gonna pass out first.

Normal geezers on a normal night out, causing mischief and having a laugh. And I was sitting in a twilight world with my best mate, trying to think of something to say to make it alright.

I’ll be the first to admit that Stumpy’s had it rough the last couple of years. I mean, no one can go through that kind of shit without it having some sort of effect. He’d changed, and not for the better. I hadn’t seen him for ages, but he’d turned up on my doorstep earlier that evening and asked me if I wanted to go for a pint.

For a while it had been great, just like old times. Back when we were eighteen and still new to the Fox and Hounds and a world filled with lager and laughs. Except that now we were on the wrong side of thirty, and the innocence and naivety that defined us then had long since faded and died.

‘You get one chance in this world,’ said Stumpy, his eyes dry and his voice firm once more, ‘and I’m gonna take it. Beer, women and football, that’s all I ever used to think about. But they ain’t enough Steve, there’s got to be more.’

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a tiny square of paper, with a miniature heart stamped in its centre.

‘Acid, Steve, that’s what it’s all about. Takes you away from all this shit.’

He opened his mouth, placed the tab on his tongue and washed it down with a huge mouthful of lager.

‘Look, mate’, I said, ‘you’ve got to try and take it easy. I thought you were going to stop taking that stuff. Things can’t be that bad, surely.’

Stumpy looked at me in disgust.

‘You ain’t got a clue, Steve, how bad things are. Not a fucking clue.’

And with that he turned away to stare out of the window at the rain filled night.

I sat there for a minute or two, then I shrugged my shoulders, walked away and joined the lads at the bar.

‘What’s up with him?’ asked Scouse.

‘Don’t ask,’ I replied. ‘I can’t work him out these days. As far as I can tell he spends most of his time tripping.’

'He's lost it if you ask me. Geezer's heading for trouble. Want a pint?'

'Cheers,' I said as Scouse leaned across the bar to holler at Tracey.

'Lager! Now!'

Tracey sighed and grabbed a couple of glasses off the shelf.

'You want to learn some manners,' she said, half-heartedly.

'Bollocks,' said Scouse, throwing some loose change onto the bar.

We stood there with our pints, looking round the pub in silence. To my amazement, Harry had managed to pull and was attempting to negotiate his way to the door with his arm round the Bacardi bird. Tommy was snoring gently on the bar, oblivious to the juke box that had kicked into action with 'A Town Called Malice'.

The Beast looked over at Stumpy, then back at me, and I knew what he was thinking. But right at that moment I just couldn't be bothered.

A couple of large whiskeys later and I'd shaken off my bad mood. Stumpy was big enough and ugly enough to look after himself.

Or so I thought.

2. Stumpy Malloy

It was in September 1979 that Stumpy Malloy turned up at the start of our third year at a dodgy Comprehensive in Basingstoke - a tough time to join a new school where kids had already found their place in the system. I'd learnt by then that people don't like change and anything that might muck up their routine ain't welcome, and that goes for pupils and teachers alike.

So when Stumpy arrived wearing these horrible brown trousers instead of the regulation black, and got into a scrap on his second day because someone took the piss out of him he was bound to stand out. He got noticed by everybody, marked down as a trouble maker by the teachers who couldn't be bothered to get to know him, and as someone to be a bit wary of by the kids. That puts pressure on from the start. But it never seemed to faze him. He settled in like he'd always been there and that impressed me.

By the time he joined our school Stumpy's face already looked years older than thirteen. His nose had been broken a couple of times and was bent out of shape, a scar winding its way down the side from bridge to nostril. He had a lump above his right eye, the result of a fall as a nipper that for some reason had never gone away and one of his front teeth had been chipped during a

fight. He had no concept of style in any shape or form, he didn't give a toss about fashion and his dull brown hair hung in a lank bundle over his head. Even at that age he was big and ugly, unafraid of what the world threw at him, unconcerned with his own appearance.

His real name wasn't Stumpy, of course, but he was a big fucker so that's what we nicknamed him, and it was one of those names that stuck. Even his old man ended up calling him Stumpy after a while.

Me and Jimmy Taylor had been mates forever, growing up in the same street, kicking a ball against the nearest garage door from the time we could walk and running as wild as we dared at every opportunity. We took Stumpy under our wing immediately, despite the fact he supported Arsenal and we were West Ham. He was one of us, a right laugh and well up for mischief so he fitted in perfect. Even though he acted the hard man and pretended he didn't need anyone, every kid needs mates, no matter what, and he started knocking about with me and Jimmy pretty much from the moment he arrived. We didn't know it back then, but from the day Stumpy joined our school our lives were changed forever.

Stumpy lived alone with his old man in Popley, a council estate on the edge of town, all box houses and dirty alleyways. No one knew what happened to his mum: Stumpy never talked about her so no one asked. He wasn't the only kid from a single parent family so it wasn't really anything unusual, and anyway, there were far more important things to talk about like football, music and girls.

Me and Jimmy loved going round Stumpy's house, cos his old man let us do whatever we wanted as long as it didn't involve damaging the small vegetable patch at the end of his tiny garden. That was his pride and joy, and he used to spend hours tending it. Stumpy said that what he really wanted was his own allotment, but he could never afford it so he made do growing potatoes, tomatoes, beans and stuff at home. I remember watching him once, out of Stumpy's bedroom window, seeing him hunched over this old bit of dirt, carefully pulling out weeds, digging little holes and planting bulbs, lost in his own world. I couldn't understand it myself but I knew how much it meant to him. The only time I really remember him losing his rag when we were kids was once when the three of us were mucking about, and Stumpy pushed me backwards into his vegetable patch.

Jack looked at of the kitchen window and saw me sprawled in the dirt, lying on top of his precious potato plants, and I saw the anger spread across his face.

Stumpy panicked.

'Leg it!' he shouted, pushing us towards the back gate.

'What about you?' I asked, 'ain't you coming?'

'I can't run away for ever, can I? Might as well get it over with now.'

Me and Jimmy ran through the gate and into the alley just as Jack came out the back door, and we heard a muffled cry as he got hold of Stumpy.

We walked home in silence, and the next day I swallowed my fear and went back to Stumpy's house.

Jack opened the door.

'Steve. What brings you round here today?'

'I just wanted to say sorry Mr. Malloy. You know, for falling into your vegetable patch. '

'It wasn't your fault son, that boy of mine pushed you over, I saw him do it.'

'Well, I'm sorry anyway, for any damage we caused.'

‘That’s big of you Steve, you didn’t have to come back round to say that. I know you lads don’t understand why I care so much about a scrap of dirt, but one day you might. People care about different things for different reasons, and that vegetable patch is my little escape from Popley every now and then.’

He was being so reasonable that I felt even worse, and I vowed there and then never to piss him off again.

Jack originally came from a small village near Donegal, and after that incident he used to tell us stories about all the land he had when he was growing up, and about how his dad had been able to grow enough vegetables to feed the whole family. It must have been hard, going from all that space to a tiny garden in the middle of a housing estate, especially when you could see fields and open country stretching off into the distance from the end of his road. It was only a couple of miles from Popley to the village of Sherborne St. John, but in terms of house prices it might as well have been on another planet. Jack Malloy would never be able to afford to live there, so he made do with his vegetable patch and a small flower bed underneath the kitchen window.

Jack was huge, or so it always seemed to us. Well over six feet tall and broad shouldered, a regular brick shit house. Massive hands, all rough and calloused due to a lifetime working on building sites. The same lank hair that Stumpy had, but still brushed back in an old-fashioned duck’s arse, a legacy of a youth spent listening to Elvis and Eddie Cochrane. He was the only grown up we knew who didn’t mind us listening to our punk records round his house after school, which is where we had to go because my old man called punk ‘that bleedin’ racket’ and made me listen to them wearing headphones, and Jimmy wasn’t even allowed to bring them home.

On his fourteenth Birthday Stumpy invited me and Jimmy round to his house after school. Jack was in the front room waiting for us, smiling broadly.

He held out an envelope to Stumpy.

‘Happy Birthday son.’

Stumpy opened the envelope, and yelled in excitement.

‘Stiff Little Fingers!’ he shouted, ‘My dad’s taking me to see SLF on Friday!’

‘You lucky sod!’ I said, gutted, but pleased for him at the same time.

Then Jack pulled another envelope from his back pocket and gave it to Stumpy. Inside were two more tickets.

‘You don’t want to be stuck with your old man all night,’ he said, ‘so I thought these two reprobates might want to join us.’

I didn’t know what to say, and Jimmy was genuinely choked. His dad never did anything nice for anybody and Jack’s kindness looked as though it had really thrown him.

‘Thanks Mr. Malloy,’ I said eventually, ‘that’s brilliant.’

‘Yeah, thanks,’ said Jimmy, head down, staring at the tickets as if he couldn’t believe they were real.

‘We’ll get the train to Reading so I can have a few beers,’ said Jack.

‘The Top Rank is just down the road from the station, so we’ll take a stroll and see what this mob are like. I had a listen to a couple of your singles earlier, Stumpy. I must admit, ‘Alternative Ulster’ and ‘Suspect Device’ are top songs. Not quite up there with The Clash, but not far off. I think I’m going to enjoy this.’

See, that was the thing about Jack. I mean, he was only in his mid-thirties at the time, and now it don't seem strange at all that a bloke that age would like The Clash and SLF. But it was different back then, and even though punk had been about for a while virtually every adult I knew hated it. While the three of us hovered around the edge of a mass of punks and skins who were pogoing and gobbing the night away, Jack spent the whole gig at the bar, drinking Guinness, nodding his head to the music and keeping out of our way, knowing that kids don't like having parents on their case. He was cool, though, me and Jimmy were proud to know him and Jimmy was always going on that he wished he had a dad like Jack. He talked to us like adults, you know what I mean? And that doesn't happen very often. He treated us as equals most of the time, and there's no better way to get a kid's respect.

Jimmy spent as little time at home as possible, because his old man used to knock him about. Never on the face, nor anywhere else you could easily see but during the summer holidays, when we used to cycle out to the Basingstoke Canal and splash about in the water I saw bruises on his back and upper arms. He never complained, though, about that or anything else. Jimmy was the most laid back kid I knew, and despite what happened at home he loved life and he always seemed to be happy. I don't know how he did it, because no one else at his house seemed to be enjoying themselves. I tried to avoid going round to his place, to be honest, because the atmosphere was so bad. On the odd occasion I did go his mum kept herself shut away in the kitchen and his dad just sat in an armchair watching telly, drinking beer and shouting at everybody.

Jimmy made the best of it, somehow, and used to spend loads of time round at mine and Stumpy's but I don't know how his mum coped.

That's not much of a life, is it?

In most ways we were a normal bunch of kids, but I suppose the only thing that was a bit weird about Stumpy was his fascination with death. He couldn't get enough of stories about rock stars that went right over the top, and Sid Vicious in particular was one of his heroes. When Sid killed himself Stumpy told me that he was really gutted, and he made up a scrapbook of press clippings relating to his death.

'Imagine being able to do what you want all the time?' I remember him saying once. 'That would be excellent, wouldn't it? I mean, look at the way they live. Booze, birds, drugs, they can get up when they want, no poxy 9 to 5 or nothing like that.'

Of course, we didn't know anything about drugs back then, and beer was the only booze we'd ever tried. As for birds, well, we talked like we were experts but I know that the furthest I'd ever gone was a quick feel of Shelley Dyer's tits through her jumper during a slow dance at a school disco, and I bet the other two hadn't done much more, no matter what they might boast.

Gradually Stumpy began to romanticise Sid's death, making it sound all glamorous, and he started putting articles in his scrap book about other rock stars that'd lived so hard and fast that they'd spun out of control.

I remember one day when we were fifteen and had bunked off school for the day. Jack was out at work and we were sitting in Stumpy's room playing the new Jam album when Stumpy decided he wanted some food.

'I'm going down the chippy. You want something to eat?'

‘Yeah, nice one. I’ll just have a portion of chips, please mate.’

‘Here, have a look at this while I’m gone. I finished it the other day.’

He handed me his scrapbook and as I started to flick through it he went out the front door on his way to the parade of shops just down the road.

It was alright I suppose, but not enough to distract me from rifling through the chest of drawers in Jack’s room in a search for the stash of porn that Stumpy claimed his old man kept. Why would I want to read about a bunch of losers when I could be looking at naked birds?

After a while, I heard Stumpy come lumbering through the front door and frantically stuffed the magazines back where I found them before he came upstairs, carrying two grease-soaked packets of chips and a bottle of Coke.

‘What d’you reckon then, Steve? Good, innit?’

And he started banging on about Sid, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Brian Jones and in particular Keith Moon.

‘He was one mad geezer,’ Stumpy said. ‘I wanna be like him when I grow up, you know, live in a fucking great big mansion, play music all the time, travel the world shagging groupies.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ I replied, ‘if you need a roadie, give us a shout, yeah?’

I looked around me at all the books in his room, not just about rock stars but all sorts.

‘Have you read all these?’

‘Yeah, pretty much. Why?’

‘Well, it’s just that you’re always mucking about in English, I thought you hated all that stuff.’

‘Yeah, I do hate English. I hate being told what to read and how to read. And most of the books they make us read are shit, anyway. I like learning Steve, just not the stuff they try and teach me.’

I shrugged. ‘All books are shit as far as I’m concerned.’

Stumpy laughed. ‘That’s because you’re an ignorant twat. Try one of these one day. You might be surprised.’

I looked around, then thought of the dirty mags I’d been rifling through.

‘Nah, you’re alright. I know what kind of stuff I like reading.’

Apart from the lessons, school was a bit of a laugh. We played a lot of football, tried our best to impress the girls and generally mucked about. There wasn’t much to worry about, until the day Nick Williams crossed our path. Nick was in the year below us and he was a right nasty piece of work. Bigger than most of his age and a real bully, always picking on the younger kids, the ones without any friends or who couldn’t stand up for themselves.

Me, Stumpy and Jimmy were on our way to the trees at the edge of the playing fields for a smoke one day when we heard Nick’s voice. We should have been in our Maths lesson but the thought of listening to Mr. Sheldrake droning on about shit like Pythagoras and algebra was too much to bear. At the time we were in the fifth year, two weeks away from leaving that shit hole forever and we didn’t care anymore.

‘Two quid? That all you’ve got? You little shit, if you don’t have a fiver for me tomorrow you’re in real trouble. Got it?’

‘Yes, I’ll have it for you Nick. Please don’t hit me.’

Nick laughed, we heard a slap and the other kid started crying, and as he did so Jimmy ran towards the sound.

‘That’s Davey!’ he shouted, and me and Stumpy started running as well. Jim’s little brother was small for his age, like Jimmy but without the self-confidence to back it up. Jimmy tried to look out for him at school but obviously Nick had already singled him out.

We rounded the corner to see Davey in a headlock with Nick squeezing his neck and punching him in the kidneys. I could see the tears streaming down the poor little sod’s face.

‘You wanker!’ shouted Jimmy, ready to launch himself at Nick Williams. Nick looked up to see the three of us bearing down on him and he looked suddenly scared .

‘Who’s that swearing?’

I turned round and saw Mr. Hughes, the headmaster, striding across the field towards us. He was always on the look out for skivers. Any old excuse to give someone the slipper or the cane. We reckoned he was a dirty old fucker who got his perverted kicks out of beating young kids, though maybe I’m doing him an injustice cos we were a right handful at school. Anyway, Nick quickly released Davey and stood there looking innocent.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Hughesy.

You don’t grass, even on someone as repulsive as Nick Williams, so we all stood there in silence while the headmaster looked at us suspiciously.

‘Right, detentions for all of you. You know you’re out of bounds here. Now go on, get to your classes.’

Nick looked at us, a smug smile on his face as he walked past us on his way back to the main building. Jimmy was fuming.

‘Something’s gotta be done about that wanker,’ he said. ‘I can’t have him picking on Davey like that, specially as we’re all leaving soon.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Stumpy, ‘we’ll sort that fucker out.’

A few days later we got our chance. The three of us were late for Assembly and as we ran across the football pitch towards the Main Hall we saw Nick on his own, also late. He didn’t see us coming and we jumped on him and started giving him a kicking. Even though he was a year below us I don’t think me and Jimmy would have stood much of a chance, but Stumpy was bigger and harder than Nick at the time and soon had him pinned to the ground.

‘Let’s teach this little fucker a lesson,’ said Stumpy, and started ripping Nick’s shirt.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, but Jimmy caught on straight away. He started laughing and pointed towards Assembly and I sussed what Stumpy had in mind. Nick struggled like fuck, but we held him down and stripped him naked, then Stumpy got him in a headlock and ran him towards the doors of the Main Hall. Jimmy got there first and held them open, Stumpy shouted at the top of his voice and shoved Nick inside, sending him sprawling across the floor. Half the school was in there, all the third, fourth and fifth years, over five hundred kids. Plus all the teachers and Mr. Hughes, who was standing at the podium about to launch into the Lord’s Prayer.

We watched through the open doors and saw everyone turn and stare at Nick Williams, naked and hunched over, trying to cover his bollocks. All the kids who he picked on could see him sniveling like a little girl and the Hall erupted into laughter. In all the commotion the three of us slipped in through the side door and joined the rest of our class.

Hughesy had a damn good idea that we were responsible, but we were leaving a few days later so what was he going to do? Anyway, punishment would have been worth it to bring that cocky sod down a peg or two, and he never picked on Davey Taylor again. On the down side, I knew we'd made an enemy of Nick Williams and I for one would be looking over my shoulder in the future.

The three of us left school at sixteen, we couldn't get out of that dump quickly enough. We thought we were men, and we wanted to start earning the cash to act like men. School had meant nothing to us beyond the chance to muck about and see how much we could get away with, although Jimmy probably would have done a bit better without me and Stumpy constantly leading him astray.

He sometimes talked about going on to the Tech college and learning a trade, but we didn't want to know and persuaded him to come looking for work with us a week after walking out the school gates for the last time. He always was a bit easily led, was Jimmy.

I didn't want to think about the future, and Stumpy was the same. Life was for living day to day, enjoy the moment and don't worry about what was gonna happen in ten, twenty, thirty years time. Irresponsible little fuckers we were, but no different to thousands of others.

My old man wasn't particularly interested in what I was going to do after I left school. All he said was that if I was going to continue living at home then I'd better find a way of paying for my board and lodging. And Jimmy had stopped talking to his dad the day he'd come home a few months earlier to find his mum sitting in the kitchen, crying and nursing a black eye.

Luckily Jack took an interest, and got us a start in the summer of '82, labouring on a building site in Basingstoke. He'd been a foreman with Lord Construction ever since he moved down from London, and used to run quite a few jobs for the governor, Charlie Lord. He was old school, was Jack. He liked a drink in the evening, but he never missed work, and blokes like Charlie Lord appreciate reliable men.

Charlie's a bit of a name around town. He's a self-made millionaire, who started Lord Construction back in the Fifties and got in on some of the early development contracts when Basingstoke began to boom in the next decade. That's when some bright spark up in London decided it would be a good idea to ease overcrowding in the city by building new estates in towns outside, places like Basildon, Watford and Basingstoke. The result was that a small market town with people who talked like The Wurzels escalated into a London overspill full of Millwall, West Ham, Arsenal, Chelsea and Spurs fans.

Old Charlie Lord had built the firm up from a one-man operation to the biggest building company in the area and had anything up to three hundred blokes working for him by the early Eighties, including Jack Malloy and most of the lads we started knocking about with.

On the night before our first day me and Jimmy went round to Stumpy's house for a bit of tea. 'Now listen, lads,' said Jack once we'd finished our food, 'I had to call in a couple of favours to get you boys a start, so you'd better not let me down. Charlie Lord trusts me, and I will come down on you lot like a ton of fucking bricks if you fuck this up.'

'We won't, Mr. Malloy, I promise,' said Jimmy.

‘You can lose the Mr. Malloy, son. If we’re on the same site you call me Jack, like everyone else does. Just make sure you keep your noses clean, ok?’

We all agreed, and for a couple of years at least, we were as good as our word. But once we got stuck into a life of lager the odd Monday would get missed, or the overtime we’d promised to do on a Saturday was spent recovering from a session, never enough to get us the sack but all the same, it got noted. Lord Construction had sites all over the place, so it was rare for us to be on the same one as Jack. When we were, mind you, we never fucked about.

As soon as we could afford it the three of us moved into a rented house on Black Dam, a new estate on the other side of the War Memorial Park, near the M3 motorway and a good half hour stagger away from the town centre. It was a typical lad’s house, no food in the cupboards, dirty cups all over the place, a back garden overgrown with weeds and covered in fag butts. We lived on fast food and lager, played music too loud and regularly pissed off our neighbours. Just like you’re supposed to when you’re young.

The early Eighties was boom time for the building industry in Basingstoke, housing estates sprawling all over town, office blocks and industrial parks eating into the surrounding countryside. I may be wrong, but I’m sure that when I was a nipper the Council said that there was only so much land that could be built on and that the rest had to be protected. Green field sites or something. But money talks, loads of high tech firms like IBM, the AA and Motorola were moving in and this was commuter country as well, people getting fed up with the London prices and wanting somewhere a bit nearer the country. So the building continued and the fields disappeared.

Still, me and the boys didn’t give a flying fuck about the rights of trees and animals so long as we were getting our wedge every Friday. The more sites that sprang up the better. The boom was good news for Stumpy and Jimmy as foremen were crying out for brickies and after a couple of years labouring and being shown a few tricks along the way they were eventually able to get bricklaying jobs. They’d lie about their qualifications if any boss bothered asking, but most of them didn’t care so long as the work got done. Jack obviously knew that Jim and Stumpy were winging it, but he kept quiet and even recommended them to other site foremen every now and then.

I had the same opportunities, but I could never be arsed to listen, and every time I tried to lay a brick or two I fucked up. After a while people stopped offering to help and labouring, which started out as something to do to get beer tokens, became my job. Story of my life.

It made me laugh, the speed with which the houses were thrown up and the prices they fetched on some of these new estates. So close together that you could see into three or four other gardens from the upstairs windows, no shops or pubs nearby and miles from the town centre. There weren’t even any decent bus routes so everybody drove, the roads got even more clogged up and once you did get into town you had to spend fucking ages trying to find a space in the car parks.

And it wasn’t as though they were built to last, not by a long chalk. I should know because I worked on loads of them and I saw all the short cuts, contributed to a lot of them, too. Building companies were so desperate to get the houses finished that their foremen turned a blind eye to all the cowboys floating about. I remember saying to Stumpy at the time that in a few years there’d be cracks in the walls and holes in the roofs, and I was right.

3. The Fox and Hounds
November 1983

In the November of '83 we were 17 and full of it, the dog's bollocks, the bee's fucking knees. Except that now, when I look back I can see that we were full of shit and knew fuck all. If you're looking for reasons why things turned out the way they did, then maybe there are a few answers behind the battered old wooden doors of the Fox and Hounds. If the furniture in that place could speak you wouldn't believe some of the stories it could tell. There's a million fucking secrets lurking in there, that's for sure. And if I had to pinpoint one moment where it started to go wrong for Stumpy it would be the day we met Harry Johnson and set foot in the Fox for the first time. I'm not blaming Harry, not for one minute: if it hadn't been him it would have been someone else, because we were there for the taking, looking for the next level, game for anything and wanting to belong.

'Where the fuck are we?' said Jimmy nervously.

'Fuck knows,' I replied. 'I'm well lost.'

We'd taken a wrong turning somewhere on our way to the Tube after watching the Hammers stick four past Spurs and now we found ourselves lost on some grotty north London housing estate. It was dark and cold, none of the street lights worked and for a couple of teenage West Ham fans we were well and truly in the wrong part of town. I'm not sure how it happened, one minute we were laughing and joking in amongst a crowd of West Ham, and then for some stupid reason we tried to take a short cut and got ourselves lost. I was beginning to feel decidedly uneasy.

'I don't like the look of this,' I said. 'Better hide our scarves.'

'Oi!' I heard a shout from the shadows beneath a nearby tower block and looked round to see a gang of blokes staring at us, big fuckers all of them.

'Oh shit!' said Jimmy, frantically tugging at the claret and blue scarf knotted round his wrist.

'Run!'

We took off as fast as we could, adrenaline pumping. I didn't dare look behind me, but I knew they wouldn't be too far away. We ran across a small playground, dodging between a couple of broken swings and a rusty old slide and into an alleyway that took us out of the estate and onto a main road. It was busy with cars, some shops were still open and I began to feel a bit safer with more people about, but I wasn't going to stop until we'd lost the gang completely.

'Fuck,' I heard Jimmy mutter, breathlessly. He slowed down and I looked ahead to see what was up. Groaning I saw another load of geezers standing in our way about 50 yards ahead. I stopped running and bent down, hands on my knees, sweat pouring off my face despite the cold.

'We've had it mate,' I said, my guts dissolving with fear. I looked at Jimmy and saw his face drain of colour and knew he was as scared as me. We stood there under the orange streetlights and waited for the inevitable as the new mob moved towards us, picking up the pace and starting to run. A huge skinhead seemed to be staring right through me and then he began to shout.

'Come on then you fuckers! Who wants some?!'

It took a moment for the realisation to hit home that he was wearing a West Ham shirt underneath his Crombie, and then the blokes were past us and steaming into Spurs like there was no tomorrow.

I looked at Jimmy and we both began to laugh, we were so fucking relieved that we'd avoided a proper kicking.

It wasn't a fair ruck, since Spurs were outnumbered about three to one and it didn't take them long to realise they were on a hiding to nothing. As one they legged it back into the housing estate and the West Ham boys made their way back up the street, laughing and shouting, pushing each other into hedges and breaking into song as they got near us.

'Johnny Lyall's Claret and Blue Army, Johnny Lyall's Claret and Blue Army!'

'Ere Steve,' said Jimmy, 'see that geezer on the end? That's Harry Johnson. He used to be a punk, knocked about with all them blokes that used to hang around outside Woolies.'

I looked at the geezer Jimmy was pointing to. He had cropped hair, and about fifteen silver studs in each ear, jeans rolled up to the top of his Doctor Martens and a black leather jacket with THE CLASH painted in white across the bottom. He had a roll-up in the corner of his mouth and another one tucked behind his right ear and as I watched he pulled a can of lager from a pocket inside his jacket and cracked it open, the liquid frothing up and flowing over his hand.

'Yeah, yeah, I recognise him. Stroke of luck they turned up, wasn't it?'

'Too right,' Jim agreed.

'You alright lads?' Harry broke away from the crowd and made his way over to us, flicking the stub of his roll-up into a hedge and lighting the next one as he walked.

'Yeah, cheers mate,' I said. 'Saved us from a right kicking.'

He took a huge swig from his can, and belched loudly.

'Don't worry about it. Nothing better than a good ruck on a Saturday evening. Take it easy, yeah?'

He turned away and broke into a jog to rejoin the main crowd and me and Jimmy followed. Now that the danger was past and we were walking behind a mob of Hammers we were full of it, and a couple of hours later we were sitting on the train home, swigging on a bottle of Merrydown that we'd bought at a corner shop near Waterloo.

'You two again. Where are you from then?'

I looked up to see Harry Johnson standing in the aisle, a can of Stella clenched in his fist, another roll-up on the go despite the No Smoking signs.

'Err, Basingstoke,' said Jimmy.

'That right? Same here.'

'Yeah I know,' I said. 'I've seen you about.'

'Where do you drink then?'

Me and Jimmy looked at each other. To admit we were only seventeen and too young to get served in pubs wasn't an option. Occasionally we did manage to have a session in the Feathers mainly cos Jimmy's Uncle Pete, who was the complete opposite of his old man, used to buy us beers while we stayed out of the way, and because the landlord was normally too pissed to know what was going on. We weren't exactly regulars but it was something.

'The Feathers,' I said.

Harry looked at us thoughtfully, as if deciding what to say. He took a big gulp from his can, dropped the butt of his roll up into it then chucked it at a couple of lads wearing Spurs scarves who were sitting at the end of the compartment. They looked round to see what was going on, saw Harry staring at them, fists clenched and obviously decided to let it go. Harry turned back to us.

‘Me and a few of the boys are having a session at the Fox and Hounds tonight. Why don’t you two come down? West Ham should stick together.’

‘Yeah, alright. Cheers.’

Harry moved on to join his mates and me and Jimmy took it in turns to down the cider as quick as we could.

‘The Fox and Hounds!’ said Jimmy.

‘Yeah I know. Not sure about that, are you?’

To say we were nervous would be an understatement. The Fox and Hounds was notorious about town. Everyone knew where it was and what it was about. I’d walked past it loads of times but I’d never had the bottle to go inside. The Fox had a bad name. It wasn’t the kind of pub you took a bird to on a date, or wandered into for a quiet pint on a summer’s day. Situated in the old part of Basingstoke at the back of the train station, it was a dark and forbidding building, the dull off-white painted brickwork flaking and covered in graffiti.

There were always boards over one or more of the windows, the result of violence or vandalism and the authorities were constantly trying to shut it down. Still, it seemed like we would be in good company and it’s never a good idea to risk offending nutters, so we decided to give it a go and get Stumpy down as well. He used to get up to Highbury every now and then with his old man, but Arsenal were away to Newcastle that day and we knew he’d be at home bored shitless. I had asked him to come to White Hart Lane with us but he said he’d rather stick a lighted firework up his arse than give money to Spurs and stand with the Hammers. No taste, some people.

The train pulled in at Basingstoke and the carriages emptied. Ahead of us I saw Harry Johnson and his mates walking down the platform, shoving people out of the way as they went. They drew alongside the two Spurs fans that Harry had lobbed a can at earlier and I saw him trip one of them up and cuff the other round the back of the head. We followed behind, walked down the stairs and went out to phones at the front of the station.

‘Oi Stumpy,’ I shouted.

Music was blaring out in the background, The Doors I think, so I shouted louder.

‘STUMPY!!! Turn the fucking music down!’

‘Hang on I can’t hear you. I’ll just turn the music down. That’s better. Who is it?’

‘It’s me, Steve. Listen, get your arse down the station. Me and Jimmy are going for a few beers.’

‘Nice one. Where we going?’

‘The Fox and Hounds.’

‘Bollocks! No way! That’s a nutters’ pub.’

‘Nah, it’s alright.’ I told him about London and the scrap. Course I glossed it up a bit, as you do, and made out that me and Jimmy had got stuck in.

Stumpy turned up twenty minutes later and we walked slowly through the tunnel that ran underneath the station, up the stairs on the other side and towards the pub. I pushed open the doors and we were engulfed in a thick cloud of smoke. A few heads turned to look then went back to their conversations. We made our way to the bar and shoved Stumpy to the front cos he looked the oldest.

A huge great geezer lumbered up to us.

‘Yeah?’

‘Three pints of Harp please,’ said Stumpy.

‘How old are you son?’

‘Eighteen.’

‘Got any proof?’

‘Err, no, I’ve left it at home.’

Fat bloke leaned across the bar and grabbed Stumpy by the shirt.

‘You takin’ the piss out of me?’

I looked round to see a crowd of blokes staring at us, watching the barman.

‘D’you know it’s illegal to serve underage kids? I could lose my fucking license.’

He was shouting now and his big face was red with the effort.

‘Cheeky little fucker! Now fuck off out of my pub and get back to the scout hut or wherever it is you came from.’

He shoved Stumpy backwards and he fell against me and Jimmy, knocking us into an empty table. A couple of glasses and an ashtray crashed to the floor and the pub went quiet.

We looked at each other, unsure what to do.

‘Leg it!’ shouted Stumpy, scrambling to his feet and for the second time that day I tried to run from trouble. This time we didn’t even get out of first gear as we turned and made a dash for the door, only to pull up short when we realised it was blocked.

Harry stood there, arms folded, looking grim. We were trapped, and in the worst pub in town. I felt my bowels dissolve and fear flooding through me. Suddenly Harry grinned and the whole place erupted in laughter. The fat bloke behind the bar was holding his sides, tears streaming down his face.

‘Oh fuck! Did you see their faces?! Priceless!’

‘Nice one Phil,’ laughed Harry, moving away from the door and towards the bar. He walked round the other side and helped himself to three pints.

‘There you go lads. You probably need a drink after the day you’ve had.’

‘Harry told me about the ruck today. Any mates of Harry’s are welcome in here. Make yerselves at home boys.’

Phil poured himself a whiskey and sat his huge frame down on a barstool, wiping his eyes and shaking his head.

We stood there, grinning self-consciously, drinking our lager and looking around the pub as the regulars got on with their night out. A dusty old George Cross flag hung in the corner above a TV bolted to the wall, a couple of fruit machines and a juke box stood near the entrance to the bogs, with a battered pool table opposite. Peeling wallpaper, bare floorboards and a handful of black and white photos above the bar.

It was mainly blokes in there drinking, but the few women around looked like they could handle themselves. It was definitely the kind of pub where you needed to know people. Strangers were not welcome.

Fat Phil Magee ran the pub back then. A mountain of a man, all beer gut and huge hands, red nose and watery eyes he was the classic landlord, a second rate heavyweight boxer in his youth who’d trawled the circuit getting beaten up for crap money but who’d made enough on the side to take over the Fox and Hounds in 1979. His claim to fame was fighting Joe Bugner in the early Seventies, back in the days when big Joe still had the urge to actually knock people out. He’d done just that in the third round and Fats had seen his career spiral downhill ever since.

Stumpy noticed a photo hanging behind the bar, of Fats in what he called his heyday, posing with Joe Bugner and a bunch of other characters.

‘Fucking hell!’ he exclaimed, pointing at the photo. ‘That’s my old man!’

‘Where?’ asked Phil.

‘That geezer in the photo. Second from the left.’

‘Jack Malloy? You’re Jack’s boy?’

‘Yeah!’ said Stumpy.

‘Well fuck me! Where is the old rogue these days?’

‘Up in Popley,’ said Stumpy. ‘Abbey Road.’

‘He’s in Basingstoke? I don’t believe it! Mind you, I should have guessed. You’re the spitting image, you poor bastard. Sod’s law you had to get yer old man’s genes. Still likes a pint does he?’

‘Yeah, you can find him down the Pen & Parchment most nights. He’s got his own barstool, tankard the lot. I’ll tell him you’re down here.’

Phil laughed and pulled three more pints.

‘Yeah, you do that son. Me and Jack go back a long way, we used to train together as well as drink for Ireland. Proper good mates we were. Did you know I was at his wedding?’

The smile faded from Stumpy’s face for an instant.

‘Nah I didn’t. We don’t talk about them days much.’

‘Fair enough, I wouldn’t want to talk about ‘em either,’ said Phil, and changed the subject.

‘So what about you then son? Do a bit of boxing like Jack?’ And with that he started bobbing and weaving behind the bar like some great fat jelly, wobbling all over the shop.

‘Come on son, get them fists up. You could do alright, the size of you. And no one’s gonna be able to do any more damage to that mug of yours. Let old Fightin’ Phil train you up.’

He ducked to the left, leaned in close and caught Stumpy a clump round the ear that sent him flying backwards. He lay there underneath the dart board, rubbing his face and looking dazed, while all around him I saw geezers laughing their nuts off.

Phil seemed genuinely upset, and made his way round to haul Stumpy to his feet.

‘Sorry about that, I don’t know my own speed and strength. Once a boxer always a boxer.

Fighting Phil Magee they used to call me.’

‘Oi, less of the Fighting,’ shouted Harry Johnson from the general direction of the bar, ‘It’s Fats to anyone who drinks here.’

‘Less of it you cheeky fucker,’ replied Phil good-naturedly before turning back to Stumpy.

‘He’s got a point though, I have put on a few pounds over the years.’

‘So you don’t miss boxing then?’ asked Stumpy.

‘Nah. I spent too much of my life farting around in the gym. Give me a few pints of Guinness and a night in front of the TV any day. I finished with boxing the day I found myself fighting the son of a geezer who knocked me out in the Sixties. He knocked me out as well. Anyway, I make more money out of this place for far less hassle.’

Fat Phil sat on a stool by the bar, staring at the old photos.

‘Listen,’ he said after a few minutes, ‘I’d really like to catch up with Jack one of these days.’

‘Why don’t I give him a call?’ said Stumpy, ‘he’ll only be sat in the Pen and Parchment.’

‘Yeah, why don’t you do that, son.’

So Stumpy rang his old man from the battered old pay phone at the side of the bar, and half an hour later Jack Malloy came bursting through the door with a huge grin on his face.

‘Phil Magee, you old bastard! I don’t believe it!’

Phil engulfed him in a massive bear hug and the two of them retired to a table in the corner of the pub with a bottle of whiskey and a couple of glasses.

The following Friday I went round to Stumpy’s after work, and was still there when Jack came home from the site he was working on in Bracknell. He grabbed a can of lager from the fridge and settled himself down on the sofa.

‘I’m glad you’re here, Steve, because there’s something I want to talk to you two about. Your new mate, Harry Johnson, you might want to be a bit careful there.’

‘Why’s that Jack? I asked.

‘Phil was telling me about him last week. He’s one of those blokes that it’s good to be on the right side of, if you know what I mean. From what Phil says, it’s a foolish man that crosses Harry Johnson. He’s only young, well, to me he is anyway. I guess to you boys 25 is old but whatever, he knows a lot of people and has a lot of respect in this town. Phil says that he’s taken a bit of a shine to you boys, says that you remind him of himself when he was younger. But just be a little bit careful, ok?’

‘Alright dad, we can look after ourselves,’ said Stumpy.

‘Yeah, course you can, son. You know it all, don’t you? Anyway, remember what I said. Oh, and by the way, Phil also told me that Harry’s best mate is the one to really watch out for. A bloke called Billy Jeffries. By all accounts he’s a right mad bastard.’

We ended up getting totally slaughtered that first night, and to say that me, Stumpy and Jimmy became regulars at the Fox and Hounds over the next couple of years would be an understatement. We loved the place and threw ourselves into the lifestyle down there, spending most weekends handing our wages over the bar.

Looking back, it’s easy to see why the Fox and Hounds came to mean so much to us. We weren’t much more than kids, just starting out, and to gain acceptance at one of the hardest pubs in town, by a selection of 100% genuine nutters was too good to be true. Rightly or wrongly we looked up to people like Harry Johnson, and to be treated like one of the boys, to be included in on some of the deals and the tales of petty villainy made us feel good.

By the summer of ’85 we were earning decent money and didn’t really care about flash clothes and flash cars; we were nineteen years old and all we wanted to do was drink beer, play football and shag women.

Harry Johnson looked out for us. Of course, we’d ignored Jack’s warning a couple of years earlier and spent as much time with Harry and the boys at the Fox as possible. We still hadn’t met his mate Billy Jeffries, though, as he was spending a bit of time behind bars. I must admit I wasn’t too sure about meeting Billy. Everyone down at the Fox, and virtually everywhere else around town as far as I could make out, was wary of him. What scared people, apparently, was

his unpredictability. He could be having a laugh and a chat with someone, but then take offence at something they said, or at the way someone else looked at him, and all hell would break loose. But I reckoned that if we were mates with Harry, then we'd be alright with Billy as well. Whenever we could afford it, me and Jimmy went to Upton Park with Harry and his crew, and he took me and Jimmy to a few away games during the '85/'86 season, when we so nearly won the League. Harry loved his football violence and he got a real buzz out of meeting up with rival mobs and having a right good tear up. He even started helping some of the serious boys organize a few meets. Although I loved being part of the crowd, and got a real buzz from the anticipation and the whole build up, I never really got into the actual fighting. It was too much like hard work as far as I was concerned.

We were due to meet Harry in the Fox before going up to London for the game against Arsenal early in 1986. He turned up late, and, unusually for Harry, he looked a bit agitated.

'Sorry lads, I'm going to have to give this one a swerve.'

'Leave it out Harry!' I said, 'it's the Gooners! We can't miss it.'

'You don't have to miss it. You've got your tickets. It's just me that's got to stay behind.'

'Why?' asked Jimmy.

'Things have got a bit out of hand. The police have been getting a bit too interested in me recently, and I got a call last night to say that if I showed up for the off after the match I'd get nicked. One of the lads I thought was genuine is only a fucking undercover cop.'

'How did you find that out?'

'A couple of lads got taken in for questioning about something else, and they saw him at the station. He won't ever show his face again, obviously, but I trusted that cunt and he knows far too much about me. I've got too much going on round here to risk getting put away.'

So that was it for Harry, although me and Jimmy still went to watch the Hammers, whenever we could afford it and weren't too hungover.

Harry knew everyone, it seemed, and by association we met a lot of people too.

The Fox became our life, the only convincing argument in favour of going to work: if we could just get through the week, we'd have enough money to get back on the lash. Through Harry we got to know a few of the lads down there, some good old beer boys and some decidedly dodgy characters. Anything you might want, someone down the Fox could get it for you on the cheap: TVs, videos, stereos, clothing, footwear, MOT's, and, of course, drugs. Nothing too heavy, mind, and no huge quantities. The dealers down there knew they were onto a good thing because Fat Phil turned a blind eye to a bit of smoke, a few wraps of speed and charlie and the odd tab of acid or two, but god help anyone who tried to shift smack.

Me and Stumpy were having a few beers one night with Harry Johnson when Fats came over to our table.

'Where's Long John got to?'

'Who the fuck's Long John?' asked Stumpy.

'If he's doing that shit again, I'll fucking kill him,' said Phil, completely ignoring him.

'Long John Cassidy's a smack head,' said Harry. 'Me and Phil caught him jacking up out the back of the pub a couple of years ago. He should know better than to try that again.'

'Why do you call him Long John?'

‘Cos he’s only got one leg. He lost the other one in a car smash when he was out of his head.’
‘Come on Harry,’ said Fats. ‘He was in here earlier and I ain’t seen him leave. He’s got to be in the bogs.’

‘Probably just having a slash,’ sighed Harry, but he finished his pint and followed Phil. A couple of minutes later the toilet door crashed open and Phil burst through with Long John Cassidy in a headlock.

‘I fucking told you once already. No one does that shit in my pub!’

‘Phil,’ said Harry, ‘he’s too out of it to understand anything. Let’s just take him home. I’ll go round to see him tomorrow and make sure he really does get the message this time.’

I saw Long John Cassidy a couple of days later outside the dole office. He had a broken nose and a black eye and one of his arms was in a sling. Harry Johnson obviously didn’t believe in a quiet chat.

Of all the dodgy geezers who drank in the Fox and Hounds, Fat Phil Magee was the dodgiest by far. He had fingers in more pies than he ate, contacts all over the place stopping by at all hours of the day and night to offload gear into Phil’s office, a dark storeroom behind the bar.

I remember being amazed at how easily available the various drugs were, and how many people dabbled in them. At times it seemed as though everyone in the boozier was up on something, and it didn’t take long before we were introduced to the highs and lows.

Speed was the first one that came our way, one Saturday night in November ’86. Me, Jimmy and Stumpy had been sitting in a corner of the pub having a few beers like usual when Harry beckoned me over and asked if I wanted to try a little livener. I had no idea what he meant, still being pretty naïve back then, but I didn’t want to show myself up so I followed him into the bogs. He went into the only cubicle, a rank smelling pit with a cracked bowl and piss all over the floor. The only thing that worked in there was the lock, and it I realized pretty quickly why that was.

Harry shut the door and pulled out a bag of white powder and a ten pound note from inside his denim jacket pocket. He tipped some of the powder onto the cistern and used a credit card to chop it down a bit and smooth it into a thin line. Then he rolled up the note, leant over and snorted the powder up his nose. He stood up, sniffing deeply and wiping the residue from his nostril, his eyes slightly red and watery.

He chopped up a second line and looked at me.

‘Go on Steve, have a go on that and tell me what you think.’

Full of false bravado I copied what Harry had done and took my first step on the road to years and years of casual drug abuse.

I walked back to our corner of the pub, and the other two took their turn. We sat there for a while, wondering what was supposed to happen and without realising it the speed kicked in and we were talking ten to the dozen and having a right laugh. The lager seemed to flow even better than normal, and after a hefty lock in we went back to Harry’s flat with a few of the lads and sat around chatting until the sun began to rise. To cap off a memorable night, one of Harry’s mates then started skinning up some big fat joints and we got stoned for the first time.

‘To help you come down off the speed,’ said Harry, inhaling deeply before passing the joint to Stumpy. Not surprisingly that first experience spun us out all over the place and I vaguely

remember someone laughing at me before I lay back on Harry's sofa and passed out. But I liked both the feelings: the buzz from the speed and the mellow space out from the puff.

I started to buy the odd bit of stuff now and then, and once a month me, Jimmy and Stumpy would pool some money to get half an ounce of puff and maybe a tab each for the weekend, or a wrap of speed. Charlie was still out of our league price wise: I didn't see the point in shelling out all that dosh for a quick high, no matter how good it was, when you could get out of it for a fraction of the cost on speed or acid.

Me and Jimmy weren't serious drug users, and could go weeks without taking anything. Lager did it for us, and getting pissed was still our favourite option, but Stumpy was a different case. He'd always been one for excess, never could dip his toes into anything. He'd always have to dive right in, to whatever it was that grabbed his attention and to be fair the geezer was nothing if not dedicated.

At school he'd been obsessed with rock stars that went off the rails, with Arsenal, and with reading books. As soon as he started working he learnt brickwork, then he discovered lager, and of course, drugs.

He fell in love with acid, and took to it like a fat bird to chips and it wasn't long before it started to fuck his head up. Acid is the dogs bollocks when you're in a good mood and right up for it, and some of the best laughs I've ever had have been when tripping, but if you're down and depressed it definitely ain't gonna do you any good.

Stumpy began to change, gradually: he had his good days but he also had his bad days and after a while me and Jimmy learned to leave him alone when he was on a downer. I didn't know what caused the mood swings, and maybe I should have asked, but I was too caught up in my own life, in having a laugh and looking for mischief. Just a typical nineteen year old I suppose.

4. Martines
December 1986

Life was ticking along nicely. Our weekends began on Thursday night, when in anticipation of pay day we went down to the Fox for a few quiet ones. Fridays generally turned into a right old mess, whilst Saturdays started later and often went on for most of the night. After a few hours sleep we were up in time to play football, and then it was a lunchtime session down at the Fox and an afternoon round at someone's house for a few smokes, some tunes or a video, before finishing off the weekend back at the Fox. Four nights a week, every week, relentlessly, for years.

Normally we were skint by the time Thursday came around, so Fat Phil would allow us a slate for the night, on the strict understanding that we paid him back the next day. On most building sites in the Eighties, the week finished at lunch time on a Friday, when Charlie Lord himself

would turn up and hand out the pay, always in cash, always in fivers. We'd normally go straight to the Fox without even stopping to wash our hands, and get back on the lager, but not before paying Phil what we owed him.

Phil wasn't the sort of bloke you wanted to annoy, but that wasn't the main reason we played it straight with him. On the quiet Fat Phil was a bit of a loan shark, lending money to those who needed it and charging them extortionate rates of interest. And his debt collector was one Harry Johnson. I was never exactly sure what else Harry did for a living, and I didn't particularly want to know, but everyone associated with the Fox and Hounds knew that he collected money for Phil.

One Friday I'd just handed over the score that Phil had let me run up the night before.

'I wish everyone would pay up as regular as you and your mates, Steve,' said Fat Phil.

'Someone got a bit behind, then?'

'Yeah, you could say that. There's a geezer that owes me a fair bit, and he don't want to pay up. He fancies himself as a bit of a hard man, and I've heard he's been saying that he's mugged me off and that he'll get away with it. Funnily enough, Harry's gone to see him tonight.'

A couple of hours later, the pub door opened and a big bloke limped in. He looked like he was in agony, and then I saw why. His right hand was badly swollen, every finger bent out of shape. His eyes were red, as though he'd been crying and he looked anything but a hard man.

Harry followed him in and stood by the door, arms folded.

The bloke made his way to the bar, then dug his left hand into his pocket and pulled out a bundle of notes. There must have been at least five hundred quid there. He put it down in front of Phil, and turned to leave.

Harry stared at him.

'What do you say, cunt?'

The bloke turned around again to face Phil.

'I'm sorry Mr. Magee, I've been well out of order. Thank you very much for lending me money, and I'm sorry it's taken so long to pay you back. I've put in a bit extra for your trouble.'

'That's better,' said Harry, 'now fuck off out of this pub and never come back. If you ever do anything to cross me, Phil or anybody that I know, I'll burn your fucking house down with you inside.'

The bloke nodded, and Harry stood to one side to let him pass. Once the door had shut he turned to look around the pub, saw me sitting in the corner and got us a couple of beers in.

'Alright Steve? What have you been up to then?'

And that was it. No mention of what had just happened, it was all just part of a normal day's work for Harry Johnson.

'Come on now, drink up. Glasses please.'

It was the night after I'd witnessed Harry's debt collecting skills, and Fat Phil moved through the pub encouraging people to finish off their drinks so that the bar staff could tidy up the place after another big Saturday night. A crowd of us sat in the far corner, our table littered with empty pint glasses, crisp packets and overflowing ashtrays.

'We alright for a lock in, Phil?' asked Harry Johnson.

‘Not tonight I’m afraid lads, I’ve got a mate coming round with a delivery and I can’t afford to have people here.’

‘Come on mate, you know you can trust us, and it’s Jimmy’s birthday! You don’t turn twenty every day.’

‘Yeah, I know, and I hope you’ve all had a good night, but I need to clear the place. So do us a favour, drink up and fuck off.’

After Fat Phil knocked us back for a lock in, we sat there for a few minutes, weighing up the options. We could normally rely on Phil to kick everyone out on a Friday and Saturday night, then leave the fire exit ajar so that we could sneak back in and drink until the early hours.

Curtains drawn, main lights off and no one any the wiser. But without a lock in there weren’t many choices in Basingstoke after 11.30 at night, so we piled back to Harry’s flat because it was the closest and raided his wardrobe for trousers and shirts. Looked like it was gonna have to be Martines.

Situated beneath the multistory car park Martines nightclub was a legendary place for anyone who’s grown up in Basingstoke in the last twenty years. And it’s not even as if it was any good: the beer was always piss-weak, the bouncers overly aggressive, the music was shite and because it was full of blokes from different estates, football teams and pubs there were always scraps breaking out. But it was the only club in the town centre, so you dusted off your trousers, dug out a shirt and stood in the queue for as long as the bouncers wanted you there. And when you did finally get to the door it was touch and go whether they’d let you in. Sorry mate, too crowded, you’re too pissed, not smart enough, basically pal you’re not a good-looking bird so you can fuck off.

We walked through town, past the Sports Centre and the benches outside Woolies where Harry used to hang out with the Basingstoke punks, sniffing glue and drinking cider, down the slope that led to the Market Square by the bus station. We stopped to laugh at two old drunks trying to fight each other outside the Nightjar pub and then carried on to the right, past Griggs pie shop and Our Price records and up the steps to the rickety concrete bridge that crossed Timberlake Road and which led to Martines.

As usual a queue snaked its way from the nightclub entrance back past Perrings department store and Wheeler’s lighting shop and up towards the Wote Street club, which for as long as I can remember has been full of old tossers playing bingo and dominoes. As we’d got there just after closing time we were pretty close to the front, and as time drew on more and more people came walking, staggering and stumbling from the various pubs dotted around in an attempt to carry on drinking until two o’clock. One nightclub in the town centre for about 100,000 people. What a fucking disgrace.

We split up amongst the crowd, trying to keep it together enough to get past the bouncers, ignoring each other because a gang of blokes together had no chance.

We made it, paid a fiver and stumbled down the stairs into semi-darkness, sticky carpets and the smell of beer, fags, dodgy perfume and knock-off aftershave. I got a round in, took a long pull on my pint and turned to look around the club, searching for familiar faces.

We were stood at the bar underneath the stairs at the back of the club, pissing about and causing a bit of mischief. We were trying to suss out some birds that might be up for it when I heard some screams coming from one of the dark cubicles near the women’s bogs. We took no notice,

and a minute or so later saw a girl emerge, clothes ripped and tears pouring down her face. Two geezers followed her, laughing, and made their way to the bar.

‘Oops,’ said Stumpy. ‘Those two have made a very bad mistake.’

‘Why?’ asked Jim.

‘That’s only Gary Irvine’s missus. He’s gonna go fucking mental.’

Gary Irvine was the head doorman at Martines, and a right vicious fucker. One of those blokes who really gets a kick out of violence, and the two geezers who’d interfered with his missus were either too pissed or too stupid to know what they’d just done. Everyone in town knew who Gary Irvine was and everyone knew his girlfriend. She was known to be a right old slapper but don’t tell Gary I said that - she liked to tease pricks and it looked as though she’d picked a right couple to lead up the garden path.

‘Oi oi,’ said Stumpy, ‘here we go.’

Gary Irvine came steaming through the crowd, followed by three other bouncers and his missus, who was screaming at the top of her voice and pointing at the bar.

‘That’s them! The dirty fuckers! Those two Gary, there at the end!’

The two blokes hardly had time to blink before Gary and his mates were on top of them, punching them all over the club, then dragging them out the fire exit to give them another kicking outside. I know that because Tommy Peters had got hold of some bird and was giving her one at the bottom of the stairs and he saw it all kick off. Put him right off his stroke he said. A couple of weeks later Phil had another delivery coming in, so me and Stumpy got the trousers and shirt out again and stood in the middle of the queue trying our luck with a couple of girls we’d been at school with, cos it was always easier to get in Martines with a bird in tow. They knew us too well for there to be any chance of a result with them so the plan was to get ourselves through the door, then ditch them as quick as possible. The feeling was mutual: they were on the pull as well and didn’t want us cramping their style. At the front of the queue I saw Harry with a girl and another couple, all dressed up and no doubt ready for a big night.

All of a sudden I heard a commotion behind me and turned to see a gang of lads steaming their way through the crowd.

‘No one takes the fucking piss out of Reading!’ shouted one of the blokes as he shoved past me.

Stumpy shouted in my ear. ‘It’s them two geezers from the other week!’

They had obviously got all their mates together and had come looking for revenge. They outnumbered the bouncers four to one and would have got what they came for, especially as Gary Irvine and his bully bouncers weren’t too popular around town anyway, but they made two basic mistakes.

First they steamed their way through a queue that contained a fair few tasty geezers with a load of lager inside them, knocking people flying left right and centre and second they came in shouting about Reading as they launched themselves into attack. Back then there was no love lost between the two towns and blokes like Harry Johnson don’t take too kindly to liberties like that. Before I knew what was happening an almighty scrap developed.

The girl with Harry got shoved headlong into his shoulder blade, blood spurting from her nose. Harry’s mate got his shirt ripped in the bundle and he started whacking the nearest bloke. He looked like he was loving it.

Me and Stumpy kept well out of it, this was way out of our league, so we moved back up the slope that leads to a car park so we could get a better view. We got ourselves a quick dog burger

from the stall run by a couple of Turks, to soak up some of the lager while we watched the entertainment.

The two girls that were with Harry and his mate came staggering up the slope, the one with the nose bleed being comforted by the other. They stood next to the burger van, looking for a taxi.

‘You alright, love?’ asked Stumpy.

‘No, it fucking hurts!’

Stumpy finished a mouthful of food and wiped his hands on his trousers.

‘Look, sit yourself down and tip your head back, try and stop that bleeding. And here, put my jacket round you, you’re shivering.’

Her friend looked at Stumpy suspiciously.

‘What are you after?’ she asked.

‘Nothing!’ said Stumpy. ‘You’re with Harry, and he’s a mate of ours.’

‘Ok, fair enough. It’s just that there are a lot of toe rags out there that’d try anything for a shag.’

Me and Stumpy looked at each other and grinned. If it hadn’t been for Harry and his mate, that’s exactly what we’d have been trying for.

We turned our attention back to the action and saw that there were about twenty blokes involved, the fight continued to escalate and I heard a loud smash as one of the Reading mob got thrown through the plate glass window of Perrings. There were women screaming and crying and people poured out of the club to watch as all the other bouncers steamed in. I heard the wail of a siren, and turned round expecting to see a load of meat wagons come tearing into the car park. Instead I saw a solitary patrol car with two coppers inside, and one of ‘em weren’t much older than me. The driver got out and looked at the mayhem in dismay.

‘The caller said it was just a couple of girls having an argument. I think we need a bit of back up here,’ he said nervously to his mate, who quite frankly looked terrified.

‘I dunno,’ said Stumpy. ‘I reckon if you walk down there, they’ll stop fighting each other.’

‘You reckon?’ said the young copper, hopefully.

‘Yeah, course. They’ll just join forces and kick the fuck out of you two instead.’

I heard the girl with the broken nose snigger.

‘You feeling a bit better?’ I asked.

‘Yes thanks,’ she said.

‘If I was you,’ said Stumpy to the coppers, ‘I’d radio in and say it’s all been sorted out. By the time your mates finish doing their make up and get down here, it’ll be over anyway. Why don’t you two go and have a nice romantic drive in the moonlight somewhere?’

The driver looked at Stumpy suspiciously, but obviously couldn’t be arsed to do anything that resembled work. He ignored Stumpy’s piss taking, and took his advice instead. The young copper looked like so happy I thought he was gonna cry.

I looked back at the fight and saw Gary Irvine curled up in a ball at the foot of the bridge. He was getting a right kicking from three blokes until Harry came steaming in with his mate and one of the bouncers and sorted the Reading boys out.

The fight ended as quickly as it had begun, with the Reading mob legging it across the bridge and up towards the station. A gang of lads started chasing them, but running with a skin full of lager is hard work so after 50 yards or so they stopped and yelled a few insults instead.

As we waited to see if the club was going to stay open, I saw Harry's mate walking up the slope towards us. He had a cut on his right hand, the knuckles along three fingers torn open, and his shirt had been ripped, revealing several tattoos on his chest.

'You alright?' he grunted at the girl with the broken nose.

'Yeah, I'll live Billy. These two lads have been looking after me.'

'Are you Billy Jeffries?' asked Stumpy.

'Who fucking wants to know?' he growled.

'Sorry mate, no offence, but we're mates with Harry Johnson. He's mentioned you before, that's all.'

Billy relaxed, slightly.

'Right, fair enough.' He looked down at the girl sitting on the curb.

'Come on, Sue, let's get you to hospital. Thanks for looking after her, lads.'

We walked down to the entrance of the club to see if the management were going to keep it open. Thirsty work, watching all that violence. Harry was standing on a patch of grass near the doorway.

'You alright?' I asked.

'Yeah,' he replied, still breathing heavily from the exertion.

'That was fucking excellent. What a bunch of wankers.'

The adrenaline was pumping and Harry seemed oblivious to the nasty gash above his right eye. He leaned down to help Gary Irvine to his feet.

'Cheers Harry, I owe you one. And you two, you're welcome in here any time you like.'

What a result. Gary thought me and Stumpy had helped him out and we weren't about to put him right. Harry Johnson obviously thought we'd been involved as well, and he took us to the bar upstairs once the bouncers had got it together enough to start letting people back inside, and bought us round after round of lager and whiskey chasers.

'We met your mate Billy a bit earlier,' I said.

'Oh yeah? I told him to look after Sue, rather than stay scrapping. The last thing Billy needs is more trouble with the police. Mind you, having said that I can't believe the Old Bill didn't turn up.'

'They did,' said Stumpy, and Harry laughed as we told him about the two coppers shitting themselves by the burger bar.

We moved to a table overlooking the dancefloor to eye up any talent below, maybe get an eyeful down some bird's top. A silver glitter ball revolved slowly above the DJ's booth as he slowed things down at half one with 'Careless Whisper.'

'I hate this sappy shit,' said Harry, 'but it's a good way to pull. I'll see you later lads,' and he walked downstairs, checking his reflection in the mirrors as he went. I saw him collar a little blond piece and steer her by the elbow onto the dancefloor. He pulled her in close and gave her arse a squeeze before looking over her shoulder and giving us the thumbs up.

We were both far too pissed to pull, although we gave it a go with a couple of good time girls that were always hanging around. They didn't want to know, so we weaved towards the entrance and walked back out into the night to get some more food from the mobile burger van in the car park.

'What a night!' slurred Stumpy.

'Yeah,' I agreed. 'It don't get much better than that. Apart from a bunk up of course.'

‘Oh well, there’s always next week.’

We got our burgers and stumbled through the car park, past the Red Lion Hotel, down Hackwood Road and across the War Memorial Park, stopping for a slash in the old bandstand.

5. That’s Entertainment

March 1987

I wandered into the living room one Sunday morning with a cup of tea and a bit of Marmite on toast to find Stumpy slumped on the sofa wearing a pair of boxer shorts and a dirty old vest. He was scratching his plums with one hand and had the index finger of the other shoved half way up his nose.

‘Easy mate, you’ll pick yer brain out if you ain’t careful.’

He withdrew his finger and examined the contents of his nostril with curiosity. I watched him roll it between finger and thumb before flicking it off into the corner of the room.

‘Sorry mate. What were you saying?’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I said. ‘What happened to you last night? I thought you were gonna come down for a session?’

‘Yeah, I was, but then...I dunno Steve, don’t you ever get bored with it all?’

‘What, with beer and football?’

‘With everything. Work, getting pissed, doing the same old things all the time, Basingstoke, England. All of it.’

‘What’s brought this on then?’ I asked, finishing my breakfast and skinning up a joint.

‘Ah nothing, don’t worry about it. I’m just feeling a bit restless, that’s all. There’s gotta be more to life than this Steve.’

He took the joint from me and inhaled deeply, then slowly let the smoke out so that it swirled up around his head like a cloud. We sat there in silence for a while, then he scratched his plums a bit more, let out a huge fart and wandered off to put the kettle on.

He could be a funny old sod sometimes. There were days when I couldn’t work him out at all, and we’d been mates for nearly eight years at that stage, and shared a house for more than two.

He used to withdraw into himself every now and then and nothing me or Jimmy did seemed to make any difference. When he was out and about he was the life and soul and everyone saw him as a big old pisshead, a right party animal. He was a proper funny fucker, he loved being the centre of attention and he’d do anything for a laugh.

But then I suppose we all put on a front to a certain extent when we’re in a crowd, so why should Stumpy be any different?

He used to try and get me to read as well, but if it wasn’t The Sun then I couldn’t be arsed. That used to really wind him up, cos he fucking hated that rag.

‘It’s dangerous,’ he said to me once, ‘they use it to spread propaganda, and they stretch the truth for their own ends. And mugs like you buy into it and believe what they print.’

‘But it’s good for football news,’ I said, unconvincingly, ‘And tits.’

He’d shake his head and mutter that if the editor of The Sun wrote that the world was going to end and we only had a week to live then idiots like me would swallow it. He refused to read any papers, saying they were all rubbish, but he’d watch the news on telly, BBC and ITV so he’d feel he was getting a more balanced view. I tell you what, for someone who didn’t give a toss about anything except beer, women and football up to the age of twenty he’d definitely changed his tune. Next thing he’d be listening to Radio 4 and buying jazz records.

I liked to hear about the books, though, and every now and then, on a Sunday night when there wasn’t anything else happening, he’d tell me and Jimmy about whatever book he’d just finished, do a bit of Jackanory for us. Blimey, imagine Stumpy reading a story for kids on the telly. His ugly mug would give ‘em nightmares for fucking years.

He’d read a book about some geezer who ran drugs and spent his life travelling the world and shagging birds, or about blokes who dice with death trying to climb mountains or exploring the ends of the earth, discovering new tribes or whatever, and he’d get all moody.

‘There are geezers out there who’re really living, Steve, doing mental stuff all the time. And that’s what gets me thinking. I mean, I’m twenty years old and what have I done? I’ve been to Highbury and the West End a few times and my old man took me down to Brighton once or twice as a nipper. But that’s it. That’s about as far as I’ve ever gone, and there are geezers out there who are really living, you know what I mean?’

‘Yeah, but some of that shit don’t exactly sound like a barrel of laughs, though, does it?’

‘I’m not saying I want to do stuff like that you knob. The point is, I ain’t doing anything at all. My life’s a waste of fucking time. I work, get pissed, do some drugs, play football, watch Arsenal and that’s it. I’m bored Steve. That’s all I’m saying.’

There’s not much you can say to that, well, not much I could say at any rate so I left it alone and skinned up another fat one. To be honest I couldn’t really see what Stumpy was on about. As far as I was concerned things were just fine thank you very much. A new season had just started, I had money in my pocket and my whole life stretched out ahead of me.

6. If The Kids Are United August 1987

We met Big Lad, Heavy Trev and Scouse in the Fox and Hounds one Wednesday night during the summer of ‘87. I was working in one of the new buildings on a business park being built near Chineham, out on the Reading road and a mate had given me a lift as far as the train station. I was wandering past the boozier on my way home when I heard a muffled shout and saw Fat Phil’s big red face peering at me from the front window. I walked in to see what was up.

‘Ere Steve, you play a bit of football dontcha?’

‘Yes I do mate. I love it.’

‘Who are you gonna play for next season?’

‘Dunno. I was down at Wingforce last season with Jim and Stumpy but it all went a bit pear shaped.’

‘What happened there then?’ asked Phil.

‘We had a Cup game one week against some mob from Andover and I’d had a bit of a skinful the night before.’

‘So what’s new?’

‘Exactly. But the manager had a right go at me afterwards, telling me I should take it more serious and lay off the lager on a Saturday night. Bollocks to that. I mean, I know I was shit but you’re gonna have the odd off day ain’t you?’

‘So that was it then? A bit of a slagging and you ain’t gonna play for them any more?’

‘Not quite, Phil. See, the geezer started mouthing off after I’d had a few beers. I got fucked off with all his moaning and started having a go back. One thing led to another and I ended up lobbing a pint in his face. Then I walked out, ripped the fuel cap off his motor, pissed in the tank and smashed his wing mirrors. I didn’t get a call the next week.’

‘Funny that,’ laughed Phil. ‘So how d’you fancy playing for the Fox and Hounds then? I’ve decided to start up a Sunday football team. Should be a right laugh.’

‘And get a few extra quid in your pocket over the bar.’

‘Yeah, course, I ain’t gonna do it for nothing. But I’ve got a few lads interested already, and if you can get the likes of Stumpy and Jimmy down I reckon we’re on to a winner. Anyway, I’ve got a bit of grub lying about so if you come down around half seven tonight we’ll take it from there.’

A bit of food was a nice touch, seeing as the fridge at our place contained half a kebab that Stumpy had brought home the previous weekend and a lump of lard that had been there since we moved in.

The others were up for a bit of football at the Fox as well, and we strolled in just before seven to be greeted by the motliest bunch of losers you’re ever likely to see. Geezers who obviously couldn’t kick a ball if their next pint depended on it, including two sixty-plus pissheads with watery eyes and arthritic limbs. The only dribbling these two were capable of was already running down their chins. There were a bunch of pimply idiots from the local college who looked as though they’d snap in two from a hefty challenge and who wouldn’t dare show their faces in the Fox at the weekends and another crowd of lads who were taking the piss out of each other over by the pool tables.

I looked at Phil and he shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

‘Sorry lads, I think it was the promise of free food that got ‘em all down here. This is probably the best bit of grub they’ve had in weeks.’

I looked at a table full of ham sandwiches that were curling at the edge, no doubt filled with meat that was due for the bin days ago, and laughed. Plates full of greasy, undercooked chips and a few sausage rolls hard enough to have someone’s eye out in a food fight. Mind you, in Phil’s eyes any food was top notch, regardless of sell by dates.

‘We ain’t gonna get much joy out of this lot Phil,’ said Jimmy, ‘not unless you’re starting up a freak show that is. Don’t tell me some of them old fuckers over there want to play?’

‘They’re probably still faster than that fat fucker over there,’ said Stumpy, pointing to a big skinhead sitting at one of the corner tables with the crowd of lads by the pool table, surrounded by empty pint glasses and crisp packets.

The idea of a team from the Fox and Hounds appealed because I knew some of the lads could actually play the game and I knew that they wouldn’t take any shit. But looking around the pub I couldn’t see more than a handful of decent footballers. Harry could play, I knew Jimmy and Stumpy were useful and I recognised a couple of lads that used to play for other teams that were pretty good but that was about it. As Fats brought out more grub I was shoved to one side by the big skinhead intent on shoveling as many chips down his neck as possible.

‘Fucking hell mate, if you’re as quick in the tackle as you are at guzzling food you’ll do alright,’ I said.

He mumbled something incoherent, spraying me with bits of potato and gulped down the pint nearest pint to him.

‘Oi! That’s my beer!’ yelled an irate punter.

‘Bollocks, not now it ain’t,’ replied the skinhead and ignoring the protests he picked up a plate of sandwiches and someone else’s pint and retired to the corner.

‘Who the fuck is that?!’ I said to Harry.

‘That’s just Big Lad, don’t worry about him, he’s alright. Pissed, probably.’

The skinhead was sitting at a table with a couple of other lads, including a stringy little fucker with a bleached flat top who I’d seen about town and a geezer with a shock of black, curly hair and a dodgy tash, and they were all punishing the beer like it was going out of fashion. I assumed they’d just come for the food as well, like most of the geezers in there.

As I drank my lager and waited for Fats to get his act together I watched the skinhead and his mates drinking and laughing and generally having the crack. He wore a Chelsea top, stretched tight over his beer gut and tucked into a faded old pair of jeans, and dirty trainers which a few years ago were probably white. He laughed a lot, huge bellows which left him slapping his thighs and wiping tears from eyes that were bright and full of mischief. He drank indiscriminately, from any pint within grabbing distance and refused to buy a round, protesting that he was skint.

As I watched he looked up and caught my eye. He stared at me for a moment then grinned and raised his pint. I found myself grinning back and returned the greeting. He finished his drink and all the other ones on the table, ignoring the protests of his mates and loudly demanded more beer. The skinny bloke with the flat top wandered over to the bar and grabbed a handful of chips as he waited for Tracey to serve him. At that moment Fats rang the last orders bell to get attention, giving one poor old sod a nasty scare, thinking his watch had gone all funny on him and struggling to get a last one in at the bar before he realised what was going on.

Half the blokes in the pub ignored Fats as he explained his vision for the Fox and Hounds FC but to my surprise Big Lad and the geezer with the flat top wandered over and took a pew next to Harry Johnson, while Curly went off to get yet another round in.

‘Alright lads?’

‘Harry,’ Big Lad nodded in greeting. ‘This here’s my mate Heavy Trev.’

‘Trev,’ said Harry.

‘Harry,’ said Trev.

‘Stumpy, Jimmy and Steve,’ said Harry, introducing the rest of us and we nodded at Big Lad and Heavy Trev and raised our pints in greeting.

Trev was the complete opposite of Big Lad: small and wiry, with a thin face and serious eyes. He had a bad case of acne, his skin boasting a couple of vicious fuckers that seemed on the point of exploding, red and angry looking, zits that dragged your eyes in their direction. You just couldn’t help staring. He was skinny, under-nourished, and looked as though he hadn’t eaten a square meal in weeks.

Their mate was still at the bar trying to get Tracey’s attention, and Harry said to me, ‘do you know him?’

‘No, why?’

‘That’s Scouse, he plays midfield. He was on Man City’s books as a kid.’

Scouse returned from the bar and greeted Harry in a broad Mancunian accent. I looked at Harry.

‘That’s why we call him Scouse,’ he explained, ‘cos he’s from Manchester. He fucking hates it. Mind you, he doesn’t do himself any favours does he?’

I looked at the geezer’s curly hair and tash and laughed.

‘Yeah, see what you mean.’

‘Alright Scouse?’ said Harry.

‘I ain’t a fookin Mickey Mouser,’ the bloke complained. ‘I keep fookin tellin you that.’

‘Yeah, whatever,’ said Harry. ‘Listen mate, are you up for this team or what?’

‘Why not? It’s been years since I kicked a ball.’

‘I thought Harry said you were on Man City’s books? Why would you want to play pub football?’ I asked

‘That was before I discovered lager mate, and the gaffer there didn’t appreciate me breathing booze all over him every other day. They kicked me out when I was eighteen, and I ain’t bothered playing since. Looks to me like this could be a bit of a laugh.’

Harry got a round in and sat next to me and Stumpy.

‘So what’s your best position then?’ he asked Stumpy.

‘Underneath with the bird doing all the work,’ he replied, ‘either that or from behind with a lager resting on her back.’

‘He plays centre midfield,’ I said, ‘no fucking skill but he can tackle.’

‘What about you then?’

‘I used to play on the wing, but I got sick of defenders booting me up in the air every time I got round them so I moved back. Now I do the kicking, and it’s much better. Centre half or right back, don’t mind which.’

I used to find it immensely satisfying launching a two footed knee high challenge on some skinny little fucker legging it down the line, knocking both him and the ball onto the adjoining pitch and jumping up with a cry of our ball ref. It was fucking good therapy after a shit week at work.

Sunday morning football can be hard work for young lads, particularly if they’re not protected by some older geezers. You know what it’s like: you get a strange mixture of blokes who turn up for a ten thirty kick-off every week, come rain or shine. There’s the people genuinely interested in football, who want to play for the love of it regardless of their level of skill. You get the people for whom it’s more of a social thing, getting together with their mates and having a laugh before retiring to the pub for a few beers. And then you get your genuine nutters, who just want

to kick lumps out of people and bugger the finer points of the game. For some of these people, no matter which group they fall into it's an escape, from the bollocks of a shitty home life, from a nagging wife and a screaming kid, from the boredom of some crappy job. Some come to get rid of their aggression on the park and turn up stinking of beer, ready to do some damage, and it's these blokes a young lad's got to be wary of.

If you play in the lower divisions there isn't much room for skill, particularly in the middle of winter on some of the pitches around town, all mud and lumps, so as a winger it can be a bit frustrating, but as a defender it's great. More scope for sliding tackles and a bit of gratuitous butchery. Of course nowadays you've only got to breathe on a bloke and the referee's blowing up but ten years ago you could get away with a lot more and for those of us not blessed with Joe Cole-type skill it was a definite bonus.

Fats tried to organise some pre-season training, but having the pub as a meeting point proved fatal. Whoever got there first would hang about for a while, get bored and order up a pint. Other lads would wander in, see lager on the bar and get one in themselves and by the time the whole team had assembled people were beginning to get beered up and no one could be arsed running around. The nearest anyone got to exercise was one night when Jimmy was ripping into Big Lad about Chelsea and eventually took it too far. With a roar Big Lad jumped off his bar stool and started chasing Jimmy round the pub threatening all kinds of horrible violence until he got knackered and bent over with his hands on his knees, face red with exertion, chest wheezing, coughing and spluttering, still muttering faint threats. The whole pub was laughing as Jimmy bought them both a pint and helped Big Lad back to his stool.

Things were going well on all fronts, regular sessions down at the Fox and Hounds, a few birds here and there and the best bunch of mates a bloke could wish for. Every now and then we'd drop a tab for a bit of variety, or do a wrap and head off to London for the night, but generally speaking we stuck to lager and pissed our wages away at the Fox and Martines. And it's always when you're slaughtered that you do something fucking stupid, isn't it?

7. Another Girl, Another Planet

July 1988

One Saturday in the summer before the '88/'89 season me and Stumpy went on a huge all-dayer with Harry and a few of the boys. No particular reason, just that the sun was shining and we had nothing better to do. Like always we had a right laugh, drank too much lager and caused a bit of mischief. Things ended up pretty messy, but no worse than normal as far as I could remember so I was a bit surprised when Harry came round our house the next day with an agitated look on his face.

'What happened with that bird you were talking to last night?'

'I got a right result,' I told him, 'shagged her over the bonnet of a Cortina.'

Harry groaned out loud and shook his head. I started to get a bit worried because Harry wasn't afraid of anyone as far as I knew.

'What's up Harry? She ain't some nutter's bird is she?'

'Do you remember her name?'

‘Yeah, Caroline. Why?’

‘That was Caroline Jeffries, that’s why. Billy’s younger sister.’

I suddenly felt sick, the fear spreading to my stomach at the realisation that I could be looking at a right kicking. Since meeting Billy just after that big scrap outside Martines, we’d become mates, sort of. It was hard to tell what Billy thought about people, unless he was giving them a hiding. That gave you a bit of a clue. He wasn’t a regular at the Fox, sometimes going weeks without putting in an appearance, and when he did turn up everyone was just that little bit more careful about what they said and how they said it.

‘I hope she was worth it,’ said Harry, as if he’d read my thoughts. ‘I tried to tell you last night but you were too pissed. Fuck knows how you managed to pull in the first place, let alone get it up.’

I tried to piece together what happened.

‘I remember doing a load of whiskeys down in one and getting a bollocking from the bouncers for rugby tackling all them birds that were on a hen night. And then the DJ put a slowie on and that Caroline asked me to dance. I was a bit too pissed for all that nonsense, so she bought me a pint and we went and sat in the corner by the fire escape.’

‘It must have been a bet,’ said Harry.

‘Leave it out,’ I said, ‘she just couldn’t help herself. Either that or she was as pissed as me. She was up for it, though. Right in the middle of ‘True’ she leaned over, unzipped my trousers and stuck her hand down my boxers. Next thing I know we’re in the multi-storey car park and I’ve got her bent over the bonnet of a motor giving her a right seeing to.’

‘You sure about that?’ said Harry, looking a bit disbelieving.

‘Well, maybe it weren’t the best bunk up she’s ever had. Actually, truth be told it’s all a bit of a blur. I know I was in the car park because I woke up there about half four. And one sniff of the old fingers told me I’d had a result, plus the fact that my boxers were hanging from the aerial of the Cortina.’

‘Some dirty old tramp probably interfered with you while you were passed out.’

‘Bollocks, you’re just jealous. I know I was pissed but she’s alright ain’t she, she ain’t some moose?’

‘Yeah, I’m just pissing about. She’s well fit as it happens. She’s also Billy’s little sister and he’ll go fucking mental if he finds out. And one more thing: you know she’s only sixteen, don’t you?’

‘Fuck off!! No way?! I thought she was about twenty!’

‘Nope, just looks older, that’s all. Listen, lie low for a few days while I find out what Billy does or doesn’t know.’

I sat there, thinking, trying to piece together all that had happened.

‘Hang on, Harry. I didn’t leave Martines with her. I remember her asking me to walk her home, and I got up, but she told me to meet her outside. I left it a few minutes while I finished my beer and then found her by the stairs to the car park.’

‘So you didn’t dance with her and you weren’t seen leaving with her. Look, as I said, leave it with me for a while.’

‘Is he that bad then, Billy?’ I asked. But I remembered Jack’s warning a few years ago, and I knew what people said about him, and I’d seen him in action. So fuck knows why I was asking.

‘He’s one of the maddest fuckers I know. Borderline psycho, a right nutter. Comes from a gypsy family.’

‘How do you know him then? I thought that pikeys kept themselves to themselves.’

‘We used to knock about together when we were kids. A load of families pitched up behind the Motorola depot on the Viables industrial estate one day when I was about ten, and stayed for a couple of weeks then moved on. But Billy’s mum was on her way out, cancer I think, and old man Jeffries stayed where he was. There was loads of shit left behind, you know what it’s like. Fucking engine parts, an old washing machine, litter everywhere. He cleaned up the field, stuck his caravan in one corner and refused to be shifted. The Council tried to move him on, and the police, but he weren’t bothering anyone, kept his dogs on a leash and eventually they left him alone. He put the kids into school, and that’s where I met Billy.’

‘So you’ve been mates a long time then?’ I said, thinking that maybe he could talk Billy out of giving me a hiding.

‘Well, sort of. We lost touch for a few years. He fucking hated school, couldn’t handle it. Used to spend more time skiving off than he did in the classroom, and none of the teachers bothered with him cos he was out of control. Then when we were thirteen the fair came to town, he met some of his cousins working on the Disco Waltzer and that was it, he got a job with them and fucked off out of it. I used to see him most years and he was loving it. A new tattoo every time he came to town, different bird each night, pulling in a decent bit of cash throughout the summer and when the weather got bad they used to fuck off down to the South of France.’

‘So how come he ended up back here then?’

‘Listen, I didn’t tell you this, right? No one knows.’

‘Knows what?’

‘He got himself into a bit of trouble. He spent time inside when he was younger, borstal and Winchester nick. One time for burglary and the other cos he was the getaway driver in an armed robbery that went wrong. Then after he’d been out for about six months he had a scrap one night with a punter up in Scarborough, and the geezer died. He knew he’d be looking at a long stretch so he did a runner. A few people saw what happened but they were pikeys too and they don’t grass up anyone, let alone one of their own. Police came down like a ton of bricks but Billy was long gone, and they had nothing on him anyway. He turned up on my doorstep one night, that’s how I know the story.’

‘Christ, that’s a bit heavy.’

‘Tell me about it. You’re the only other person who knows and I shouldn’t have said anything really, so keep it to yourself, right?’

‘I ain’t stupid Harry, I won’t say a word.’

‘Yeah, I know you won’t. He’s trouble, but me and him go back a long way. I’m probably the closest thing to a best mate that he’s got. Not sure if he’d listen to me when it comes to his sisters though.’

‘Shit, I’m dead if he finds out.’

‘Leave it with me. As I said, lie low for a few days.’

I stayed away from town for a week, jumping at shadows but the following Sunday Harry came round to tell me I was in the clear.

‘He knows something happened with Caroline. Said she got home late the other night and had oil all over her skirt but she ain’t talking. He’s well fucked off but it looks like you’re alright.’

I said a silent thank you to Caroline Jeffries and swore I’d be a bit more careful in future. Easily done when you’re sober, but good intentions always go to shit after a skinful.

The following Friday we were all in the Fox, at the start of yet another session, but the atmosphere was tense, Billy had turned up and he was in a foul mood. He sat there in silence, staring into his pint while the rest of us tried to have a laugh. Two beers in and he suddenly slammed his glass onto the table and stood up. He looked each of us in the eye, and I dunno if it was my guilty conscience, but it seemed as though he looked at me slightly longer than the other lads.

‘Someone shagged my little sister last week, and when I find out who done it I’ll fucking kill ‘em. If any of you know anything about this, fucking well tell me now.’

He stood there, fists clenched.

I didn’t dare look at Harry, so I sat there trying to appear unconcerned, hoping that Billy wouldn’t notice my hands shaking.

‘Come on Billy, none of us would do anything like that,’ said Stumpy and the other lads nodded in agreement.

If only you knew, I thought.

‘While you’re up you might as well get the beers in,’ said Harry, trying to lighten the mood.

Billy stood there staring at him for a moment before turning away and walking to the bar.

A couple of hours later I was having a slash when the door to the bogs was kicked open, and in strolled Billy. I must admit I was a bit wary of him at the best of times, and it didn’t help that right there and then I felt as though I had the word ‘guilty’ written all over my face.

‘Alright, Billy?’ I said, nervously.

‘I will be when I find the slag who shagged Caroline,’ he said.

‘What if you never find out?’

Billy turned and stared at me.

‘I will. Believe me, I will.’

8. Sunday Morning Nightmare November 1988

The alarm clock woke me and immediately I knew I wasn't alone. Instinct told me I was sharing my bed, and it wasn't the most attractive partner I'd had in my time. In fact, it was cold, congealed and stuck to the side of my face. With a sigh I removed the half-eaten kebab from my cheek and stumbled towards the bathroom. My head pounded, my guts were in turmoil and one look in the mirror told me I'd somehow managed to age about fifty years in one horrific night. My eyes were red and there was a suspicious mark on my neck. I vaguely recollected a drunken grope with what had turned out to be a female vampire of some description. I'd thought she was going to whisper romantic sweet nothings in my ear, along the lines of ‘d'yer wanna pint’, or ‘do us a favour, shag us in the bogs’ but instead she'd latched herself onto up my neck and it had taken three of my mates and a bouncer to pries her loose. I guess the bruising above my right eye had been from her handbag after I'd downed her drink and floored her with a well executed rugby tackle. No sense of humour, I reflected bitterly.

I knocked on Jimmy's bedroom door and getting no reply I pushed it open. There was no sign of him, so I guessed he'd got a result last night, and Stumpy was nowhere to be found either. I made my way to the kitchen and forced down a pint of water and some toast, then beat a hasty retreat back to the bathroom where I promptly threw up. Groaning I returned to the wreckage of my bedroom and started searching for my football kit. No burglar could ever have created a mess as bad as this I thought, sifting through the piles of wet clothing on the floor. I stopped, puzzled, and looked again at my clothes. There hadn't been any wet stuff when I'd left the house pub-bound the night before. I knelt down and gingerly sniffed at a pair of jeans and recoiled in distaste as the realization struck.

As I stood there amongst the devastation, with my love bite and black eye and a body that cried out for mercy, I told myself for the thousandth time that I had to clean up my act and calm down a bit. Half convinced I finally located my rancid kit bag, more by smell than anything else, and left the house, shivering as a biting wind cut through my clothes.

I was walking towards Tommy's house when I bumped into Caroline Jeffries. It was the first time I'd seen her while still sober since that night in the car park, and I hadn't fully appreciated how fit she was. I definitely fancied her, but reminded myself that not only was she young, she was also related to the biggest maniac in town.

'Good night in Martines, Steve?' she asked, smiling.

I looked around me, nervously, remembering Billy Jeffries' warning in the Fox a few months ago.

'I was pretty hammered last night actually, don't remember too much about it. Why? Nothing happened, did it?'

Caroline laughed. 'Don't worry, Steve, you were too pissed to do anything. Take care, though, and I'll see you around. Nice love bite, by the way. Classy.'

That shook me up, I must admit, and I was still a bit unsettled when I met Tommy Peters coming out of the corner shop clutching a pie and a pint of milk. He had a nasty looking cut above his left eye.

'What happened to you?' I asked.

'Don't you remember? We had a scrap by the burger van.'

'Who with?' I asked, 'What about?'

'No idea. I think I'd recognise the geezers again, but fuck knows what started it.'

'What did Michelle say?'

'What do you think? She hates it when I go out on the piss with you lot anyway, let alone coming home with a black eye.'

'In the dog house then?'

Tommy laughed. 'You could say that.'

He'd been living with Michelle for years. They'd started going out at school and had got a house when they were only seventeen. I know there are some couples who get it together as youngsters and make a go of it but I had my doubts about Tommy and Michelle. For one thing, he loved his lager and his football and going out with his mates every weekend. For another, he had an eye for the ladies that had led him back to more than one dodgy flat in Popley or Buckskin, and Michelle wasn't stupid. He definitely cared for her, in his own way, but the combination of ten pints of lager and a flash of thigh was usually enough to send him over the edge. And his mates

were no help: I know I never tried to talk him out of going off with some old slapper, and I'm damn sure none of the others did, either.

Anyway, we walked to the pitch and twenty minutes later I was sitting in a cold and draughty changing room with ten other blokes all desperately trying to reconstruct the events of last night. Jimmy Taylor was being violently sick in the outside toilet, we had no subs and the kit was still unwashed from last week.

'What happened to you last night?' I asked Jimmy.

'Fuck knows,' he said in between pukes. 'I woke up in my van at half six this morning, head in a bag of cement. I feel like shit.'

'You alright to play?'

'Dunno Steve. I'll give it a go. Make or break.'

A pungent aroma wafted through the hut and everyone looked accusingly at each other and the smell nearly made me join Jimmy over the bowl. There was the usual banter, the piss taking and general abuse that you always get at football, but I noticed Stumpy wasn't joining in. He was normally in the middle of it all, especially if someone was having a chunder like Jimmy was. He had his shirt on but was sitting naked from the waist down.

'Put it away Stumpy,' I shouted across the hut, 'you're making me feel ill.'

He didn't move and I realised he'd fallen asleep. I got the sponge from the bucket and lobbed it at him. With a start he woke up and looked around, as if in a daze.

'You alright mate?' asked Harry, rubbing Deep Heat all over his legs.

'Yeah, yeah. Didn't get much sleep last night, that's all.'

'Oi oi! You pull or something?'

'I wish. Nah, I scored a couple of tabs and went round the Beasts house. Been fucking tripping all night.'

'You want to watch that shit,' said Harry. 'It'll fry your brain. Stick to speed and E's mate. Can't go wrong.'

And with those words of wisdom he walked out of the changing room with a ball under his arm. The rest of us sat shivering in the freezing hut until the very last minute then made our way out to the pitch, a sorry looking sight in our muddy and crumpled shirts. The sky was grey and leaden, the clouds almost within touching distance and it was cold. In fact it was fucking freezing and once again I asked myself what the fuck I was doing when not half an hour ago I'd been lying in a warm bed and cuddling a loving kebab.

We were playing the Black Lion, a typical estate pub that always put out a lively team, and I knew we were in for a rough morning when Tommy grabbed my arm as we walked towards the pitch.

'That geezer there, number 6. That's who I was scrapping last night.'

At that moment the bloke looked over, clocked Tommy and turned to say something to a big ugly fucker standing next to him.

'Shit,' I said

'What's up?' asked Tom

'That's Nick Williams talking to your mate.'

'Nick Williams? That rings a bell. He's supposed to be a bit tasty ain't he?'

'Yeah, if he's got all his mates around him. He's a fucking bully.'

'How do you know him then?'

'He was the year below us at school,' I said, and told him about the time we'd shoved him into the Main Hall naked. Tommy laughed.

'He's been after me ever since and I try to keep out of his way. He knows I knock about with some tasty geezers so I doubt he'd have a pop on the street, but he's gonna love this.'

Nick Williams started up front, centre forward, and he was looking more than pleased at the prospect of giving me a good kicking.

'You're a fucking wanker Bonds, just like the rest of your family.'

'At least my sister don't sell her arse for a tenner on a Friday night and give out blow jobs for Campari and lemonade.' I was still pissed from last night's lager and whisky frenzy and felt brave.

'I'm gonna break your fucking legs you little shit.'

He gave me a clump round the side of the head and ran off. I was going to have to watch myself. It was a rubbish game, no skill or tactics and interesting only to street-fighting enthusiasts. We kicked lumps out of each other and occasionally out of the ball, and after 45 minutes the score remained at 0-0.

The second half kicked off into the same routine as the first until finally, just as the game seemed to be dragging towards a 0-0 draw there was a goalmouth scramble at their end. After everyone on the pitch had hacked at the ball Jimmy Taylor somehow managed to scramble it over the line and celebrated by puking over their keeper. Nick Williams took great exception to this and stuck his elbow in my face. Seeing Big Lad, Tommy Peters and Harry Johnson running towards me I got suddenly brave and booted him in the bollocks as hard as I could. A general free-for-all ensued and the referee, deciding this was a bit too much even for his loose interpretation of FIFA's laws abandoned the match and legged it as fast as his spindly old legs could manage. We were still scrapping when the Beast spotted a meat wagon come screaming through the entrance on the other side of the park.

'Fuck! It's the law!' he yelled, and sprinted into the woods behind the changing rooms. The rest of us followed, running through the park in our football kits as the Black Lion lads made off in the opposite direction. Unfortunately this meant that we had to leave all our gear in the changing rooms, but as Jimmy had the only key we knew we could retrieve it later. A couple of coppers followed us, but their hearts weren't in it and they soon gave up.

We hid out in the back room of the Fox and Hounds having the crack and sinking a few pints, laughing about our narrow escape from Plod.

At one point during the afternoon The Beast wandered over to where I was sitting. He had the glazed look of someone who's permanently stoned and not for the first time I wondered how the fuck he could keep it together enough to play football. If I smoked as much as him I wouldn't even be able to get out of bed in the morning.

'Is Stumpy alright?' he asked.

'Think so,' I replied, 'why?'

'It's probably nothing, but he was in a bit of a mess when he came round mine last night. He'd gone to the cemetery on his own and done a tab.'

'That's a bit weird.'

'That's what I thought, and he was still tripping when he got to my place. Thing is, he was going on about some really strange shit.'

'Like what?' I asked, intrigued.

'He told me he'd seen the spirits of people who weren't supposed to have died when they did, and that he talked to them about their deaths.'

'He's doing too much of that shit.'

'Yeah, so maybe someone should have a word with him then.'

At that point something important suddenly occurred to Harry.

'Hold on,' he said, 'if we've got the only key to the changing rooms that means all the Black Lion gear is still in there.'

'Yeah, so?' said Big Lad

'Well let's go and have a bit of fun with it,' said Harry.

I forgot all about what Beast had said as we piled in the back of Harry's Transit and drove back to the pitch. No sign of the Black Lion boys, so we let ourselves into the changing room and got our gear back on. Then we went into the other changing room, gathered all their clothes and made a big pile on the floor. Giggling like a bunch of school kids we took it in turns to piss all over it, then Big Lad had to go one better and he pulled his jeans down, squatted over the clothes and laid a cable on top.

'You dirty fucker!' said Jimmy

'Bollocks,' said Big Lad, 'they're a bunch of wankers. Deserve all they get.'

We left the changing room unlocked and drove back to the Fox and Hounds to carry on drinking. Nick Williams was gonna go mental, and no doubt I'd be even higher on his list of people he wanted to beat up, but after several pints that afternoon, I couldn't care less.

I didn't really care about anything much back then: life was good, and I couldn't see any reason why that might change. We all drank too much and did stupid things but I thought, what's the point of life if you can't have a laugh and muck about? We lived in a town that was seriously lacking in decent night spots but we made the best of what we had.

Apart from the Fox and Hounds and Martines there was a nightclub called Diamonds on the edge of town, underneath the snooker club in the middle of an industrial estate, but it wasn't often that we could be bothered heading out that way. In the late Eighties, if we were working locally we used to knock off at lunchtime on a Friday and head to the snooker club to have a butchers at the strippers they used to have down there, and if we weren't too pissed after that we might try Diamonds but most days it seemed like too much hassle. There was also a small place called Magnums just outside the town centre that used to have the odd good night but generally we stuck to what we knew best: the Fox and Martines.

Basingstoke is one of those towns that's a bit of a joke really. Too many roundabouts, too many soulless estates, a London overspill town with no character.

Doughnut City, Boringstoke, good subject material for a comedian. A small theatre, an even smaller museum and a couple of half decent restaurants. You wouldn't go there for the culture or the cuisine, that's for sure. It was known for having the biggest multi-storey car park in Europe, a million fucking tonnes of concrete or something. How about that, eh? Makes you proud, doesn't it?

There's money in the area, no doubt about that. There are some right posh villages just outside Basingstoke, some lovely old houses around and some decent places in town as well. But there are also all these overspill estates, and not much for blokes and birds to do at night except get

pissed. I never understood the licensing laws back then either. You were always reading about fighting after closing time, and all these do gooders trying to understand the psychology of the youth and all that but it was fucking obvious to me.

For whatever reason, there's something inside blokes in Britain that leads them to drink to excess, and especially after a load of beer more than one of them gets a bit punchy. So they get to the pub at 6 or 7 o'clock and they know they've only got about four or five hours in which to get drunk. They gun the beers down as fast as possible, get pissed and then all the pubs kick them out at exactly the same time.

Gangs of lads, all trying to get to the front of the taxi rank or be first to the burger bars and kebab vans. It ain't rocket science, is it?

In Basingstoke, after a Friday or Saturday night the top of town gets covered in McDonalds wrappers, fag ends and beer cans, there's usually a few winos hanging around, with their mangy dogs on leads made of rope, shouting at themselves and each other and stinking of booze.

As a piss take we called it Amazingstoke, used to joke about seeing that bird from Wish You Were Here trying to find something to get excited about, telling her that the only thing uglier than the concrete town centre was Big Lad's arse after a vindaloo and did she fancy getting a close up of that or what.

London is only 45 minutes away by train, and the sea is an hour down the road so there's plenty around, and if you like that kind of thing you can be in the Hampshire countryside within a few minutes. As I said, there's loads of picturesque villages, with thatched cottages and gardens full of flowers, some huge mansions and miles and miles of fields and woods, and of course some great country pubs that we used to get thrown out of whenever we fancied a change of scenery. Every now and then I used to drive out of town, through Cliddesden village, past the Jolly Farmer and the duck pond and up to the top of Farleigh Hill. I'd park up by the side of the road and look down on Basingstoke. Green fields and trees all around, farms everywhere, with sheep and cows and even deer, and then this jumbled mess of concrete in the middle of it all. I'd stay there until the sun went down, watching the lights come on across town and then try to imagine I was somewhere else, somewhere exciting where no one knew me. I never told the lads I did that of course, didn't want them thinking I was some kind of weirdo.

As I said earlier, the town started to develop in the Sixties and Seventies and the estates grew: Popley One, Two, Three, Four, Five and Six (amazing imagination, these town planners), Oakridge, Buckskin, Winklebury and South Ham. They all had their soulless shopping parades with a pub in the middle, real locals' boozers with crap beer and no character, always good for a scrap at the weekend. And there's always a convenience store, a Chinese, a bookies, maybe a playground in the middle that's used as a drinking den for underage kids. Graffiti on every wall, condoms and syringes underneath the swings: you know what I mean, these estates are all over Britain.

My old man used to tell me that when he was younger the town centre was really lively at night, with loads of pubs and people out and about. The Grapes, The Goat & Barge, The Anchor, a real variety. But then the builders moved in and knocked a few of them down when they developed the town centre back in '66, the flats above shops where people used to live disappeared and the town was dead after six o'clock.

Stumpy told me about a story once he'd read in an old copy of The Gazette that he'd found, when he was working on the renovation of an old house into about fifteen boxy little flats. When

the Council was discussing plans for the town centre redevelopment they seriously considered knocking down St Michaels' church, which has been there for about 1000 years, and putting a car park in its place. Now I'm not religious, not by any means, and I don't really give a monkeys about most churches, but even I can recognize that St Michael's is a pretty special building. Fortunately the plan got knocked back, but it just goes to show what type of idiot you can get working for your local Council.

They have done a lot of work over the years, however, I'll give them that: they've covered most of the area and extended its boundaries, pedestrianised and modernised, but they've missed the point as far as I'm concerned. At night that shopping centre was a ghost town. Go to other places and they're lively, people are out and about, pubbing it and clubbing it, but not in Basingstoke, cos they ain't got the option.

There was a rumour that used to do the rounds that the owners of Martines had some clout with the local Council and that whenever anyone applied for planning permission to put another club in the town centre the Council would turn it down in return for a fat pay off. I don't know if there's any truth in that or not but I definitely think it's odd that we've only got one place. I used to do a fair bit of work for Lord Construction around the country, and places like Norwich and Chester have got a much better nightlife than Basingstoke. I dunno, maybe it's just that the Council is full of boring old fuckers who don't want us to have a laugh.

Don't get me wrong. This is my home and it always will be. It's given me some of the best laughs and the best mates anyone could ever ask for and I won't hear a bad word about the place from anyone who doesn't come from here. But we can slag it as much as we want and I certainly wouldn't recommend anybody come here for a holiday. But you can always have a crack in your home town, even if most of the pubs are shite.

It's all changed now. A few years ago they started a massive redevelopment of part of the town centre. They knocked down the bottom half and a great chunk of the multi-storey car park and built a brand new indoor shopping complex, with an outside area full of restaurants and a new ten screen cinema.

The Great Wall of China take away and restaurant has gone, where I took a girl once after a skin full of lager and was sick all over the starters. So has the Chelsea Coffee House, the Wimpy and the fish and chip shop by the bus station. Knights record shop went, as did Harlequin records, that became Our Price and ended up as one of those dodgy catalogue shops. And Staffords, the camping and accessories shop run by an old queen who wanted to measure your inside leg even if you only went in for a set of tent pegs. Griggs Pies, the barbershop run by old Les and the Nightjar pub got knocked down, and so did the old style cinema with its usherettes selling Kia Ora and watered down coke, the place where I remember queues round the block for films like Grease, Star Wars and Jaws.

It's made a massive improvement to the town, apparently, and not before time. It's attracted shoppers who previously went to Southampton and Reading, been great for the local economy and it's brought in new and better restaurants. It's still soulless and corporate, though, but at least you can go shopping when it's pissing down outside.

But Martines has gone, buried underneath a huge Debenhams, and a new club called Liquid has opened up round the corner from the new bus station. If you'd told me that back in the late Eighties I'd have been half inclined to get a petition going to keep it open. No matter how many

shit nights I had in there I never would have wanted to see it go, but now, well now I don't really give a toss if the truth be told. I've got more important things to worry about.

But I'm jumping way ahead here, and I promised myself I'd try and write this down as it happened, in order like. A couple of nights after that match with the Black Lion me and Stumpy were watching this documentary about a geezer called Timothy Leary who seemed to have spent most of his life off his nut, and I was reminded of what the Beast had said to me in the boozier.

'Ere Stumpy, what was going on the other night, before you went round The Beast's?'

'Last Saturday?'

'Yeah, that's the one.'

'That was a bit fucking weird Steve, now that you mention it.'

'He told me you dropped a tab and went up to the cemetery.'

'Yep.'

'What's all that about then mate?'

'Remember I told you once that I was bored with all this? That my life is just one big fucking routine? Well, I wanted to do something different, y'know, spice things up a bit so I bought a couple of tabs, done the first one and took a stroll. I started coming up as I walked through the gates and then it all went fucking mental.'

He stopped talking and to my surprise I could see sweat forming on his forehead. He wiped it off, his hand shaking. I'd never seen him like that before.

'Look mate,' I said, 'it's alright. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to.'

'Nah, it's OK. Beast knows, but just don't tell anyone else, will you? Don't want people thinking I'm some sort of nutter.'

I nodded in agreement, even though most of the people who knew him already thought he was a bit loopy.

'I walked down the main path, looking at some of the headstones, reading about all the different people who were buried there, and then I sort of found myself wandering into the far corner, towards graves that had only just been filled. You know what it's like when you're tripping, everything goes a bit haywire doesn't it? It seemed like all the little noises that you hear, the traffic on Worthing Road, the wind in the trees, all that sort of faded away and all I could hear were my own footsteps. And then I realised it wasn't just my footsteps I could hear. There was someone else walking behind me.'

'Serious? What did you do?'

'Any other time I'd have fucking shit myself. But this felt like it was normal, somehow, so I carried on walking. But then I felt someone, or something pull on my arm and guide me towards this one particular grave. And there weren't no one else in the cemetery Steve, I know that for certain. The main gate was locked, in any case. I had to climb over the wall to get in myself.'

'But it was just the acid, right? Making you see and feel things?'

'I don't know mate. Really I don't. Fucking logic tells me it was the drugs but this weren't like any other trip I've ever had. I found myself standing in front of this headstone, and it was the grave of a twelve year old kid who'd died last year. I remember thinking what a waste of life that was, to die so young and then...'

He trailed off into silence, and his eyes were a long way away. He was pale, and shaking slightly and it was beginning to spook me a bit as well.

‘As I stood there I saw the earth on top of the grave begin to move, and then a hand appeared, and reached up in the air, as if it wanted me to grab hold of it. I didn’t know what to do so I just watched, and then this kid appeared. He climbed out of the fucking grave Steve, I saw it happen.’ I went cold, and couldn’t think of anything to say. Stumpy didn’t look like he was talking to me anymore, it was almost as though he was talking to himself, trying to make sense of what he thought he’d seen. Because I was convinced it was the acid making him see all this weird shit, I don’t believe in all that bollocks. As I sat there Stumpy’s eyes suddenly cleared.

‘I know what you’re thinking Steve, you reckon it’s the tab, you think I was hallucinating.’ I didn’t say anything, just sort of shrugged.

‘Well listen to this then. The kid who climbed out of that grave was burnt to fuck. His face was a mess mate, and I’ve had fucking nightmares about it ever since. He kept saying ‘it wasn’t my fault, it wasn’t my fault, I didn’t mean to do it.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘He just stood there, saying the same thing, over and over again, tears pissing out of his eyes, holding his arms out towards me. In the end I couldn’t handle it any more and I legged it.’

‘That’s fucking strange mate.’

‘You’re telling me Steve. But here’s the worst bit. It freaked me out so much that I went down to The Gazette’s office and asked to have a look through their archives, and I checked out the period around the time of this kids’ death. And you know what? He was real, and he died in a fire. Tried to cook himself some chips in a deep fat fryer when his mum went round the corner to the shops. Burnt the house down and died.’

I didn’t know what to say. As I said to him, that was fucking weird and it freaked me out. It must have been the acid, surely, cos shit like that doesn’t really happen, does it? But I didn’t know what to make of it so I kept my mouth shut.

Stumpy sat there in silence for a while and then went to his room and shut the door.

9. Holidays In The Sun July 1989

Friday afternoon and I’d managed to knock off early. I walked into the Fox, and saw Big Lad and Heavy Trev sitting in the corner.

‘Alright lads? Lagers?’

No response, and that ain’t normal. Big Lad didn’t usually need to be asked twice if he wanted a beer.

‘What’s going on?’ I said, getting myself a pint and walking over to join them.

Big Lad held up a copy of The Sun.

‘We’ve gotta have some of this,’ he said, showing me an article in the centre pages.

‘Girls Have Fun In The Sun!’ screamed the headline, and I looked with interest at a series of pictures showing topless birds on beaches and in bars, all quoted saying how much sex they were getting in this Spanish resort called Torremolinos.

‘Looks fucking excellent to me,’ I said.

‘Yeah, too right!’ said Big Lad.

‘You might even get your end away without having to pay for it,’ said Trev.

‘Shut up and get the beers in you little tart. So what d’you reckon? End of season tour for the boys?’

‘Great idea,’ I said, ‘Count me in. But how are you going to be able to afford it? I thought you was out of work again?’

‘Yeah I am, but I had a right result at that last place before I left.’

‘Courage, weren’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ said Big Lad, laughing. ‘Security guard at a brewery. What were they fucking thinking of?!’

Heavy Trev returned with a round, and we toasted Torremolinos.

‘What happened at Courage then?’ I asked.

‘First day in this delivery driver comes up to me and asks if I like lager. Stupid question, I tell him, so he goes on to ask if I want to earn some extra cash and get as much lager as I can drink.’

‘Another stupid question.’

‘Exactly. So I turn a blind eye to a few unauthorised truck loads and they weigh me in with crates of lager and some extra bunce. Our shed is full of the stuff. Trouble was, I got word that the management knew something was up so I decided to get out before I got caught. I flogged a load of the lager last week’

‘And you’ve got enough for some mayhem in Spain?’

‘Too right. I’m well overdue for some serious chaos. Now then, whose round is it?’

We ended up having something to celebrate as well at the end of the season, finishing runners-up in the League and winning the Basingstoke Cup, another kick in the teeth for the local FA who hated the fact that a bunch of pissheads like us kept doing so well. There’s a few teams around town that get all the credit, teams that the local FA and the Gazette like, but a bunch of drunkards from a dodgy boozer? They definitely wanted us to fuck up, and it didn’t help that Billy Jeffries had signed on at the beginning of the season.

It wasn’t that he was any more violent on the pitch than the rest of us. It was just that his mere presence scared the shit out of most referees, and the League committee knew we were getting preferential treatment.

I went home after a couple of lagers to see what Jim and Stumpy thought, and it weren’t a surprise to find that they were well up for it. Stumpy in particular was well chuffed, cos this would be his chance to finally go somewhere different.

On July 1st fifteen of us set off for Heathrow in the back of Fat Phil’s battered old van for a week of total carnage on the Costa Del Sol. All the way to the airport we tried to persuade him to come with us but he didn’t trust anyone else to run the boozer. In other words, no one else knew how to fiddle the books like him.

We had a few cans on the way, one or two more before we got on board and a couple on the plane, just to make sure. Most of the passengers hated us by the time we landed in Spain, but we didn’t give a fuck. We were on a mission.

Our hotel was smack bang in the middle of town, right near all the bars and clubs and only a few minutes walk from the beach. The place was full of high rise buildings and even though it was still quite early the streets were crowded with gangs of English, tattooed blokes and pissed up women all pink from too much sun.

‘Looks like Blackpool,’ said Harry.

‘Yeah,’ said Stumpy, even though he’d never been there, ‘but with sunshine. This is fucking brilliant. Who’s for a lager?’

It was three o’clock in the afternoon, so we dumped our bags and made straight for the hotel bar, got in a round of San Miguel and plonked ourselves down next to the pool.

‘No right hand drinking for the rest of the holiday,’ said Tommy Peters, ‘anyone caught doing that has to down their drink in one.’

‘Oh dear, what a shame,’ said Big Lad, deliberately picking his bottle up with his right hand and drinking it in one go.

The beers flowed, the sun seemed to grow even hotter and it didn’t take long before the combination kicked in and we were all pissed. A plate of fish and chips helped soak up the alcohol and one turn around the block found half a dozen Scousers willing to sell us E’s and speed.

By half ten on that first night everyone was in a right old mess. The girls might have wanted fun in the sun, but not with the Fox and Hounds FC. That dubious pleasure would have to wait. I’d read about blokes like us in the papers, about lager louts and football hooligans, about people who bring shame on the good name of England when they go abroad and act like mindless yobs. And you know what? I didn’t care. I got a real buzz from hanging round with a solid bunch of mates who’d always back you up in a bit of trouble and who didn’t give a fuck about anything much.

Drunken chaos was our thing, and Torremolinos was the perfect place to go. English and Irish theme pubs, Happy Hours that stretched on into the night, drinking competitions, wet t-shirt contests, loads of clubs and there’s always the hotel bar if you haven’t pulled and you want a quick drink to finish off the night. You don’t even have to speak Spanish.

We surfaced around two in the afternoon on the second day and made straight for an English cafe round the corner for a fry-up. Full works and yesterday’s copy of The Sun and The Star, even the tea came in mugs.

‘What about checking out the beach?’ suggested Jimmy after we’d finished eating. We took a stroll down to the sea, the idea being to spend a couple of hours wandering up and down, eyeing up the topless birds and shoving each other into the water. After twenty minutes, however, Big Lad had enough. It was baking hot and the sun was already beginning to burn his head, he had rivers of sweat running down his red face and his t-shirt was saturated. He was getting more and more irritated by the minute.

‘Fuck this,’ he said, ‘I’m going for a beer. Who’s coming with me?’

He stomped off to the nearest bar, sat down under an umbrella and yelled for the waiter to bring him a San Miguel. Harry and Tom continued up the beach, pretending to be DJ’s from a club in town, using that as an excuse to chat up the girls, and the rest of us sat by the water, taking it in turns to keep Big Lad company. If we left him on his own for too long we’d hear this loud bellowing from inside that continued until someone gave in and went to sit with him.

‘This ain’t fucking natural!’ I heard him shout at one point, ‘you could fry a fucking egg on my forehead!’

‘Senor, please, your language. It is upsetting my guests,’ said the bar owner.

‘Fuck off Manuel,’ came the reply.

Not surprisingly we peaked too early again that night, and the next day decided to lay off the booze during the day in an attempt to make it to some of the clubs we’d heard so much about.

The second time we went down to the beach we somehow managed to get ourselves involved in a kickabout with a bunch of Spanish waiters and we were doing blinding things for international relations until Harry launched into a sliding tackle that left one of their blokes with a broken collar bone and a mouthful of sand.

‘The ball was there to be won!’ Harry protested, but it got a bit messy when they started getting all excited and he refused to apologise. In the end Billy Jeffries threatened to burn down their restaurant unless they fucked off out of it. One look at that mad fucker and the Spaniards realised he meant business.

The week continued in much the same vein – up in the early afternoon, a couple of hours on the beach then an evening of drink and drugs, maybe a bit of a fumble with some Northern bird before crashing out towards dawn. During the daytime we read English papers, watched English films in the bars, and talked to other English people. Most of the bar tenders and waitresses were British, or from Australia or New Zealand and all the menus were in English so we didn’t even have to learn the Spanish for beer. In short, we learnt absolutely nothing about Spain.

But on the second last day Jimmy’s snoring was too much to take. I woke early, walked round the corner for a bite of breakfast and found Harry and Stumpy already there.

‘Back to the grind tomorrow,’ said Harry.

‘Yeah,’ said Stumpy with a sigh, ‘this has been fucking great. I could stay here forever.’

‘Look lads, let’s do something different today,’ said Harry

‘Like what?’ I asked

‘I dunno, hire a car, take a drive down the coast and see what’s what. I’ve heard about this place called Puerto Banus, supposed to be where all the really rich people hang out.’

‘Sounds good to me. Might find ourselves a rich old tart each, get taken care of for the rest of our lives.’

So Harry finished off his mug of tea, went to a rental agency and returned half an hour later at the wheel of an open top jeep.

‘Come on then lads, let’s get amongst it.’

The sun was shining on yet another cloudless day as we drove down the coast, the sea on our left, through Benalmadena and Fuengirola and on to Marbella. A few miles further on we reached Puerto Banus, parked the jeep in a back street and took a stroll down to the harbour.

‘Fucking hell! Have a look at that!’ said Stumpy.

‘It’s another world,’ said Harry, and it was. All along the harbour front were cafes and restaurants, tables outside, full of people who were so obviously rich they didn’t have to try. Ferraris, Mercs, a Lamborghini and BMWs lined the streets and in the water were the biggest yachts I’d ever seen. Stunning looking women dripping with gold walked arm in arm with fat old geezers wearing white suits and shades, wandering in and out of jeweler’s shops and designer clothes boutiques.

One glance at a menu told us we were way out of our league, but we stayed for ages, staring at the cars, the boats, the women, pretending just for a while that we belonged.

In the afternoon we drove up into the hills behind Marbella, and within minutes had left the tourist trail behind. The road wound its way up through orange groves and past olive trees and eventually came to a small village which looked at first sight as though it was deserted. We parked just outside the square, went for a look around, and saw a group of old men sitting in the shade near a church, playing what looked like dominoes. They stopped to stare at us as we walked by.

‘It’s like another country,’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ said Stumpy, ‘you won’t find any Guinness up here like you do in that Cock and Bull boozier near the beach.’

We went to a small restaurant and tried to order food, but the waitress didn’t speak any English and the menu was all in Spanish. She understood San Miguel, though, so we shouted up some lagers which were half the cost of beer in Torremolinos.

We sat at a table overlooking the square, watching the old men playing their game, watching a couple of mangy dogs searching for food, feeling for the first time that we really were in a foreign country. It was so peaceful, so quiet, it was like time had stood still for a couple of centuries and we sat there for hours enjoying the peace and sipping on cold San Miguels. The only sign of life from outside the village came when an ancient, wrinkled old man came wandering through the square on the back of a donkey as old and decrepit as him. Normally this would have led to a shitload of piss taking, but it seemed so normal in this setting that we sat there in silence and watched him weave his way out of the village and up the hill into the distance.

Eventually Harry finished off his bottle and stood up.

‘Come on lads, I’ve got to get this thing back by six, and I’ve got the taste for more lager now.’

We paid our bill and said goodbye to the waitress, who giggled when Stumpy tried to give her a peck on the cheek. The old men were still sitting hunched over their game in the middle of the small square, but they looked up when they heard the car start and nodded a farewell to us.

We drove down through the hills and back up the coast, the radio tuned in to a local station playing some old flamingo crap, or whatever they call it, and the sun had set by the time we arrived back in Torremolinos. Big Lad and Tommy Peters had only just got up and we rounded up the rest of the lads to go out for another huge session, losing yet another night and god knows how many brain cells in a frenzy of booze and drugs.

A week on the lash is a long time in anyone’s book and I know I wasn’t the only one who needed another holiday by the time we’d finished.

But it’s funny that out of all the memories from that week in Torremolinos, of all the laughs we had, the one that stands out the most clearly is sitting outside that restaurant in the middle of the hills, drinking lager with Stumpy and Harry.

10. Road To Ruin.
April 1991

Friday night and I walked into the Fox and Hounds to be greeted by a barrage of insults and a handful of peanuts. I checked my watch and found I'd missed the 6.30 meeting time by a good ten minutes, and as I was the last of the boys to arrive it meant I had to buy every bastard a drink. Sighing I made my way to the bar and ordered up fourteen pints of lager. A few of the lads had worked a half day and had been in since lunchtime and were beginning to look a little the worse for wear. Snatches of conversation drifted towards me as I downed my first pint and got a refill. Big Lad and Jimmy Taylor were arguing over the outcome of last weekends' West Ham v. Chelsea match, and needless to say it wasn't the score they were interested in.

'Come on Jimmy, get a life. We ran your boys the length of the Kings Road,' Big Lad was saying.

'Only cos we had half the North Bank waiting at Sloane Square Tube. It was a set-up you prat.'

'Ah, well, I wouldn't know about that. Me and Tom got fucked half way down and stopped in the Nags Head for a few snifters. By the time we got out we'd spent all our money, missed the last tube and everything. Had to get a sherbet all the way to Waterloo and do a runner on the old git.'

Harry Johnson had cornered a young punk in the corner and was regaling him with tales of the old days.

'100 Club, late '76, or was it '77? Anyway, there I was, at the front, and I gobbled straight in Joe Strummer's eye. He looked at me and then smacked me round the head with the microphone stand, right in the middle of 'Complete Control'. Couple of weeks later I see him in the bogs at the Roxy and he had the cheek to try and ponce a fag off me. Course I told him to fuck off.

Jimmy Pursey was there, he thought it was well funny.'

The young punk looked bewildered.

Tommy Peters was telling Terry Jones about the bird he'd pulled last week at five to two in Martines.

'Bleached hair? A bit boss eyed you say?' asked Terry.

'Yeah, that's her. A right old moose.'

'I don't believe it. I shagged her three weeks ago!'

'Nice one!' said Tommy. 'Any good?'

'What, me or her?'

'Her of course, I'm not fucking interested in your performance. Anyway, the last time I shagged your bird she told me you were shit in bed.'

'Cheeky fucker. No bird that goes out with me would look twice at an ugly cunt like you.'

'Yeah, well, we'll both be in the shit if Michelle and your missus find out what we've been up to.'

'Tell you what, if that bird's out tonight, how about tapping her up for a bit of two's up?'

'Fuck off Tel, I wouldn't be able to concentrate with your hairy arse around. Anyway, you'd only get pissed off when she spent all the time with me. Nah, your best bet is to get the beers in, prove to everybody that you do know how it's done.'

Terry wandered over to the bar to get a round in, and I saw the Beast slumped in a corner, gazing round the pub with a serene smile on his face, nodding his head to the music and sipping on a

Guinness. Scouse, Heavy Trev, Harry Johnson and Billy Jefferies were playing pool, shouting and arguing, abusing each other on every shot and in severe danger of shredding the cloth. Again.

Stumpy stood by the juke box with a couple of quid in his hand, flicking through the selections and choosing some early Jam, Madness and Specials. Good drinking music. The atmosphere grew heavier, the air smokier and the conversation progressively louder and more slurred. Round followed round, the chasers appeared and I gazed around the pub through the bottom of yet another empty pint, well content. A scuffle at the bar was sorted out by Jimmy and Big Lad, their football disagreement long forgotten.

'Why must you record my phone calls, Are you planning a bootleg LP?' As 'Gangsters' cut through the air Big Lad climbed onto a table and raucously sang along, out of tune and out of time, his face all red and sweaty and his eyes screwed up in concentration.

Suddenly Stumpy grabbed my arm and shouted in my ear.

'Bloody hell, look at the state of that!'

'What? Who? Where?' I slurred.

He was swaying all over the shop and pointing in the general direction of the bar.

'Over there, tall bird, black hair, Arsenal top. She's fucking lovely!'

I looked again, through the mass of bodies that separated our table from the bar, and then I saw her, arm raised like the boy Adams appealing for offside as she tried to get the barman's attention. She eventually got her drink and stood at the bar, gazing around the pub as though she was looking for someone.

'I tell you what Steve my old son, she keeps staring at me. I reckon I'm in.'

'Leave it out Stumpy, you ain't got a chance. She's probably wondering what home you've escaped from.'

'Nah, you're just jealous. I tell you, she wants me.'

And with that he was gone, shouldering his way through the crowd towards the bar. Then, just as he got near he stopped, as if unsure of how to make his approach. He told me later that a thousand thoughts raced through his mind, a hundred different chat-up lines, but none of them seemed to fit the occasion. Fortunately inspiration struck in the nick of time and he launched into the finest rugby tackle the Fox has seen since Harry Johnson took out three Chelsea fans in one fell swoop back in the winter of '87.

The whole pub went silent and we awaited her reaction as Stumpy lay on top of her giggling to himself. I went over and pulled him to his feet.

'Nice one Stumpy, that should do the trick.'

He reached down and helped the girl to her feet. A result after such a sensational opening was surely a foregone conclusion.

'Alright darling? Want a pint?'

Amazingly she wasn't too impressed and she cut short his chat with a face-numbing slap followed by a pint of lager over his head.

'You fucking prat,' she snarled as she barged past him and stormed out the door. We were pissing ourselves with laughter, clapping and cheering Stumpy as he stood there at the bar, lager dripping down his face, clothes drenched, pride hurt. He looked genuinely bewildered that he'd failed so dismally and I saw him shake his head in disbelief at her obvious lack of humour.

'Birds,' he shrugged, and returned to the lads.

A couple of hours later I was coming out of the bogs when I felt my arse being pinched. There's a first, I thought to myself, normally it's me doing that and offending birds at the same time. I turned round to see Caroline Jeffries smiling at me, and she was looking absolutely gorgeous.

'Long time, Steve. How's it going?'

Three years on and I still jumped every time I saw her.

'Yeah, good thanks. You?' I looked across the pub to see where Billy was, and saw him by the bar deep in conversation with Harry Johnson.

'I'm alright Steve. I'm at university, living in London now.'

'University?' I said, impressed. 'You're the first person I know who's ever gone to one of them places. Brains as well as beauty, eh?' The lager had taken effect and I was getting a bit brave.

'You haven't changed,' she said, reaching out to touch my arm.

I knew that I was playing with fire, but there was a look in Caroline's eyes that told me she wanted more than a chat, and I was at that stage where common sense went right out the window. I couldn't remember a great deal about the romantic time we spent in the glamorous multi-storey car park, but I definitely wanted a re-match.

I leant in towards her and whispered in her ear. 'Look, do you want go somewhere a bit quieter?' Before she could answer I was grabbed from behind and dragged into the bogs.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?!' It was Harry Johnson, and he wasn't amused.

I sobered up pretty quickly, and only one thought struck me.

'Billy didn't see me, did he?'

'No, luckily for you he's still at the bar. But do yourself a fucking favour and leave Caroline alone. Christ! You can be a right fucking idiot sometimes, Steve.'

By the time I left the toilets Caroline was nowhere to be seen, so I joined some of the lads by the pool table for a messy game of Killer. It was a fucking shame, really. Caroline was gorgeous, and I'd have loved another chance with her. But Harry was right, even though me and Billy were mates I couldn't take the risk of him finding out what had happened that night in the multi-storey.

At closing time everyone was well and truly slaughtered and Fat Phil was doing his best to kick people out. A beer fight broke out near the pool table, followed by a massive bundle that nearly crushed Heavy Trev and by the time all the lads had staggered out into the night air we were covered in beer, filthy from the dirty pub floor, stinking of smoke, a slurring, stumbling mess. A few of the lads wandered off towards Beasts' house to get a bit more wrecked, but I had the munchies big time and couldn't think beyond a fucking great big donner with chili sauce and chips.

As I stood in the queue, fumbling through my pockets for cash and dropping change all over the pavement, I became aware of a blonde girl watching me, smiling.

'Alright, love?' I slurred.

'Not as good as you, by the look of it. Have you been fighting ash trays or something?'

I looked down at my stained jeans and laughed.

'I am a bit of a mess, aren't I? I don't normally look this bad.'

'You look alright to me.'

Even in my drunken state I could recognize when I had a sniff of a chance, so I did the gallant thing and offered to buy her a bag of chips.

'That'll be a fiver, mate,' said the kebab man.

I put a handful of coins on the counter and went to grab the food.

‘Oi! There’s only three quid there.’

‘Bollocks,’ I muttered to myself, digging around in my pockets for some more cash.

‘You dropped some on the floor, if that’s any help,’ said my new friend.

I looked down and saw a few coins in the gutter, bent down to retrieve them and took a right tumble into the road. I lay there for a moment, giggling to myself, then scrambled back to my feet and handed the money over.

‘Classy,’ the girl said, and smiled at me again.

Blimey, seemed like I could do no wrong. Time to try the old Bonds charm. All subtle, like.

‘Look, do you wanna come back to my place?’

‘Not tonight,’ she said, ‘I think you need to sleep off all that lager. But listen, here’s my number. Give me a call sometime. Oh, and thanks for the chips.’

And with that, she stuck a scrap of paper in my pocket and was gone.

Three days later we saw Stumpy’s girl again. It was a lovely Spring day, far too nice to go to work so I’d rung in sick and was spending the day loitering in the town centre with Stumpy and Tommy Peters.

‘Steve! It’s that bird from the other night!’

‘What you gonna do this time then? Why don’t you forget the rugby tackle and just punch her in the side of the head?’

‘I’m gonna talk to her. She’s gorgeous.’

‘Careful what you say,’ said Tommy. ‘A mate of a mate knows her, says she’s well posh.’

‘What’s her name then?’ asked Stumpy.

‘Jenny Harper,’ replied Tom.

Jenny was walking out of Our Price clutching a bag when her eyes met Stumpy’s. Apologetically he held up his hands as he approached and said: ‘I come in peace, as the bishop said to the actress.’ Me and Tommy winced in embarrassment.

To our amazement she didn’t ignore him or whack him round the head with her Our Price bag, but instead gave him a withering glance and said,

‘If that’s your best line I’d stick to rugby tackling.’

‘Yeah, err, sorry about that, I don’t know what came over me.’

‘Nothing to do with ten pints of lager by any chance?’

‘Well, I must admit my judgment might have been slightly impaired by a few alcoholic beverages, but honestly, it’s not like me to floor defenseless birds, er, women in pubs.’

‘Listen Stumpy, if you want to get anywhere in life start telling the truth. I’ve seen you and your friends knock down plenty of girls in Martines, so wise up will you? And by the way, for your information, women do not like that sort of thing.’

And with that she turned and walked away. Stumpy watched her disappear into the crowd, looking stunned.

‘She knows my name,’ he said, ‘she’s seen me in ‘Tines. I’ve probably even tried to pull her when I’ve been pissed up. Flippin’ eck lads, I think I’m in love’.

‘Don’t be such a ponce Stumpy, that’s yer dick talking. Come on, let’s go to the pub,’ came the sympathetic response from Tommy.

But Stumpy had fallen and it wasn't hard to see why. Although his observation that she looked just like Catherine Zeta Jones might have been slightly off the mark nevertheless there was no doubt that Jenny Harper was fit. She had long black hair, dark brown eyes and a cracking figure, a nice old set of pins and a soft, well spoken voice. She had that air about her, classy, you know what I mean? Mind you, that doesn't explain what she was doing in a boozier like ours. We retired to the Fox for a few lunchtime beers, but Stumpy kept himself to himself, ignoring our attempts to draw him into conversation and distractedly waving away the joints Tommy kept offering him. He spent an hour or so staring into his lager, a million miles away from planet Earth. Eventually he straightened up, a determined look in his eyes and said 'That's it, I'm gonna ask her out.'

'How are you going to do that then?' I asked. 'You don't know where she lives, do you?'
'Nah, but I'm bound to see her around town somewhere, and when I do I'm gonna go for it.'
'Good for you, mate,' I said, 'I could do with finding a bit of regular myself.'

I went to the bar to get a round in, and as stood there waiting for Tracey to serve me I had a sudden recollection of the girl at the burger bar.

'Ere lads,' I said as I handed out the beer, 'I think I pulled the other night.'

'What do you mean?' asked Tommy.

I told them what had happened and Tommy laughed.

'She's probably a right minger.'

'She looked alright to me.'

'My gran would've looked alright to you, the amount you'd drunk. Any bird who fancies you after a session at the Fox must be mental or desperate. Probably both.'

'There's only one way to find out,' said Stumpy. 'Give her a bell, mate.'

'Yeah, yeah. I might just do that.'

11. Is She Really Going Out With Him?

April 1991

'Steve!'

Half six on a Thursday night and I was watching some old bollocks on TV, not really concentrating on it, thinking instead about the weekend. The football season was nearly over, only one more game for the Fox to play and then a whole summer of nothing. No World Cup, no European Championship, nothing until August. It was enough to get anyone down. The phone call interrupted my thoughts.

'Alright Stumpy. What's up?'

Stumpy sounded well agitated.

'It's that bird, Jenny Harper. I saw her in town this afternoon and asked her out. She only went and said yes! I'm down the Fox trying to get my head together.'

'Nice one!' I said, 'that's excellent news!'

'Well I'm not too sure about that. She said the only night she can make it is tomorrow.'

'Hang on, that's Friday night,' I said.

'Nice one Mastermind, that's the problem. Friday night is lads night, I can't go out with a bird instead.'

‘So you’ve blown her out then?’

‘No, she gave me her phone number and I’ve got to ring her in a minute.’

‘She ain’t stupid is she?’ I said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s sussing you out mate. She knows you’re one of the boys, so if you back out of a Friday session in favour of taking her out it must mean you’re serious, yeah?’

‘Yeah, I see what you mean. That’s a bit fucking devious ain’t it?’

‘That’s birds for you,’ I replied.

Stumpy sounded a bit distracted after that, and rang off pretty quickly. An hour later the doorbell went and I opened up to find him on the doorstep.

‘Lost my key again,’ he said. ‘You got a minute?’

‘Yeah, ’course. What’s up?’

‘I told Jenny that tomorrow’s alright, even though it means missing out on a session. She’s class, Steve, I’ve got to give it a go. Trouble is, I’ve never been out with a bird like that before. Where the fuck am I gonna take her? What should I wear?’

I started laughing.

‘Well fuck me if Stumpy Malloy ain’t all nervous! You wait ‘til I tell the lads!’

‘Leave it out Steve!’

‘Bollocks, you’d be the first one to take the piss if it was someone else.’

‘Yeah well, that’s as maybe. You gonna help me out or what?’

‘Alright stropo bollocks, don’t sulk. Get yerself a beer.’

Stumpy grabbed a couple of cans and we sat down at the kitchen table.

‘So what did you have in mind then?’ I asked.

I dunno, that’s the trouble. A meal I suppose, that’s what you’re supposed to do isn’t it? Harvester or somewhere.’

‘You can’t take a bird like Jenny Harper to the Harvester, you heard what Tommy said. She’s posh mate. You gotta go somewhere flash.’

‘What, in Basingstoke?’

‘Yeah, I take your point. It’ll have to be one of the villages, or Hartley Wintney, Odiham or whatever, they’ve got fancy places out that way. And you’ll need to dress up a bit,’ I said, looking at Stumpy straight off the site, all covered in concrete and dust.

‘Yeah, I realise that. But there’s another problem. I can’t exactly pick her up in my van can I?’ Stumpy’s van had to be seen to be believed. It used to be white, once upon a time, but it got so grimy after a few years that it ended up a sort of two tone grey. Someone had written in the dirt ‘I wish my missus was as dirty as this’ which made Stumpy laugh so he left it like that. Rust all over the wheel arches and around the back door, which was dented in a couple of places after some reversing problems out the Fox car park after a few beers. The inside was worse, with burger wrappers, empty cans of coke, tea bags and old betting slips all over the floor. The springs had gone in the passenger seat, which was ripped in a couple of places. It fucking stank as well, just to round things off nicely.

At the time I was driving a Golf Gti that I’d bought with a hefty loan from the bank that I had absolutely no intention of repaying, and I knew exactly where Stumpy was going with this.

‘You can take my motor if you want,’ I said, ‘as long as you don’t get too pissed and stack it.’

‘Cheers Steve, you’re a life saver.’

We looked in the Yellow Pages and picked out a restaurant in Odiham that looked pretty flash, and Stumpy booked a table for the next night.

‘You never know Stumpy, you might even get a result after a meal in there.’

‘Leave it out Steve, she ain’t like that.’

I was about to launch into him again for talking like a tart, but decided to let it go.

We sorted out one final problem, which was that he’d blown all his wages on a ‘certainty’ in Saturday’s 3.30 at Chepstow. No problem though, I bunged him fifty quid along with the keys to my motor and off he went back to the Fox, nervous as a schoolkid.

The next night I went out with the boys as per usual but I must confess my heart wasn’t really in it. Sure I flung a bit of beer around, rugby tackled a couple of people, showed Sandra Clark my knob for a laugh but it was all, well, kind of half-hearted. I was worried about Stumpy, and not purely for selfish reasons. When you grow up in the kind of environment we’d grown up in you learn to hide your emotions (except when it comes to football, of course), and you learn not to show any kind of weakness. You acted hard, talked a good fight and got stuck in when necessary. You’d do anything for your mates but there was none of this sharing your feelings, heart-to-heart type stuff that girls go in for all the time.

And Jack Malloy wasn’t really your caring, nineties kind of bloke. Crying was for poofs or girls, anyone give you any grief, smack ‘em one, and a woman’s place was in the bed or the kitchen. Without sounding like some kind of New Age tosser it has to be said that Stumpy had never known a mother’s love, there had been none of the gentle touch in their place in Popley when he was growing up, and consequently he was even more hard-bitten than the rest of the boys. The nearest he’d shown me to having a sensitive side was when Graham Rix missed that penalty against Valencia in the Cup Winners’ Cup Final back in 1980.

I could tell that he’d already really fallen for this Jenny Harper bird, and that he thought she might be out of his league cos she sounded so posh. And if this date led anywhere, and he went into a relationship thinking he wasn’t good enough for her, well, then what?

Tommy was already in the pub when I arrived, so I told him about Stumpy’s date and he laughed and said he felt sorry for Jenny, but that maybe she was after a bit of rough, just for the experience, like.

Big Lad, however, was confused. Great furrows of concentration lined his brow as he tried to comprehend what Tommy Peters was telling him.

‘You’re trying to tell me Stumpy’s not coming out tonight?’ he asked.

‘Yes, for the tenth time, he ain’t gonna show,’ replied Tommy.

‘But it’s Friday night for Chrissakes! What the fuck’s he playing at?’

‘He’s taking that bird out, y’know, that Jenny Harper, her with the Arsenal shirt he tried to pull in the Fox the other week.’

That left the big skinhead completely nonplussed.

‘He’s taking a bird out on a Friday night?! What the fuck’s wrong with seeing her during the week like any normal bloke? I tell you what, Stumpy’s losing it, someone’s gotta have a word.

‘Ere Tommy, do us a favour and get the beers in, I don’t feel right.’

Tommy knew exactly what he meant. There was an unwritten rule amongst the lads that Friday was the night for going out with the boys and getting completely bolloxed, and although over the years a few of them had occasionally had a lapse of faith as it were, Stumpy was a regular. He’d

always said that if he was stuck somewhere without a watch or a calendar he'd know it was Friday night cos his body clock would automatically steer him towards the nearest boozier. Having said that, Big Lad hadn't been in town when Stumpy had seen Jenny outside Our Price, me and Tommy had.

'What d'you reckon Steve?' he asked me. 'This is bang out of order.'

'Don't worry about it mate,' I said in an attempt to calm him down, 'Stumpy'll be back, you wait and see.'

'Yeah, and you missed a session the other week anyway, so I don't know what you're whinging about,' said Jimmy.

'That was cos my Mum was in hospital you stupid cunt,' replied Big Lad looking well pissed off.

'Oh yeah, right, I remember,' said Jim, 'sorry about that mate, err, wanna pint?'

'Better get a chaser as well. I still don't feel right.'

'Stumpy will be alright,' I said, 'you know what he's like with birds. Remember that Sharon Wilkie he used to go out with?'

'Yeah, couldn't forget her in a hurry,' replied Big Lad.

'Well she laid it on the line once, didn't she? Either he took her shopping one Saturday to look at kitchen fittings for that flat she wanted him to move into with her, or he went to Highbury, it was football or her. He told me he didn't even bother to give her an answer, just picked up the stuff he had round her place and came down the pub muttering about how stupid some birds were.'

I took a sip of my pint.

'And then there was Joanne Stewart.'

'Remind me. What happened with her?'

'She came down the Fox one night to pick him up cos they were supposed to be going out for dinner. Trouble was he'd been on an all dayer and was slaughtered. He only went and pissed himself in her car.'

'Happens to the best of us,' said Big Lad.

'Yeah, but that was the second time he'd done it and another time he'd thrown up in her wardrobe. They'd only been going out for three months, and she started having a go at him, saying he had a drink problem. He lost it, and started taking her car apart from the inside. Pulled off the rear view mirror, ripped out the stereo, booted the glove compartment in and then smashed the wing mirror. She came to a screaming halt, all hysterical and he jumped out and went storming off, piss stains all down his jeans. So don't worry about this Jenny Harper, Stumpy won't change.'

Although I'd done my best to reassure the boys I must confess I was a bit worried. I'd never heard him talk about a girl so seriously before. Despite his battered old face and complete lack of effort he'd always done alright with the women, but had never really cared about any of them. And yet here he was, blowing out the boys and behaving like a love-struck teenager. This one was different.

I was playing pool with Jim when Tommy Peters wandered over and handed me a large whiskey.

'Looks like Stumpy's sorted himself out. What about you? Did you ever phone that bird you supposedly met the other night?'

As it happened, I'd been carrying her phone number with me ever since, but I still didn't know whether to call her. What if Tommy was right and she was a moose? You know what it's like when you're pissed up. The old judgement ain't too clever sometimes.

'I ain't making it up, Tom. Look, here's her number.'

Tommy took the piece of paper from me.

'Julie,' he read, then legged it towards the bar.

I ran after him, but before I realised what was happening, he'd fed a couple of coins into the pay phone.

'You tosser!' I shouted, and grabbed the phone from his hand.

'Hello?' I heard a girl's voice on the other end say, 'who's this?'

Tommy stood there, laughing.

What the fuck, I thought to myself, go for it.

'It's Steve,' I said, 'from the kebab van the other night.'

'I didn't think you were going to call.'

'Yeah, well, here I am. Look, do you fancy going out for a drink sometime?'

'I'd like that. How about Sunday?'

'Ok, sounds good. What about The Queen in Dummer? Say seven?'

'I'll see you there.'

I hung up and looked at Tommy.

'Nice move,' he said, 'meet her in a village pub in case she's a dog, less chance of anyone seeing you with her.'

Stumpy was already home by the time me and Jimmy stumbled in from the pub and I was too pissed to ask him how it had gone. But the next morning I emerged in time for Football Focus to find him sitting on the sofa looking well smug.

'So how did it go then?' I asked.

'Fucking brilliant!' he said, grinning. 'She's the dogs, mate. A right laugh. It was a bit awkward to start with, you know what it's like. Specially when the waiter brought over the wine. I wanted lager, but Jenny asked for a bottle of some French stuff and the geezer poured about half an inch into my glass. Leave it out mate, I said, I've got a right thirst on. That wouldn't satisfy a queer. Well I didn't know he wanted me to taste it, did I?'

I laughed. 'I bet that impressed her!'

'That's the thing Steve. Any other bird might have been embarrassed, but she just laughed and told the waiter to give a man a man's drink. We had a right grin from then on. She loves her food as well, and her drink. And she knows as much about Arsenal as I do.'

'Sounds like you're smitten mate. You gonna see her again?'

'Yeah, I'm taking her to the pictures on Wednesday.'

'You're just full of class ain't you? Something I've been wondering though,' I said, 'what was she doing in the Fox on her own that night?'

'She'd gone down there to meet her uncle. Him and her old man fell out years ago and that's the only way she can see him. He's the black sheep, you know what it's like. He was running late that night, course she never ended up meeting him cos I did a Bill Beaumont on her.'

Jimmy wandered into the front room, yawning and scratching his plums.

'You get your leg over last night or what?' he asked.

'Oi! Leave it out. Jenny's class mate, not like the old slags you go with.'

‘Easy tiger, I was only asking. Anyway, nothing wrong with slappers. You know where you are with them.’

‘And you know where they’ve been,’ said Stumpy.

‘Not with you, you ugly cunt. They just laugh when you try it on.’

‘Alright, alright,’ I said, ‘you’re giving me a fucking headache. Anyway, Stumpy’s not the only one who’s pulled,’ and I told them about Julie.

‘Nice one, Steve!’ said Stumpy, ‘good luck to you.’

‘She’s probably a right fucking retard,’ said Jimmy.

‘Cheers Jimmy, that’s exactly what Tom said.’

We settled down to watch the rest of Football Focus then decided to wander down to the Fox for a couple of early ones. I’d never seen Stumpy so happy, he was like a different bloke. After some of the shit I’d been hearing about him recently, dropping trips like they were Wine Gums and getting all moody and that, well, this made a right change. He was like a kid at Christmas.

The Queen is a bit of a posh boozer in a little village full of thatched cottages and rose gardens, a good place to take a bird if you don’t want your mates to spot you, as Tommy had pointed out. I got there just before seven, and grabbed a table facing the door. I had a very vague recollection of Julie, but wasn’t at all confident that I’d recognize her.

Ten minutes later, as I was getting a second pint in, I saw the pub door open and a slim, blonde girl walked in. She was about five six, nice figure and a pretty face. So far, so good.

‘Bit of Dutch courage?’ she asked, pointing at my pint.

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ I replied, ‘and if you get me another one I’ll be even braver.’

‘Listen, Steve,’ she said as she came back to the table with a pint and a large wine, ‘I hope you’re not going to get too pissed tonight.’

My heart sank as she said that, and I sighed as I took a long pull on my pint.

‘Julie, I think we need to get something clear straight off. I love my lager, and I love my football, and I ain’t about to give either of ‘em up.’

Julie laughed.

‘It sounds like you’ve made that speech before.’

‘Yeah, well, I’ve learnt that it pays to get that on the table early doors. There’s been a few misunderstandings in the past.’

She laughed again.

‘Don’t worry, Steve, I’m not going to ask you to give up the things you love. Blimey, this is a bit heavy for a first drink, isn’t it? I like to get pissed just as much as you, I was just asking you to take it easy tonight so that you’d be in fit state for a bit of fun later.’

And with that she reached under the table and put her hand straight on my cock. I almost spilt my lager.

‘Do you want to get out of here?’ I said.

‘Yeah, I’ve always thought this pub’s a bit poncy anyway.’

I followed her back to her flat on the Oakridge estate, where she cracked open a bottle of wine. I couldn’t believe my luck when she disappeared into her bedroom and came out a few minutes later dressed in a see-through white negligee and nothing else. We didn’t have time for any more

conversation before she had me handcuffed to the bedpost and was having her very wicked way with me.

What a result.

12. Ever Fallen In Love With Someone...

August 1991

Stumpy started seeing Jenny regularly, and after the summer, once the new football season was underway they went and watched Arsenal pretty much every week, all over the country. That must be a right result, meeting a girl who likes football. And not only that, one that supports the same team as you. He started seeing her more than he saw us and even seemed to be mellowing out a bit. We didn't really talk about it but I got the impression that whatever release acid had been giving him didn't seem quite so important anymore.

In fact, everything was going great until the day she introduced him to her parents. We used to take the piss out of her for being posh, but that's only cos Tommy had told us she came from a rich family. We didn't really know anything about her, and all Stumpy knew was that she lived in Old Basing, a village on the outskirts of town that was full of right nice houses, and that she had an uncle who didn't see eye to eye with her old man. Anyway, one Sunday he got invited round to meet the parents and have a bit of lunch and when he came back he was fuming.

'What a wanker!' he said, grabbing a lager from the fridge and flinging himself down on the sofa.

Me and Jimmy were watching a Baywatch video, but he was so pissed off Jimmy turned the TV off.

'I take it lunch didn't go too well,' he said.

'Not in the fucking slightest!'

'What happened then?'

'I knew it would be a disaster as soon as I got there. Her old man opened the door, took one look at my van and asked if I'd park it round the corner, didn't want the neighbours to see it. Didn't even say hello.'

'What's the house like then?' asked Jimmy.

'Fucking huge. In a little close, only four other houses around. They must be loaded.'

'Not surprised he weren't impressed with you then. If I was a rich old fucker I wouldn't want my daughter bringing home a hairy-arsed builder from Popley either.'

'Cheers mate!'

'I'm only winding you up. He sounds like a right knob.'

‘He is Jimmy. Little geezer, comes up to my armpit, wearing a shirt and tie in his own house. He’s got this horrible little tash and everything inside is immaculate. Used to be in the army and reckons conscription is the only way to go. Colonel Harper. What a tosser.’

‘What about her mum?’

‘She’s sound, really nice but I reckon she’s scared stiff of her old man cos she hardly said a word. Halfway through lunch the phone rang and when he went off to answer it she smiled and gave me a wink and her and Jenny laughed, so they obviously know what he’s like. But it all went pear-shaped afterwards when Jenny and her mum pissed off to do the washing up. He only turned round and told me he didn’t want me seeing his daughter! Leave it out, I said, if she’s happy surely that’s all that matters. I was trying to keep things civil, for Jenny’s sake but he was winding me right up. ‘I didn’t spend thousands of pounds educating her at a private school for her to end up with the likes of you’ he said.’

‘That’s a bit out of order’

‘That’s what I said. I told him he didn’t know anything about me and he said he didn’t need to know anything. Said he knew my kind and told me again to stay away. Or what? I said, what are you gonna do if I carry on seeing her? He lost it then and started shouting, told me to leave his house and never come back. I got a bit stropy as well and told him to fuck off. That’s when Jenny and her mum came back in the room.’

‘What did they say?’

‘Her mum started crying and ran straight back out again. Jenny didn’t say a word. She went and got my jacket and showed me the door.’

‘So that’s it then?’

‘Dunno, probably. She looked well fucked off, and I weren’t going to apologise.’

‘Don’t blame you. He sounds like a right wanker.’

‘He is, and I’ll have him one day, the stuck up prick.’

I was dozing on the sofa that evening when the doorbell rang. Stumpy was in the kitchen making beans on toast so he went to answer it. I heard muffled voices, then Stumpy’s head appeared round the door.

‘Steve, you don’t mind if Jenny stays for a couple of days do you?’

‘What?!’ I said.

‘Don’t ask,’ he mouthed, so I nodded and said yeah, no problem.

A couple of hours later he came downstairs and sat down.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked.

‘She’s only gone and left home,’ he said. ‘It weren’t me she was pissed off with this afternoon, it was her old man. Said he’s been controlling her life for too long and it was time she stood up to him.’

‘It’ll be nice to have a bird around the place,’ said Jimmy. ‘She can do the cooking and cleaning. Here, has she got any nice kit with her?’

‘You keep away from her underwear, d’you hear me? Dirty little fucker. If I catch you with her knickers on your head I’ll give you a right slap.’

‘Alright, alright I was only fucking about.’

Jenny stayed for two weeks, and it did make a nice change. Birds do things that we don’t think about, like sticking bleach down the bog, dusting stuff and cleaning the oven. It wasn’t until she

moved in that I realised what a fucking tip we lived in. A right disgrace. Still, never mind, we were happy.

But after a fortnight she cooked us all a nice bit of grub, said thanks very much and told us she was moving out.

‘Where to?’ I asked.

She looked at Stumpy.

‘You haven’t told them yet, have you?’

‘I was going to, just didn’t get round to it.’

‘Told us what?’

‘We’ve got ourselves a flat. Move in tomorrow.’

‘Fucking hell Stumpy! When were you gonna let us know? What about the rent on this place?’

‘Well, I’ve paid until the end of the month and I was hoping you’d be able to find someone else by then. Look, I’m sorry, I should have told you before but you know how it goes.’

But it wasn’t the rent I was worried about. Stumpy and Jenny had only been going out together for a few months. They hardly knew each other. That evening, once Jenny had gone to bed I tried to make him see sense but he wasn’t having any of it and we were getting dangerously close to the first row we’d ever had when I let it go, wished him all the best and poured us both a large whiskey.

‘What else can I do Steve?’ he said, ‘she says she ain’t going back home, she can’t stay here with us lot and I want to be with her.’

But it sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than me. They moved out the next day, into a tiny one bedroom place near the town centre. Me and Jimmy spent the rest of the month looking for another person to share our house. Easier said than done. The rest of our mates were already sorted, and it was a right bunch of freaks that answered our ad in *The Gazette*. If the truth be told I’d enjoyed having Jenny staying. Even though it weren’t for long she made me see what a bunch of slobs we were. Yeah, I know I said we were happy, but it made a nice change seeing the kitchen all neat and tidy and flowers in the living room. Don’t tell the lads I said that, obviously.

Eventually we gave up looking for someone else, and when our lease ran out at the end of the month Jimmy moved in with his younger brother and I managed to get a place about a ten minute walk from the Fox and Hounds. It was strange living on my own after six years sharing with my two best mates but you soon get used to change.

I was still seeing Julie, and we were still having a good laugh. It was nothing serious, as far as I was concerned, and I have to say it was nice to be able to take her home without worrying whether one of the lads was going to burst into my bedroom with a condom on his head.

I even started doing a bit of housework here and there.

A few weeks after he moved out, at the start of the new season, I met up with Stumpy for a few quiet ones one Saturday night. Well, I’d thought it would be a few quiet ones but after six or seven pints we got the taste and started chasing the lagers with whiskey. At some point in the evening, Stumpy slipped a tab across the table.

‘Come on, Steve, let’s go on a little trip.’

Why not? I thought, and washed it down with the remains of my pint. I went straight to the bar before it kicked in, and got a double round, just to keep us going.

We sat there in silence for a while, waiting. After a while, Stumpy looked at me.

'Phil Daniels,' he said.

'Eh?' I replied.

'Phil Daniels. In Quadruphenia, remember?'

'Not really, mate,' I said, not paying too much attention.

'He had it sussed. Ended it all after finding out that Sting was just a fucking bell boy. Drove his scooter off the cliff into fucking oblivion. Blaze of glory, Steve.'

Then, after a little while.

'Charlie George, 1971.'

This was all getting a bit random.

'What are you on about?'

'That goal he scored at Wembley. Arsenal done the Double that year. If I had to choose a way to go, I'd like my final moment to be something like that, flat out on my back in the middle of the pitch. As I said, blaze of glory, everyone knows my name and I'd die happy.'

'What do you want to die for? I thought you were Mr. Loved Up these days?'

'Yeah, life's sweet at the moment. But who knows what's gonna happen? And who wouldn't want to be like Charlie George?'

I sat there, imagining Stumpy at Wembley. Come to think of it, his hairstyle wasn't that different from Charlie George. And then I saw Charlie sitting across the table from me, grinning like an idiot. A part of my brain told me that the acid had kicked in with a vengeance, so I raised my pint.

'Cheers, Charlie. Great goal,' and I started giggling.

Acid, what a great fucking drug. If you're in the right mood.

13. Merry Xmas Ev'rybody

December 1991

Friday night, the week before Christmas and me and Jimmy had gone down the Fox early to help Fat Phil decorate the place. That took all of twenty minutes as the useless git had only managed to get hold of a ropey old plastic tree and a few bits of tinsel.

'No point in splashing out,' he explained, 'last time I tried that some fucker nicked all me baubles and I caught a geezer having a slash up the tree. Dirty sod.'

'Yeah whatever, Phil,' said Jimmy, 'as long as you've got all the Christmas tunes I'm sure we can create that party atmosphere.'

'Too right. Slade, Band Aid, Wizzard. I've got the lot.'

We finished off and Phil poured us a pint. We were halfway into a session and the pub had filled up nicely when the door burst open and Stumpy staggered in looking like shit. He walked to the bar, said something to Phil then spotted us in the corner.

He sat down and put his head on the table.

‘You alright mate?’ I asked

Stumpy didn’t reply, just sat there shaking his head from side to side, his long hair trailing in a pool of spilt lager. I started to get a bit worried.

‘Stumpy. What’s up?!’

Still no reply. Phil came out from behind the bar and waddled across the pub holding a lager and a whiskey. He put them down next to Stumpy, looking grim.

‘Do you know what’s up with him?’ asked Jimmy.

Phil nodded. ‘It ain’t good lads,’ he said.

‘Jesus!’ I said. ‘Is it Jenny? Is she alright?’

At the mention of her name Stumpy grew suddenly animated. He jerked his head up, sending a spray of lager from his wet hair over the table behind us. He gulped the whiskey down in one and demolished half his pint before speaking.

‘No she ain’t alright. As far fucking from it as you could get in actual fact.’

‘What’s happened?’ I asked, fearing the worst.

‘She said it would be ok,’ he said. ‘No problems, just a quick visit and home before opening time. I’ve never seen anything like it. It was fucking awful.’

‘What?!’ shouted Jimmy. ‘What the fuck has happened?!’

Stumpy looked grim, and took another pull on his pint.

‘Ikea,’ he said finally, in a whisper. ‘I’ve been to Ikea.’

‘Christ!’ said Jimmy with feeling. ‘Ikea? The week before Christmas? How d’you get yourself roped into that?’

‘She wore me down. On and on she went, whinging about going to Ikea cos she’d seen some fucking shelves or something in the catalogue. Well go then, I said, go and buy the bloody things. I even said I’d pay. But oh no, I had to be there. What if you don’t like them she asked. As if I give a flying fuck what shelves look like! All you do is put stuff on ’em. But you know what birds are like once they get a bee in their bonnet. Wouldn’t let it lie, and in the end I cracked. Anything for some peace and quiet. But I tell you what. Never again. Never a-fucking-gain.’

Me and Jimmy laughed and shook our heads in sympathy. The poor sod. Ikea at Christmas, what a nightmare.

‘So it’s going well then? This living together lark?’ said Jimmy.

Stumpy grunted. ‘It ain’t the crack it was living with you two. But it’s a damn sight more civilised.’

‘Who wants civilised?’ said Jim.

‘Not me, that’s for sure,’ I said, though at the back of my mind I remembered the difference Jenny had made to our place when she’d stayed for a while.

‘Well, I’ve got to admit it’s hard work sometimes,’ said Stumpy. ‘I’m always doing things wrong, you know what I mean? I piss on the toilet floor after I’ve had a few beers, leave stains on the dishes when I wash up, leave my clothes lying about, don’t take messages when her mates ring, annoy the neighbours when I play my Jam albums too loud. I mean, I know I ain’t perfect,

but my old man never nagged me like that when I lived at home. I tell you what, Steve, you've done the right thing not moving in with Julie.'

'That ain't ever gonna happen,' I said firmly.

'Look Stumpy, that's just the way females are. They can't help themselves. Some are worse than others, I'll give you that but they all nag to a certain extent,' I said, as though I'm an expert or something.

'If you're mum had been about I bet she would have done the nagging,' said Jim. 'My old girl was always having a pop at me. I couldn't wait to leave home.'

'Yeah, well, I didn't have a mum did I? So I've never had this before and sometimes it does my head in.'

'You don't think you moved in together a bit quick, do you? I said, 'I mean, you've only known her, what, 8 months or so?'

'I dunno mate, you might have a point. Still, too late to worry about that now, isn't it?'

'True. Oh well, you gotta take the rough with the smooth and all that.'

I didn't want to dwell on the conversation, it gets me down all that stuff and anyway it was Christmas, a time to celebrate.

'Yeah, you're right,' said Stumpy, 'no point in banging on about it. Who wants a pint?'

We drank until closing time then went outside to find the streets all covered in white. It hardly ever snows in Basingstoke, and we were like a bunch of kids as we started a snowball fight and built a snowman in the car park of the Fox and Hounds in front of Fat Phil's old van.

Stumpy forgot about his problems and cheered right up, especially when a police car came sliding round the corner on a sheet of ice and crashed into the wall of the car park. We hid round the corner then waited for the coppers to get out and inspect the damage before pelting them with snowballs, crunched up as tight as possible.

We legged it, skidding all over the place and were still laughing when we got to my place.

I got out some of my records, and we sang along to the Pistols and the Clash until my neighbours started banging on the wall at half one, then Jimmy and Stumpy staggered off into the night and I crashed out on the sofa.

It was a blinding night, just like the way things used to be. Talking, laughing, taking the piss out of each other and a load of booze into the bargain. No drugs, nothing stupid, just a fucking good crack. Apart from a little whinge about living with his bird Stumpy had been good as gold, just like the mate I remembered.

As soon as I entered the Fox I sensed that something was wrong. There was a bad atmosphere, you know what I mean? I couldn't put my finger on it but somehow I knew that trouble was brewing. The lads were in raucous mood. I made my way through the crowd to get myself a pint. It was getting late, and I'd only just got home from work, so I wasn't in the best of moods myself. I'd half promised to take Julie out, but after a shit week I just wanted to have a laugh with the lads.

Harry Johnson was standing at the bar looking pissed and angry.

'What's up?' I asked him

He pointed over to the group of young punks that had recently started drinking in the Fox.

'Cunts don't even know who TV Smith is. Never heard of The Advert. "No Time To Be Twenty One", I said, "Bored Teenagers", "Gary Gilmore's Eyes", never heard of 'em. Cunts. Or Malcolm Owen. How can you say you're a fucking punk when you've never heard of the fucking Ruts?! I'm telling you, I'm goin' over there again in a minute an' if that cunt with the mohican says he's never heard of Jake Burns I'm gonna kick his head in.'

I left Harry stewing at the bar and joined the rest of the lads at a table near the juke box. I could see they were all getting pretty messy, and the banter was flowing.

There was a table full of girls sitting behind us, and after a while Stumpy leaned over to the girl nearest him.

'Scuse me love, but I couldn't help noticing. You've got a lovely face.'

The girl looked a bit embarrassed, and turned away, her cheeks red.

'Nah, seriously,' said Stumpy, 'I was just saying to the boys here that you're really pretty.'

'Thanks,' said the girl, and turned her chair towards Stumpy, looking for more compliments.

'Yeah, lovely face. It's just a pity about that great fat arse of yours.'

'What?! What did you say?'

'Your arse. It's fucking huge. You wanna lay off the pies love, have a bit of respect for yourself.'

Stumpy turned back to the lads and took a huge mouthful of lager. The girl jumped to her feet and ran towards the bogs, tears streaming down her face.

'Watch out! Mind yourselves, wide load coming through!' yelled Stumpy and we all cracked up. Fat Phil came lumbering through the pub collecting glasses, and one of the girls' mates told him what Stumpy had said, expecting the landlord to do something about it. Phil just laughed, shook his head and said, 'nice one Stumpy!'

A couple of hours later I was standing at the bar with the rest of the lads when I looked round in time to see Jimmy Taylor creep round the crowd and go down on all fours behind Stumpy. Big Lad gave him a healthy shove in the chest and Stumpy flew backward into a group of mightily unimpressed women.

'Oi! Watch it!' shouted one of the girls, as a Bacardi Breezer toppled off a table and onto her skirt.

'Bollocks,' said Stumpy, struggling to his feet and booting Jimmy up the arse. Jimmy responded by chucking the dregs of his pint at Stumpy, who jumped on him, sparking off a massive bundle.

Fat Phil waddled out from behind the bar.

'Alright lads, that's enough. You know the law's still looking for any old excuse to shut me down. Now go on, take your session somewhere else.'

I could see that Phil wasn't joking.

‘Come on lads,’ I said, ‘let’s go’.

I gulped down my beer and helped a couple of them up. As we were leaving I sensed rather than saw something happening in the corner of the pub, and turned just in time to see Harry deliver a sickening headbutt to the nose of the young Mohawk, and watched as he booted him on the ground a few times.

‘Cunt,’ he muttered as he cuffed a couple more punks round the head and walked out the door. I guess the geezer didn’t know who Jake Burns was.

It’s a fucker when you’re sober. I mean, things were already messy, but what could I do to make ten pissed up lager louts see reason? I know the sensible option would have been to go straight home, but I’ve never been blessed with too much sense, especially when it’s a Saturday night and I’ve just driven home after a bastard weeks’ work in a Godforsaken hole like Wolverhampton. Still, I tried.

Half the lads wanted to try their luck in Martines and half fancied a curry. I knew that either option was bound to end in disaster.

‘Why don’t we just call it a night, eh?’ I said, half heartedly. ‘Big game tomorrow and all that.’

‘Fuck off you ponce,’ slurred Tom, shoving me into a hedge. ‘I’m up for some mayhem.’

‘Listen,’ I said, pulling twigs out of my hair, ‘you’ve got no chance of getting into Martines. Look at the state of you.’

‘Curry it is then lads,’ said Harry and started walking towards the Taj Mahal.

‘Yeah,’ said Big Lad, ‘curry and a runner. Lovely.’

There was no point in reminding Big Lad that the last time he attempted a runner he’d gone about ten paces before crashing into a pillar and falling flat on his face. I remember him lying on the floor giggling to himself in front of the long-suffering waiters as Jimmy tipped a plate of chicken vindaloo over his favourite shirt. The next day he vowed he’d never to try a runner again after fourteen pints of Stella. I suspected he’d just about reached that limit so I should have known better.

As we walked towards the Taj Stumpy grabbed my arm.

‘Who’ve we got tomorrow Steve?’

‘Black Lion,’ I replied.

‘Bunch of wankers,’ he said.

‘You know it.’

‘I’ve had enough of playing against tossers like that, haven’t you?’

‘What?! No way! That’s the kind of game I fucking love!’

‘Tell you the truth Steve, I’m finding it hard work getting out of my pit these days.’

‘Come on mate, we all feel like shit on a Sunday morning. But you know as well as I do that once you get the first ten minutes out of the way it’s the best cure for a hangover in the world. And come half twelve the beer don’t taste any sweeter.’

‘I dunno mate, I’ve had enough. I’m thinking of packing it in.’

I didn’t take him too seriously, I must admit. The geezer was slaughtered after all. We turned the corner into Wote Street and I saw the neon lights of the Taj about half way down the road.

‘Oh shit,’ I said as I pushed open the restaurant door and the lads piled in behind me.

‘What’s up now you tart?’ asked Tommy Peters.

‘Nick Williams and his boys are in, over there by the fish tank.’

‘Fuck ‘em. If they want some they can have it.’

The waiter directed us to a table in the far corner, next to the bogs and about as far from the entrance as possible.

‘Oi Vijay!’ shouted Big Lad, ‘eleven lagers over ‘ere and make it sharpish.’

‘Make that twelve,’ I said as Vijay walked past. I had some catching up to do. A few minutes later he turned up with a tray full of lukewarm cans of Skol and patiently handed them round. Christ knows how he put up with blokes like us. I’d fucking hate to serve a bunch of pisheads on a Saturday night. Maybe it’s true what they say about the waiters gobbing in the food of geezers who give them too much stick. And to be honest, when I see some of the tossers in a curry house, all beered up and thinking it’s funny to abuse the staff, I wouldn’t blame ‘em.

Vijay was alright, he lived next door to Tommy Peters and they had a good little arrangement going whereby Vijay kept Tommy stocked up with curry while Tommy supplied Vijay and his brothers with puff. And he knew that we didn’t mean any harm, that we were a bunch of pissheads up for a laugh. Well, most of the time, anyway.

Once the food arrived we got stuck right in, spilling it all over ourselves, the table and the carpet. Tommy Peters was in the middle of telling us in graphic detail what he’d done to some old boiler the previous night when a piece of Naan bread hit Big Lad squarely in the face.

‘Who the fuck threw that?’ he demanded, glaring round the table. Getting no response and seeing the rest of the lads equally bewildered he rose to his feet and looked around the room just as a handful of pilau rice hit him in the chest. Silence descended over the restaurant as Big Lad finally located the source. Nick Williams had armed himself with a bowl of mango chutney and was about to let fly.

‘Food fight!’ yelled Big Lad and that was it, the whole place went mental.

Tommy Peters lobbed an onion bhaji at Nick, scoring a direct hit and Harry followed it up with a bowl full of meat samosas. The Black Lion boys had obviously been in the restaurant for ages, cos there was hardly any food on their table, but we’d only just been served and had enough nosh lying around to feed a third world country. But that’s typical of Nick, no fucking brains. Tommy picked up a plateful of chicken madras.

‘Come on then!’ he yelled and charged across the room. I saw him stick it straight in Nick’s face and heard the scream of pain. A huge brawl broke out as what started out as a harmless food fight turned into a proper scrap, plates and glasses were smashed and a woman started crying. I kept myself pretty much out of it, standing near our table gulping down pints of Skol and lobbing the odd bit of curry here and there. I saw Vijay’s face looking out from the kitchen door, horrified at the damage being done to the family restaurant and the lack of lager in me made me realise what we were doing. Feeling guilty I put down the bowl of lamb dopiaza I was about to throw and moved towards the mayhem, thinking I might be able to calm things down.

Stumpy had grabbed their keeper by the ears and was rubbing his face into a carpet drenched in food and lager. Big Lad tipped their table over and lobbed a chair at Nick Williams, whose eyes were still screwed up in pain from the madras.

And then I heard the distant wail of sirens.

‘Fuck!’ I shouted, ‘it’s the law! Come on lads, runner!’

I didn’t stop to see who was behind me as I ran towards the door and gave it an almighty shove with my shoulder. Someone piled in to the back of me and I smacked my face against the plate glass window as the realisation struck that the fuckers had locked us in.

Three squad cars and a meat wagon screeched to a halt outside. Bit over the top I thought, it was just a scrap, a bit of fun your Honour, no harm done. Plod thought otherwise and a couple of hours later we found ourselves being charged with drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace and criminal damage

And to make things worse, it was Saturday night, we were due to play the bastards in under nine hours and nobody had forgotten the outcome of the last match between the two teams.

I found it hard to get to sleep, not surprising considering the rock hard mattress and the noise of snoring coming from a bunch of pissed up geezers in the cell with me. Something was bothering me, nagging at the back of my mind and it took a while before I recognized it as shame.

I was ashamed of our behaviour in The Taj, embarrassed not only by the damage we had caused and the disrespect to Vijay and his family but also because of the effect we had had on other people in the restaurant. A lot of people were not surprisingly outraged and disgusted by our antics, but I also saw a couple of women genuinely scared, crying and unable to escape because the doors had been locked to allow the coppers to nick us.

I'd been involved in plenty of incidents like that before, food and beer fights, a few scraps, runners from restaurants, bundles in the middle of the town centre and thought nothing of it. It was just a bit of high spirits, wasn't it?

For the first time I wasn't so sure. Maybe I was getting old or something.

The coppers let us out at half nine, giving us an hour to get home and pick up our kits. It was a mild spring morning, and the boys were on good form, all things considered. The lads from the Black Lion weren't stupid enough to start any trouble in the cells and I'd eventually managed to get a bit of sleep. I couldn't see the court taking it much beyond a fine, as long as Vijay's old man didn't decide to press charges and in the end that's exactly what happened. I felt bad for Vijay, though, cos we'd done a load of damage to his family's restaurant and as I said before, he was alright.

'Listen Steve,' said Tommy, as we walked away from the cop shop. 'We shouldn't have wrecked Vijay's gaff. He's alright, know what I mean?'

'I was just thinking that myself,' I replied.

'Well let's get this game out the way and have a whip round for the damage. What do you say?'

'Nice one. I don't want to get barred from there anyway, they do a mean ruby.'

The game was pretty mild, all things considered. Nick didn't turn up, no doubt still suffering from the after effects of a chicken madras in the face, and both teams were knackered from the previous night. We beat them 2-1 and there were only seven yellow cards. The ref even thanked us after the game for giving him such an unexpectedly easy morning.

We went to the Fox and Tommy had a chat with the lads. All agreed we'd been a bit out of order so we collected a score off each of them and then me and Tommy walked though town to the Taj Mahal. The restaurant usually had an all you can eat Sunday lunch buffet but when we arrived the door was still locked. Tommy knocked, and we waited.

'What are you doing here?' Vijay opened up and looked at us in surprise.

'Listen mate,' said Tommy, 'we were bang out of order last night and we wanted to say sorry.' He held out a bundle of notes.

'The lads have all chipped in, there's nearly two fifty there. I know it won't be enough but it should buy a few plates and chairs.'

An older man appeared behind Vijay, saw the two of us standing on the doorstep and started speaking in Urdu, or Hindi or whatever it was. I didn't need to be able to understand the language to know he wasn't welcoming us in.

'My dad wants you to go. He says you've done enough damage here already and he never wants to see you again.'

'Just give him the money then, and tell him we're sorry.'

Vijay spoke to his dad for a minute or two, then showed him the money we'd collected. The old man looked at us again, a bit uncertainly, then replied at length.

'He says you've done the honourable thing by coming to apologise and trying to pay for some of the damage. We couldn't open this lunchtime because there's still so much cleaning to be done. He says that if you really want to make amends...'

We looked at each other, sighed and walked into the restaurant, sleeves rolled up ready for an afternoon's cleaning.

'The things we do for the lads,' I said.

'They owe us for this,' muttered Tom, menacingly.

15. Jenny Harper
June 1992

Sunday afternoon and I was walking home from my mum's house, belly full of roast dinner and a couple of cans of lager on top, feeling well content. There's nothing like a bit of home cooking every now and then. Come to think of it, there's nothing like a bit of any old cooking. I was living almost entirely on takeaways and toast and I'll tell you this for nothing, it weren't doing my guts any favours at all. You'd think that having a regular bird might mean I'd get a decent bit of grub here and there, but Julie was as shit at cooking as me.

I took a short cut through the park, and as I walked past the swings I saw Stumpy and Jenny sitting on one of the benches, holding hands and staring into space. Love's young dream, I don't think.

'Oi oi, what are you two up to then?' I asked.

'Just chilling out,' said Stumpy, 'enjoying the sunshine.'

'Have a seat,' said Jenny, so I did.

'So what's happening with you then, Steve?' she asked.

'Not a lot,' I replied, 'you know the score, bit of this and a bit of that.'

'I've never understood what that means,' said Jenny, 'bits of what?'

'It don't mean nothing,' said Stumpy cheerfully, 'it's just something knob ends like him say when they want it to sound like they've got a life.'

'Don't be so mean!' said Jenny.

'What?! I'm just pointing out the obvious. He's a loser, just like me. 'Ere, is that the ice cream van I can hear? D'you two fancy one?'

‘Yes, I’ll have a 99 with a flake please. What about you Steve?’
‘Sounds good to me, though if it’s a tasty bird behind the counter ask her if she’ll give me a 69 instead will yer?’
Stumpy laughed and walked off towards the car park.
‘I wish he wouldn’t say things like that,’ sighed Jenny.
‘Like what?’
‘You know, put himself down, call himself a loser. It really upsets me.’
‘Come on Jenny, he’s only pissing about.’
‘You might think that, but he’s not. Oh I know he jokes about with you and with the rest of his mates, but he means it. He really doesn’t have a high opinion of himself, despite what I say to reassure him.’
‘He’s always seemed alright to me,’ I said, although I knew that was a long way from the truth. I’d seen him at his low points too many times.
‘Well, you know what he’s like, full of macho pride. He’d never admit to a weakness to you, would he?’
‘No, I suppose not. Listen,’ I said, as something more important sprung to mind. ‘Has he said anything about playing football next season?’
‘Yes, he told me he wasn’t going to bother.’
‘I’ve asked him a couple of times on the phone and that’s what he said to me as well. But I don’t get it. Stumpy loves his football.’
‘Yes I know he does. But he’s changed Steve. He really isn’t the same person he used to be.’ She fell silent for a moment, then looked at me.
‘You know he still takes drugs, don’t you?’
Of course I did, but that’s not the sort of conversation you want to be having with someone’s girlfriend. But seeing as she’d brought the subject up...
‘Yeah, well, we’ve all dabbled in them over the years.’
‘But Stumpy more than most, from what he’s told me. He’s been very honest, and some of the stuff he’s said has been quite scary. You know, the hallucinating and everything. Especially that time at the cemetery. I know you know about that. Obviously I want him to stop and he keeps saying that he will but I think he’s finding it really hard, he seems to have some sort of self destructive streak in him. And the worst thing is that it’s begun to affect his mind.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘I came home from a night out with my friends recently to find him cowering on the sofa, really disturbed. I couldn’t get any sense out of him at all that night, and he didn’t come to bed. In the morning I asked him what was going on, and he told me he’d taken some acid while watching a football match because he was interested in the reaction he’d get. He said that he felt himself get sucked in through the telly and on to the pitch, and at the precise moment that happened a player went in for a tackle and broke his leg. He told me that it was a sign and that he’d never play football again.’
‘But that’s ridiculous!’ I said.
‘Yes, I know, but there’s no telling him that.’
We sat there in silence for a while, watching Stumpy at the ice cream van. As he walked back towards us Jenny suddenly grabbed my arm.

‘Don’t say anything to Stumpy, will you Steve? He’d go mad if he knew I was talking about him.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I said, ‘I won’t say nothing.’

16. Something That I Said.

July 1992

I was in the mood for a sesh. It was baking hot and I’d been stuck in a traffic jam on the M25 for two hours, and I was severely pissed off. Why is it that you only get delays on the way home from work? And on a Friday afternoon as well. I wouldn’t give a monkeys if I got stuck in traffic on the way to work on a Monday morning but on a Friday afternoon? That’s taking the piss as far as I’m concerned. It didn’t help matters when I discovered the cause of the hold up was a minor prang between an old lady and some poncy looking Volvo driver. It’s always the way isn’t it? They were on the hard shoulder, not even blocking the traffic and yet there was a huge tail back to see what was going on.

The old lady looked shocked and upset and was being comforted by the other driver, oblivious to the hold-up they’d caused. I joined the rest of the rubber-kneekers at having a good butchers at the damage and slowed down just enough to shout ‘you pair of WANKERS!!’ out of my window, well pissed off that my drinking session was being delayed because of this pair of idiots.

The Volvo driver looked up and I heard him say ‘well *really!*’ as I moved on down the motorway.

The Pistols were blaring from my stereo, my temper was getting worse and I was looking for any excuse to kick off. I finally got home at half seven, four hours after leaving the site I’d been working on in Derby. I was still working for Charlie Lord, and for some reason he was still putting me on sites all over the country. Dunno why, there must be labourers as crap as me in every town in England but there you go, not my concern.

Anyway, I ran straight up to my room to get changed, not bothering to wash. I threw on my regulation white T-shirt, denim shirt, jeans and DM’s, legged it back downstairs and grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge to drink on the way to the boozier.

‘What are you doing tonight?’

With a start I noticed Julie sitting on the sofa leafing through an old copy of Escort I’d left in the bog. She was looking at me with a dangerous glint in her eye and once again I cursed myself for giving her a front door key in a moment of weakness.

In the beginning I reckon Julie had been attracted to me because she saw me as a bit of a lad, someone who knew his own mind and who didn't take any shit. I suppose it was all a challenge for her, along the lines of I'll change him, tame him or whatever the fuck it is these birds think. She used to encourage me to go out with my mates, telling me to come back to her house at the end of a night out, leaving the back door open and even bringing me bacon and eggs the morning after, an aspirin to soothe my hangover.

Never complained about the states I used to get into, even when I turned up one night with Stumpy, Big Lad, and The Beast and trashed her kitchen in an attempt to knock up a late night snack. Stumpy had passed out in next door's garden after trying to break into their greenhouse in a search for tomatoes for his sandwich, Big Lad had fallen asleep on the bog in the middle of a dump, and Beast had pissed himself on the couch. No problem to Julie, she even made the lads a cup of tea in the morning and washed Beast's jeans as he apologetically scrubbed her sofa clean. And the sex was fucking great. For a while.

I was naive enough to think I had it sussed, that I'd finally found a woman who wouldn't try to change me and just accepted the way I was, warts and all. Fat chance of that. After about six months she showed her true colours, and started nagging me about the amount of lager I drank, the amount of time I spent with the boys, and about my refusal to take her away for a weekend during the football season. I suppose it was my fault in a way: I let the relationship drift along, never giving any thought to what Julie wanted. As far as I was concerned it was just a bit of a laugh, live for today and all that. While Stumpy was trying to make things work with Jenny, I was doing my best to avoid giving Julie any kind of commitment. The arguments grew more regular and became more fierce, and now it looked as though she was brewing for a big one. 'Where are you going tonight?' she asked again after I blatantly ignored her initial question.

'It's Friday night,' I replied by way of explanation.

'So?'

'So I'm going out with the boys like I do every Friday night.'

'Why do you have to go out with them tonight?'

'Cos I always do, that's why.'

'Can I come with you?'

'No you can't.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm going out with my mates, that's why.'

'Well, aren't I your mate?'

I was getting well fucked off. There's no arguing with some women, they've got their own version of things like reason and logic.

'Of course you're my mate, but this is different, it's a lads night.'

'What are you going to do that you don't want me along?'

'Nothing special, it's just that... look, why the fuck would you want to come out with a bunch of pisseheads anyway?'

'You're going out to pull other women aren't you? Or have you got another girl on the sly already? Yeah, I bet that's it. You're not going out with the lads at all!'

'Oh for fuck's sake! All I'm gonna do is go down the Fox with the boys, get beered up, play some pool, go down Martines and probably get kicked out like we do every week. I just want a night out with my mates is all.'

She finally cracked, stood up with eyes blazing and started shouting.

‘Go on then, go out with your precious mates if they mean that much more to you than I do. But don’t expect me to be here when you come back.’

All of a sudden I took a step back and looked at her, filling up with angry tears, all hurt, accusing and desperate, bitterness brimming over because I refused to change or even compromise. I knew I was being selfish and uncaring but I didn’t give a shit. All I wanted was to get down the boozier and get amongst it with the boys.

‘Fuck this, Julie, I don’t need grief in my life. Do us both a favour and piss off for good.’ And with that I stormed out the front door and stomped off down the street cursing. She ran to the gate and was still abusing me in a shrill voice as I turned the corner towards the main road.

‘You’re a fucking wanker Steven Bonds! A selfish bastard! Go on, run off to your mates, I never fucking liked you anyway....!!’

In the heat of the moment I didn’t stop to consider the wisdom of leaving an angry woman alone in the flat but I wasn’t really thinking too clearly and was still swearing when I got to The Beast’s house and let myself in the back door. I knew The Beast was in from half a street away because he had some heavy metal shit blasting out of his stereo at full volume, and as I expected there he was in his front room, spliff drooping from the corner of his mouth, legs wide apart and eyes closed as he thrashed his air guitar on the Knebworth stage of his mind.

The Beast was a funny fucker. Sometimes I used to wonder why he knocked about with us lot at all. He had a mane of hair, wild and unkempt, a full beard and he rode an old Triumph motorbike. He was the hairiest geezer I’d ever met, and had been since puberty. He grew his first beard at the age of fourteen and I don’t think he’s trimmed it since, and with his horrible greasy jeans and tattered leather jacket he looked like the worst kind of headbanger. He was constantly stoned and the most mellow bloke I knew. Nothing ever fazed The Beast and he was the ideal bloke to spend a bit of time with when you were stressed out coz he’d just turn off the music, hand you a can of Special Brew and a spliff and listen as you whinged your heart out.

He lived alone in a pit of a house not far from me. His folks got lucky on the pools a few years back and fucked off to Marbella, leaving The Beast to cope alone. Over a period of time he gradually turned the place into some kind of pikey’s gaff, with old washing machines and bits of cars in the front yard and a workshop out back. The neighbours hated him but Beast didn’t give a fuck. He was a welder by trade and set up on his own when he realised he wasn’t going to find an employer who’d put up with his smoking habits. Beast maintained that being wrecked is the ideal state for welding because you’re totally focused on that little green flame.

He bought himself some gear shortly after that and started working for himself, transporting it about in a sidecar fitted to his Triumph. He was a familiar sight around town on that bike and was doing pretty well for himself. He taught me and Stumpy to ride his motorbike and Stumpy always said that if he could ever get round to saving up the money he’d buy one for himself. The Beast used to do a bit of welding in his back yard workshop and was rebuilding a vintage E-Type Jag in his spare time. He was a good mechanic as well, which accounted for the permanently black finger nails and oil-stained clothes.

Anyway, as usual Beast just listened to me whinge on and after a while he stubbed out a joint and said,

‘She’s a nutter Steve, you’re better off without her. Come on, let’s get beered up.’

That’s what I like about my mates: they put things in perspective.

At half four in the morning, after a lock in at the Fox and a few more at Harry's place I was back at the Beasts, at that stage of drunkenness where I was quite frankly scared to go to bed. I knew I was heading for one almighty hangover and I wasn't ready to tackle it.

Beast was feeling similarly shell-shocked and he rolled a joint as we sat in silence, waiting for the break of dawn. I knocked up a cup of tea and found a couple of pies in the fridge that still looked vaguely edible. I was feeling like shit and I knew that I was in for a miserable Sunday, especially when it dawned on me that I'd left Julie alone in my house. I sat back in the armchair groaning quietly, closed my eyes and must have fallen asleep because the next time I looked out of the window it was light.

It was gone eleven before I felt up to the short walk home.

'Oi Beast!' I yelled up the stairs, 'I'll see yer later.'

I heard a vague grunt from his bedroom and let myself out the front door. It was another scorcher, the sun warm on my face. It was a lovely day but I couldn't shake the image of Julie's angry face. Getting pissed definitely helps forget the arguments and numbs the pain, but it can't get rid of them unfortunately and everything always seems worse with a hangover.

I put my key in the front door and walked inside, that sinking feeling growing with every step.

'Bit of a mess, eh?' said Stumpy, lounging on the sofa and surrounded by what looked like everything I owned. All in a thousand pieces.

'What are you doing here?' I asked, though my mind was elsewhere as I tried to take in the amount of damage in front of me.

'Jenny's kicked me out. I did phone before I came round but you weren't in. You really should get that back door fixed.'

'There's nothing wrong with my back door.'

'There is now. I had to smash the window on it to get in. And I'll tell you something else. This place is a right tip.'

'Well I didn't fucking do this!' I said.

'Me and Julie had a right old barney last night and like an idiot I stormed off leaving her here.'

'Well that weren't too fucking clever was it?'

'Yeah, I realise that now but you know what it's like. All I wanted to do was drink beer, not waste time having a row.'

'You're best off out of that mate,' said Stumpy, 'she's a fucking nutter.'

Which was exactly what Beast had said the night before.

'You ain't seen the kitchen yet have you?' he asked

I didn't dare go in there. The living room was bad enough. The fabric on my armchair and sofa had been slashed with a bread knife, the curtains had been pulled off the rails, the few books I owned were now scraps of ripped paper and my football trophies, pride of place on my mantelpiece last night were now in bits in the fireplace.

'Fucking bitch,' I said, the anger rising like bile in my throat.

'Yeah,' said Stumpy cheerfully, 'she's smashed up half your record collection as well.'

'NO!!!!' I shouted, 'not my records! She can't have!'

'Yep.'

I didn't really give a fuck about anything else in my flat. Like most birds Julie had attacked what would have meant most to her: the kitchen, furniture, curtains and whatever. Unlike most birds Julie was a vicious cow who really knew how to stick the knife in. My records and my trophies. I

suppose it says a lot that it didn't even cross my mind that I might have been partly to blame for the situation.

'Might as well go to the pub,' said Stumpy. 'Can't sit around in this tip.'

I sighed and decided things couldn't get any worse. Another relationship had bitten the dust, and lager seemed to be the only answer. Halfway through our third pint something clicked.

'What d'you mean Jenny's thrown you out?'

'Exactly that, she's thrown me out.'

'Why?'

'You know what birds are like. When did they ever need a reason?'

'Leave it out mate, you must have done something. Jenny ain't like Julie, she always seemed pretty normal to me. What was it? Drugs? Or did you piss all over her clothes again?'

Stumpy waved his empty glass at me.

'You want another one or what?'

'Oi oi, what's going on here then? Bit of a sesh?'

'Alright Harry?' I said, 'how's it going?'

'Be a lot better when that ugly fucker's got me a pint.'

And with Harry's arrival I forgot all about Jenny, particularly when Harry pulled a few forms out from his back pocket and waved them in front me.

'Got a couple more signed on last night down Martines. Should have a good side next season, bit more cover.'

We chatted about football for a while, and at the end of the evening Stumpy asked if he could crash on my sofa for a couple of days.

'Just til I get things sorted out,' he said.

'No problem,' I replied, and left it there. If Stumpy didn't want to tell me what was going on I wasn't going to ask. He ended up staying for three days, and seemed to spend most of that time either on the phone to Jenny or devouring the contents of my fridge. He must have got something sorted with her, because on the fourth day I came home to find him gone and a note beside the phone that simply said 'Cheers' and had a £20 pound note underneath.

I took the money and went straight to the pub, found Harry and Heavy Trev playing pool and got a round in.

'You heard about Billy then? asked Harry.

'No, what happened?'

'Banged up, six months.'

'I didn't even know he was in trouble.'

'Well he don't advertise the fact, but he got nicked a while ago for off loading dodgy tenners all over town and they sent him down yesterday.'

'That's a fucker,' I said, 'cos Stumpy's been acting weird for a while and he reckons he ain't gonna play next season. That means we've lost our central midfield.'

Harry laughed.

'Billy will be well chuffed to hear that your only concern about him doing six months is that he can't play football!'

'Yeah, well, I'm gutted for him and all that but you can't tell me he's too bothered about going down? Must be like a second home to him.'

‘True enough. He doesn’t give a fuck now you mention it. Some blokes can handle it, some can’t.’

‘Well, there you go then. So what about our midfield then?’

‘Well, we’ll have to play you and Scouse there and the two geezers I signed on last night will have to go straight in. Then we’ll have to get a couple more players won’t we? I’ll see what I can do during the week. You sure about Stumpy then?’

‘Well I saw him and Jenny last month down the park, and when he went off to get some ice creams she told me that he wasn’t going to play again. Said that he’d seen some geezer break his leg on the telly while he was tripping and took it as an omen or something. Load of old bollocks if you ask me, but what can you do?’

‘Not a lot Steve. Geezer’s getting fucking strange if you ask me.’

17. Colonel Harper
July 1993

Colonel Harper has a lot to answer for, I’ll tell you that much for nothing. I swear he was partly to blame for Stumpy losing the plot.

I know that Mrs. Harper tried, for a while at least, because Stumpy used to fill me in on the gossip. She used to phone Jenny when he wasn’t around, and they’d meet up occasionally for a coffee in town or for lunch at some country pub. Stumpy went along a couple of times and he reckoned that she was alright. A bit of a laugh, actually, when given the chance. When the Colonel wasn’t controlling every aspect of her life.

Then one evening he came home early from a Neighbourhood Watch meeting while she was on the phone to Jenny. She didn’t hear the door open, carried on chatting and he overheard her arrange to meet their daughter for lunch the following day.

He arrived nice and early in the car park of the Jolly Farmer pub in Cliddesden village, and was in plenty of time to see Stumpy drop Jenny off and watch his wife arrive in her Range Rover. It was typical of the cowardly bastard that he waited until Stumpy had driven away before confronting them. He obviously had no intention of picking a fight with a big ugly builder.

I know all this because Stumpy came round my house early the next morning in the worst temper I’d ever seen him in.

‘I’m gonna kill that fucker!’ he shouted, even before saying hello and demanding I put the kettle on.

‘Hold on mate, what’s going on? Who do you want to kill?’

‘Colonel fucking Harper, that’s who. I dropped Jenny off at the Jolly Farmer yesterday to have lunch with her old lady, but she was home less than an hour later crying her fucking eyes out.’

Apparently Colonel Harper had stormed into the pub and literally dragged his wife outside.

‘How dare you disobey me!’ he’d shouted.

‘I ordered you to have nothing to do with Jennifer while she insists on co-habiting with that layabout!’

Jenny’s mum didn’t say anything, as usual. She went all pale, started trembling and withdrew into herself. Jenny wasn’t quite so docile, and she had a right old go at him. In the end he threatened to disown her completely and said he’d cut her out of his will. She told him to do what he wanted, that he didn’t own her, that she couldn’t believe that they were related and that she never wanted to see him again.

It was all I could do to stop Stumpy driving straight out to Old Basing and giving the little fucker a right good kicking.

‘He needs it Steve! He’s a fucking wanker and a bully and I ain’t having it. I’m gonna give him a hiding and I’m gonna smash up his gaff!’

I managed to calm him down, then suggested we knock for The Beast and go for a couple of jars. The Beast is always handy in this type of situation. Thinks things through, all calm and rational.

Once we were sitting in the grubby tip that passes for a garden out the back of the Fox and Hounds, Stumpy told The Beast what was going on and repeated his desire to go round there and cause some extreme damage.

‘Look mate,’ said The Beast, ‘what good would that do, apart from make you feel better? I know he deserves it, but have a think about what you’re saying. Despite what Jenny says he’s still her dad and I’m damn sure she won’t thank you for beating him up. And her mum, you said she was alright, didn’t you? You don’t want to traumatise her do you? Also, you can guarantee he’ll call in the Old Bill and for something like that you could easily get sent down. Then you’d probably lose Jenny and he wins, doesn’t he?’

Stumpy looked at me, and I nodded.

‘He’s right mate.’

‘So you’re telling me to do nothing, let him get away with it?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘Not necessarily,’ said The Beast. ‘There are other ways of getting even – a bit more subtle, if you know what I mean.’

‘No I don’t,’ said Stumpy

‘Come on mate, use yer loaf. There are loads of things you could do: take out a subscription to a gay porn mag in his name, shoot him up the arse with an airgun, let down his tyres on a regular fucking basis, get pizzas sent round his house in the middle of the night, hoax calls to the fire brigade...’

I started laughing and Stumpy soon cottoned on. After a couple more beers the ideas were flowing and the plans were in place to seriously fuck up Colonel Harper’s life.

The first couple of times we phoned for a pizza on his behalf we parked my car at the end of his close and pissed ourselves as he stood in his doorway, red in the face with rage, arguing with the poor old delivery bloke. The gay porn subscription caused no end of bother, so Mrs. Harper told Jenny. He was the most homophobic bloke around, and having that stuff in his house, in envelopes addressed to him nearly sent him round the bend, if you’ll pardon the pun.

But in the end, I suppose, Colonel Harper's attitude began to fuck things up, because deep down I don't think Stumpy ever thought he was good enough for Jenny, and the constant message of disapproval he was getting from her old man probably helped convince him of that even more. We stopped the tricks after a couple of months, when the novelty wore off. Jenny managed to persuade Stumpy that her dad wasn't worth worrying about, although I often wondered what she'd have said if she knew what we'd been up to. She said that in time, if he realised that they were serious as a couple, then he'd come round to the idea and see a bit of sense. I had my doubts, as did Stumpy, but he agreed to keep out of the Colonel's way, for her sake.

18. Safety In Numbers
September 1994

One Saturday afternoon I got stuck into a bit of a session with Harry and a few of the boys. Harry had been down to Winchester to see Billy, who was coming to the end of yet another stretch inside, and he was always in the mood for a beer after those visits. After watching Final Score I got the munchies, so I left the pub and staggered up to Macdonalds for a spot of dinner. While I was sitting outside the Willis Museum at the top of town, stirring my tea and munching my Big Mac and large fries I became aware that I wasn't alone. I looked up and saw the pig ugly face of Nick Williams staring down at me. I gagged on my food.

'Move along Nick,' I said, 'you're putting me off my dinner.'

He stayed where he was and it gradually dawned on me that Nick wasn't looking particularly friendly, and the two lads with him didn't seem overly keen to extend the hand of friendship either. I put the remainder of my food on the bench beside me and glanced warily around for an avenue of escape as I asked what was up.

'Just a little word, cunt,' said Nick, knocking my burger to the floor and grinding it into the paving slabs with his size elevens.

'I heard something very interesting last night. It was Tina's hen party, and you know what birds are like when they get pissed. They talk about all sorts, don't they?'

'You've lost me Nick. Who the fuck is Tina, and what's all this bollocks got to do with me?'

'Tina is my cousin Halfpint's sister, and the reason you should give a fuck is because Caroline Jeffries was there, down from London for the night.'

I still couldn't see where this was going.

'So?'

'So they start talking about first shags. And guess what? Caroline let it slip that you were hers.'

'That's bollocks!' I said, trying to remain calm and bluff my way out of what was turning into a bit of a fucking nightmare.

'No it ain't. Why would she lie? You shagged Caroline Jeffries, and as soon as Billy is out of nick, I'm gonna tell him. Everyone knows he's been after the geezer who done her for years.'

I was shitting myself, but continued to bluff it.

'Even if it was true, which it ain't, why would Billy believe you? He'll probably give you a kicking for trying to stitch me up.'

'I ain't scared of Billy Jeffries,' said Nick, 'and I've got a feeling he will believe me. Especially when Tina backs me up.'

And that was when I realised that Nick Williams really was as stupid as he looked. Anyone who said they weren't scared of Billy had to be fucking struggling upstairs, if you know what I mean.

'I ain't finished, either. We're gonna have the league this year, alright? You're fuck all without that twat Stumpy Malloy, and we all know how long a broken ankle takes to heal.'

And with that Nick's mates grabbed my arms and pulled me backward off the bench. As I hit the deck I sobered up instantly, reached out and yanked the legs out from underneath one of the blokes and rolled to the side as quick as I could. I scrambled to my feet, booted the other geezer so hard in the bollocks that I knew he wouldn't be going anywhere in a hurry and legged it down Church Street. Nick and the other lad were hard on my heels as I headed in the general direction of the Fox and Hounds.

Under normal circumstances, with a skinful of lager and faced by Nick on his own I would have taken my chances and had a pop at him, even though he's a lot bigger than me and likely to give me a bit of a battering, because running in that situation would have done me no good at all around town.

Once word of that got out I would have been a laughing stock. I get out of most iffy situations by bluffing it big time, giving it large and hoping that the other geezer backs down first. If not, a solid headbutt followed by a boot to the nuts usually does the trick, but this wasn't a normal situation, it was two against one and they weren't out to give me a slap, they wanted to put me out for the season. Not only that, but if Nick did tell Billy about Caroline then Christ knows what might happen. Billy might believe him, he might not. Either way, I couldn't take the risk of him being told.

As I ran I thought to myself, for fuck sakes it's only the Basingstoke Sunday League, but then again I'd been winding Nick up for years and I suppose a geezer can only take so much shit before he flips and goes for revenge.

I legged it past the Hop Leaf pub and across the bridge towards St. Michael's Church, through the graveyard and round the back, hoping to lose them in Glebe Gardens. Nick was falling behind but his mate was quick and was gaining with every stride as I headed back towards the town centre. I knew that if I got behind the train station I'd be near the Fox and into safe territory. I looked over my shoulder and saw Nick way back, breathing heavily, red in the face as he struggled to keep up and I knew I could get to the pub before he got hold of me but his mate was on a mission, barely sweating, looking like he did this every day for fun.

The lager had taken its toll on my stamina, I had a stitch and I was getting severely pissed off with the whole thing. Bugger this, I thought as I swerved to the right and came to a sudden halt. Nick's mate ran straight past before stopping and turning to face me. As he turned I smacked him as hard as I could in the side of his jaw, heard a satisfying crack and was off again, past the drunks and young lovers, past the nippers playing football, past Glebe House and up the steps by the Basshouse, into the town centre again. I took another glance behind and saw Nick and his mate at a standstill at the entrance to the park, Nick leaning on the barrier gasping for breath, his mate holding his face and looking mighty pale. The adrenaline was pumping and my heart was beating ten to the dozen but I'd escaped and I gathered my wits about me, hurried on through town, past the railway station and up the hill towards the Fox and Hounds.

Once I was safely inside and had a pint in my hand, I thought about what I should do. There was only one person worth talking to, so I bought Harry a beer, took him to one side and told him what had happened.

'This ain't good, Steve. I know Billy likes you, but he won't be happy about this. He'll think you've been taking the piss out of him all these years.'

‘Will he believe Nick, though?’

‘I don’t know, mate. No one likes Nick Williams, but if it’s true that other people know then Billy’s gonna ask around, isn’t he?’

‘What if I just tell him the truth? He might understand, no?’

‘No. Remember, he asked all of us if we knew anything, and we all said we didn’t. If you tell him now that you were lying, he ain’t gonna take it too kindly. And he probably won’t listen to me if I try to help, either.’

‘Oh fuck. What am I gonna do, Harry?’

‘There’s only one thing you can do mate. You get to Billy before Nick does, and I’ll make sure that no one else talks.’

19. Wrong Place, Wrong Time

October 1994

‘Shit,’ said Heavy Trev, ‘I’ve left the bloody directions at home.’

We were half way down the M3 on our way to the Isle of Wight for our Hampshire Cup game against Newport Town. We’d set off around lunchtime on the Saturday with the intention of catching a late afternoon ferry and making a night of it on the island. It was a bit of a celebration for Billy, fresh out of nick and looking for a big piss up.

‘Stop at the M27 services and give their secretary a ring,’ suggested Big Lad, ‘I could do with a piss and something to eat anyway.’

The other cars in our convoy pulled in behind us and a few of the lads piled in to the shop to pilfer some pies and a couple of dirty mags as Trev used the phone. His face was grim as he returned to the van.

‘Bad news lads. Half their mob have gone down with the flu. Geezer said he’d been trying to call me for a couple of days, but I’ve had my phone cut off cos that fat bastard spent his half of the bill on lager.’ Big Lad, his lodger, didn’t look remotely concerned.

So that was it, game off.

‘Let’s have a night out anyway,’ said Jimmy. ‘Somewhere different for a change.’

‘Nah,’ said Big Lad, ‘if we head back now we can be in the Fox for Final Score.’

As we hadn’t bothered booking any accommodation on the Isle of Wight we decided to head for home, and we pulled up in the car park at just gone 4.30.

The beers were flowing nicely, the pub began to fill up and everyone was having a good laugh. Then at just after eight, the door opened and Nick Williams walked in with about a dozen of his mates from the Black Lion.

‘What the fuck are they doing in here?’ asked Jimmy.

I knew exactly why. Nick must have found out that Billy had been released, and he’d come down to ruin my life. He wouldn’t have known that we were supposed to be in the Isle of Wight.

‘This is a diabolical fucking liberty,’ snarled Billy Jeffries. ‘I hate that fucker.’

‘Easy tiger,’ said Harry, ‘I know he’s a fucking idiot but what’s he ever done to you?’

‘A few years ago some dirty bastard interfered with my little sister Caroline, as you well know. She’s never told me who it was but I’ve seen that cunt eyeing her up.’

Harry shot me a look and I breathed deeply before taking Billy’s arm and pulling him to one side.

‘Listen, Billy. There’s something I need to tell you. I wasn’t gonna bother you with it on your first night out, but it’s something you need to know.’

‘What is it, Steve?’

‘I heard this a couple of weeks ago, from a mate’s bird who knows your sister.’

Billy’s eyes narrowed.

‘See, the thing is, you’re right about Nick and Caroline. If you know what I mean.’

‘I fucking knew it!’ roared Billy, as he flung his half full bottle of Bud to the floor. The sound of breaking glass caused everyone to turn, and all eyes were on Billy. Then, somewhat appropriately, one of Harry Johnson’s choices kicked in on the juke box and everything went mental. As Malcolm Owen launched into ‘Staring At The Rude Boys’ so Billy Jeffries launched himself across the pub.

‘You cunt!’ he growled, grabbing Nick’s shirt, driving a knee into his groin and punching him in the face. Nick fell, his head hit the floor and bounced upwards to be met by Billy’s forehead. Bone on bone Nick’s nose never stood a chance. It split across his face, blood spurting out to stain Billy’s shirt. Nick made a horrible sort of gurgling noise as he struggled to breathe with the fluid flowing down his throat.

The fight was over almost before it had begun. Thirty seconds I reckon, a first round knockout. A referee would have stopped the contest then and there, Nick’s corner would have thrown in the towel. But this wasn’t a boxing match, governed by rules and regulations. There wasn’t a referee, or any judges, or a trainer to decide when his man had had enough. This was pub fighting, anything goes.

‘Get the door!’ shouted Harry and a few of the boys moved to secure the front entrance and the fire escape, to keep an eye out for the law and to stop anyone leaving; a load more moved in on the Black Lion boys. Fat Phil stood behind the bar, one massive paw on the phone to dissuade anyone daft enough to dial all the nines. Not that anyone would have thought such a thing - this was blind eye city, I didn’t see nothing officer. Nobody wanted to get involved. Some people watched with a detached interest, some with fear in their eyes. Others turned away, adrenaline pumping, hoping things wouldn’t escalate and drag them in.

Nick’s mates, all brave and macho in their own pub (as, of course, we were in ours) stood silent, fists clenched, watching and waiting but making no move to help. They were onto a loser and they knew it. Wrong place at the wrong time and no mistake.

So the fight was over with a knee to the groin, a punch to the face and a headbutt to the nose. Unfortunately no one told Billy that. He was out of control by now, all he wanted to do was inflict maximum damage. I’ve read about proper nutters, how they get this darkness descending when they lose it big time, how there’s always a violent rage simmering just below the surface, just below boiling point and normally just within control. But when it unleashes itself they’re a slave to its demands.

Another headbutt smashed Nick’s mouth, splitting lips and breaking teeth, and then the punches rained in over the head and upper body, followed by the boot as Billy got to his feet and used Nick Williams as a human football.

It took Fat Phil, Harry Johnson and Tommy Peters to drag Billy away and I’m convinced they saved Nick’s life. And saved Billy from spending the rest of his days inside.

‘Alright son, that’s enough,’ said Phil, grabbing Billy’s arms and pulling him backwards. Billy struggled for a minute or so, his eyes full of hatred. Eventually he seemed to calm down and slowly the muscles relaxed, the eyes began to clear and Billy muttered ‘ok, ok, let me go.’ The extent of the damage shocked even the most hardened present, and a crowd gathered in shocked silence to gaze at what remained of Nick Williams. He could, easily, have died that night: he could have drowned in his own blood or been killed by a shattered rib puncturing his heart.

Billy looked at the Black Lion boys.

‘Get that fucker out of here. Now!’

Nick’s mates picked him up and carried him from the pub, unconscious and barely breathing, and put him in a van.

Billy walked up to the bar.

‘Get us a beer, Phil. I’ve got a right thirst on.’

Slowly the pub returned to something approaching normal, and the beers began to flow again. I was badly shaken by what I’d seen, and wasn’t convinced I was completely in the clear.

Harry must have noticed my agitation, because he steered me into the corner of the pub an hour or so after the fight.

‘I made a few phone calls the other day Steve, and it’s all sorted. Most of the girls at that hen party were too pissed to remember anything, and I’ve had a quiet chat with Tina and Halfpint, if you know what I mean. Relax, son, it’s over.’

I heard that Nick’s mates drove him to the hospital that night, where doctors already badly overstretched and understaffed, who didn’t need the extra work caused by human violence, began the job of putting him back together.

He was in there for weeks, hooked up to a drip because his jaw was wired shut. He was a fucking mess: no front teeth left and a face that needed loads of surgery. They managed to fix his nose and his cheekbones were reset, but no amount of surgery could save the sight in his right eye, as the retina had been detached and damaged beyond repair by the force of the punches.

I know all this because I went to visit him. Don’t ask me why. I still can’t work it out. Maybe it was the guilt: after all, the reason Nick was in hospital was because of me and my lies. I knew what Billy was capable of. I’d seen him punch the fuck out of blokes for looking at him the wrong way, so I had a fair idea of what he’d do when someone really crossed him. But I still went ahead and did what I did, and now Nick was lying in a hospital bed. Whatever the reason, somehow I found myself driving towards the hospital a couple of weeks later.

Fortunately Nick was asleep when I got there, cos I’ve no idea what I would have said to him. I only stayed for a couple of minutes, staring at the mess in front of me.

He had a broken arm and six busted ribs, a ruptured spleen and damage to several other internal organs. But they can be fixed, can’t they? Trouble is, the mind’s a different matter. There wasn’t any brain damage, apparently, but Nick Williams was never gonna be the same again.

On my way from the ward I bumped into a geezer who turned out to be Nick’s uncle. He assumed I was a mate and seemed glad of the chance to chat.

'His spirit's broken they reckon, son. He ain't got the will to recover. He's given up. I wish I could get my hands on the bastards who did this. I know he's a bit of a rogue but no one deserves a kicking this bad.'

I muttered something, made some old excuse and got the fuck out of there. A couple of months later I met the uncle again outside the bus station. He recognised me and with a look of reproach he updated me on the situation.

'Three months in hospital he was, and now he's back home with his mum. He don't talk no more, hardly eats anything and his mates don't want to know. I know you lads have got your own lives to lead but Nick needs the company. He needs someone to pull him out of it.' Believe you me, I thought, I'm the last bloke Nick would want to see. But I kept quiet as he continued.

'He can't work, he's on disability benefit, and he's on these drugs that don't mix with alcohol. Imagine that? No more lager. He's had it son, life over before he's even thirty.'

The police came down on us like a ton of bricks, of course. They were well aware there was no love lost between us and the Black Lion boys and they were sure that one of us was responsible, but they couldn't prove it. No one was talking. The doctors had called them in immediately but when questioned Nick's mates said they'd found him like that in a car park at the back of the railway station. I guess that Billy Jeffries scared the shit out of them so much they didn't dare say a word. An appeal for witnesses drew a blank: nobody had seen a thing.

We were all pulled in for questioning and threatened with a charge of attempted murder, but if silence is the only response what use are threats? We knew that no one would talk and each of us sat there in silence until in frustration the police kicked us back out onto the streets. I don't know about the others, but I was shitting myself when the questions were raining down, thick and fast. It took all my willpower to hold it together and blank the coppers.

I must admit I had mixed feelings about what happened. Nick was a bully who'd given out loads of beatings in his time, who picked on those unable to fight back, who stole and lied, pushed drugs and extorted money. From what I heard, he'd posed as the gas man more than once and robbed elderly couples of their life savings. He was no stranger to the law.

I was talking to Stumpy one night when he summed up the thoughts of many.

'Serves the fucker right Steve. What goes around comes around, know what I mean?'

'I dunno Stumpy, that was fucking nasty.'

I couldn't help feeling it was a huge step in the wrong direction, yet another example of the way we were heading towards bad times, of the way we seemed to be losing control of our destiny. Times had changed. Life used to be one big laugh, but recently things had started to get serious: that trouble at the Taj, Nick and his mates trying to put me in hospital, and now he'd had his life ruined because of me.

Despite everything, though, I know I wasn't the only one shocked when I read in The Gazette six months later that Nick Williams was dead, overdosed on sleeping pills.

We were talking about it in the Fox that night, me and a few of the boys.

'Look, I never liked that fucker, he was scum,' said Stumpy, 'but suicide? That's a bit heavy.'

I kept quiet, because the truth of it was that my conscience was giving me a lot of grief. On the one hand I felt like shit, because everything that happened to Nick Williams was down to me. But then again, if I hadn't done what I'd done it could have been me lying in a hospital bed for months on end. I don't know what Billy would have done to me, and I hope I never find out. He

was so unpredictable that it's anyone's guess how he'd have reacted. Maybe he'd have had a quiet word, but maybe he would have lost it completely and killed me there and then. I couldn't take that chance, could I?

Stumpy was just about to say something else when the door to the pub opened and Billy walked in. He saw the Gazette on the bar, picked it up and read about Nick.

'That's one less cunt to worry about,' he said, his face betraying no emotion whatsoever.

He looked at each of us in turn, as if daring us to contradict him. We all looked down into our pints and stayed silent.

20. Days Of Speed
August 1995

Big Lad staggered over to me just before last orders and leaned in close to make himself heard above the juke box.

'Ere Steve,' he slurred, 'I hear Sandra Clarke's back in town and she's down Martines with some of her mates. Let's steam in there and see what we can get hold of. I ain't had a bunk up in ages and I'm burstin.'

He had a big red face, sweat dripping down his shiny forehead. I could smell the beer on his breath and he had a piece of onion stuck between his front teeth. No wonder he never pulled. Still, the worse he looked the better my chances, and if Sandra really was back in town...

'You're on my old son, let's go,' I replied and we forced our way through the crowd towards the door of the boozier.

We joined the queue, saw a few of the lads wander past and stand further back and eventually the bouncers gave us the nod and we piled inside, handed over the cash and made for the nearest bar. Big Lad was skint, yet again, so I got us in a couple of bottles and we stood there looking around the club.

'There she is Steve,' Big Lad shouted in my ear. 'Look at the fuckin tits on that! Is that a belt she's wearin' or what?'

'Tell you what, she ain't got much on underneath that thing,' I replied. 'It's either a G-string or nothing, and if I know Sandra it's nothing. The dirty old slag.'

'I love a bird in black leather boots,' said Big Lad, drooling into his pint.

'Well I'll tell you this much for nothing,' I said, 'you ain't got a fucking chance my old son. She's got Steve written right across her snatch so you might as well fuck off to the bar and get the beers in.'

'In yer dreams Steve, in yer dreams,' slurred Big Lad and went weaving through the crowd to the bar with a tenner from my wallet. I saw him accost Heavy Trev on the way and knew that the

vodka was calling them both. I might as well forget about a beer coming back now, not to mention my change.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to find Tommy Peters standing behind me holding a couple of large whiskeys.

‘You thinking what I’m thinking?’ he asked, nodding towards Sandra.

‘Yep,’ I replied. ‘I’m gonna give it a go.’

‘Good for you Steve. Tell you what, I’ll have a pop at Fat Debbie if you want. Clear the ground as it were.’

I looked at him, full of drunken admiration. Fat Debbie was Sandra’s best mate, and she stuck to her side like a slug sticks to lettuce. I dunno what it is, but it seems to be some sort of universal law of nature that says for every fit bird in the world there’s a fat old boiler that hangs around with her, and who’s made it a mission in life to spoil the chances of any geezer who tries to pull her mate. What Tommy was offering to do went way beyond the call of duty.

‘Cheers mate,’ I said, as Tommy made his way towards Sandra. The rest of her crowd had already hit the dance floor, leaving Sandra and Debbie lounging by the stairs. Tommy leaned in close and said something in Debbie’s ear. She looked at him, uncomprehending, so Tommy grabbed her arm and dragged her off to dance.

I stood there for a minute, contemplating my move. Sandra Clarke, every lad’s wet dream.

A couple of the boys had tried their luck over the years but Sandra went for the money men, flash cars and golden gifts, trendy London clubs and holidays in the Caribbean. But despite all that she was a Basingstoke girl at heart and loved nothing more than going out with her mates to get pissed up and flirt with the boys.

I’ve known Sandra for years and every now and then when particularly hammered and convinced that I’m irresistible to women I’ll try and chat her up, usually failing at the first slurred attempt at conversation. Funny, it’s taken me a while but I’ve come to realise that women aren’t generally too impressed by the amount of beer a bloke can consume, or by the ability to name the entire England squad from the ‘82 World Cup. Still, doesn’t stop me from trying and that night I was definitely pissed enough to believe I was God’s gift.

I’d been drinking all day on account of Tommy’s birthday and a whole crowd of us had started in the Fox and Hounds early that afternoon. The sun was shining and the football season was just around the corner so the lads were in fine humour. There’s nothing quite like a session on a perfect English summer’s day, surrounded by your muckers and feeling that nothing matters beyond that night.

We’d spiked Tommy’s lager with half a gram of whizz and he was all over the shop, talking ten to the dozen and chomping through the Wrigleys like it was going out of fashion. He looked like he was having such a good time that the rest of us had a dabble and by the time we stumbled into Martines everyone was pretty messy.

I staggered over to Sandra, took her hand, put it on my plums and in my best Jim Bowen said ‘I’ve got a lovely young couple here from Basingstoke’ and began giggling.

To my complete amazement she looked straight into my eyes, put her vodka and lime on the bar and said ‘alright Steve, let’s see what you’ve got.’ She grabbed the front of my jeans and gave a good squeeze, took the pint glass from my immobilized hand and led me towards the door. I followed behind, still in a state of shock and half expecting her to turn round and tell me it was all a wind up and to fuck off and stop bothering her.

Word spread throughout the club like wildfire and as I reached the exit I heard my name being shouted out over the mike. Harry had stormed the DJ's booth and had commandeered the controls while Big Lad held the bewildered DJ in a headlock.

'Go on Steve, my son, give 'err one for me!' The words echoed round the club as Sandra shook her head in disgust, and I mumbled pathetic apologies. I looked behind me as we reached the door and saw a flurry of movement as the bouncers reclaimed the DJ's booth and dragged Big Lad and Harry towards the fire exit. The days when Gary Irvine had worked in Martines and we could run free in there had long gone, unfortunately.

I didn't say a word as we walked over the narrow bridge to Market Square, past overflowing litter bins and a couple of concrete flower beds that housed a few tired looking tulips. She even bought me a burger from the van opposite the old cinema for the taxi ride, and before I knew it I was sitting in her front room with a can of Carling in my hand watching Red Hot Dutch with Sandra Clarke. Every fantasy was coming true.

The trouble with speed, though, is that you can drink gallons of lager and still feel top of the world, but as an aphrodisiac it leaves a lot to be desired and I was beginning to feel decidedly seedy as the effects began to wear off and the alcohol kicked in.

Sandra looked at me, smiled and beckoned me over.

'Come here,' she said, and I stood up and staggered across the room, making my way to her via the dining table and a couple of walls before gazing bleary-eyed down at her.

'Shall we?' she asked and pulled me close. I shut my eyes as we kissed and the room began to spin alarmingly.

'Fuck,' I swore to myself. Not now, for fuck sake, don't blow this one Steve. But every pint I'd drunk seemed to be mocking me, every whiskey laughing in my face. The speed was wearing off rapidly and the burger began to churn around in my stomach. However, like a trooper I made it to the bedroom, and stood there in stunned silence watching Sandra peel off her top and reveal those perfect tits of hers.

She lay down on the bed, her mini skirt barely covering the tops of her thighs, looking like one of the birds in the porn film we'd just been watching.

'Come and lie down Steve,' she said, but the room was still spinning, getting worse by the minute.

'Err, just gonna have a quick slash,' I mumbled and staggered towards the bathroom. I closed the door behind me and leant against it, breathing deeply. I moved over to the bog and put my hands on the wall to steady myself before reaching down to unleash what was a pretty sad looking knob. I closed my eyes and did my level best to keep my aim straight but watched in distress as splashes hit the toilet roll holder and dribbled down the back wall.

I tried to clean up the mess, bent down a little too quickly and fell into the bath.

'Steve? Are you alright in there?'

'Yeah, no problem. I'll be out in a sec.'

I struggled out of the tub, turned on the cold tap and stuck my face under the cool, refreshing water. Didn't do a damn bit of good.

Opening the door I returned to the bedroom. Sandra lay there looking at me, a half smile on her face. I unzipped my jeans, kicked them to one side and tore off my shirt. I moved forwards and fell onto the bed beside a naked Sandra Clarke. I leaned over to kiss her, the spinning got out of control and the last thing I remember is Sandra saying,

‘Oh fuck. You better not be sick in my bed Stevie Bonds!’

How? How the fuck couldn’t I stay together enough to sort her out? Not for the first time, and I’m damn sure not for the last, I cursed alcohol and its effects. Why do we do it? Why do we always have to drink that one pint too many, that one short that’s gonna to push us over the edge?

I awoke with a stinking hangover and a seriously dodgy stomach to see Sandra standing at the foot of the bed, arms crossed and a face like thunder, totally unimpressed by my non-performance.

‘What a mess,’ she said, unable to hide the scorn and disgust in her voice.

‘Any chance of a coffee?’ I croaked.

‘One cup and then I want you out of here.’

As I sipped from my cup Sandra stood there, pointedly looking at her watch every minute or so and ignoring me until finally I got it together enough to haul myself out of her bed and leave.

There was so much I wanted to say: to apologise for being too pissed; to ask, plead if necessary for another chance; to ponce the cab fare home, but in the end I just couldn’t bring myself to say anything. In this life you get your chances and you grab ‘em, fuck up and that’s your lot- walk away and move on. No regrets, right? Yeah, right.

It was a gorgeous Sunday morning, the sun already hot in a cloudless sky. My head pounded and I was skint, stuck on the other side of town and I’d fucked up possibly the only chance I’d ever have of shagging Sandra Clarke. Disconsolately I wandered down Popley Way, scuffing my shoes as I went, kicking stones and muttering to myself.

‘Oi, hobo, you want a lift to the homeless shelter or what?’ I looked up to see Stumpy grinning at me from his van.

‘I’ve been round to see the old man,’ he said, ‘come on, jump in - you’re making the streets look messy. What have you been up to then? You stink like a fucking brewery.’

I sighed and told him the sorry tale.

‘Sandra Clarke, eh? You lucky bastard’

‘You seem to be missing the point mate,’ I said, ‘I passed out, didn’t even get my knob wet.’

Stumpy pulled into the car park of an M&W and switched off the engine. He looked at me, serious all of a sudden.

‘No Steve, I’ve got the point alright. The point is, you can go out and do that kind of shit. You’re young, free and single and it doesn’t matter what the fuck you do. So you fucked it up with Sandra, so what? She’ll still be there next weekend and if not there’s plenty of others. You wanna know what I did last night? Spent the evening round at Jenny’s parents’ place, looking at their holiday snaps from Tenerife and trying to stay awake. One poxy can of Sainsbury’s own, a cup of coffee and enough dirty looks to last me a lifetime. Bundle of fucking laughs. You know how much her old man hates me - he only lets me through the door cos he’s finally realized she ain’t gonna back down, and she’ll only go round there if I go too. Thank your lucky stars you ain’t tied down and you can do whatever the fuck you want.’

‘I take it he never sussed out you was behind all them tricks then?’

‘I reckon he knows, but he can’t prove anything can he?’

We went inside the shop, picked up some fry-up gear and a couple of papers and drove off in silence towards Stumpy’s place.

I hadn't seen Jenny for ages and I was shocked by her appearance. She'd lost weight and had dark circles under her eyes, and although it was gone eleven she still had her dressing gown on, a right old granny's number, all pink toweling and fluffy collars. A cigarette hung from her mouth and I watched as the ash fell from the end onto the carpet. She rubbed it in with her slipped foot and walked up the stairs. Didn't even bother to say hello.

'Bring me a cup of tea,' she said to Stumpy, 'and I'll have some toast as well.'

'Since when did she start smoking? I thought she was dead against it?'

I looked at Stumpy and he shrugged as if to say, what can you do? He took her tea and toast and I could hear raised voices coming from the bedroom, muffled by the ceiling, and then a door slammed and Stumpy came down the stairs, shaking his head in disgust.

'What's going on?' I asked as Stumpy got out a frying pan and started a fry-up. My hangover forgotten, I tried to get him to tell me what was happening but he wasn't having any of it.

'Just her time of the month mate, you know how it is. You want mushrooms in this fry-up or what?'

End of story. I'm not one to pry so I left it at that but I confess I was a bit worried. Despite my initial reservations about their relationship and the effect it had on Stumpy, I was genuinely fond of Jenny and really wanted things to work out for the pair of them. Even if Stumpy didn't come out with the lads quite so often and did spend his Sunday afternoons gardening and doing repairs around the place, I'd thought he was happy and that's what counted. And Jenny was sound as a pound, a really nice girl. I wish I could find someone like her. However, things obviously weren't right at the moment, Jenny looked a mess and Stumpy didn't seem to care.

21. Tell Us The Truth
September 1996

'2-1,' said Fat Phil, 'that'll do. What are you boys drinking?'

Another season had started and we were in Division One. We weren't expecting to do that well but we'd started off by beating a village side in the first game and Phil was well chuffed. We'd had basically the same squad for over nine years now but had brought in a couple of young lads to do the running for us this year. Stumpy, however, couldn't be persuaded to play again, despite my best efforts.

Even Jenny told him he should give it another go. I guess she thought any kind of exercise might help shift the drugs from his system. But nothing doing. Thirty years old and he'd given up football. Couldn't work that one out myself. In fact, I couldn't work him out at all these days. Stumpy had changed, become more withdrawn, he wasn't the same laugh he used to be. Hardly ever even came to the pub anymore.

We still talked, on the phone or he'd come round during the week for a smoke, but things were different. We didn't seem to be as close as we used to be.

After a couple of pints, Harry stood up.

‘Right lads, I’m off.’

‘Leave it out Harry,’ said Jimmy, ‘it’s only half three.’

‘Yeah I know, but I’m taking this bird out tonight and I don’t want to get too messy.’

‘Never stopped you before mate.’

‘True, but this one’s a bit different. Classy sort, and I’ll have no chance of a bunk up if I’m staggering all over the place.’

‘Ere hang on,’ said Tom, ‘are you talking about that bird I saw you with outside the cop shop the other day? Posh looking thing, driving a BMW?’

‘Yeah, that’s her.’

‘Bit older than you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well fuck me, I thought that was your mum.’

‘Oi, less of it you cheeky cunt.’

‘Ere Harry,’ said Big Lad, frowning. ‘You ain’t shagging a fucking copper are you?’

‘Am I fuck!! I was just walking past there when she pulled over to ask directions. We got chatting and the next thing I know she’s asked me out for a drink. Thought she must be loaded driving a motor like that so I went for it. Shagging a copper! Like fuck!!!’

Harry wandered off, leaving the rest of us getting slowly pissed throughout the afternoon.

A couple of hours later I was playing pool with Jimmy.

‘Have you seen much of Stumpy recently?’ he asked.

‘No I haven’t as it goes, have you?’

‘Yeah, I saw him on Tuesday in the town centre, coming out of the offy round the corner from Marks and Sparks. He was pissed and on something as well, and it was only half four.’

‘Did you talk to him?’

‘I tried, but he weren’t making any sense. He didn’t fucking recognise me at first. How long have we known him?’

‘Fucking hell, even completely slaughtered I’d recognise your ugly mug.’

‘Listen, I ain’t joking Steve, he was in a bad way.’

I put the cue down on the table and sat down on a stool.

‘Alright Jim, fair enough. That kind of behaviour ain’t normal I must admit. I’ll have a chat with him sometime. I was just thinking earlier that he’s changed a bit these past few months.’

We continued with our game, and after I potted the black and collected a fiver off Jim for the bet we’d had I’d completely forgotten about Stumpy. Jimmy went off to the bogs, and The Beast walked over.

‘Listen mate,’ he said, ‘I couldn’t help overhearing what Jimmy was saying. He’s right you know, someone should have a word with Stumpy. That ain’t the first story I’ve heard about him losing the plot.’

‘Yeah yeah,’ I said, ‘I’ll have a word with him. I said I would, didn’t I?’

‘Yeah, but I know what you’re like Steve.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look mate, how long have I known you?’

‘I dunno, about fifteen years ain’t it?’

‘Something like that, and we’re mates, right?’

‘Course we are. Why, what’s up?’

‘Don’t take this the wrong way, but sometimes you’ve got to think about other people.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look, you’re a good bloke Steve, one of the boys. Always up for a grin and all that, but when was the last time you made an effort to find out how someone was getting on? You know, had a proper chat.’

‘I dunno what you’re on about,’ I said, puzzled.

‘Alright, put it this way. How long have you known Scouse?’

‘Ever since Harry conned him into playing for us. When was that, eight, nine years ago?’

‘Yeah, 1987. And how much do you know about him? I mean, do you even know why he moved down here in the first place?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I just assumed he came down looking for work.’

‘Well he didn’t. He came here cos he couldn’t live in Manchester anymore.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he was going out with this Pakistani girl who came from a really strict religious family, and they went mental when they found out she was seeing a white Christian boy. They tried to stop her seeing him and when she refused they disowned her. Just like that, they kicked her out the house and everything. His parents didn’t approve either, turns out the old man was a right racist wanker. So they got a flat together, and made the best of it, and they didn’t see anything of their parents. Then she got pregnant, and they decided to visit their families and try to make them see sense. But on their way to her house they got attacked by a gang of skinheads and beaten up. He spent three weeks in hospital.’

‘Fucking hell!’ I said, ‘what happened to his bird?’

‘She died in the ambulance. They’d kicked her so hard in the stomach that she lost the baby and had some massive internal injuries,’ said The Beast.

‘He was so fucked up by the whole thing that he packed his bags the day he got out of hospital and jumped on the first train out of Manchester. Picked a name from the map and that’s how he ended up here.’

I sat down, shocked, and looked over at Scouse. All those years and I didn’t have a clue.

‘Poor fucker,’ I said, ‘that’s fucking awful.’

‘Too right, it’s something he’ll never really get over.’

I began to see what the Beast was getting at, but he hadn’t finished.

‘And did you know that Jimmy has been saving up to take a year out, go back to college and get a business diploma?’

‘No,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘Yeah, he’s had enough of site work, he wants to get an office job. His old man worked on the tools all his life and ended up with arthritis, causes him all sorts of grief and that’s why he’s always been such a miserable fucker.’

That made sense, and so did the reason Beast was telling me all this.

‘You always run away from anything too heavy. I’ve heard you, whenever anyone tries to talk to you about anything serious you walk off. Now that’s fine as far as it goes, but sometimes you’ve got to be there, and right now Stumpy needs help.’

I nodded, and looked out of the window thinking about what The Beast had just said.

‘How do you know all these things?’ I asked.

‘Because I talk to people, and I listen to what they tell me.’

It made me feel pretty bad, if the truth be known. Jimmy was my best mate, and he couldn't tell me about something that important, probably thought I'd take the piss, or not even listen. And Scouse. What the fuck must that have been like?

That was the first real indication that there was something wrong with Stumpy, or at least the first time I realised. The Beast was right, maybe I should have seen it coming, looked out for my mate a bit more but it's hard enough looking after yourself sometimes, isn't it? And I'll admit I'm not the most observant bloke in the world, but when Tony Two-Fights came into the Fox and Hounds later on that night and said 'you, a word outside' even I sussed that something wasn't right, and what The Beast had said earlier made even more sense.

As his name suggests Tony's only been in two scraps as far as anyone's aware but these were conducted with such a horrifying level of violence that they quickly became legend, and most people kept out of his way if they could help it. He was a small geezer, but really stocky, with powerful arms and legs and a barrel of a chest. He also carried a knife and was known to associate with some dubious blokes from a top Millwall firm. Tony dealt in anything that came his way, especially drugs, and he wasn't someone I really wanted much to do with apart from scoring the odd bit of puff every now and then if my regular supply had dried up. Still, I followed him outside, giving it the large one to the rest of the pub (I'm hard, I ain't scared, the usual bollocks) and asked him what was up.

'Your mate Stumpy,' he said, 'watch him. He's losing it.'

'What do you mean? What's he been up to?'

'He's been round my house three times already this week.'

He didn't spell it out but he didn't need to. Stumpy was buying drugs, lots of them by the sounds of it. And there was me, thinking he'd calmed down on the old acid front.

'Not being funny, Tony,' I said, 'but what do you care about a geezer like Stumpy Malloy?'

'Listen wanker, I'm just giving you fair warning is all. Why is none of your fucking business. Just hear what I'm saying, got it?'

'Ok, ok,' I said, 'cheers for the nod. You want a pint or anything?'

'Nah, got business to sort elsewhere. I'll see you around. You keep an eye on that mate of yours, he's getting a bit too fucking fond of his tabs.'

I was confused. As far as I was aware Stumpy didn't know Tony Two-Fights. Of course, we all knew who he was but I hadn't realised he was Stumpy's dealer, or that he was doing so much acid. And why was Tony so concerned about Stumpy? It didn't make any sense.

I went round to see Stumpy the following evening. Jenny opened the door, eyes all puffy and red. She looked surprised to see me.

'Hello Steve, what are you doing here?'

'I came to have a chat with Stumpy.'

'He's not here,' she said, and started to close the door.

'Where is he?' I asked, puzzled.

'In Ireland,' she replied, and tried again to close the door, but I stuck my foot out to stop her.

'Jenny, what's going on?'

'You'll have to ask Stumpy,' she said, and started crying.

'Come on Jenny, you can tell me.'

'Look Steve, I'm not crying over Stumpy. Well, not this time, anyway. My dad got beaten up the other night. He was attacked on the way home from an army reunion. He's still in hospital.'

Two things crossed my mind, one of which was, serves the fucker right. He'd had a kicking coming for years. I didn't say that, of course.

Instead, I looked at her and voiced the other thought.

'Did Stumpy have anything to do with it?'

'He swears he didn't, and I've got to believe him Steve, I've just got to.'

She sounded so desperate that I found myself agreeing with her, saying that of course Stumpy wouldn't have been involved. She told me she had to go, and so I let her shut the door and I walked away.

Things started getting even weirder after that. Tony turned up on my doorstep a week later and invited himself in. Fuck knows how he got hold of my address.

'Where's Stumpy?'

'I don't know. Ain't seen him in ages. Last I heard he was in Ireland.'

'Make some calls,' said Tony, and I could see that he wasn't in the mood to be mucked about. I rang Jenny.

'He's still away Steve. He's taken a few days off and gone to see his uncle in Donegal.'

'Is everything alright?'

'Well, my dad's out of intensive care, so that's one good thing. As for Stumpy, I told you the other day. Ask him.'

She gave me a phone number and put the phone down.

I rang the number in Ireland and a bloke answered.

'Hello?' I said, 'can I speak to Stumpy please?'

'Who?' said the voice on the other end.

'Stumpy. I mean, Brendan Malloy. I'm a mate of his, phoning from England.'

'He's not here. If you must know he's in hospital. He ain't been right since he arrived.'

'Why? What's happened to him?'

'Listen son, I don't make a habit of discussing other people's business. If you're such a mate of his then you need to talk to him yourself, ok?'

I thanked the man, hung up and told Tony. He looked at me strangely and made to leave but curiosity finally got the better of me and I grabbed his arm.

'Listen Tony, what the fuck's going on with Stumpy? Does he owe you money or what?'

Tony sighed, looking agitated.

'Listen, there's some bad acid around. This mob in London have been shipping over some seriously messed up shit from New York. It's been doing the rounds up town and it's sent a couple of geezers a bit mental. One of 'em walked into an off licence while he was tripping and pulled out a shooter, killing bloke behind the counter. Poor little fucker was only 18. This firm want to push the batch in towns around London and they want my market down here. They're leaning on me to work my punters harder but I'm not happy about it. I've got my reputation, yeah? Anyway, I've been selling it to Stumpy, using him as a guinea-pig as it were, to see what effect the acid has on him.'

It didn't really sink it straight away. This was serious stuff.

'Stumpy has been acting weird, from what I hear. As I said, I haven't seen him in a while, but I know a couple of geezers who run into him every now and then and they reckon he's lost the plot totally. And by the sounds of it things ain't too good between him and his missus. All I know is that he's in hospital over in Ireland. That don't sound too clever to me.'

‘No it don’t. Might be the acid, might be that he’s a fucking nutter. But I ain’t gonna take any chances. That’s me out.’

And with that Tony left. I don’t know exactly what happened to him but I never saw him again. Maybe that firm in London didn’t take too kindly to him telling them where to stick their acid.

22. The Beginning
December 1996

After that business with Tony Two-Fights, when I heard that Stumpy had been seen around town, I’d gone round his house a couple of times, but on both occasions he was out and Jenny didn’t know where or what time he’d be back. All she said was that his behaviour was getting more and more erratic and that she was beginning to get seriously concerned for his sanity. I didn’t know what had happened in Ireland, and I didn’t particularly want to talk to her about it, even though she seemed to want to, so I left it alone for a while. He hadn’t been near the Fox for months, he still wasn’t playing football and I didn’t know what else to do.

So one Friday night in the December of ‘96 I went round to see Jack Malloy, to see if he could help. He’d always been there for us as kids and I still saw him every now and then when he popped into the Fox for a Guinness with Fat Phil. We sat in the front room for a while, Jack nursing a large whiskey while I demolished a can of Stella. He sat there in silence, waiting for me to speak. He knew something was up but I guess he wanted me to be the one to broach the subject.

‘It’s Stumpy,’ I said, finally. ‘Fuck knows what’s happened to him, but I’m worried that he’s gonna do something really stupid.’

Jack nodded, and sighed. He got out of his armchair and walked to the kitchen, returning with a full bottle of Johnny Walker and a glass for me. It was going to be a long night.

‘I know he ain’t been right for a while. My brother told me he’d gone to Donegal to try and straighten himself out but I guess it didn’t help. Things ain’t always the way they seem Steve, stuff has happened to that boy that you don’t know about. We’ve not had it easy, you know. It’s been a hard life, and although I’ve done my best I can’t deny it would have been a bloody sight easier with a good woman by my side.’

‘What happened?’ I asked. ‘To Stumpy’s mum, I mean?’

It’s something I’d never really thought about before, but all of a sudden it seemed like the most important question in the world.

Jack filled our glasses, got me another Stella from the fridge and set off down the bitter road of memory.

‘I came over from Ireland in 1964, looking for work and a bit of adventure,’ he said. ‘I was twenty years old and I wanted a taste of the high life. The village I come from is tiny, everyone

knows everyone else and their business and it all got too much for me. London back then was amazing, all sorts going on and it didn't take me long to meet up with a whole load of Irish lads around Kilburn way. We used to drink in a boozier called the Cat and Fiddle on Kilburn High Road, and I met Stumpy's mother in there one Friday night in the autumn of '65.'

'So she was from round that way too then?' I asked

'No, she wasn't as it happens. She lived in Fulham and was on her way to visit a friend in Kentish Town when she got lost and stopped in the pub for directions. If truth be told I don't remember a great deal about that night. I'd been drinking most of the afternoon and was singing along to some Irish folk song on the juke box when she came over where I was sitting and asked if she could join me. I do remember that she told me she was a ballet dancer and that her name was Mimi Labelle. Yeah, you may well laugh, but that's what she said. Anyway, I must have done something right because she was all over me and at closing time I took her back to the flat I rented above a bookies, round the corner from the pub.'

Jack filled his glass once more and offered the bottle to me. I shook my head and grabbed another Stella from the fridge.

'We made love, if that's what you want to call it. You know what it's like when you're young and pissed, we were at it all night. I passed out at some point, though, and when I woke it was nearly midday and she was gone.'

'So did she leave a number or anything?'

'Nothing. As far as I was concerned it was a one night stand, no more and no less. I just figured she'd been after a bit of rough for some reason.'

Jack sat there, swilling the whiskey round in his glass, staring at the fire. Outside it had begun to rain and for a while that's the only sound I could hear. Jack was silent and it didn't look as though he wanted to talk any more. But I was curious now, and couldn't help myself.

'But you saw her again, didn't you Jack?'

'Yes, I did see her again. About two months later I was in the Cat and Fiddle, having a couple of beers with some lads from the site when this right poncy looking feller came in and asked the barman if anyone called Jack drank there. The barman laughed and told him there were about five regulars called Jack and pointed me out, saying I was one of them. Well, the feller came over and asked if he could have a word outside. I was going to tell him where to go but for some reason I didn't, and instead I followed him out of the pub. And he asked me straight out if I knew Mimi Labelle. You ain't likely to forget a name like that so I said yeah, what of it? He looked me straight in the eye and told me she was pregnant.'

'Flippin 'eck!' I said. 'How the fuck did he find you?'

'That's the first thing I asked him. Turns out he was her flat mate and had come home from work a few days earlier to find her crying her eyes out. She didn't want to say anything at first, but after a while she confessed to being pregnant. She said it could only have happened the night she met me and she told him my name and where we'd met.'

'So what did you do? Tell him to sling his hook?'

'No, I asked him where she lived, went straight round there and asked her to marry me.'

'You what?!' I exploded. 'You shag a bird once, some geezer you've never met tells you she's up the duff and you not only believe him but you want to marry her?! Were you pissed or what?'

'Yeah, I'd had a few,' admitted Jack, 'but that's not the point. That's the way it was back then, particularly where I'm from. I was young, came from a religious family and I felt I had to face

the consequences of my actions. Oh I know you reckon I was stupid, but think about it. What was the choice? I didn't believe in abortion, and I still don't. Anyway, even if I did I wouldn't have known where to go to sort it out. I could have walked away but I didn't. We talked about it, she felt the same way I did about things and she didn't want to go through the whole thing on her own.'

'Not being funny, but how did you even know it was yours?'

'I didn't ever ask that question, not even to myself Steve. I guess I was naive, but that's the truth of it. Anyway, there's no doubting the resemblance, is there?'

Jack got up and disappeared upstairs, returning a few minutes later with a faded and tattered old photo album.

'Stumpy doesn't know anything about this Steve, and I'd prefer to keep it that way.'

'No problem,' I said, turning the pages to see a handful of black and white photos. There was one of Jack, dressed in a suit and grinning in embarrassment at the camera. Next to that was one of a load of lads in building gear, holding pints and giving thumbs up, then another of Jack shaking hands with a bloke I assumed was the best man.

Then there was a photo of Jack and Mimi. She looked small, standing next to him, and was smiling shyly at the camera. She wore a simple wedding dress, high heels and she had her hair pinned up.

'Blimey,' I said, 'she's gorgeous.'

And she was, no doubt about it. A right stunner.

Jack nodded, slowly.

'Yep, she was a cracker that's for sure. Trouble is Steve, looks ain't everything, you know what I mean?'

The next photo looked like it belonged in some feature on crime syndicates. Four blokes stared at the camera, dressed in identical suits and all with the same expression on their faces. And it wasn't a friendly sort of look at all.

'Who's this lot?' I asked.

Jack gave a wry snort and took a big slug of whiskey. He was beginning to slur.

'That,' he said, 'is Mimi's family.'

'But I thought she was a ballet dancer or something. This lot don't look like they'd have a surname like La Belle.'

'That's cos they don't. And nor does Mimi. That's just a stage name, but I didn't find out the truth until our wedding day.'

This was getting complicated so I walked into the kitchen to get myself another beer. On the way back I stopped for a slash and by the time I got back to the living room Jack was asleep, snoring gently and still clutching half a glass of whisky. Obviously I wasn't going to get the whole story there and then so I took the glass away from his hand, grabbed a blanket from the bedroom upstairs and covered him as best I could. Then I switched off the lights and made my way out into the rain-filled night.

As usual I didn't have enough money for a cab, so I walked through Popley towards town, sipping a can of lager and thinking about what Jack had told me. All that business in London with Stumpy's mum must have had something to do with the way my mate had turned out. There was a message there, I was sure, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

23. Blinded By The Greed
Christmas 1996

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon and was I having a few drinks with Harry to talk tactics. Things were starting to get a bit serious: we were fourth in the League with a game in hand on the team above us.

Harry got the beers in and we sat down at one of the corner tables.

‘So what d’you reckon then Harry? We gonna go for it or what? Bit of decent training, keep the interest up and we should be sorted. If Billy stays out of trouble with the law I reckon we’ve got a good chance of doing something this year. It’s just a shame Stumpy’s lost the plot.’

I noticed Harry wasn’t paying much attention. He kept looking out of the window, as though expecting someone.

‘What’s up mate? You look a bit pissed off.’

‘Sorry Steve, my mind’s elsewhere at the moment.’

‘Anything I can do?’

‘Not unless you can explain how a bird’s mind works.’

I laughed. ‘Fuck me, if I knew that I’d be a fucking millionaire wouldn’t I?!’

‘It’s Karen, she’s gone all weird on me.’

‘Karen? That posh bird? I didn’t know you were still seeing her.’

‘Yeah, been three months now.’

‘How come I’ve never seen you out with her then?’

‘Well that’s it, see, it’s like she doesn’t want anyone to know we’re together. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’ve got no problem with keeping birds and mates separate but I get the feeling there’s something she doesn’t want me to know.’

‘Maybe she’s seen us lot out on a sesh and just doesn’t like what she saw. Wouldn’t blame her.’

‘Nah, it’s not that. She’s always asking about you lot, especially Stumpy.’

‘Stumpy? What does she want to know about him?’

‘Everything it seems. What he’s like, who he’s going out with, where he works.’

‘D’you reckon she fancies him or something?’

‘I asked her that and she got right pissed off. Told me she was just taking an interest in my mates, that it helped her to get to know me.’

‘Well you’ve got me Harry, I can’t work that one out at all. Do you want another pint?’

‘Yeah, go for it. Look, sorry mate, ain’t like me to get hung up on some old tart. Now then, what were you saying about the team?’

We had a few more beers and talked football, but I could see that Harry was still brooding. Despite what he said I could tell he was really into this Karen bird but like the rest of us he wasn’t going to admit it. Later on that afternoon we tried to persuade Fat Phil to shell out for a new kit as a Christmas present. Nothing doing, the tight fucker.

Phil had been acting strange for a few weeks now. Wouldn't do afters, stopped coming to watch the boys and was generally acting pretty unsociable. I mean, he was supposed to be the manager for fucks sake. It came to a bit of a head on Christmas Eve when I saw him arguing with Harry Johnson, but nothing was said to me and I was too pissed to take that much notice anyway. January 2nd came and I wanted a beer. I didn't bother phoning anyone because I guessed they'd all be as bored as me and that a few of them would make their way down to the pub. I walked through the deserted back streets of Basingstoke, past overflowing litter bins and an abandoned car, past dirty grey buildings covered in graffiti and grime and I couldn't shake the sense of foreboding that had been with me all day. A steady, persistent drizzle fell, soaking me to the core. It had been raining constantly for over a week and the sky seemed to have disappeared altogether. I shivered and dug my hands deeper into my pockets. It was already like Christmas had never happened.

As soon as I turned the corner I knew something wasn't right, that my instincts were correct. The pub was shrouded in darkness, curtains closed both downstairs and in the flat above where Fat Phil lived. I could see someone thumping on the front door.

He turned and saw me. It was Stumpy.

'The fat fucker's overslept,' he said indignantly, no hello or nothing, no explanation of where he'd been for the past few months, blanking his best mates.

'Oi, Phil! Get the fuck down here and give us some lager!'

Getting no response he went off to find a stone to lob at Phil's bedroom window, and as he drew his arm back I had a sudden and vivid recollection of Christmas Eve, of seeing Phil and Harry Johnson in deep and animated conversation in the corner by the juke box while all around them sweaty, drunken bodies belted out a deafening chorus of 'Merry Xmas Evr'ybody'. I remember thinking how out of place it seemed, how angry Harry had appeared and the worried look on Phil's big red face.

There was a tinkle of broken glass as Stumpy misjudged the strength of his throw, and a muttered 'oops' as he prepared to leg it.

'Don't bother mate,' I said, 'he ain't there.'

'How do you know?' asked Stumpy.

'I've just got a feeling, that's all,' I replied. 'But I tell you what, I reckon Harry knows what's going on.'

We walked away from the Fox and Hounds, and my concern over the pub made me forget to ask how Stumpy was, or what the fuck he'd been playing at recently.

As we turned to corner towards Harry's nearby flat I was suddenly struck with a pang of nostalgia for the place, as if I already knew that things wouldn't be the same again, that another chapter in our lives had closed.

Harry looked fucking awful, haggard and gaunt, dark rings under his eyes and a face covered in stubble. He looked like he hadn't slept or washed in a week, and that was most unlike Harry cos he normally took great pride in his appearance.

'Bloody hell Harry, no offence mate but you stink!' said Stumpy, subtle as ever.

Harry shrugged his shoulders and wandered into the disaster area that used to be his kitchen and dug out some cans from his fridge. We cracked them open and looked at one another.

'What's going on Harry?' I asked.

He shook his head, as if he didn't know where to start.

'Look lads, things have been getting pretty fucked up recently. First that business with Karen, now this.'

'What business with Karen?' I asked.

Harry looked at Stumpy, opened his mouth as if to say something then thought better of it and kept quiet. He took another pull on his can, and for once I caught his mood and didn't ask again.

'Do you know where Phil is?' said Stumpy.

'He's gone mate, and he ain't coming back.'

'Gone?' I said, 'what d'you mean gone? Phil's been at that boozier forever, it's all he's got!'

'There's things you don't know, Steve. Phil got himself into a bit of trouble just before Christmas and it all got too heavy. He had to go, no choice in the matter.'

'What was he up to?'

Harry sighed.

'I don't suppose it matters if you know or not. You ain't gonna say anything are you?'

We both nodded.

'You know that Phil was always dealing in this and that, dodgy goods all over the back room at the Fox? Well, he got greedy, didn't he? Thought he could up the stakes and bring in some real money. The stupid cunt started knocking out smack.'

'No!' I said, disbelieving.

'He always said that stuff was for losers! I remember when he caught Long John Cassidy jacking up in the bogs, he went mental at him!'

'Yeah, I remember that as well. But that was before he realised how much dosh was involved. He got in with his mate from Bangkok, started setting up mules to bring gear over, condoms in the gut, stuffed toys, packages sent by post.'

'How did you find out about all this then?' asked Stumpy.

'I caught him red handed one lunchtime. Me and him had talked over a bit of business, and I'd left to go and see Karen when I realised I'd left my mobile in the back room. I walked back to the pub and there he was, a fucking great stack of powder next to him, set of scales and a few hundred little plastic bags. I went fucking mental, but he told me it was too late, he was in too deep. Then on Christmas Eve he got hold of me, panicking, and said he'd been stitched up by his mate in Bangkok. He'd borrowed a large amount of wedge from some heavy boys up town, invested it in Thailand and his mate disappeared.'

'Fuck,' said Stumpy, 'that's a bit naughty.'

'Too right, and it left Phil in deep shit. All he had was the pub, and that ain't worth even half of what he owed. In the end he came to me and asked for help. I managed to raise enough money to give him a fair price for the boozier and that was it, he left a couple of days later.'

Neither of us asked where Harry got the money from. As I've said before, he was one of them blokes who never seems to work but always has cash to spare.

'Where's he gone?' I asked.

'Fuck knows, he didn't tell me and I didn't want to know. As far away from here as possible if he's got any sense.'

We sat there in silence for a while, and then it sank in.

'So you're the new landlord of the Fox and Hounds?' I said to Harry.

'Looks that way,' he replied.

'Shouldn't you be opening up then?'

Harry looked at his watch.

‘Fuck, yeah I should. Thing is, I know jack shit about running a boozer.’

‘Call Tracey, she’s been there for years, should know what’s what.’

So Harry rang her up and she agreed to meet him at the pub, even though it was supposed to be her day off. She wasn’t the brightest star in the sky but she’d been there long enough to give Harry a clue, and as the weekday trade was never too heavy at the Fox they got through the first couple of days with no problem. But Harry wasn’t a landlord, and didn’t want the hassle so he asked around and found a geezer called Terry Irvine, who was the father of Gary, the one-time bouncer at Martines, and sold the pub to him.

I was right when I’d thought it was the end of an era, because things changed from that day on. The place that had been like a second home to us for God knows how many years was now owned by a stranger.

I was in the pub a few weeks later when some nasty looking bastards walked in, asking for Fat Phil. Terry Irvine knew the score, but as he genuinely wasn’t involved and legally owned the pub there wasn’t a lot they could do. He kept Harry’s name out of it and the blokes left empty handed. In any case, nobody knew where the fat fucker had gone.

The worst thing about Phil leaving is that the football team went to shit. Terry Irvine wasn’t interested and said he wouldn’t be stumping up the pitch fees next season, despite a quiet word from Harry Johnson, and no other pub, restaurant or firm around town wanted to be associated with the Fox and Hounds team even with a change of name.

We’d been together as a team for nearly nine years and I didn’t want it to end, but it looked as though some of the other lads didn’t really care. I know people move on in life, and I know that football isn’t everything, but we’d had a damn good thing going and at 31 I felt I had a few more years to give.

The rest of that season was downright depressing. From fourth in the League and challenging the top teams we ended up playing with nine or ten players each week and getting relegated. Tommy Peters amazed everybody by announcing his engagement to Michelle, and told us he’d promised to give up Sunday football to spend more time with her. I was too disgusted to even try and talk some sense into him.

Stumpy had lost it months ago, and I hadn’t seen him since Christmas, Big Lad moved to Southampton and took up rugby and Harry was serving a five year ban for headbutting the Black Lion linesman and then trying to force the ref to eat his own notebook after getting a red card. Scouse and Terry Jones decided that enough was enough and got transfers to another team, and Billy Jefferies had got himself banged up. Again. Talk about rats and sinking ships. They asked me to go and play as well but I stuck it out to the bitter end. At the end of the season we folded and I for one was truly fucking gutted.

Stumpy turned up on my doorstep late one Tuesday night looking gaunt. I hadn't seen him since that business with Fat Phil and the Fox and Hounds. He'd disappeared again into his own little world and still wasn't returning phone calls. His skin was grey and sallow, his eyes ringed with black and his face haggard and unshaven.

'You look fucking awful,' I said. 'When was the last time you slept?'

'I'll sleep when I'm dead,' he replied, with a half-hearted attempt at humour. I invited him in, got us a beer and came straight to the point.

'You look fucked mate, what's up?'

'Listen Steve, you know me, I ain't one to whinge. But I'm in a bit of trouble here, to be honest. These last few months have been a fucking nightmare. Living with Jenny is doing my fucking head in and I can't seem to do anything right. She shouldn't be with a loser like me, she deserves better.'

'Leave it out, I thought you two were good together.'

'Nah, I'm a waste of space Steve. I just drag her down.'

'What exactly have you done? Here, you weren't involved with her old man getting a kicking, were you?'

Stumpy looked me straight in the eye.

'No mate, I swear I wasn't.'

He fell silent, and sat there with his head in his hands. I didn't know what to say, so I sat there with him like some fucking muppet and after a while he just got up and left. I guess The Beast was right all along. I'm never going to be a Samaritan.

Two nights later, Jenny came round to my place, eyes all puffy from crying, and a nasty red mark on her right cheek.

'Christ!' I said. 'What's up?'

'It's Stumpy,' she said. 'He's out of control, and I don't know what to do. I can't handle it any more. I didn't know where to go. You're his friend, I thought you might be able to help.'

'Alright Jenny, calm down. Tell me what happened.'

'He went out yesterday with some of the people he's been hanging around with recently and I didn't see him again until the early hours. I was asleep when he came in, and I only went downstairs because I heard all this noise and thought he'd fallen over or something. It was horrible Steve! He was like a stranger, acting really weird, shouting at me, saying I was out to get him.'

'Sounds like he was tripping,' I said, remembering the dodgy acid Tony Two-Fights had been selling him a while back.

'Yes, I guessed that, but it wasn't like any of the other times I've seen him. He went mad and attacked me Steve, saying I was the devil. I managed to get away and locked myself in the bedroom, and he started smashing the house up. I found him curled up in a corner of the kitchen at half seven this morning. He was surrounded by hundreds of his books, most of the pages ripped out. You know how much he loves his books. I think that's what upset me most, even more than him hitting me in a way.'

'Jesus,' I said, and I was shocked at what I was hearing.

'What sort of state was he in when you found him in the morning?' I asked.

'He was really quiet. He kept looking at the damage he'd caused, at all his ruined books and he just kept saying sorry. He saw what he'd done to me and started crying. He told me he'd taken

some acid and had gone on his own to the church up on Sherborne Road and had started tripping in the graveyard. You know it's not the first time he's done stuff like that. He said he started hallucinating and got paranoid and when he tried to walk home he said he kept seeing the devil blocking his path. It took him hours to find his way and when I went downstairs he thought I was the devil and that I'd followed him home and wanted to kill him. That's why he attacked me.' I sat there on the sofa, trying to make some sense of it.

'But why rip up all those books?' I said.

'He told me that there were messages in some of them that would tell him what to do with his life, and when he couldn't find them he got angry and tore them apart.

'He locked himself in the bedroom after that, and wouldn't come out for hours. Eventually he came downstairs, told me he couldn't deal with it all any more and said he was going. He left an hour ago, no bag or anything and I don't know where he is. I don't know what to do Steve. I can't let him hit me.'

'Course you can't, that's bang out of order.'

'I mean, it's not just me I've got to think of now.'

'What?'

'I'm pregnant Steve.'

'Jesus! And he doesn't know?'

'No, I don't want to tell him, not when he's acting like this.'

'But don't you think he should know? Maybe that would straighten him out.'

'No Steve, I don't want him told. Promise me you won't tell him? Ok, it might make him see sense. But what if he takes some more of that stuff and thinks I'm carrying Satan's child or something? I can't trust him. Don't tell him Steve, please?'

Well, what do you say? Stumpy was one of my best mates, even if we hadn't seen much of each other these past few months. But no matter how bad it gets you don't go around beating up women, and if she wanted me to keep the secret then I'd try. No promises, but I would try. I comforted Jenny as best I could, then told her to sleep in my room while I crashed on the sofa. This was all way out of my league and I lay awake for hours trying to work out what to do. Tony Two-Fights might have been right when he said Stumpy's behaviour could have been caused by the dodgy acid, or maybe he was a genuine nutter. I didn't know the answer, and eventually I decided that the only person I knew who might be able to put a different spin on things was Jack. The next night I took Jenny with me to Abbey Road. I had wanted to go back to see him ever since our last chat, to get the rest of the story but kept putting it off. I'd seen how painful it was for him to relive the past. But maybe the answers lay in Popley, and maybe Jack could help Jenny understand what was going on. I took a bottle of Johnny Walker, knocked on the door and waited.

'Steve, Jenny. Come in.'

'Alright Jack? Hope this ain't inconvenient.'

'Course not. Anyone who turns up holding a bottle of whiskey is welcome in this house.

Anyway, I had a feeling you'd be back.'

'Look, I'm just gonna pop round the offy for a couple of lagers. Do you mind telling Jenny what you told me last time?'

'Yeah, I guess she's got a right to know. It's Stumpy again, isn't it?'

‘Yeah, he’s gone a bit mental, did a fair bit of damage last night. Nothing anyone says seems to make a difference to him. It’s like he’s given up.’

Jack looked at me, sort of curiously.

‘Taking a bit of interest in his welfare, aren’t you son? Don’t tell me Steve Bonds is beginning to grow up?!’

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not, so I let it go and wandered round to the off licence. I looked back to see Jack hold the door open and Jenny walk inside, and by the time I got back with a carrier full of Carling he’d told her as much as I knew.

‘Last time I was here you said that Stumpy’s mum wasn’t who she said she was.’

‘That’s right, she wasn’t. There was no Mimi La Belle, that was just a stage name. I married Karen Brown from Stepney.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘She told me a pack of lies son. She was training to be a ballet dancer and she was living in Fulham at the time, but all the rest was bollocks. She told me that her family had a penthouse suite overlooking Hyde Park and that they spent a lot of time at their villa in the Caribbean. Anyway, the truth came out because her flatmate, that poof Crispin, decided to invite her family to the wedding as a surprise. He went through her address book one night, found a number next to ‘mum and dad’ and rang it. Some bloke answered with a cockney accent, he thought it must be the butler or some kind of hired help so he gave him the details of the wedding.’

‘Except it wasn’t the butler,’ I said.

‘You’re quick son, you’re getting there. No, the man on the other end of the line was her dad, Mickey Brown, a scrap metal dealer from Stepney. She had made the whole thing up, her family, her background, the lot.’

‘Did she admit to all this then?’

‘Well she had to in the end, because Mickey and his three sons turned up at the wedding. Remember that photo album? There’s a picture of them in there. When they walked into the registry office she nearly fainted. She realised that Crispin must have been behind the whole thing, the two of them had a row and the truth came out.’

‘Christ!’

‘Christ is right son.’

‘So what did you do?’ asked Jenny.

‘Nothing I could do. The registrar was about to begin and the Browns were blocking the door, so I went through with the ceremony and then went back to the Cat and Fiddle for the reception. And that’s where the fun started.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Think about it. There’s all my mates from the building site, Mimi’s friends from ballet school, her old man and three brothers who should never have been invited and a few kegs put on by the landlord. Everything was fine for a while because old man Brown kept himself to himself. But then he came over to me and his daughter and started having a go at her, asking her why she’d left home without telling him where she was going, was she that embarrassed by her family that she didn’t want to invite them to the wedding, that sort of thing. She started to have a go back, and her accent slipped straight away. Sounded like some old boiler from Billingsgate. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but it was all a bit of a shock to me.’

‘So why had she left home?’

‘She told her dad that he’d treated her like shit all her life, that he’d knocked her about when he’d come home pissed from the pub, that he was a complete low life and that she never wanted to see Stepney again.’

‘I bet that went down well.’

‘Yeah, right. I thought he was going to lay into her, but he stopped himself and looked at me instead, asked her what she saw in me and what could I offer her. She didn’t answer him straight away, then he asked her if she was pregnant. Just like that, out of the blue. She admitted it, and he punched me in the face. I landed on top of the wedding cake and it just all kicked off. My mates piled in, old man Brown and his three sons started lobbing chairs all over the place and the next thing I know the police have arrived and are nicking everyone. I spent my wedding night in the cells, got stung for twenty quid in court the next morning and was bound over to keep the peace for a year.’

‘What did Mimi, Karen, say about it all?’

‘Nothing. Never mentioned it again. Refused to even discuss it.’

‘So you stayed married then? And she had the kid. Stumpy.’

‘Yeah, he was born six months later, and we stayed together for three years. I don’t know how we managed three days, the rows we had, but we managed to stick it out until 1969. July 14th, I still remember the date.’

‘That’s Stumpy’s birthday!’ said Jenny. ‘What ended it then?’

‘I dunno love, nothing specific, it’s just that some people ain’t meant to be together. We did nothing but argue, and in front of our son as well. I started spending more and more time at the pub, slept on a camp bed in the baby’s room and we lived like the strangers we were. Then one day, July 14th, I came home from work and she was gone. Packed up all her stuff and bugged off, leaving Brendan sitting in his high chair smearing a chocolate bar all over his face.’

‘She left her own son? On his birthday?’

‘Yeah, can you believe it? She was never exactly maternal, and I know she regretted having him but even so, I never saw that coming. She resented the fact that she’d had to give up her ballet dreams I suppose, and never gave him much attention. But despite all that, Brendan loved his mum. Do you know he didn’t speak for a year after she left? Not a word.’

‘Didn’t you try to find her?’

‘What would have been the point? She’d made it clear she didn’t want anything to do with either of us and I figured Brendan would be better off brought up by one parent who loved him.’

‘So you stayed in London what, another 7, 8 years?’

‘Yeah, until 1977 when we moved down here. Things were getting tight in London and I heard there was plenty of work in Basingstoke so I came down, got a job with Charlie Lord and as you know I’ve been on his books ever since.’

Jack’s speech was getting a bit slurred, and he was punishing the whiskey. I felt bad about reminding him of the past again, cos it obviously still hurt. But I wanted to know the truth.

‘I told you last time that Stumpy doesn’t know any of this. I took him to see doctors, psychiatrists, anyone I thought might be able to help him. It broke my heart to see him like that, day after day not saying a word. He wouldn’t play with other kids, took no interest in books or anything. And then one day, while we were at the park he asked me to push him on the swings. Just like that. I ain’t ashamed to admit that I cried my eyes out, it was the best thing that could

ever have happened, and after that he began to develop, and within a few months it seemed like he was back to normal.

‘But he’s never asked about his mother, not once. After he started speaking again it was as though he’d blanked the whole thing out. I was glad when he started knocking about with you lot and you nicknamed him Stumpy, because Brendan was her choice. That name was the last link with her.

‘You two came here looking for answers. I don’t know if you’ve found any but I’ll tell you this much. Stumpy’s carrying a lot of pain inside. That whole episode with his mother definitely affected him and it ain’t good to keep all that bottled up. I’ve seen the way he is with women, won’t let them near him. You’re the first girl he’s ever opened up to Jenny, and if he’s started acting funny you can bet you’re the reason. Not saying it’s your fault, mind. I know you’ve been good for him. I’m no expert, but all that stuff that happened must have caused some damage. I did my best over the years, but...’

I didn’t say anything about the drugs. Maybe Jack knew, maybe he didn’t, but whatever the case he’d lived through enough bad shit tonight.

Jack finished off another glass, and struggled to put it on the table next to his armchair. I heaved myself off the sofa and moved over to take the glass from him. He stared up at me, eyes glazed and speech slurred.

Jenny looked over and I nodded towards the door. As she got to her feet she looked down at Jack.

‘What can we do?’ she asked.

‘Sometimes you can’t help a man who doesn’t want to be helped. Steve, you’ve been a good mate to Stumpy, you, Jimmy and the rest. And Jenny, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to him, even if he doesn’t realise it. Don’t beat yourself up too much over all of this. If Stumpy wants help he’ll have to admit it to himself first.’

And with that Jack’s eyes closed and he began to snore. We cleared up the empty cans and put the whiskey bottle in the bin, turned off the lights and let ourselves out.

‘You didn’t tell him he’s going to be a granddad,’ I said.

‘No,’ replied Jenny, ‘I need to find Stumpy, try and sort things out with him first. Do you know where he might have gone?’

‘No, none of the lads have seen him recently, and he ain’t answering his mobile as I’m sure you’ve found out. But I know he’s been knocking around with some of the geezers who drink in the Three Lions.’

A week later she rang me to ask my advice.

‘You were right, Steve, I found him in that horrible pub. And I’m going to tell him everything. He’s been really trying hard these past few days and I think he’s ready to change. I’ve booked a cottage for the weekend down in Devon, but I’m not going to tell anybody where we’re going. I want to take Stumpy away from all this, even if it’s just for a couple of nights. There’s too much temptation here, too many drugs and too many people willing to give them to him. I think that if I can get him off the acid he’ll start acting like himself again. What do you think?’

I wasn’t convinced, but didn’t say that. I told her to go for it and wished her all the best. I dunno, maybe Jenny would have been able to help Stumpy. Maybe their weekend away could have pushed him back in the right direction. We’ll never know, though, will we? Because on the Sunday night I was in the Fox when Jimmy’s Uncle Pete came in.

‘Steve, where’s Stumpy?’

‘Dunno Pete. Jenny’s taken him away for the weekend. He’s probably getting his leg over, the lucky sod.’

It was then that I noticed Pete was really pale.

‘Ere Pete, what’s up?’

‘It’s Jack. He’s dead.’

I looked at him, disbelieving.

‘But I saw him the other night! He looked fine.’

‘I’m sorry Steve, but he’s gone.’

I sat back in my chair, the shock taking over, tears springing to my eyes. I blinked them back.

‘What happened?’

‘You know what he was like Steve,’ said Pete, choking on his words.

‘Saturday afternoon, half four, he always went down the Pen and Parchment for Final Score.

Every week, regular as clockwork. Landlord has a Guinness sitting on the bar waiting for him, and we’d watch the results coming in. It was our tradition.’

‘Yeah I know. We used to take the piss out of him, boring old fucker.’

‘Well he didn’t turn up yesterday and I got a bit worried so I went round there. His van was outside and the lights were on in the living room. I rang the doorbell, then had a look through the window and there he was, lying in front of the telly. I smashed the window to get in but it was too late, he’d been gone for hours. Heart attack they reckon. I tried to find Stumpy last night, but none of you boys were around and I ain’t got any phone numbers.’

I sat there stunned, trying to make some sense of it all but I couldn’t. Jack Malloy, dead? The man was a fucking ox, how could he die? He used to boast about never taking a day off sick, he was always healthy.

I got up from my chair and walked outside. Even though it was nearly May it was still cold but I didn’t notice. I was crying, like some fucking kid. I don’t know when I last cried it was so long ago. I started walking, aimlessly at first but then I headed home. I rang Jimmy, Tom and Harry and told them the news, but it didn’t get any easier no matter how many times I said it. I knew that I had to get hold of Stumpy but his mobile was switched off, so in desperation I rang Directory Inquiries to get hold of Colonel Harper’s number, on the off chance Jenny had told her parents where she was going.

‘Hello?’ Her dad answered the phone.

‘Mr. Harper, my name’s Steve. I’m a friend of Stumpy’s...’

That’s as far as I got.

‘How dare you ring my house! I want nothing to do with that hooligan, nor with any of his friends. Do not ring this number again, do you hear?’ and with that he slammed the phone down, the stuck up prick.

There was nothing for it but to wait, and when Stumpy came round my house the next night. I could tell he didn’t know. He looked happier than he had done in years.

‘Ere Steve, we’ve had a great weekend! Went down to Torquay, stayed in a proper hotel and everything! That Jenny, I tell you she’s the dogs fucking danglies mate! And you’ll never guess what, I’m gonna be a dad! Listen mate, will you be the godfather? I know I’ve been a bit of a tosser recently, but things are gonna be different from now on.’

He sat there, grinning his head off, like a dog that's just realised it can lick its own balls. I looked at him, horrified by what I had to say.

How do you tell someone that their old man's dead? And Jack wasn't just a dad to Stumpy, he was his best mate. Well there ain't no easy way, I'll tell you that much.

He took it bad. I mean, really fucking bad. No tears, nothing like that, well not in front of me at any rate. But I could see what the news had done. Stumpy closed up there and then, shut himself off from the rest of the world, Jenny and the unborn baby included.

There was a good turn out at the funeral, which was no surprise as Jack was a popular bloke. All the lads from the Fox were there, plus his mates from the Pen and Parchment and from Lord Construction. Even Charlie Lord made an appearance. As did Harry's bird, which struck me as odd. She stood apart from the main crowd, all done up in black with a veil over her face but I recognised her easily enough from a photo Harry had on his mantelpiece.

'Harry,' I said, 'what's Karen doing here? She didn't know Jack did she?'

'Yeah, she knew him alright. Way back when, in the Sixties.'

The penny dropped.

'Fuck me, that's Stumpy's mum isn't it?'

Harry nodded and I could see him getting angry.

'How did you find out?' I asked.

'She was always asking about Stumpy. You know that, I told you about it, remember? Then at Christmas she went and bought him a present, asked me to give it to him. That's when I guessed. Should have sussed it sooner, but I asked Stumpy about his mum once and he told me that as far as he was concerned she was dead.'

Harry shook his head and his voice was bitter.

'I really liked her, you know? Even though she's that much older she was always up for a laugh. But all she wanted was to get close to Stumpy. She fucking used me, the bitch.'

'Why?' I asked. 'Why did she come and find him after all these years?'

'Guilt,' said Harry. 'She felt guilty for running out on him, for being selfish. She had this stupid idea that she could make it up to him.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Well I ain't gonna tell Stumpy, that's for sure. Look at the state of him. That bit of news wouldn't do him any favours.'

Stumpy was pissed, even though it was only ten thirty in the morning. Bleary eyed, unshaven and stinking of whiskey he looked more like one of the winos who hang around in the park at the back of the church than a son in mourning. The priest did his best to provide a bit of comfort, but all he got was a mouthful of abuse.

'Why don't you fuck off and leave me alone?'

'It's alright son, I know you're upset.'

'You don't know anything pal. You can stick your religion up your arse, I don't believe any of it. It's all a load of bollocks.'

I caught the tail end of this.

'Come on mate, it ain't his fault. He's only trying to help.'

‘Yeah, well I don’t need his help, nor anyone else’s. You can all fuck off as far as I’m concerned.’

I walked back over to the lads.

‘He’s taking this bad,’ I said.

‘Not surprised,’ said Jimmy, ‘he’s had a tough old time of it recently. Best thing we can do is keep an eye on him. The way he’s carrying on I’m surprised he’s still got a job.’

‘Not for much longer from what I hear,’ said Tommy Peters. ‘The foreman on our site reckons he’s on his last warning. One more fuck up like the other week and he’s out, funeral or no funeral.’

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘He went down the pub at lunch time and came back so pissed he couldn’t do anything. He tripped over a sack of cement on his way to the bog and knocked over a ladder. Andy Burns was halfway up it at the time with a hod full of bricks and I tell you he weren’t amused. I thought he was going to lump Stumpy, but the foreman got in the middle of it and sent Stumpy home. He pulls another trick like that and he’s gone. Then again, though, at the moment I doubt he could give a toss about work.’

The priest beckoned to the pallbearers, they lifted Jack’s coffin from the back of the hearse and carried it inside the church. We followed, and took our seats in pews near the front. I looked around me but couldn’t see Stumpy, so I got up and walked back outside. The cold weather had stayed with us, and I was glad to be wearing a long overcoat.

Stumpy was standing under a tree, smoking a roll up and shivering.

‘Come on mate,’ I said, ‘the service is just about to start.’

‘Yeah, whatever,’ he replied.

‘Look, I know this must be hard, but everybody’s waiting. This is our chance to say goodbye to Jack.’

Stumpy pulled a small bottle of Bell’s whiskey from his pocket and took a long drink.

‘Go back in Steve. Say all the goodbyes you want, it won’t make any fucking difference. This is all bollocks.’

I shook my head and walked away.

Halfway through the service, as we stood to sing ‘Abide With Me,’ I looked round and saw Stumpy standing on his own by the door. And I’d like to think he stayed to hear the speech Pete made in memory of his old mate, a speech that left more than one person wiping away a tear or two.

But he didn’t come to the cemetery for the burial, for all that ashes to ashes, dust to dust stuff and it was left to his mates to throw a handful of earth on top of Jack and say a final farewell. Dark clouds that had been threatening rain all morning finally broke, and I stood there getting soaked with Harry, Jimmy, Big Lad and the rest, each of us lost for a moment in our own private memories of Jack Malloy.

After the service all the lads went back to the Fox for a few beers, but before I joined them I walked over to see Stumpy’s mum. She was still standing on her own, as if unsure what to do.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘My name’s Steve, I’m a mate of Stumpy’s.’

‘Yes, I know who you are. Harry’s told me all about his friends.’

‘Look, I dunno why I’m saying this, but I know what happened. Jack told me a couple of weeks ago.’

‘Then you must think me a right bitch.’

‘Yeah, I did at first. But I guess there’s two sides to every story, you must have had your reasons.’

‘I was young, selfish and scared. What I did was wrong, and I’ve regretted it ever since. But I made my bed, as they say. I just thought I might be able to rectify some of the damage. It looks like I’m far too late.’

‘I don’t think Stumpy would thank you for showing up. He’s a bit of a mess right now.’

‘I know. I’m going back to London this afternoon.’

‘What about Harry?’

‘Harry hates me. He told me he never wants to see me again.’

‘He’s upset, can’t blame him really. He thinks you’ve just used him.’

‘I did, at first. But I grew really fond of him, genuinely.’

‘Tell him, then, because I know he really likes you.’

‘I’m not sure Steve. Maybe it’s best if I just leave, put all this behind me. Just tell him I’m sorry, will you?’

She walked out of the cemetery and over to her BMW. I turned and walked down Worting Road in the rain towards the Fox and Hounds. I told Harry about our conversation, but he didn’t want to know, said he wasn’t interested.

‘She took me for a mug mate, and no fucker gets a second chance with me.’

There were some dark days for a lot of us after the funeral. Jack had been a rock for the lads, someone we saw as a reassuring, permanent presence, someone we could always rely on and it was difficult to come to terms with the fact that he’d gone.

Two weeks later me and Jimmy went round to Jack’s house with Pete and helped clear it out, which wasn’t a job that any of us wanted to do. What made it worse was the fact that nothing had been touched, the place was in exactly the same state as it had been when Jack died. There was a copy of the Racing Post on the floor, a half empty cup of tea on the little table next to his favourite armchair, and a couple of things that left me puzzled. There was a photo from his wedding day, one of the ones that he’d shown me a couple of weeks earlier, and there was also a letter, addressed to Brendan Malloy. I looked at the post mark and saw that it had only been sent a couple of days earlier.

Something told me it was from Stumpy’s mum, because no one in Basingstoke had called him Brendan for nearly twenty years, but it didn’t feel right to read it so I put it in a box I found that contained some other personal stuff and didn’t mention it to Jimmy or Pete.

I stood in the kitchen before we left, looking out at the vegetable patch that had always been Jack’s pride and joy. I hoped that whoever bought the place would look after it with the same care and dedication that Jack had.

Jack’s brother had told us to do whatever we wanted with the stuff, and the clothes and furniture went to some of the lads and to charity. I took the box of photos and the letter to my flat and stuck them in the loft. I don’t know why, but I thought maybe Stumpy would want them one day, to answer a few questions or something.

There was a will, and through the sale of the house Stumpy got a few grand, but he didn’t want anything else and never even set foot in the place before it got sold.

25. Going Underground
October 1997

I'd been on fire the night Stumpy went missing. Couldn't put a foot wrong. I was the life and soul of the party, full of sharp one-liners and witty comebacks, devastatingly effective chatting up the women and a demon on the dance floor. That's why I couldn't understand why I woke up on a park bench covered in vomit instead of in the warm embrace of a love-struck lady. I'd taken a look around me and found I'd made it about half a mile from Martines but had obviously found the effort of walking across the War Memorial Park to my flat far too much like hard work. Dawn was breaking and I felt like shit. I staggered across the park and made it to the comfort of my own bog only seconds before my bowels exploded in protest at yet another monstrous night. I slept for a couple of fitful hours before the phone rang and jerked me from a horrible nightmare. It was Tommy and he sounded concerned.

'You alright mate?' he asked

'Well, I think 'alright' is being a touch optimistic' I replied, 'but I'll live. Why do you ask?'

'Do you remember what happened last night Steve?'

'Course I do. Sort of. I was on top form wasn't I? Blinding laugh as I recall. How come I didn't pull?'

'Top form? You must be fucking joking. You were a dribbling fucking mess. How you didn't get your head kicked in I'll never know. Top form my arse.'

'What are you on about?' I asked. 'What happened?'

'You were out of it before you left the Fox. Scouse spiked your last pint with half a gramme of whizz and you were all over the shop.'

Well, this was news to me and understandably I was a touch concerned. It seems that once again real life and lager life had got themselves all mixed up in my head. Tommy went on to explain that I'd been barred from the Red Lion for trying to fight the bouncers, barred from the Feathers for being sick over the landlord and barred from the Basshouse because I'd staggered up to the DJ, shoved him out of the way and proceeded to embark on some truly horrendous karaoke, despite the fact that it was only a normal Saturday night disco. When the DJ had tried to point this fact out to me I'd taken a bar stool to his record collection and then used it to batter my way past the doormen. Apparently the landlord was going to press charges, and one of the boys on the door had sworn revenge, just as soon as he got out of hospital...

Martines had found me in a highly abusive frame of mind, and after I'd rugby tackled the third girl in as many minutes I was ejected for pissing over the balcony onto the heads of the poor bastards on the dancefloor. As the bouncers were dragging me out I'd directed a drunken headbutt at one of them but fortunately Harry was on hand to smooth things over. Miraculously I hadn't been arrested, beaten up or suffered too much damage to my person but Tommy wasn't sure how long I would remain a free man.

'Anyway, that's not really why I called. The point is, Stumpy's done a runner and no one knows where he is. He was supposed to be doing some overtime this weekend but he didn't turn up for work this morning and he had the keys to the site in his van. That's still outside his house, but he

ain't there and judging by the state of the front room it looks like Jenny's moved out. I wondered if he crashed at your place last night.'

Anything was possible but after a quick search of the house revealed no signs I tried to think where he might be. I started to get a bit worried myself. There was something seriously fucked up about his recent behaviour, and ever since Jack had died it was as though he'd given up. I phoned a few of the lads but no one had seen him, so I took a deep breath and rang Colonel Harper's number. Fortunately it was Jenny that answered.

'Jenny, it's Steve. Have you seen Stumpy?'

'No, not since Friday. It's over between us Steve. I've tried to help him but he doesn't want to know. He's still drinking too much and I know he still takes drugs, despite all his promises. He hasn't hit me recently but I thought he was going to on Friday night, so I packed my bags and left.'

'Jenny, what the fuck is going on?'

'I wish I knew Steve, I really wish I knew.'

'But I thought you two had it sussed? I mean, I know he ain't the easiest geezer in the world to live with but I thought you'd sorted him out.'

'So did I. It was good for a while, it really was. He used to laugh about staying in on a Friday night, going on about the stick you lot would give him next time he saw you. And he was so happy when I told him about the baby. But it all changed when Jack died. He stopped talking to me, stopped looking after himself, just gave up. You know he's lost his job, don't you?'

'No', I said, 'when did that happen?'

'A couple of weeks ago. Charlie Lord has been really good to him, Steve. He had a lot of respect for Jack so he turned a blind eye to the missed days and the mornings Stumpy turned up for work stinking of alcohol. But in the end he became such a liability that he had to let him go, and to be honest I can't see anyone else giving him a chance.'

I sat there feeling bad. Things had obviously been going wrong for a long time.

'Are you ok?' I asked.

'Not really, but I'll get by, I have to. I'm nearly seven months pregnant Steve. I know how hard it was for him when Jack died, but he's going to be a dad himself and if that's not enough to make him get his act together then what is?'

I didn't have an answer to that, so I told her to take care and to give me a call if she needed anything. Things must have been bad for her to move back home, because for that arsehole Colonel Harper it would be like he was right all along. And I bet the fucker let Jenny know as well.

I felt bad for her, because we'd always got on well, but I had other things on my mind. Like the fact that my own behaviour might well have landed me in a load of bother. I drove round to One Pound Franks' Hairdressing Salon the next day for a crew cut and went unshaven for a few days in a pathetic attempt at disguising myself, but I knew it was only a matter of time before I was caught and was seriously worried about my freedom. Like most of the lads, I'd been in and out of trouble for years, usually for stupid stuff like drunk and disorderly and criminal damage but it looked as though this time I may have gone too far.

It's one thing to stand in front of a judge on a charge of D&D after challenging a police officer to a down in one race when he's trying to evict you from a boozer, and then running off down the street with his helmet. That may even be seen as vaguely amusing, but it's quite another to be up

for smashing up property and people in full view of a crowded pub, and I couldn't see the judge giving me a good ticking off and a fine while trying to hide the smile from his face at my roguish behaviour. Nope, this time I was in the shit.

Harry came to see me a couple of days afterwards, and he didn't look too pleased.

'Listen, Steve. I've been to see that bouncer, and sorted things out with him. I had to call in a fucking big favour to get him to leave you alone, and to be honest neither of us is happy about it. You can't keep expecting me to bail you out when you fuck up. You need to sort yourself out, Steve.'

I felt like shit.

'I'm sorry mate, you're right. I need to grow up, lay off the booze a bit. After all that's happened I just wanted to get out of my head. Thanks for sorting out that geezer for me.'

'I know things have been shit these past few months, what with Jack and everything, but you can't use that as an excuse for fucking around like you were the other night. As I said, you don't have to worry about the bouncer, but there's nothing I can do about the law.'

Harry stood up, told me to look after myself and let himself out.

Stumpy turned up a week later, coincidentally on the day the law finally caught up with me. I found him sitting in my back garden smoking a joint, dirty and disheveled, his face unshaven and his hair full of twigs.

'Where the fuck have you been?' I asked.

'Southampton,' he said. 'I hitch-hiked down there and tried to stow away on a liner bound for God knows where, but I got caught searching for food in one of the kitchens and they kicked me off. I walked most of the way back, sleeping rough. Can't even run away properly. Have you got any food? I'm starving.'

And that was the only explanation he gave, despite me asking him what the fuck he would have done if he had managed to get to another country. So I took him inside and made him some breakfast while he had a bath, and as he was finishing his third cuppa the doorbell rang.

'Steven Bonds?'

Three coppers standing on my doorstep, with a meat wagon parked out front.

'We're arresting you on suspicion of criminal damage and grievous bodily harm. Anything you say may be taken down as evidence and used in a court of law.' And so on.

I was amazed it took them so long to track me down, and by the way they acted on finding me in you'd have thought they'd just brought Ronnie Biggs home from Brazil.

'You're in deep shit sonny!' said one of the coppers gleefully, 'gotta be looking at a couple of years for this one'.

Stumpy stuck his head out the kitchen window and started giving out some abuse.

'Well, well, well,' said the laughing policeman, 'if it isn't Stumpy Malloy. A little bird tells me you're big and brave enough these days to beat up pregnant women. Lucky for you she's too stupid to press charges. Watch yourself Malloy, we're on your case.'

They took me down to the station, did the photos and fingerprints and all that bollocks, charged me and shoved me in a cell. I got bail and was due in court two months later and that's the worst time I can ever remember. Not knowing if I was going to go down or not, wondering how I'd survive if I did.

The day before I was due up in court, I went round to see Harry. I don't know what I was hoping to hear, but when the door opened I knew I wouldn't get a sympathetic ear.

‘Alright Steve, what’s up?’

Billy Jeffries stood there with a can of Special Brew.

‘Alright Billy, where’s Harry?’

‘He had a bit of business to attend to, then we’re off out on the piss. You coming in?’

I hesitated. I didn’t want Billy to know how scared I was of being sent down, but then again, if anyone knew how to survive inside it was Billy Jeffries.

I went in and sat down.

‘I’m up in court tomorrow, Billy, and the truth is, I’m shitting myself.’

Billy’s eyes narrowed, and he stared at me. He hated any kind of weakness. For a moment I didn’t think he was going to say anything, but then he took a swig of Special Brew and gave me a few words of advice.

‘Once that cell door shuts for the first time, Steve, you’ve got to forget everything outside. If you spend your time thinking about what you’ve lost, your stretch will seem twice as long. Forget about your friends, your family, football, the boozier, just concentrate on getting into life inside.’ Well, I was right about the lack of sympathy. This was making me feel even worse. It didn’t get any better.

‘You’re gonna be new to prison, son, and that’s as good as having a fucking great sign hanging over your head advertising the fact. Every other con in there is gonna know it’s all new to you. So the first cunt that tries anything with you, punch him in the face as hard as you can and keep on punching and kicking until he can’t fucking move. That way, people should keep out of your way, and you won’t get taken for a mug.’

Fucking hell.

I sat there for a few minutes while Billy sat back in his chair and finished his can. Then I got up to leave.

‘Not coming out for a few beers then?’ he asked.

‘No, I want to keep a clear head for tomorrow.’

‘Right you are then, son.’

Prison was a piece of piss for Billy Jeffries but I ain’t like him, and I was terrified at the thought of going down. It was a real wake up call, but the question was, had I slept too long?

To everyone’s amazement and to the horror of the arresting officer I only got community service. 200 hours, mind, but give me painting an old people’s home over Winchester nick any day of the week. The court case came up a week before Christmas, so maybe the judge was in a festive mood. Whatever the case I would have sent him a thank you card if I could have been arsed.

The boys took me straight to the Fox and Hounds where Terry Irvine laid on platefuls of sandwiches and chips and we had a celebratory piss up. Stumpy turned up, looking rougher than I’d ever seen him, stayed for a pint and said well done to me then disappeared again.

He came round to my house the next day with a few cans.

‘Sorry I didn’t stop last night. I wasn’t in the mood for a piss-up.’

‘That’s alright mate, come in. What’s been going on then? I haven’t seen you in ages.’

‘I’m a dad,’ he said.

‘Nice one!’ I said, cracking open a can and toasting him.

‘What is it? Boy or girl? Everything alright, healthy and all that?’

‘It’s a boy, that’s all I know. Jenny rang to tell me, but she won’t let me near the house. I haven’t even seen him.’

Stumpy sat on the edge of the sofa in his dirty jeans and faded old Arsenal top, hair all greasy and face unshaven, looking close to tears.

‘I’ve fucked up everything,’ he said. ‘There’s just no point any more.’

‘There’s no chance then? Of you and Jenny getting back together?’ I asked, even though I knew the answer.

‘No chance at all. We’re history, like we never happened as far as she’s concerned’

‘Fuck mate, I’m gutted for you.’

‘Yeah well, I’ve only got myself to blame. I’ve been a right cunt. Y’know, sometimes Steve, I think it would be better if I wasn’t round here any more.’

‘Leave it out mate, you’ve got loads of mates in town.’

‘Maybe, but things are changing, people move on. Well, some do anyway.’

I laughed.

‘I know what you mean, but no matter what happens, we’re your mates and we’ll always be here.’

And that’s the closest thing to tenderness that ever came between me and Stumpy.

He just sat there looking totally lost. And even though for once I tried, I couldn’t find the words to comfort him.

We were so obsessed with being what we thought were real men we forgot that sometimes it’s the simple things that mattered. That sometimes a hug or a kind word can make all the difference in the world, and then someone makes a gesture but we’re so caught up in all the bollocks that it just slips straight past, ignored and forgotten.

‘I’ve done some bad things, Steve, and I wish I could turn the clock back and change them. But I can’t, and I’m not sure I can handle that.’

‘We’ve all done stupid things mate, you’re not the only one.’

‘I don’t mean the stupid stuff Steve, I’ve done some really bad shit.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like hitting Jenny, like kicking in a couple of teenagers and stealing their beer in Glebe Gardens the other week just because I was skint, cos like a cunt I’ve spent all of my old man’s money on booze and drugs. Like beating up Colonel Harper.’

‘What?! I asked you about that, and you promised me it wasn’t you!’

‘I know,’ said Stumpy, ‘sorry about that. We’re alright though, aren’t we?’

‘Yeah, course,’ I muttered, although at that moment we weren’t alright.

He’d lied to me, blatantly looked me in the eye and fucking lied.

Don’t get me wrong, I ain’t jumping on some moral fucking bandwagon here. I’ve lied and cheated for most of my adult life, and I don’t think twice about it. Sometimes I lie when it would be easier to tell the truth, it’s almost habit.

But this was different. Stumpy was one of my best friends, and we’d always told each other the truth. Well, I for one know that I’d never lied to him, at any rate. I felt let down, the bond between us had been broken in a way, and it hurt.

We sat there for a while and then he got up and left. I wanted to help him, I really did but the cruel truth is that I watched him go. I wanted everything to be the way it used to be, when we

were just starting out. Me, Jimmy Taylor and Stumpy Malloy, no problems, no hassles. Living for the weekend, for West Ham and Arsenal, beer and women, the Fox and Hounds F.C. Heartbreak, illness, death, I didn't want them to have a place in my life.

Stumpy began to self destruct at a rapid rate: unable to come to terms with the death of his old man, with the failure of his relationship with Jenny and with the fact that he had a son he wasn't even allowed to see, he seemed to be trying to drown the memories in alcohol and drugs. He drifted away from the boys even more after moving into a room above the Three Lions, a dodgy boozier at the best of times, where he earned his beer money by collecting glasses.

I knew I hadn't been there when he needed his mates and I did try to sort him out. I even swallowed my disgust at Arsenal and offered to drive him up to Highbury at the start of the '98/'99 season, but he wasn't interested. After a while he began avoiding my phone calls, and even blanked me when I showed up at the Three Lions one Friday night.

I was worried about him but I had my own life to lead and there's only so much you can do for a bloke. Jack's last words stayed in my head, and he's right. A person has to want to be helped. That sounds harsh, but it's the truth.

When the Fox and Hounds football team disbanded our whole group had gradually started breaking up, some of the lads settling down, others drinking in new boozers, a couple leaving town completely. My latest brush with the law had shaken me up I must admit, and I was determined to lie low for a while. I was thirty two years old and had finally come to realise I couldn't go on acting like a prat forever.

I saw a few of the boys every now and then of course, especially Beast and Jimmy Taylor because we still played in the same football team, sponsored by the firm Jim had got himself in with. It was only Division Four but it was alright I suppose. Nothing like the Fox and Hounds though.

26. All Around The World
January 1999

Heavy Trev and Tommy Peters collared me one night down the Fox.

'Listen Steve, we've had enough of all this,' said Tommy. 'Things ain't been the same since the team broke up, you know that. It just ain't the grin like it used to be.'

'True,' I said bitterly, 'but things change, move on. Life ain't one big fucking party you know.'

'Yeah, I do know. But who's to stop us dragging the party out for a bit longer?'

'What are you on about?'

'Thailand, Australia, New Zealand. There's a big fucking world out there. Let's have some of it.'

'Hang on a minute,' I said, 'what about Michelle?'

'What about her?'

'I thought you two were supposed to be engaged?'

'Yeah, well, we were. Not one of my better ideas. She's a fucking miserable cow so I booted her out.'

End of story.

‘We’re gonna buy one of them round the world tickets, piss off for a year,’ said Trev, ‘get us some sunshine.’

‘Well that might help your zits I suppose.’

‘Fuck off! Listen, what d’you reckon. You up for it or what?’

‘Me?!’

‘Yeah, you. It’s gotta be better than this place. Pubs that shut at midnight if you’re lucky, queues to get into the shit holes, one fucking nightclub? I’ve heard you can drink all night in Sydney, and that’s just in the boozers. Loads of clubs, beaches, sun, birds. We should have gone fucking years ago!’

‘I dunno, I’ve never thought about going anywhere else.’

‘Well start thinking, you knob! What have you got here? We’re going in six months, that should give you enough time to get some wedge together. All you need is the price of a plane ticket, cos we’ll be able to get work in Oz, no problem.’

‘Says who?’

‘Come on, use yer loaf. We’re tradesmen, yeah? And they’ve got the fucking Olympics coming up. We’re bound to get a start somewhere.’

They rambled on for a bit and after a few beers I got quite excited by the thought of packing up and leaving, but I knew in my heart I wouldn’t go. I’d never been anywhere, apart from Torremolinos, and had never wanted to either. Say what you like about Basingstoke but it’s my home. It’s where I belong. I know where everything is and I like that feeling. A week away might be alright, but a year? No thanks.

But as the weeks passed I began to have second thoughts. The winter seemed endless and going to work on freezing cold mornings was getting harder and harder. Sitting in the car wrapped up in a fleece jacket waiting for the heater to kick in, scraping ice from the windscreen, working outside when it’s so cold that you think your ears are going to fall off. Pitch black when you leave the house, and already dark when you get home.

And no one to come home to.

Football wasn’t the same crack any more and even the Fox and Hounds had changed, with Terry Irvine getting it into his head that he wanted to turn it into some kind of fucking theme pub, serving basket meals and turning that scrap of wasteland out the back into a kiddies play area. Harry was still banned, Billy Jefferies was behind bars, yet again, and I hadn’t seen Stumpy since he’d blanked me at the Three Lions. Scouse’s football career had been cut short after breaking his leg jumping out of a bedroom widow, after a suspicious husband had arrived home early from a meeting because he suspected his missus was up to no good. The geezer added insult to injury by stamping on Scouse’s bollocks as he lay writhing in agony in a flower bed, and for weeks he was unable to enjoy any kind of sex; even his Traci Lords collection was too painful to watch. Mind you, he got his revenge eventually when the lady left her husband and moved in with Scouse.

Things didn’t work out there either, so he ripped off a building society for a five grand loan and joined Trev and Tommy in Oz. I began to wish I’d gone too. I’d drifted into a relationship with a girl I’d known at school. She’d split up from her husband and had a couple of kids and it was getting messy, so much so that the youngest one had called me dad when I’d given him an Easter egg. I should have walked away there and then but my usual fear of confrontation meant I kept going back for more.

The Beast had finally finished putting together the E-Type Jag he'd been working on for years and spent most weekends driving it around the countryside or tweaking it in his workshop. I used to pop in for a smoke every now and then but couldn't persuade him to come to the pub, particularly now that Terry Irvine had banned the lads from skinning up in the Fox and Hounds. Even Jimmy had changed. Like Beast said, he'd taken a year out of work and put himself through college, doing some course or other that meant he could get himself an office job. More money and a company motor, but he had to wear a shirt and tie every day, work late and put up with loads of stress and shit. We'll always be mates but I could sense that we'd grown apart over the last couple of years.

Emma, the bird I was seeing, said that everybody had moved on except me. She said that most of the time I had the mentality of a twenty year old, and when I thanked her she said it wasn't a compliment. Maybe she had a point.

Every now and then I got a post card from some exotic location or other, always with the same message: 'It's hot and sunny, the beers cold, the birds are willing and you're just a tosser stuck in Basingstoke.' At first they made me laugh, but after a while they just depressed me.

One mild evening during the autumn of '99 I was walking through town on my way home when I bumped into Jenny Harper, complete with pushchair. She looked good, despite the bags under her eyes. A life away from Stumpy obviously agreed with her.

'Hello Steve, how are you?'

'Yeah, not too bad. You?'

'Fine thanks, although this one does his best to keep me up all night. He's nearly 18 months old now and really should be sleeping through but if he cries I just can't help myself, I just have to give him a cuddle. It's just me and him, you see, we need each other.'

Jenny was rambling, and she stopped when she realised, looking embarrassed.

I leant down towards the pushchair and had a proper look at Stumpy's son for the first time. He was wearing a tiny pair of jeans and a miniature Arsenal top and he was making a real mess of a packet of Cadbury's Buttons, spreading chocolate all over his face and hands. He had a blotchy red face, and a shock of black hair sticking out all over the shop. Ugly little fucker, if you ask me, just like his old man.

'I don't give him chocolate very often, he does make a bit of a mess with it,' she said.

'Yeah, I can see that.'

'So, what's new with you Steve? Settled down yet?'

I thought about Emma, and the fact that I was in yet another relationship that was going nowhere.

'I am seeing someone, but it ain't serious.'

Jenny laughed. 'You don't change, do you? Hasn't there ever been anyone special, Steve?'

I thought about Caroline Jeffries, as I did every now and then, wondering again if she could have been the one for me.

'Nah, I'm happy on my own Jenny,' I lied.

We stood there for a couple of minutes in awkward silence, although the kid didn't care. He was staring at me and I must admit it was a bit unnerving. Then he screwed up his face in complete concentration for a minute or so before sighing in satisfaction and leaning back in his pushchair. Jenny looked at me apologetically and reached into a backpack to pull out a container of baby wipes and nappies.

'I think he needs changing,' she said, by way of explanation.
Time for me to leave, I didn't need to be looking at things like that.

'What's his name?' I asked, as I prepared to go.

'Jack Brendan Harper,' she replied.

'Does Stumpy know?'

'No. He doesn't know where I live and that's the way it's going to stay. I don't live around here anymore, and I've only come down for the night to see my parents. You can tell him you've seen me if you want, and tell him the baby's name but that's it. He caused me too much pain, and we're better off without him. Jack is the best thing that has ever happened to me Steve, I can't describe the difference he's made to my life, and I will never, ever do anything that puts him at risk.'

I told her that I didn't see Stumpy around any more, but stopped myself from pointing out that if he'd been allowed near his son he might have been able to sort himself out. Nothing to do with me, right?

Jenny leaned down to unbuckle Jack from his pushchair and lifted him out on to the grass. I took a last look at him and said goodbye.

But that wasn't the last time I saw Jenny Harper. A couple of hours later my mobile rang.

'Steve? It's Jenny.' She sounded as though she'd had a glass of wine or two.

'What's up?'

'Look, I know this might sound a bit odd, but do you fancy meeting up for a drink tonight?'

I hesitated. I had a lot of time for Jenny Harper. If truth be told, I even fancied her a little bit, though I would never have done anything about it, even after she broke up with Stumpy. There are some things you just shouldn't do.

'It's just that I haven't had a night out since Jack arrived. My parents will baby sit, and I really could do with some company.'

Despite my reservations, I agreed and we met up that evening in town. Even though it wasn't a date, I felt nervous and probably had a few too many beers to calm myself down. Jenny was definitely pissed, and by closing time she was pressing a leg against mine and leaning in very close to talk to me.

'Thanks for this, Steve. I've had a really nice time.'

'Yeah, so have I.'

And I had. Jenny was great company and we'd had a laugh. Neither of us had mentioned Stumpy. And as for Emma, she hadn't even crossed my mind.

'I feel a little bit drunk,' said Jenny, 'could I come back to your place for a coffee before I go home?'

I should have said no. I should have seen what was coming, but I led the way back to my flat even though I knew no good would come of it.

She sat on my sofa as I went to the kitchen to make us both a drink. When I came back into the living room she'd found my cd collection, and Massive Attack was playing softly in the background.

Shit, this is hard to write. But it needs to be told.

I sat next to her, and she laid her head on my shoulder.

We listened to the music and I put my arm around her, pulling her in close. Part of me was still convinced I was being a friend, a shoulder to cry on. But my guilty conscience didn't stop me from kissing her.

We went into the bedroom. We undressed each other, and fucked like it was the end of the world. No tenderness, just raw, passionate, animal sex.

Afterwards, we lay together on the bed and realisation dawned.

'I should be getting home. Can I call a taxi please?'

'It's the middle of the night. Come on, I'll give you a lift.'

'Won't you be over the limit?'

'Don't worry about it, I'll be ok.'

Stilted conversation, because we both knew that what we'd done had been wrong.

I said earlier that there are some things you just shouldn't do, but some might say, what's the problem? Jenny and Stumpy had been separated for a long time. Why shouldn't we have a bit of fun? But that's not the point. Jenny was the only woman Stumpy had ever loved, she was the mother of his son, and he was supposed to be my best friend. Jenny had come to me because she was lonely, and I'd taken advantage of her.

I felt like the biggest cunt on earth.

27. In A Rut

July 2000

Wednesday night and I was having a quiet pint in the Fox on my own. Time was I wouldn't have to make any phone calls, just turn up down the pub and there would be some of the lads propping up the bar. But things had changed, and it wasn't like that anymore. Believe it or not but I was sitting in the corner reading a book when the door burst open and Scouse, Tommy Peters, and Heavy Trev piled in and ordered up the beers. I couldn't believe that a year had passed, and when they asked what I'd been up to I couldn't think of a single thing worth telling them. They were all looking good, tanned and healthy, laughing and joking and full of stories.

'What's all this then?' said Tommy, 'Steve Bonds sitting on his own reading a book? Has the world gone mad?'

'It's one Stumpy gave me years ago. You know what he's like with his books, fucking loves them. He was always trying to get me to read, and he said if I never read anything else I should give this a go.'

'"Papillon". What's that all about then?'

'I've read that,' said Heavy Trev, 'it's fucking excellent. About this French geezer who gets banged up on an island that's a prison for something he didn't do. And he spends his whole time trying to break free. True story. They made a film about it, y'know, with Dustin Hoffman and Steve McQueen. It was shit compared to the book.'

I laughed. 'I never thought I'd see the day when I'd be discussing literature with you lot. How's it going then, have a good time?'

'Fucking superb!' they said, all at the same time.

'Honestly Steve, you should have come,' said Tommy. 'Sydney is the dog's bollocks mate. Excellent boozers, blinding clubs, loads of good beaches and some of the fittest birds you'll ever see. Even Trev got his end away!'

'Yeah,' said Trev, 'and the East Coast is just one big party. Byron Bay, Surfers Paradise, Fraser Island, Airlie Beach, Cairns. I've got to say that it's a bit fucking young, though. Most of the people on that circuit are only about twenty. Still, everyone's up for it, the hostels are a laugh and you can eat for fuck all, a few quid a day and you're well away.'

'Which means more money for lager,' said Scouse.

'Did you get work then?' I asked.

'Yeah, we got a start on a site in Sydney, run by these dodgy Greek geezers, all cash in hand, no questions asked. Done us a treat for a couple of months and then we fucked off up the East Coast on a drinking mission. You'd have been proud of us Steve, we put Basingstoke firmly on the map.'

'I tell you what,' said Trev, 'Thailand and Indonesia were fucking great as well, something totally different, know what I mean?'

'No I don't actually,' I said, 'having never been further than Torremolinos.'

'D'you want to see some photos then?' asked Trev.

'Yeah, go on then, might as well. If you're gonna depress me you might as well do it properly.' Tommy handed me three packets of photos.

'I've got loads more,' he said, 'but this is just a selection, a taster for you.'

The three of them kept looking at each other as I opened the first of three packets, as if they couldn't wait for me to see the pictures. And they were good, I must admit. Sydney Opera House and the Harbour Bridge, holding surf boards in Byron Bay, standing by a four wheel drive on Fraser Island, loads of group shots with other blokes and fit looking birds and by the looks of it the sun had shone every day. The second packet was from Bali and the rest of Indonesia, temples and jungle, crowded market places and yet more beautiful beaches and then I came to the third set, from Thailand.

The boys on a beach, holding up a huge bag of grass. A small wooden hut overlooking a secluded bay, three hammocks strung out over a rickety looking veranda. Smiling and raising bottles of beer to the camera, standing with a big fat geezer who looked the spitting image of...

'Fucking hell! That's Fat Phil!!!!'

'Yeah!' said Tommy, 'mental, eh?!'

I put the photo down on the table and sat for a minute, trying to get my head round it.

'How?' was all I could manage.

'Total coincidence mate. Unbelievable bit of luck. We went to this island in the south called Koh Pha Ngan, cos we'd been told about these all night raves they have during the full moon. We got there in time for one and had a right laugh, but the place, Hat Rin, was full of these fucking hippy tossers and the next day we wanted to get the fuck out of there. We met this one geezer who was alright, and he told us about this place he'd been staying on the other side of the island, run by a big fat English bloke who always had a good stash of puff.'

'Fat Phil,' I said.

‘Yeah, although that thought never crossed our minds of course. We got a lift on an old pick-up truck, to this hut complex called the Happy Buddha, and there he was, lying in this fucking reinforced hammock with a bottle of Singha beer in his hand. He went nuts when he saw us.’

‘I bet he did! So how is he, how did he end up there?’

‘He’s doing excellent, though for some reason he does miss this place. Sends his regards by the way. Asks if you’ve managed to grow up yet.’

‘Cheeky fucker.’

‘He took the money Harry gave him from the pub and flew straight to Bangkok, had some idea he might be able to find the geezer who stitched him up. Course he had no chance, Bangkok’s fucking huge, so he went down to Koh Samui for a bit and then over to Koh Pha Ngan. Met this little Thai piece who spoke a bit of English and decided to go into business with her. He put up the money, she sorted out all the legal stuff and away you go, bob’s yer uncle. They have to pay some local mafia operation a bit of protection every month, but they keep things sweet and as long as the money comes in there’s no problem. We stayed there for a month, and he said we’re always welcome.’

I looked at the photos and listened to the stories but I still couldn’t imagine what it really must have been like. How could I when Basingstoke was pretty much all I knew? But what I could tell was how much they’d enjoyed themselves. That was obvious. I couldn’t believe the change in them. A lot of the rough edges had gone, the rawness, and they all seemed so mellow, a damn sight more tolerant than they had been.

‘You’ve gone soft,’ I said, ‘bunch of ponces.’

But the abuse was half-hearted. Truth be told I was well jealous, and I knew they were right. I did have to see it for myself. I’d got so caught up with life in Basingstoke that I’d forgotten there was a whole world out there, new countries, different people, adventure, excitement. The lads kept rattling on about the Thai islands, about lying on the beach outside Phil’s place for days on end, smoking grass and playing cards, shooting the breeze with other travellers and learning about where they came from, the Dutch and Danish, Canadians and Kiwis. And learning about themselves at the same time. Realising that there was more to life than working some shitty job all week and then losing whole weekends in a frenzy of lager and drugs.

‘Not that there’s anything wrong with that Steve,’ said Trev, ‘I like nothing better than a good old session, and one of the things I really missed about Amazingstoke was the lads, the football and the piss-ups, but there’s more out there, you know what I mean?’

By the end of the night I’d convinced myself that I was going to go travelling. Tommy, Trev and Scouse were already planning their next trip, a big one starting in the winter of 2002 if all went well.

‘We’re gonna start in New York, buy a big old American motor and drive across to California, do Mexico and that and get down into South America, take the car as far as we can. Venezuela, Chile, the Inca Trail in Peru, Brazil, Argentina. Maybe find Maradona and finally give him the slap he deserves for ‘86. What d’you reckon Steve, up for this one or what?’

‘Too right. Count me in.’

It was time to move on. I should have done it years ago but I guess I was trying to hang on to my youth, refusing to accept that things had changed. But they had, and life just wasn’t the same crack. The town wasn’t ours anymore, not like it had been. There was a whole new generation of drinkers out there, and we had nothing to say to them, nothing in common. Queues outside all

the pubs in town, jam packed solid when you did get in through the door and music so fucking loud it made your head pound. Emma was wrong, I had changed. Now I sounded like an old cunt.

But things had definitely changed for the lads, and it was only now that I could see it.

‘So what about Stumpy, then?’ asked Trev. ‘Sorted himself out, has he?’

‘To be honest, I haven’t seen him in nearly two years. No one has. The last time I saw him he blanked me. I have tried, but the geezer doesn’t want to know.’

I didn’t tell them about my night with Jenny, and that that was one of the reasons I hadn’t gone out of my way to see Stumpy. In fact, I hadn’t told anyone what I’d done. It was something I had tried to forget about, to bury deep inside. But I still couldn’t help thinking about it every now and then, and it didn’t get any easier to deal with. I hadn’t heard from Jenny after that night, and I assumed she was feeling as bad about it as me.

I still had a few beers with Jimmy, Harry and The Beast, but the time had definitely come for a change. I decided to calm things down even more and save up enough wedge to join the lads on their next trip.

28. Something Better Change

July 2002

Six o’clock on a Friday night and I lay back in the bath clutching a spliff in one hand and an ice cold lager in the other. My favourite time of the week: a good soaking to wash away the dirt and clear the head. Not that long ago I’d be out the door by now, on my way to Fox and the start of a weekend on the piss. Funny how things change, ain’t it?

You know, I used to love drinking. I mean, really love it. I couldn’t think of any place I’d rather be than down the boozier with my mates, knocking back the pints and having a right fucking good laugh. Forget about work, money, women, bills, all the usual bollocks that drags you down, and get out of my head. I can’t quite put my finger on when it began to change, but the hangovers grew worse and worse, to the extent where I couldn’t get out of bed some days cos I felt so ill. I’d always missed the occasional Monday or Friday at work but generally got away with it because I was just a young lad, and that’s what young lads do.

But when I got to my late twenties that didn’t wash anymore, and it definitely wasn’t going to help me in my mid thirties. A couple of meetings with my boss convinced me to start taking it a bit easier, particularly on a Thursday or Sunday night. Again, years ago I wouldn’t have given a fuck, just walked out of work and found myself another job. Things changed though, a bit of a downturn in the economy and work wasn’t quite so easy to come by.

And I began to appreciate the fact that I wouldn’t be able to play football forever, that one day, it could be tomorrow or in five years time, I’d be hanging up my boots. I decided to treat each match like it might be my last, and I knew I suffered on the pitch with a hangover. Even though

the crack wasn't the same since the Fox and Hounds had folded I still loved my football. So the Saturday nights grew less and less brutal, and the evenings I spent supping a few quiet ones, or sitting on my sofa getting stoned and mellow, grew more frequent.

The phone rang, and I lay there aiming to let the answer phone take a message.

'Steve? You there mate?'

I scrambled out of the bath and made a grab for the phone, trailing water all over the bedroom.

'Stumpy? Is that you?'

'Yeah, 'fraid so mate.'

I hadn't heard from him in nearly four years, and I suddenly realised how much I had missed the old bastard's company. How had we let that amount of time pass us by? And then I remembered what I'd done.

'How's it going?' I asked. 'Where are you?'

'At the Three Lions,' he replied. 'Listen, you fancy a couple of pints tonight? There's something I want to talk to you about.'

And immediately my first thought was, he knows. He knows what I've done and he's gonna want to sort it out. My heart sank at the prospect. But I deserved whatever was coming to me, I couldn't deny that.

I realised I had tuned out for a moment, and had to ask Stumpy to repeat himself.

'I said, things are looking up for me, Steve. I just wanted to have a chat with you. It's been a long time.'

Slightly relieved, I thought back to the last time I'd seen him. His battered face had looked even more worn, dark circles under his eyes from too many sleepless nights on acid, clothing shabby and torn. He looked like a man of fifty in a thirty six year-olds body. He was washed up, most people thought he was a right loser and he was mourned by friends as if he had already died, relegated prematurely to the level of town drunk.

But I'd always hoped there was more to Stumpy than that. The geezer that used to be the life and soul couldn't have disappeared totally could he? He sounded pretty together on the phone, so I ignored my guilty conscience and agreed to meet him. I slung on some clothes and walked apprehensively into town.

The Three Lions is an old boozer stuck, at the end of a row of terraced houses that are small and squashed together. It's built from red brick that's long since faded to a dirty grey, where time, weather and pollution have joined forces to stain the walls. You wouldn't know the pub was even there if it wasn't for the tatty old sign hinged to a length of flagpole that squeaked in the wind above battered green doors. Push these open and enter a twilight world; smoke-filled air, the smack of cue on ball, music pumping from the juke box, Sky Sports silent in the background with no one watching. A collection of permanently drunk old men reviewing the 'Sporting Life', a few bikers playing pool with tattooed birds smoking roll ups and drinking cider. Bit like how the Fox and Hounds used to be, to tell the truth, before the lads took it over, but not somewhere I'd chose to drink if given the choice.

I got there early, before Stumpy had a chance to get too slaughtered but he'd beaten me to it. I was surprised to see him freshly shaved, dressed in clean jeans and a new shirt. His eyes were clear and bright, his hand didn't shake as he raised a pint to his lips. And he didn't punch me straight in the face, which was a good sign.

'Alright Steve? How's tricks?'

‘Yeah, not bad Stumpy, you know how it is. Win some, lose some. You’re looking well.’

‘Yeah, thanks. I am feeling fit as it goes. Listen Steve, I’ll come straight to the point. I’m making a final effort to do the right thing, and I wanted to see all the lads again before I go.’

‘What are you on about? Go where?’

‘I’m moving on mate, to better things. There’s nothing here for me any more.’

‘What’s brought this on then?’

‘As I said, there’s nothing here for me any more. Me old man’s gone, Jenny’s disappeared somewhere, and I’ve never even seen my kid. I’ve well and truly fucked things up for myself and I want to go somewhere better than all this. All that fucking acid scrambled my brain for too many years and I get these fucking awful flashbacks every now and then, I’ve drifted away from my best mates and there’s too many bad memories for me here. How many more reasons do you need?’

‘Fair enough mate, when you put it like that. But you look like you’re getting things sorted. Can’t you do that here?’

‘It’s too late, Steve. I can’t trust myself to stick around this town and not do something really fucking stupid that’ll fuck up someone else’s life as well as mine.’

‘Yeah, well, maybe you do need a fresh start.’

Part of me was relieved. The selfish part, of course. If Stumpy had sorted himself out, and wanted to move somewhere else and start again, then that had to be good news, yeah? He was my best mate, or at least he used to be, but with him gone I wouldn’t have to worry so much about what I’d done all those years ago.

So when’s this gonna happen then?’ I asked.

‘August Bank Holiday,’ he replied.

‘Blimey, that ain’t too far away.’

‘Yeah, I know. I haven’t worked out all the details yet, but that’s when it’s gonna be.’

We had a few pints, played some pool, put five in a row by The Jam on the juke box and for a while it was like drinking with the Stumpy of old. With Paul Weller singing away in the background we could have been kids again.

‘Thick as thieves us, we’d stick together for all time

And we meant it but it turns out just for a while.....’

‘What are you up to on the Bank Holiday then?’ he asked.

‘No plans,’ I replied. ‘Why?’

‘I just fancied getting together with a few of the lads, you know, for old time’s sake, before I go.

Things ain’t been too clever recently and I thought a weekend away would be just the ticket.

What d’you reckon the chances are of getting all the boys together?’

‘Bank Holiday sounds like a great idea to me. I’ll make a few calls. Some of the boys have pretty much settled down but with the right amount of persuasion I’m sure I could twist a few arms.

Where do you fancy going?’

‘Brighton,’ he said. ‘I remember going there as a kid with my old man. Always wanted to go back but never seemed to get round to it. And it’s less than two hours away. What kind of useless wanker am I, eh?!’

He got fairly emotional towards closing time.

‘You’ve been a good mate to me, Steve. In fact, I couldn’t have asked for a better set of mates, even if I don’t see many of ‘em these days. It’ll be great to get us all together for the weekend.’

‘Yeah, just like the old days, eh?’

I finished off my pint, said goodbye and wandered out onto the streets.

29. Thick As Thieves
August 2002

I drive up the road towards the Fox and Hounds and glance at my watch as the familiar old building comes into view. We’re supposed to meet at five o’clock but I’m early, the excitement and anticipation dragging me towards the pub at just gone four. As I guessed, the boys were well up for a weekend away and despite the short notice they all said they’d be able to make it. I can’t wait and think to myself that this is just what the doctor ordered. I pull into the empty car park, leave my car in a space right by the front door and walk inside.

‘Alright Steve? Makes a change for you to be early for anything.’

Stumpy is sitting at the bar, a half empty pint glass in front of him, a fag burning in the ash tray.

‘Alright Stumpy,’ I reply, ‘how long have you been here?’

‘First pint,’ he says, ‘going down a treat.’

‘Get ‘em in then.’

Terry Irvine pours me a pint of Carling and I take a deep drink. There’s still nothing like a cold lager on a hot summer’s day.

‘All the boys still up for it?’ asks Stumpy.

‘Yeah, they’ll all be here, don’t worry.’

I hear a Colonel Bogey horn outside the pub and in come Harry Johnson, Tommy Peters and Billy Jeffries. I haven’t seen Billy for ages and ask him how he’s been, has he had a good summer.

‘Could have been better Steve, I just got out of nick yesterday.’

‘Again! What for this time?’

‘Don’t ask, doesn’t matter now. What are you drinking?’

He’s wearing a T-shirt and I can see more home made tattoos on his forearms. His hair’s all grey and there are deep lines around his eyes. He looks older, even more street-wise, and he stands with his back to the bar so that he can see everything around him.

Harry has had a skinhead and is wearing an old leather jacket that I remember from years ago, with THE CLASH freshly repainted in white across the back. He’s wearing a 1960’s West Ham shirt and Doctor Marten boots.

‘Mine’s a lager Bill,’ he says and stands there grinning.

Tommy Peters is still exactly the same, tanned from the building site, dressed in the latest trendy gear and obviously up for mayhem.

‘Still on for the trip?’ he asks.

‘Nah,’ I say, ‘I ain’t done acid in years.’

‘Not that kind of trip you tosser, I mean travelling. America, Brazil and all that.’

‘Yeah I know mate, I was only pissing about. Course I’m still up for it. Can’t wait.’

The door opens again and a thick cloud of smoke follows The Beast as he takes a final toke on a spliff and grinds it under his biker boots. He looks around the pub, manages to focus on us standing at the bar and wanders over.

‘Nice,’ he says, nodding his head and Terry pours him a Guinness.

Big Lad, Heavy Trev and Scouse are next in, dropping their bags by the door and accepting pints that are lined up on the bar.

‘You’ve put on a bit of pork,’ Stumpy says to Big Lad.

‘Well I was never exactly Twiggy was I?’

‘Yeah I know, but you look more like Fat Phil now.’

‘That’s what marriage does to you,’ says Big Lad.

‘You’re married!’ exclaims Stumpy, ‘when did that happen?’

‘Last summer. I was going to get an invite to you but Steve said you’d lost the plot so I didn’t bother.’

Stumpy looks at me and smiles, knowingly.

‘Well, shit happens doesn’t it? So how’s married life then?’

‘Alright, as far as it goes. I get me dinner every night and a bunk up once a week, but she’s always going on about the amount of lager I drink, wants me to give it up so that I’ve got a better chance of getting her pregnant. Fuck that, who wants a sniveling brat anyway?’

Immediately he realises what he’s said, and looks guiltily at Stumpy. The rest of us fall silent for a moment as Stumpy looks down at the floor and then back up at Big Lad.

‘Listen, sorry mate, I wasn’t thinking.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ says Stumpy, ‘now are you going to create history and actually buy a round?’

We all laugh and the conversations begin again.

Heavy Trev is as skinny as ever, although that year in the sun seems to have finally got rid of the acne. Not too sure about that bolt through his eyebrow though.

‘How’s the leg?’ Stumpy says to Scouse. ‘I heard you bust it jumping out the window trying to get away from some geezer whose missus you were knobbing.’

‘It’s alright, I never played football again and it still gives me a bit of jip in the winter but that’s why I’m planning to head for the sun with Tommy, Trev and Steve.’

‘You never told me you were going away,’ says Stumpy.

‘Yeah, been here too long,’ I reply, ‘time to move on.’

‘Exactly what I’m doing,’ he says.

My mobile rings and it’s Jimmy, running late and panicking that we’ll go without him. I tell him not to worry.

Terry Jones arrives and at half five Jimmy bursts through the door, all sweaty and anxious, still wearing his suit. Stumpy laughs and gives him a big hug.

‘Jimmy Taylor! How long’s it been?’

‘Too long Stumpy, too fucking long. How are you doing?’

‘All the better for seeing you mate. Time for a quick one before we go.’

‘Too right, I’m gasping.’

I look round at my mates as drink my lager, see them all laughing, taking the piss, looking forward to a weekend away and my eyes rest for a moment on Stumpy. He’s had a fucking rough time of it over the last couple of years or so, but it looks to me as though he’s come through the other side and I’m happy for him.

‘Come on lads, drink up,’ he says, ‘if we leave now we should be down there by half eight.’

‘Better take some cans with us,’ says Harry, ‘you know what Bank Holiday traffic can be like, don’t want anyone dying of thirst on the M25.’

He buys three crates from Terry Irvine and we put one in each motor. I’m driving, and Stumpy jumps in the front seat, Jim and Tommy in the back.

Billy Jeffries, Terry Jones and the Beast pile into Harry’s old Capri and the other lads get into Scouse’s Transit.

Stumpy has brought a couple of tapes he’d made way back in the early Eighties, and fills the car with tunes from The Jam, Madness, Specials, Pistols, Clash, Dexy’s and the like, every one a classic. Jimmy and Tom crack open the lagers and skin up an endless supply of joints, we sing along to the music, windows down, volume up.

The traffic is heavy up the M3 and onto the M25, and after an hour I have to pull over on the hard shoulder so we can piss away some of the lager we’ve been drinking. I’m sure I’m over the limit already but I feel good and I ain’t gonna stop.

It takes us ages to get into Brighton but finally we’re there and we stick the motors in a car park off West Street and then hit the pubs down The Lanes. It’s been a gorgeous day and the evening is still warm, people drinking outside watching the world go round. Everyone’s up for it, the bars are packed, there are women everywhere and I know it’s going to be a weekend to remember.

I get chatting to a bunch of girls.

‘You down here for the rave?’ one of them asks.

‘What rave?’ I say.

‘There’s huge bash on the outskirts of town tomorrow night, should go on for the rest of the weekend. Old school. You should come along.’

She smiles at me and I think I’m in. I tell the boys and they’re well up for it.

We move on, a pint here and a pint there, drinking and chatting and trying to pull. Tommy gets lucky and Terry Jones moves in on her mate, Big Lad, Trev and Scouse disappear into a curry house and the rest of us wander back to my car, open up the boot and tuck into the remaining cans of lager, which are warm and taste rough. Big Lad and the others turn up an hour later and we all walk down to the beach, where a bunch of people have lit a fire and are sitting round it listening to music pounding from a nearby car.

We sit down on the stones near the sea and drink our lager.

‘Do you ever see Jenny?’ asks Stumpy suddenly.

I hesitate, then tell him I bumped into her once in town.

‘Did she have the kid with her?’

‘Yeah,’ I say.

‘I don’t even know his name,’ he says sadly.

‘It’s Jack,’ I say, and he smiles to himself.

‘Look mate, I’m sure there must be some sort of law that says you can see your own son, even if you’re split up from the mother.’

‘Maybe there is, I don’t know. Never bothered to find out.’

‘But you must have wanted to see him, surely?’

‘More than anything in the world, Steve. But I ruined things with Jenny, and I reckon the kid’s better off without me. I’ve never told anyone this, but my earliest memory is of my mum and dad arguing. They used to shout and scream at each other. Dunno how old I was, and I dunno what it was all about but that’s all I remember about my mum. I wouldn’t want any kid to go through that.’

He falls silent and I turn to look at the flames, and listen to waves breaking on the shore. I think about the box of Jack’s stuff I still have in my loft, and the letter I found that I’m sure is from his mum and wonder, briefly, if I should tell him about it. When we get back home, I decide, I’ll take it round to the Three Lions. Maybe it’ll answer a few questions, bury a few ghosts.

After a while Stumpy looks at me.

‘I know what happened between you and Jenny, by the way.’

‘What?! What are you on about?’

‘Don’t bullshit me, Steve. I saw her going into your flat that night, and I saw you both come out a few hours later. Doesn’t take much to work it out.’

I’m stunned. I can’t believe he knows.

‘You know that I always got on well with Jenny’s mum. I saw her in town the day Jenny came home to visit, and she told me that Jenny had bumped into you in the park. I had a few beers that evening, then decided to come and see you, to apologise for being such a cunt the last time you came to see me, and to find out how Jenny and the kid were. It was quite late by the time I got to yours. But not too late to see you two together.’

I feel devastated.

‘Listen, Stumpy. I don’t know what to say. There’s no excuse for what I did, I’ve felt like a cunt for years. How come you didn’t say anything at the time?’

‘Steve, don’t worry. It’s ok. I’ll admit I was pretty fucked off for a long time, to say the least. I came close to coming to see you a few times, but I’m glad I didn’t. The state I was in back then, I don’t know what I’d have done. But as I told you in the Three Lions, I’m moving on. None of that matters anymore. I’ve sorted myself out. I know what I want, and I know where I’m going.’ I hesitate for a second. I want to be convinced that I’m forgiven, that things can go back to the way they were between us. And that’s what Stumpy’s saying, isn’t it?

‘That’s good, mate. I’m happy for you.’

I’m shocked by what he’s just said, but I try and smile. I betrayed my best mate, and that’s been the hardest thing I’ve ever had to live with. Knowing that Stumpy knows as well makes it even worse, despite his apparent forgiveness.

I lie back on the stones, still slightly warm from the days’ sunshine, and try to lose myself in the Café Del Mar compilation that someone has stuck on the car stereo. But I don’t feel good about myself, not one little bit.

On Saturday morning we go for a huge fry-up and bump into Tom and Terry walking along the seafront.

‘Alright lads?’ says Stumpy, ‘how d’you get on last night?’

‘That’s one more satisfied customer,’ says Tommy, grinning.

‘You sound like a fucking whore,’ says Big Lad.

‘Yeah, you’ve got a point. Maybe I shouldn’t be giving it away for free.’

‘Fuck off!’

It’s another scorcher and we spend a few hours on the beach, even dipping our toes in the water. A kip in the shade under the old pier, and then a few early lagers before returning to the cars for a bit of deodorant, and some aftershave to take away the smell.

The Beast sits in the back of my car, skinning up a few joints for the night ahead.

‘You alright Steve?’ he asks

‘Sound, mate’

‘Like the old days, eh?’

‘Yeah.’

I hesitate, and The Beast sits there, watching me.

He was right, you know. That time when he told me I always ran away from any responsibility, anything heavy. I’ve been a right selfish cunt over the years, and I know now that I should have made much more of an effort with my mates. Not that I’ll ever admit it.

The Beast sits cross legged on the ground, filling up an empty Marlboro packet with joints, and I crack another can and join Jimmy and some of the other lads in the back of Scouse’s Transit.

At one point in the evening, in a pub down The Lanes, Harry comes to the bar to help me get a round in.

‘Good crack, eh?’

‘Yeah, fucking good crack. I’ve missed nights like these.’

‘Stumpy’s looking well, isn’t he?’

‘He is Harry. It’s good to see, especially after what he’s been through.’

‘Did you know I told him about Karen, his mum?’

I look at Harry in surprise.

‘When was that? I didn’t think anyone had seen him in ages.’

‘Couple of months ago, I bumped into him in town, we had a couple of lagers, and I dunno why but I told him the whole story.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Nothing Steve. Absolutely fucking nothing. Changed the subject like I’d never mentioned her.’

‘And what about you, Harry? You ever tempted to get back in touch with her?’

‘I told you once before, Steve, that no fucker gets a second chance with me.’

He doesn’t sound convinced, but I ain’t gonna pursue it.

We drink until the pubs shut, then grab some burgers, a change of shirt from the motors and a couple of us take a chance, and drive through the crowded streets to the old warehouse on the edge of town where the rave has already started. I’m pissed, shouldn’t be driving but I don’t care, a line of charlie from Harry and I’m together enough. We give the doorman a tenner each and walk into a wall of sound. Strobes light up the place, packed with people dancing their nuts off, a huge sound system in the far corner pumping out the sounds. Some geezers are selling beer out of a huge barrel filled with quickly melting ice.

‘This is fucking great!’ yells Jimmy in my ear, handing me a cold Red Stripe. I nod, and look around me, trying to spot the girl from yesterday.

Harry comes along and empties a wrap of speed into my can.

‘I’ve got more charlie as well if you fancy a snort later.’

I smile and raise my lager.

‘Cheers!’ I say and laugh, drunk enough to ignore the guilt I still feel about Stumpy.

We drink and dance, try to chat the birds up but voices get lost in all the noise. Eventually, by pure chance I bump into the girl I spoke to yesterday in the pub and I take her with me to find Harry, and the three of us go into the men’s bogs and snort a few lines. She tells me her name is Zoë, she’s down from London and says me I’m welcome to visit her anytime I want. She writes her phone number on my arm with her eyeliner then arranges to meet me later before going off to find her mates.

The music is pumping, I’m feeling charged and I look around for my mates.

Then suddenly things rapidly spiral out of control. Everyone around me is completely slaughtered on a combination of alcohol and narcotics and the atmosphere changes, becomes dangerous. I can’t work out why and think that maybe I’m being paranoid. But the charlie I’ve just snorted kicks in, diminishes the effect of lager and clears my mind in an instant. I look around me with total clarity and know there’s something wrong.

I see Stumpy in the middle of the dancefloor, surrounded by a group of blokes. The body language tells me they’re arguing and then one of the blokes starts pushing Stumpy. He stumbles backwards, recovers his balance and moves forward again.

And then it happens. I see the other lad pull something from his back pocket and catch the glint of a blade as it flashes under the strobe lights, almost like it’s in slow motion. Stumpy sees it coming and ducks out of the way; he catches the bloke a cracking right hander to the side of the head and follows it up with a few more choice punches. The lad goes down but his mates are already steaming in and instantly a massive ruck breaks out, boots and fists flying everywhere, glasses and bottles shattering on impact. The music seems even louder as I shove my way to the source of the trouble and begin lashing out around me.

The rest of the lads arrive and I see Big Lad land a telling headbutt, Harry and Tom side by side, Billy a virtual blur of violence. I’ve got no idea who I’m fighting and a quick glance around me shows that half the blokes in the club are scrapping by now.

Against the backdrop of thumping hardcore the police sirens sound faint, and then the music stops as a dozen or so coppers burst into the warehouse, truncheons flying, hitting out at anyone within striking distance. I see Tommy go down, blood pouring from his face, and Jimmy falls as well. And then I see Stumpy, arm raised above the bloke who’d kicked it all off. Stumpy’s somehow got hold of the knife and I see a manic look on his face and madness in his eyes as he brings the blade down, plunging it into the body beneath him. He looks up, sees me staring and grins. His shirt is torn and his face glistens with sweat and I feel for an instant as though I’m staring at a complete stranger.

‘This is it!’ he screams and then he’s off, out the fire exit next to the DJ’s booth. Some of the coppers have obviously seen what Stumpy has done and several go straight after him. I manage to avoid the clutches of the policemen inside the club and make it out as far as the main exit, where two coppers are trying to stop people leaving. One of them makes a grab for me, and in desperation I punch him in the face as hard as I can and he hits the deck.

Then I’m out of the front door and into my car, engine engaged, foot to the floor and racing behind the police cars, not thinking about what I’m doing. God knows how he’s done it, but Stumpy’s on a police motorbike and is tearing through the streets, one step ahead of the law. One of the coppers must have left his keys in the ignition, the stupid cunt.

I look at the clock on my dashboard and am amazed to see that it's ten o'clock on Sunday morning and the roads are quiet, the sun is already hot and it promises to be another beautiful day. I have no sense of reality as I drive along the A259 out of Brighton, jumping red lights and swerving round the Sunday drivers, oblivious to the scenes of suburban normality carrying on all around me.

The engine is racing as I crash through the gears, tyres screeching on hot tarmac, stereo blaring but I can't hear, I'm not listening. It takes all the effort I've got left to concentrate on the road, to keep Stumpy in sight and to avoid the other cars, the roundabouts, the traffic lights, the police. For most people this is a normal Sunday morning, walking the dog, reading the papers, breakfast in bed. But for a few of us things will never be the same again: for me and Stumpy, the lads back at the club, the poor fucker lying in a pool of blood with a knife between his ribs.

We roar through coastal towns, a desperate convoy chasing a desperate man, I know I'm not going to get to him first but I have to keep trying, I'm too scared to stop and as I drive I'm wondering how the fuck we'd got here, to this point in our lives.

I have no fucking idea what's gonna happen, can't begin to make any sense of it all, the window is open, warm air blowing onto my face and my eyes sting from exhaustion. I don't know how long I've been awake, I have no idea how many lagers I've had, how many whiskey chasers, how much coke or speed but as I cling to the wheel my brain can focus on only one thought. We are in some serious fucking trouble.

I remember a conversation we had years ago. I don't know why it comes into my head but it seems suddenly important. He told me once during a particularly horrendous drinking and acid session that he was on a mission to go out in a blaze of glory, and his eyes lit up with a whisky-fueled intensity as he described how he was going to grab his fifteen minutes of fame.

In a rare moment of clarity I remember thinking Jesus, the crazy bastard really does mean it, but then the trip kicked back in, my attention was diverted by the theme tune to 'Match of the Day' and all such talk of oblivion was forgotten. He told me didn't want to live beyond thirty five. What's the point, he said and I tried to tell him. But I'd had too much beer and too much whiskey, the acid was messing seriously with my head and I couldn't make him see. Was it before all that stuff with Jenny, before his old man died? I couldn't remember.

I remember him as a kid at school, going on about living fast, dying young and leaving a beautiful corpse, and how me and Jimmy used to laugh because Stumpy Malloy is one of the ugliest bastards you're likely to meet. None of us took him seriously, and it hits me now as I drive that maybe we should have, that maybe it wasn't just talk. It also strikes me that he hasn't told anyone where he's planning to go, for this new start of his, and I get a sinking feeling deep in the pit of my stomach.

Over the squealing tyres and police sirens I hear another sound, and I look out of my window to see that a helicopter has joined in the chase. I still have no real idea of what he's going to do, even when he takes another sudden right and begins tearing along the cliff edge of Beachey Head on the outskirts of Eastbourne. He's taken one of the cops by surprise and in trying to negotiate the turn the car has come a cropper in a ditch but the other three carry on, sirens blaring, lights flashing in the summer sun, the helicopter flying low over the coast.

Stumpy comes to a halt, looks back and sees the police cars driving over the grass towards him. Then he looks beyond them and sees me, and he waves and smiles like this is the most ordinary day in the world. The police cars stop, one of the drivers gets out and shouts something, but the

wind catches his words and I can't hear what's been said. Stumpy looks at him for a moment, looks at me, then guns the engine, flicks a defiant V and roars forward.

I close my eyes before the bike reaches the edge of the cliff, but I hear it crash onto rocks far below and I hear the roar as it explodes. I stay where I am for a moment, in shock, unable to fully understand what has just happened, but knowing, somewhere deep inside, that my world has changed forever.

When I open my eyes again I can't believe what I see: Stumpy is lying on the grass right at the edge of the cliff and I laugh in desperate relief. He climbs to his feet and brushes the dirt from his clothes, and two of the coppers make a move towards him.

He holds up a hand for them to stop.

'You fuckers take one step closer and I'll jump,' he shouts and they come to a halt.

'I just want to talk to my mate.'

I walk slowly towards Stumpy standing at the edge of the cliff, and I smile.

He looks at me, returns my smile.

'This is it Steve, I've made my mark.'

I look behind me at the row of policemen, then up at the helicopter that is still circling high above and I have to raise my voice to ensure he hears.

'You certainly have Stumpy. Come on mate, let's get you home,' I reply, just trying to make everything alright, not thinking about what I'm saying. As if the coppers would ever let us walk away from all this.

Stumpy laughs, briefly, then looks me straight in the eye.

'That geezer's dead, isn't he?'

And even then, I can't see, I don't understand. I could lie, but I don't.

'I think so mate, I didn't see anyone bother to try and revive him.'

'So I'm probably looking at 15 to 20 years for what I've just done. That's no good to me Steve. I've fucked everything up, it's all my fault and nothing's ever going to change that. I can't even trust my best mate, can I?'

His voice catches and his words burn into my brain, into my heart.

I step forward, but I'm too late, like I have been for too many years now.

Stumpy looks beyond me, beyond everything.

'Cheers Steve, you take care of yourself.'

And he's gone.

Epilogue.

November 2004

‘What are you thinking about Steve?’ asks Caroline.

‘Nuthin’ love,’ I say, as I reach out for the bottle of Singha beer that Fat Phil brought me a couple of minutes ago.

‘You look like you’re miles away.’

‘Nah, just can’t decide between the green chicken curry and the snapper, that’s all,’ I say.

But she’s right, as usual. I’m a million miles away from the Happy Buddha beach, from carefree backpackers, from Thailand.

I’m back in England, reliving the past, torturing myself yet again. I’m sure Caroline knows this as well, but she won’t interfere, won’t hassle me, she’ll just leave me alone until I’m ready to talk. That’s one of the many reasons why I love her so much. She rescued me when I was as low as it’s possible to get, dragged me back from the brink, and that’s no exaggeration.

The months after Stumpy killed himself were a living nightmare, my life collapsed around me and it felt like there was nothing worth hanging on to. People kept telling me that things would get better, that they always did, but at the time I couldn’t see it. What if that wasn’t true? What if things just got worse and worse? For a long time I convinced myself that when Stumpy found out about me and Jenny it pushed him over the edge. Maybe it was my fault that he topped himself. But I talked it through with Caroline, I told her everything, and she helped me to understand that Stumpy had started out on the road to suicide a long, long time ago.

Angels, or saviours or whatever you want to call them come along at the strangest times, and my one appeared in Winchester nick a few months after I got handed a two stretch for my part in the events that lead to Stumpy’s death.

I had a bit of previous, as you know, and the law doesn’t take kindly to blokes like me smacking a copper in the mouth and breaking his jaw so badly he had it wired up for three weeks. I was also way over the limit when they breathalysed me, plus testing positive for cannabis, cocaine and speed. There was no way I was gonna escape a prison sentence. I didn’t even make bail.

I fucking hated prison, hated being locked up, with nothing to do except think about the past, sinking deeper into depression. I didn’t even try and take Billy Jeffries’ advice about forgetting the outside world. He might have been able to switch off, but I couldn’t. The only positive thing that happened was Billy and Harry coming to see me after a few days. Not surprisingly, Billy knew a few faces and once people realised I knew him they pretty much left me alone. It also helped that I’d given a copper a hiding, of course.

A few of the other lads made the effort to come and see me as the weeks and months passed, but their visits only made me realise how much I’d fucked things up, and the person I wanted to see more than anyone was in a hole in the ground next to his old man. I never even got to say goodbye.

And then, one unforgettable day, I received a visitor. I'd been expecting Harry, and I stood at the entrance of the hall looking for him. He wasn't there, and thinking there'd been a mistake I was just about to turn and leave when I saw a familiar face smiling at me.

Puzzled, I walked over to where she was sitting.

'Caroline Jeffries. What are you doing here?'

'Aren't you going to sit down?' she said.

'Yeah, yeah of course.'

She laughed.

'It's been a long time, Steve. I know you've had your moments, but I never expected you to end up in a place like this.'

'What are you doing here?' I asked again.

'I've been living in London for the past few years, but things changed and I moved back to Basingstoke a couple of months ago. I went to see Billy the other day and Harry Johnson was there, they were talking about you and Harry said you seemed really depressed. I just thought I might be able to cheer you up.'

Of course I was depressed. I'd lost everything, and in doing so realised how little I'd had to call my own after nearly forty years on this planet. My best mate had killed himself, and I still had six months to go before I got an early release, assuming I could stay out of trouble that is.

'Does Billy know you're here?'

'Yes. And amazingly enough, he approves. He's always liked you, Steve, even though you lied to him about me all those years ago.'

'What?! Billy knows about that?'

'He's known for a long time. He found out after that business with Nick Williams. He was picking a mate up from the hospital the day you went to visit Nick, and heard you asking the nurse what ward he was on. Billy went straight out and put some pressure on Halfpint and got the truth.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Caroline smiled.

'Billy's not as bad as you think, Steve, he's calmed down a lot over the last couple of years. He doesn't blame you for keeping quiet, and he knows the problems it would have caused among the lads if he'd given you a hiding. And he also happens to think that the world is a better place without scum like Nick Williams.'

Caroline started coming to see me on a regular basis, things just clicked between us and one day she asked me what I was going to do once I got out. That was something I'd spent a long time thinking about, and the truth was I didn't have a fucking clue.

Things had changed, and I don't just mean for me. Scouse and Heavy Trev had gone travelling again, not to America but back to South East Asia for a bit more sun, sea and smoke, while Tommy had got back together with Michelle and had finally agreed to marry her and start a family. Beast had sold his house and bought a plot of land in Devon, where he planned to build his own place, with a workshop where he could do up bikes and cars.

Harry had amazed everyone by getting back together with Karen Brown and was spending most of his time with her in London, while Jimmy had also quit Basingstoke and his new professional

life. Spending four hours a day driving to and from his office in Kings Cross had proved more than he could bear, so he'd told his boss where he could stick his job, jumped on board the first plane he could get and went to work for Fat Phil on Koh Pha Ngan.

The lads had moved on, each in their own way, but I was stuck, couldn't move past Beachey Head and all that had happened over the years.

There was nothing left for me in Basingstoke, and I couldn't face the thought of being a labourer any more, seeing the ghost of Stumpy everywhere I went, so when Caroline suggested we spend a few months travelling I jumped at the chance. She'd been in touch with Fat Phil and we had an open invitation to stay with him for as long as we liked. We had a couple of tickets to Bangkok and a bit of cash courtesy of Harry Johnson, but I wasn't quite ready to face anyone from my past so soon after getting out. The guilt was weighing me down. Harry offered to pick me up from prison, but I thanked him for everything and told him I'd rather get the fuck out of town with Caroline. Harry understood, and wished me luck.

The day after my release we did fly to Bangkok, but instead of heading south we went north, to Chiang Mai and the hill tribes beyond and then east, into Laos. After a few weeks we headed back into Thailand, got an overnight bus down to the coast, then a ferry over to Koh Pha Ngan and a rickety old pick up to the Happy Buddha, where we had an emotional reunion with Jimmy and Fat Phil.

Putting some distance between me and my past has helped me see things differently, helped me appreciate the good times. I'll never forget Stumpy Malloy, even if one day I'm able to forgive him for what he did. And maybe then I'll be able to forgive myself.

I've never regretted anything more than the missed chances I had to help my mate. There isn't a day that goes by when I don't think of him, when I don't wish with all my heart that I'd done some things very fucking differently.

I said at the beginning of all this that my life changed forever on the day he walked into our school, and for the most part that change was for the good.

But when he took his life he took part of mine with him, and it's only now that I'm beginning to laugh again, to even consider enjoying life.

Caroline is helping me move on, but it's a journey that will take a long, long time.

The blood red sun sinks over the horizon and Fat Phil lumbers over to light a bonfire on the beach, before fetching a fistful of beers from the fridge and handing them out. Jimmy's just finished his shift behind the bar and he joins us with Nina, his Swedish girlfriend. By complete chance Scouse and Heavy Trev turned up late last night, having spent a couple of days travelling from Cambodia. They didn't even know I'd been released, and couldn't believe it when they emerged from their hut at lunchtime to see me sitting at the bar.

'Are you sure you're ok Steve?' Caroline asks.

I smile, look around at the faces of my friends and raise my bottle of beer in a silent toast to Stumpy Malloy.

'I will be.'